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**DIGGING INTO THE DEPTHS OF EXISTENTIALIST ABSURDISM THROUGH  
GOTHIC IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S *KAFKA ON THE SHORE***  
HARUKI MURAKAMI'NİN *KAFKA ON THE SHORE* ROMANINDA GOTİK ÜZERİNDEN VAROLUŞSAL  
ABSÜRDİZMİN İNCELİKLERİNİ İRDELEME

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**Abstract**

This study aims to bring the realms of philosophy and literature together to create a link between our quotidian lives and fictional worlds. Absurdity in an existential sense means there is an internal contradiction in one's aspiration to seek meaning in the universe which is destitute of such meaning. The correlation between absurdity and existentialism was asserted by Albert Camus who gained insights into absurdity by contemplating Sisyphus. Nonetheless, the purpose of this study is to blend existential absurdism with gothic genre to explore elements of existential absurdity and gothic echoes in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*. One's existential angst can be evaluated from a perspective which is also related to gothic, since the universe devoid of rationality, purpose and joy can be likened to gothic fiction whose attributes are also irrationality, gloominess and uncanny. To cope with the absurdity that surrounds us, as though we were characters trapped in manifold absurdities of gothic fiction, we resolutely cling to hope or death. Death is also a theme of gothic fiction from which characters endeavour to escape but mostly fail, like existentialists cannot escape from suicidal desires in nihilism called the universe.

**Keywords:** *Absurdity, Gothic, Existentialism, Meaning, Sisyphus.*

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### Öz

Felsefe ve edebiyat alanlarını bir araya getiren söz konusu çalışma, günlük hayatlarımız ve kurgusal eserlerin dünyaları arasında bir bağ kurmak niyeti taşımaktadır. Varoluşsal manada absürdizm, anlamdan yoksun olan evrende anlam bulma beklentimizin temelinde yatan çelişkiye atıfta bulunur. Sisifos miti üzerinden absürdizm felsefesini geliştiren Fransız filozof Albert Camus, absürdizm ve varoluşçuluk arasında bir ilişki olduğunu savunmuştur. Ancak bu çalışmanın ortaya çıkışının altında yatan esas sebep, edebiyattaki gotik türü ile varoluşsal absürdizmi harmanlayarak, Haruki Murakami'nin *Kafka on the Shore* romanında, hem gotik öğeler hem de varoluşsal absürdizmin izlerini tespit etmektir. Kişinin varoluşsal acıları gotiğe dair bir bakış açısıyla da irdelenebilir, zira mantık, amaç ve neşeden yoksun olan evren; mantıksızlık, kasvet, bilinmezlik ve garipliklerle tanımlanan gotik dünyası ile ilişkilendirilebilir. Gotik romanın binbir türlü absürtlüğünde hapsolmuş karakterlermişizcesine, bizi gerçek dünyamızda çepeçevre saran absürdizmle mücadele etmek için ya umut ya da ölüme sıkı sıkıya sarılırız. Ölüm, gotik roman için de, karakterlerinin kaçmaya çalıştığı ancak çoğunlukla bu konuda başarısız olduğu bir temadır; bu durum, varoluşçuların evren diye adlandırılan hiçlikte, intihar arzularından kaçamamalarıyla özdeşleştirilebilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Absürdizm, Gotik, Varoluşçuluk, Anlam, Sisifos.*

### Introduction

Absurdity encompasses features of idiocy, unreasonableness or it alludes to things or situations which are so ludicrous as to be amusing. Albert Camus declares that life is absurd, that is to say, life is accused of being illogical, foolish and even ridiculous or laughable. By the same token, the world of gothic might be charged with similar accusations. Gothic might be considered as a realm full of non-rational, unrealistically and ludicrously terrifying creatures and events; we may regard gothic as a genre which is fanciful, supernaturally gloomy and remote from reality. After reading a gothic book, we can safely go back to our seemingly rational reality but what if life is also absurd and has no difference from gothic fiction? Then we have nowhere to go and we are bound for living in absurdity, since absurdity is the kernel of our lives. With the aim of unearthing the resemblance between the absurdity of our lives and of the world of gothic fiction, I will delve into existentialism and refer to one of the most prominent existentialist philosophers Albert Camus and his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. By means of Camus' conjectures, I aim to analyse the well-known Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's novel *Kafka on the Shore*, which can be categorized under both existentially absurdist and gothic genre.

Before delving deeply into some specific details about the novel, lingering over a comprehensive definition of absurdity in an existential sense would be beneficial. When mentioning that life is absurd, Camus does not intend to convey that there are some ridiculous, unreasonable or meaningless happenings in our world that attribute life such a characteristic as being absurd. There are no specific events which can be conceived as absurd; on the contrary, what is meant in Camus' essay is that life is already absurd in its essence. In that case, the reason why we live in spite of life's absurdity is open to question. Albert Camus languishes over such issues as whether life is worth living or not, what absurdity is in the

context of our daily lives, the cruciality of death, particularly committing suicide, when one comes face to face with this absurdity. He attaches absurdity an utmost importance and regards suicide as a philosophical antidote to it. In his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus raises this existentialist matter for consideration and asserts: “*There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy*” (Camus, 1955: 4). Camus believes that when human beings are directly confronted with the irrationality of the universe, whether consciously or unconsciously, they yearn to possess happiness and reason. Nonetheless, “*(t)he absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world*” (Camus, 1955: 15, 20).

