

Meursault of Camus's *The Outsider*: Portrayal of a Man Confronting the Absurdity of Human Life

MOSTAFA FARUK AHAMED

Abstract. In his classic novel *The Outsider* (1942), Camus depicts Meursault as such kind of extreme existentialist individual who is indifferent about his life and who refuses to conform to social norms. We, the readers of this novel, are stopped by his astonishing and surprising comment in the beginning of the novel when he says, "My mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I don't know". (*The Outsider*, 49) Here Meursault shows himself as a complete indifferent man about human relationship. Although Meursault is an indifferent sort of person, he has committed such kind misdeeds which are not accepted and allowed by the modern society. His random acts of violence without any regret have proved him guilty in the eyes of the society and the law. As the story progresses to the end, we can realize that Meursault is just a victim of the contemporary society, social thoughts and beliefs. Nobody can deny that Meursault is not a professional criminal. In fact, he is indifferent about his life because he cannot avoid the truth. In other words, Camus's Meursault doesn't know how to tell a lie to others to cover up the truth inside.

Keywords: Extreme existentialist; human relationship; acts of violence; injustice.

In the novel *The Outsider*, Camus has portrayed Meursault as a man who is trying to confront the absurdity and is revolting against the injustice of the society. Meursault can speak the truth only. He doesn't know any sort of deception, cunningness and hypocrisy to protect himself. But in reality, on the contrary, society doesn't allow all truths. Does the society try to find why Meursault couldn't cry sitting beside his mother's dead body? On the day of his mother's funeral he became very exhausted and tired because of the scorching sun. There is nobody in the society who can understand the psychological condition of Meursault.

In this novel Camus uses a lot of symbolic words to deliver the exact message. The very common words such as the sun and light, darkness and shadow, happiness and sorrows etc have some different meaning which we can see throughout the story. When we read these lines, "She said, 'If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church.'" She was right. There was no way out" (*The Outsider*, 51). The book is not voluminous : it's short containing only 125 pages, and written in short sentences, staccato style of writers like Hemingway. It's easy to read the novel but the inherent meanings are deeper than the words depicted on the pages.

Meursault shows himself as "a man who agrees to die for the truth." Camus characterizes him as man of truth. He mentions him, "the only Christ that we

Received : 28th May, 2019; Accepted : 6th June, 2019

deserve”. Smith amplifies the novel’s biblical echo by translating the final sentence as “So that it might be finished, so that I might feel less alone, I could only hope that there would be many, many spectators on the day of my execution and that they would greet me with cries of hatred”. (Smit, 57)

It’s Albert Camus who has maintained his pacifism and he is always against death as the capital punishment be it in his country or anywhere. In collaboration with Arther Koestler, he has written an essay against capital punishment. He is consistent in his call for non-aggression in Algeria. To him, the extreme punishment of the state against an individual is absurd. He pictures Meursault as a revolutionary person against all absurdities against the society. (Yeatman, 154)

Different thinkers, philosophers, and writers have interpreted absurdity in different ways. Sartre finds the absurdity in the individual experience of human beings. On the contrary, Kierkegaard tries to prove that the absurdity of certain religious truths prevents us from reaching God rationally. Although Camus’s early literary works focus on Absurdity, immediately he feels sad to declare himself as a “philosopher of the absurd”. Later on he shows himself as less interested in the Absurd shortly after publishing *The Myth of Sisyphus*. To distinguish his ideas, scholars sometimes refer to the Paradox of the Absurd, when referring to “Camus’ Absurd”. (Curtis, 335)

Camus’s ideas about absurdity in his early stage of writings are reflected in his first collection of essays, *Betwixt and Between*. (1937) In his second collection of essays, *Nuptials*. (1938) Camus shows himself more sophisticated about Absurd themes. Here he focuses on the experience of the Absurd. In *The Outsider* (1942) he portrays a man who is living an absurd life. In the same year he released *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a literary essay on the theme of the Absurd. His U-Turn towards the attitude about the Absurd is revealed in a collection of four letters which he has written to one of his German friends in the *Revue Libre* in 1943, *Cahiers de Libération* in 1944, and the third in the newspaper *Libertés*, in 1945 and the last one was published as *Letters to a German Friend* in 1945.

