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THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY, POWER AND AGENCY IN POST-COLONIAL CONDITION: POST-COLONIAL STUDY OF THE STRANGER BY ALBERT CAMUS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze Albert Camus masterpiece novel "The Stranger" as a quintessential postcolonial text that focuses on the themes of colonialism, identity, and moral ambiguity. Meursault, the protagonist, serves as a lens through which the complexities of colonial identity are explored. His emotional indifference coupled with his detached perspective reflect on the broader alienation experienced within a colonial context. It highlights the disconnection between the colonizer and the colonized in significant ways. By employing a postcolonial framework, this analysis seeks to reveal how Camus critiques the subalternity, hegemonic structures and power dynamics inherent in colonial relationships. Meursault's interactions with the Algerian landscape and its inhabitants reflect the absurdity of existence in a world marked by violence, oppression and cultural dislocation. It is suggested that "The Stranger" critiques the moral and psychological implications of colonialism, urging readers to confront the ethical void that arises from such extractive systems. "The Stranger" reassesses the understanding of identity and belonging in a ruthlessly indifferent post-colonial world.

Keywords: Post colonialism, Absurdity, Identity, Colonialism, Albert Camus, "The Stranger"

Introduction

Existentialism has always been central to the interpretation of Albert Camus's philosophical novel *The Stranger* (1942), despite the fact that the novel also offers major postcolonial insights concerning colonial relation with the colonized Algeria. The novel is set in French Algeria. It depicts Meursault who is French Algerian and an apathetic and alienated person. This somehow shows the disconnectedness of the colonizers from their subjects and vice versa. His absurd and often ruthless actions, especially the lynching of an unknown Arab exposes questionable ethics colonial viciousness. "Similarly, Meursault's lack of remorse, demonstrates the objectification which is common to colonization as the colonized are similarly othered, dominated and denied authority and choice (Ally, 2018).

"The element of anonymity of the lynched Arab shows an important asymmetry of the narratives' concern which demonstrates that colonial discourse often erases aboriginal

subjectivity (Daoud, 2014)". In addition, Camus depicts Meursault as an indifferent as well as ambivalent character who undermines the value of the man as both an indigenous colonizer and is simultaneously an object of colonial subjugation himself. "This queer ambivalence relates to the call and response nature of identity that is apparent in colonial subjects, who are expected to negotiate two cultures, (Pawar 2016).

The postcolonial nature of the novel, therefore, is well served by the conflicted structure of the work which resists formal storytelling. This kind of fragmentation often encourages the readers to read the text actively and think about the values and norms that are constructed and imposed on anybody. "While, in his philosophical works, championing the irrationality of the absurd, Camus breaks down the conventionalism by establishing colonial motives as the source of meaning on intrinsic existence (Oelhoffen, 2014).

The novel "The Stranger" depicts the hostile relations between indigenous colonized Arabs and French colonial masters of Algeria. As observed, "Meursault is indifferent to the abuse his friend Raymond inflicts upon an Arabic woman. It is a reflection of the common attitude of colonialism towards native inhabitants of the colonized territories (Litcharts, n.d.)". Additionally," The trial scene also shows this criticism; the defendant is not sentenced because of the crime he committed but because of his lack of understanding of conventions. It critically shows the illogicality of colonial justice (Becker, 2023).

This paper will want to assert that Camus's novel "The Stranger" is perhaps one of the most seminal texts to study with the lens of postcolonial study because here colonialism is seen to influence subject formation. From the analysis of its themes, it is easy to discover that Meursault's character is a reflection of a world that demands the narrator to come to terms with the post-colonial world.

Literature Review

Most of the previous research papers and critical commentaries on "The Stranger" have been mostly preoccupied with existentialist analysis of the novel. However, new researches have started to turn their attention toward postcolonial aspects of the novel. You may read modern critics such as Edward Said (1935-2003) who believe that "Camus's work can obviously not be studied without reference to the colonial situation in which they were written" (Said, 1978). The background of the novel in which was written i.e during the colonization of Algeria by France, is an excellent clue for considering the problem of isolation and moral perversion.

A major focus of the previous works has been the distinct color of the Meursault's face that is significantly different from the Arab characters of the novel. Critics say that his aloof and alienated nature emerges not only from 'his natural obsequiousness but also from postcolonial attitudes towards the native people' (Hobson, 2024). This view seems to be in harmony with postcolonial theory and the analysis of relations between colonizers and the colonized (Ashcroft et al., 2000). The depiction of colonized Arab characters in the novel is as voiceless, anonymous and barbarously that are excluded from civilised society and have neither agency nor power.