We quest after meaning or reason by pursuing our dreams and by striving for being a particular person or we feel obliged to attribute some meanings to everything that happens to us and struggle to find some logic or blessing even in our unpleasant experiences. Nevertheless, the world we are thrown into offers us a formless chaos, indifference, an endless pursuit that might lead us nowhere, the recurrence of similar experiences, ceaselessly running time and eventually our own death. Camus asserts that not only life but also humans are absurd. We said that our life is absurd, but that we expect to find something in the universe, whether it is meaning or reason or consistency, that is, this expectancy is a lot more absurd than life itself. Camus assumes that “*I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. 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 on man as on the world*” (Camus, 1955: 15, 20). Haruki Murakami, whose novel will be dissected comprehensively below, also questions why everyone is always in a rush in an absurd way:

*The station's packed with people streaming in and out, all of them dressed in their favourite clothes, bags or briefcases in hand, each one dashing off to take care of some pressing business. I stare at this ceaseless, rushing crowd and imagine a time a hundred years from now. In a hundred years everybody here- me included- will have disappeared from the face of the earth and turned into ashes or dust. A weird thought, but everything in front of me starts to seem unreal, like a gust of wind could blow it all away. I spread my hands out in front of me and take a good hard look at them. What am I always so tense about? Why this desperate struggle just to survive?* (Murakami, 2006: 18)

What is the relatedness of gothic to “absurdity in existential sense” or vice versa? Absurd is against reason, so is gothic. Gothic also gives emphasis to irrationality and gothic utilizes the concept of irrationality to fill its readers with fear. According to Darryl Hattenhauer, the character Dr. Montague in American author Shirley Jackson’s gothic horror novel *The Haunting of Hill House* “*has an irrational fear of irrationality*” (Hattenhauer, 2003: 156). As Hattenhauer refers to, this character says “*Fear... is the relinquishment of logic, the willing relinquishing of reasonable patterns*” (Hattenhauer, 2003: 156). I have been inspired by these words uttered by Shirley and the professor mentioned to create a connection between gothic and existentialist absurdity. Dr. Montague does a scientific research as to whether supernatural events exist in

reality or not. In short, he is after rationality in a realm called supernatural which is generally associated with irrationality. As Camus suggests, what Dr. Montague does bears a resemblance to the fact that humans long for rationality in a universe which is bereft of sense. Dr. Montague seeks rationality not in the universe but in a mansion which is thought to be haunted by ghosts. From this perspective, the universe can be likened to a gothic novel's atmosphere. As it is deduced from Dr. Montague and other characters' fear of paranormal entities such as poltergeists, when we come across something which we cannot define or categorize by means of logic, we start to be overwhelmed with fear. As Dr. Montague maintains, fear emerges as an outcome of the renouncement of logic. When we are led astray from the path of logic during reading a gothic novel, we feel fear. Such inexplicable phenomena as haunted mansions irritate readers, since we desire to be offered intellectual lucidity by authors. We continue to read a gothic novel with trepidation and discomfort for the reason that we can not guess the next complexity or ambiguity which the author gets prepared to present us. By the same token, the universe lack of logic strikes terror into hearts of existentialists. Authors of gothic genre and God act in a similar way here; they both supervise the running of our lives or lives of gothic characters. When the universe or God seem to be oblivious to our calls for reason and happiness, we feel crestfallen, lonely, suicidal, distraught, cynical and helpless, just like gothic characters experience when they encounter some unearthly creatures. Therefore, both the earth and the world of phantoms seem to be absurd, malignant and unreliable.

As stated in the previous paragraph, transcendental and incomprehensible creatures and events revolving around them in Gothic fiction reduce us to inability to come up with a logical deciphering, which makes us feel apprehension. The reason behind this is that human beings react to anything unfamiliar or uncanny with emotions of nervousness, terror, fright or alarm. Likewise, according to the existentialist Camus, when we manage to elucidate one way or another what is happening around us, we start not to have uncanny feelings about our world. The world seems something familiar to us. Nevertheless, when we ruminate on our existence and unload delusions surrounding us, our world might seem unfamiliar to us and we might feel like an alien or a stranger in the universe. The relationship in which absurdity is associated with gothic is conceivable here, because both of them might create feelings of uncanny and unfamiliarity within us. For instance, a fictitious character's beloved mother who turns into a monster or an apparition causes feelings of uncanny and absurdity in the character's mind. We might not feel "heimlich" (Freud, 1953: 222) (familiar, unintimidated and secure), well and free from fear when we read a gothic novel or while we live. Furthermore, not only *dramatis personae* in gothic literature, but also we are searching meaning in everything throughout our lives. While we are living or reading a gothic novel, our minds get suspended whether incidents happening in the world of gothic or that of ours are totally ridiculously nonsensical ones or this illogicality is just a facade which hides some secret logics awaiting to be expounded.

***Kafka on the Shore from the Angle of Existentialist Absurdism***

In the following discussion, I will broach the reasons why the novel *Kafka on the Shore* should be categorized under the genres of gothic and existentialist absurdism and I will give various evidences from the novel to demonstrate the truth of my assertions. Absurdist fiction revolves around ultimately meaningless actions by which even readers feel perplexed due to these actions' not having an inherent clarification or purpose in themselves. Nonetheless, because I will analyze absurdity in the novel from Albert Camus' existentialist angle, I will show the similitude between the gothic implications in the absurd acts of characters and in our daily existential angsts. I am inclined to regard the fictional characters as if they were real people. Every single deed not only from this fiction but also from our worlds can be an example of absurdity; however, I will give prominence to the instances in the novel which seem to blend gothic with absurdity. The novel centers around main characters' mystifying events among which we can list Johnnie Walker, a brutal cat-slayer; Nakata, a determined cat-seeker who seems to act in a mechanical or unemotional way like an automaton; and Kafka, a fifteen year old boy embarking on a risky journey to achieve his dreams. Besides them, I will strive to analyze Hitler as a real life figure to exemplify absurdity and gothic personified in one person.

