

# Caligula's Absurd Fight Against Absurd Reality

**B.J.Geetha,**

Asst. Prof. of English,

Periyar University,

Salem

Tamilnadu.

[geetprem05@gmail.com](mailto:geetprem05@gmail.com)

Man in the contemporary world wishes to be happy but finds his desires to be frustrated by the nature of existence. Albert Camus, the French Nobel laureate, is hailed as a philosopher novelist-an advocate of existentialism, a harbinger of a philosophy of the absurd. He defines the absurd as something which arises from a confrontation between the human desire for coherence and understanding and the existing irrationality and opacity of the world. His interpretation of the absurd conforms to the ancient mythic patterns used to represent the human condition like Tantalus tormented by the illusions of water and of fruit-laden trees beyond his reach; Prometheus chained to a rock; and Sisyphus pushing his boulder towards the hilltop, only to see it rolls back. The main moral consequence drawn by Camus from his analysis was that the absurd reduces all actions to ethical equality insofar as they cannot be referred to any 'absolute' standard of right and wrong.

Camus wants to approach the problem of the absurd from an existential point of view. He deals with the subject from a practical and human standpoint. He does not speak in abstraction and speaks in an involved manner than as an objective philosopher. Camus' philosophy is a philosophy of the absurd. For him, the absurd arises from the relation between man and the world, between man's rational demands and the world's irrationality. The themes which he derives from it are those of classical pessimism. As the absurd is a relationship with an experiencing mind, it follows that the absurd cannot be established as something absolute and universal. The absurd is the confrontation of two things- existence and individual mind. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world for its existence.

Camus wants to establish his theory of absurd through his protagonist of the play *Caligula*. In this play Camus' use of the historical Emperor Caligula influenced a generation of individuals that believed that the world had no meaning, and his play brought life back to these individuals through his absurd characters, inherent nature of men and their existential behavior. Camus had read about Caligula as early as 1936 in the Roman historian Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. Suetonius's Caligula is an insomniac, is obsessed with the moon, compels the citizens of Rome to make wills in his favour and to enrich the state treasury by attending brothels, uses absolute power to humiliate his Senators and indulge in sexual excesses, commits incest with Drusilla his sister and suffers intensely from her death and was distraught at the death of his sister but his mental sickness had long been apparent. But Camus presents his Caligula as a perfect ruler before he runs away from the palace after Drusilla's death. When he returns obsessed with the moon, moreover, one must understand his insanity as part and parcel of a lucid insight into the absurdity of life. Caligula is motivated by the good intentions of changing the world for the better by teaching Romans the fundamental truth that society represses. Caligula's grief is far greater

importance. It's because he draws from the fact that men are going to die and they are not happy was his first and foremost concern.

Camus' *Caligula* is to be studied in the spectrum of absurdness of life with a metaphysical anguish. Caligula realizes on the death of Drusilla, his sister and his mistress that "men die and they are not happy" (I120). He disappears from the palace for three days and comes back as a metaphysical hero. He is obsessed by the quest for the Absolute and poisoned by contempt and horror, he tries to exercise, through murder and systematic perversion of all values, a freedom which he discovers in the end is no good. He rejects friendship and love, simple human solidarity, good and evil. He takes the word of those around him, he forces them to logic, and he levels all around him by force of his refusal and by the rage of destruction which drives his passion for life. But if his truth is to rebel against fate, his error is to deny men. One cannot destroy without destroying oneself. This is why Caligula depopulates the world around him and, true to his logic, makes arrangements to arm those who will eventually kill him.

He wants to make the impossible possible, such as bringing the moon to earth with the help of Helicon. "Men die and are not happy" (I 120) – such is the complaint against the universe pronounced by the Caligula, who in Camus' play is less murderous lunatic, slave to incest, narcissist and megalomaniac of Roman history than a theatrical martyr-hero of the Absurd. Caligula is a man who carries his philosophical quarrel with the meaninglessness of human existence to a kind of fanatical but logical extreme. Camus himself described his hero as a man obsessed with the impossible and willing to pervert all values and if necessary destroy himself and all those around him in the pursuit of absolute liberty. *Caligula* was Camus' first attempt at portraying a figure in absolute defiance of the Absurd, and a remarkable composite by adding touches of Sade, of revolutionary nihilism, of the Nietzschean Superman, of his own version of Sisyphus, and even of Mussolini and Hitler, to his original portrait. *Caligula* is the story of a superior suicide. It is the story of the most human and the most tragic of errors. Unfaithful to man, loyal to himself, Caligula consents to die for having understood that no one can save himself all alone and that one cannot be free in opposition to other men. His *Caligula* is a wonder picture on the meaninglessness of human life.

