

## **Howard Campbell as an Existential Absurd Being in Kurt Vonnegut *Mother***

### *Night*

This research is mainly concerned with the existential crisis that the protagonist character Howard Campbell from *Mother Night* faces. In the novel, the narrator, who is also the protagonist, suffers from identity crisis, alienation and loneliness. In this process, he makes effort to preserve his dignity. The novel is set in the context of post Second World War. He lives with a fear of trial that he might go through.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night* projects the plight of Howard Campbell. He is a war criminal. He hides in a small attic in America for fifteen years. Campbell worked as an American spy. But in the context of post war, he goes through situation that looks absurd. He tries to live as an artist. As a beloved, his life remains incomplete. He tries his best to get engaged in creative works. He tries to maintain dignity and wants to take a career. In this process, he faces unexpected difficulties. He faces crisis as whole mechanism tries to prove him as a Nazi war criminal. His identity as an American spy starts haunting him. He is compelled to run away from Germany. This act makes him guilty and lonely. He hopes to live meaningful life with dignity and recognition but still he has been imprisoned as a war criminal.

The main thrust of this study is to explore how the narrator of *Mother Night* becomes an absurd being. He lives an empty and meaningless life though he has desire of living as a reputed artist. This study explores how Campbell goes through the state of hopelessness, worthlessness, senselessness and emptiness. While going through such state of difficulties, he becomes like an absurd character. Despite all difficulties, he tries to live a dignified life. Though he commits suicide, he does not project the concept of nihilism but rather asserts the victory of individual.

*Mother Night* is third novel of Kurt Vonnegut. It is a confession of American playwright and Nazi propagandist Howard Campbell, Jr. He has been recruited as a

Nazi propagandist and American spy at the same time. He serves good secretly. Towards the end of the Second World War, American authorities save him from hanging. They help him to hide in New York. The reason he must live in hiding is his allied contact person during war disappeared. He has no one left to the fact that he worked for the allies. He thought that serving good secretly will make his identity. His service makes huge difference to America since it helps them to get important information of enemies. Germany became successful to manipulate people through the propaganda broadcasted by Campbell and they get huge favor of people to continue the war. But both of the country refuse to make any public acknowledgement that Campbell used to work as an American spy. Consequently, Campbell is recognized as a Nazi war criminal. Russia wants to use him as an example that the American are hiding criminal. They send Resi and Kraft to make conspiracy against him. They want to abduct him to Moscow. He attempts to commit suicide since he does not see any purpose to live. This act is a result of meaningless life. Neither Germany nor American agents acknowledge his contribution.

Moreover, Russia, Germany, Israel struggle hard to prove him as a Nazi criminal. Israel is trying to get him over there so he can be tried for the war crimes. As he awaits for trial to start, the narrator explains about the events of his life for historical fact. His dream of living in the world of love fails. His literary works are stolen. Resi is his only hope of life. She turns out to be a Russian spy. Kraft acts as his friend but he makes conspiracy against Campbell. He spends his entire life hiding in a single attic. His life became senseless because he has nothing to do in that small room and he has no-one to love him.

Likewise, Campbell concludes that there is nothing to live for. He decides to stop running. Various countries are enthusiastically waiting to punish him. They are eager to show the world that they imprison the real Nazi criminal. He surrenders

himself to Israel trial. There is not any purpose of escaping from the situation so that he wants to face whatever comes to him. He had no inclination to any nation. He only loves his wife and his writing. He lives with the sense of doom after he loses both. Hegla died in war and Resi is proved as a Russian agent who has perfect plan to manipulate Campbell. Despite all these, he was hopeful for life that he will be proved as an innocent. He hopes to revive his art of writing. Pertaining these hope, he manage to stay in small attic for many years. His monotonous life becomes his daily routine. In spite of these, he challenges the situation and attempts to survive in single attic for fifteen years. His postwar trial for crimes against humanity leads him to commit suicide.

Kurt Vonnegut, an American novelist was born on November 11, 1922 in Indiana Police Indiana from German-American parents. Vonnegut became famous through various texts like *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse- Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. His satirical literary style and science fiction is well known to everyone as well as he is well known for the use of humor in his writing. Vonnegut creates his own unique characters and world in his novels such as John Kraft and Dr. Jones in *Mother Night* who seems insane but they are challenge to major authorities. Showing Vonnegut's talent for satire, *Player Piano*, took on corporate culture. *Mother Night* also makes Satire on authorities of various countries. He was educated at Cornell University in upstate New York. He was regular columnist and the managing editor of the *Corral Daily Sunin* where he wrote satirical antiwar articles. Vonnegut got opportunity for military services. His work *Mother Night* draws the dramatic power from the experience of his own and of Nazi war criminals. They are not forgiven though some of them are innocent. Howard Campbell suffers because he is followed by various nation despite his innocence. He was recruited in the army because of his poor academic background. He was in Dresden Germany during the allied firebombing of the city and

saw the devastation caused by war. The effect of the war shapes his concept for writing that often touches the plot related to war. Vonnegut worked in Vitamin Syrup factory for pregnant women. He accomplished his college education after surviving from war. He worked as a police reporter for the Chicago City News. For a while he accepted a public relation job with General Electricity. He completely engaged in full time writing after quitting the job three years later.

