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An Inquiry into the Stranger Called Meursault: An Existential Man of Nihil Value in an Absurd World

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Abstract:

What is life? Is life meaningless? What is the purpose of life? There are questions and there are answers and in between there is a vagueness of the resolution existing between life and death. This paper is an inquiry into the life of Meursault, a stranger in his own life and almost a stoic. He was an unusual, peculiar man who rarely reacted to anything. Albert Camus's famous work *The Stranger*, also known as *The Outsider*, emphasizes the existence of a person who is free in choosing what he will, yet he had no true choice of his own. Absurdist in nature, Meursault, a superficial man, doesn't believe in god and have no real sense of purpose in a meaningless world. He embraces the absurd condition of his humanly existence, but there is truly not an exact way to know such a man who is indifferent to his own existence. So, "One must always imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, *The Myth* 111).

Keywords: Camus, Meursault, Existentialism, Absurd, Nihilism, Stranger.

The translation may change 'the worlds' of a novel, but it should not ever change the primary character of the novel in the process. And Meursault remains the same—as in the French and in the language of English—in the novel *L'Etranger* or *The Stranger*, for his character was sewn in the shades of black and white, not ever grey, and as clean as slate, yet he was a bizarre one. Be it the middle, or the end, or when the novel begins, he had never shown any signs of trying an alteration for himself nor he had shown any vulnerability where he could be punctured with the needles of empathy or sympathy, but he had always been a different one—one non-relative to the crowd—a man who believes one always dies in the end and makes no difference whatsoever.

Unagitated by his mother's death, apathy towards his girlfriend, unexcited at the offer of his promotion by his boss, and unperturbed by the murder for which he is incarcerated, Meursault is a stranger to himself and the society. An existentialist, a nihilist, and an

absurdist, he was everyone in his own unique ways. He had never felt any remorse or personal emotions in his life, as he seemed aware of the meaningless and futility of life when ultimately one has to face death. A first-person account of the life of Meursault divided into two parts, before and after the murder of Arab, the novel signifies the importance of human life which could only be understood in the light of death and morality. The conscience of Meursault changes with the course of events—he was an indifferent man in the first part where he conforms to the patterns of life, but a changed, rational man in the second where he challenges existence, though for a limited time, and affirms that this physical world is entirely meaningless and does not have any future and death is inevitable and this realization makes him happy and peaceful. In the end, there is no hope and no despair for Meursault. The novel is all about the perception of life which begins with Meursault's mother's death and ends with Meursault waiting peacefully for the inescapable death, and leaves behind a pertinent question—does anything matter eventually if the death is waiting for everyone?

The story of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* starts with Meursault and ends with Meursault; there is no one else inside the novel who means much to him. Meursault, an indifferent French Algerian, while attending his mother's funeral, was more concerned about the high temperature of the environment than the demise of the woman who brought him to this world; shows inert feelings towards his girlfriend who was passionate about him; kills an Arab man without any great motive; and then tried and sentenced to death which brings him less fear but more detachment towards life. Though his mother's death has really not been significant for him, it was his death sentence that brings change in his consciousness for the time, though he did not regret killing the Arab at all. Meursault believed that life is meaningless as everyone had to eventually die and so his indifference to everything propels towards his theory of absurd—he has no real thoughts about love, friendships, and even enmity—he is neutral throughout lacking any ambition. Though the death of others has no meaning for him, his own death proclamation turns out quite different—the hope of more life, if it will be there, brings Meursault great happiness. He sees clearly the value of life when left with no choice but to face death; he admits fear to the prison chaplain when he insists on talking to Meursault. He also storms into chaplain, for he believes that the chaplain's certainties have no meaning for his condition and his death is inevitable so he discharges all ideas of hope. Meursault becomes most aware at the time of the idea of his death which will end his impermanent life. The whole life is absurd, and to assess the beauty and pain with what is lost and what is gained in life until it exists is to become truly free of everything. Finally, Meursault was no stranger to himself.