*Caligula* presented a challenge for the audience as well as critics. Was Camus' Caligula an absurd hero, anti-hero, or a villain? Camus' main characters realize that men live and die without reason; Caligula was in the unique position to kill others with seeming impunity he says:

A tyrant is a man who sacrifices a whole to his ideal or his ambition. But I have no ideal, and there's nothing left for me to cover by way of power or glory. If I use this power of mine, it's to compensate. (III 153)

Knowing life has no meaning, yet traumatized by the death of his sister, Caligula starts to enjoy acting without logic. If the gods have no logic, and Caesar is a god, then he can do as he wishes to extract revenge on the absurd universe. Caligula offers some explanation to his mistress, Caesonia, as he strangles her:

This is happiness: this intolerable release, devastating scorn, blood, hatred all around me, the glorious isolation of a man who all his life long nurses and gloats over the ineffable joy of the unpunished murderer; the ruthless logic that crushes out human lives. (IV 180)

Caligula enjoys an absolute freedom over his fellow men which enables him to carry out his experiments, and destroys everything which other people regard as significant. He imposes all the atrocities on the Roman senate and on his people; compels the citizens to make wills in his favour and to enrich the state treasury by attending brothers, uses his absolute power to humiliate his senators and indulges in sexual excesses. The ultimate truth about the human condition that men die and are not happy can be altered by no power. But Caligula fails to hold this understanding; the authority which he enjoys in the world of men serves only to heighten the irony and intensity of his failure. Though the basic intention of Caligula is to change human life for the better it has been abetted with violent means.

He is wrong in denying any value to life. He does not accept that life is ambivalent. That is why young Scipio maintains in his desperate attempt to save Caligula from his devils. Caligula's second crime is to break the solidarity of man. His resentment is the natural anger that results from frustrated desire, but the nature of perversion that appears in Caligula is purely intrusive and due to confused ideas, Pride in Camus's eyes is a virtue and he cannot blame Caligula on this account. Caligula's pride goes astray and become merged with his power; he fails to identify his enemy correctly. He hates life for its very fragility and identifies with the forces that destroy it. Caligula's postulate is not, 'if God is dead everything is permitted' (Braun 51) but, "if I must die, everything is permitted (to me)" (Braun 51). In his futile attempt to emulate fate, he soon regresses to infantile and false delusion of omnipotence.

He himself realizes at the end of the play that he has not taken the path which he should have and that the freedom which he exploited was not of the right kind. It is indeed difficult for the average spectators to put him in the frame of mind where he is able at one and the same time to admire Caligula and reject him to sympathize with his ideas while criticizing his behaviour, to regard him alternately as a hero and a villain. Caligula's attitudes are unacceptable since it bears the statement his sincerity is in denying the gods. He destroys the freedom of others in asserting his own freedom. The individual's quest for authenticity and freedom must coexist together with his commitment to others around him. It is the story of the most human and the most tragic of errors. Unfaithful to mankind by loyalty to himself, Caligula consents to die for having understood that no human being could save himself all alone and because one cannot be free against the other men. But he will have some souls like that of his friend Scipio from sleep without dreams of mediocrity.

The Theatre of the Absurd expresses the anxiety and despair that spring from the recognition that man is surrounded by areas of impenetrable darkness, that he can never know his true nature and purpose, and that no one will provide him with ready-made rules of conduct as Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The certainty of the existence of a God who would give meaning to life has a far greater attraction than the knowledge that without him one could do evil without being punished. The choice between these alternative would not be difficult. But there is no choice, and that is where the bitterness begins.