Most of the Kurt Vonnegut texts deal with the effect of wars. The horrible experience arouse anti- war feelings in him. The irrationality, inhumanity, insanity of the war sets background for his texts. He mocks war and its major contributor through his writings. He was the prisoner himself during the attack in Dresden, Germany. He brought the dark side of the war in his writings as well. Though he was successful in his career, his own personal demons makes him impatient. He struggles with depression for years and he attempts to take his own life in 1984. Vonnegut might face various challenges, he is well known as a literary icon. His frustration and failure suicide attempt is also projected in the novels.

Different critics have observed this novel from different perspectives. Regarding Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*, Einar Stenin Valgarssonin in his article "The Madness and Sanity" examines *Mother Night* in terms of responsibility, identity, moral schizophrenia and illusion. Valgarssonin argues the situation Campbell had put himself into as a spy to keep his sanity given in the situation may indeed be a sort of madness:

Campbell's cover is to be a Nazi radio propagandist; his speeches are anti- semite, and demoralizing about the allies but boosting the German war effort. Secretly, in so doing he is broadcasting vital coded information to the allies. The code is transmitted through idiosyncrasies in his speech (cough, deliberate pauses, changes of tone, etc.). Campbell

himself never knowing the content of the information he is sending  
(except one instance, to be addressed later). (4)

Valgarssonin criticizes his choice. He decides to become agent of both countries at a same time. He is later identified as a Nazi criminal and suffers throughout life. His pain is result of his choice. Campbell is responsible for his pain himself, as a result he decides to commit suicide. His action could be judged as madness rather than perfect choice.

Robert T Tally, Jr. analyzes the Campbell choice as an existential angst. His choice to be American spy and Nazi propagandist creates anxiety. He could not choose the right one. Vonnegut establishes existential angst, the pervasive mood of anxiety that accompanies human freedom, as a key feature:

The juxtaposition of Campbell's own playing, his schizophrenic division of his own aspects of Campbell's own existential angst from his interest in but fight from history, to his voluntary embraces of a horrible duty, to his remarkable ability to pretend to be something else, and finally to his acceptance to the utter absurdity of his, and the human condition. (43)

He focuses on the pervasive anxiety that surround the human being. The anxiety is tied to the crisis of authenticity. Campbell feels total responsibility for one's choice and deeds. He chooses to be Nazi propagandist with the intention of serving American allies. Serving as an American agent leads him to act as Nazi propagandist. It is sole reason of his anxiety, not knowing if his action is right or wrong.

Susan Farrell concentrates on false narration created by Howard Campbell:

Campbell is an artist, and art requires the telling lies, according to Vonnegut, 'To say that he was a playwright is to offer an even harsher warning to the reader'. Vonnegut adds," for no one is better liar than a

man who has warped lives and passion onto something grotesquely artificial as a stage. (6)

Farrell opines that Campbell choose to be Nazi radio propagandist for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. He continuously adds lies in his writing to entertain readers.

Campbell had earlier suggested that one of the main reason he had agreed to serve as a secret agent for the U.S was that he was a ham, that he loved the opportunity to playact.

“ As a spy of the sort he described, I would fool everyone with my brilliant interpretation of a Nazi, inside and out” (41). His major intention is to create plot of stories from the surrounding he involves in. *Mother Night* is confessional account of Campbell so the whole story told by him could be false narration.

Similarly other critic David Simmons analyzes this text as a modernist text rather than postmodern text:

Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel is an exciting re-evaluation of this much overlooked author’s work. Tally deftly rereads Vonnegut’s novels, situating them in an American tradition of fiction that seeks to make sense of the larger American experience. The book skillfully interweaves germane selection of literary and critical theory to convincingly argue Vonnegut should be reassessed as a substantial modernist rather than postmodernist. (1)

The plot of novel is based on world war. It focuses on alienation, loss and despair of the protagonist. Life of the characters in the novel is unordered. They repent on their condition rather than entertaining the loss and failure.

Jerome Klinkowitz argues that “much of Howard Campbell’s life involves fabrication . . .” (Vonnegut Effect 53), he never suggests that Major Frank Wirtanen might be part of this fabrication, instead he argues that the novel is “a classic story of someone being used” (52).

For Klinkowitz, Campbell is best seen as a pawn of Major Wirtanen and of American Government. He is used by both nation in need but ignored by both of them after end of the war. He has been thrown as a war surplus.