Meursault could be a hero, or an anti-hero, or a 'nobody'. One could also assume that his mother, during his formative years, might be responsible for what Meursault had become; his mother might have been going through a crisis or any such circumstances which had had such an effect on Meursault, but there is no proof of it. The story starts when the mother dies, and Meursault shows, right from the start, that he had become an absurd man out of unknown causes, or it might have no relation to his upbringing. Generally, the story of Meursault tells that humans are basically free and responsible for their own actions in the meaningless world which generally gives us any real value or purpose in life. Sometimes the novel becomes slightly surreal—more like a dream than the reality—especially when he was hanging amidst the railings of the outside world and the prison, though he becomes displeased as the time proceeds and hoping he would become an escapist:

In the end, all I remember is...an ice cream vendor blowing his tin trumpet out in the street. I was assailed by memories of a life that wasn't mine anymore, but one in which I'd found the simplest and most lasting joys: the smells of summer, the part of town I loved, a certain evening sky, Marie's dresses and the way she laughed. The utter pointlessness of whatever I was doing there seized me by the throat, and all I wanted was to get it over with and get back to my cell and sleep. (Camus, *The Stranger* 104-105)

He faintly shows a little care for the world he had left behind, but still he could not face the trials and tribulations, the reality of the life, and he wants to sleep for a long time before the disgusting world takes over his life again. It is also evident from the novel that Meursault, due to his absurd, purposeless nature, is an unmotivated person who likes to spend the day smoking cigarettes more out of habit than desire and, going with the flow, he neither faces nor avoids any challenge. He awakes and recovers during the time of imprisonment from his earlier thoughts which were evident at the start when he was unmoved by his mother's death, in the middle when he was unable to reciprocate the love of his girlfriend, and as he was unaffected by Arab's death whom he murdered without any second thoughts. After the qualitative changes, he misses everything from making love to a woman, smoking cigarettes when he desired, and swimming at ease. These small, meaningless joys suddenly find new importance in his life—their futilities were gone. Facing his imminent death in the end, Meursault suddenly has trouble accepting his fate and dreams of living his life again, but ultimately coming to terms of the meaningless world, abandoning all hopes of the future, he accepts his destiny and transforms into a happy man.

The novel is basically absurd, for Meursault does not follow any order and he is irrational; he just does it because it has to be done. While on the contrary, the entire trial of his murder needs rational order of things which leads to his imprisonment, and yet the logic and reason given are absurd which has no real connection to the crime committed by Meursault which symbolises human beings attempt to find rational explanations behind irrational events in the universe. Camus's absurd philosophy that Meursault, like all the people, will have no further importance as he has to die in the end, no matter when. Therefore, life is and always be meaningless. The Stranger has also shown the importance of physicality in Meursault's life rather than the role of social or emotional needs. As a narrator, he reminisces and concentrates on the physical aspects of his surroundings rather than looking at emotional or psychological characteristics of the people, places or things. He is an emotionless nihilist.

Though Meursault is an absurdist and an existential nihilist who believes that "a human life is insignificant and without any intrinsic meaning and purpose" ("Existential nihilism"). And everything is clear from the first lines of the book where Meursault says casually, "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" (Camus, *The Stranger* 3). Meursault has no appreciation for anything and his unbiased attitude makes the whole world as similar as his feelings for his mother, so his life stops for no one, not even for his mother who has died. After attending his mother's funeral, Meursault realises that he has to go back to his work as the formalities are now complete—his mother is buried under the ground—and Sunday, like any other, is over. Nothing really had changed for Meursault. Also, he was more present with his disturbance and discomfort on the bus and the inclement hot weather during the death ceremony; he even recalls the discomfort when he shoots the Arab, his murder doesn't bother him much though. But he is an honest person, for he mentions whatever he feels; he never imitates emotions which is one reason which makes him a coldblooded murderer in the courtroom in the eyes of the people. Meursault has never been an uninteresting character or a normal one—he is not a conventional person who adheres to the rules of the society but cares about the physical world only and cannot find enough reasons in his life worth making an effort for. The actions of Meursault make him an existential man, "exploring the issue of human existence" ("Existentialism"), as he is completely indifferent to the meaningless world which gives him no sense of purpose for existence. Meursault is the only person who was responsible for what he has become, as he was entirely free to choose his existence.

