



# Sufferings To Self: Nietzsche's Nihilism In Absurd Life

LAXMI R VALI BALLA

Research Scholar

JNTU, Kakinada

Andhra Pradesh, India

## ABSTRACT

'Knowing- Self' plays a prominent role in the human journey. To build harmonious society 'understanding between self and world' is important. A sympathetic awareness on the issue or ability to understand something in life is called understanding. When man understands truth in life, the possibility of mental and physical sufferings like unknown fear, anxiety, and depression may not exist in human life. In '*As You Like It*', Shakespeare's quote "All the world's a stage and all men and women merely players" (Herbage, 257) clearly depicts human connection through drama. In the journey of human life, everyone has to face sufferings without a chance of escape. The philosophical theory of absurdity states that human life is a clash between self and world. It claims that human life is meaningless, hopeless and uncertain in the modern world.

Nihilism stood as a profound philosophical phenomenon to challenge individual's identity for social well-being. Moreover, Nietzsche's Nihilism is a response to the erosion of traditional values and Christian beliefs. Passive nihilist can be called pessimistic because he lives in suffering with a psychological trauma. But Active nihilist tries to make his suffering into a meaningful suffering by creating hope in hopeless conditions.

The paper is aimed to explore how Nietzsche's views on human sufferings with reference to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and Badal Sircar's *Procession*.

**Keywords:** WWII, Absurd Life, Nihilism, Sufferings, Self, Positive Attitude

## 1. INTRODUCTION

'Knowing- Self' plays a prominent role in the human journey. In Shakespeare's *The Seven Ages of Man*, the man wants to explore his purpose of life but it becomes absurd. Martin Esslin, critic says in *The Theatre of Absurd* that life is meaningless, illogical and absurd. In support to that Albert Camus, great existentialist proposes that human existence itself is absurd, so it's better to enjoy the essence of life by acceptance. In the contrary, Friedrich Nietzsche father of Nihilism suggests to explore meaning in life. Though Nihilism describes about sadness or gloomy picture of life, Nietzsche's views on sufferings have given positive impact on self-transformation.

Nihilism is the philosophical concept that denotes a general mood of despair or pessimism toward life. At first Friedrich Jacobi was used negatively to characterize transcendental idealism and later it came into

lime light by Russian Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*. After WWII, modern man tries to find meaning of his survival, the result is absolutely nothing. In such a gloomy dominance of existential absurdity, Nihilism stood as a profound philosophical phenomenon to challenge identity of an individual as well as existential dilemma for social well-being. Moreover, Nietzsche's Nihilism is a response to the erosion of traditional values and Christian beliefs. Based on attitude, Nihilism can be categorized into Active Nihilism (optimistic) and Passive Nihilism (pessimistic).

## 2. NIHILISM: COMBATING NOTHINGNESS IS LIFE

### 2.1 Absence of Meaning: Existential Dilemma

Kristen E. Shepherd-Barr in *Modern Drama* says that modern theatre of absurd plays are not coincidence "that after s in the mid-1940s, reflecting despair after two devastating world wars and the Holocaust, what meaning is left?" (Shepherd-Barr, 76) In fact, after the two World Wars, uncertainty of unavoidable suffering and anxiety of isolation are prevailed in the modern era. The destructive effects of which includes the loss of meaning, the feeling of alienation, the uncertainty of identity are reflected in human existence. Most of the late 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> century playwrights were shattered by the bizarre happenings of the World Wars. Moreover, genocide of Holocaust by Nazi rulers made human life so terrible and anxious. Modern man's existence becomes obscure, uncertain and insecure due to unexpected tribulations. Man lost his faith in God as he was unable to get defence from God.