The rules of logic cannot destroy Caligula; he dies knowing that he has failed. His statement that, "I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn't the right one" (IV 181) invites the audience to find the reason for his failure in something other than the laws of logic. In pursuing his reign of absurdity, Caligula acted as if his freedom were

limitless, as if all actions were equal. His rule is opposed on the one hand by the patricians who uphold the sanctified social institutions and condemn the idea of absurdity in the name of the gods or eternal values, but their opposition is proved ineffectual. On the other hand, the character Cherea, Caligula's confidant, resists Caligula's reign of terror for entirely different reasons. Without seeking to defend his position from any rational or religious viewpoint, he simply states that "some actions are... more praiseworthy than others" (III 168). It is not a higher idea which makes him oppose Caligula, but rather a personally felt belief that all actions are not equal and that man's charge is to judge human actions and to set limits which cannot be transgressed. The world remains absurd, but Cherea introduces a concept here that will not permit uncontrolled freedom to destroy those needs which are basic to human existence.

Generally, a sense of the absurd is most likely to arise in one or more of four different ways. First the mechanical nature of the lives of many individuals, the deadening routine that makes them, may someday cause one of these individuals to question the purpose and value of his existence. The second possible source of the absurd lies in an acute sense of the passage of time. It is a sense of time as the destructive element. This experience may be linked with a realization of the inevitable and ineluctable character of death. Caligula drastically undergoes this and found himself as the sole teacher of this to the world which remains under the darkness of ignorance. Life is impermanent and all the gaiety experiences of the human world are temporary. Caligula remains as a sole absurd hero who has learnt the secret of impermanence of human life. Through his absurd realization Caligula wanted to bring this teaching to his subjects through absurd measures. Thirdly, the absurd arises due to the experience of being thrown in an alien world. This sense may be produced by a feeling for the contingency and arbitrariness of our existence. This kind of feeling is also found in Pascal and Kierkegaard as well among the modern Existentialists. It may also arise from a sudden awareness of the radically alien nature of familiar natural objects such as 'stone', 'tree', 'bench', etc. An instance of this type of absurdity is found in *Nausea* by Sartre. Camus says that we may have an intense feeling of 'hostile primitive du monde'. Lastly one may possibly have an experience of the absurd from an acute sense of isolation from other individuals. Thus Caligula's philosophy and his impossible fight against god and his ideals isolated him from the rest of the social circle to the world of absolute dismay and absurdity.

The second theme Camus uses throughout *Caligula* is the inherent nature of man, and this theme was also very influential to the audiences of the 1940's. Throughout the play, Caligula is infamous for challenging the inherent natures of man, and Camus explains this during his preface to the play when he writes:

Caligula challenges friendship and love, common, human solidarity, good and evil... He levels everything around him by the strength of his rejection and the destructive fury to which his passion for life leads him. (Camus 45)

Caligula has become a monster, and it becomes obvious that Caligula must die. The necessary upcoming death of Caligula is expressed by Caesonia when she asks him, "Hasn't it been enough to see you killing others, without my also knowing you'll be killed yourself? . . . Day after day I see all that's human in you dying out, little by little" (IV 178). Because of the blunt and inherent truth that Caligula's lover expresses, Caligula slowly begins to realize that he will die, and he understands that he has become an inhuman monster. Caligula finally realizes that it is

unnatural for a human to challenge fate, and he finally expresses the truth to his own reflection when he states:

If I'd had the moon, if love were enough, all might have been different . . . There's nothing in this world, or in any other, made to my stature. And yet I know, and you too know that all I need is for the impossible to be. ( IV 181)

Caligula's eventual death concludes Albert Camus' themes of absurd characters, inherent natures of man, and existential behaviours in the play *Caligula*, and these themes were very influential for a generation of World War II survivors that believed that life had no meaning. It's easy to understand how important this play must have been to the public, and it is also easy to compare Emperor Caligula to the infamous tyrants, Hitler and Mussolini. However, the play is less influential on the generations of individuals that did not experience World War II, but it is still very entertaining. It is a very funny, absurd, and entertaining play when read in today's society, and it still expresses Camus' existential views towards life. *Caligula* was one of the most important plays in Europe during the 1940's, but I, for one, would jump at the chance to see it now in the year 2001.

