

# The Absurdity of Love as Presented in the Name of Our Fathers and a Sunday at the Pool in Kigali

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the absurdity of love in two novels: *In the Name of our Fathers* by Abdirazak Y. Osman and *A Sunday at the pool in Kigali* by Gil Courtemanche. It endeavours to analyse two major ideas, absurdity and romance in these primary texts. There is a convergence between love and romance semantically, thus this study employs the two words interchangeably – to convey the same meaning. Absurdity, as a phenomenon, is discussed in two sections as a progressive theory: absurdity in the novel as a genre and absurdity of love in these two primary texts. On romance, the study discusses the characteristics of romance novels in relation to absurdity. The study uses the theory of the absurd to analyse the parallel romantic relationships in the two primary texts. It also employs a qualitative research methodology with textual analysis as the major method of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Primary data is drawn through close reading of the two primary texts. The data collected from the two primary texts will be classified in relation to the study's anticipated chapters. Secondary data will be collected from related books, projects, theses, critics, scholarly journals from both print and the Internet. In the conclusion, the outcomes of the research will be discussed and areas of further study outlined. It is expected that this research will develop new perspectives in the prism of romance and hence contribute to the already vast knowledge that the world is aware of.

**Keywords:** **absurdity:** impossibility, contradiction, hopelessness, nothingness, meaninglessness, futility. **Dash:** an empty space outside the house, a veranda, a hall. **diraa:** a long, loose over-dress made of semi-transparent Swiss voile worn by Somali women, especially women from the northern part of the country. **formula:** structure, technique, style, steps, stages. **influence:** to end up in, to lead to, to trigger. **romantic love:** a relationship that involves sexual intimacy

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the aspects of the absurdity of love in the two novels. I analyse, first, the romantic relationships of Ali and Iftin and other relationships of other couples in *In the Name of our Fathers*. Second, Gentile and Valcourt's romantic relationship and that of other love partners in *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* are analysed to identify aspects of absurdity in them.

In *In the Name of our Fathers*, it is fascinating how the writer, Abdirazak Y. Osman, is able to creatively embed a love (romantic) story of two youthful characters, Ali and Iftin, in a civil conflict context. The story is strangely captivating in that amidst confusion, fear, tension, fights, violence, deaths and terror, a romantic (love) relationship sprouts and grows. The only saddening aspect of that romance is its unexpected ending. This absurd ending informed the concept of this study.

Another thought that underscores the sentiments of this study is the discussion that Shah puts forward in his paper: *Vetoing Transcendence: Albert Camus as a Philosopher of Immanence*. He mentions an anonymous epitaph on the grave of Camus that indicates that glory and love are temporal and that life and death are inevitable. The epitaph reads:

Here I understand what  
They call glory:  
The right to love  
Without limits. (3)

## Aspects of the Absurdity of Love in *In the Name of our Fathers* and *A Sunday at the pool in Kigali*

It is necessary, at this point, that I first discuss the absurdity in *In the Name of our Fathers* and *A Sunday at the pool in Kigali*. In *In the Name of our Fathers*, the absurdity of love starts with Mona, the maid in the family of Ali's family's house, and her boyfriend. Ali says, "When Mona knew that none of the adults was going to be home she would sometimes bring her boyfriend to the house, and she would usually use my room to entertain him. She was too shy to meet him in the presence of others, and she didn't have a room of her own (5)." The act of Mona keeping her love secret confirms that love is absurd - why could one hide a good thing? If at all the thing is good.

Falis, Ali's stepmother, thinks that Ali's love life is absurd because he is visited by different girls in different nights. On the other hand, Ali thinks that it is absurd for Mona to go out with the same boyfriend all the time. This is a trait that he might have picked from his father who marries many times. On his part, he (Ali) believes that a person needs different lovers in order to satiate his or her urge for love. This is the philosophy that Camus postulates as he (Camus) himself indulged in romantic relationships with many women.

Ali admits that his romantic life has been absurd. He says, "I am always lucky attracting girls, but I almost always have a problem with them at the end, especially if they become mournful or something like that" (212, 213). He gives the example of Shukri, Mona's friend, who wanted him to promise that he would be her boyfriend before they made love and he could not because he had a girlfriend and their relationship ends at that point.

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At Zeila, the ancient Somali port city, Iftin comes to Ali and tells him that she had rushed things a bit and apologises to him. On his part, he asks her if he could see her again. She tells him that she could find him because she knows Djibouti like the back of her hand. To this Ali says, "Maybe she was just getting rid of me, but I accepted her promise anyway (217)."

In *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, we meet Gentille whom the writer describes sensually: "And Gentille, whose name is as lovely as her lovely breasts, which are so pointed they abrade her starched shirt-dress, Gentille, whose face is more lovely still, and whose ass is more disturbing in its impudent adolescence than anything else about her, Gentille who is so embarrassed by her beauty she has never smiled or spoken an unnecessary word... (5)." Valcourt has secretly admired Gentille for six months. It is absurd that Valcourt waits for six months for an opportunity to express his love to Gentille

Absurdity comes out in terms of the age gap between the two lovers; Valcourt being older compared to the youthful Gentille. Love is absurd because it does not choose the ages of those who fall in love as in the case of Valcourt and Gentille. He [Valcourt] is ready to protect her [Gentille] like an adopted daughter in order to save her from the danger that her identity as a 'Tutsi' poses.

Valcourt reads from the works of Paul Éluard's *Oeuvres complètes* (Complete Works) under the magical fig tree at the Hôtel Des Millies-Collines. The lines: "We are the first cloud we two/ In this absurd expanse of cruel happiness (98)." These lines are a confirmation that romance is followed by absurdity, cruelty and happiness.