### 2.2 Absence of God: Nietzsche's Nihilism

Nietzsche started his academic career as a pious student of theology but his Christian faith had undermined by scientific discoveries. In his book *The Gay Science*, the phrase "God is dead" had grabbed the world and questioned their existence. Friedrich Nietzsche, father of Nihilism proclaims objective truth, "absence of God" in times of tribulations. Nietzsche strongly targeted the foundations of Christianity and traditional morality to bring awareness on his contemporary realities. William Hubben says that fate made him as "a solitary prophet" and the roots might have been his early "moral shocks". (Hubben, 93)

### 2.3 Absence of Harmony: Absurdity

The conflict between man and world leads to absurdity of anxieties where fundamental question "Why?" rises such as "Why do I suffer?" "Is there any Savior?", "Does God Exist?" The views are discussed in *Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil* in an informative way. Absurdity is a fundamental clash in human consciousness with the world where an individual struggle to get harmony from his surroundings. So, the man is in 'out of harmony' to do anything in his life. Then he moves into the melancholic world that consists of alienation, uncertainty and despair. The confusion dips the man into absurdity, where he feels alone, stressful and ambiguous.

## 3. ACTIVE NIHILISM: UNDERSTANDING TRUTH IN ABSURD LIFE

The modern man is in out of harmony when he carries undignified fight for his life such as lack of freedom to live or take decisions of his own. The post-war creation of absurd theatre clearly portrays modern man's psychological sufferings of external factors like Hiroshima atomic bomb explosion, unexpected war fare, and Hitler's rules. The world had gone through psychological trauma due to immeasurable loss of people, wealth and protection. The effected humanity questioned their existence for whom sake they were suffering and to what sake they were in danger or threat. Artistically Samuel Beckett's characterization in *Endgame* is the best example for series of suffering in silence and anxieties, terrible genocide of the period. Similarly in *Processions*, Badal Sircar portrayed absurd theme of multiple processions and uncertainty of screaming voices of Khoka in the play with unique characterization. Khoka, a young boy represents social anxieties of Indian youth.

‘Problems are problems’ but identification of the problem is crucial in the process. Moreover, finding solutions with right attitude is a skill. Attitude makes a big difference in making the environment positive or negative. It can be illustrated with some possible examples as follows:

Human Absurdity	Truth	Active Nihilism	Passive Nihilism
Life	Mysterious	Searching for meaning in Life	Life is hopelessness
Sufferings	Attachment	Meaningful suffering	Despair
Death	Inevitable	Right to Die	Fear of Death
Attitude	Response	Right Attitude Saying ‘No to No’	Negative Saying ‘Yes to No’
Anxiety	Threat/danger	Sweet Anxiousness	Trauma

### 3.1 Understanding the Truth of Life: Mysterious

The absurdity of human life is mostly portrayed in the post-modern drama of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously, Birth and Death in human life are mysterious, enigmatic and absurd in the modern world. Influence of philosophical insights on many playwrights like Samuel Beckett in Western theatre and Badal Sircar in Indian theatre changed the scenario of conventional theatre with their experimental plays and themes in post-modern drama. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare depicts that world is a stage and humans are actors playing roles through their inescapable, cyclical journey from birth to death. The poem *Seven Ages* states that seven ages as Infant, School boy, Lover, Soldier, Justice, Old man and final decline are part and parcel of life. But in each stage man tries to find the truth, meaning and purpose of life but he feels mysterious.

The absurdity of birth and death is common for human beings. When man understands the truth of absurdity, he can accept the reality of life. Albert Camus, the great existentialist believes that accepting meaninglessness in human life is essence where as famous nihilist Friedrich Nietzsche claims that creating meaning in meaningless life develops catastrophic consciousness in the complex world. Kirsten E. Shepherd - Barr rightly said in *Modern Drama* that “If we are mere specks in a void without meaning, we have to *create* meaning, since it is not given”. (Shepherd-Barr,77). The inner strength of will power helps modern man to embrace the suffering in a positive way and it can turn suffering into meaningful suffering.

### 3.2 Understanding the Truth of Sufferings: Attachment

Generally, “suffering” is unwelcomed word in human mind. The blissful life of harmonious existence is laid by the foundation of traumatic veracity of inescapable suffering, pain and struggle. Buddhist monks say that the root cause of suffering is attachment. If man attaches to the worldly things like recognition, money, wealth, love and expectations automatically he has to welcome both misery and happiness. Buddhism suggests humanity to practice attachment to the detachment.

