The impact of World War II and literature on the concept of absurdity in the works of Boris Vian

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Abstract

In the second half of the twentieth century’s literature, absurdity issue was considered more than anything else. In fact World War II is the main cause of it. In several studies, many factors played a major role in this issue. The concept of absurdity in French literature was always unimportant topic and the great writers of the twentieth century such as Sartre, Camus and Boris Vian had been considering it. Although Boris Vian was not directly influenced by war and his ideas were dissident to great writers such as Sartre and Camus, but all of his works were published during World War. He had a self-centered attitude and he avoided from dependency on any other doctrine and collective wisdom. Heroes of Vian’s works while experienced absurdity at all times but they also were looking for a solution to get away from it. But they could not find a suitable way and as a result they have suffered from disappointment and failure. That is why Vian himself considered human of the twentieth century a man combined with disappointing issues.

Keywords: Absurdity, Literature, World War, Disappointment.
Introduction:
World War II (1939-1944) and France occupation by the German army created a deep wound on people’s thoughts and opinions. Its results could be easily seen in French literature. In France, after 1945, the philosophy of absurdity emerged. This issue was influenced by French occupation, the atomic bomb of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War and all the tragedies and events after the war.

In fact, the word "absurdity" is used in various fields. A lot of meanings have always been understood from this word. From philosophy point of view it means something that has no logical reasons and at the same time is meaningless. The real meaning of this word was founded by existentialist philosophers. These philosophers believed that human existence in the world basically precedes his essence. Existentialist philosophers also undermined the existence of God, because not only man has reason for his existence but also he shapes his own destiny. Thus man tends toward absurdity. The main reason for this wish is war and living conditions of post-war. In fact, war and its consequences have been leading man of the twentieth century to the meaninglessness of life. World War in France left one million four hundred thousand dead. These statistics have been published just in France and if we study this issue in all countries at the war then we will be confronted with a staggering figure.

In World War II, over sixty million men and women were killed which is much more than the people killed in World War I.

This issue created a profound impact on public opinions and also on French literature. Despite all these terrible statistics, we could not describe all painful disasters of war. We also could see the effect of war consequences in art. A good example is its influence in French literature. Of course there is a contradiction that stories of writers who participated in war are not real and often they are inspired by imaginations. This is an abstract effect of World War II.

The readers of these stories, however, feel the real space of war by reading them. Absurdity authors have not tried to retell the reality of war. But they have tried to stimulate the reader's emotions. In fact, the war has inspired these authors to write books in the form of novels, poems, as well as many theater plays.

According to these authors, French literature reflects the historical events associated with war. They argue that most of the culture and collective beliefs of our society have been made by literature. They believe that literary story is an image of the collective thoughts. This issue represents physical and tangible aspects which include both mental and intellectual images. In fact whatever which has been portrayed in literature is an abstract form of war. Since the war itself is a part of the collective wisdom.

According to Schoent:

"contradiction that influences both literature and war is absolutely real. That is why through fiction stories readers become familiar with the world and war space. They are looking for war
realities which of course are not true. On the other hand, this contradiction encourages most of the readers to only read books which are being derived from literary and peaceful traditions”.(Pierre Schoent, World War Fantasies, 2009).

In fact through literature, the individual and abstract thoughts of authors could create collective wisdom. This contradiction is very important because it shows that we cannot properly prove that the issue of absurdity has been influenced just by the war. Actually we are analyzing fictions to enter to the reality. Authors show sense of absurdity in their writings by different ways. According to their beliefs war is replaced by other issues such as death, violence, misery, happiness, hope and even absurdity. All of these issues have been initially derived from the war.

In this article we want to analyze the ideas of Boris Vian and the other authors of absurdity. In reality, we want to show the impact of World War on the concept of absurdity and the ideas of these authors after the event of war.

The influence of literature on absurdity:

‘Absurdity will replace logic and reasoning when war is over’”(same author, same book p-45).

From Schoent point of view this issue is not suitable for many authors because it is not an empirical fact. Actually in addition to having war experience the main purpose is how to transfer these emotions (same author, same book, p-46). Absurdity is a tool for overcoming these emotions. The most important issue is to underline absurdity by describing emotions and feelings. In fact it is not necessary to describe these feelings through real issues, there are several other ways to express this sense of absurdity. Changing the style of writing is one of the methods that authors such as Céline (1894-1961) have suggested for this issue. He is the inventor of a method in which the feelings of contemporary man is discussed and as a result new forms of literary subjects will be created. His book “Trip in Deep Night” and several other books describe war absurdity.

In this book he portrayed a young man’s imagination that has been influenced by absurdity after the war.(Georges Deckote and Al, literary history, 1991, p-163).

‘He often explained his poetic art through expression of emotions and feelings’” (Jacques Barsan and Al, literature in France from 1945-1970; p-370). "I mainly looked for a language in writing to express explicit emotions word by word and this language is the same language which is used in ordinary people’s conversations."(same book; p-372).

