

Faith in Man's Dignity ': A Study of Albert Camus' The Outsider

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Abstract: It is said that- 'its choice- not chance- that determines your destiny.' Albert Camus, a French renowned writer believes so and continues with his faith in man's dignity despite his experience of 'cold and indifferent universe' during the World War II. The World English Dictionary defines 'Faith': 'A Strong or unshakable belief in someone or something without proof or evidence.' Meursault, the major protagonist of *The Outsider* is shown as a self-absorbed man in the beginning but ultimately emerges to be a man of truth at the end of the novel. The irrational act of killing Arab grants him the life of confinement. The solitariness takes him close to his own 'self'. His obedience to his conscience and complete understanding of his renouncement of existing social values make him aware of the truth, which strengthens his faith in his dignity. The present paper investigates how the conversion of hero from vanity to modesty towards the end of his life affirms the dignity and value of life. He denies to regret his crime and to surrender God for redemption. Instead, he admits the truth and tries to free himself from a deep sense of sin by keeping himself true, sincere and honest to himself. The paper aims at studying the journey of the culprit for salvation without faith in God. The knowledge of death makes man aware of the beauty of the universe which he tries to derive from the life that is left.

Keywords: conscience, destiny, dignity, faith, salvation, self, truth.

I. Aims and Objectives and Research Methodology

The aim of the present study is to critically investigate how the faith in the principle of 'humanism' was shaken during the post world war period but flourished to some extent in the literary world. Post-war period of 1920s may be described as an era of disillusionment and despair that led mankind to a complete disintegration of earlier established values and this crumbling had huge impact on the flourishing literary world of 20th cent. Albert Camus was not an exception. But what differentiates him from his contemporary writers is his keen interest in the search for liberty in the chaotic era of disillusionment and depression which has been explored intensively through his literary legacy. The recipient of Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, Albert Camus (1913-1960) is distinctly termed as a French philosophical writer, novelist, essayist, dramatist of modern era. The year 2013 marked the birth centenary of this famous writer. The present paper explores how an individual's obedience to his conscience and complete understanding of his renouncement of existing social values make him aware of the truth, which strengthens his faith in his dignity through the character of Meursault in Camus' *The Outsider*. Since only one text is selected for study, it offers a restricted critical examination of an individual's belief in the salvation without faith in God. The method adopted for study is based on the primary sources like the original texts and secondary sources like criticism, reference materials, and internet sources with the topic related discussions.

II. Albert Camus and Humanism

World War I and II have left man in a perilous state of mind with the loss of hopes, goodness, meaning and natural brotherhood. Despite facing 'a cold indifferent universe' after war time, Camus is seen embracing the principle of humanism. Hence his literary works explore the search for liberty, justice, value and faith in man's dignity against the age of despair. The political upsurge that Camus experienced during the period of Germany occupied France led him to formalize his views on human existence and kept him always on "the side of life." His belief in sacredness of human life in fact proved to be boon for the victims of war. He writes, 'Life may be meaningless, but mankind and its societies are larger than one person.' (www.egs.edu/biography)

III. Faith: A Definition

The World English Dictionary defines 'Faith' - 'A Strong or unshakable belief in someone or something without proof or evidence.' (www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/faith)

IV. The Outsider: An Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The present paper is an attempt to study faith in man's dignity in the face of what Camus saw as 'a cold indifferent universe'. In his first famous novel, *The Outsider* (1942), he advocates the intrinsic value of justice and human dignity through Meursault, the protagonist of the novel, who is shown as a self-absorbed man in the beginning and ultimately emerges to be a man of truth at the end of the novel. The story centers upon a 'seemingly law-abiding bachelor' who works in an office in Algiers. The news of the death of his mother moves him a little. He attends the religious funeral of his mother indifferently without shedding tears. He enjoys next day with his girl friend, Marie Cordona. Further, he allows himself entangled in the matter of Raymond Sintes and his mistress. His helping Raymond for no reason as such, develops hostility against the Arab, the brother of Raymond's mistress. During the tense moment, Arab 'misconstrues' Meursault's intention and attacks him with knife. For self-defense, Meursault shoots the Arab dead. His inexplicable act of killing Arab leaves society bemused and him as an 'Outsider', as he admits his crime and tries to seek salvation without God's intervention.