As for the structure of the novel, it is quite noticeable that the ideas discussed in the novel "The Stranger" challenge traditional ways of reading through a complex plot. As Hutcheon puts it, "The structure of having unchronological episodes is to reflect post modernism for the readers that subvert conventional methods (Hutcheon, 1988)". This aspect is, therefore, essential for anyone to realize who wish to decipher how Camus weaves a line of meaningful existence within an inherently meaningless context.

Camus ingenious style and ambivalent perspective neither explore a romantic notion of identity through an existentialist notion of freedom nor a Saidian or Foucauldian notion of the "Other" in colonialism. At this juncture, the comparative analysis between "The Stranger" and J.M. Coetzee's original masterpiece novel "Disgrace" is of immensely help. "Both novels, in some ways, represent alienated non-Western individuals in what can be considered as a dehumanising and sexualising manner, which sustain colonialism tropes (Reimer, 2015)". This poses important questions related to the locus of power and authority in colonial text. Even though Camus condemns the colonialist for direct their brutality and violence, he, however implicitly, reproduces certain discursive colonialist clichés as well.

In this novel, the ruthless and indifferent actions of Meursault, particularly the violent part he plays in the murder of an Arab man, is brilliantly portrayed to give an insight of the colonial violence and systemical irresponsibility between identity and power. "The Stranger" by Albert Camus and J.M. Coetzee's masterpiece novel "Disgrace". "Depicts non-Westerners through a lens that often eroticizes and dehumanizes them. It, in turn, reinforces colonial hierarchies as well (DiVA, 2015)". This crucial representation raises critical questions about agency and voice in colonial literature. It suggests that while Camus critiques colonialism for its explicit brutality and violence, he also perpetuates certain stereotypes inherent in colonial discourse.

The protagonist, Meursault's actions, particularly his violent confrontation with an Arab man, serve as an example of colonial violence and indifference. It also portrays the psychological effects of colonization not only on the colonized but also to the colonizers as Fanon describes them. Similarly, the "another-tainment" of the trial of the protagonist demonstrates how colonial structures erase and subalternate the voices of colonizers. I uphold as supported by Hobson (2024), "the trial transforms from the real injustices of the murder to the social values around mourning. It strips the victim's personality away under the veneer of fabricated ethics".

Theoretical framework

This analysis will use Absurdism as well as Postcolonial theory as the theories of engagement. The philosophy of Absurdism is primarily based on Satre's oft-quoted assertion "existence precedes essence". It, in many ways, supplies the notion that human existence is inherently without purpose. Hence, people must provide their own purpose to this purposeless universe (Camus, 1942). As for this philosophy of so-called phenomenological nihilism, it is described by the events that happened to Meursault in the course of the novel. Camus, in "The Myth of Sisyphus", asserts that "the confrontation with absurdity leads to a choice: either to affirm the suicide and accept existential meaninglessness or to despair on the inevitability of suicide" (Camus, 1942).

This is not simply an existential crisis but, and most importantly, it leads to the existence of the human being in a world that lacks moral values.

"Postcolonial theory", in its simplest form, is an analysis of the ethical and literary questions raised in reaction to colonial authority and complex colonial relations. "It (post-colonial discourse) stresses the impact of colonialism on construction of identity and social relations (Bhabha, 1994)". In "The Stranger" Camus gives a clear picture of personal isolation. It, simultaneously, attacks political aspects of colonial subjugation "that show how social systems influence subjectivity and the concept of ethics" (Bhabha, 1994). The plot takes place in colonial Algeria. Although the story is not focused on Algerian people or backdrop but rather the emotional attitude of Meursault: the emotionless colonial subject. It is especially possible to develop an understanding of identity struggles within the context of colonialism in this segment of the novel.

As a result, by combining the analysis of the colonial grievances and the absurd in Camus's novel, this paper will aim to explore postmodern propositions of the 'self,' ethic, and social organization in the post-colonial nations. This paper will try to depict how Meursault's existentialist suffering in an absurd world is portrayed in a post-colonial Algeria. Meursault, the protagonist remains calm during the course of the novel, on all critical events, e.g. his mother's funeral or the lynching of an Arab. His queer indifference is a clear violation of the societal norms.

