

Social Robotizing And Idiosyncratic Subjectivity In Camus' The Stranger: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

The present research studies nature, impact and consequences of individual-society conflict as portrayed in Albert Camus' novel, The Stranger. All societies, beyond ages and spaces, imperially require their subject to observe societal norms that are purported, propagated and performed through social institutions. In response, spirited individual in such a society endeavors to preserve his/her singularity and uniqueness in contrast to societal demand of robotic compliance, be constructive or destructive for individual soul. As its attestation, history and literature contain such episodes and characters whereas societal space for individual expressions brings about obedience; contrariwise, an attempt for the reign of predefined, unified and domineering social norms necessitate rebellious noncompliance. In this regard, textual analysis of the selected novel has been carried out by employing close reading technique. The findings uphold that Meursault's behavioral oddity is the direct result of prevalent societal imperialistic drives. The modern authoritative society of Meursault employs its institutes to reign over him by cutting his individualistic potentials down. In this struggle for survival, Meursault wins as he accepts physical assassination by uncompromising society but rejects its offer of material prosperity on the cost of psychic apathy.

Key Words: Society, Individual, Social Institutes, Conflict, Automaton, Singularity.

Introduction

'The Stranger' (1942) by Albert Camus (1913-1960)- a French philosophical writer- depicts the modern society that out-rightly and bluntly rejects individuality and shows hostility towards Meursault's individualism. The study aims to explore individual-society relationship in terms of Camus' character Meursault and his relationship with his society. Society's imperial call for conformity and individual's rebellious endeavor in response to preserve his singularity is cardinal to the research.

Since the genesis of human life on the face of the Earth, man is in conflict with the outer forces that seek strict compliance. Over timeline, these forces varied in quality and amplified in quantity. Furthermore, presence of these forces necessitates vigorous resistance in individuals in order to maintain their subjectivity. In this strive, man, sometimes, engenders idiosyncratic behavior to soothe his intrinsic drive of individualism that runs counter to societal expectation or limits and, as a result, causes conflict.

If we locate such individuals in literature we find a plenty of them. Aeschylus's Prometheus (c. 430 BC)- a Greek rebellious figure- rejects Zeus's autocratic sovereignty; Sophocles' Oedipus (c. 425-29 BC) confronts cruel fate; Thomas Becket (1169)- a medieval religious figure- encounters state hypocrisy; Dr. Faustus (1604) shakes medieval boundaries; King Lear (1608) and Othello (1622) of Shakespeare battle with Id; Nora in The Doll's House discards patriarchal world (1879); Tess of d'Urbervilles (1891) strives against capitalist society; Devil's Disciple iconoclasts shame morality (1897); Proctor in The Crucible sacrifices against

tyranny of majority (1953); Achebe's character, Okonkwo combats with colonizer (1958); in the very line, Meursault in *The Stranger* (1942) by Albert Camus estranges himself against social domineering. These are some examples to quote of those individuals who faced conflict with outer forces.

The story commences with the gloomy news of death of Meursault's mother. Being quite objective towards mother, he remains pacific: neither does he weep nor does he showoff mourn that disturbs the social fabric because society believes in expression, be it true or false. To add fuel to fire, he spends his coming days with his girlfriend, Marie, enjoying physical life. The worst happens when on beach he, disturbed by the heat and atmosphere, shoots an Arab. Here, he does the mistake that offers open chance to society to revenge on this antisocial behavior either by getting him back to social automaton or by simply bumping him off. During trial, the examining magistrate, the judges, the chaplain all tries hypocritically best to make Meursault remorse, confess and be a social robot to get free. When he refuses, they all go other way round to assassinate this antisocial being. In the end he is hanged for his crime of being individualism and singularity, not for the murder.

Research problem:

The research problematizes a society's institutional censorship against the cardinal call of an individual for the expression of his/ her subjectivity.

