

Meursault, a Perfect Individualist Who Rejects Collective Values: An Epitome of Intercultural Encounters

Muhammad Tofazzel Hossain¹
Homayra Binte Bahar²

Abstract

The novel *The Stranger* reflects Albert Camus's existential and absurdist philosophy. The protagonist Meursault is presented as a perfect model for the society in terms of ethical values that are free from hypocrisies, lies and illusions. He refuses to play games of the society and accepts death for the sake of truth. Therefore, he is considered as a martyr for the truth. The objective of this article is to examine Meursault's character from the perspective of the *3P model of culture: perspectives, practices, and products*. Thus, this paper presents Meursault as a victim of intercultural encounters that happen due to a clash between Meursault's individual values and the collective values of his society. Meursault refuses to disguise his true feelings and consequently he is considered as a monster and a major threat to the society. Actually, Meursault embraces the free will by rejecting the collective values of his society and therefore the society labels him a stranger. This paper vividly mirrors intercultural encounters that are manifested in Meursault's attitudes and activities.

Keywords: Existentialism, individualism, collective values, intercultural encounters

Introduction

Albert Camus, a proletariat atheist and deeply accomplished moralist, has created his ethical epitome Meursault to decipher the message of striving for a just and humane society suppressing the appetite for mundane survival. This existentialist character Meursault is very much specific to his feelings towards mundane world and his persistent indifference to so-called collective values never allows him to deviate from his individual values. He undoubtedly respects his self which is a part of bigger predestined fact and Camus very sharply portrays this issue in his novel *The Stranger*. This paper aims at representing Meursault as a perfectionist who being on the edge of life and death chooses to respect his essence and authenticates his meaningless human existence through the sacrifice of his own life for the sake of truth and justice. He proves that mere religious feeling does not have any connection to goodness of being. Christ was born to be a prophet, but Camus extracted a prophet out of a commoner. Christ sacrificed his life for the betterment of humanity showing uncompromising respect for truth and the self which ultimately opened up the journey from essence to eternity. This article explains the existential essence of Meursault that is the moral value of the self, in a bigger sense and connects the existential crisis between the colonial period and

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Southeast University, Bangladesh
Corresponding author: tofazzeltuhin@yahoo.com

² Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Southeast University, Bangladesh

the postmodern time where extrinsic factors as well as intrinsic issues continuously bother human race. Meursault talks about a timeless crisis that has been haunting the human race since the time of creation. This crisis aims at binding human relation to injustice to incorporate mundane appetites. The spirit of Meursault does never try to marginalize the significance of just feeling because life ultimately perishes in nothingness. So, clinging to unfairness by opposing the self is always worse than death. This realization is very much needed in the present world and for all time. There cannot be any option between good and bad. Meursault's surrender to mundane justice actually shows his final indifference to this world where his self gets reunited with the bigger essence.

Meursault tries to seek death in the heart of life. In *The Prophet*, Gibran (1923) said:

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life? /
The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot
unveil the mystery of light. / If you would indeed behold the spirit
of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life. / For life and
death are one, even as the river and the sea are one. / In the depth
of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the
beyond; / And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart
dreams of spring. / Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate
to eternity. / Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd
when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him
in honor. (Verses 90-91)

Actually, our atheist protagonist Meursault obnoxiously renounces the contrived concept of mundane life nurturing his insurgent into the ship of ultimate faith headed to boundless eternity. The self-realization of being in oneself announcing submersion in truth, he celebrates himself, sings himself in the assumption of self-understood loath and moves towards life. Like Walt Whitman he does not like to trouble his spirit “to vindicate itself or be understood” with the elementary laws that never apologize for mistakes (Walt Whitman, 1855, Section 20). This paper aims at justifying Meursault as a perfect individual and an absolute free man who rejects collective values of the society, paradoxes, compromises, and conflicts of life. However, his different moral standards, attitudes and activities establish him as a monster in the society where he lives. Therefore, Camus's depiction of Meursault has been examined from the perspective of the *3P model of culture: perspectives, practices, and products* (Frank, 2013) with a view to exploring intercultural encounters. *Perspectives* mean “what members of a culture think, feel, and value”; *practices* mean “how members communicate and interact with one another”; and *products* mean “technology, music, art, food, literature, etc.; the things members of a group create, share, and transmit to the next generation” (Frank, 2013, p. 3). John H. Bodley (2011, p. 21) describes culture as “what people think, make, and do as members of society.” Moreover, he defines that culture “is patterned and provides a model for proper behavior, and it regulates