The play deals with the individual struggle to understand life. The idea that life is absurd stems from the conflict between man's desire for rational explanation and the essential opacity of the world. What man wants to know is why things should be this way and not otherwise, why do laws differ, why can we not understand the notion of time, why are there just so many biological species and no more, why do human beings so often fail to communicate and more particularly why do men die and are not happy.

By saying "Men die and they are not happy" (I 120) what he expresses in practical terms is the deadlock reached by the man who has seen vanity. Rupert Brooke evidently regards, in his poem *Heaven*, this understanding as being general that even aquatic life shares it,

Fish, fly-replete in depth of June  
 Dawdling away their watery noon,  
 Ponder deep wisdom dark or clear  
 Each secret they have their stream and pond,  
 But is there anything beyond.  
 This life cannot be all they swear,  
 for how unpleasant if it were,  
 .....  
 And under, that Almighty Fin,  
 The Littlest fish may enter in.

The difference between Rupert Brooke's fish and Caligula is that the former has faith in a Almighty fin whereas the latter, having nothing but a question vertically, seeks to vent his consequent frustrations by forcing a change in those around him. (Richard, 28).



“Men die and are not happy” (I 120) - this feature of human predicament prevails behind all of Caligula’s inhumanness. It is the result of his anguish. Anguish, according to existential philosophy, is the reaction of the man who has had a vision of the absurd. Caligula realizes that one cannot be free against other people. It is not the physical loss of Drusilla that matters much to the peck of troubles Caligula encounters but it is his inner response is very significant which brings out meaninglessness of human life. Her death is only a boundary situation and there begins his voyage as an absurd hero reaped with tyranny. He is feeling insecure and his return after three days promotes him to release his metaphysical anguish. He thinks that his anguish can enable him to stuff his subjects with his teaching. He thinks his labial teaching would end up only with partial success. So he uses tyranny and cruelty, which would ensure experience of heap of sufferings, and that experience would teach them lesson they most needed. Caligula thinks he can hold the moon in his arm, make the sun set in the east and men can cease to die and will be happy. The physical delight which man feels at being alive is tragic because it highlights the horror of his inevitable death. His rally is to teach his people who live on the mirage of false life. Being an emperor he thinks he can obtrude his logic on them. His unconcerned behaviour for others designs his own end. Thus Cherea says, “He is converting his philosophy into corpses” (II 132).

In his quest for absolute and superhuman power there is a dark impels of lust for destruction, the power to kill. He says, “I kill, I exercise the rapturous power of a destroyer” (IV 180). Later he realizes that his orgy of killing has not solved his problem, he is equally sure of himself that he too is going to be murdered by the conspirators. People have no respect for his life since he devalued their life. It is his knowledge of the absurd and the acceleration of tyranny that lead him to his own end. Caligula is condemned in denying any value of life. His crime is to break the solidarity of man and his revolt against god. Man rebels against fate as against a harsh and unjust master. But the value of rebellion must be judged by its aim. If the aim is to expose the harshness and injustice of the master then the rebellion is justified; if the victim is merely attempting to become an executioner or wants to play the role of a Rescuer then the rebellion is unjustified. Caligula realizes that he has crowned himself as a king of carnival. In his monstrous loneliness, he has acted like Prometheus in reverse, a satanic Prometheus who would hear neither the cry of mankind nor the song of the ocean tides, but could engulf all in his revenge against Zeus. Caligula’s revolt proceeds exclusively from his frustrated hope for happiness. Though his wish is innocent it follows that his conduct must be innocent. Even after the realization of his wrong choice and the acknowledgement of failure, Caligula does not end his life in despair, but in an affirmation of life.