In this analysis, it will be discussed how Camus's protagonist acts as a critique for the individual oppressions and all similar injustices that are influenced by historical / dialectical materialism especially in the postcolonial contexts. Meursault, the protagonist, is an absurd hero accepts his own death in similar manner. Meursault explores the tension between one's freedom and the oppression inflicted by the collective society. This, in turn, shows two frameworks of human existence given that the world is an absurd one and the colonial aftermath is inescapable. It helps in a better analysis of how these themes are interconnected and how they are relevant to modern discourses of morality and identity in the postcolonial world. Through analyzing Camus's narrative using these frameworks, one gets deeper understanding of the fight against oppression and isolation in various forms throughout the history and literature.

Data Analysis

Absurdity in Meursault's Character

The protagonist Meursault's almost ruthless indifference is most evident in his reaction to his mother's death. His queer emotional detachment during her funeral serves as a stark illustration of absurdity. (Camus, 1942). He focuses more on describing the heat of the sun rather than mourning her loss. "It was then that I realized that you could be happy or sad without knowing why" (Camus, 1942). This critical moment shows his existential condition. He, as Satre famously asserted, lives authentically. He "exists" in a world devoid of meaning and essence yet he intentionally continues to live it without finding any viable answer. The perspective of Meursault: the detached perspective highlights the absurdist belief that life is fundamentally meaningless. This realization

leads him to live authentically, albeit being alienated from societal norms. Meursault is an existential iconoclast who never abides any socially constructed value.

Meursault's subsequent actions further reinforce this theme. His relationship with Marie is characterized by mere physical pleasure rather than emotional connection. When Marie asks him if he loves her, he indifferently responds: "It didn't matter" (Camus, 1942). This shocking response shows his rejection of conventional emotional engagement which is a hallmark of colonial approach, absurdist philosophy as well as postmodern thought. Meursault's interactions, throughout the narrative of the novel, are devoid of the emotional depth which is expected in romantic relationships. It reflects his broader existential detachment. His emotional indifference also hints at the uncouth emotional coldness of relationship that exist between a colonizer and the colonized.

The Colony and Moral Shades in Camus's "The Stranger"

The murder of an Arab man on the beach by Meursault adorns a realistic function that is both absurd and critical of colonialism. Lynching the subalternized Arab itself seems ruthless from of cruelty. It is, rather than being remorseful, precipitated by an overwhelming heat rather than any moral justification at least for Meursault: "It was because of the sun" (Camus, 1942). This randomness is not only indicative of Meursault's absurd existence in a postcolonial world. It is, on the other hand, the naked violence of colonial rule be it existential or knowing. The killing is, presumably, committed out of unconscious colonizers' hatred of what the victim symbolizes, rather than out of betrayal by the absurdity that has become Meursault's existence.

Some critics took an extreme position and pointed the random killing of an Arab as a sign that colonialism was not entirely immoral after all (Hobson, 2024). One can understand, by the very perusal of the novel, that the lynched Arab character is depicted with no name which is emblematic of his dehumanization within the colonial model. This lack of identity is actually a typical characteristic of how the hegemonic structures erase postcolonial subject from all dominant discourses. Moreover, the portrayal of the account during the trial the puerile concentrating on the character of Meursault also supports this element of the novel. Society tends to focus on his emotional indifference when committing the act rather than the act itself. During Meursault's puerile trial, societal reactions to his crime shows moral hypocrisy which is an integral part of the colonial world. The attention, in the course of novel, deliberately turns from the act to the man – the lack of grief prevails over the murder committed by Meursault. As one critic notes: "The trial is no longer really concerned with justice for the Arab victim; it is, on the other hand, about the revenge of the colonial society against Meursault for not fitting in the social norms." (Hobson, 2024). This criminal inversion might help in explaining how colonial societies are so concerned with compliance to the established norms rather than with delivering justice. It, apparently, offers a really insightful critique of conformity.

Themes of identity and Alienation in "The Stranger"

Self-constructing is a primary concern of postcolonial theory. Critical analysis of the previous literature proves that a protagonist of the novel "The Stranger" is a character

whose personality is incoherent and formed by distinct post-colonial conditions around him. His isolation from society becomes apparent at his trial when he is condemned for what he is – a man who failed to be normal. This theme harmonizes well with postcolonial theories of analysis that seek to understand how identities are negotiated within power relations (Bhabha, 1994).