human society so that people can successfully maintain themselves and reproduce” (Bodley, 2011, p. 21). This paper is an endeavor to examine Meursault’s attitudes and the activities from the perspective of the *3P model of culture*. Thus, this model establishes a link between the reasons for the estrangement of the protagonist from the outside world and his ethical values.

Literature Review

Lalami (2015) portrays Meursault as an “unabashed and remorseless” man who ultimately beats death on his moral ethics in view of finding the meaning of meaningless human existence. However, Masur (2017) argues that “Camus’s objective in *The Stranger* is to demonstrate the fundamental illegitimacy of French intolerance for the existentialist ideal” (p.15).

Payne (1992) says that Camus devoted his whole life to find out the meaning or purpose of human existence on this earth. Masters (1974) says that Camus gives respect to man throughout his writings. Moreover, he states that Camus’s “writings are intended to console man so that he will not be misled by any hopes of myths or deities” (as cited in Payne, 1992, p. 2). Furthermore, Camus says, “I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one” (as quoted in Masters, 1974, p. 2). Orme (2013) states that Camus is an absurdist writer. Though he is not a trained philosopher like his friend Jean-Paul Sartre, his “belief in the creative potential of human beings in the face of (metaphysical) adversity provides a useful blueprint for humanity’s propensity to confront and ultimately overcome misfortune, both natural and man-made” (Orme, 2013, p. 85). Moreover, his review shows the crucial condition of man in between death and existence. Free existentialists like Sartre and Camus support the freedom of choice of an individual. In Sartre’s *Nausea* and Camus’s *The Stranger*, the protagonist feels agnostic regarding their social milieu and defined systems. The protagonist procrastinates and apparently, he may be looser, however aesthetically Meursault beats death by accepting death courageously (Bowker, 2014). Masters (1974) says that in the novels *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947), Camus develops his views of absurdity through his characters. In fact, his characters are an extension of himself and his philosophical views.

Long (n.d.) says that Meursault is a “stranger” to society because of his lack of emotions and of having a different moral. Moreover, the society does not recognize him as a living being due to his emotionless features (Gnanasekaran, 2014). The primary theme in Camus’s novels is that human life is meaningless (Cline, 2018). However, one can overcome this feeling of absurdity “by a commitment to moral integrity and social solidarity” (Cline, 2018, para. 1). Albert Camus is not a philosopher in the true sense (of the term), but his philosophy has been extensively intimated in his novels. Therefore, he is considered as an existentialist philosopher. According to Camus, “the absurd is produced via conflict, a conflict between our expectation of a rational, just universe and the actual universe that it is quite indifferent to all of our expectations” (Cline, 2018, para. 1). When Camus wrote his novel *The Stranger*, he was representing

existential proletariat face where every moment people had to find out the extract of meaningful life out of the debris of the Second World War. Human life was moving anti-clockwise and mundane challenges along with materialistic commodity-based market economy put down human faith underneath emotion and empathy. So, Meursault did not feel guilty of sending his mother to the old people's home because when emotion dies, there remains social formalities for displaying empathy. However, Meursault is absolutely against these so-called collective values. His individual motivations and values guide him to accept the truth and the ultimate end as the part of the inevitable fact. In this meaningful world, death is certain, norms are not. So, Meursault is the social guideline in the journey of cultural conflict between collective values and individual values.

