

**KAMEL DAOUD'S POSTCOLONIAL RESPONSE TO *THE STRANGER*
BY ALBERT CAMUS**

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The Stranger, (*L'étranger* in original) a 1942 novel by the French author Albert Camus draws heavily on the Camusian philosophy of the absurd and existentialism and was earmarked as a seminal twentieth century novel. Recently it has come to limelight once more as it got challenged by an Algerian author, Kamel Daoud in his novel *Mersault Investigation* (*Mersault, contre-enquête* in original) The paper aims to focus on the philosophical underpinnings of both the works that won for Camus the Nobel prize for literature in 1957 and for Daoud the prestigious Goncourt prize in 2015.

The main protagonist of Camus' novel *Meursault* is psychologically detached from the world around him. Events that would be very significant for most people, such as a marriage proposal or a parent's death, do not matter to him, at least not on a sentimental level. One day he kills an Arab he barely knows without any discernible motive. For this he was sentenced to death. This post-colonialist response of Kamel Daoud to Camus' aforesaid novel explores elements from the perspective of the brother of the unnamed Arab victim and other protagonists. Daoud explores their subsequent lives following the withdrawal of French authorities and most *pid-noirs* or the French settlers from Algeria after the conclusion of the Algerian War of Independence in 1962

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Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger* (*L'Etranger*) has to be studied in the background of Second World War and in the light of the author's preoccupations, conditions and context of living and work. The main character, Meursault is an indifferent French Algerian described as "a citizen of France domiciled in North Africa, a man of the Mediterranean, an *homme du midi* yet one who hardly partakes of the traditional Mediterranean culture". Like Camus he was a '*pid-noir*' belonging to the generation of French settlers of Algeria under the French occupation. He does participate in the ritual following the death of her mother but nonchalantly. Some days after despite himself he shoots at an Arab man and kills him in an Algerian beach without having a strong motive to do so. As a consequence, Meursault was arrested, tried before a jury that found him guilty and then finally guillotined. The first half of this classic novel was a narration in the first person by Meursault himself. The second part of the novel commences after the apocalyptic murder of the Arab man when the hero of the novel finds himself in the prison but never does he repent his action or seek mercy. He accepts his destiny.

The novel gets its inspiration from the phenomenologist and existentialist philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century in the post war years. The intellectuals and the authors during this period were questioning the meaningfulness of life and existence as the blood bath they witnessed left them clueless as to the human control on unfolding of catastrophes. Human beings, it seemed, are caught in a race to fit into socially acceptable roles and Camus' novel questions this 'socially acceptable'.

Jean-Paul Sartre's article "Explication de *L'Etranger*," on the eve of publication of the novel also helped it attract readers and intellectuals. Sartre wrote:

«À peine sorti des presses, *L'Étranger* de M. Camus a connu la plus grande faveur. On se répétait que c'était « le meilleur livre depuis l'armistice ». Au milieu de la production littéraire du temps, ce roman était lui-même un étranger. » (Jean-Paul Sartre, « Explication de *l'Etranger* » in *The Situation-1*, 1947)

(Barely out of the press, Mr. Camus's *L'Etranger* enjoyed the greatest favor. It was repeated that it was "the best book since the armistice". In the midst of the literary production of time, this novel was itself a stranger. ")

Before entering into the details of the widely acclaimed novel, *The Stranger*, some details about the novelist: Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a representative of non-metropolitan French literature. He was born in Algeria under the French rule to modest parents. His mother was illiterate. He started his career as a journalist and very early showed inclination to intellectual circles of strong revolutionary tendencies. The author lost his father in the First World War when he was only a few months old. Camus was deeply interested in philosophy. According to Camus the moral or the social orders are not rational or natural. But this did not make him indifferent. On the other hand, life's apparent meaninglessness does not lead him to despair. A born humanist, Camus had faith in man and believed in man's dignity in the face of what he saw as a cold, indifferent world. An unfortunate car accident cut short his career but he remained a very influential author of the twentieth century. His philosophy of absurd as painted in *The Stranger* was a major contribution to Existential thought of his time. He received the Nobel prize at the age of forty-five.

Camus published in 1942 along with *The Stranger* his famous philosophical essay on the absurd *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Myth de Sisyphe*). These two works established the reputation of Camus as an important literary figure. In his short lifetime Camus was a prolific writer. He produced numerous novels, essays and plays on the absurd. Among his other most notable novels were *The Plague* (*La Peste*) published in 1947 and *The Fall* (*La Chute*) published in 1956. Along with his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his essay *The Rebel* (*L'homme révolté*) won international acclaim. In 1957 he was awarded the Nobel prize for his contribution to the world of literature.

Camus along with many Paris based intellectuals of the time, witnessed and experienced the horrors of World War II, Hitler's Nazi regime and the unprecedented killings of the War and came to the conclusion that life left to it had no rationale or redeeming meaning. Many could no longer accept that human existence had any real goal or objective as they lost faith in God or in any religion. In fact, this Existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and his associates asserted that our existence precedes our essence. This contradicted the older 'Essentialism' that had dated back to Plato and Aristotle stating that every entity has its own essence including humans pre-determined by God. The existentialist philosophy of 'absurdity', on the other hand, calls for human intervention to find the true meaning or purpose of his life in an otherwise meaningless

world. Mersault the hero or anti-hero of Camus' novel does not cry at his mother's funeral, does not believe in God, and kills an Arab man because the harsh sunlight of the Algerian beach was beating down upon him tortuously and because the accumulation of perspiration on his eyebrows started trickling down in drops upon his eyes blurring his vision. For this crime Meursault is deemed a threat to society and sentenced to death. During his trial the jury questioned more his remorselessness at the death of his mother than his criminal act. However Mersault he comes to accept the "gentle indifference of the world," and finds peace with his self and with the society that persecutes him.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus explains his concept of the absurd and of its acceptance. In the myth Sisyphus would have to push a rock up a mountain. Upon reaching the top the rock would roll down again leaving Sisyphus to start over. Sisyphus to Camus is an absurd hero who is condemned to a meaningless task. Similarly man is a victim of the orthodoxy of habit. In *The Stranger* Mersault faces execution tempted by despair, hope and salvation. Dr. Rieux of *The Pest* attends the plague affected citizens of Oran actually stages a protest against the unjust and absurd world by confirming Camus' conviction that despairing of mankind is not the solution; without having the unreasonable ambition to save men we still want to serve them.

