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## Exclusions and Nonconformity in Albert Camus's *The Adulterous Woman*

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### Abstract:

My paper looks at the politics of human emancipation and compromised identities of those who are continuously subjected to silences and conforming tendencies. More than providing a physical confront for personal liberty, I contend to show Camus's use of the narrative operates on a plethora of metaphors and symbols to implicate the autonomy of the central character. Through the impressions invested towards the end of the story, I go on to show the process in which Camus connects natural world, mystical revelation and the emancipation of humanity from the mundane. With the use of psychoanalytical readings of subversions and the modernist approach in the narration, I intend to demonstrate an alternative mode of cognition to the whole contention of personal necessities and structural expectations.

**Keywords: emancipation, autonomy, subversions, structural expectations.**

The apropos of despair in the landscape of the dispossessed is centrally located in the silences of the absurd. The claustrophobia and the sickness of the melancholic is experienced, as an individual tragedy and the malign of the existence at large. The disease of poetic discomfiture in the works of Albert Camus is a gyration of human loss and the meaninglessness of humanity. The misery and the laconic disappearance of thought and all the possibilities of human goodness foreshadows an irrevocable defeat. The expertise of human life is set within the archives of accepted norms and one has to conform to this adherence. To have a thought that transgresses with the normative social pattern is an abomination of morality that deserves the perils of occlusion and elimination.

The title of Camus's short story *The Adulterous Woman* (1957) delegates the normalising discourse of silencing or diabolizing somebody who intends to implicate herself as the 'normal', however outside the patterned and inherited structures of normativity. Camus's contention is set beyond the dictates of any '-isms' to a possibility of a realisation of that unlearned consciousness that is repeatedly damaged by the brutalities of reality. Hence Camus observes in *The Rebel : An Essay on Man in Revolt* , "Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being."

The reluctance and the disinclined narrative that flounders in the opening lines, find a fitting pretence of expression in introducing the central characters. Here one reads the difficulty of anxiety, engaging to bring oneself back to life and the realities that foster to terrorise peace

and the contentment of a normal human life. The demolition of thought and the incoherence of language to convey emotions are all transpired into human silences. The house fly is a metaphor of Janine's perception, tracing and capturing, the images in the bus. Its movement, determined by Janine's consciousness, is worked out in the separation of the image and the source, to ascertain the possibility of consciousness to perceive itself and its condition outside its living reality. The harshness of the weather symbolised by the sand, wind and desert, are all hostile and aggressive to which human beings are pitifully subjected to be annihilated or to languish irrevocably. Camus steadfastly returns to the bleakness of the weather to suggest the unwholesomeness of the modern world. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus describes the abasement of this modern world, "This absurd, godless world is, then, peopled with men who think clearly and have ceased to hope". The coldness of the weather was seemingly aggravated by the wind scratching against the windows. Nature is not only bleak but is detrimental to damage and sabotage everything. The bus could hardly make any progress – " .. the vehicle was rolling, pitching, and making hardly any progress." Movement reflects upon the futility and the vain attempts of survival that is crushed down by the harshness of the weather. This idea of the bus being sabotaged by the weather and the sand getting into the carburettor and disrupting its functioning, is symptomatic of the malaise of the human society at large and the emotional destitution of the individuals. The cold obtrusive wind, entering the bus is also emblematic of this similar sense of despair that characterised human relationships. Nature, as depicted by Camus, broods on the tendency to project human beings as suffering souls, constantly at the risk of termination.

The details of Marcel as observed by Janine, in every possibility, captures the utter lifelessness and a sluggish sense of morbidity. The monotonous and drab details about Marcel, makes him appear almost dead, without any signs of life. It is observed how Marcel's "heavy torso would slump back on his widespread legs and he would become inert again and absent with vacant stare." Janine's supposed travel with the dead and the complete lack of any gesture of communication between the couple, makes the absence of sympathy as the driving motivation between them. Rather one can estimate, Janine's reluctance and indifference of this immediate reality. She is overwhelmed by a revulsion and indignation towards the whole sense of claustrophobic irritance in the bus. The violence of the storm and the inaction of the passengers in the bus is projected to accentuate suffocation and the stifled ambience, that one experiences in the midst of a decaying world of emotional dilapidation. The rattling movement of the storm is dangerous, but it is not deprived of the dynamism that characterises life - "Their silence and impassivity began to weigh upon Janine: it seemed to her as if she had been travelling for days with that mute escort" -

