



Albert Camus's *The Stranger*: Unreflective Feeling, Indefensible Indifference

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ABSTRACT

Camus's *The Stranger* has always been deemed as one of the pioneers of the coterie of literary pieces to proffer infinite number of hidden meanings and implications. Many critics have also pointed out these undertones in a variety of styles that culminated in challenging ideas and studies. Many have introduced Meursault as the lackluster statue of an emotionless figure, who lives like a soulless creature and many others, considering this idea, have suggested an honest and truthful Meursault. However, this paper argues that a strong undercurrent runs throughout the novel that proves Meursault possessive of feeling and emotion and contradicts the view of the truthful and honest Meursault. More importantly, this essay tends to highlight the subtle point that the leading character lacks the humanistic reflectivity of the emotions/feelings and suffers from deep-seated sense of indifference as an innate drive that leads him to fatal actions and tragic ending.

KEYWORDS: Camus, Stranger, Feeling, Reflectivity, Indifference, Honesty.

INTRODUCTION

In the cold and doleful spring of 1942 when France witnessed one of the most horrendous periods of World War II, the publication of *The Stranger* heralded an era of literary stature and esteem for the young Camus. This enthralling novel that inflicts a considerable thought provoking wound at first reading brings forth and rummages through the deepest senses of one's anguish and throws a peripheral light on the mourning of French people going through the invasion of their country by Nazis. Yet, the all-pervasive undercurrent of the novel does not seem to chiefly center upon war and invasion, but in essence, it echoes the tone of a chaotic mind reflecting the writer's own recollection of a life lived in this anarchic period. One that came into close contact with two inhumane and absurd world wars that vitiated Europe as the first victim, bestowing the massacre of thousands of innocent people. *The Stranger*, therefore, can be deemed as the evidence of Camus's sharp and critical observation of these disturbing wars and, indeed, of what he calls 'absurd' about the human life and destiny.

Over the past few decades, innumerable articles and books have been published offering various critical reviews of this literary piece. Generally, much of the scholarship laid stress on the purposeless and absurd outlook of Camus's works, particularly, *The Stranger*. Many scholars, as clichéd, contend "the [main] aim of *The Stranger* [as] the exact sensation of absurdity" (Bloom 2008: 55) or a perfected "network of thematic and stylistic devices that enforce the impression of absurdity" (61) while Camus names absurdity as the impassable gulf, which exists between man and the world. In another commentary, Sartre radically ushers his verdict that Camus "distinguishes *The Stranger* [as something] between the *notion* and *feeling* of absurd", which in fact "plunges us without comment into the climate of the absurd" (qtd. in Bloom 2001: 10). Needless to mention Greenblatt's idea of New Historicism that might have streamed as the political undertones that Camus seethed adroitly into the novel, which caused the "German censors to refuse publication, seeing the essay as an attack on local patriotism" (King, 2010: 44).

We can also trace the vestiges of other phenomenal literary movements like pastiche (postmodernism) in which Camus imitates the technique of authors like Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck to describe a man with no apparent inner life or/and empathy. Bronner, too, claims that, in *The Stranger*, Camus "fuses the modernism of André Malraux and the classical prose of André Gide with an exoticism both often shared in their writings" (1999:147), which are the long-occupied labels of Camus's works as well. Eventually, the most thought-to-be-logical appreciation of the novel has been peaked to the idea of the honest and innocent Meursault that even Camus himself marked it off as plausible. He explains: "The hero of the book is condemned because he does not play the

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game” simply because “he refuses to lie” (qtd. in Solomon, 2006:24). This approach of declaring the protagonist as truthful has been endorsed extensively through which, Meursault’s characteristics “appear to be a kind of total sincerity which disconcerts us because it is virtually unknown in our world” (Bespaloff, 1962: 93).

