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Postmodern Absurdist Critique of Julian Barnes's *The Only Story*

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Abstract

*This research paper endeavors to examine the postmodern absurdism as a literary subgenre in postmodern fiction. It delves deep into the concept of absurdism by concentrating upon the characteristics that distinguish it as a postmodern subgenre. Through the analysis of the postmodern novel, *The Only Story* (2018), this research paper illustrates how the characteristics of absurdism have an impact upon a postmodern society characterized by boredom, meaninglessness, futility, and confusion. It also highlights how different characters, events, and places have been portrayed in the novel to depict the absurdity of human existence. The theoretical paradigm of the research is based upon Thomas Nagel's Essay "The Absurd" which is about postmodern space of absurdism and was presented in the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division. The study limelights how the absurd occurrences and bizarre characters found in the researcher's primary text depict the complexity of the postmodern absurd world in both literal and metaphoric dimensions.*

Key Words: Postmodern Absurdism, Julian Barnes, The Absurd, The Only Story

Introduction

This research paper explores absurdism and co-production of postmodern society in *The Only Story* (2018) and asserts that absurdism cannot be separated from postmodernism. This research is grounded on the theoretical framework of *The Absurd* (1971) that has been expounded by the selection of the text written by Julian Barnes, *The Only Story* (2018). This text gives a comprehensive idea to understand absurdism under the heading of postmodernism and also clarifies that how postmodern society has its deep effects on the absurd subjects. Most of the researchers view absurdism from the theatre's aspects in literature, but this research provides a postmodern angle to look at absurdism and also highlights its harmful effects on

society. Furthermore, in contemporary fiction, absurdity as a topic is often been depicted communicated; however, this paper not only proclaims that we are caught in a tumultuous journey but also that we ourselves have divided the present-day world and can't get away from the sentiment of estrangement and dislodging. As Thomas Nagel asserts, "Absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics" (Nagel, 1971).

Barnes's *The Only Story* (2018) is quite different from his previous fictional works as it depicts man's absurdity and experience of life's awful powers, like anguish, estrangement, breakup, alienation, and purposelessness skirting either on agnosticism or

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sustenance. It is inside this setting that Barnes delineates his characters as the people who, without any assistance, are confronting the brutal attacks of a meaningless life. Through this test practice, they try to cover what Camus portrayed as the unfamiliar opening to comprehend life as absurd. Barnes is completely mindful of the plight of men who are living in the contemporary society, lost to values, higher ideals, and even God, not discovering sustenance in time-worn convictions and customary feelings. Barnes's hero feels obliged to live on the individualistic plane. It is this felt sensation in living circumstances that at last outcomes into absurdity for him. He perceives this reality both inside and outside the marvelous world. He inventively and imaginatively depicts this capability in his *The Only Story* (2018), subsequently giving a predictable structure to the ill-defined realities of human presence in absurd state of social disorder.

The Only Story (2018) is a story of the protagonist Paul, who is only 19-years old, and he falls in love with Susan who is 48-year old. Both met with each other at the tennis club where they were assigned to be the partners in a doubles tennis tournament. Susan is married to Gordan, who is amusingly horrifying and drinks all the time and has two daughters. Paul and Susan begin an affair which remains till the completion of the first part of the novel. The second part of the novel starts with the fight between Paul and Susan on a trivial issue that becomes the harbinger of their breakup. Both Paul and Susan feel meaninglessness in their lives and their lives becomes absurd. In the third part of the novel, Paul starts living alone and contemplates over the meaning of love. He also tries to solve the riddle of what had happened with him and Susan and finally finds no great reason for their breakup.

Literature Review

Harris in his *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (1971) explicated that late American books pass on the feelings that "our own is an absurd universe, disorganized and without signifying" (p. 64). Numerous authors of such Absurd books endeavor to show an understanding of this sad circumstance that infests the postmodern culture, giving bits of knowledge into how one can acclimate to this better approach forever. Michael Foley's *The*

Age of Absurdity: Why Modern Life Makes It Hard to Be Happy (2011) presents how a variety of both synthetic and common elements represent the bedlam in contemporary society. He further argues that such factors of bedlam become the cause of wars and cataclysmic events. Foley proposes that the best approach to get by right now is to acknowledge and hold on the confusion as a necessary piece of discovering comfort in its absurdity.