Research Objectives:

- To examine the absolute censorship of societal institutes on individuals in the given text.
- To explore individual's strive for subjective existence in *The Stranger*.
- To find out the result of individual-society conflict in the selected novel.

Research Questions:

- How do societal institutes censor individual's behavior in the given novel?
- How does Meursault combat against the societal domineering?
- What are the consequences of individual-society conflict, as portrayed in *The Stranger*?

Methodology:

The research is of qualitative nature. The text of Albert Camus' novel 'The Stranger' as research sample is analyzed through the apparatus of textual analysis. Textual analysis is a research tool in which contents of the given text are thematically analyzed in accord with research objectives and research questions.

Significance of the Study:

The study furnishes active and valuable contribution to the existing knowledge. It opens new ways to understand queer nature of Meursault. The research claims that literature stages human conflicts and welcomes further researches on similar literature.

Literature Review

A society is defined as "a group of people whose members interact with each other, reside in a definable area, and share a culture" (Sociology 10). Guided by nothing but will, early man acquired civil structure to legitimate his crude powers (Rousseau 21). In the said structure, culture

is at core that includes artifacts and the patterns of thinking, feeling and acting of any society (Sociology 53). To add, religion is required to be believed as per the explanation of religious authorities. Mill states that a religion if not debated constructively becomes finally a taboo (On Liberty 34). Similarly, modern man is, psychologically, the most suffered and the most shattered entity rendered with either existentialistic submission or nihilistic suicide. As society is a set of individual therefore individual's progress ensures social progress. An ideologically 'grown person' is consistently to 'look within and mould the patterns of his behavior'. His change "in ever changing circumstances of life in the light of goals and purposes is what symbolizes the very life- soul of his society" (Habib 104). Man is a 'personality woven of individuality and sociality' both go side by side for the betterment of both (106). Contrarily, any social authority in absolute terms engenders rebellion; consequently, people endeavors for liberty (On Liberty 6-7).

Albert Camus is a 'humanitarian existentialist' (Solomon Sec. 1, p. 6) though he himself denounced this label many a time: 'No, I am not an existentialist' (qtd. in *Absurd to Revolt* 2). Anyhow, *The Stranger* seemingly depicts chaotic existence of human beings. Baker opines that 'in philosophy of absurd' he employed; in the utter 'moral pessimism' he expressed and in the 'portrayal of the alienated man', the novel is an existentialist work to its truest (53). Besides, the novel incorporates all the salient postulates of existentialism: 'ejection of God', 'love for physical life', 'struggle against death', 'the sense of being alienated', 'freedom of choice', 'suffering of world', 'individuality versus the other people and institutions', 'the desertion of man', and 'myth-making' (Özyön 89-103).

Camus in his fiction '*The Stranger*' expresses absurdity: his key concept (Bloom Guides 13). Absurdity is a sad conclusion met by those who believe in the utter possibility of rational explanation of existence of world but who find a never-to-be-met gulf between existence and logicity (Cruickshank 49). Meursault's situation appears quite similar to this one. Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre opines that the novel does not explain anything because absurd only describes and so enables the audience to point out its absurdity (54). Camus depicts a man in an absurd world fighting against it. Moreover, this 'classical work' is 'about absurd'; at the same time, it's a work 'against absurd' (Sartre 54). On the other hand, Stephen Eric Bronner terms '*The Stranger*' as a 'bildungsroman: an educational novel' that is more a rejection of absurdity than being a work of absurdity (11).

Quite evidently, Meursault, being absurd, lives by his animal spirits: a life of physical being and no objection. He holds 'immediate hedonistic pleasures' dear to him and is sensuous to a level of 'solipsism' (Rasin 50-4). In agreement to Rasin's opinion, Sprintzen explains his physical being as one who rejected future hopes; lives in present time; accepts what is offered and asks nothing more (25). Neither past nor future mends and effects his present that is completely intact and immune to any change. Showalter also agrees with both of previously mentioned critics and reaffirms sheer physical existence of Meursault in the 'certainties' of immediate moment of life because he has given up uncertain hope of future (107).