An example which typifies both gothic and absurdity can be Johnny Walker, one of the major characters in *Kafka On The Shore*. Fred Botting indicates that "*gothic signifies a writing of excess*" (1996: 1). Indeed, in Johnny Walker's evil treatments to which poor cats are subjected, readers feel nauseous, since descriptions of the scenes in which cats are massacred are immoderately unpleasant, excessively deplorable and shockingly bad. Since Nakata's duty is to find out where missing cats are, in one of his quests for a lost cat called Goma, Nakata encounters a weird black dog that is able to speak and that takes him to the place where Johnny Walker, aka cat-slayer, lives. When they arrive Walker's home, the black dog leads Nakata to the kitchen after passing through a dark and gloomy corridor; as might be expected from a novel which involves gothic elements, the kitchen "*had only a couple of windows and was dark*" (Murakami, 2006: 46). Before delving deeply into what Nakata experiences in Jonny Walker's dwelling, it would be beneficial at this point to direct our attention to what Botting states about the features a gothic fiction has had throughout centuries. According to him, "*(Gothic) appears in the awful obscurity that haunted eighteenth-century rationality and morality*" (Botting, 1996: 1). Gothic, at that time, followed the course of "*despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism and the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence*" (Botting, 1996: 1). Gloomy and mysterious gothic atmospheres indicate the impossibility of escaping from the past, since the past disturbingly forces itself upon the present by arousing emotions related to terror and laughter. In the twentieth century, gothic figures, in manifold ways, persisted in keeping up with the pace of modernity by means of displaying less favourable aspects of enlightenment and humanist values with counter-narratives. Many perceived threats to these values, threats concerning "*supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption*"

(Botting, 1996: 1) are encapsulated in gothic fiction. Despite the fact that gothic writing is not a purely negative term, objects and practices that are regarded as irrational, negative, immoral and fantastic hold the interest and attention of gothic. As the world has been becoming more and more secularized since the eighteenth century along with continuously changing social and political conditions and diversified approaches to religion, gothic writing and its reception have gone through prominent shifts. Nevertheless, gothic excesses, such as “*the fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries*” (Botting, 1996: 1) still evoke ambivalent emotions in the tales associated with desire, darkness and power.

During the scenes depicting cats which are paralysed or dispatched by Walker, one can come to realize that there are a good many features characterizing gothic genre in this novel. For instance, when Nakata gets kitchen, he opens a refrigerator and notices that it is full of “*cut-off heads of all colors and sizes, arranged on three shelves like oranges at a fruit stand. The cats’ faces were frozen, facing forward*” (Murakami, 2006: 46). Gothic, as explicated above, touches upon topics which have relevance to immorality, irrationality, perversion, terror, evil, mental disintegration, supernatural and so on. What I mean here is that Johnny Walker’s acts seem to demonstrate his mental illnesses or his vulnerable mental health, which winds up his actions’ being irrational, fearsome and also perverse. What is immoral is likely to be illogical, so gothic characteristics like being irrational or fearsome or immoral are closely linked to one another. One characteristic evokes the other. Furthermore, terror-invoking scenes delineating how Johnny Walker slaughters cats in cold blood are manifestations of extreme physical harm inflicted on them. Although the cats have been paralyzed by some kind of injections and are not able to move in any way, Walker makes them feel unimaginable pain:

*Johnnie Walker placed the limp cat on top of the desk, opened a drawer, and with both hands extracted a large black package. He carefully unwrapped it and spread out the contents on the desk. These included a small electric saw, scalpels of various sizes, and a very large knife, all of them gleaming like they’d just been sharpened... All the while he was whistling ‘Heigh-Hoo.’... He narrowed his eyes and gently stroked the cat’s head. He ran the tip of his index finger up and down the cat’s belly, then picked up a scalpel in his right hand and without any warning made an incision straight down the stomach. It all happened in an instant. The belly split wide open and reddish guts spilled out. The cat tried to scream but barely made any sound at all. His tongue, after all, was numb, and he could hardly open his mouth. But his eyes were contorted in terrible pain. And Nakata could well imagine how awful this pain was. A moment later blood gushed out, wetting Johnnie Walker’s hands and running down his vest. But he didn’t pay attention. Still to the accompaniment of ‘Heigh-Ho,’ he thrust his hand inside the cat’s body and with a small scalpel skillfully cut loose the tiny heart. He placed the gory lump on his palm and held it out for Nakata to see. ‘Take a peek. It’s still beating.’ Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he popped the heart into his mouth and began chewing silently, leisurely savoring the taste. His eyes glistened like a child enjoying a pastry hot from the oven... ‘Fresh and warm. And still beating in my mouth.’ (Murakami, 2006: 48)*

