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The incomprehensibility of life: An analysis of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses the quest for identity and the existential crisis of Meursault, the central protagonist of the novel *The Stranger*, an existentialist novel, published in 1942. The novel is based on Meursault, who is disconnected from the societal norms and is lost in the incomprehensible complexities of life. Through the central character of the novel, Meursault, the paper aims to explore the crisis of the "absurd man", who "does not hesitate to draw the inevitable conclusions from a fundamental absurdity" (Sartre *An Explication* 4). Concepts like choice, responsibility, bad faith are used to portray how Meursault is confronted with absurd circumstances in his mundane daily life that lead to the destabilization of his thought and identity hence bringing forward the world's meaninglessness and how he attempts to rationalize an incomprehensible, unordered existence.

Keywords: identity, existential crisis, choice, responsibility, bad faith

Introduction

After the World Wars, people around the world faced a feeling of alienation and found themselves in an impersonal and uninhabitable setting. The tragic deaths, devastation of towns, rising suffering and misery made men lose trust in God and started contemplating how "God, who chose the best of every world, is all mighty, good and wise, is indifferent to the misery" (Beyond Absurdity: The Philosophy of Albert Camus 12). The people suffered a profound feeling of loss as spiritual beliefs vanished and people became interested in revolutionary doctrines and mass movements to relieve their existential psychological distress and to discover a purpose of life. It stripped away the privilege of man in a life of equality, happiness and harmony leaving people to a cold, depressing universe that guaranteed little and where death seemed inevitable.

Camus claims

"in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land...freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, what counts is not the best living but the most living" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 5).

The writings of philosophers, poets, thinkers and physicists rescued the man from helplessness by representing the complexities of human life in their works and provided various solutions to ameliorate nightmarish alienating impacts on humanity. Existentialism as an ideology became increasingly common in Europe, especially in France. Prominent thinkers whose works have developed and shaped existential philosophy are Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Karl Jasper, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. A number of writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky, C. F. Kafka explore the crisis of the individuals who are subjected to a sense of disorientation, disillusionment and meaninglessness in an absurd world. The fundamental spirit of philosophy is to understand the essence of the man's existence. Whether man fits into predetermined patterns or our existence determines our own personal patterns is a question that has been central to philosophy since the time of ancient Greece. Sartre in his famous lecture given in 1946 put forward, "Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (Sartre *Existentialism*).

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Existentialism, a philosophical enquiry that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century lays emphasis on the belief that human beings create their own values and a meaning to their life by their own free will. Existentialism emphasizes that individuals act independently and reject the notion of supernatural in determining the nature of a human being (essence). An individual with this view is not born with any innate personality. In other words, there is no fixed essence. The maxim "existence precedes essence" is applied to Existentialism after the famous lecture given by Sartre in 1945 at Club Maintenant in Paris which was subsequently published as *Existentialism as a Humanism* in 1946. Sartre puts forward that what all existentialists (theist and atheist) "have in common is simply the fact that they believe that *existence* comes before *essence*... He gives the example of a paper-knife to illustrate his belief that "existence precedes essence" saying that for the knife to be created, its purpose or essence has to be determined in advance by its creator. The creator identifies the need to cut paper and he designs a tool that could cut paper, builds it and the knife comes into existence. But Sartre says that with regard to human beings, this does not stand true and they come into existence without having any predefined purpose or essence. Camus differs from other existentialist authors in his comparatively positive belief that the human beings can overcome nihilism and vanity in existence through knowledge of the inherent absurdity of life. Camus vigorously addresses his main concept throughout his works: the idea that people should be content in a meaningless existence. In his novels, plays, essays and stories Camus maintains that by way of concerted effort, the seeming nihilism of the universe can be conquered. His definition of 'absurd' world is based on a fear between life in an incomprehensible world and the need for rationality of humanity. While this opinion led Camus to be termed as an existentialist, Camus is also considered a moralist who does not lose his hope in humanity.

The existential ideas of freedom, choice, obligation and bad faith emerge in Meursault's difficulties in *The Stranger*. These principles illustrate how his life cripples under unexplained miseries and afflictions in the life of Meursault. *The Stranger* deals with an average man's daily life which brings people to a world of seclusion in which they do not meaningfully relate to their identifications, their relationships, their culture of life and and work. Patrick McCarthy claims that, "this feeling of absurdity arises out of the daily routine work" (75). The mysterious narrator of the book, Meursault, contemplates the essence and value of human relations, of feelings, of contact, and the everyday choices of his "absurd life," (*The Stranger* 121). In the mundane incidents of daily life, people lose their virtue, relationships, honesty, and search for truth.