However, despite all the efforts made and all the claims laid for cementing Meursault in the frame of an honest and truthful man, this interpretation is unconvincing in spite of the authoritative fact that the author has validated it himself. To begin with, the entire proposition of Meursault’s honesty and the truth about his feelings needs to be redefined by a completely new context of comprehending of what ‘feeling’ is. He is a stranger not because he does not play the game of the other people, like lying, but simply because he is a stranger to himself; alienated from all the innate reflective qualities and feelings of an individual, despite large number of appraisals that assessed Meursault as a character who lacks all sort of feelings. In fact, most readers hold the leading character to be the paragon of innocence and honesty, since they mostly fail to point that these features are attributed to the reservoir of feelings, which is in essence, left ‘deactivated’ in the canyons of his heart. Therefore, this paper, briefly, contradicts and dims the panorama of the innocent and truthful Meursault and argues that the main character is fund of feelings and emotions, but is the demonstration of unreflectivity and indifference, for it is only with judgment and reflection that human beings give credence and validity to their feelings.

Expressing through a challenging vista, O’Brien declares that the Meursault of the “actual novel is not quite the same person as the Meursault of the commentaries. Meursault in the novel lies. He concocts for Raymond the letter that is designed to deceive the Arab girl and exposes her to humiliation” (1970: 21) and he later lies to the police to get Raymond discharged. Considering these statements, we can easily identify the main character as nothonest enough. If this stranger has been defended as the omen of pure and honest feelings, it has also been asserted that Meursault has no feelings, which is certainly not true in one sense. He enjoys the warmth of the sun and Marie’s company while going swimming. He even enjoys smoking just a few hours after his mother’s death in the morgue. He is annoyed by the sun and by the fact that it is Sunday. Therefore, he certainly feels his surroundings and is totally aware of his inner feelings and thoughts.

He does also prove his consciousness to be still in effect. Proven guilty, Meursault condemns the jury and everybody else in court as being obsessive more about his apathy toward his mother’s death rather than being charged with murder. He abhors and reproaches most of the dialogues to be centering upon him as being ‘soulless’ as the cause-célèbre issue and finally says “the futility of what was happening [back in the court] seemed to take me by the throat, I felt like vomiting, and I had only one idea: to get it over, to go back to my cell, and sleep” (Camus, 1942:65), which alludes to him as possessive of emotions and consciousness that nonetheless operate as profoundly silenced.

In truth, what he lacks and mostly shocks us is his inappropriate response and unreflective reaction to whatever occurrence that seems to affect him. Generally, Meursault’s feelings should be treated as absolutely autonomous; unconcerned with reflection. In the first part of the novel, we are encountered with the inert and stagnant-minded Meursault, who plays the role of a space from which the reader watches his frozen world discloses itself. It is a simple world without response, interpretation, and reflection. He resides in the same planet along with other people, but rarely does he live emotionally with others, instilling himself as pure experience without the slightest reflection, causing him to develop and maintain a sort of doppelganger, doubled in nature comprising of an isolated soul mingled with a decent-faced mien assuring everyone as the statue of sincerity and honesty. When Marie asks if he loves her and wants to marry her, he weirdly replies, “That sort of question had no meaning, but he ‘supposed’ he didn’t” (24) and causes Marie’s sadness (merged with consternation).

Setting the collection of his impassivity, he thinks no thoughts and feels no feelings upon his mother’s death, smokes cigarette, meets Marie the following day and goes swimming with her, which are again the proof of his indifference. In fact, he can feel desire but not love; he feels fondness for his mother but not grief; he has thoughts but does not think; he exists but does not think of himself as existing. That is what makes him so strange, even to us as we read and try to make sense of his feeling system. He also admonishes himself in the mortuary, when his mother’s friends in the nursing home come by to offer their words of consolation; he feels paranoid and gets the “absurd impression that they had come to sit in judgment on [him]” (8) since he is not shedding any tears and seems indifferent. It is not much to surprise to treat Meursault as a reflective transcendental narrator and the unreflective bearer of experience in part I who only thinks quiescent thoughts that cannot be involved in the process of judgment or reaction.

