



The Stranger : A Study of Sexism, Racism and Colonialism



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Abstract : *Albert Camus's present novel The Stranger widely considered as the true representation of his philosophical movement Existentialism and Absurdity. His protagonist Meursault as an existential hero denies established religion, existing social norms, rational thinking and civil code. He asserts himself freely and revolts against the constructed world and culture. He thinks the authority will not judge his behaviour and there is no law to punish him. He is free and responsible for his own action. He thinks he is free and to be free is a proof of individual's existence. As an absurd hero, Meursault remains as an outcast in society not showing any emotions or sympathy towards humanity. He thinks life is absurd and there is no meaning, so to search meaning in life itself is an act of absurdity. Apparently it is truth that this novel is a study of absurdity and existentialism. But when we critically examine the protagonist, pied noir, Meursault then we come to know that Meursault displays misogynistic attitude towards women, perpetrates prejudicial act against native people and commits a callous crime against an indigenous person. Hence, there is a paradox here, since Meursault is an atheist, existentialist and nihilist hero for some readers, but a sexist, racist and colonialist villain for others. Thus, he appears to be guilty of sexism, racism and colonialism. Through this article, my aim is to confront with Camus surface level interpretation of this novel and explore the hidden meaning of the text from the sexual, racial and colonial point of view.*

Keywords : *Existentialism, Absurdity, Rational Thinking, Civil Code.*

Research Paper :

Introduction :

Albert Camus (1913 to 1960), a well-known French-Algiers novelist, dramatist and short story writer. Apart from this, he works as a journalist of *The Alger Republicain* and chief-editor of daily newspaper *The Combat*. In 1957, for his literature, he was awarded **The Noble Prize**. His literary works are:

The Stranger (1942), a novel

The Myth of Sisyphus (1942), a collection of essay

Caligula (1946), a play

The Plague (1947), a novel

The Fall (1956), technically best novel.

Exile and Kingdom (1956), short story collection

The Stranger and its companion philosophical work *The Myth of Sisyphus* were published in the dark days of World War II. When France has surrendered to Hitler, the British were under siege, the Americans were still recovering from Pearl Harbour and the Russian were on the defensive. The both World Wars destroyed the world. It creates total chaos and anarchy. In this destruction, human beings lost their existence. He became the puppet in the hands of fate. He lost his belief in God and became absurd. In this irrational world, everyone tries to find out the meaning in life. But life became directionless, meaningless and the condition of human being became absurd and helpless.

This destruction, irrationality, helplessness, absurdity and darker side of life are depicted by Albert Camus through his pied noir protagonist Meursault who is an outcast and alienated from the humanity throughout the novel. Meursault, as what Camus presented to the world, as an absurd and existential hero is a clerk in an office who leads strange life in Algiers. He attends his mother's funeral procession at old house in Marengo where he kept her. Being a son he shows disrespect and emotional detachment towards his mother as well as all humanity. He smokes cigarettes and takes nap during the funeral. Next day, he goes to comic movie and has sex with Marie, his girlfriend. He writes a letter for his neighbour, Raymond Sintes who wants to teach his unfaithful Arab girlfriend. He helps him in the police station and goes with him on beach to meet Masson, a friend of Raymond. There he shoots one of the Arabs, brother of Raymond's girlfriend, who follows them to take revenge against Raymond. This is the climax in the story occurred in first part of the novel.

The second part of the novel fully deals with consequences of the murder. Where Meursault is arrested and the trial is held. The trial continued till the eleventh year and he is interrogated. But Meursault shows no interest and remains passive about his present condition. In court rather than answering the questions, he enjoys the nature and physical beauty. So whenever prosecutor asked him about the murder of the Arab, he answered he shot him because of the sun. He shows no regret and remorse of his act, no belief in God. So in inquiry, he is blamed not because of murder but his behaviour he presented at the time of his mother's funeral. In court, prosecutor is interested in his behaviour. He is judged recalling his past life that is his behaviour with his friends, with boss and Marie, his girl friend. All of them as well as the members of nursing home were summoned in the court and their witness is taken into granted to judge Meursault. At last, he is sentenced to death and when asked his last will, he wished to be executed in public places only to be greeted by the crowd with cries of hatred.

The person, who commits all these socially non-approved things and refused his responsibility, the person who questioned the legal system, the structure of moral society, the religious belief and even who ill-treats the women and murdered the Arab is studied and accepted as an absurd hero by Camus and good humanist by Sartre. Jean Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher, in his essay "*An Explication of the Stranger*" (1947) considered him as an existential hero who is free and responsible for his action. Both of them did not think that the murder committed by Meursault has a political dimension and the legal system of pied noir French depicted in the novel is oppressive to indigenous Arabs. But this notion is challenged by many modern critics and readers. They think Meursault as a sexist, racist and colonialist hero.

Meursault: A Colonialist Hero :

There is no doubt that Meursault, a pied-noir, is a main character to understand colonial theme of this novel. But the political situation of Algeria is also important to explain the picture of Algeria. Algeria had been ruled by France since 1830. So in Algeria there was co-existence of French, indigenous Algerian, Arabs and other significant group the pied-noirs. The pied-noir literary means black foot was the French man born in Algeria. They were given more privilege than the other indigenous people and Arabs. They considered the Arabs as a threat to them so in each and every activity, they dominate the Arabs and become violent against them. The Arabs being majority in Algeria treated as other by the pied-noir. They are trained to consider themselves culturally, socially and economically inferior and marginal.