In this way numerous critics and reviewers have diversely interpreted *Mother Night*. Some of the critics regard it as modernist text rather than postmodern text. Others analyze it from the perspectives of existential angst. Some talks about false narration of protagonist and other analyzes the text in terms of identity and responsibility.

As far as my reading goes any critic has not examined the protagonist as an Existential Absurd being. Campbell fails to establish his meaningful identity. He had been recruited as American spy but his contribution is never acknowledged. Hence, he regards himself as stateless person. Lack of nationality defines his identity. His dream of being true writer remains unsuccessful. He came to know that all his literary writings have been stolen and these are published by other. His desire to live in the 'Nation of Two' remain unsuccessful with the death of Hegla.

The narrator, protagonist faces a sense of loss throughout life. Alienation, lack of freedom and crisis of identity defines his life. American agent uses him only as a war surplus. He attempts to be proved as an innocent but it became worthless. Eventually, he turned out to be stateless, motionless and meaningless being. Despite the harsh situation, he faces the challenges and manages to stay in small attic throughout life. He hopes to get freedom.

The term existentialism gives emphasis on the meaninglessness, purposelessness and the absurd situation of human existence. Absurdism is a philosophy based on the belief that the universe is irrational and meaningless. The search for order and meaning draws the individual into conflict with the universe, and social rules and regulations. It maintains, existence precedes essence. This theory

implies that the human being has no essence because he is no more than what he is. In the same line, absurdist believes the universe is meaningless and irrational. Any search for order by human beings bring them into clash with the universe and causes chaos. Man is alienated from himself, from other person, and from God. As a result man has been burdened with absurdity. Absurdity is the denial of meaning, value, and purpose. It is a result of alienation. Absurd “has no purpose, goal or objective”. Absurdist writing shows the absurdities and contradictions of any human situation. They focus on the fact that human condition is helpless, insecure and hopeless.

The sense of alienation and estrangement gives rise to widespread despair from the established order and value. The term ‘Existentialism’ came into prominence particularly in Germany and France as a Philosophical movement after world wars.

Jean Paul Sartre defines, “Existentialism is primarily concerned with human existence, especially man’s most extreme experiences, the confrontation with death, anguish and anxiety, despair, and guilt” ( Existentialism and Humanism 589-90).

Existentialism analyzes dread, anguish, despair, love hope etc. and attempts to uncover their meanings because the attempt to create meaning in a world without defined guideposts and rules, it believes that freedom and responsibility create anxiety, fear, despair, and dread for the individual. This philosophy was in many ways an outgrowth of the pessimism inflicted upon the world after two horrific world wars that left footprints of hopelessness on the world.

Absurdity is the heart of existentialism. This is a catch-all term for those whose writings are associated with the theme of dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment, nothingness, and so on. Absurdity is the belief that there is no meaning of life or no meaning in the universe . Man attempts to search such meaning are absurd because meaning does not exist. Some absurdist believe in slightly different view. There is meaning but man cannot find it .The only thing that gives meaning to life



is absurd itself. Man should embrace the fact that life is absurd if he wants to survive.

Absurdist believes that we cannot avoid absurdity because it is inherent in the world.

The world is beyond comprehension of human reasoning, Albert Camus says:

This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together. (362)

This was the view of Camus. The world is absurd and there is no purpose and objective of anything. In other words it is full of absurdity, irrationality and incongruity.

According to Camus, man has a longing for reason. For him absurdity is born and man needs to understand this despair and come to the terms with it. He believed man should embrace the absurd and lives in spite of it. If man could do this, this was all he could hope in life.

The Absurd man seeks certainty but recognizes that he can only be certain of the absurd. People desires for unity, reason and certainty, but the only truth it conforms that there is not such a world. There may be meaning to life, but there is no sure way of knowing what this meaning is.

Albert Camus believes that human being is an isolated existent in an alien universe. The universe does not possess any inherent truth, value or meaning. "The universe" states Camus "henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile not futile" (Ellman 852). Camus reached to a conclusion and he declares the condition of man is absurd. He realized that the speculative system of past provided no reliable guidance for life. Absurd man is naturally filled with anxiety and helplessness when he becomes aware of his futile living. Then one realizes that forlornness, anguish, despair

are the characteristics of life. One need to choose to submit oneself to the hand of the god or death if he wants to get liberation from the anxiety of the absurd world. Either of the choices is ridiculous for him. He believes that one needs to accept the challenges. People should not commit suicide and bow before God.

Albert Camus lays emphasis upon choices. Sisyphus is given the choices. He does not surrender to God and makes a choice. He believes that choice leads us to the absurdity but joy comes out of that absurdity. As Ellman and Fieldelson remarks, he sees man “arriving through admission of absurdity at an affirmation of his own worth” (806). He focuses on struggle against absurdity for humanism and optimism.