Intercultural encounters with perspectives, practices and products

Camus belongs to the proletariat class and is influenced by the spirit of socialism to fight against all injustices and class distinctions in the world. He portrays his character Meursault as an extension of his own self to deny the cultural, political, socio-economic, and so-called aesthetic and religious doctrines and to make himself an absolute free man. Through Meursault the writer emphasizes the self what we perceive as an individual self, not the self continuously being monitored and judged by others. Camus's protagonist does not sacrifice his self rather respects it – denouncing the self that is perceived by others. His accepted anguish is his bliss, his pride and condemnation to collective values in order to protect his individual perspective of self-domain.

The penetrating philosophy of existentialism shows its introspective spectrum without essentially spoiling the idea of absurdity which is particularly the nexus between Albert Camus and his character Meursault. The hero is haunted by the absurdity of mundane life where the lineage of religion and collective values fail to play any influential effects on his thought line. Camus does not attribute any prophetic qualities to him, but rather the presence of Marie creates a momentary satisfaction in Meursault's feeling of existence, though any social bindings like marriage is suffocating to him. Indeed, Meursault finds himself in some situations that actually happen by chance and he reacts to these situations in accordance with his own values. Actually, he clearly shows his sheer indifference to internalizing any typical social or religious values. He does not bother about the existence of God. He has nothing to do with Him. This French national does not know why he is living but he is acutely responsive to his biological as well as spiritual urges. He surrenders to romance and Camus speculates it as a simple fulfillment of human need where Meursault does not identify himself as a rapist. Whatever happens between Marie and him is under mutual understanding. But a social certificate like marriage is absolutely unnecessary to him because somehow marriage is a certified prostitution to Camus and his hero does not find any logical meaning in this sort of relation. Two humans can come closer upon mutual agreement, it necessarily does not need paper-based formality. Meursault's perspective is absolutely reason-oriented. He believes that reason is the only gateway to nihilism. The crisis of international wrong, that is global, sociopolitical crisis, experienced in the

beginning of the 20th century caused him to develop high self-esteem and a complete indifference to mundane world. The killing of the Arab was a fatalistic incident in which he behaved like a tragic mythic figure who triggered the gun button just because of the dazzling sun. This incident created a sense of deep pain in him and his self-gratification dissolved in a moment turning him to be unhappy forever resulting in triple buttoning on trigger. However, the protagonist was guillotined for his indifference to killing an Arab and thus collective values were established prioritizing the social law. Undoubtedly, the society entirely rejects Meursault's individual philosophical agenda.

The sheer rejection of religious surrender and misbehavior to the clergy are considered as the naked refusal of Godly faith. However, this is a big cosmic issue regarding the fallibility of religious rituals. Meursault will survive as long as he can survive as a man in mutual connectivity with himself. The very moment he feels that he cannot reasonably consider godly rituals, he denies and happily accepts death. He is a modern man who is not confused but confident of his fate and future. He has the feeling of true essence where he denies what he does not believe. He finds a true solace in demolishing fake cults. His essence guides him to death. And the unreasonable hatred of people gives him the pleasure of nirvana that he is free from all social clutch and among all the existing humans he is the only one to get the feeling of ultimate truth. Thus, Camus develops his absurdist views through his characters. Meursault is a post-war colonial product and his creator is a proletariat class. The post-war social crisis, political game of body politic, influence of Darwinism, opponent classes of communism and capitalism develop the ideas of human insignificant existence for real. If this earth causes so much suffering to human life and God does not come to help humans, then necessarily religious sermons become overtly useless to a wounded man. Meursault is representing a barren human mind which is looking for absolute purpose of vulnerable human life with reason. He only acknowledges reason as his tool of existence. The existentialist philosophers and writers boldly demonstrate the paradigm shift of thought with this sheer negligence to collective values. Now the question is—do they have any value? Yes, they do have and that is the worship of reason. And reason leads to a just soul, that is, to the true essence. Meursault is a man who is led by reason and he never agrees to accept fake assessment of life even to save his life. He has crossed time — present, past, and future. He is in between life and death in the trial scene. He unquestionably chooses to be a part of eternity as death is the ultimate fate of human life. He knows that throughout life he has shown the least interest in earthly achievements and now, on the verge of death, Meursault does not betray his self just to save his life. He knows that any inevitable truth cannot be denied by some fake statements. So, he is ready to accept the truth and he does not support anything that he has ignored throughout his life in order to respect his human essence. He becomes a timeless creation, a prophet, a truth hunter, a humane voice who embraces his unwanted fate in which he is fatally victimized. He is a modern hero with reason and just soul who respects his free will to disrespect the religious offering as the doorway to his further existence. In the passionate sense, the dos and don'ts return to his thinking principally even

