

## **Albert Camus' Meursault in *the Outsider*: An Existential Hero And Beyond**

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**Abstract:** The objective of this study is to analyze Albert Camus' Meursault in *The Outsider* from existential point of view considering all major features of existentialism. The study also investigates Meursault, the protagonist, as a character beyond this perimeter. Meursault, an individual marginalized for the exploitative nature of society, is characterized as socially isolated and emotionally detached who seems to regard life meaningless. A sense of alienation springing from social factors is primarily responsible for his isolation and emotional detachment from social life. But for having distinctiveness as an individual, he neither plays the games of society nor accepts the vague appearances and values manufactured by society. Consequently, his existential crisis intensifies. Yet, he is not confined within any structure rather he goes beyond. The study finds that Meursault is equally an existential hero and a mirror reflecting the ugly truth of society. Thus, the study helps the readers to grow a critical and analytical understanding of their own society through the eyes of Meursault.

**Keywords:** Beyond, Existentialism, Existential Crisis, Isolation, Meaningless, Meursault, Society

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In existentialism, it is widely viewed that life starts without any specific reason, and is lived through with lack of energy and desire, and ends by chance. It is defined as irrational, meaningless and absurd. Immediate perception of life seems different but ultimate stance of life is similar to each other in terms of lack of energy and desire. Moreover, existentialism claims itself to be superior on basis of human freedom characterized by freedom of choice and moral responsibility of deeds, and thus it liberates human life from determinism. Apparently the existentialists tend to enjoy absolute freedom independent of any external influence, and they even feel that psychologically but in practice we see that they are controlled by their sense of sincerity and autonomous quality. It can be observed here that the rationality and legitimacy of human will depends on taking moral responsibility of an action. It means, to the existentialists, freedom, a manifestation of psychological quality, functions as the sole principle of moral values guided by personal sincerity and autonomy. But if freedom includes the concepts like 'personal sincerity' and 'autonomy', defined through social essences, it becomes no longer uncurbed exercise of human will rather it works like an illusion of freedom under a kind of self-imposed regulations. Albert Camus, despite being an existentialist, does not want to define life as such rather he takes life as it is which must be lived through, suffered, defied yet cannot be explained adequately. Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1942), reflects conflicts in terms of his existence and essence of society. Though he apparently seems to be psychologically free, he cannot wield his freedom under social realities. Moreover, through his trial the novelist implies that social essence stands against individual freedom and feelings. The judicial system appears to be fake and biased where justice as a the system is a sarcasm and not interested in the murder he committed; rather the system is considering him as a threat based on some peculiar traits. His non-conformity to the current codes has been the real cause behind his execution, and it takes to another point that legal system is not here to judge right and wrong, rather to ensure conformity and to nail peculiarity with the best possible steps. Thus social essence as appeared in the novel

