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## Theme of Absurdity in Shashi Deshpande's *If I Die Today*

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### **Abstract:**

In *If I Die Today* Deshpande explores death, meaninglessness of human relationship, fear from the confrontation of truth and murder in the sense of absurdity which exists only for the short period in the lives of the characters but at the end they conquer this sense of absurdity and accepts the accepted ways of life. In *If I Die Today*, no theory of absurdity has been followed but only some concepts and happenings of day- today activity have been discussed to show creeping absurd elements in characters' psyche. Incidents and speeches of characters are enough to project the vision of a modern Indian psyche.

**Keywords:** Absurdity, Meaninglessness, Existentialism, Theatre of Absurd, Religious and Political orthodoxy.

### **Introduction:**

*A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty is a familiar world. But in a universe suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and the setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.*(Camus, The Myth 6)

The Theatre of Absurd is a post World War II designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s. Their works focused largely on the idea of Existentialism and expressed what happens when human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence. Martin Esslin coined the word absurd similar to the way Albert Camus uses

in his 1942 essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus'. The absurd in these plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning, and/or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces. This style of writing was first popularized by the 1952 Samuel Beckett play 'Waiting for Godot'.

In his 1965 book, *Absurd Drama*, Esslin wrote that the Theatre of absurd attacks the comfortable certainties religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly responsible; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. Absurdist believed that life is absurd but they also believed that death and the 'after life' were equally absurd if not more, and that whether people live or not all of their actions are pointless and everything will lead to the same end. (Wikipedia)

Theme of Absurdity, as we see, is ordinary in English fiction. Writers of globalised world were writing and are still writing to project several aspects of absurdity. But in Indian English fiction we find only some glimpses of it. Indian English writers rarely touch the theme of absurdity while exploring truth in the works of art. Only few names as Malay Roy Chodhury and Badal Sarkar are prominent in Indian English fiction for projecting absurdity in their works. Though the work of Shashi Deshpande is circumscribed to the issues of female protagonists but close scrutiny of the novels shows that she uses the element of absurdity too in her novels like '*A Matter of Time*', '*Small Remedies*' and '*If I Die Today*'. The present study shows absurdity in Indian scenario while discussing several characters in the novel '*If I Die Today*'.

### **Discussion:**

*If I Die Today* often called crime novel deals with the concept of absurdity also. Throughout life man pursues one goal or another and creates the ambience of comfort about him, but at a sudden point he starts to contemplate about the happiness, about his possessions. All his efforts in life are directed in pursuit of endless series of deeds with a purpose of getting

happiness. But suddenly he thinks, if all efforts do not bring any happiness then it is useless to involve in them. At this moment his all efforts/adventures are seen to him meaningless, well to say absurd. Same actualization comes to Manju's psyche when she senses no happiness amid all comforts of her life. *"But looking back, I have to wonder whether there was any moment when I said to myself- I am happy."*(If I Die Today-4)

An absurd lives his life in present therefore to him happiness is the thing of present. People who are striving hard accomplishing any goal forget its presence in present and live miserable life. Manju contemplates, *"happiness was or will be. It never is."*(If I Die Today-4) Manju has everything in her life what she wished: her husband is a pathologist in a well-known hospital; she works as a lecturer in a college; both had planned their lives and arranged it in their way. A comfortable family life, three years daughter, Sonu and a nanny to take care of her and with next step they planned another child.

Manju always used to be craved being at home but now when she is at home because of her pregnancy she is bewildered. *"I am staying at home and honestly, it is getting on my nerves. I hate it."*(If I Die Today-14)The pattern on which her life was speeding shrinks and there evolves another pattern with which she is unable to cope. At this point she feels her pregnancy a burden; a new pattern brings boredom, loneliness and inactivity in her life. Each day comprises of morning, afternoon, evening and night; the work is divided or set up according to the different periods of time. Each day is same but different. Monotonous routine and repetition of same pattern brings the feeling of absurdity in her mind. While going through the process of 'maternity' same routine affects her mental condition and she feels absurd, she says, *"One child more or less what does it matter?"*(If I Die Today-11)

Hopelessly she thinks life as a 'cosmic accident' which means meaningless occurrence. In the next speech, she further expresses her absurd thoughts, *"one sperm one ovum coming together- it's just matter of chance; what meaning can there be in it? Human life on this planet itself seems a bizarre chance."*(If I Die Today-12) In the Plague, Camus suggests that, *"boredom or inactivity causes the individual to think. This is similar to the idea of meditation, an almost motionless activity, allowing the individual to think with clarity."*(19)