In gothic plot, architectural designs or places have a pivotal role. Among gothic novels’ certain trope-centered formulas, one can see gothic landscapes which are generally “*desolate, alienating and full of menace*” (Botting, 1996: 2). While wild and mountainous locations predominate in the eighteenth century, in later years modern gothic novel directs its attention

to dark and labyrinthine streets which evoke “*the violence and menace of Gothic castle and forest*” (Botting, 1996: 2). In *Kafka on the Shore*, Murakami reconstructs mysterious, gloom-ridden, dim streets which are significant characteristics of gothic fiction. When Nakata has been asked to track down the missing cat called Goma, he goes to “*the vacant lot*” and has a conversation with other cats that might know something about the missing one’s whereabouts. However, the cat called Mr. Okawa says it cannot give any information about where Goma is, since it does not want to get involved in “*a dangerous, nasty business*” (Murakami, 2006: 40). Mystery in this explanation intensifies with a vicious, appalling and ghastly dog that appears out of nowhere. Its belligerent mood is described as follows: “*Its teeth had blood stuck to them, and slimy bits of meat matted around its mouth*” (Murakami, 2006: 40). The uncanny, mystifying, and bizarre impression given by the dog becomes more irritating by its command “*Stand up and follow me!*” (Murakami, 2006: 40) After Nakata obeys its command, the dog leads him to Johnnie Walker’s old-fashioned and sombre house after striding through unfamiliar territories and labyrinthine streets, which are suggestive of gothic writing.

Camus believes that we are searching for meaning even if we live “*in this unintelligible and limited universe*” (Camus, 1955: 15, 20). In the world devoid of meaning, like Hitler whom I will anatomize in following paragraphs, Johnnie Walker searches for his own meaning, which becomes his fate. The motivation behind Johnnie Walker’s collecting and killing cats is to “*get these cats’ souls*” (Murakami, 2006: 69). Just as Hitler is a human shape of evil, so Johnnie Walker epitomizes gothic characteristics such as “*excesses*”, “*immorality*”, “*human evil*”, “*social transgression*”, “*mental disintegration*”, “*moral decay*”, “*monstrosity*” and “*perversion*” as Brotting stated above. Killing cats so as to get their souls is not only applicable to gothic but also what he does is utterly absurd/unreasonable. Like Hitler, murdering living beings constitutes meaning to Walker; his way of searching for meaning or giving meaning to his life is repugnant and outrageous.

One of the hallmarks of gothic fiction is its monsters. Nonetheless, in my opinion monstrosity has two dimensions; while one is directly related to the physical appearance of a monster, the other is about psychology of a monster. When it comes to illuminating psychological and emotional characteristics of a monster, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* might come to mind. When Victor Frankenstein comes face to face with the animate creature he has constructed, he does not seem to be in a state of peaceful happiness: “*The beauty of (his) dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled (his) heart*” (Shelley, 1994: 56). At first sight, the creature resembles a monster due to his being grossly malformed. The monster’s abnormally formed body gives rise to prejudices about its character and Victor believes that the monster has malevolent desires. Victor’s repugnance of “*the demoniacal corpse (he) had so miserably given life*” (Levine & Knoepfmacher, 1979: 100) becomes more intense when the monster murders Victor’s younger brother William. Nonetheless, the monster shrieks with pain because of his having been by his lonesome all his life. The monster believes that he has committed evil deeds, since “*misery made (him) a fiend*” although he had been “*benevolent and good*” (Levine & Knoepfmacher, 1979: 100). The monster who does not even have a name exclaims to his master

that *“Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous”* (Levine & Knoepfmacher, 1979: 100). The reason behind his own sufferings and the sufferings he caused is that he needs compassion and companion.

We encounter people who see themselves as monsters, and therefore live in agony, not only in *Frankenstein* but also in *Kafka on the Shore*. Oshima is in charge of the library which accommodates Kafka. One day, a group of feminists come to the library and accuse Oshima of not having restrooms set aside for women and of listing male authors before female authors in bookshelves. When Oshima is deemed to be *“a typical sexist, patriarchic male and a totally pathetic, historical example of the phallogentric”* (Murakami, 2006: 60) by the women, he confesses that contrary to how he looks, he is not a male. To Kafka’s and women’s horror, he unfolds the truth about his sex and sexual identity: *“My body is physically female, but my mind’s completely male... Emotionally I live as a man. But I am not a lesbian, even though I dress this way. My sexual preference is for men. In other words, I’m a female but I’m gay... So what am I discriminating against?”* (Murakami, 2006: 60). The rationale behind his confession is to create an awareness and release himself from the burden of hiding his identity. His distress stems from his perceiving himself as *“a hopeless, damaged, homosexual woman”* (Murakami, 2006: 69), which ends up alienating himself from the others. He does not want to be considered as *“a monster”* (Murakami, 2006: 61) on account of his difference. By the same token, one of the protagonists Nakata is exposed to the very same maltreatment. Because he has not been *“very bright”* since he had a mysterious accident in his childhood, he stays away from people and their stares with total contempt, which makes him get along very well with cats that are free of such prejudgements. As a consequence of his being a dull-witted person, he is also regarded as *“some kind of monster”* not by cats but by people (Murakami, 2006: 62). Therefore, all monsters seem to be in need of getting free from their being monstrous, which can be called their search for meaning in the absurdity created by their monstrosity.