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ceases to accept harmony and tolerance in varieties. It only accepts uniformity at the cost of individual freedom. As an existential character Meursault seems to have been unaffected by socio-economic factors of the society. The society where Meursault lives has a potential impact on him leading to his absurdity, causing him to turn to alienation only when he loses all of his faith in all existing external structures or essences of society.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Outsider projects a gripping story in two parts. Each word as well as each sentence of the story is natural and reader-friendly but never dull in terms of pleasure and thought. The story is about a simple man, Meursault who works in a private firm as an employee, leads a semi-confined social life and enjoys nature and natural instincts. He socializes with a few people Raymond, Masson and Salamano, and spends a quality time with his girlfriend, Marie Cordona. Following the storyline, two events are found to be driving force of the book. The first is that, during his mother's funeral, he shows some socially unacceptable attitudes by smoking, taking white coffee and not seeking his mother's face. The second one is that Meursault cruelly but accidentally killed an Arab. This is how the first part of the story ends. The second part is about Meursault's trial and legal procedure which leads him to the capital punishment. Total absurd mechanism of judicial system reveals through Meursault's minute observations and comments on various events. His feelings, rejections and convictions have been juxtaposed against social and legal practices. His denial of repentance and utter hopelessness on forgiveness from God have made him villainous in the eyes of law and society. To the moment, he keeps denying the belief in God and in papal authority. In the end, he was hanged in public. Mamun (2012) explains the confrontation between an individual and the society focusing on how the society judges and responds to an individual based on his personality traits strange or akin to the ongoing social practices, and thus how the imposition of social order curbs individual's liberty in the truest sense. He also demonstrates various encounters between Meursault and society portrayed in the novel, and symbolizes those events with natural elements. However, his article not only generalizes society and social elements but also equalizes nature with culture without providing concrete components of society and their functions in practice. Hence in his article, the activities of Meursault against society, social codes and practices appear to be inexplicit and intangible in terms of his relation to the whole dynamics of society. His study ideally showcases constant and strident conflicts within a society but categorically ignores the maw of society and its apparatuses which exploit an individual in multiple ways, and push him to the margin. Shobeiri (2013) outlines the concept of absurdity as Albert Camus explored both in *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and brings a parallel analysis of Sisyphus and Meursault in terms of their absurd and happy attitude towards the absurdity of existence, of life and of death as well. Terming Meursault as an absurd happy man, he comments that, "Meursault's achievement of happiness is neither transcendent nor sensual; it is, in reality, an affirmation of the dignity and value of life" (Shobeiri 838). He studies Meursault's indifference and dispassion towards society, and analyzes the comportment of the protagonist through his unconventional ideas about funerals, love, marriage, friendships, religions, God, life and death. He also demonstrates a progressive development in the character of Meursault from an undecided absurd man to a happy absurd man, a symbol for modern humanity who "is neither a stranger to the world nor to himself though he is a stranger to the world of those who have deluded themselves into believing in a transcendent spiritual union between people" (Shobeiri 844). His analysis albeit detailed and insightful lacks multidimensionality as it presents one-sided version of the protagonist as a hero fighting against all oddities of the society. Severe conflicts between society and the protagonist, exploitative grip of societal norms, the victimization of the individuals under the wheel-fire of society have not been taken into considerations. Islam (2015) brings a comprehensive analysis of various existential characters, particularly a comparative discussion between Meursault of Camus' *The Outsider* and Gregor Samsa of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. While analyzing the character of Meursault, Islam comments characterizing him as a scapegoat of modern civilization which enslaves people entirely and finally leads them to a horrible state of alienation.

Maher (1998) explains political scenario of the time which strongly motivated Albert Camus to create such a character called 'Meursault'. He actively justifies Camus' slight statement that Meursault is the only Christ that modern civilization deserves. He interprets the character as a representation of uncompromising truth, integrity and courage for which he refuses to play the games of society. This is the core reason why society considers him as an imminent threat and executes him. However, the article seems to have less interest to examine the multiplicity of dimensions of the character Meursault. The discussion above about Meursault moves forward following a linear and narrow perspective where he is regarded as 'victim of society', 'absurd happy man', 'scapegoat of modern civilization', and 'modern day Christ'. But we will attempt to study the character Meursault in the light of the salient features of existentialism to see how he is a full-fledged existential character and beyond. As Jean Paul Sartre in his article "An Explication of *The Stranger*" comments that "he is there before us, he exists, and we can neither understand nor quite judge him. In a word, he is alive, and all that can justify him to us in his fictional density" (Sartre 04).