Kamel Daoud's novel *Mersault Investigation (Mersault, contre-enquete)* is a criticism, particularly in its first part, of Camus and Mersault as representatives of French colonialists and imperialists. His anger at the description of the cold-blooded murder in lyrical French, the language of the colonialist also deserves to be noted and as such makes his work conventionally a postcolonial Algerian creation. Harun, the hero of his novel is the brother of the unnamed Arab man, Moussa. He is the angry and frustrated narrator. He points out how Mersault disdainfully will leave out his brother's name in his narrative as well and will kill him without a discernible motive. Retelling Camus's *The Stranger* through Arab eyes, this debut novel develops a specifically Algerian take on the absurd condition depicted in Camus' novel.

Let us come to the second part of this paper wherein the writer and journalist, Kamel Daoud writing in the twenty-first century in the post-colonial era when Algeria is no longer ruled by France wishes to surface his grievances against Camus who makes "the murder of an Arab man" the central theme of his best seller novel without even a care to name the Arab man. In his novel *The Mersault Investigation (Mersault Contre-enquete)*, winner of the prestigious Goncourt prize. He poses himself as the brother of the killed Arab man and tries to voice the pain of the "Other", convinces the reader regarding the inhuman atrocity of the white man and the white author.

In a frame reminiscent of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Kamel Daoud depicts a bar in Oran, "a city with its legs spread open towards the sea" as the scene of his drama where the narrator shares his story to a western literature student. However while doing so he uses the French language, the idiom of the enemy colonialists, "the murderer's words and expressions" as if they were the "stones from the old houses the colonialists left behind."

Kamel Daoud refers to the dead Arab as the narrator's brother who is "a brief Arab, technically ephemeral" having no name and carrying only the name of the incident. The two Arab brothers : the dead brother is now named Musa and the grievous brother and story teller Harun along with their restless and lamenting mother are the main characters of the story.

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The metaphorical importance that these characters bring to surface is the legacy of several thousands of Mersaults and their sheer indifference to the Arab life that impacted the history of that people. Thus the novel in a way contains a strong message of the empire speaking back.

The novel is full of female imageries that the author uses in abundance. The narrator, Harun compares the erstwhile colonized Algeria to a prostitute and the European settlers to the rapists and violence perpetrators. But after the liberation Harun witnessed the dwindling enthusiasm among the Algerians as well as the collapse of illusions on their part and compares the liberated capital to “an out dated actress left over from the days of revolutionary theatre.”

The second half of the story unfolds the grievances and the disillusionment at the post-colonial failures. The narrator, Harun, following the footsteps of Mersault, kills a French man to revenge his brother’s murder at the hands of Mersault although a perverse act only mirrors the first murder committed. The juxtaposition of the two murders gives way to a complicity of imprisoning duality: Mersault kills the Arab man dazzled by the scorching sun while Harun commits the murder in the moonlight; The time of the second murder is two in the morning rather than in the afternoon; in place of the unnamed Arab victim we find the French victim carrying a name. The second murder happens immediately after independence and yet the accused is interrogated by the anti-French fighters. So Harun thinks aloud that had he killed the French man during the war of liberation he would have been considered as a national hero!

Mersault Investigation (Mersault contre-enquete) alludes to the July 1962 killings of the Europeans in Oran that in turn led to the October 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris. Government and the media colluded to hush up the reports of these atrocities and the victims officially forgotten for a long time. In the 1990s a civil war broke out between the Islamists and the military regime and once again all information was silenced by the two competing causes.

The novel constantly plays between French imperialist and Algerian nationalist, French or Arabic languages, between God-written catastrophe and man-written blunder and last and the most important, between the two protagonists, Mersault and Harun. The novel criticises and rejects the choice of the Algerians in general between military nationalism and religious internationalism when it comes to conceive of the ruling power and condemns the latter as Arab-ness on the same lines as the Negro-ness which are regressive concepts. Blackness only gets a visibility when seen from the point of view of the white men.

At the end of Daoud’s novel Harun is chased by religious fanatics where in Camus’ novel Mersault is visited by a priest. Not only *The Stranger*, *The Qu’ran* also targeted as a text to curb Algeria’s increasing religiosity.

Along with the deep insight and philosophy comes the stylistics of writing by Daoud. Where Camus’s vision is cold and stripped of emotion, Daoud’s is sensuous, comical and passionate. The novel’s opening line – “Mama’s still alive today”, as opposed to Camus’s “Mother died today” – signals the attitude of this audacious project right from page one. The theatrical monologue is sometimes Beckettian, sometimes (in its self-referential intricacy and inter-textuality) Borgesian, and always brilliantly metaphorical. For its incandescence, its precision of phrase and description, and its cross-cultural significance, *The Meursault Investigation* made its mark as a literary contribution.

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