Love, also, doesn't mean anything to Meursault, though he is physically attracted towards his girlfriend. He has barely anything to say to Marie when she visits her once in prison. His thoughts over love and marriage were clear. When asked by Marie, Meursault agrees that he would say 'yes' to any girl who proposed marriage to him, and Marie is no different than any other girl to him. Meursault, as a whole, can be termed as an irresponsible and unreliable man. His philosophy of the assumption of equality makes him an untrusting, ignorant, and a neutral man: no woman is good for him than the other; no man is good for him as a friend than the other; a job is same as any other job; and, killing a man is the same as not killing him. He is a man showing less emotions than the normal people: there is an invisible grief, which means nothing, when his mother dies; there is little happiness, when he should have been elated—or would have shown some respect—at Marie's exhibition of love; and neither to any remorse for his crime of murdering another human being. He also has no regret at the loss of his freedom. Contrary to the natural human feelings, he has no bitter feelings for Raymond, who drags him into the situation, and his lawyer, who defends him poorly. Meursault, in another perspective, suffered from boredom, which ultimately leads to his death sentence.

Meursault is a nihilist—disapproving social conventions and expectations—rejects god completely, stating that he didn't believe in god, which also makes him an existentialist who questions the existence of god and people who follows god, like the chaplain. Eventually, he revealed himself and the world in his own conscience:

Then, I don't know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me. I grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy. He seemed so certain about every thing.... And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head. He wasn't even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man. Whereas it looked as if I was the one who'd come up empty-handed. But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me.... Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he. Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind levelled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to

me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we're all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him who also called themselves my brothers? Couldn't he see, couldn't he see that? Everybody was privileged. There were only privileged people. The others would all be condemned one day. And he would be condemned, too. What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral? (Camus, *The Stranger* 120-121)

After the outburst of emotions before the epiphany, Meursault calms down and sleeps with wondrous peace, and, after waking up, the world still meant nothing to him. Moreover, before it all ends, the clear manifestation of Meursault's thoughts in *The Stranger* allows him to face his death happily, as he has come to terms with his own existence and becomes aware of the freedom—especially the choices he had made throughout his life—and he thinks about his mother and the final destination:

So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again.... And I felt ready to live it all again too...I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world...I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate. (Camus, *The Stranger* 122-123)

Meursault, in an absurd state of mind, becomes ecstatic while his end is near and he wants the cheerful crowd, on the day of his execution, to greet him with cries of hate, an emotion of pure joy he wants to witness harmoniously before leaving this meaningless world. He believed his mother must have felt free before her death and was ready to live it all again. Meursault believed in the absurd and called life meaningless. As Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* asserts, “For the absurd mind, the world is neither so rational nor so irrational. It is unreasonable and only that.... Only at the end of this difficult path does the absurd man recognize his true motives” (49). The struggle in life of an absurd person is never-ending and he repeats his struggles again and again, and without any temptation. Meursault is Camus' image of absurd. “Aware that life is futile, Camus feels himself stranger to it” (Woods 165) and so does Meursault. Absurd is simply when there is no hope left for humankind and questions arise about the futility of one's existence. The novel indicates that life really has no purpose of its own, so it is useless to seek for meaning in the world, and death will bring down everyone eventually. When existence means nothing, the futility of life leads to

philosophical death of the soul, and the unusual man named Meursault realised it on the verge of his death, so he earned peace in the end. But nobody would miss Meursault, for after all who cares about a stranger in the end who surrendered to death, though his hopeless situation demanded his suicidal sacrifice as a result of the ridiculousness of his existence.

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