Kierkegaard is an existentialist who accepts absurdity of the world as fully as Sartre or Camus. He believes life is full of anxiety, uncertainty, and angst. Being a theist existentialist, he advocates to submit oneself in the realm of God. Man can be free from angst and uncertainty in the presence of the God. According to him there is God and get redemption from angst which is known as ethnic, religious choice or he has to reject the God and go to perdition” (Choice 828-34).

The protagonist of *Mother Night* chooses to be an American spy and Nazi propagandist. His freedom of choice makes him anxious. He suffers meaninglessness, nothingness, emptiness, failure, frustration, alienation, absurdity. In addition Campbell is struggling with himself and crowded world. In the world he faces pain and suffering, nothingness, meaninglessness. Despite the hardships, he manages to struggle with the situation. The ideas of major theorists including Albert Camus, Jean- Paul Sartre, D. Pritchard, T. Nagel, and Martin Esslin are key to the constitution of the methodological basis of this thesis.

The overall thesis will be in the form of an essay. It includes introduction, textual analysis and conclusion. In the first part, a brief introduction to the thesis its objectives, problems, literature review, major argument and outline of overall thesis are

included. Similarly, in the second part, the textual analysis and review of theorists are included. In the final part, a summary along with findings provide conclusion to the research paper.

*Mother Night* represents absurd and ridiculous condition. The major character of the novel feels difficult to deal with such situation. The absurd world of the novel is characterized by irrationality, meaninglessness, purposelessness and senselessness. The protagonist's activities seem to be futile. He makes unsuccessful attempt to create meaningful identity. Any nation does not approve him as their citizen. This search is absurd in the sense that every verdict to prove his identity is collapsed. On the other hand, he lives absurd and meaningless life hiding in New York. Nobody recognizes him. He is scared to be known by anyone. Due to countless hardships he himself is confused and does not know what to do and what not to do. Moreover, he looks through window where some children play with noise. His daily routine is to listen the noise of those children. Listening to those cry could not add any significance to his life.

The major character in the novel seems to suffer alienation when every significant part of Campbell loses its value in his life. Campbell loses the ability to write. Hegla died in Dresden bombing, Campbell desperately tries to live but suffers from feelings of guilt and a general detachment. Campbell wants to give meaning to his recruitment as Nazi propagandist but finds it hard to do so. Later, Campbell follows absurd life when he leaves Resi as well. His absurd characterization is supported with his attitude to commit suicide. Throughout his life, he leaves a traumatized life because of the death of his beloved wife. He cannot find meaning of his life without her. Campbell's intention of committing suicide is guided by absurdity because his hope to be proved as an innocent fails. He befriends with Resi and George Kraft. They make conspiracy to abduct him to Russia. It creates frustration. He hopes nothing more

except searching his real identity, establishing his writing career and stay in purposeful and meaningful world. But all these attempts fail.

Absurd simply means widely unreasonable, illogical, inappropriate or ridiculous. It is utterly senseless, untrue or contrary to common sense or logical reasoning. It is the state or condition in which human beings exist in an irrational and meaningless universe. This theory advocates human life has no ultimate meaning. Camus allegorically portraying a man (namely Sisyphus) rolling a piece of rock to the top of the hill and finding it downhill again, and the one experienced by the twentieth-century man who is deeply involved in the absurdity of his life. He knows what it really means to feel absurd without the hope to gain a heavenly knowledge or physical strength. The idea of absurd is one aspect of Existentialism. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, instance, referring to a mythological story, Albert Camus, an existentialist, portrays absurd man of the twentieth-century, one who goes beyond the limits of rationality and looks despairingly into darkness.

Absurdity lies in its root that life is “an elaborate journey, leading nowhere” (Nagel 50). The ordinary conception of absurdity is one on which “there is a discrepancy between pretention or aspiration and reality” (Nagel 51). It means absurdity focuses on incongruence, disparity and inconsistency in life. As a heart of existentialism, absurdity questions the search of meaning and purpose in life:

. . . for one’s life to be absurd it is essential that there is the relevant discrepancy between pretention or aspiration and reality, it follows that someone who is perfectly aware of the meaninglessness of their life would lead a life which was meaningless and yet not absurd. . . if nothing is valueless and hence absurdism is true. (Pritchard)

Life is meaningless and purposeless. To search meaning in life is nothing more than absurd. The idea of absurdity is even exploited and heavily used in literature in the

twentieth century. People are wandering in the meaningless, purposeless, and senseless universe. In *Mother Night* Campbell faces absurdist world. He is in constant search for meaning:

The cry was this: "Olly-Olly-ox-in-free,"  
 And I, hiding from many people who might want to hurt or kill me,  
 often longed for someone to give me that cry for me, to end my endless  
 game of hide-and-sake with a sweet and mournful. (16)

He has been hiding in small attic for fifteen years. He is accused for the crime against humanity during Nazi rule. He hides in New York to save himself from punishment. His desire to get cry from someone indirectly related with his wish of verdict. He hopes for witness from American War Department might prove him as an innocent. He wants to establish himself as Howard Campbell. He helps American allies in war through his secret participation. Moreover, he hopes that cry from someone might prove him as a well-known writer. In this sense he seeks for his true identity rather hiding in small attic of New York.

