

The Big Void: Lost God in Western and Eastern Literature

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Abstract

Proposed paper explores role of Absurd Theatre in relation to current times. It does not aim to come up with answers but seeks to make its readers reflect on the absurdity and futility of human life in order to understand his existence in this wide world through philosophical enquiry of Eastern and Western philosophies. Paper focuses on existence of 'Godot' and man's efforts to attain salvation in spite of the threat as posed by a fragmented world. Work undertaken is an effort to trace absurdism in both Eastern and Western parts of the World in present times where culture is being understood in different contexts. Here is a small effort to explore Western thought through Sartre's work, Nietzsche's views, Eastern thinking as reflected in Bhagavad Gita and Gautam Buddha's teachings, and understanding metaphysical emptiness as brought forth by Haruki Murakami. While West confronts meaninglessness through rebellion and self-definition, Eastern works talk about acceptance and transcendence for confronting the Void. Humanity at large is struggling to find purpose amid the absurd existence. Literature, philosophy, and theology have been taken up for interdisciplinary insights on universal human concerns in uncertain world of present times.

Keywords: Absurd, Meaningless, Philosophy, Humanity, Purpose

Introduction

Philosophical View

Absurdist believe that humanity searches for meaning in a meaningless world and in a universe that stays silent without offering an answer to resolve man's dilemma. There are some absurdist who believe that one should embrace what is absurd and not search for something that does not exist; that man should connect himself to beautiful life and live it fully without trying to find cosmic purpose for his existence. Thus, absurdist warn against meaningless conflicts that occur in meaningless world for non existing God. Albert Camus gives example of myth of ever toiling Sisyphus to avoid Nihilism. Absurdism for him does not mean that man should move towards despairing life that in turn might lead to suicide. Instead he calls for heroic revolt against oppression that is caused by meaninglessness.. Camus asks man to become liberated from all kinds of constraining norms, allowing oneself to then create a purpose for living. While Jean Paul Sartre invites man to create some meaning for his life, Albert Camus asks people to defy the meaninglessness and enjoy life to fullest. Both absurdist approach absurdism in different ways. Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus had different philosophical outlook to what it meant by absurdism in the world. Nietzsche declared that "God is dead". He had commented upon collapse of moral order in Christian world, Sartre's argument is that there is no such thing as a "divine creator" and humans come first in existence and then they go on to define their existence through choices made by them. Camus does

not invite anyone to make choices, he just tells one to enjoy at all times.

Though God does not exist for these absurdists. they are not without hope for mankind. Nietzsche believes that old order paves way for the new, old values create possibility of new. For him this is an opportunity to overcome oneself. This philosopher was an optimist who was saying “YES” to life. Camus keeps silent and let’s others know that one should accept the absurd without looking at false comforts. His hero, Sisyphus, works without any kind of higher purpose. His message is to live despite negativity and futility. Sartre emphasizes freedom and responsibility within and indifferent universe.

Problem Statement

This paper explores different literary works from Eastern and Western English writings seeking interpretation to “death of God”, a shift from metaphysical certainty to existential ambiguity. Texts are explored to seek answer to difference between literal atheism in Western Context and spiritual displacement in Eastern Context.

For this, an effort has been made to understand what “God” means in different hemispheres, i.e Eastern and Western. Prominent Eastern literary writings from thinking rooted in Hindu, Buddhist and other indigenous belief systems met out different treatment to “God”.

Vedas, Puranas, Mahabharata and Ramayana from Hindu literature come up with personal God like Krishna and Shiva on one hand and an impersonal God termed as Brahman that coincides with pure consciousness on the other. Divinity in Eastern texts is to be explored as “ Atman is Brahman” in the Upanishads where the self is one with the ultimate reality. Here the divine is plural, multi layered, and often symbolic Buddhist literatures shifts away from the God who is the Creator; this literature talks about enlightenment that dawns into the nature of mind. Tao Te Ching, a Taoist text, says Tao is natural, ineffable way that is closer to cosmic order than a personal God. Eastern literature presents non-dualism unlike dualistic thinking to be found in Western thought. Here divinity is discovered, realized, or harmonized with. While man looks for salvation in western world, in eastern world he seeks moksha, nirvana by dissolving ego.

Western concept of “God” as portrayed and shaped by Christianity, Judaism and Islam refers to God as a personal, single and creator deity who comes with human-like emotions and with intentions of loving, judging, forgiving and commanding.

In Bible, God is the maker of covenant who directly interacts with the prophets. In Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’ he is the ultimate moral order, and he is the sovereign judge of good and evil in Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’. There is clear distinction between the transcendent and eternal God and finite creation in the form of Humanity in Western Literature. This in turn shapes Western literary themes of sin, redemption, divine justice, salvation, and human rebellion.

Literature Review

This study takes up five literary texts from Western literature and five from Eastern literature that directly address and strongly echo that the “God is dead” theme.

‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’ (1883–85) by Friedrich Nietzsche contains famous declaration of the author, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him”, it examines moral collapse and the need for new values.

‘The Brothers Karamazov’ (1880) by Fodor Dostoevsky, interrogates the consequences of God’s silence and the moral vacuum that follows. Focus is upon poem that is central to Western atheistic literature. Ivan

Karamazov argues that God does not exist, “everything is permitted”. Here one comes across moral chaos that follows divine absence.

‘Waiting for Godot’ (1953) by Samuel Beckett addresses absurdist view of the world where transcendent authority is either absent or dead. It is an empty universe where, “Nothing happens. Nobody comes, nobody goes.”

‘The Stranger’ (1942) by Albert Camus depicts universe sans divine meaning. Meursault confronts a world where morality is human-made, “I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world.”

‘Lord of the Flies’ (1954) by William Golding explores collapse of moral order when symbolic divine morality goes missing, showing a godless world spiraling into chaos. “Maybe there is a beast... maybe it’s only us.”

Five well known texts from Eastern cultural backgrounds touch upon themes of divine absence, disillusionment with religion, or the void after loss of traditional faith.

Arundhati Roy in her ‘The God of Small Things’ (1997) talks about breakdown of conventional religious and moral structure. God does not appear in a world ruled by caste, politics and personal tragedy.

In ‘Midnight’s Children’ (1981) Rushdie talks about traditional divine authority giving way to history, nationhood and human agency. India’s fate unfolds without divine intervention.

Rohinton Mistry depicts suffering, injustice and political violence in a world without God in his ‘A Fine Balance’ (1995). Characters in this work struggle in an amoral universe where the divine intervention is absent. Suffering is arbitrary, “You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair.”

‘The Guide’ (1945) by R K Narayan is a story about a reluctant holy man. Religion is revealed as social performance rather than divine truth, “I had to act holy.” The story exposes hollowness of religious authority where there is no divine presence.

‘The English Teacher’ (1945) by R K Narayan comes up with a protagonist who confronts a universe where God is either distant or silent. Author reflects upon 20th C Indian secular-existential questioning. After personal loss, the protagonist finds no comfort in religion; meaning must be self-made, “Life is to be lived, not controlled.”

Research Questions

Questions taken up for study focus upon manifestation of different conditions that reflect upon “God is dead” in texts under consideration.

Different strategies express divine absence or metaphysical collapse. Books under lens have been studied to seek answer to this specific question.

Research Gap

There is no one framework where studies directly analyze “God is dead” across Eastern and Western literatures. No direct theory fits Nietzschean nihilism into Eastern literary systems. Most research on “God is Dead” is studied through either European existentialism or modernist and absurdist Western texts.

There is very little said about postcolonial writings of Rushdie, Mistry, Narayan or Roy in relation to breakdown of traditional values and religious systems, void after colonial disruption or spiritual homelessness. Intersection of postcoloniality + divine absence is a missing area of research. Eastern literary expressions of divine absence from Chinese, Japanese existentialists, Korean modernists and Middle Eastern remain understudied.

There is no strong comparative research to distinguish between Western Philosophical nihilism and

Eastern spiritual fragmentation to be found.

Scope of this Study to fill Gaps

This study contributes to this research by proposing further topics for research that can fill existing gaps: Nietzsche's statement of the "death of God" can be studied outside European existentialism, modernism, and absurdism by delving into Eastern cultures that do not share his theological foundations.

Gaps can be addressed through comprehensive understanding of texts in context of cross cultural comparative studies, exploring Eastern Anglophone and translated texts in relation to divine crisis, in formulation of theoretical frameworks that can account for non-Western metaphysical structures and by furthering investigation of interdisciplinary works on global implications of divine absence. This would address the problem faced in comprehensive understanding of how "God is dead" condition is reimagined in Eastern and Western literatures by revealing broader patterns of spiritual, moral, and cultural transformation in the modern world.

Thesis Statement

While Western literature talks about death of God as an existential crisis and a moral crisis; Eastern literature connects it to loss of traditional values and spiritual systems. Eastern texts negotiate colonial modernity, disillusionment and identity crisis; Western texts focus on collapse of absolute values, absurdity, meaninglessness and human autonomy.

Methodology

Qualitative research is theoretical. Focus on key literary texts from Western English literature and Indian English literature.

Conclusion

The study reveals a condition where Western texts depict divine absence as existential and moral crisis, whereas Eastern writers focus on secularization, postcolonial rupture and cultural dislocation. These findings underscore how shared human concerns-meaning, morality, and spiritual orientation are negotiating differently across cultural and historical contexts. Future research can expand by including more literature from Japan, China and Korea in the East and African and Latin American literature from the West. Motif of the "death of God" remains a vital evolving lens through which writers worldwide interrogate human condition in post-metaphysical, globalized era.

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