at the crucial moment of life and death (to be, or not to be) as well as of what interests him. However, he is apathetic about maintaining the social values and he has always been a stranger to his society. His final wish is to see that there's a big crowd that hates him on the day of execution by guillotine and Meursault survives there on his own feeling that has nothing to do with the social abhorrence or love. He is clear to his own self. With death he gets united with the universe.

At the beginning of the novel, Meursault is found oblivious of his surroundings and therefore he simply replies to the caretaker that he does not want to see his mother's body. Moreover, when he is asked by the caretaker, "Why not?" he says, "I don't know." (Camus, 1988, p. 6). In fact, Meursault remains so cool, so detached, and so cynical that he does not accept any of society's formulas. Nevertheless, he is very frank and honest about his feelings, and exchanging views. He refuses to lie about himself and his religious beliefs even to save his life. He knows that death is certain and he believes that death closes everything. Therefore, he wants to live his life the way he wants to. Hence, any attempt to plan for the future, for example, a job in Paris or marrying Marie, is meaningless to him.

Meursault's relationship with Maria is something that is settled for pleasure and human bonding. Any social constraint or religious personification is not needed for establishing man-woman relation or ethics that have certain aspects like physical bonding or mental cognition. As long as two humans are not committing any heinous crime to each other, the institutional regulation or monitoring is unnecessary. His perception about love is mutual relation, involved correspondence and understood pleasure. The sense of commitment actually creates bindings and furthers any relations. Camus's protagonist is an uncompromisingly honest man. Therefore, he needs to certify his emotions for any typical social corrections. If the feeling is true and the partner is equally passionate about closeness, the relationship can continue based on personal commitment. The protagonist expresses his individuality through his feeling of essence, existence, and freedom that is the ultimate spirit of an existential man. Meursault refuses to get married as it does not coordinate with free essence. Collective values do not compromise with the understanding of freedom that precedes essence and the protagonist of Camus is not bothered with prolonged relation. Nothing is accomplished in this transient world and the existentialist believes that only death is certain. His catchphrase "existence precedes essence" that underlies a philosophy of individualism in the cataclysm of celestial collectivities is coated with religious and social phenomena. Regarding relationship, love, marriage and freedom, Sartre says:

Especially hopeless is the relationship of love. In love, too, what the lover wants is not merely the physical possession of the Other—but to possess the Other's freedom. He does not want to enslave the beloved; he would feel humiliated by being loved by someone who was psychologically conditioned to love him. Also, total enslavement of the beloved to him, a mechanical beloved, would soon kill his love. On the other hand, the lover would not

be satisfied with someone who loved him because she had freely taken a pledge [of marriage?] to do so. The lover does not want to possess the beloved as a thing, he wants to possess the beloved as a free person. But the desire of the lover is hopeless—how can the beloved be a free person if I possess and enslave her freedom? (Lavine, 1984, p. 390).

Sartre also says:

We suffer as nihilating conscious beings from being empty, without substance, without essence, without any foundation for our lives. Love offers us a foundation. We seek a foundation for our being in the lover, in the idea that the lover is the real foundation of my being.” (Lavine, 1984, p. 391).