Caligula enjoys an absolute power and freedom over his fellow men which enables him to carry out his experiment in what Nietzsche called the ‘transvaluation of all values’ and destroy everything which other people regard as significant, he fails. The ultimate truth about the human condition – that men die and are not happy – can be altered by no power, however absolute in human terms; and in this respect, the authority which Caligula enjoys in the world of men serves only to heighten the irony and intensity of his failure. He himself realizes at the end of the play that he has not taken the path which he should and that the freedom which he exploited was not of the right kind, and the programme note which Camus wrote in 1945 makes the reasons for Caligula’s failure quite explicit: The only possible liberty is a liberty which concerns death. The man who is finally free is the one who accepts death as it is, also accepts the consequences in the

same way i.e the overthrow of all the traditional values of life. But if Caligula's sincerity is in denying gods, his error is in denying men. One cannot destroy anything without destroying oneself. That is why Caligula clears off the people around him; and faithful to his logic, he does all that is necessary to arm against him those who would finish by killing him. Caligula, in fact, indulges in a wholesale revolt embracing all areas of life. He tries to demolish all established social norms, economic patterns, ethical standard and moral principles- in fact, the entire structure of time-honoured values in civilized society. Thus the protagonist emerges not as a modern Sisyphus but as the prototype of the Absurd Superman, who inevitably destroys himself. His extinction of his own physical existence as ultimate proof of the validity of his ontology. Thus Caligula's life exposes the limits of human power.

*Caligula* is the story of a man who commits suicide- a dignified suicide. It is the story of the most human and most tragic of errors. Unfaithful to mankind by loyalty to himself, Caligula consents to die for having understood that no human being could save himself all alone, and because one cannot be free against the other men. But he will have at least aroused/ awakened some souls- like that of his friend Scipio and his own- from sleep without dreams of mediocrity.

It is this reference to young Scipio which most clearly emphasizes Caligula's didactic intention, and it is Caligula's role as a potential educator that Camus lays most insistence in his attempt to transform the person whom Suetonius presents as a bloodthirsty, tyrant, driven mad by a combination of epilepsy, fits, insomnia and an unwisely mixed aphrodisiac, into a sympathetic and even attractive character. The basic motive for Caligula's behaviour as Camus tries to make clear is good one: to change human life for better, albeit by violent means. The charge of bloodthirstiness is disposed of by Caligula's remark to Scipio that his absurd fantasies cause fewer deaths than the smallest of wars undertaken by a tyrant and the emphasis throughout the play is the suffering that Caligula himself endures, particularly, his discovery of anguish is described in vivid physical detail:

Pain everywhere, in my chest, in my legs and arms. Even my skin is raw, my head is buzzing, I feel like vomiting. But worst of all is this queer taste in my mouth. Not blood, or death, or fever, but a mixer of all three. I've only to stir my tongue, and the world goes black, and everyone looks horrible. How hard, how cruel it is, this process of becoming a man! (I 127)

Thus, there is no question of his finding any coldly sadistic delight in the suffering which he inflicts on others. Like the Romantic hero whom he so much resembles, Caligula suffers precisely because he is more aware than anyone else of what human life is really like, and it is his desire to pass this awareness that Camus presents him in his most favourable light.

The legendary hero Sisyphus has in him all the virtues of the absurd. The different versions of the myth of Sisyphus show that he is prepared to rebel against the Gods and cheat them, if necessary just like Caligula. But Caligula went rebel against Gods to announce their treachery against human unlike Sisyphus who wants to live his life to bring in meaning to his existence. By doing so Sisyphus wants to retain the priceless gift of continued physical life. Each version shows that he has a great respect for the Gods, hatred of death, and intense passion for life. He appears to be heroic even in his punishment. Similarly Caligula too perceived to be heroic even in his perpetration of cruelty to fellow human being.

His greatness and tragedy lie in the consciousness of the human situation. The value of life is enhanced by the awareness of the impossibility or reducing it to human understanding. Camus portrays through his favorite examples of the absurd man, Caligula who has accepted the conclusions of his argument.

### Works Cited

Braun, Lev. "Moralist of the Absurd: Caligula' Logic." *Witness of Decline*. America:Farileigh

Dickinson University Press, 1974. Print.

---. "Moralist of the Absurd: Farewell to Caligula." *Witness of Decline*. America:Farileigh

Dickinson University Press, 1974. Print.

---. "Moralist of the Absurd: Why Caligula?" *Witness of Decline*. America: Farileigh Dickinson

University Press, 1974. Print.

---. "The Challenge of Caligula." *Witness of Decline*. America: Farileigh Dickinson University Press, 1974. Print.

Camus, Albert. *Caligula and Other Play*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1959. Print.

\*\*\*\*\*