Absurd originally means out of harmony. As per Oxford dictionary definition, absurd is something that is completely ridiculous; not logical and sensible and absurdism is the belief that human exist in a world with no purpose or order. As Lavine describes the concept of absurd conceived by existentialists:

Granted, says the existentialist, I am my own existence but this  
 existence is absurd. To exist as a human being is inexplicable, and  
 wholly absurd. Each of us is simply here, thrown into this time and  
 place . . . only contingently, and so my life is an absurd contingent fact.  
 . . I have stripped myself if all acceptable structure, the structure of  
 knowledge, moral values; and human relationship; I stand in anguish at  
 the edge of the abyss. I am looking into emptiness and the void,

hovering over the abyss in fear and trembling and living the life of dread. (79)

The feeling of anguish and dread are caused by the supposition that man is a measurable creature whose life is controlled by some super-human forces. Absurdity is caused by emptiness and void of the world. As the world itself is void and senseless, human search for meaning and sense is absurd. The more human beings are in search of meaning, the more they fall into the abyss of meaninglessness, and senselessness.

*Mother Night* has its foundation on this very fact and brings forward the concept of senselessness and meaninglessness. Campbell participates as a Nazi propagandist and as an American spy is both absurd. It is nothing more than the struggle to establish his identity in this meaningless world. His search for identity amid uncertainty, disorder and chaos:

I disappeared from Germany at the end of the Second World War. I reappeared, unrecognized, in Greenwich Village. There I rented a depressing attic apartment with rats squeaking and scurrying in the walls. I continued to inhabit that attic until a month ago, when I was brought to Israel for the trial. (16)

He engages himself in nonsense and meaningless things. It was not necessary for him to participate as a Nazi propagandist and American spy because he was living the life of a well-known writer before it. Campbell wanted to expand his capability to create plot for his writing so that he participated as a Nazi propagandist. It makes him to escape after the end of World War II. As a consequence, he hides in a small attic. His life becomes uncertain, chaotic and disorderly.

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe. It regards human existence as unexplainable. It stresses on freedom of choice and responsibility for the

consequence of one's acts. Robert Solomon traces existentialist thought in the nineteenth and twentieth century's primarily through Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre and identifies three themes that pervade existentialism. First is a strong emphasis in the individual although that is variously defined and understood.

For Nietzsche the goal in life, to really exist as opposed to so called living, is to fully manifest your talents and virtues, thus "becoming the person you really are" (38). Second is the passionate role of commitment, as opposed to the usual philosophical emphasis on reason and rationality. Existentialism urges us to live our lives to the fullest, according to our own individual understanding. For existentialist, to live is to live passionately. And third is the importance of human freedom to make choices, and responsibility to do so consciously. The message of existentialism, unlike many more obscure and academic philosophical movements, is about as simple as it can be. It is that every one of us, an individual, is responsible for what we do, responsible for what we are, responsible for the way we face and deal with the world, responsible, ultimately, for the way the world is.

Absurdity is the heart of existential philosophy. Existentialist presents absurdist world, which is meaningless, senseless, ridiculous and worthless. It highlights absurdities and incongruities of life, Kierkegaard (in Alexander Dru) defines absurd as:

What is absurd? It is, as may quite easily be seen, that I, a rational being, must act in a case where my reason, my powers of reflection, tell me: you can just as well do the one thing as the other, that is to say where my reason and reflection say: you cannot act and yet here is where I have to act. . . The absurd or to act by virtue of the absurd, is to act upon the faith. . . I must act, but reflection has closed the road so I take one of the possibilities and say: This is what I do; I cannot do otherwise because I am brought to a standstill by my powers of reflection. (37)

Absurdism believes that though human beings attempt to search meaning in life, life itself is meaningless, purposeless and senseless. Moreover, life is disordered, chaotic and messy. Absurd also refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any.

The meaningless and futility in *Mother Night* represents the same fact.

Campbell seeks meaning of life but he fails. He suffers the condition of alienation, emptiness:

West Germany asked the government of the United States politely if I might be a citizen of theirs. They had no proof one way or another, since all records pertaining to me had burned during the war. If I was citizen of theirs, they said, they would be as pleased as Israel to have me for trial. If I was a German, they said in effect, they were certainly ashamed of a German like me.(103)

These views are expressed by Germany and American authorities for whom he served long. He wants to be proved as an innocent but it is failed due to the attitude of both countries towards Campbell. His attempt to be established as a writer fails because his writings are stolen. Another attempt to live as a beloved of “nation of two” remains unfulfilled with the death of Hegla. Resi deceives him as well. Hence, everything around him seems irrational, ridicule and chaos.