The philosophy of life teaches that accept the pain in life which is unavoidable but as per psychology suffering is a choice. Pain in life is unavoidable for every human being and therefore Dr. Joseph Murphy states in *In Believe in Yourself* that “Pain is not a punishment; it is the consequence of the misuse of your inner power.” (Murphy 51)



### 3.3 Understanding the Truth of Death: Inevitable

The fear of Death causes suffering in most of the situations because death is unacceptable or unimaginable word for weaker mind set of people. If truth behind 'Death' is understood, the anxiety of death will be vanished. The reasons behind death may vary from person to person but it is unavoidable in journey of life. In Buddhism and Christianity 'death' has a prominent place for attainment or salvation. In contrary to the beliefs of Christianity Nietzsche argues that though life has no inherent meaning, the inner strength of positive mind set can search meaning for life before death. By creating 'self' man can survive happily in midst of sufferings.

## 4. EXPLORING POSITIVITY IN ABSURD SUFFERINGS

### 4.1 Creating 'Self': *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Friedrich Nietzsche's novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a story about Prophet Zarathustra. It is one of the important works of Western philosophy and published in 1883. The prophet descends from his mountain retreat to preach a new teaching about humanity, morality and spirituality. It is a mouth-piece work of Nietzsche describes themes of Life, Death and Morality. *Urbemensch* (Superman), the protagonist overcomes his traditional morality and achieved a higher level of existence by his self-affirmation and transformation.

The novel is an example for optimism in nihilism. The novel explores various themes from ethics, psychology to politics and culture. The character *Urbemensch* stands for higher level of knowledge serves as a teacher or a mentor. Thus, one must create a goal of high level in life. The other character "Saint" symbolizes traditional morality and religion, so one must develop an attitude of saying "No to No" like blind beliefs in the system. The one more character "voluntary beggar" represents free will of an individual. Nietzsche says that an existentialist usually gives value for his free will but it is his choice.

An active nihilist faces catastrophic situations with positive attitude and constructs new life by quitting despair, gloominess in their lives. These positive will-powered individuals overcome negative thinking by creating their own validation such as self-belief, self-respect, self-esteem and self-love. Nietzsche expresses his views in three concepts in the novel as follows:

- Learn to Live
- Learn to Die
- Learn to say 'No'

### 4.2 Accepting Psychological Suffering in *Endgame*

Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* is one of the best examples of Absurd Theatre and it was first written in French and translated to English by himself. The title *Endgame* itself symbolically states that human life is a game that ends with death, an inevitable incident in human life. The play *Endgame* reflects hard realities of modern world, in which modern man is accompanied by disorder and disbelief, a kind of insecure existence. Beckett's plays are mostly deal recurring theme of his surrounding man and his problems.

The expression of "nothingness" is expressed in the play *Endgame* with four characters such as Hamm, Clove, Nag and Nell. The minimalists are in great agony throughout the play as Hamm is confined to chair, Clove walks with difficulty and Nag and Nell occupied little space in their ashbins. The absurd play never provides a meaning but motivates the audience to interpret it in accordance with their perspective.

The theme of the *Endgame* is obviously labelled as absurd play of "interdependence" with minimized characters Hamm, Clov, Nag and Nell. The mutual relationship between the characters shows the necessary need of adjustment as a sort of compromise in life. Beckett satirically mocked pitiful condition of characters with his artistic humorous dialogues. The characters in the play *Endgame* encounters existential struggle of the contemporary issues, and the characters strive to endure the circumstances as it is without an alternative choice.

The characters are in sombre situation to lead their pathetic life; it seems that they have lost their intrinsic value and happiness. The life of Nag and Nell acknowledges the anguish of life in the modern existence and their life in ashbins symbolizes the terrible life of old aged parents because they are thrown into

garbage bins as wastage. The ashbins symbolize coffin, death and grave thus the unavoidable end of the human to be swept to grave by death. From beginning to the end of the play each character strives for existence and survival in a hopeful way.