Protagonist Kafka utters his feelings about one of the most scandalous high officials of Nazi Party and one of the crucial organizers of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, when he finds a book on him in his friend Oshima’s log cabin. Kafka is of the opinion that *“strangely, the guy never felt any remorse (after having disposed of millions of Jews by deadly means)”* (Murakami, 2006: 43-44). Actually, I do not have the same judgement formed about Eichmann as Kafka, in other words, I do not find Eichmann’s not feeling guilty strange. Before further improving the extent of my deduction, making reference to Kafka will be conducive to the reasoning behind my way of thinking:

*Sitting in court in Tel Aviv, behind bulletproof glass, Eichmann looked like he couldn’t for the life of him figure out why he was being tried, or why the eyes of the world were upon him. He was just a technician who’d found the most efficient solution to the problem assigned him. Wasn’t he doing just what any good bureaucrat would do?... Adolf Eichmann, caught up-whether he liked it or not- in the twisted dreams of a man named Hitler. (Murakami, 2006: 43-44)*



I assume that Eichmann lingered over actualizing Hitler's dreams for such a long time that he must have lost his intention of looking for meaning in his life. He clung resolutely to somebody else's, Hitler's understanding of what life means, or somebody else's understanding of absurdity; in this great void in his mind, Eichmann turned into an automaton or a vulgar worker who is supposed to do whatever is asked of him. Hitler pursued his own dreams at the expense of others and his victims were not only Jews but also SS soldiers like Eichmann who were under the control of one man, that is Hitler. Remaining stubbornly faithful to another person's absurd aims like destroying Jews for the sake of so called higher ideals avoided Eichmann discovering and pursuing his own truth or his own absurdity. Truth and absurdity can be used interchangeably in this context, since searching for truth is already something absurd in itself. Hitler found sense and logic in exterminating a race, although it sounds absurd/unreasonable to us, it never seemed that much absurd to him. One's absurdity is something unique, which means it is meaningful only to one, not to others. Just as Sisyphus did, so Hitler created a mission for himself which got him nowhere but kept him zestful throughout his life. From an ethical point of view, his deeds causing millions of deaths were not only absurd but also abominable, however, from an existentialist point of view stated in this paper, his way of trying to make sense out of life is as absurd as that of all of us. Therefore, Hitler was a great absurdist like Sisyphus whom I will explain in detail below; he was not thwarted and frustrated by the heavy burden of immense meaninglessness offered by the universe. By creating an absurd aim and chasing it, Hitler discovered a meaning to live no matter how much suffering his meaning brought to humanity. Maybe, we should conclude that Hitler, by means of his cruel and despicable acts, seemed to be a living embodiment of absurd and gothic.

### **Sisyphus as the Absurd Hero**

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus, the first king of Corinth, because of his being a dishonorable and murderous despot, incensed the gods. His murdering travellers and guests who came to his palace, which is regarded as a violation of Xenia (the ancient Greek sacred rule of hospitality), aggravated the situation. Zeus desired to impose a penalty on Sisyphus as retribution for his crimes and asked Hades to take him to the underworld. Although he managed to trick Hades more than once and unbridled himself, the last penance which was given to Sisyphus by Zeus was an unconventional one in respect of its characteristics. He was required to roll a huge stone up a hill. However, the absurdity is in the fact that the stone will roll back down when Sisyphus reaches the climax with it and that this act will be repeated till eternity. His being condemned to a recurrent task which will end up in vain can be considered as an allegory to depict humans' strenuous but futile attempts to look for meaning and truth in Camus's existentialist philosophy.

Camus dispels our doubts about whether Sisyphus was happy or not during his pointless toil. According to him, Sisyphus is the absurd hero both through his passion and his torture. "*(Sisyphus') scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life*" (Camus, 1955: 77) have

exasperated the gods. The gods have inflicted the severest penalty on him in which he has been made to work like a Trojan to accomplish nothing. Nonetheless, he has never ceased his fruitless labour. In Camus' opinion, *"this is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth"* (Camus, 1955: 77). For Camus, what makes this myth tragic is that its hero is conscious of the absurdity of his act. He becomes wholly cognizant of his wretched condition every time he climbs down. If he had a chance to reach success in the end, his task would not be a torment. Camus holds that Sisyphus is *"the proletarian of the gods"*, due to his being *"powerless but rebellious"* (Camus, 1955: 77). Here, Camus highlights the resemblance between Sisyphus and workmen of today who are forced to work from dawn to dusk. Likewise, workmen have to deal with exactly the same kinds of tasks every day and their fates are not less absurd than Sisyphus'. Nevertheless, Camus believes that Sisyphus' triumph also lies in his incessant endeavour which gives him affliction. He says *"the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn"* (Camus, 1955: 77). His fidelity to his ceaseless work is indicative of his laughing at Gods in a contemptuous manner; he seems as if he challenges all the gods that put him in this awkward position. Camus believes that *"the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy"* (Camus, 1955: 77).

Sisyphus is happy, resistant, confident, audacious and heroic, so is the protagonist Kafka Tamura in Murakami's novel. On his fifteenth birthday, Kafka makes a life-changing resolution to run away from home. He has been longing for escaping from his father who is wholly inattentive to his son for quite a long time and at last he shows a courageous behaviour by setting out his journey to Shikoku, far south of Tokyo. On his arrival, his next objective is to find a library to spend his whole time and by dint of his determination, he feels like *"clouds floating across the sky"* and *"totally free"* (Murakami, 2006: 10). Kafka and Sisyphus bear resemblances in terms of their both being strong-willed, strengthful and gleeful as Camus suggests. Nonetheless, the most crucial analogy or parallelism between them is the fact that they are striving against absurdity without showing despair. Sisyphus toils away at rolling a huge stone up a hill although he will face the fact that the stone will roll down again the moment he brings it to the summit. This requires strenuous effort, however, that this effort is also a futile one causes us to feel sorrow for Sisyphus. What Sisyphus experiences must be quite familiar to us, though. In our daily lives, we act in the same way as Sisyphus does, ignoring how absurd every task we should undertake is. Similarly, Kafka seems to be satisfied with and passionate about pursuing his dreams. Kafka picks out hope after facing absurdity. Kafka's seeking hope, freedom, rationality and fulfillment in an absurd world has no difference from Sisyphus's tiring and fruitless endeavour. Even if Kafka has aspirations about future, his hopes for meaning and logic from the universe are in vain.