In her introspection of the past Janine remembers her decision to settle with Marcel, primarily because she yearned for love and fondness and it was Marcel, who deliberately and most obligingly provided her with this sense of security. However, it is the manner of this remembrance is ambiguous and problematic. As Camus prioritises in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and

for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.” There is a pragmatic reasoning for the contentment of her married life with Marcel and that destabilises the perfection of this camaraderie, bringing back to mind her initial reluctance to accept Marcel. It is indeed quite interesting to note that at that exact moment of indelicateness and dereliction, Janine suddenly caught the glimpse of the french soldier looking at her in the bus. He was distinctly and conspicuously observing her. He was wearing the uniform of the french regiments of the Sahara and an unbleached linen cap. He had a long and pointed face of a jackel and it is this lean appearance seem to suggest him to be unscrupulous and devious – “ .. so thin in his fitted tunic that he seemed constructed of a dry, friable material, a mixture of sand and bone.” There was something vile and shrewd about him, yet it gave Janine the realisation that she could still be warm and inviting. She indulges in a self gratifying thought that her voluptuous body, childish face, bright and naïve eyes can still be fascinating and charming.

“Summer was always the hardest, when the heat stifled even the sweet sensation of boredom.” – the relationship was not only strained but it also lacked the tenderness and togetherness between the two individuals. It was devoid of that essential feature which made the relationship significant. Hence if boredom paves the inevitable end of a relationship, it can be treated as the primary cause of the annulment. However, this boredom was not the disintegrating factor of their relationship but the monotony that stripped the possibility of an accusation. It’s the claustrophobia and the inevitable confinement of performing the expected duties. Janine was yearning to break from this fatigue and to find the beauty of an intimate liberty within herself. The uncertain adversity of the relationship is steeped further into the uninviting gloom of the war. The desolation of the war unleashed upon the couple the cruelty of emotional indifference. After being rejected on the grounds of his health, Marcel was taken up by the desperation to recuperate his economic stability and his masculine ardour to ‘provide’ for his wife. As a matter of fact, after the situations started to change when the war came to an end, he was driven by this desire to make enough to regain the financial stability. Hence despite his wife’s reluctance to travel, he was overwhelmed by this need to make enough opportunities for themselves. Janine on the other hand was a complete stranger to realities of the desert. She dreamt of soft sand and palm trees, quite adhering to the charm of a pleasant travel with her husband. However, reality heaved upon and broke her by the dreariness “...of the cold, of the biting wind, of these semi-polar plateaux cluttered with moraines ... merely stone, stone everywhere, in the sky full of nothing but stone-dust, rasping and cold, as on the ground, where nothing grew among the stones except dry grasses.”

The introspection of her loneliness and the necessity of a separate existence is what characterises Janine’s need to acquire a parallel individualistic seclusion, from the demands of a domestic life. As Camus writes in *The Rebel*, “... rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself – a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist. Rebellious thought ... is a perpetual state of tension. In studying its actions and its results, we shall have to say, each time,

whether it remains faithful to its first noble promise or if, through indolence or folly, it forgets its original purpose and plunges into a mire of tyranny or servitude.” Her love for Marcel is not thwarted by the desire to break away from him. But it is this simultaneous need to have the choice of a personal liberty that plays an integral role for her. The loud outbursts of Marcel that she could overhear in the room, while waiting for the former to come up and at the same time being too conscious of the rippling sound of the river and the sound of the swaying palms, coming from the window-slit. However, it can be mentioned as Camus points out that suddenly Janine could sense the sound of the river is being pronounced and she could become even more distinct with it. Her recluse traces her in the midst of the rippling water becoming almost a orchestration of waves and a whole furlong of palm trees caught in the turmoil of a storm. Nature was no more distant and unfamiliar than the endearing thoughts and the distant imaginings of the invisible waves. Memory invaded her and thoughts of long lived lives jostled the discomfort of regret. The coldness of the floor intruded, to be caught and turned in the direction of the erect and flexible palm trees, in dreams of herself in peace and in recollections of her past.