To convey the message to the readers clearly, Camus highlighted the dualisms such as happiness and sadness, dark and light, life and death, etc. He explains the fact that happiness is fugitive and fate of human being reaches to the destiny by death. In *Le Mythe*, Camus emphasizes dualism paradoxically. Despite the mortality of our lives and the world’s silence, we value our own lives. While we can live with a dualism, “I can accept periods of unhappiness, because I know I will also experience happiness to come”, we cannot live with the paradox, “I think my life is of great importance, but I also think it is meaningless”. In *Le Mythe*, Camus finds our experience of the Absurd and asks how we live with it. Our life must have meaning for us to value it. If we accept that life has no meaning and therefore no value, should we kill ourselves ? (Camus 3-8)

In *Le Mythe*, Camus suggests that “creation of meaning” would entail a logical leap or a kind of philosophical suicide in order to find psychological comfort. To him logic is the main theme of his characters, “My mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I don’t know. I received a telegram from the old people’s home - Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Very sincerely yours. That doesn’t mean anything. It might have been yesterday.” (45)

Meursault who has been focused as an Absurd hero in *The Outsider*, has killed an Arab and after a trial he has been sentenced to a death penalty. Camus’s famous play *Caligula* ends up admitting his absurd logic as not correct. That is totally wrong. And he has been killed by an assassination which has been deliberately brought about. However, while Camus possibly suggests that *Caligula*’s absurd reasoning is wrong, the play’s anti-hero does get the last word, as the author similarly exalts Meursault’s final moments. (*Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 7)

Camus always rejected nihilism (The belief that nothing in the world has a real existence) and made a significant contribution to a viewpoint of the Absurd, “If nothing had any meaning, you would be right. But there is something that still has a meaning.” (*Second Letter to a German Friend*, December 1943). Camus identifies Meursault as a basis for human solidarity. If so, a man projects himself as a rebellion against all misdeeds of the society, he will identify himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical. But for the moment we are only talking of the kind of solidarity that is born in chains. (*The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, New York: Vintage 17).

Camus depicts Meursault as a simple man who works in an office and leads a simple and routine life. He follows an uncomplicated way of life. He has been never motivated. In other words, we can say that he is a man without a past. He can be symbolized as a blank canvass where no artist has drawn any kind of picture. It means, in his life, there is no special event or any story which can give him excitements of life. To him life is just to lead. He has two defining characteristics - he does not lie, in other way; he cannot think anything but the truth only. The falsification of the society always disturbed him. In the trial part of the novel we see that he has been punished by the law because he cannot tell a lie. Another characteristic is that he cannot express his emotion like others and to others. He doesn’t have any romantic thoughts and high ambitions for better life or success in his career. He is content with what he is. Camus constantly narrates his indifferent characteristics about anything. Camus says, he (Meursault) “doesn’t mind”. Camus has created him as a man with no speciality. In short, he is a simple man.

Philosophically, if we analyse Meursault’s character, to [Kierkegaard](#) honesty is exploded as the aesthetic sphere of existence. But Camus thinks that it’s impossible to live a true honest life without compromise. Meursault’s death reminds us how the society can be too cruel to a human being who has no power except the

honesty. Camus has indicated that if Meursault compromises with the dishonesty and hypocrisy of the society and the people, he can avoid his punishment. In his moral ground, as Camus describes him as a man of strong morality, he cannot be submissive to the hypocrisy. Rather, if we consider the ideals of Meursaults and his behavior, we find some philosophical relevance with the famous philosopher Kant. His theory of Categorical Imperative has been reflected by the ethos of Meursault, yet the result is a mechanical and sub-human existence.