Absurdist novels characteristically present view of human existence as essentially meaningless and world lacks true communication. Life for an existentialist is arbitrary and meaningless. Man is thrown into this world. They are dethroned, disarmed, and helpless. One of the basic existentialist standpoints is the existence precedes essence; has primacy over essence. That is why a sense of thrownness captures his thought. No knowledge is obtainable regarding man and his future position, unless a certain period of time passes. “The existentialist hero has infinite possibilities to choose



from that this vision calls forth”, Glicksberg states, “but his range of freedom is cruelly curtailed by his vision of nothingness and the dread that the vision calls forth” (100).

The minimum profit which is achieved is that he is saved from the void” (53). The freedom of choice is guided by the concept of nothingness and the concept of void. “I often heard a cry from that little Eden, a child’s cry that never failed to make me stop and listen. It was sweetly mournful cry that meant a game of hide-and-sake was over” (16).

Campbell in *Mother Night* makes choice of absurd and meaningless life.

Campbell is engaged in looking through the window everyday where he listens the same noise of children. He has nothing in the attic to engage himself than listening to the noise of children to avoid void.

Absurdity is opposite of what is thought normal and rational. It is illogical, irrational, and unsystematic than the mainstream one. It can be taken as non-normative and non-sensitive. In this sense, human beings want to avoid absurdity and are always in search for meaning and sense in their life. Human beings are living in the absurd and meaningless world, which is worthless and senseless. Human life has no purpose and no meaning. It is futile and void. In this absurd world, Campbell searches meaning and sense. It means he is in search of identity as he feels, but he is in crisis of his identity. He wants to make sense of the world he lives. His identity is thrown into crisis after the end of the war. It includes chaos, disorder and uncertainty, Campbell is in search of stability and certainty:

The Republic of Israel stepped up its demands for me, encouraged by rumors that I was not an American citizen that I was, in fact, a citizen of nowhere. And the Republic’s demands were framed so as to be educational, too- teaching that a propagandist of my sort was as much a

murderer as Heydrich, Eichmann, Himmler, or any of the gruesome rest. (27)

After the end of the war, his identity is in crisis. Both of the countries never acknowledge him as their citizen rather these countries intend to prove him as Nazi war criminal. He wants order certainty and stability but he feels certainty and stability is impossible in the uncertain and unstable universe. Moreover he lacks true identity. Being Native American he serves as a writer and propagandist in Germany. He contributed for American as well. But he feels lack of inclination to the any country because of their ignorance towards him. "I was left alone-so much alone that I was unable to take back my own name, and almost nobody wondered if I was the Howard W. Campbell, Jr" (20). He is alienated and isolated for so long. He is never introduced to anybody for fifteen years. Everyone assumes, he might be dead. Nobody could recognize him though he appears in front of them. Identity crisis makes him more hopeless. People have freedom of choice in the absurd world. Amid multiple choices, they choose their own path and take responsibility to themselves. They enjoy in the option they choose. "But I've always known what I did. I've always been able to live with what I did" (116). In this sense, he takes full responsibility of his choice. "I want to be tried for my crimes against humanity'. I said. 'I am willing to go.'" (167) Campbell feels that no one is responsible and he should take responsibility himself.

Absurdity is seen in his relation with Resi. At first they conduct affair. They plan to live together forever. But their relationship breaks when Campbell comes to know Resi is intending to take him to Russia. Feelings of deception makes him suffered in their relationship. "You no longer believe that love is the only thing to live for? She said No, I said" (143). Love is basis for his life. Campbell life is futile and motionless when his hope of living disappointed him. His beloved wife Hegla died soon at war. His life became meaningless. Later, Resi appears and she seems to

generate hope in his life. But Campbell feels defeated when he came to know that she is the agent of Russian spy. She is following him to take him to Moscow. He is deceived by Resi as well.

According to Sartre, the “absurdity” of human existence is the necessary result of our attempts to live a life of meaning and purpose in an indifferent, uncaring universe. Similarly, Campbell lives in uncaring world though he tries to live meaningful life.

According to the newspaper and radio, justifiably angry people had already done what they could about me, breaking into my ratty attic, smashing my windows, tearing up or carting off my worldly goods. The hated attic was now under police guard around the clock. (103)

Campbell continuously try to prove himself as an innocent but world seems harsh towards him. Whatever comments pass to him, is always negative. They seem to prove him as Nazi war criminal. In such situation he feels frustrated and void of living in the world.