Michael Meredith in "*For the Absurd*" *Log Magazine: Special Thematic Issue on the Absurd* (2011) states that absurd realism is neither against the realism & humanism nor it is against the positivism or post-positivism rather it is a space where things are always unclear and concrete. On the creative front, existentialism is mostly represented in the works of [Jean-Paul Sartre \(1948\)](#), Albert Camus (1942) and [Franz Kafka \(1996\)](#), who all perceive the absurd as a reality. Instead of being an empirical structure in and of itself, Camus sees it as ridiculous state of present that is addressed through fiction. Camus, for example, in his work *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) considers whether human activities have any significance in his work or not. The Sisyphean predicament, in his opinion, is an ethical narrative about the mad state of human proximity, in which man, like Sisyphus, is continually torn between his power and the horrible discipline where the whole existence is applied towards accomplishing nothing" ([Gavins, 2012](#), p.108). Given the absurdity of the struggle between man's desire for grandeur and the real-world elements of an adversarial world, Camus suggests that suicide is an acknowledgment of life as futile and is the most basic way out for man's anguish.

In a review of *The Only Story*, [Lucy Scholes \(2018\)](#) opined that Julian Barnes has written this work with such a breaking enthusiastic sharpness as an old man is looking back to his life and is trying to recall his glorious past. Paul, the protagonist of the novel thinks back over his and Susan's life and tries to reconcile the familiar question of memory in which he could find the value of their existence. [Lawrence Osborne \(2019\)](#) in her book review of *The Only Story* says that as the story of the novel continues, Julian Barnes narrates it through all the first, second and third-persons narrations. Sometimes, however not generally, with inconspicuous impact, Barnes explains the uneasy

living of Paul and Susan which shows their postmodernist absurd existence.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the current study encompasses the idea of Postmodern Absurdism in literature. Despite the fact that its first appearance was seen back in 1875 which showed postmodernism as a method for depicting a style of painting, the term postmodernism is associated for the most part, with the twentieth century, French Impressionism. As Grenz comments, it was first associated with painting, religion, society and later with engineering and verses. (Grenz,1996). The Hungarian critic Martin Esslin coined the term 'The Absurd' in his book *The Theatre of Absurd* 1961 (Esslin, 1961), which displays the spearheading and progressive works of well-known absurdist writers, like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Arthur Adamov, Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Paul Sartre. Panda avows that these absurdist writers exhibit extraordinary types of craziness to the performance center through social changes and reactions to the human situation in the after-war society (Panda, 2016). Esslin defines the term in these words "absurdism in the field of music, the word 'Absurd' means 'out of harmony' and holds dictionary meanings such as incongruous, unreasonable, illogical, and ridiculous" (Esslin, 1961, p. 23). In Petty's views, "Absurdism, is one of the most exciting and creative movement in the Modern Age, as a term it is applied to a particular type of realistic work which has absorbed readers and critics for the past four-decade" (2012).

Thomas Nagel, in his essay *The Absurd* (1971), talks about the absurdity and discloses the fact that absurdism is a permanent or a temporary condition for which a man struggles without any reason. According to him, man assumes that the thing that he wants to have is the best thing, and without that thing, his existence will be futile. He remains unable to see the already existing reality by foregrounding it with his absurd life. Nagel further argues that man's condition of absurdity is because of our attention to a trivial thing. He asserts that man's attention is usually drawn towards a subject that has no serious value and ultimately, man becomes overwhelmed by that subject by rejecting all the reality that exists

within his circle. Furthermore, Nagel argues that whenever a man faces the situation of absurdity, he usually tries to get the existential idea by solving the problem due to which he has been facing the absurdity. He says that it is the aspiration that excites one's emotions of absurdity, and this aspiration of one thing makes the life of that person absurd as the man cannot look at the other things that are happening in his surroundings. Nagel asserts that "In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality" (1971, p. 4).