The staunch denial of Meursault to ethically and socially abide unusual culture make him out-casted in society and even in relationships. Despite the self-representation in almost each episode, the protagonists' sense of self is constantly undermined by external power structures. That shows the experience linked to colonized individuals whose search for a double self is marked by oppressive forces. During the trial, people classify the accused as a perpetrator, which is why the trial becomes the unmistakable representation of an entire society. It captures the way in which identity is used to persecute those that do not conform to societal norms just like Meursault.

Symbolism as employed by Camus in "The Stranger" is apparent at many instances with a view to explain the extent of Meursault's isolation in the post-colonial conditions. For instance, we can see the "never ending naked blazing sun" which can be seen not only as a representation that brings discomfort but also discomfort in a conceptual level at large. The scorching sun turns to be an antagonist in some moments. It is most significant at his mother's burial and the most malicious at the moment of the murder of an Arab. It is, in significant way, an embodiment of an oppressive force that criminalizes the protagonist and intensifies Meursault's emotional isolation.

Besides the symbols such as the sun, Camus uses dialogue to elaborate Meursault's estrangement. His interlocations, throughout the plot, are mostly epileptic or shallow. He tries to hold a conversation with other people in his company but in vain. For instance, when interacting with Marie or with other characters like Raymond Sintes there is no profound communication. It reminds us of how post-colonial powers never hears when the subaltern speak. It is also clear how the isolation of Meursault is embedded in social setting.

There is also the spirit of alienation in personal relations as much as in social relations of the novel that possibly connect to the broader societal issues which are characteristic of the colonial conditions. The absence of interaction or relation among the French and the Algerian characters simply depict the unfair treatment of the Algerians by the colonizers French resulting in the exploitation of the latter. It reflects on how colonization not only robs one of the abilities to make decisions, but of their very humanity and identity as well.

Thus, it can be stated that, in the works of Albert Camus (both philosophical and literary), one can find a rather gloomy portrayal of a person seeking for meaning in the world which itself is meaningless inherently. Simultaneously, the author can be seen providing the reader with a critical reflection of oppression and alienation in the post-colonial society. "The Stranger," by Albert Camus ultimately helps the reader to unhinge from the very notion of identity formation and forces him to engage the multiple layers of unsettling truths that stand at the heart of the morality of the novel.

In conjunction with postcolonial theory, Camus' use of absurdism in the text enables him to come up with a captivating narrative that provokes readers into questioning their existence as individuals and as part of the larger society. It, in its broader context, challenges people to accept an understanding of the place that human occupies on this planet and typical struggle for the meaning of life. In "The Stranger" Meursault portrays the depth of absurdism and colonial critique. The journey not only reveals the patterns of moral crises and personal identity but also refers to the problems of the identity of cultural subjects and their moral experience under colonial conditions.

Conclusion

Albert Camus's masterpiece novel "The Stranger" explores key postcolonial themes through its depiction of the complex dynamics between the Algerian populace and the French colonizers. Albert Camus weaves the narrative intricately that not only reflects the absurdity of existence but also critiques the colonial power structures. It is shown that hegemonic structures not only dehumanize and subalternize the native but also deal mark them as the "Others". The protagonist: Meursault, as a French citizen in Algeria, embodies the detached perspective of the colonizer although not explicitly. He implicitly showcases an indifference that parallels the broader societal neglect toward the Algerian people which in turn is a key aspect of post colonialism.

Throughout the novel, Camus illustrates how colonialism reduces individuals to mere symbols of their nationality or race. "The Arab man whom Meursault kills remain unnamed, highlighting his status as a faceless and more importantly voiceless victim within a colonial framework" (Hobson, 2024). This act of violence is devoid of moral justification and serves to critique the arbitrary nature of colonial justice and authority. The phrase "It was because of the sun" (Camus, 1942) shows this cruel senselessness. It reveals how external forces dictate actions while stripping away individual agency and identity from the colonized.

Moreover, the trial of Meursault further exposes the moral hypocrisy inherent in colonial societies. Instead of focusing on the murder itself, the proceedings revolve around Meursault's emotional detachment and failure to adhere to societal norms. As noted by critics, "The trial becomes less about justice for the Arab victim and more about punishing Meursault for not conforming to social expectations" (Hobson, 2024). This inversion emphasizes how colonial systems prioritize conformity over genuine justice. It, in turn, reflects a broader critique of societal values that marginalize the voices of colonized individuals.

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