### III. MEURSAULT AS EXISTENTIAL CHARACTER AND BEYOND

Existentialism is popularly known as a philosophical movement which emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany and France. The emergence of this philosophic stand was not propelled by any fixed situation or cause, rather it came out naturally as a response married with deep experience of failure for all western structures including social, political, economic, ideological and intellectual mode of thoughts which were considered to be unwavering for good. With the spirit of renaissance and French revolution, the western world started moving the progress of human civilizations based on some key concepts of the Enlightenment such as truth, prosperity, freedom, peace and harmony. These progressive democratic ideals got a tremendous shake due to the World War I, the collapse of the empire, the Communist revolution of 1917, the Great depression of late 1920s and 1930s, and finally the outbreak of World War II. Since all these external structures failed to sustain, the only entity left was internal authority of self or human individual which started concentrating within leaving all the external factors. This was the reason behind the genesis of existential philosophical movement. Moreover, the origin of such thought can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century German Romanticism, the brainchild of Kantian philosophy, which focused on human spirit as the centre of thoughts. Thus, existentialism came to light as a new way of philosophical thinking centering human individual as conscious subject. There are a few names who contributed to the development of this movement further. They are Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre. Since human individual was the centre of their philosophical movement, they moved forward addressing a few concepts including primacy of existence, anguish, absurdity, nothingness, death and alienation. The base on which existentialism stands is 'existence precedes essence'. It holds the primacy of existence over essence. It gives supreme priority on human being as a conscious subject rather than an object that is controlled or anticipated by external systems or essence. From this view, Meursault can be analyzed as a conscious subject both physically and psychologically. As an individual exercising complete freedom, he consents to accept social norms and values but never sacrifices his sense of existence. Example can be drawn here that he borrows a "black tie", and "armband" from his friend, Emmanuel to attend his mother's funeral so that he looks socially appropriate. Another example of his accepting social norms is that he consents to marry his girlfriend, Marie Cordona though he does not have faith in traditional concept of marriage. On the contrary, even in both cases he shows his physical and psychological consciousness of existence and gives utmost significance to it over any social norms. As he states:

He then offered to bring me a cup of white coffee. I'm very fond of white coffee, so I accepted and he came back a few minutes later with a tray. I drank. I then wanted cigarette. But I hesitated because I didn't know if I could smoke in front mother. I thought it over, it really didn't matter. I offered the caretaker a cigarette and we smoked (Albert 14). Here we see, having coffee and smoking in mother's funeral go against the essence of society but he did not hide his feelings that manifest his existence over essence.

Another mark of existential standpoint is the sense of anguish. It is commonly claimed that an existential character would have an anxiety or a sense of anguish which is, in other words, the dread of the nothingness of human existence. Apparently, Meursault does not seem to have anxiety in this particular aspect. But a deeper level, he has a generalized uneasiness towards the existing social structures, anxiety towards meaning of life and human existence. Meaning of life and human existence had not been clear to him until the last moment of life approached him. For this reason, we see that his realization of life, of happiness changed at the end of the novel. So he uttered, "Finding it so much like myself, in fact so fraternal, I realized that I'd been happy and that I was still happy" (Albert 117). This statement adequately suggests as Maher (1998) writes that he is often found to express his feelings towards happenings around him. He has some affection for mother, romantic memories of girl-friend, love for nature, and a strong urge to feel the life with full exuberance and freedom. He is not indifferent to life and the world what he is apparently understood rather "the universe is indifferent to his fate, that life will carry on after he has gone (280)."

The third point is absurdity of life based on its inexplicability, vagueness of its genesis and uncertainty of destination ending in death. All of these questions make human existence wholly absurd and contingent fact. In the novel *The Outsider*, we observe that Meursault reads a piece of news from an old newspaper about the murder of a young man committed by his own mother and sister for the greed of money without knowing his true identity. Later on, knowing the truth of his identity, both mother and sister committed suicide. Reading it thousands of times, Meursault decides that this incident is either "improbable" or "quite natural" (78). This interpretation explains life as incomprehensible and totally illogical. This is actually his view on the absurdity of life and existence.

Other two features which dominate the concept of existentialism are nothingness or the sense of void and alienation. It is observed that the very character Meursault falls under no definition or given structures. He is completely free from all philosophies, sciences, political theories and religions. No angels or essences can explain his thoughts and activities. We see that he leads his life in his own way. He is present in everyday life in terms of doing job, passing time with girlfriend and friends but also remarkably absent in those activities. He feels himself alienated from people, society and social institutions. The reason behind this alienation is that

society and social institutions are run by certain essences and power of reasons while he is driven by his consciousness of freedom and responsibility. In case, Meursault cannot identify himself with those institutions which he consequently considers worthless and vacant. Therefore, he prefers natural human relations with others to any kind of socially defined relations. His alienation leads to the failure understanding between him and other people of society. The evidence supporting this view can be taken from the novel when the lawyer misunderstood him. He explained himself saying:

I'd have liked to have kept him back and explained to him that I wanted to be friends with, not so that he'd defend me better, but, so to speak, in natural way. The main thing was, I could tell that I made him feel uncomfortable. He didn't understand me and he rather held it against me. I wanted to assure him that I was just like everyone else, exactly like couldn't be bothered (65-66).