Meursault's society is fully satisfied only to think that he hasn't cried even seeing the dead body of his mother. Rather he has smoked cigarettes sitting beside it. He has denied seeing her face. He violated the social prejudice for lamentation by drinking white coffee instead of drinking black tea. What the other people usually do at the death of their beloved mother keep themselves awakened and lament. On the contrary, he slept the whole night without any hesitation. He, as soon as buries his mother, has returned to Algiers. Not only that, he immediately after, the next day, meets her girl friend Marie in a sea beach and enjoys a romantic swim with Marie. In the evening he goes to watch an adult movie with her and the whole night they spend together. Here Camus shows him as a passive and extreme indifferent character. But is this the end? He has been executed on guillotine. Is this the only reason that he is inactive in the society?

The society hasn't tried to find out why he murdered the Arab. It only tries to criticize the silence and inactivity of Meursault. The society always tries to prove him as a cruel man. Everybody keeps in mind that Meursault hasn't spent a single drop of water at his mother's death. The state lawyer comments about him, "any man who was morally responsible for his mother's death thereby cut himself off from the society." (*The Outsider*, 49) The lawyer wants to prove that Meursault is morally responsible for his mother's death.

Undoubtedly, Meursault's negative attitude has led him to his downfall and he himself is responsible for this. Even then, we must listen to him. Maybe he has something to say! Meursault thinks that it's his responsibility to always tell the truth. So he has uttered the truth only. But he cannot impose this truth in his practical life situation. He never believes that for establishing the truth, man must follow and adopt some tricky paths. But will the society accept the truth of Meursault? Will this be accepted logically? Will the law and state people receive this truth? Of course, they won't accept it. His truthfulness will remain inactive to the law and the society for ever.

It's true that Meursault created a physical relationship with Marie. But it doesn't mean that he is always interested in sexual relation with others. He hasn't any interest to go to the prostitution. In one point of the novel, when Meursault was defeated by Raymond in billiard board and Raymond proposed him to go to the prostitution, Meursault says, "no, because I don't like that sort of thing." (91)

The strange character Meursault is full of curiosity and interests. He has been treated as cruel, hedonist, physical, materialistic and guilty by government, lawyer, the visitors of the court and many other people of the society. But, on the other hand, according to Salamano, Raymond and Marie those who have tried to understand him, Meursault is not only innocent but also a great man. Marie is fascinated by his indifference and strange type of characteristics. Marie was so attracted by him that she recurrently induces him to marry her. Although she knows that if she marries him, one day she has to face so many sorrows in rest of the life. Love of Marie, Raymond and some of the other characters have made him classic.

Meursault has rejected the social practice of that contemporary society. He is isolated from the society. The man who cannot accept the society, must not have any right to live in the same society. He is treated as unexpected and threat to the society. To the society, he is completely an outsider. The trial has taken a U-Turn when the court has been informed that he hasn't shown any emotional outburst of his mother's death. The court has become able to prove that he is a criminal in nature. Finally, he has been sentenced to death. Camus tries to say, "The hero of the book is condemned because he (Meursault) doesn't play the game. In this sense, he is an outsider to the society in which he lives," (*Preface to the American University Edition of The Outsider*, 39). He also thinks, in his opinion :

Meursault is not a reject, but a poor and naked man,
in love with a sun which leaves no shadows. (48)

Mostafa Faruk Ahamed

Lecturer in English

Jazan University, Jazan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Works Cited

- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1955.
 _____. *Caligula and Three Other Plays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1958.
 _____. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*. New York: Vintage Books, 1956.
 _____. Preface to the American University Edition of *The Outsider*, January 1955.
 _____. *Essays of Nuptials*, 2nd edition, 1938.
 Curtis, Jerry L. "The Absurdity of Rebellion". *Man and World*. 5 (3), 1 August 1972.
 Smith. *The Outsider*. Paperback – International Edition, November 26, 2013.
 Yeatman-Eiffel, Evelyne. Mayo. France: mayo-peintre.com, 2012.