Misery knows not the miserable, but what it intends to destroy, like the insides of a relationship where silence predominates. The brutality of being subjected to neglect or the crude feeling of being the compromised other, cast out psychologically to follow the legitimate precepts of expectations. Camus’s implementing of certain symbols in this context is particularly vital enough to trace the dismal condition of Janine’s situation. The narrow streets, the decaying December roses, the pungent stench of dust and coffee, the smoke of a wood fire are all symbols suggesting the disruption and the terrible sense of suffocation on being limited within a relationship that fails to provide love and togetherness. The animosity of the Arab crowd was equally distressing and Janine could understand the violence dictated against her. It was not only the racial difference but also her sexuality that provoked this brutality charged upon her. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett in *Rebellious Feminism – Camus’s Ethic of Rebellion and Feminist Thought* ponders over the uniqueness of Camus’s ideas of a defining a feminist index in his writings. She states that “far from being masculinist, Camus’s sense of rebellion relies on what are often considered to be gynocentric values—compassion, relationship, the body, and the earth. Rather than isolating these to a “private” sphere, these values and qualities are necessary components of rebellious action, and rebellious acts that ignore or abandon these can no longer claim to be rebellion.”

There’s nothing to be done except the longing of the imaginative, to travel beyond the limits and discern the rightful need to live and to find solace and emancipation from the atrocity of the mundane. For it is indeed this monotony that gradually tightens its power upon an individual and vandalize the prospects of life. The settlement of the arab nomads provided Janine this sense of freedom and unbelongingness. Their vagabondism came to Janine as that lighthearted beauty and the delicate elegance that made life meaningful and interesting. The innocence and the simplicity of these people fascinated her. These uncomplicated and undemanding modes of human life delve into a transpicuous freedom that one experiences. As

Janine was looking at the nomads' encampment it is this disengagement that enticed her. She engages in a thought about the beginnings of time, when human life was indeed without the complicated dictums of obligations. Her mind introspects into the vast spaces of uninhibited freedom, when the course of human civilization ceases and one can merge and diffuse in the quaint sensibility of one's identity without any doubtful quotients of restrictions and commitments.

The ambiguity of sordid human relationships has a pathological and a psychological devastation on the minds of those who suffer the brunt of such brutalities. It is often observed that the volition of human conviction and the coherence of physical well being drops and the angst, flowing in the rapid streams of the human mind, shatters the corporal structure and turns to nothingness the whole existence of the individual. Janine's resignation to the demands of her husband and the use of the word 'dragged' brings the thought of a corpse being dragged. Although she identifies sleep to be the only recourse to her troubled mind, she couldn't rest and separate herself from the thoughts of a life beyond the circumscriptions of reality. It can be mentioned that it is indeed the subliminal aspirations and the yearning for emancipation that provides her with the possibility and the strength of continuing with the harshness of reality. It is on these moments of lonesomeness that those distant images of comfort settle upon her with greater magnitude. Hence in the utter silence of the room she could fathom the distant sounds of the town, the old nasality of the phonographs in Moorish cafes, in her blankness she could also be conscious of the slow moving crowd and of the group of Arab vagabonds, who filled her minds with soothing thoughts of solitude.