Moreover atheist existentialist Sartre opines there is no God, so there is no perfect and absolute vantage point from which human actions or choices can be said to be rational. Likewise, Campbell does not have faith on God. There is not any basis to prove either his action is right or wrong.

“It was not the thought that God was cruel that froze me. I had taught myself never to expect anything from him. What froze me was the fact that I had absolutely no reason to move in any direction. What had made me move through so many dead and pointless years was curiosity. (150)

It states that Campbell never believes in god. He never demands anything from God though he is in harsh condition. He does not believe on any social conducts that is

based on religious belief. His participation as Nazi propagandist could be never justified as unethical because his participation as an American spy is not ethical as well.

Another equally important issue raised in *Mother Night* is existential crisis. Campbell is in existential crisis. He hides his true identity in order to save himself from war crimes. Neither he is recognized by his name nor he possesses citizenship of any nation. "I am an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation, and a nationless person by inclination" (3). It reveals Campbell's satire against nations who do not regard him as his person. "I disappeared from Germany at the end of the Second World War. I reappeared unrecognized, in Greenwich village" (16). He remains unidentified and took pseudo name because revealing his identity could get him into trouble. Hiding his true identity and himself in small attic makes him unknown to everyone. Moreover everyone remains indifferent towards him. " 'Nobody spits on me,' I said. 'Nobody even knows I'm alive anymore'" (38). He is forgotten by people. He hides for fifteen years that nobody ever thought he might be alive. He will be killed if they know he is not dead. Freedom of choice is another feature of existentialism. Campbell takes full responsibility for his choice and is ready to suffer consequences.

Campbell embraced the ambiguity and absurdity found in his life by constructing an existential perspective. He explained his instance as, "what froze me was the fact that I had absolutely no reason to move in any direction" (150). Campbell's assertion that his existence is of no great consequence embodies the absurdist and existentialist idea that life is devoid of purpose and meaning. Further Campbell adds, "How long I stood frozen there, I cannot say. If I was ever going to move again, someone else was going to have to furnish the reason for moving (150)." But nobody ever appears to give him hope and reason for living. He decided to kill himself instead. It concludes the theory of absurdity that wait produces no results of

certainty; only authentic experience possible is the journey 'wait' or individual action itself.

Absurdism in literature focuses on the experience of characters in a situation where they cannot find any inherent purpose in life, most often represented by ultimately meaningless actions and events. Absurdist works often explore agnostic and nihilistic topics:

{ . . . } The human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd. . . . After the 1940s, however, there was a widespread tendency to view a human being as an isolated existent who so cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning, and to represent human life- in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end- as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. (Abram 1)

It is a kind of rebellion against essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and traditional literature that "human beings are fairly rational creatures who live in at least partially intelligible universe, that they are part of an ordered social structure and that they may be capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat" (1). Moreover, absurdism "emerges from the individual's determination to discover purpose and order in the world which is essentially absurd" (Childs and Fowler 1). It highlights "the bridgeable gulf between aspiration and fulfillment, the impossibility of communication the futility of human relationships" (1). All hopes and aspirations are not fulfilled in practical world. There is same condition in *Mother Night*. After meeting with Kraft and Resi, Campbell hopes to go to new country and get a new life but he gets opposite. Being Russian agent, Kraft and Resi were intending to take him to Moscow for their benefit.

“Resi turned to me. I am a communist agent- yes. And so is he. He is Colonel Iona Potapov. And our mission was to get you to Moscow” (140). Campbell is not able to fulfill his hope of getting new life in another country. In the end of the story, he is in same condition as in the beginning but with more tension and troubles. He cannot solve his problem. His hope goes in vain. His friend and beloved deceive him. After the sock he decided to commit suicide. “I think that tonight is the night I will hang Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself” (175). He does not intend to live any longer since life does not go to proper direction. He finds life is full of motionless and meaningless. It is absurd to live anymore. Thus Campbell’s life in *Mother Night* is full of absurdity. He lives in problematized life. The meaningless and worthless search of identity become the cause of absurd life. Campbell stands as senseless and pointless person to the rational world. That’s why to analyze Campbell, existential absurdity as the theoretical tool is essential and ethical

After the detailed analysis of *Mother Night*, through the critical angle of absurdism brings the researcher to the conclusion that the novel is an epitome of absurdity. The protagonist’s absurdity can be traced taking account of the various events happened to Campbell. Failure of authorities to acknowledge his service to America, death of beloved, theft of his literary works, Resi evil intention, Kraft pretention bother Campbell. He feels existential crisis since he does not have true identity except the tag of Nazi war criminal. The established rules of Israel trial against Nazi criminal make his life more painful. *Mother Night* is full of absurdity meaninglessness, senselessness since his true hope of getting rid of accusation of being Nazi criminal does not succeed. He is in search of meaningful life but it seems impossible. He is pushed towards disorder, chaos and confusion though he attempts to search order, certainty and stability. Everyone might have forgotten the war but it still haunts him. The victims of Auschwitz have forgotten the trauma but he is followed for

the crime which he has never committed. He could never escape though he tries to run from the situation. Finally Israel gets him to trial. When he needed to add his defense at trial, the narrator finishes up the story detailing his life and comes to the realization that he will always be remembered as the Nazi war criminal. He longs to be free but leaves his life hiding being trapped in a small attic. Campbell is totally guided towards meaninglessness and purposelessness.