The central subject in the writings of Camus is a harsh demonstration of man's inequality and an exploration of ethical questions in the world. Camus uses the Greek myth as reference to illustrate the futility of life in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The mythology depicts the eternal doom of Sisyphus who has been condemned to move a rock up a hill, but the rock rolls down before it reaches the top. *The Stranger* is perhaps as Sartre puts it "constructed so as to furnish a concerted illustration of the theories expounded in *The Myth of Sisyphus*" (Sartre *An Explication* 8). The novel calls for contemplation, and appeal to its readers to

take into consideration their own mortality and purpose of their lives. The existential predicament of Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger* which is unsympathetic and indifferent to the incidents of his own life and others around him is critically analysed.

The Stranger is divided into two sections. The first section deals with a French- Algerian shipping employee, Meursault, who is unaffected by his mother's death and is in a romantic association with a former colleague named Marie. The second section revolves around Meursault's arrest for killing a person and his indifference to his conviction and death sentence. His life is unfolded through the passive, oblivious, and truthful narrator. Meursault experiences a lack of purpose as he discovers that his decisions, thoughts and acts have no significant effect on the human life. He has an obtrusive social flaw - he seems to lack the fundamental sentiments and reactions expected from him. He becomes an outsider without integrating with community and he experiences the reality of life, death and sex from outside. Meursault's indifference to the love of Marie and his nonchalant behaviour to the death of his mother or the murder of an Arab in the second section are seen as being without justification. Even when he is embroiled in a personal crisis, which ends in a miserable and unfair trial, he considers with calm, almost intriguing truthfulness his internal emotions and the deeds of others. He is a stranger for this reason, distant and disinterested.

The reader sees their own world through his perspective and as David Sprintzen comments,

"Meursault's revolt consummates a series of rejections : of resignation in the face of inevitability of death, of acceptance of the meaninglessness of a life without resignation in the face of inevitability of death, of acceptance of the meaninglessness of a life without transcendence , of any "leap of faith" in an afterlife at the expense of the only life we are given with certainty, of the rituals of habit through which one's life is reduced to a meaningless routine—often rationalized in terms of a hoped-for life hereafter, of the oppression of normal social order in which we are expected to be, feel, and behave in accordance with the "rules of the game" and of recognition of a life without purpose" (125).

On this basis, existential theory is used to examine the essence of Meursault's character. Meursault, a clerk in his thirties, wants a meaningful and contented life but his desire is broken as he had to give up his studies, subsequently realizing that ambition was meaningless. In the repetitive routine of activities at work and Sundays spent in mere observation of people, he believes that his essence is utterly trivial as his life exacerbates the absurdity of life. Whenever people fail to think and believe in a divine agent that governs human destiny, they encounter absurdity and frustration.

Meursault does not concern himself towards the events taking place around and rejects the norms and traditions of social system. A compelling instance is Meursault's indifference to the telegram notifying him of the death of his mother.

Meursault says

"Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely ' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday. I have fixed up with my employer for two day's leave; obviously, under the

circumstances, he couldn't refuse. Still, I had an idea he looked annoyed, and I said, without thinking: 'Sorry, sir, but it's not my fault.' (*The Stranger* 9)

These lines reflect Meursault as a detached person who doesn't even feel sorrow at the death of his mother. The actions of Meursault makes Sprintzen comment as follows,

"This is not the normal reaction of a son to the news of his mother's death. What kind of a person responds in this matter-of-fact way? Are we not at first put off by such casualness? Perhaps even scandalized by our initial encounter with Meursault? Is not this Meursault a stranger to our normal feelings and expectations? We sense a distance. (*Camus: A Critical Examination* 23).