Gentille enjoys being spoken to by Valcourt. She tells him, "...I like it when you talk to me (139)." She makes him to say that he likes how she looks – her behind and her chest. She also wants him to tell her about himself, about his country. It is love that makes her want to listen to her lover (Valcourt). This comes with the absurd behaviour of a lover. Otherwise, how can a person just enjoy listening to another?

Gentille and Valcourt sleep together under the big tree, Kawa's grave. Even when Jean-Damascène leaves a big pot of coffee, some bread, tomatoes and hard cooked eggs beside their naked bodies they do not hear. When Gentille wakes up, she sees their father watching them from afar, near the house. She covers herself without feeling even an iota of shame or embarrassment. She calls him to eat with them. It is absurd that Gentille is not ashamed when her father sees her naked because she is in love with Valcourt. They also call the pleasure they have under the tree 'mutual suicide' (200) and their last death. The idea of the absurdity of death, life and love is manifested.

Valcourt tells Gentille that he fell in love with her the first morning, at six o'clock when she started her internship. It turns out that Gentille fell in love with him at the same time - love at first sight, the idea of soulmates coming into play in their case. This brings out the question why they waited for so long to express their love to each other. Valcourt asks, "So why did we wait so long?" then Gentille says, "I don't know, but I am not sorry (216)." It is absurd that they waited

for so long for them to tell each other that they loved each other.

Victor brings two beautiful gold wedding rings that Valcourt and Gentille exchange. Then, Father Louis baptises the daughter of Cyprien "Marie-Ange Émérita" before he disappears without telling the people present that he has been ordered to go to Banalli with all other employees of the French Embassy. The exchange of rings between spouses symbolizes their commitment to their love and marriage. That it can only take commitment to stay in it. So why commit to it in the first instance if it is bound to end unless the spouses invest so much in it to keep it from coming to an end? It is equally absurd that rings are what signify devotion and commitment between partners.

As Valcourt walks through the market with a German television crew that wants to make a short film on life after the genocide. Suddenly Valcourt sees the white cover of a book that has a photograph inset in the centre. He realises that a tobacco seller who is putting on a broad-brimmed straw hat and who is reading Paul Éluard's *Oeuvres Complètes* (Complete works). He approaches the seller and recognises the back of the neck and as he bends over recognises the hands holding the book. He calls out "Gentille" (254). She responds to his greetings and places the book on the tobacco leaves. He tries to kiss her but she recoils and bends her head. He tells her that he still loves her and that they will leave Rwanda. Gentille responds to him in a weak voice amid a cough, "No, no my darling, if you love me as you say - and I believe you - I believe you - you'll go away. I'm not the Gentille you loved and that you think you still love... I am not a woman anymore... Bernard please, please, if you love me, go away. Go now and leave the country. I'm dead (254,255)." She draws a finger along his hand and apologises for touching him. She then tells him, "Go, my love (255)." Valcourt goes away and starts mourning again. He goes back to Victor's place and drinks a lot. This second death of Gentille hits him more than the first one. On the other hand, if the great love that Gentille and Valcourt enjoyed was to end in so much pain, then this is the highest level of the absurdity of love and romance. And, death and suffering seem to be intertwined to bring about the phenomenon of absurdity.

Finally, Gentille succumbs (real death) to Pneumonia after six months of her last encounter with Valcourt. She is interred under the fig tree that shades the swimming pool of the Hôtel Des Mille-Collines. The curtains falling on Gentille is an indication of the absurdity of life and love. Valcourt experiences the absurdity of love and life.

In his latter days, Valcourt stays in Kigali and works with a group that defends those accused of participating in the genocide. The Tutsi-dominated government threatens to expel him from Rwanda. When asked to talk of Rwanda, he narrates the story of Kawa. As a response to the absurdity of life, he does not lose hope. He is living with a Swedish woman of his age, a doctor with the Red Cross. This shows his resilience against the hopelessness of life and of love – the absurdity of life and love.

The two (Valcourt and his Swedish wife) have adopted a young Hutu girl whose parents have been sentenced to death for taking part in the genocide. They call the girl Gentille and Valcourt is at peace once more. By naming the girl Gentille, Valcourt is fighting his loss of Gentille. In addition, marrying a woman of his age shows that his loving the young Gentille is absurd; but even as he gets a fourth chance in life by marrying the Swedish woman and being at peace - he still misses Gentille, but life has to go on anyway - regardless of the absurdity of love or life that he encounters.

## 2. Conclusion

After the analysis of *In the Name of our Fathers* and *A Sunday at the pool in Kigali*, I make several conclusions on the absurdity of love. That in *In the Name of our Fathers*, Mona's love relationship with her boyfriend is absurd as she only brings him (her boyfriend) to the house when she knows that none of the adults is going to be at home. The other idea of Ali's father marrying many times claiming that his wives are barren or bad-tempered is absurd. The story of the old she hyena who refuses to marry after her husband dies is absurd. The absurdity of love comes to the fore in Ali's romance life. He admits that his romantic life has been absurd. This is why he says that he is always lucky attracting girls but he almost always has a problem with them at the end, especially when they want him to commit to their relationship. There is the absurdity of love when Gentille goes to Méthode's burial and tells Valcourt that she did not go there because of Méthode but because of him (Valcourt). Absurdity is exhibited in the age difference between Valcourt and Gentille. Valcourt feels that taking Gentille to Canada where she would depend on him is to make her a slave. He wants to stay with her in Rwanda where she could later walk out of his life in what he calls 'the pleasures and ambitions so natural' to find a lover of her age. The research findings promote romantic relationships devoid of physical or emotional suicide and murder emanating from ongoing or termination of such relationships demonstrated in the manner that Valcourt in *A Sunday at the pool in Kigali* marries a Swiss lady of his age and goes on with his life.

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