The need and the understanding of love and tenderness have never been antithetical to her. Marcel has worked his way to convey this sense of security to Janine. But the maddening melancholy that one feels for being forced into a role with only the sheer necessity of marriage is what becomes excruciatingly jarring for the relationship. Hence Janine contemplates over physical antipathy that she felt on occasions of physical intimacy with Marcel. This has all contributed to reduce the relationship to find shelter in the dark crevices of human closeness. The vitality and the presence of the body and the celebration of the undeterred ecstasy are all pushed aside into non existence. This physical incompatibility sent tremors of unconsummated emotions of love, tenderness, benevolence and affection, which are all turned inside to breed on despair. Janine was only aware of that irrevocable feeling of necessity that Marcel had for her and Janine could never move away and deflect herself from this obligation. Janine's incomprehensibility draws upon a revelation that not only provides an insight into her relationship with Marcel, but most importantly it prioritises the problematic paradigm of patriarchal prejudices. Moral righteousness, ethical sobriety, intellectual pride and sexual superiority can be mentioned to be the tenets of the patriarchal archetype. It is only in the sensitive domains of emotional proximity with them that one looks into the shallowness of all the grandeur. Janine is conscious not only of the monotony and the squalid life cast upon her in the contrived relation with Marcel but what troubles her further is the banality of Marcel's platitude – "...the only common expression of

those madmen hiding under an appearance of wisdom until the madness seizes them and hurls them desperately towards a woman's body to bury in it, without desire, everything terrifying that solitude and night reveals to them."

The silence that soon transpired with the night, was occasionally caught in the confusion of senses that was engaged upon the incumbent desire to survive by liberating herself from all the bonds that connected her to Marcel. The surreal night was no more opening possibilities for Janine to experience emancipation, but it is the night with all its strange foreign air that claims and occupies Janine's heart. The ethereal nature of her mind, that dreams and imagines further away from the sleeping Marcel, converges with the occult of the night sky. The lineament of her conscious self softens and turns inward to listen to its more interiorized testaments of liberty. This section of the story is foreshadowed by an overriding silence that absorbs and soaks the entire ambience and the characters. Marcel is steeped in a heavy sleep and in a dreamlike movement Janine prepares herself to leave the room. We might even feel at one point of time that suddenly the night with all its elemental variation has been projected in the subconscious of Janine and we are as audiences perceiving constantly the objective details no more from outside but as essential components of Janine's subconscious.

It is this context, one can state Bartlett's quotation (in *Rebellious Feminism*) from Susan Griffin's groundbreaking work *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society* (1995) - "If human consciousness can be rejoined not only with the human body but with the body of the earth, what seems incipient in the reunion is the recovery of meaning within existence that will infuse every kind of meeting between self and the universe, even in the most daily acts, with an eros, a palpable love, that is also sacred." Similarly, Stephen Eric Bronner in *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist* (2004) [University of Minnesota Press, 2002] talks about this conception of a mystical revelation in terms of emancipation and personal liberty. He mentions that "There is indeed no reason to think that the main character will change her life or even ask herself "profound questions" about its meaning. Her adultery remains metaphysical, and liberation – the exile into the kingdom of nature – momentary and purely subjective."

The solitude and the perfect sense of emancipation settled upon Janine once she moves out of the hotel. However, the cadence of silence was seldom broken by the infrequent flashes of reality that constantly tried to summon her back. The movement of time is expressed in the description of the thousand stars loosening their positions in the sky and disappearing in the horizon. The dissolving of the stars in the horizon and the falling darkness of the night and gradual progress for Janine to disseminate the variety of social and the psychological impediments. The night prevailing over the fading light of the stars can also be seen as Janine dissolving with the expanse the night. This diffusion is symbolic of her breaking away from the physical and mortal form which is constantly subjected to mutability and transitory feelings of human suffering – "Breathing deeply, she forgot the cold, the dead weight of others, the craziness or stuffiness of life, the long anguish of living and dying." But the night with all its

realization and reconciliation of deliverance brought along with it the brutal awareness of reality. Janine's accumulated strength and the beauty of her interiorized freedom enabled her thoughts of dissipation with her husband, but it could never provide her with a permanent solution. It implemented the possibilities of imagination and personal liberty which though rejected and obstructed at the end, remains vibrantly stable. To her husband's inquisition and to all his mannerisms and endearment, Janine can never return to. She has subverted all those requirements that could have fulfilled her to the status of a diligent housewife. Hence when Marcel implores to understand her problem at the end, she could only reply with "it's nothing". Thus making it suggestive that Janine will continue to suffer within the problematic dynamics of her relationship with Marcel but she has successfully shut herself away from her husband and allocated her own individualized space within the realms of her sociopolitical reality.

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