The key term in Sartre's study of freedom is 'bad faith' which arises when an individual avoids the discretion to act according to his freedom of choice and avoids responsibility to act in required circumstances. Sartre believed that individuals exercise bad faith because they are threatened and constrained by both the repercussions of freedom and the demands of society (Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 41). Bad faith is not only an occurrence that certain individuals encounter, it is a constant possibility for all the people which leads them into a state of "self-deception" regarding their abilities and possibilities. As Sartre says "It is a paradoxical, confusing perplexing and therefore ultimately a schizophrenic attempt at self-deception, although the fact it may even be the normal aspect of life for many people" (Sartre, Foucault). Therefore, it is on people to lead an aesthetical, spiritual or religious life. Sartre claims that human beings are born in hollowness but when they become aware of their condition, they come out of it on their own will.

According to Sartre, human nature is not predetermined and "man is condemned to be free" (*Existentialism and Human Emotion* 15). He further says: "What is at the very heart and centre of existentialism is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realises himself" (47). In other words, it can be said that although human beings are free, however the situation itself restricts them. In other words, individuals can choose between alternative options in a particular situation; however, they are not free to choose the situation they encounter as external factors can impede their choices and ability to achieve their objectives.

In the funeral of his mother, Meursault reflects on the natural surroundings, "For some time the countryside has been alive with the humming of insects and the crackling of grease" (20). Furthermore, instead of grieving, he closely observes people who are present in the funeral: "almost all women wear aprons wrapped around their waists, which made them stick their bloated belly even more". He doesn't remember his past days with his mother or offer prayers for her but examines the surroundings carefully and even examines the guard as well. "He walked with grace, without a single needless step. On his brow he developed some sweats, but he didn't wipe them off." (21) He even feels joyful that after his mother's funeral he would go to "sleep for 12 hours" (22).

Even after his mother's death his dismissive attitude persists. He flirts with Marie and also compares physical satisfaction to the beautiful natural landscape

"I let my head sink on its belly. She said nothing and there I left. I had in my eyes the entire sky, and it was all blue and gold. I could feel Marie's stomach gently throbbing under my neck back. She dived off when the sun got too hot and I

followed. I picked her up, put my arm around her waist, and we swam together" (24).

When Marie presents a desire for marriage, he attempts to prevent it. Moreover, on Marie's proposal for marriage he responds:

"I explained her that it really didn't matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married.... She then remarked that marriage was a serious matter. I said 'No.'...She just wanted to know if I'd have accepted the same proposal if it had come from another woman with whom I had a similar relationship. I said 'Naturally.'" (44-45)

Meursault maintains a specific schedule for every day: sleeps at night, eats lunch in the same restaurant and smokes, and watches people all afternoon on his terrace. Although he observes attentively, he has no interaction with others.

"it was a good afternoon. And yet the floors were gloomy and the few nearby people were in a hurry...I felt they had to go to movies...the street was progressively deserted...the sky clouded over...then gradually it cleared again. However, the passing clouds left a sort of rain warning hanging on the street that made it dimmer. There was a lot of noise at five o'clock. ...People gradually came back from their walks. The street lights unexpectedly appeared...few stars that appeared very pale in night sky. (25-28).

The notions of love, sorrow, ambition and loyalty are beyond his understanding as they do not inhibit physical experience. The ontological anguish of Meursault is evident as he continues to struggle without purpose. That being said, according to Camus, criticizing the present life is not justified, as it means ridiculing the present. Likewise, Meursault does not look forward to the forecoming times and is merely associated to the present. His attitude of an absolute thoughtless existences is demonstrated on two occasions. First is when Meursault is offered a raise and is required to work in the new Paris office to which Meursault conveys his disinterest. To this, his boss replies that he has no ambition to which Meursault says:

I would rather not have upset him, but I couldn't see any reason to change my life. Looking back on it, I wasn't unhappy. When I was a student, I had lots of ambition like that. But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered. I told him I was quite prepared to go; but really I didn't care much one way or the other (*The Stranger* 41).

Meursault encounters the burdens that the world forces on desires as he had many ambitions as a student, but had to sacrifice his education. Hence, making him believe that goals are meaningless. The second instance is when shortly after he kills the Arab, he openly expressed his thoughts to one of the jury members. On being asked about his sadness he faced on hearing of his mother's death, he says: "I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was hard for me to tell him what he wanted to know. I probably did love Maman, but that didn't mean anything" (*The Stranger* 65). As Patrick McCarthy comments regarding *The Stranger's* influence that,

"it lies in the way that the novel has caught fundamental traits of modern individualism: the determination to trust one's own experience while distrusting the many and varied forms of authority, the attempt to face the absence of transcendence and to enjoy this life, and the recognition that

it is difficult to use language to say even the simplest things" (103).