Manju fills the void of her life by thinking, watching what is going about her as Meursault in *Stranger* encounters his absurdity in the prison by memorizing what had happened in the past. Her absurd thoughts visualize time to time with the development of the plot. When she had to attend a get together organized by dean and his wife Rani she thinks while standing outside their home. *"The same people, the same food, the same conversation. How damnably dull life was! Or, more accurately, how damnably dull we made it."*(If I Die Today-23)

Imprisoned in her pregnancy, Manju symbolizes human beings who is caught and trapped in this hostile world, quests for freedom. Her other speech makes visible her absurd sense when she says *"Motherhood, I thought.....it's a trap.....you forget what the word 'Freedom means."*(If I Die Today-49) She feels stranger in her own life when her each beautiful relationship seems her disoriented. Her husband creates the ditch of desolation between them and her three years old daughter seeks her way in the company of Kamala. When Manju emphasizes doing something on her part, there is a clash among them. Manju sets so many small goals in her life but when things go out of her control she feels absurdity in her life. Adele King says:

*The absurd emphasizes man's freedom, a freedom where no good or bad choices can be made man's desires conflict with the indifference of the universe.*(56)

Through Manju, Deshpande figures the reality of an average Indian who in different periods of time experiences the absurd situation or absurdity. The stark comments over her circumstances are apt to demonstrate absurd in her life. *"I am failure.....Inevitability, which comes from being what we are."*(If I Die Today-46 )/*"For all of us there comes a time when we can no longer hide our knowledge of what we are from ourselves."*(If I Die Today-48) Her craving for freedom from all relationships and traditional boundaries is modern human's cry to change all accepted beliefs and norms.

Camus states that man, after being conscious of his meaningless and senseless existence in the world discards the uselessness of his daily actions. Now, he is tired off his mental and physical agony and sees absurdities in his life. He says. *"Those flashes of reality come to him in the oddest places and at the oddest time."*(The Stranger-11-16) Realization of absurd directs man to be stranger in his own world as it happens with Manju. Deshpande insinuates Guru in some starting pages of her novel until the end by either mean or another. When cancer patient

Guru arrives in doctors, there are ripples. They are muddled at this point of arrival about their own doings and flabbergasted on what type of life they were continuously living. Jiangzhu in his research paper reiterates:

*Disease, death and hunger are often regarded as the themes to discuss. Evil, crime and violence are often thought to be natural things in the society. When people come across these occasions, they would feel sad and sympathetic for the dead of the patients. But in the 'Theatre of Absurd, people consider it at an indifferent attitude. The world makes people feel unconcerned and even unmerciful.(1462-1466)*

Like the characters of a conventional novel Meera and other characters feel helpless to confront a man who is about to die. When they become familiar about Guru's disease and death, they are compelled to think, "*What do you say to a man who's dying what you talk about.*"(If I Die Today-6) But Guru an unconventional tone is not afraid of his death. Like an absurd one he accepts the unavoidable harsh reality of life and enjoys calmly and peacefully his remaining part of life. When he says "*If I die Today, you die tomorrow*"(If I Die Today-8) reminds us Meursalt, Camus' one of the major absurd characters. He states, "*all alike would be condemned to die one day*" (The Stranger-11-17) He easily accepts what comes next as Meursalt does. Guru, a gregarious impresses each one especially female folk because of his interest in other's life heading off his own life which really has no purpose. His amiable tone brings him close to each character of the novel.

In Camus's Stranger Meursalt's encounters with worldly life seem absurd to a layman. He is typical but complete absurd in the novel that has some noble and innocence values in his heart and never regrets over his deeds. Guru, in the novel, at some instances reminds us of Meursalt. An absurd does not believe in any God and moral ethics. In his view all religious, moral and social codes are obscure and somehow responsible for man's predicament. A conventional character runs his life in believing these codes but Guru never does so. Emotions cultivated by moral, social and religious codes suppress the truth and brings absurdity in the lives of characters. "*To waste this one life you have in pretences in fake emotions, is a crime.*"(If I Die Today-42)