Notwithstanding the meaninglessness of one's existence and one's doings, a person, just like Sisyphus, has an inclination to pretend as if his/her need of meaning will be provided by this indifferent universe when in fact this assumption is only in our imagination. This romantic outlook on our own lives and universe reflects itself in our hopes which motivate us to

continue to live. Humans' striving to go on and not giving up on living are not only absurd but also rebellious. Camus calls this absurd victory! Sisyphus becomes victor by means of ignoring that the rock will roll down every time it reaches the climax and exerting himself to do his job. By the same token, Kafka has the intention of achieving to become the toughest fifteen-year-old on planet and this goal engrosses his mind to the exclusion of other negative thoughts which might deter him. Kafka does not want to attach importance to the outside world and its absurd demands. For instance, obligation to go to school represents an unfamiliar world for him, but he takes notice of his own absurd aims when he decides to live his own life on his own. He desires to create his own absurdity which will help him gain the sense of familiarity. In other words, he feels secure not in yielding to other people's absurdities but to his own one. He longs for being free of feeling like an alien in his uncanny world shared by his father. He becomes the master of his fate and of his own absurd, since if one follows one's dreams, one can feel less absurd. In short, both Sisyphus and Kafka find remedy and explanation in hope and pretension when they face the ambivalence and senselessness which govern the universe.

Although their labour or expectations are totally ludicrous, Sisyphus and Kafka proceed through clinging to the absurdity of their hopes and therefore they do not feel lost in the absurdity of the universe. In other words, they do not commit suicide or lose hope after acknowledging the chasm between the irrationality of the world and their attempts to find rationality in this irrationality. What gives me the incentive to utter such words about committing suicide is that Camus provides us with two ways to fight against absurdity; either hope or committing suicide. Camus believes that when we regard the universe as alien, unfamiliar or disturbing, there is no remedy for it, since there is nowhere else to go or "*no hope of a promised land*" (Camus, 1955: 6). For Camus, the feeling of absurdity arises out of "*this divorce between man and this life*" (Camus, 1955: 6). If one longs for committing suicide, it means that one is faced with this absurdity; since "*there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death*" (Camus, 1955: 6). Gothic insinuates itself in existential absurdity when we choose not hope but death in our fight against the absurdity of the universe. Longing for death evokes melancholy which one feels in the gothic atmosphere of the universe.

The second protagonist Nakata, who is past sixty, due to an enigmatic accident in his early childhood, is slow-witted. In spite of losing his intelligence to be able to write and read, after this accident, he acquires a skill which enables him to decipher cats' language and talk with them. On account of this miserable event which turns him into a witless person, he no longer has any hope of happiness. Unlike Kafka and Sisyphus, he loses his ambition of achieving something for his own, except searching for lost cats in his spare time; Nakata is not as determined, ambitious, courageous, robust, high-spirited as the other two are. He faces the absurdity the universe presents him and consents to receive it without feeling worried or joyful about this fact. He welcomes life as what it is.

Nakata possesses some of the hallmarks of a gothic figure, such as of a fantom or a spectre, since he does not feel any kind of emotion at all. *“He (has) never felt lonely or unhappy”*, (Murakami, 2006: 71) even though he has not made any friends. *“He (has) never felt sexual desire, or even wanted to be with anyone... He understands he is different from other people. He thinks his shadow on the ground is paler, lighter than that of other people”* (Murakami, 2006: 71). He has never become ill. Pain and confusion have meant nothing to him other than abstract concepts; fear is not a kind of feeling which he is accustomed to, too. He is like an automaton or a ghost which is devoid of consciousness. *“A constant smile on his face, he (has) never tired of any chores”* (Murakami, 2006: 71) given to him. He used to be like a guest in the classroom whom teachers also tended to forget. *“No dissatisfactions, no anger at anything. No feelings of loneliness, anxieties about the future, or worries...”* (Murakami, 2006: 72). *“The concept of death (is) (also) beyond his powers of imagination”* (Murakami, 2006: 17, 69). He is aware of the fact that his parents are dead and that he will face death one day and be cremated and buried; that is all he feels when it comes to death.

Both absurdity and gothic seem to be preoccupied with death as a theme. Nakata’s way of perceiving death has philosophical significance, since, to Camus, *“Judging whether life is or is not worth living (committing suicide) amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy”* (Camus, 1955: 4). While giving thought to what Nakata says about death, I realized his serene way of receiving death, and I thought he might be living in the tranquillity of death. He admits that life is painful, that there is no need to feel this pain and mentally he seems to be no longer alive. Maybe he is killed by his illness; what I mean is that his body functions healthily but his soul has been completely dead since he had that accident which caused him to be a soulless body. As Camus suggests in following lines, Nakata admits that life is heartbreaking and desensitizing and therefore he does not live but continues to exist habitually by killing his zest for life. Although Camus takes death as the termination of one’s physical existence, I regard death as discontinuance of mental existence, which means not willing to enjoy life. He does not have aims, objectives, energy or enthusiasm which can trigger him to unshackle himself from this incessant lassitude. Camus holds that

*In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it...It is merely confessing that that ‘is not worth the trouble’. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.* (Camus, 1955: 5)

Nakata is remote from becoming an absurd hero or a victor of absurdity; he cannot fight against senselessness via hoping a bright future. He surrenders to the indifference of the universe and seems unagitated, which indicates his voluntary death inside.

