

# Meaninglessness of Human Life: A Study of Albert Camus' *The Outsider*

Dr. Ritu Yadav

Associate Professor, Govt. PG College, Sector-1, Panchkula

---

## ABSTRACT

*The outsider* by Albert Camus contains various components of commerce, absurdist philosophy. The hero of *The Outsider* is an important figure in terms of external status. He is different from his counterparts in the nineteenth century fiction not merely in terms of this external obscurity which the latter often shared with him but in that he is no longer confident of his ability to understand what he saw and attempted to describe. The main figures in the nineteenth century fiction were never victims of uncertainty and perplexity we notice in Meursault.

---

## INTRODUCTION

This character, Meursault, makes frequent reference to his own inadequacy, his failure to understand even ordinary happenings and his apparently genuine, ethical and difference and concern. The very first sentence of the novel informs us of the moral unconcern and emotional deficiency which mark his attitude to his mother's death, he says: "Mother died today. Or perhaps it was yesterday; I am not sure." (13) It is a new type of figure who occupies the central position in Camus' novels. He describes himself on different occasions as one confused and unable to concentrate or think or understand the things. John Cruickshank says in this context that,

In *The outsider* the meaningful word of the first person narrator, which was at one time accepted without question, is replaced by a world of incoherence, a world where rational analysis has little scope, and where model purposes and responses are conspicuously absent." (152)

Meursault's sense of bafflement and absurdity, however, goes with an absence of sourness or bitterness against himself. We generally associate the apathy or allegation which marks Meursault's attitude with disillusionment and disappointment. Meursault, on the other hand, looks normal on the surface. He enjoys the normal pleasures of life. He is fond of good, eating and drinking. He takes sunbath, goes to cinema with his girlfriend, but we discover that while he is doing all these things he is not involved in them at all. He performs his duties like a robot. The objectivity with which he described his mother's funeral may give the impression that he has grown in sensitive to finer sentiments. Actually, it is not a case of hardening or disillusionment. It seems the essence of his personality has always been like that. The only thing that seems to have happened in this case is that by chance he has been awakened into knowledge of all our rationality, our ethics and our laws being merely matters of convention. He perceived that we have arbitrarily imposed these laws or conventions on ourselves and on the universe. The naked reality knows no law, no morality and no reason. This awakening was not at all a painful experience just happened and he become a totally a different man.

Meursault is in complete in difference to anything, except immediate physical sensations together with an absolute refusal to lie about his own emotions. He receives the news of his mother's death with vague annoyance at having to ask for two days leave of absence from the office where he works. He says: "Sorry, sir, but it isn't my fault, you know." (13)

He shocks us by being a standing refutation or negation of our usual definitions of sanity and normalcy. He looks normal and self composed and so raises the question in most readers' mind: If he is normal, what is the state of affairs with those who are different from him? Are they really what they claim to be or are they mere pretenders?

The most striking and formidable characteristics of Meursault is his honesty. He never tries to hide his true feelings. The girl asks him to marry her, and he promptly agrees: "she asked me, if I loved her, I said, that sort of question had no

meaning, really, but I suppose I didn't." ( 42). This honesty springs from his complete detachment from the normal issues of life which generally evoked strong reactions from us. He makes us feel that all such responses are fake and conditioned and do not express our inner most authentic self which is generally absent from these loud responses. He is a thorough-going individualistic who has miraculously liberated himself from artificial social conditioning and become the poor bare forked animal which, according to Lear of Shakespeare's play is "the thing itself"(84), the bedrock of humanity without any conditioning or artificiality. He does not attach importance to anything that we do as members of our society. So he does not feel the need of telling a lie and maintains absolute honesty and candour where most of us will feel compelled to fake and pretend.

During Meursault's trial and sentence, he is told that according to the police report he had shown greater callousness at his mother's funeral. When his lawyer asks him whether he had felt grief on "that sad occasion"( 68), he replies: "I answered that of recent years, I had rather lost a habit of noting my feelings"( 69).

Meursault's indifference to whatever happened around him or to him as a member of a social setup may seem to border on insensitivity. It may look paradoxical, but it is true that Meursault's is the most compelling human voice in the novel, because all others are walking shadows or pretenders. He is what he is, and makes no claims for himself or being heroic or angelic or both. This candidness and purity of expression carries its own significance and even if he discards what we generally take to be our indispensable paraphernalia for being considered human, he is the most authentically human voice in the novel. Nothing concerns him or nothing matters for him. He, therefore, is experiencing life as an outsider. This moral concern for and total detachment from his experiences come handy to his prosecutors as an evidence against him. For understanding the peculiar nature of Meursault, we can keep in mind following words of Maurice Nadeau:

Meursault does not exist, he merely reacts to the impulses he receives. His mother's death elicits no expression of feeling on his part: he has nothing to say about it. He becomes a murderer because of a beach, an Arab, the sun, a revolver in his pocket, a combination of circumstances that he has neither sought nor desired. He attends his own trial, without feeling in the least concerned by the cross examination, the speeches of prosecution and defence, the picture that is built up of him or even by the verdict itself. He walks to the guillotine without a word, as if it was not he who was about to be executed.(84)

In the trial, the defence pleads homicide with extenuating circumstances and argues that the fact that "for one tragic moment he lost his self control"(105) should not earn him the death sentence. He is sentenced to death and while he is waiting for his execution he rejects the Chaplain's offer to offer consolation of religion.

Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why...from the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing towards me... and on its way, that breeze had levelled out all the ideas people had tried to foist on me in the equally unreal years. I was then leaving through."(118).

His last reflections as he falls asleep on the eve of his execution bring him a sort of insight:

With death so near, mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life again. And I too felt ready to start life again....For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that you made to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators, and that they should greet me with howls of execration.(120)

All his life he has lived with the sense: "All this is unreal". But the sense of unreality does not torment him. He accepts life, sunlight, food, girls' bodies he also accepts the unreality. It is the trial that pulls him up. The prospect of death has awakened him up. In his pre-face to the American edition of *The Outsider* Camus wrote:

The hero of the book is condemned because he does not play the game. In this sense he is a stranger to the society in which he lives: he drifts in the margin in the suburb of private solitary, sensual life"( 5).

Man, as Aristotle told us, he is a social animal. His individual existence cannot be distinguished from a social, social and historical environment. Karl Marx has emphasized that man is a social being. He wrote in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, "Man exists also in the real world as the awareness of the social existence, and as a totality of

human life activity.... Death seems to be a harsh victory of the species over the definite individual and to contradict their unity. But the determinate individual is only a determinate species being, as such, mortal.”(116)

But in the modern society, the social environment is denied to man and he is forced to live an isolated life and his lead to experience alienation. The existentialist writers are totally against the views of Aristotle and Karl Marx. According to George Lukacs, these writers have an opinion opposite to this. He says,

Man, for these writers, by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings. Man may establish contact with other individuals, but only in a superficial, accidental manner, by retrospective reflection, for the others, too, are basically solitary, beyond significant human relationships.(476)

Meursault’s condition in this novel is like this but he accepts his situation as it is and does not do anything to change it. In other words he does not play the game to make his life look much more smooth and agreeable than it really is. Meursault never lies about his own feelings and is honest. It is this candidness which gives the status of a hero to the central character. In an existential is the novel like *The Outsider*.

When Raymond is beating up, the Arab girl, Meursault refuses to stand for the Police because he dislikes the Police. But his dislike for the Police does not make him angry about social oppression. He personally makes no move to interrupt the social oppression which is actually at the moment very tangibly going on in Raymond’s room. The reason why he will not send for the Police is his fidelity to the hierarchy of his own feelings. He says, “I didn’t like Policeman”( 43). He is indifferent to the beating up of the woman. And he does not permit himself any action that will not be in full conformity with his stronger and more insistent feelings. In the case of Meursault, we find the same kind of freedom which gains by adopting an attitude of scorn towards the society but at the same time he is totally isolated and eliminated from the other human beings.

The modern society has created a deep sense of moral and social alienation in the individual. There is total isolation in the life of man. This alienation is a process which once it gets started, makes the individual feel estranged not only from the outside world, but also from a part of his ownself; some of his own acts confronting him as an alien power. Frederick Patka has rightly pointed out that the sources of alienation is inbuilt in the very fabric of modern society. As he says:

The feeling of loneliness is conditioned by the very nature of the expanding collectivization of life. The organized human relationships of modern society move only on the level of impersonal formalities, of being just officially interested in others who happen to be thrown together in the same amorphous pool of life.”(Frederick 53)

Thus, we see that Meursault is living a lonely life, and most of his actions have become merely external gestures. His relations with his fellow men are those between two abstractions. He has no friends but only contacts. The hero in *The Outsider* has no unusual feelings to bestow; in fact has hardly any feelings at all. He is living a life full of boredom and despair. He does nothing apart from the fixed daily routine. He simply goes to office, comes back, smokes until dinner time, then goes to bed again. On Sundays he gets up very late and passes the whole day smoking cigarettes and watching the passers by on the silent street. It seems as if he is waiting for death. His life is not at all meaningful or endowed with any purpose. He exists almost entirely on the subjective plane in terms of his authentic self.

Camus argues that the only certain thing in life is the inevitability of death, and because all humans will eventually meet death, all lives are all equally meaningless. Meursault gradually moves toward this realization throughout the novel. Hence he believes he is liberated from these false hopes and all he has to do is enjoy the remaining days of his life,

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*, trans., Stuart Gilbert, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961.
- [2]. Cruickshank, John. “The Art of the Novel(1)”, *Albert Camus and the Literature of the Revolt*, A Galaxy Book, New York: OUP, 1960.
- [3]. Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of King Lear*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1949.
- [4]. Nadeau, Maurice. “Albert Camus: Novelist”. *The French Novel Since War*. Trans., A.M. Sheridan Smith, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967.



- [5]. Camus, Albert. "Preface to the American University Edition of *The Outsider*", *Albert Camus: Selected Essays and Notebooks*, ed., trans., Philip Thody, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970.
- [6]. Lukacs, George. "The ideology of Modernism", *20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge, London: Longman Group Ltd., 1972.
- [7]. Patka, Frederick. Ed. *Existentialist Thinkers and Thought*, Secaucus: The Citadel Press, 1972.