Analysis

Barnes, in *The Only Story* (2018) investigates the person's awareness of being isolated from the entire mechanical assemblage of social rituals and ceremonies. He opens the text by uttering the following words:

Most of us have only one story to tell. I don't mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there's only one that matters, only one finally worth telling, this is mine (Barnes, 2018, p. 13).

Julian Barnes sees that self-distance is a major obstruction in the psychological development of a person which is more regrettable than social estrangement. The protagonist of the novel Paul, endeavors for his significance and reason for being loved forever. He is very peaceful for his nearby residents and neglects to give them any comfort. He finds himself when he approaches Susan in the tennis club and understands that separation lies in getting included. This also shows that Paul is a perfect symbol of absurdity as through his character, the writer is intentionally attempting to pass on to the comments on absurdity, which is overwhelming in the present society. The novel is absurd in its nature as it manages the hero's depression and feelings of anguish radiating from his irritation, breakup, meaninglessness, convention, and his actual self. As Paul asserts, "Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less? That is, I think, finally, the only real question" (Barnes, 2018, p. 13).

Nagel, in his essay *The Absurd* (1971), asserts that whenever a man feels that he is in an absurd situation, he actually tries to change it through different thinking patterns. He firstly goes for changing the thing due to which his aspirations are being demolished, then he looks at the next end that is the realistic manner of looking at the things, and finds that there exists the reality. He himself writes, "When a person finds himself in an absurd situation, he will usually attempt to change it, by modifying his aspirations (1971, p. 4). Barnes also examines absurdity by focusing on unhappiness and the struggle to adjust to ordinary activities, the futile attempt to escape life, and the struggle to change in conformity with an emotional culture. Barnes introduces characters in his work who have improved existentialist ideas that correlate with Absurdism. He anticipated the belief that solipsism is an innate power that affects some aspect of the human experience by saying that myself is the best self. He regards fatigue as a mental miracle in the majority of his stories, and his seemingly exhausted protagonists are treated as dynamic, multifaceted, and strengthening persons. Barnes believes that fatigue, which includes a state of heightened hesitance, holds the key to opportunity. Barnes says in his Kenyon College address that the most important kind of opportunity is the ability to think about others and to sacrifice for them repeatedly. As Barnes speaks through Paul:

The time, the place, the social milieu? I don't know how significant they are in anecdotes about affection. Maybe in the days of yore, in the works of art, where there are fights among affection and obligation, love and religion, love and family, love and the state ([Barnes, 2018](#), p. 13).

Barnes's novel offers the reader a storyteller who is both intriguing and amusing. His ability for the formation of period interferences additionally has no little influence in keeping the reader in thrall. *The Only Story* happens in the fifties, sixties, and seventies at the core of the Sexual Revolution when profound desire and enthusiastic delicacy was turned into the request for the day and ultimately led towards Absurdism of life (Steel, 2018). As Paul speaks for Susan:

I was matched with Mrs. Susan Macleod, who was unmistakably not a Caroline. She was, I estimated, someplace in her forties, with her hair pulled back by a lace, uncovering her ears, which I neglected to see at the time ([Barnes, 2018](#), p.16).

Barnes gives a point by point record of the odd encounters of both of these upset hyper-Absurd characters. He centers around the different blends of mental issues, youth injury, money related conditions that unite them as bookkeepers under the office. Through portraying their current age and affection Barnes, communicates the fatigue, estrangement, and tumult which is present in the contemporary society. *The Only Story* (2018) sets that an uplifted awareness can be accomplished when fatigue is changed over to fixation. From the beginning, Paul is resolved to not winding up in the suburbs like "with a tennis spouse and two kids," but on the other hand, he is absolutely uninterested in easygoing sex. Susan at first encapsulates both defiance and profundity; however, in the middle of the novel she deals with their love in a very affectionate manner. In spite of the fact that the relationship brings the sting of social shame and much misfortune as well, the storyteller stays devoted to his development of the story. As Kirkus proclaims, "The Only Story is a somber but well-conceived character study suffused with themes of loss and self-delusion" (Kirkus, 2018).