4.2 Meursault's Reaction to Death

The novel is divided into two parts. Part I delineates no. of events full of absurdity and i.e. made visible through the 'divorce between man and the world'. The news of the death of Meursault's mother with which the novel opens is seen to be treated coldly. Meursault is shown devoid of a feeling of 'guilt' since he lacks the exact knowledge of his dead mother. For instance, when his boss wants to know how old his mother was. He says, 'About sixty.' (TO, 29) He does not mind his boss offering his condolences after he himself enters into a 'mourning mode'. Camus dramatizes the meaninglessness of man's life when he finds the inevitable truth of human being is bound to acquire the status of 'classified fact' or 'a more official aura' through the proper funeral ceremony of the dead one. As V.H. Date states, 'Man being a social animal is certainly indebted to society for the opportunities he gets to show his moral and spiritual worth.'(5) But the character of Meursault projected in the first half of the novel appears to be social misfit against this view. His behavior is seen as totally incompatible with the aims of society as he himself too perceives the worldly affair to be incoherent. For instance, Meursault's refusal to see his dead mother's face for the last time emphasizes his indifference towards his own 'self'. It is very well reflected in his conversation with Caretaker:

Caretaker: Don't you want to?
Meursault: No.
Caretaker: Why not?
Meursault: I don't know. (TO, 12)

Further, the vanity of Meursault's character is made extensively noticeable when he gets bored and little frustrated with the 'customary thing' like a condolence visit of people to watch over her mother. He exhibits his inner thoughts by watching women in 'aprons tied tightly round their waists', their swollen bellies', 'huge paunches', old men's 'toothless mouths' (TO, 15) and so on. He is unable to make his presence valid since he finds 'people sitting in silence...was getting on' his nerves. (TO, 16) The idea of developing intimacy after condolence meeting seems to be ostensible for him. He sarcastically thinks, 'as though a night spent in silence together had put us on intimate terms.' (TO, 17) Camus depicts Meursault as a self-centered man on an extreme level which normal readers will hardly comply with. Besides, his mother's dead body, Meursault does dare to admit his inner delightment over the 'breeze coming up over hills.' (17)

His being judgmental during the vigil scene intensifies his abnormality as it exhibits the lack of normal human emotions such as grief which comes with the death of a person. The narration of Meursault's action and reaction is characterized by 'an overdose of melancholy and despair'. Dr. Michael Delahoyde in his compilation of commentaries on Camus', *The Stranger* makes a note on Meursault's behaviour:

Any time he is forced by society to identify, interact, or express basic human emotions and behavior, he views it as a form of punishment that stifles his individual desires. (www.public.wsu.edu)

4.3 Meursault: A Man Devoid of Emotions and Aspirations

Meursault in *The Outsider* represents a hero with a state of absolute solitude, the 'sequestration', which he dares to overcome by swimming and watching cinema. He is a man of no vision as he allows himself get involved with Raymond's matter, for which he has to pay later on. His act of writing a threatening letter to Raymond's mistress though demonstrates his helping nature on superficial level rather it is his irrefutability. Because he admits, 'I did it haphazardly, but I did my best to please Raymond because I had no reason not to please him.' (TO, 36)

The fabric of Part I of the novel is permeated by the theme of negation in the context of man-woman relationship. Meursault's behavior with Marie reinforces the man-woman relationship devoid of love and commitment. He is frequently found in a denial mode to the emotional reaction of Marie that is generated due to his act of fancying her. He apparently reacts, 'It didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so.' (TO, 38) He seems to be too unsentimental to allow himself to have the emotional contentment though later on he kisses her. Like Camus he too doesn't believe in 'abstractions such as love'. (www.Goodxbadx.blogspot.in)