Prabhakar Tambe's death in the novel is like the murder of the Arab by Meursault where the hostile universe is responsible for the murder of an Arab. When the sharp shining knife shines in sun light and flashes on Meursault's eyes he triggers on the pistol. The same thing happens with Shyam when he operates Tambe, where, "*there were multiple adhesions- he accidentally cut through major vessels/ he had a cardiac arrest and was gone.*"(If I Die Today-106) It shows man's helplessness towards the indifferent universe when he says, "*Sometime one just can't understand how things happen.*"(If I Die Today-106) Meursault does not make any effort to save him in the trial; he presents incidents as they were. He does not add any logic and goes on without contemplation. All the doctors involved in Tambe's operation take the responsibility of his death inwardly but they do not feel guilty. Camus writes:

*A man imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly. It is ready to pay up. In other words, there may be some responsible person, but there are not guilty one in its opinion. At very most, such a mind will consent to use past experience as a basis of its future actions.*(The Myth-44)

Childlessness brings the feeling of absurdity in Tony's mind. The realization of the fact leads Tony and Cynthia in the abyss of absurdity. They sense meaninglessness and nothingness in their relationship. The acceptance widens the scope of loneliness and burden. The lack of child destroys the easiness between the two and they behave like stranger to each other. To Camus:

*Just as there are days when under the familial face of a woman we see as a strange her we had loved mothers or years ago, perhaps we shall come even to desire what suddenly leaves us so alone.....that denseness and, that strangeness of the world is absurd.*(The Myth-11)

Man's quest for fulfilling and getting more in each sphere of life breaks the old tradition and values. When man crosses the moral and social values and devalues traditional husband wife relationship then this situation leaves him in absurd conditions. Ashok, having relationship with Leena crosses boundaries but when awakened he finds his act absurd and wants to return to his wife. Both Ashok and Tony return to God's ways of life. After facing the absurd, Tony overcomes the feeling and wins his faith in God. He wants to return to his parents for espousing

to old ways of his life. His speech is modern man's cry to return to his homeland "*It's like a dream calling me, my parent's home, the beaches, the churches, the old ways of life.*"(If I Die Today-88)

Deshpande uses symbolic images of nature in a praiseworthy manner to exalt the beauty of language, thought and to introduce what comes next. She uses the description of the Nature to produce and to reduce the absurd effect in the novel and also for presenting the mental visions of the characters. After heavy rains outside, Prem comes soaked and changes. Manju thinks, "*Prem came in drenched. I heard him moving about as he changed.*"(If I Die Today-91) She symbolizes overcoming of all emotions, guilt and isolations of Prem with the word 'drenched'. She senses the change inside his mind. By talking with Prem, Manju conquers her absurd thoughts and returns to normalcy. As water cleanses the impurity so her talk with Prem kills absurd from their life as she describes, "*The water ran down.....carrying away....all the debris of summer.*"(If I Die Today-103) Rieux in Plague believes that man can strive for love and happiness while facing the absurd, so it happens with Manju. In the line "*The stumbling footsteps crunching on the dry leaves.*"(If I Die Today-90) Deshpande symbolizes man's belief to 'dry leaves' which was crunched by footsteps (working of human mind). Emily Zants says, "*this is a force strong enough to compel men to survive the destructive elements of the world of absolutes- the world of the absurd.*"<sup>425</sup>

The temple built by Sethji symbolizes God, day time indicates good time and dark to bad time. When there is a good time, he is deep attached with God. But when bad time hovers him, he scared to go on that path which he was following for a long time. In this dark hour, the idea of God seems him absurd. This idea can be seen in the following lines of the novel: "*The clump of mango trees .....On the traditional lines....in the day time it a cheerful place.....it seemed dark....I regretted having come this way.*"(If I Die Today-89)

### **Conclusion:**

Deshpande's characters and their comparison with Camus' writings show the germinating seeds of absurdity in Indian society which is the main purpose of the writer to show Indian psyche beyond limitations in which they were dwelling. To show absurd in Manju I analysed her character with Meursault and her experiences of pregnancy are like Meursault's encounters in

prison. Manju seems to be trapped in the case of motherhood which brings absurd thoughts in her mind which is a change in the vision of an Indian mother. Death, disease and hunger are found in absurd sense as it happens with Guru. His acceptance of death is also found in absurd term. For Tony and Cynthia childlessness brings the absurd thoughts. Along with Ashok and Leena's relationship, the operation of Prabhakar Tambe by Shyam has been seen in absurd sense. To sum up, all the characters suffer from the feeling of absurdity in different period of life but at the end they create meaning in spite of objective meaninglessness about them and find values of living.

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