But then, as his deactivated derivation of feelings keep steering the wheel of the story, the dénouement of the second episode finally reveals and unleashes his downright suppressed feelings and judgment of love, anger and guilt as he 'feels' the claws of the imminent death upon himself. The prison deprives him of his unreflectivity and then his trial divests him of his indifference to others' opinions of him, forcing him to reflect a range of feelings unprecedented in his life experience. Having the chaplain talked to him into the existence of God and afterlife, he ultimately feels that "something seemed to break inside [him]" and "in a sort of ecstasy and rage" he seems to "pours out all the thoughts that had been simmering in his brain" (74). He remembers his mother's final days of living as "she had taken on a fiancé to make a fresh start" and respectively "he feels ready to start life all over again" (75) that undoubtedly requires his rooted sense of judgment directed at the nature of love and nostalgia. He even states his bitter-sweet statement that "for everything to be [set and] accomplished there should be a huge crowd of spectators greeting him with howls of execration" (76) that directly points to his wavering and judgmental sense of guilt and anger. These reflections can even turn his reaction to Marie as something changed as he himself is changed from the poverty of consciousness (part I) to richness of emotions (part II) as, theoretically, love is not simply a feeling but a system of judgments, meanings, expectations, regrets, needs, desires and metaphysical longings.

Therefore, the climax of the story creates a renaissance in Meursault's feelings and flickers on his judgments and inner reflections. He can be described as "the man who...", but he himself has no self-image until his trial shoves him back into prison where he can finally judge himself. Chaplain's final words referring to Meursault's hardened heart goad his consciousness and throw him into a sort of Baudrillard's Hyperreality that takes effect on Meursault, splits all the illusions of reality/unreality and reflectivity/unreflectivity created by his doubled nature, and shines on the fragments between his static feelings and reflective emotions.

Given the opportunity to activate his feelings and judge himself a few days before his execution, he reckons himself guilty of a crime: a hardened criminal. Many critics believe this act of crime and murder does not spring from his barbarity, but merely bridges its way up to action because of his innocence and lack of feelings that he does not even regret it on the day of his trial. But who is seriously a criminal? The simplest definition of a criminal is someone who commits a course of action contrary to the written and solidly adjusted laws of his milieu regardless of the core incentive of that crime. However, in most of the written and approved laws by the Parliament in each society there is a lack of flexibility; one that can be resilient to different tones and dimensions of a crime. As a result, it is not much to surprise why death penalty starts with a shadow chasing up a murderer and ends up haunting him/her down to death, no matter what the true cause or stimulant happened to be.

In the case of *The Stranger*, Meursault, too, is, in part, the convicted criminal of this unyielding law. He murders and shows no sadness upon his mother's death since he suffers from the sentimental nineteenth century feeling of *mal du siècle* (world-weariness). Killing the Arab guy certainly is the evidence of his sub- or inhumane course of action and the law enforcement does not fail to include him in the group of related criminals. In addition, what the law takes advantage of to pronounce him guilty is his apparent lack of feeling and 'soullessness', not exclusively his act of killing another person. More importantly, when being asked if he feels sorry about the crime, he says he does not feel remorseful.

Factually, he is guilty, in part, since he committed the act of murder, which is in essence unlawful, but considering his time of murder in part I that was declarative of his lack of emotion and reflectivity he can be stated to be temporarily innocent. Logically speaking, he is guilty of both his indifference and living in a society that has no values to offer, where everybody bows insincerely to their pre-established customs and undesirable relations, while he defies. Unreflective to all the customs and rules, he fails to understand that he does have to cry when his mother dies, though dishonestly, and this provides the court too useful an asset to announce him guilty of the crime he felt nothing for. To make matters worse, he cannot even stand up against the jury for alleviating the extremity of his punishment, since he is both captured by his apathy and the fact that though it is all about him being penalized, he is never given the real opportunity to defend himself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can define Meursault as a fully conscious character who only has no reflective feelings upon various fake and hypocritical rules and customs of a society that in the moment of defiance, though lawfully,

pushes anyone to the edge as a stranger, and he is figuratively exiled because of not playing the game of the others. He goes on to live like an unreflective mirror hoarding all the incidents of life in a heart that works unsympathetically and a mind that thinks unreflectively but he is finally caught in the solid net of the law, which offers no sympathy and reflectivity like him. Pure honesty is asserted to be his feature, but he also lies since he does not feel anything about it, so all the calamities in his life do not seem to stem from society and hypocrisy, nor from extreme honesty. But it all comes from his deep sense of indifference and unreflectivity that operate as a mirror that has deactivated all its features to reflect, which is not honest nor truthful and is no more, no matter it concretely exists or not. Therefore, all the Meursaults are destined for doom first by themselves then by society, before being sentenced to death penalty or any other fatal endings.

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