As Albert Camus indicates, *“In this unintelligible and limited universe, man’s fate henceforth assumes its meaning”* (Camus, 1955: 15, 20). While pushing a boulder uphill till eternity was Sisyphus’ destiny, Oedipus Rex’s fate was to fulfill a prophecy that he would murder his father

and wed his mother. The adversities they were exposed were preordained; maybe in ancient Greek tragedies, heroes' endeavours to escape from their fates illustrate absurdity; writers like Sophocles guarantee that no matter what happens, nobody can break free from his/her fate. In a gothic novel, likewise, characters cannot free from their pasts, or some horrible events they are bound to experience. What I mean is that trying to escape might be a kind of absurdity in itself. Likewise, we cannot leave behind our universe and our fates just like Greek gods or kings. Through the end of the novel, like Oedipus, Kafka cannot manage to liberate himself from the curse put on him -killing his father in one of his astral voyages and having sex with his mother's ghost. Since other-worldly beings like ghosts are also particular characteristics of gothic fiction, Kafka's fate is intertwined with absurdity and gothic as well.

### Conclusion

The interconnection between the gothic genre in literature and the notion of absurdity in Camus' existential philosophy stems from the fact that both of them have characteristics in common, the most crucial of which are unreasonableness and excessiveness; however, gothic and absurdity in existential sense especially approximate to each other when humans, as if they were gothic characters trapped in a gothic architecture, feel an intense feeling of horror and cannot overcome suicidal thoughts in their confrontation with the absurdity of the universe. The characters and the atmosphere of Haruki Murakami's novel *Kafka on the Shore* serve typical examples of the interrelation between gothic and existential absurdity. When we come face to face with the immense depth of absurdity, we either choose hope just like Kafka and become preoccupied with our dreams or works to do or we prefer death either mental or physical one as Nakata does in the novel. By pursuing his ambitions, Kafka refuses to admit defeat when he is faced with the fact that life has no inherent meaning to offer him, which is also exemplified in the myth of Sisyphus in which Sisyphus does not give in to the absurdity of pursuing an aim that is impossible to be successfully completed. Sisyphus epitomizes the incredible resilience of the human psyche and our infinite passion of life against the absurdity in Albert Camus' existentialism. Contrary to Sisyphus and Kafka, Nakata, in the novel, gives up the daily struggle, shows no signs of liveliness like a ghost in gothic fiction, feels free from emotion of any kind and gives himself to the peacefulness of death in his mind. No matter what we select between the two solutions defined by Camus when we come to realize this fact, hope or death, it certainly directs us to acts which also include absurdity in themselves. Our approach to absurdity might differentiate but we cannot escape from it just like characters in a gothic novel cannot break free from the control of existentially absurd events. Whereas being a character in a gothic novel might require to be subjected to absurdity and its defining characteristics such as irrationality, uncanny and unfamiliarity, being a human being necessitates enduring and ignoring the absurdity of living.

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## Genişletilmiş Öz

Absürt kavramı, gülünç olarak nitelenebilecek kadar mantıksız olan olay ve durumlara gönderme yapmak için kullanılır. Albert Camus'a göre, hayatımızı niteleyen temel kavram absürtlüktür; dolayısıyla absürt kavramına ithaf edilen mantıksızlık ya da gülünç olma gibi tüm özellikler hayatımızı da tanımlamak için kullanılır. Benzer şekilde, gotik edebiyat türünün de bu özellikler etrafında şekillendiği farz edilir; gotik bir eserde irrasyonel, gerçek olamayacak kadar korkutucu varlıklar ve olağandışı kasvetli olaylarla karşılaşırız. Neyse ki, gotik bir roman okuduktan sonra sözde rasyonel bir gerçekliğe sahip olan gündelik hayatımıza dönebiliriz; ancak ya hayatımızın da gotik bir kurgudan farkı yoksa diye düşündüğümüzde ne olacak? O halde, evren harici gidebilecek bir yerimiz olmadığına göre, absürtün hayatımızın temelinde olduğunu ve onunla yaşamaktan başka bir şansımızın olmadığını farz edebiliriz. Hayatımızın ve gotik kurgunun içindeki absürt öğeleri ortaya çıkarabilmek niyetiyle, Camus'nün varoluşçuluk felsefesini ve bu konuda kaleme aldığı felsefi eseri *The Myth of Sisyphus*'u (Sisifos Söyleni) irdeleyeceğim. Camus'nün konuyla ilintili ifadelerinden yola çıkarak, Japon yazar Haruki Murakami'nin romanı *Kafka on the Shore*'un hem varoluşçu felsefe bağlamında absürt hem de gotik bir eser olarak değerlendirilebileceği kanaatindeyim.

Camus'a göre insanlar, bilinçli ya da bilinçsiz şekilde, evrenin irrasyonelitesi ile karşı karşıya geldiklerinde, mutluluk ve anlam bulma arzusu duyarlar. Fakat, absürt, insanın bu ihtiyacı ve dünyanın bu ihtiyaca yönelik vurdumduymaz suskunluğu arasındaki çelişkinin mutlak sonucudur. Anlam arayışı insani bir ihtiyaçtır; nitekim en talihsiz deneyimlerimizin dahi içerisinde bir anlam ya da hayır bulmak için kafa yormamız bu ihtiyacın bir ürünüdür.