Life without any aspirations is reflected in Meursault's negative response to an opportunity of working in Paris and in his decision of marriage that hardly matters him. In fact it is not his disbelief in 'love', 'commitment' or 'change' required for the status of integrated being. Rather he wishes instinctively to get absorbed in the world without any reason as he repeatedly says, 'It didn't really matter.' (TO, 44) However, what matters for him is his faith in himself, which in the eyes of society is a less worth evidence. Hence he is being treated and compelled to feel as a 'stranger'. Since Camus himself views the world as irrational, he doesn't allow Meursault too to understand and enjoy the world through some reason. Consequently, in one of the incidents we find Meursault refuting his Boss' proposal firmly and coldly, as he opines, '...you could never change your life that in any case one life was as good as another ...' (TO, 44) The periscopic analysis of Meursault's rejection to the concept of meaningful life offered by his Boss in fact exhibits the clarity of his mind full of dignity. As Aristotle states, 'Dignity doesn't consist in possessing honours, but in the consciousness that we deserve them.' (www.Fightrankism.wordpress.com)

4.4 Meursault's Rationalism and Absurdism

The meticulous dissection of Meursault's movements and intentions reveals the real meaning of absurdity of which ironically he becomes a victim. It is true to believe that life seems to be valueless when it doesn't allow one to live up to one's aspirations. And this contradiction gives birth to absurdity. Thus as it has been said, '...the absurd is neither in man nor in the world but in their common presence: it comes to be born of their antinomy.' Therefore, on one hand Meursault appears to be a rational being in his going back to the fighting place on beach, as he reasons, 'I wanted to hear the murmur of its water again, to escape from the sun and the effort and the women's tears, and to relax in the shade again.' (TO, 58) Whereas, on the other side, the world represented by Arab rationalizes his presence at the same place for he too seems has no intention of fighting again. But as it is being stated above, it is the presence of rationalism on both the sides that causes absurdity. However, one side has to encounter it and face the consequences. In the case above it is Meursault. Some part of the narration of Meursault's unforeseen fight with Arab definitely is sufficient enough to emphasize the truthfulness of his character. He narrates,

... I took a few steps towards the spring. The Arab didn't move. The sun was beginning to burn my cheeks and I felt drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. I moved forward. ... And this time, without sitting up, the Arab drew his knife and held it out towards me in the sun. My whole being went tense and I tightened my grip on the gun. And it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness. (TO, 59-60)

4.5 Meursault: A Man of Free Will

Thus, during his chance fight with Arab, Meursault chooses to shoot him and proves himself a man of free will. In his article on Human Dignity, O'Hara Philip Antony refers a German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who holds the opinion 'that "Free Will" is essential, human dignity is related to human agency, the ability of humans to choose their own actions'. (www.en.wikipedia.org). Part I ends with Meursault's realization of in the words of John L. O'Sullivan a 'manifest destiny' (www.wikipedia.org) which slowly turns into a 'divine destiny' at the end of the book. It is perhaps his awaken conscience which further retains his moral dignity intact.

In the beginning of Part II, Camus maintains the neutrality of Meursault's mind. He is shown facing a moment of arrest, imprisonment, even trial with unruffled mind. Meursault does justice to the authorial principle of existentialism by making his choice of acceptance of consequences of his deeds, which ultimately makes his existence meaningful. The focus of investigation more on his private life than on his crime reveals the hallowness of legal system that shatters Meursault's belief in it. Consequently, the court comes up with an observation of Meursault being 'taciturn' and 'withdrawn' (TO, 66) Even, during the interrogation when he was asked 'why did you pause between the first and the second shot?' or 'why did you fire at dead body?' (TO, 67), Meursault appears to be quite speechless. His reticence becomes so powerful that the lawyer is left in the state of turbulent and is forced to take out 'a silver crucifix' (TO, 67) as if a final weapon to make Meursault blurt out the truth and repent over his deeds.

In Meursault's views finding answers to these questions or intervention of God is a worthless job since the consequences of his criminal deed are quite obvious. However, his incredulous stand against lawyer's belief

in God underscores the authorial concept of wisdom which lies with the 'conscious certainty of death without hope.' Meursault's denial of 'symbol of suffering' (TO, 69) further contributes to more in the makeup of his image of unwelcomed, rejected, self-opinionated and 'Mr. Antichrist' being, which reinforces his permanent disposition to police. However, his act of confession of his crime can be perceived as an urge towards contrition unlike the character of Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as in his case it symbolizes his self-effacement whereas for Meursault it is his self-esteem.