They present the Arabs as a barber, uncultured and dangerous tribe and their presence in Algeria is a threat to the peace.

The Stranger is a true reflection of colonial Algeria. All social groups are presented in the novel. The Arabs are : nurse in the nursing home; Raymond' girl friend; her brother and his friends. The caretaker in the old home, the magistrate in the court, Meursault's boss, some are the French. Raymond, Marie, Masson, Salamano are the pied-noirs. Sometimes people of all three groups get together and arises tension. The pied noir is a dominant group in the novel. The major incident is Raymond's exploitation of Arab girl. He cheats her, beats her violently still he is not punished. The police slapped him not because of his ill-treatment to woman but because of his smoking. So the question raised whether smoking is serious crime than beating a woman or it is just because the woman is Arab. Later Raymond requests Meursault to write a letter first, he neglects but when he comes to know that the woman is Arab, he writes. The duty of the Arab nurse in the Nursing Home is to watch over Algerian French. No other French is present there to get service. It symbolises that Arabs are slaves and such types of services are only for them. There are a number of Arab characters in the novel but they are reduced and depersonalised. They lived and even died without name or identity in Meursault's world. The Arab who is killed by him is not named in whole trail. In the court, Arab is neglected as an animal. So this nameless presentation shows Camus' colonial attitude.

Camus explanation of Meursault's killing of Arab is an unplanned act or spontaneous uncontrolled act. He shoots Arab because of the heating or scorching the sun, because of the glaring of Arab's knife. But in reality, it is not an unplanned murder and the Arab has not become the victim accidentally, the sequence of violent events occurred on the sea beach prepared for this murder. Meursault and his friend Raymond and Masson encountered them thrice. In the first meeting, they fight and Raymond wounded. In the second, there is no fight but third time Meursault alone went there and he saw the Arab his glaring knife and shot him. So the question arises who forces him to go on the beach. It shows that he dislikes the Arab's dominant nature. The next point is that Meursault fires four more times in the dead body of the Arab. This extra shoot in the lifeless body changed the nature of the murdered as a pre-planned violent act. It shows pied-noirs wrath towards the Arabs.

In the court, proceeding Meursault is accused for one crime and punished for the different. He is judged for not what he did but for what he was. The prosecutor asked him questions not about the Arab murder, but about his detached behaviour in funeral procession. So for the court, his action and behaviour at the natural death of his mother is more important than the

killing of Arab. Not a single Arab is called as witnesses in the court, instead of the person who are not related to the beach incident are summoned as a witness.

In any colonial work, there is conflict between colonizer and colonized. The colonizer wants to assert their domination culturally as well as physically. The colonizer imposed their culture, language, beurocracy on colonized and the colonized trying to revolt against the domination of colonizer. This clash between two is apparent in this text. Meursault, the protagonist, is a pied-noir, a middle class person who is neither French man nor original Algerian. He is a pied-noir, literally means a black foot person, a French man born in Algeria. Who is both a colonizer and colonized. As a colonized, he is victim of French domination. His boss a French man always dominates him. When Meursault asks for off his boss thought that he is getting more holidays. So he was not very pleased about that. Meursault rejects his boss' offer as a promotion in Paris. According to boss Meursault should take it as a change in life but Meursault rejects it replying, "*You could never change your life.*" but "*He looked upset and told me that I always evaded the question and have no ambition which was disastrous in the business world.*" It shows Meursault's hatred against the French men. It shows his revolt against the colonizer's attitude, their culture and domination. There are three groups in this novel, the French, the Pied-Noir and the Arabs. So the Arabs are twice colonized. They are the victim of pied-noir as well as the French. In the court, they are neglected by the French as well as pied-noir. There are two Arabs on the beach, one of them is killed. The second is the eye-witness of that incident but in court he is not summoned. It means Arabs have no existence in Algeria as they are marginal.

In colonial text, women are exploited by the patriarchal society. Women are prize for the colonizer. They are treated as an object and secondary to men. The voices of women are always repressed in the colonial text. The oppression of women is visible in this novel. There are less women characters. They are marginal, neglected in the text. Madam Meursault, the novel opens with her death. She is dead and not given much importance but she is mentioned throughout the second part of the novel. The second, not much important, character is a warden woman who is present at the coffin of Meursault's mother and in the court as a witness. The third women character is Masson's wife who is also less important. But Marie and Arab woman, Raymond's mistress is visible throughout the novel. Raymond treats his mistress as a prostitute and beats and cheats her. He abuses her and uses very slang language to her. Meursault, the protagonist helps Raymond in this incident. Marie, Meursault's girl friend is a major woman character who is ill-treated by Meursault and sexually exploited. He wants to have sex with her but never wants to marry.

CONCLUSION :

From the beginning, *The Stranger* is commonly read as an existential and absurd novel all over the world. But colonial critics opposed this approach. They discovered colonial elements in this novel. According to them, the protagonist Meursault, a pied-noir, is a murderer who killed the Arab, exploits women culturally as well as physically and revolts against the Christianity is not simply an absurd or existential hero but a person who wants to assert his superiority over the Arabs and even on the French. So, this is not fair to say to him as Sartre and Camus said an existentialist and absurd hero. But he is a sexist, racist and colonial hero who oppressed Arabs and women throughout the novel.

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