Beckett's language in *Endgame* is something in nothingness. When speaker communicates, the listener must grasp the aim of the speaker but in Clov's receptiveness states that the purpose of language is demolished. Beckett's black humour is visible in repetitive dialogue of Clov's to Hamm "I will leave you, I have things to do" (Beckett, 110) but their dependency reflects fear of isolation. In Beckett's plays repetition is a literary device through that characters' futile existence is portrayed. The characters' repeated dialogues highlight a representation of post-modern trauma of the period.

### 4.3 Societal Suffering in *Procession*

Badal Sircar's *Procession* is play of social satire. The play is aimed to portray societal hardships of the times in which communist ideologies such as classless society, moneyless society are demanded for a better society. Basically, India is caste based society in that lower strata people are devalued and demotivated by wealthy upper class people. The disillusionment of modern society is well- portrayed with the themes of class struggles, labour exploitation, black market, violence, unemployment and identity crisis

The characterization in the play, *Procession* presents psyche of an individual. The play mainly focuses on two generations of young and old. Khoka is a young boy, who represents contemporary society of youth who are in great disappointment. Old man is hopeful in midst of uncertainties of the world. The insecure youth are in disillusionment due to lack of employment and identity but Old man searches for a new home of egalitarian society in a hopeful way. The positivity in absurdity is clearly visible with the characterization.

## 5. RIGHT ATTITUDE: ACTIVE NIHILISM IN SUFFERINGS

### 5.1 Right Attitude towards Sufferings

Attitude is simply a 'response' in human language. It transmits the message directly to other as what communication does. When a person is confronted with a difficult situation, the action towards the problem is his 'attitude'. Attitude is in four categories such as Positive Attitude, Negative Attitude, Neutral Attitude and Right Attitude. Everyone has to know the tips to handle negative attitudes like fear, anxiety, tension, over thinking which would emerge from unconscious mind unknowingly. Michael Foley in *The Age of Absurdity* says that "the positive emotions are capricious day-trippers, but the negative emotions are imperialists – determined to invade, overwhelm, occupy and subjugate." (Foley, 60) The negative emotions dominate the human psyche and slowly weaken person's mind and hence self-analysis has to be done in a regular practice. If man goes with self-analysis, his mind would open the doors with productive attitudes like open body language, positive-going, patience, compassion, enthusiasm and confidence. If not so, pessimism closes all the doors of optimism.

### 5.2 Learn to Say 'No' - *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Nietzsche *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* tells about the importance of "Self-transformation and it is possible with "self-affirmation only. It is the first and foremost practice to focus on self. In this process, man has to focus on weaknesses rather than strengths. The proverb "To err is human; to forgive is divine "is helpful for the man to support himself or excuse the others for social well-being. The self-examination helps a lot in taking the risks in life as a challenge. Self-belief, self-respect, self-analysis, self-esteem, self-questioning, self-confidence are a part of "Self". Ms. Shalini Rana rightly supports in her article that "every individual is unique and different from other individuals and he is replaceable and in the journey of life one has to conquer oneself rather than world". (Vol V, 2022)

### 5.3 Learn to Live – *The Myth of Sisyphus*

The harsh realities of two world wars made the human existence horrible and hopeless. The meaningless existence brought forth physical and mental suffering like fear, anxiety, pain, misery, discomfort, anguish, adversity, hardship, torment, distress and struggles. Besides, scientific advancement created unemployment which made so miserable for common people. In such insecure world, modern man strives to live with modern predicaments such as existential angst, uncertainty, loss of hope, lack of identity and alienation.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus portrayed unending spirit of Sisyphus in accomplishing the pointless task. Camus suggests through the character Sisyphus as not being rebellious in nature because non-acceptance causes suffering. Sisyphus's two traits of acceptance and resilience turn the unending suffering to a great challenge. The non-rebellious or submissive nature is the main reason for his happiness in the world of melancholy. For Nietzsche suffering can protect as a psychological defence. And hence one must create one's own meaning in the meaningless world and build value in the hopeless world. To achieve the fearful fear, Nietzsche advises humanity not to search for reasons for the problem but to face the sufferings with bold mind set of 'will power'.