Nagel in his essay *The Absurd* (1971) talks about absurdity and asserts that the absurdity is like having no aim in life while man, through changing his mind, can change absurdity into existentialism. He further suggests that an individual faces absurdity on a temporary or permanent basis and tries to get out of his by fighting against it. In *The Only Story*, one can easily notice the Kierkegaardian theory that the individual is exclusively answerable for offering significance to their own lives and for carrying on with that life enthusiastically and truly, regardless of numerous Existential impediments and interruptions, including despair, tension, absurdity, alienation, and boredom. As Paul narrates, "My mother, of course, was never stuck for a phrase. As I said, I drove Mrs. Macleod home, and nothing

happened. And again; and again" (Barnes, 2018, p. 18).

Positive self-evaluation is a crucial component of the ability to cope with absurd levels of anxiety and isolation. A positive mental self-perception is a sign of trust and establishes the conditions needed to face challenges and the unexpected future. People always construct absurdism as a basic principle to interpret their own reality, giving everything they encounter, relevance and significance. As Nagel writes "It would be different if we could not step back and reflect on the process but were merely led from impulse to impulse without self-consciousness" (Nagel, 1971, p.5). Man is fully aware of his inner and outer world, but he interprets both of the world in a way that no one except him can interpret that better than him. After getting experience of the inner and outer world, people construct their own phenomenological reality which remains dependent upon their own biased observation. The procedure of self-awareness is the name of this innovative procedure. Barnes also, through his novel, tries to do the same by making his protagonist character worthwhile. "I am sorry our acquaintance has been so brief, my dear" (2018, p. 47).

Nagel, while talking about absurdism, argues that "most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually" (1971, p. 1). Social structures provide a sense of belonging and stability, as well as a mechanism to avoid confrontations with mortality and absurdity. It is like a person who works in a company that is nearing the end of its life expectancy. For the modern man, the consciousness of absurdism develops a sense of isolation and terror. In Barnes's point of view, everything is destined to an end, and all endeavors planned for keeping up what is known and natural are insignificant.

I guess I could do some genuine research – search for old postcards in the central library, or chase out the not many photographs I have from that time, and retrofit my story as needs are. In any case, I'm recalling the past, not reconstructing it (Barnes, 2018, p. 4).

Nagel asserts "that absurdity results because what we take seriously is something small and

insignificant and individual" (1971, p. 6). Individuals are constrained into a sphere of isolation and estrangement as they battle to discover a reason forever. In many cases, the ideas of detachment and alienation, as depicted by Postmodern Absurd, contrast from that of existentialists. While existentialists see estrangement as a natural, certain part of human presence, which blocks the person from discovering importance in an absurd life, preposterous pragmatists consider it to be the contention amongst the individual and social order world. For example, the existential idea of estrangement is underpinned by Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1996), which isn't though pragmatic but imaginative realm. Gregory's sense of alienation is triggered by forces beyond his control when he wakes up one morning and realizes he has turned into a bug. In this sense, his detachment is the result of his unusual transformation rather than the fact that he lives in a chaotic society. Barnes' characters in *The Only Story* (2018), for example, face a sense of isolation as a result of a daily reality that causes them to feel alienated. These characters grow apart, not because of their usual structure, but because of their struggle to adapt to a world ruled by viciousness and a frightening atmosphere. One of the characters, Paul, for example, battles to his stress on a regular basis because he is afraid of being judged by the general public.

Conclusion

In this article, absurdism as a postmodern hybrid genre has been critically analyzed by concentrating chiefly on the elaborative characteristics of absurdism like boredom, confusion, and meaninglessness. The current research acutely focuses upon the Nagel's idea, which considers absurd as an integral part of postmodernism. The novel *The Only Story* (2018) doesn't only nullify the basic characteristics of Postmodernism like representation of hyper-reality, the futility of life, and absurdism; rather it vividly highlights that almost all of the characters of the novel are facing absurdity in a way that is common to all of them. For instance, in *The Only Story*, components of perplexity, history, mainstream society, counterculture, love, separation, sex, and science are joined to make a satire of the

social interference of the Postmodern Absurdity. In the whole of the novel, protagonist characters in specific and minor characters, in general, remain in a vicious circle of life which makes their lives full of

absurdity. To cut the discussion short, it can be rightly said that it is the result of postmodern advancement that the protagonist characters like Paul and Susan face absurdity in their lives.

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