According to him, rational thinking is pointless and 'utterly useless.' Because of his bad faith and indifference, Meursault is considered an existentialist who preferred not to live according to "reasoned arguments but on the "perceptible appearances." Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* questions: "How does one exist without any given purpose or meaning? Isolated from any logic, without an easy explanation for why one exists, there is what some call 'existential angst'" (15).

It is his refusal to accept any individual values which makes Meursault an example of bad faith. As Sherman mentions in *Camus and the Absurd*, Meursault's conviction, that nothing makes a difference in the meaningless world which means to exist without contemplation which he calls the 'general policy commitment' which can be regarded as a type of "metaphysical suicide" (54) which is referred in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (54) to explain that man enters into a "leap of faith," trying to evade from the sufferings. The two major events in Meursault's life reveal his bad faith for which he blames nature. To him, the "unfathomable sun," leads to his destruction. At first, Meursault doubts the existence of people around him and talks merely about the sun in the most unsettling sense about the heat, light and discomfort it produces saying "with sunlight falling down, the landscape shimmering by heat, it was inhumane and oppressive" (15). The second instance is when Meursault blames the sun's scorching heat for the death of the Arab saying,

"The heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks, beads of sweat were gathering in my eyebrows. The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman.... All I could feel were the cymbals of sunlight crashing on my forehead...everything began to reel.... My whole body tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. (58-9)

When questioned about the killing by the judge he says, "Fumbling a little with my words and realizing how ridiculous I sounded, I blurted out that it was because of the sun" (103). After Raymond had been slashed in a confrontation against the Arabs, Meursault decides not to pursue Raymond up the bungalow's stairs and decides to walk again to the beach despite the sun heat. Meursault feels that the sun is intolerable and says, "I rattled my teeth, clamped my hands in my panty pockets, tightened every nerve to conquer the heat" (57). As Meursault points out, it was this burning that made him move on, which he could no longer stand.

"I knew that it was stupid, that I wouldn't get the sun off me by stepping forward... and the Arab drew his knife. At this point, the trigger gave; and then fired four more times at the motionless body. I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs" (59).

He is absurdly removed from reality and can't think and behave because of the injustice of the sun. In an absurd world, people can commit a criminal act without any motive. Meursault is jailed for killing the Arab yet he does not feel any remorse or regret as when the magistrate questions, he replies, "Was I sorry for what I had done? I thought about it for a minute then said that more than sorry I felt kind of annoyed" (*The Stranger* 70). His refusal, thus as David Sprintzen comments

"constitutes a sort of inarticulate metaphysical rejection by which he places himself beyond the horizon of the normal social world. As a spiritual alien upon whom accepted social absolutes make no claim, his being can only appear to the "good people" as a threat to the values and beliefs that are dear to them" (*Camus : A Critical Examination* 31).

His lawyer warned Meursault that his recklessness turned the jury against him and urged him to alter his statements to which he responds, "By nature my physical needs often distorted my feelings. On the day of my mother's funeral, I was very tired and sleepy. So I was not fully aware of what was going on" (*The Stranger* 65). He knows he's going to die sooner than others but that doesn't make him feel distressed or fearful. He says,

"But everybody knows life isn't worth living. Whether it was now or twenty years from now, I would still be the one dying...since we're going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter" (114).

Sprintzen comments on this absurdity,

"For the absurd man, the supernatural seems at best an unsubstantiated hope, at worst a vain delusion. In either case, it is distraction that threatens to rob us the weight, the beauty, the intensity of the present, until death takes it from us forever" (*Camus: A Critical Examination* 20).

In conclusion, Meursault not only rejects conforming to the social standards but also refuses to be enticed by the temptation just to become acceptable by the society. Through the character of Meursault, Camus presents to his readers his views on the impermanence of life and inevitability of death, recognition of the meaninglessness of existence. He questions the compromises individuals make in their present in the hope of an afterlife and routines of everyday life that have reduced human life into a purposeless ritual and condemns the oppression of the usual social structure in accordance to which human beings are expected to conduct themselves. It can be said that Meursault represents every person who shows "no sign of sharing normal human feelings" (Sprintzen) and portrays "how arbitrary and superficial are the codes with which we cover up the stark incomprehensibility of life" (Bree).

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