The most important issue for Céline is to influence reader’s feelings and emotions toward the war.

The authors of absurdity:

For writers who are looking for a way to express war feelings to the readers, absurdity and its expression is the best way to transfer these emotions and feelings.
Writers like Albert Camus with his works such as (Suspicion and Caligula), are among authors who are well expressing the concept of absurdity in their works. Of course other great writers also expressed the concept of absurdity by this method.

Authors such as Boris Vian in all his works refers to the concept of absurdity. The same goes for other writers like Lonesco, Beckett and Sartre.

Several factors play a significant role in the issue of absurdity.

Some of these factors have innate or mental origins and some have external and social basis, such as unstable social and environmental issues and war consequences.

In analyzing these issues we cannot rely just on one of these factors. Only a set of different elements is needed to influence human nature. Also all people are not equally affected by absurdity. The severity and type of absurdity differs from one to another. The same goes for their weaknesses and intensities. For example a person who has suffered from love failure may soon recover his disappointing feelings by falling in love with another person. The same is true for a person who has lost his job but soon he has found a new job. In other cases, though, some people may be led to absurdity and this pessimistic feelings may stay with them all through their lifetime.

Those who usually have problems with the mystery of creation are among this group of people.

The concept of absurdity is the main reason that religious beliefs are so weak among existentialist philosophers.

As an example Sartre in his book “Nausea” describes man loneliness in society.

Michel Pruner in another book called ” Being and Nothingness” in regard to Sartre says:

“man emptiness more than anything else shows his weaknesses.”

(Michel Pruner, 2003,p-2).

Camus, too, has perfectly showed the concept of absurdity in this book “The legend of Sisyphus”. He says:

“The world by itself is not absurd or meaningless but confronting with nihilistic thoughts creates meaninglessness in men”. (Camus, 1965 ,p-106).

In fact what we could see in all works of these authors is human loneliness and nihilistic life after World War II.

Boris Vian, himself, while his thoughts are all indirectly influenced by war, shows the concept of absurdity in his works. Of course his ideas are different from those of Sartre and Camus.
According to Vian whatever happens in human destiny including: death, despair…etc. are all affected by the war. In Vian’s works, heroes are looking for a way to justify absurdity and meaninglessness of life but they are not able to find any solution. For example in this book “Froth on the Daydream” where the main players of the book namely Chick and Jean Paul Sartre talk with each other, Boris Vian tries to rejects Sartre’s opinions. He believes that any sort of responsibility will hurt individual liberty. While Sartre believes that any kind of dependence and philosophical commitment may lead to meaninglessness, Vian argues that preservation of individual freedom and independence are more important issues.

Boris Vian faces with absurdity:

According to Vian, man failure in the world will never end. In his book “Froth on the Daydream” the main characters experience a world full of poverty and misery. Vian, in this book, asks what is the origin for all of this pain? Why does man tolerate all of this hardship?

According to him, man’s suffering in this world is permanent and will never stop. He argues that there is no any cause and solution for it.

In most of the Vian’s novels, the violence against man is the real cause of absurdity.

The main concern for all of the writers of twentieth century is the same issue. In fact anything which stimulates a person against another person is called violence. In Vian’s novels we could clearly notice the role of violence. This could be seen in his books : “Froth on the Daydream”, “Red grass” and “Heart snatcher”.

According to Vian, man has to live with violence. Any injustice which he has to confront will lead him to disappointment and defeat.

Everything concerning injustice and anger is the result of war consequences and there could be clearly seen in various novels of this author.

In the novels “Red Grass” and “Heart snatcher” all characters are surrounded by violence. In regard to “Heart snatcher” novel, Pierre Kast writes:

“There is a cruelty and violence in this book which reflects an ambiguous pain”. (Pierre Kast, 1962, p-76).

Therefore Vian’s heroes are always disappointed and this disappointment will lead them to a solution that could not be anything but death.

Conclusion:

In fact death is a window through which Vian’s hero might be able to get rid of the absurdity of life.
However man waits until he dies by natural causes. From Vian’s point of view death is the only solution to end man’s absurdity. Of course there are many tools for Vian’s absurdity. These tools will be appeared in various and different forms of violence, disease and poverty.

Even though it seems very stupid to live like this but the author resists and does not choose suicide as a solution. In order to get rid of absurdity, Vian uses different ways but in reality none of them works. According to Vian, life is like a cage and there is no anyway that man can leave this cage. Probably what World War II has done to man is the main reason for Vian’s way of thinking. All writers of the second half of the twentieth century believe that absurdity has captured most of the world and our lives. In fact Vian portrays various characters of his novels in forms of poor people or those who have deeply suffered in World War II.

Those who have been damaged both psychologically and socially in war.

Vian argues that due to war the meaning of life has completely changed. He deeply believes in absurdity and in his various novels we cannot find any room for happiness and gracefulness.
References