Death is the most relevant and significant theme of existentialism. Most of the existentialists assume death as the final form of nothingness. According to Jean Paul Sartre, "Death is as absurd as birth—it is no ultimate, authentic moment of life, it is nothing but the wiping out of my existence as conscious being. Death is only another witness to the absurdity of human existence" (Lavine 332). Another very influential existential philosopher Martin Heidegger holds that the meaning of life and existence depends on death. He assumes death as the only way to free ourselves from the fear of death and the triviality of life. Death functions as a pathway to achieve the fulfilment of human self. To Meursault, death appears as a liberating force from absurdity of human life, and thus it gives life meaning and accomplishment. As he expressed: "so close to death, mother must have felt liberated and ready to live her life again. No one, no one at all had any right to cry over her (116).

Meursault is experiencing an existential crisis that has been revealed at the very outset of the novel with his first statement where he says, "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know" (Albert 01). It is certainly not the complexity of language rather it manifests existential crisis through which he is going. Alienation, the pivotal theme of existentialism, is working as a force inside him which has been magnified for being a citizen of colonial state where he always finds himself as an alien. Another noticeable feature of his character is that he does not have faith in existing social structures or centre of the society. All of these structures of society seem meaningless to him. Therefore, he shows a sheer indifference to the society in general, and to the life under this society in particular. His denial of shifting to Paris for a lucrative offer of job proves his indifferent attitude. Replying to his boss, he says, "I said yes but I didn't mind. He then asked me if I wasn't interested in changing my life. I replied that you could never change your life, that in any case one life was as good as another that I wasn't at dissatisfied with mine here" (Albert 44). Here we see his existential crisis is also manifested with this denial.

Meursault, the very character, is an example of honesty, truth and integrity. He never tells a lie, never hides a truth, nor even exaggerates a truth. He speaks out his inner feelings as it is, a bare truth. For this reason, very plainly he expresses his bearing about his mother's funeral and his response to the question of love and marriage. In a conversation with his girlfriend, he says, "I replied as I had done once already, that it (love) didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't" (Albert 44). Important characteristics of a person are compassion and positivity towards happenings in life. For an existential character, the most challenging aspect of life is his perception about death. We see most of the characters with existential crisis are uncompassionate and impatient towards death which they consider absurd. To them death is equally meaningless as birth and life living in this world. Moreover, they also believe that "life is not worth living" (Camus 11). The very character Meursault though does not realize any meaning of life till his proximity to death, at his final moment he finds death the only way to make birth and life meaningful. Death viewed by Meursault in the end as fulfilment rather than frustration or an object of fear. Here he can be compared with Christ or Socrates regarding tranquility in accepting death. And this realization has made Meursault uniquely resilient character who becomes a shelter for all those people who often remain anxious about death or do not possess any obvious religious beliefs.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Going deeper into the text, a reader can easily find that it contains multitude in themes and meanings. Existential questions and absurd realities have been cardinal parts of the protagonist's character. His relation to Marie, his urge to be with nature and candid expression about what he feels inside look absurd, even threatening to other people but Meursault reveals naked truth both of inside and outside without any doubt, hesitation and color. So Camus himself remarks in "Afterword" of the novel that Meursault has been "condemned to death" (118) because "he refuses to lie" (118), and to act as puppet in the game of lies and pretensions as per hypocritical society wants him to do. He tells his lawyer that he cannot lie in front of the judge, and he does the same. He even does not manipulate his feelings towards love, marriage, death, God and religion when he was asked about these aspects in several occasions. Meursault is mostly deemed as an absurd character which can be argued as an unjust representation of him, as close analysis of his character does not show any absurdity in his activities or speech towards his fellow people. In this sense, labeling him as an absurd is a failure or a limitation of the perception about him not of the character himself. Even alienation in Meursault is also complex. He does

not feel alienated solely for socio-economic causes, not even for the cause of thinking over the shortness of life. He seems to have been quite satisfied with his imminent death. Albert Camus created Meursault as a singular and incomparable character that cannot be confined to a particular definition or a final judgment. Rather the qualities in him, resolution, rationality, autonomy and uprightness, have made a space for “us to reexamine our lives in the light of what we have read and what we have experienced” (Maher 280).

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