Campbell is the major character and the protagonist of the novel, who lives in the small attic after the end of Second World War. He never introduced himself to other. His attempt to reestablish his identity never fulfilled. Whoever comes to him with the pretension of help, makes him more hopeless. He feels deceived and defeated every time. Everyone uses him for their benefit including America, Germany, Russia, Israel, his friends and beloved as well. He chooses to be American agent. His freedom of choice become the sole reason of anxiety. His continuous attempts frustrate him. Campbell reaches to the conclusion that his quest of being identified as innocent could not be successful.

Likewise, his desire to establish true identity is impossible. Actually all these efforts and values are worthless and meaningless. Everyone stands against him. Defeat from his friends and beloved become the major cause of his absurd world. The whole novel emphasizes on individual freedom, the feeling of absurdity, anxiety and loneliness.

This study endeavors to prove Campbell is absurd character, his life is guided by meaninglessness and purposelessness. He lives in absurd life after being accused as a Nazi criminal. He became helpless after death of his beloved. He ended to be stateless person when both of the nation deny his identity. He is alienated and frustrated from society. He is searching the way for his self-identity. Absurdism advocates that the human life is essentially isolated in a meaningless world. The research of *Mother Night*

bases on the root of existential absurdity and presents the characters void of specific meaning and purpose in their life. Campbell is considered to be an escapist. Campbell escapes from Germany and hides at small attic. He has no other work than listening to the noise of children coming through window to avoid the void. His identity crisis and unsuccessful attempt to be proved as innocent makes him hopeless and meaningless. He could not adjust himself in the absurd world. Campbell is presented as an alienated character among others. He is frustrated himself to Israel trial and struggles to establish his identity. He feels anxious because his freedom of choice establishes him as a Nazi war criminal.

In this way the life of Campbell in *Mother Night* is absurd. He used to send coded message to allies. He never knew the meaning of those messages. He pretends to work as Nazi but the same pretention made him war criminal. His every action seems worthless to generate new hope of life. His motionless life after war and his post relation with other makes him more pessimist towards life. He lives in crazy world who does not acknowledge his contribution but accuses him as a criminal. It makes him feel separated from everyone and isolated from the world. In this sense, *Mother Night* incorporates the theme of absurdity in its heart thereby supporting the existential belief that world is meaningless, purposeless and worthless.



## Works Cited

- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.
- Childs, Peter and Roger Fowler. *The Routledge Dictionary of literary Terms*. Ed. Roger Fowler. New York: Routledge Publication, 2006.
- Cornwall, Neill. *The Absurd in Literature*. New York: Palgrave, 2006. Print
- Gavines, Joanna. *Reading the Absurd*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013. Print.
- Hong, Howard, J, and Edna H. Hong. *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton: UP, 2007. Print.
- Lavine, Thelma Zeno. *Modern Existentialist and Phenomenological Studies*, New York: Monarch Press, 2002.
- Murray, James H.A, et al. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Nagel, Thomas. "The Absurd" *Life and Meaning: A Reader*, Ed. O. Hanfling. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987: 49-59. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Pinter, Harold. *The Caretaker*. New York: Dramatist's play service, 1991. Print.
- Pritchard, Duncan. "Absurdity, Angst and the Meaning of Life." *Monist* 93 (January 2010): 3-16.
- Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*: Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. Colorado: WSP, 1966. Print
- - -. *Existentialism and Humanism*. London: Methuen, 1948. Print
- - -. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Trans. Carol Macomber. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2006 Print.

- - -. "Choice in a World Without God." *The Modern Tradition: Background of Modern Literature*. Ed. Ellmann and Feidelson. New York: Oxford UP, 1965. 835-38.
- Scholes, Robert, "A Talk with Kurt Vonnegut". 1973. *In Conversation with Kurt Vonnegut*, Ed. William R. Allen Jackson: U Mississippi Press, 1988, 111-32.
- Simmons, David. "Review on Mother Night: *Mother Night*". Goggle.Com. Web. 17 May 2016.
- Tally, Robert T. Jr. "Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice writer." *Mother Night*, 2009. 2-4. Web. 17 May 2016.
- Valgarson, Einan Stenin. "The Madness and Sanity". *Mother Night*. Kurt Vonnegut. Island. Sigitum University press. 2009. Print.