When we say that my lover is my world, it means that we contrarily justify other's essence as under my control. In fact, enslavement is another name of collective values and engagement ring is a symbol of barrier. Meursault is a free being and he agrees upon having free relation rather than imposed social institution like marriage. His perception is that no true love can be equally free and possessive. So, the lack of love in his love relation is to enjoy the freedom and absolute satisfaction and the product is having a non-institutionalized relationship. On the other hand, when Raymond's girlfriend was proved to be unfaithful, Meursault found it justified to punish her tough-mindedly for infidelity. In this spirit, it is understood that he is more concerned about ethical presence in relation, rather than certified reproduction of human relation.

Camus believes in Sartre's assertion that “man is condemned to be free” as the underlying inevitability of human life is death. It is a maleficent power which is indifferent to our response. A freeman like the protagonist is not worried about death. He saved his friend out of friendly feeling, not social responsibility, however the death of an Arab is a cosmic reaction to the overheated weather. We see that Meursault is upset about the blistering heat and detached to accept his mother's funeral procession. His sweating and lethargy make him feel terribly bad and distasteful. Moreover, he does not feel any connections to his mother as his feelings died long ago. However, this very situation helps other people think that Meursault is heartless as he does not display his emotions like other people do customarily. Actually, he repudiates the extravagant concepts of human being and thus protests against collective values.

Now, the question comes: What values guide a person in his/her actions? In this regard, Sartre says, “You're free, (to) choose ... No general ethic can show you what is to be done. ...No moral ideals, no universal values can guide you.” (Lavine, 1984, p. 380). A person is free here and responsible for choosing his own actions based on his own principles, ideals, norms and standards. However, Meursault is an absolute free soul and ready to accept death denouncing social judgment and corresponds to ultimate end of human life. The hero of Camus is not

paradoxical like other modern man. He is decisive. He knows what to do and what not to do. His perspective on religion is like not accepting any unknown and unseen truth that does not directly interlink with his life. He defied the clergy to establish his own perspective. What he did not believe in his whole life, he cannot believe this for the sake of saving his life. His perspective towards humanism is self-evident. Therefore, Meursault boldly confronts the clergy. He is not an escapist. He is not a follower of false seriousness or forced norms. His final destination is made by him not by God or clergy. He knows that death is a must for all. Therefore, he needs no moral justifications to accept death, or to avoid it, or to delay it for some more days. He is a courageous man, who is willing to accept the truth. He is responsible for giving meaning to his world. He believes in his true essence and does not pursue any other possibilities to deny his responsibilities. He does not have any project to fulfill to avoid death. Whatever happens, he takes its responsibility.

Meursault kills the Arab “because of the sun” (Camus, 1988, p. 103). Meursault feels loathsome about the blistering heat of Algerian temperature and accidentally shoots the Arab. Meursault does not hide his emotions. He is what he is and that makes him an individual. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, an individual is the highest source of truth (Michaud, 1919). An individual carries the ethics of the universe by being a part of the universe. Therefore, the establishment of the truth depends on the search of the truths of life, the realization of the truths and practices by an individual. Meursault has done this job successfully. As an individual, he is a perfect role model and is considered as a martyr for the truth. However, his individual values contradict with collective values of his society. Consequently, the clash is evident between Meursault and his society.

Conclusion

Meursault is a denying hero, even though he is the epitome of morality and suffers the anguish of guillotine due to his choice of death. He fulfills all his responsibilities as a friend, an employee, and takes the responsibility of killing. Only truth is our moral conscience and as long as it is with us, Christ will keep continuing visiting the world in the form of Meursault. Camus tries to exhibit his protagonist as Christ who sacrificed his life for establishing the truth. Meursault sacrifices his life for his ethical values. Camus believes that we can create values for all humans overcoming the absurdity of the universe. Verily, values can be created and established through our commitment to values. Traditionally, many people believe that values can be found in religion, but Camus confidently embraces the free will in establishing ethical values. Actually, Camus’s hero Meursault rejects collective values by adhering to his individual values and thus develops intercultural encounters.

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