Gotik edebiyatın, felsefi anlamda absürt ile ilişkisine gelinecek olursa, her ikisinin de mantığa karşı olmaları en başta gelir. Gotik kurgu, irrasyoneliteyi, eserlerinin okuyucuda yarattığı korku duygusunu baskın tutmakta bir enstrüman olarak kullanır. Mantık arama bir ihtiyaç iken, bu ihtiyacı giderememesi kişide korku yaratır. Korku da mantıksızlıktan beslenir, çünkü korku, anlam verilemeyen durumlarda ortaya çıkar. Gotik romandaki hayalet benzeri doğüstü varlıklarla karşılaşan karakterler, bu varlıkları sıradan algıları ile tanımlayamadıkları ya da kategorize edemedikleri için korkuya kapılırlar. Mantıktan yoksun bir evren de, varoluşçu filozofları dehşete düşürür. Tanrı ya da evren, anlam arayışımıza yönelik çağrılarımıza duyarsız kaldığında; gergin ve çaresiz hissedişimiz, bir gotik karakterin dünyadışı varlıklarla karşılaştığında hissettiği yoğun duygulardan farksızdır. Evrenin de gotik kurgunun yarattığı atmosfer gibi absürt, kötücül ve güvenilmez oluşu ürkütücüdür. Varoluşumuza anlam atfetmeyi bıraktığımızda, aslında dünyanın bize ev değil, tam tersine hiç tanımadığımız bir alemmiş gibi gözükmesi bu sebeptendir. Benzer şekilde, gotik bir romanda, kurgu karakterin annesinin hayalet formunda karşısına çıkması, ona en yakın olan ve sevgi beslediği kişinin, ona en uzak, tanımlanamaz ve korkutucu bir varlığa dönüşmesi gibi, evren de onu algılama biçimimizi varoluşsal felsefe doğrultusunda değiştirdiğimizde bize yabancı gözüktür.

*Kafka on the Shore* romanı, gotik ve varoluşsal absürdizm kategorileri altında incelenebilir; absürt eylemlerinin altında gotik özellikler görebileceğimiz kişi ve durumlara örnek olarak da kedileri vahşice katletmeyi kendine görev edinen Johnie Walker, bir robot kadar mekanik ve bir hayalet kadar duygusuz bir karaktere sahip Nakata ve hayallerinin peşinde çıktığı yolculukta başından türlü esrarengiz olaylar geçen Kafka isimli karakterler verilebilir. Roman içinde bahsedilen Hitler gibi gerçek dünyadan bir karakter ise yaptığı katliamlar ve bu katliamlarını haklı çıkarmak için kurduğu ideoloji ile şüphesiz gotik ve absürt öğelerin vücut bulmuş halidir. Gotik edebiyat, aşırılık barındırır ki romandan verilen örnekler bu son derece rahatsız edici, kabul edilemez ve uç eylemlerde bulunan karakterlerin eylemleridir. Konuşan hayvanlar gibi doğüstü olaylar, karanlık, kasvetli ve labirent benzeri yerler,

şeytani planlar, psikiyatrik hastalıklarla zihni bulanık ve ahlaki değerleri yozlaşmış, sapkın eylemlerde bulunan karakterler ve canavarlar gibi gotik romanın klasik unsurları da bu roman vasıtasıyla söz konusu çalışmada analiz edilmiştir.

Yunan mitolojisindeki önemli figürlerden biri olan Sisifos, despotik eylemlerinden ötürü, tanrıların gazabına uğrayıp koca bir kayayı bir tepenin zirvesine çıkarmakla cezalandırılır; bu cezanın absürt yanı sıra kayanın zirveye her varışında tekrar geri yuvarlanacak olması ve Sisifos'un her seferinde onu tekrar tepeye sürüklemesi gerekeceğidir. Camus'nün varoluşsal felsefesinde, sonuçsuzlukla bitmesi kesin olan bir eylemin ya da bir manası olmayan bir işin sürekli tekrarlanması, nefsine çabalarının sonucunda insanların bir anlam ve doğru aramalarını betimleyen bir alegoridir. Ancak Sisifos'un tanrılara inat, işkenceye dönüşen bu eylemi, hiç yılmadan tekrar etmesi onun hayata karşı duyduğu bitmek bilmeyen arzuyu gösterir ve onu bir kahraman haline getirir. Sisifos mitinin trajik tarafı, kahramanın, eyleminin absürtlüğüne tam anlamıyla bilincinde olmasıdır. Sisifos, hayatın ona sunduğu absürtlük karşısında hiç umursamamacasına hayata tutunur. Camus' a göre, evrenin bize sunduğu tek seçenek olan absürtlük ile baş edebilmemiz için iki method vardır; ya umut ya da intihar. Sisifos, tanrıların ona reva gördüğü bu zorlu ve işe yaramaz eyleme bağlılığını öyle bir ortaya koyar ki hiçbir zaman umutsuzluğa kapılmadan sanki dalga geçmesine tanrılara meydan okur; dolayısıyla zaferiyle mutludur. Murakami'nin romanında da hayatın anlam yoksunluğu karşısında kendi anlamlarını bulma arayışına düşen karakterler Sisifos ile özdeşleşlik kurarken; hayattan kopan ve yaşamaktan haz duymayan Nakata gibi karakterler ise durmadan ölümü düşünüp absürtlük ile mücadelede ikinci yöntem olan intiharı tercih ederler. İntihar, dolayısıyla ölüm teması, romanda absürt ve gotik öğelerin iç içe geçtiği olaylarda kendini gösterir.