Camus allows himself to delve deeply into individual freedom experienced by Meursault during his confinement. As he himself expresses, 'When I was first imprisoned though, the worst thing was that I kept thinking like a free man.' (TO, 75) or 'I realized then that a man who'd only lived for a day could easily live for a hundred years in a prison.' (TO, 77) The dramatization of Meursault's unruffled state of mind takes Camus close to Jean-Paul Sartre, an existentialist, who philosophies in his book, *What is Literature?* translated by Bernard Frechtman:

Everything leads us to believe that there is a certain point in the mind from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be regarded as contradictory..... (144)

This is how he embarks into a new life. He admits, '... for the first time in several months, I clearly heard the sound of my own voice.' (TO, 79)

4.6 Knowledge and Truth: The Essence of Faith

Since knowledge is an essential element in all faith, the self-knowledge undoubtedly strengthens one's belief in one's dignity. The awareness of Meursault's 'criminality', of his 'being guilty' or restricted role of 'chance' in his act of killing Arab makes the process of his conversion from vanity to modesty possible and also enables him to confront with the realities of the hostile world. His being obedient to his conscience signifies his truthful nature, though he is being leveled the charges of killing 'a man in order to resolve an intrigue of unconscionable immorality' (TO, 92) and 'burying his mother like a heartless criminal' (TO, 93).

Towards the end of the novel, Camus makes an attempt to safeguard human dignity through Meursault's acquiescence of the truth which is the essence of the 'faith'. It is very clearly reflected in the scene where after the final hearing of his death sentence, he equates placidly his returning to jail with 'dreamless night' (TO, 94). His belief in 'self' is powerful enough to embrace his end as 'an innocent sleep' (TO, 94). Though he hardly says anything in his defense against his being accused as a sacrilegious man, who lacks 'soul', 'humanity' 'moral principles', 'basic human reactions' and 'eternal remorse', he reacts stoically and feels like 'drowning in some sort of colourless liquid' (TO, 101). Basil Willey in his essay, *Shakespeare and Stoicism* of Seneca quotes T.S. Eliot's views on 'stoicism'- 'Stoicism is the refuge for the individual in an indifferent or hostile world too big for him;' (68)

Meursault emerges to be a follower of 'Stoic Doctrine', which aims to make man 'invulnerable', 'to live in superb detachment, enjoying the 'central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation.' However, though the moral emptiness in the outer space forces man to invert his 'inner space' and fills it with his own convictions as Meursault does, towards the end he is seen becoming more human with natural fear for death on the gallows. For a moment he appears to be hinged upon any 'chance' or 'luck' of escaping from the mechanism that he was caught in. He finds fault with the legal system that denies any chance to 'the condemned man'. He expresses, 'I could see that what was wrong with the guillotine was that you had no chance at all, absolutely none.' (TO, 107) But again being a mouthpiece of Camus, Meursault strongly supports the belief of his creator that- 'Given that you've got to die, it obviously doesn't matter exactly how and when.' (TO, 109) Consequently, he is found convinced with the given choice when he says, 'After all, the condemned man was obliged to lend moral support. It was in his interest that everything should go off without a hitch.' (TO, 106) It is remarkable to see him making sense of his dejected existence in the defective social structure ungrudgingly and heroically due to the moral fervor and affirms the dignity and value of his life. Instead of imagining the divine faces 'emerging from any oozing stones' (TO, 114), he remembers his mother and tries to comprehend her feelings when she was 'close to death'. His strongly being reminiscent for the first time in life underlines his conversion from indifference to kindness. According to one of the thinkers, V.H. Date 'The mental or the moral conversion may take place in an individual without any direct intervention of anybody else.' (57)

V. Conclusion

Even though Camus refutes the ancient proposition that 'God is wrathful' his faith in the transcendence of the perception of beauty compels one to turn to nature, which itself is the creation of God. It is true that the knowledge of death makes man aware of the beauty of the universe which he tries to derive from the life that is left. For Meursault being close to death is an opportunity to live life again in the real sense. He tries to attain it

by cultivating the intimacy with various organs of Nature especially with Sun and Sea. He has courage and imagination to face the bleak reality of his life and enjoy the Periclean recovery when he looks up 'at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky' (TO, 117) and finds 'the benign indifference of the world 'so 'fraternal', which in his eyes is his sincere and honest attempt to free himself from a deep sense of sin.

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