### 5.4 Learn to Die- *Endgame*

The play opens with a bare setting of nothingness. The setting is a small room with two small windows, two covered dustbins, a chair in the centre, and a door. The light in the room is grey. The chair in the middle is covered by a sheet. When curtain opens, the pseudo couple shocks the audience with their irrelevant observations and enigmatic appearances such as watching the world through window, continual walking, confined to chair and ashbins. The characters strive for uncertain future but there is no change in their lives. The play starts in unconventional setting of the stage and ends with no progression, no development and no resolution in the characterization.

In *Beyond the Pleasure and Principle* Sigmund Freud states that repetition is an upsetting experience in which unfulfilled desires affect subconscious mind. According to him, it is either physical or emotional trauma, in which mind struggles to process its normalcy. If expected desire is not fulfilled in any relationship, repetition compulsion may create strained relationship, where people may not trust or like each other. The same relationship is portrayed through Hamm and Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*. Dependency is the key factor in which tension, conflict and difficulty in communication played a role of absurdity.

### 5.5 Learn to Change- *Procession*

In *Procession* Sircar presented multiple sub-themes of human exploitation in day today life. The Bengali based theme of *Michil* or *Procession* was staged in 1974 at the village of Ramchandrapur in West Bengal. The play is designed to perform in busy streets of Calcutta to achieve audiences' involvement in action more than of response of negative or positive. The play has multiple themes of processions, altogether portrays social suffering in common.

Sircar's theatre is generally aimed for the oppressed people in the society to bring consciousness about socio-political evils like terrorism, capitalism and caste discrimination. The Satabdi team of Third Theatre attract the audience to participate in the procession without any pre-planned practices. Thus, it is called as theatre for oppressed because lower strata community of people are unable to express their inner agony and then so, it is an opportunity for weaker section of people to raise their voice as a protest.

### 5.5 Sweet Anxiousness: Understanding fear and anxiety

The author wishes to conclude that Nihilism of gloominess is definitely the other side of coin. So it's better to understand the absurdity of human anxiety in a positive way, then it becomes sweet anxiousness. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard says that anxiety is a driving force to achieve meaning in futile life. Thus, therefore 'will power' in absurd situation turns suffering into meaningful suffering for that 'self-belief' is mostly required to search meaning in life. Dr. Joseph Murphy says in *Power of your Subconscious Mind* that "True and lasting happiness will come into your life the day you realize that your subconscious can solve your problems, heal your body, and prosper you beyond your fondest dream"(Murphy,204)



## REFERENCES

- [1] Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.
- [2] Esslin, Martin. *An Anatomy of Drama*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.
- [3] Foley, Michael. *The Age of Absurdity*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2010.
- [4] Herbage, Alfred. *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. U.S.A: Viking Penguin Inc., 1977.
- [5] Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, England: Penguin, 2005.
- [6] Hubben, William. *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche & Kafka*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- [7] Murphy, Dr. Joseph. *Believe in Yourself*. India: Rakshi, 2024
- [8] Murphy, Dr. Joseph. *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*. India: Amazing Reads.
- [9] Rana, Ms Shalini. "Absurdity, Nihilism And The Existential Crisis: A Study of Mistry's Novels through the Lens of Existentialism." *GAP Bodhi Taru Journal*. Volume-V, Issue IV, October-December, Special Issue, 2022.
- [https://www.gapbodhitaru.org/res/articles/\(117-120\)%20ABSURDITY,%20NIHILISM%20AND%20THE%20EXISTENTIAL%20CRISIS%20A%20STUDY%20OF%20MISTRY%20NOVELS%20THROUGH%20THE%20LENS%20OF%20EXISTENTIALIM.pdf](https://www.gapbodhitaru.org/res/articles/(117-120)%20ABSURDITY,%20NIHILISM%20AND%20THE%20EXISTENTIAL%20CRISIS%20A%20STUDY%20OF%20MISTRY%20NOVELS%20THROUGH%20THE%20LENS%20OF%20EXISTENTIALIM.pdf)
- [10] Shepherd-Barr., Kirsten E, *Modern Drama: A Very Short Introduction*. United Kingdom: Oxford 2016.