Moreover, living by immediate pleasure, the absurd character of Meursault lacks power of judgment. His dealing and relation with his social fellows is characterized by 'an incorrigible lack of contempt for 'Other'' as he had no concept of good or evil (Masuda 52). Subsequently, he lacks any 'hope or redemption' and has no 'ethics or religion' (Özyön 92). In this way, Meursault is a character free of all responsibilities that a society or religion puts on individuals; so, he lives a life of only physical enjoyment.

What is more, Camus posits that absurd must accompany revolt in order to sustain its solidarity and to end up in prosperity. Therefore, for a systematic understanding of Camus' oeuvre, concentration is inevitable on two pivot points: 'absurd and revolt' (Foley 3). This revolt takes multiple objects: absurdity, societal norms, transcendental values, etc. to dig out

happy notes of individuality while living in a hopeless situation. In the same way, Meursault is a modern Sisyphus living amid absurdity as 'an absurd in revolt'; consequently, he lives a life of physical involvement and takes respective moral action (Foley 58).

Sartre calls Meursault 'one of terrible innocents' who shakes society by rejecting its 'rules of games' (54). He is a social rebel who confronts society on all levels, be it traditions, values, religion, etc. Actually, his estrangement owes to his rebellious nature towards the society that tends to confine him. Germaine Brée, in this regard, puts that he 'refuses to make any concession' towards dictatorial norms and rituals because he has found them mere superficial abstractions (2). Meursault does not allow his society to put, authoritatively, any definition of his lifestyle. He tries to be the only master of his life and will; moreover, he thought of his life as a 'life unit' and to preserve it he is to live in unique singularity (Champigny 4). Therefore, 'he does not live by the rules'; rather, he is contemptuous and indifferent to the values which other people find respectable

(Sprintzen 29). Moreover, it's the society that stirs up the string of revolt and sows the seed of resistance.

Robert Champigny states that Meursault's dispute and fight with Chaplain proves his rejection of all pseudo-values of morality and existence. The priest tries to enslave him for 'divine city' but he rejects the idea in favor of his self-made world (4). Prior to it, Champigny says that in 'pseudo-ethical process' one is asked to yield ones individuality for the sake of generality and, in the end, generality is taken as totality to engulf all of individual's freedom (3). Against such a societal proposal, rejection and revolt by individuals is inevitable. Therefore, Camus feels annoyed to acknowledge the existence of any transcendental values, be it Christianity, capitalism, history, or any else (Okazaki 417). Camus' fictional character 'Meursault' embodies this very rejection of meta-narratives.

Avi Sagi talks about the real concern of 'The Stranger' that is 'social alienation'. Meursault finds his social world a stranger; as a result, he does not share its values and remains honest to himself (90). Likewise, excessive attachment to self-honesty creates a rift with the hypocrite society he lives in. Unconcerned about the scorn of society, he, like Christ, is ready to die for honesty and truth (90). Brée opines that Meursault is a man who only answers and does not question anything because his society is unable to bear truth (02).

René Girard, in his work, 'Camus' Meursault retried', expounds his nihilistic understanding of the work. Girard explains Meursault being the fantastic quintessence of an individual who is philosophically absorbed in nihilism and he is the very figure which was literarily built in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Diving deep into the text, Camus' character and work both are not justified as nihilistic in the general terms of nihilism. In comparison to American authors like James Cane and Hemingway, it's evident that Camus owes them a big deal in his theme of emotional detachment but his character Meursault is not an intentional nihilist in the line of American nihilists (01)

Another dimension explored in the novel, 'The Stranger', is its colonial underpinnings and post colonialism responses. Bhoyar submits, 'The Stranger' is a true reflection of colonial Algeria' (135); hence, it employs all the machinery of colonialism. From the negligent treatment of anonymous Arabs to the exploitation of colonized women, the novel is a colonial portrayal (136- 8). Quite obviously it is depicted that Arabs were subjugated twice: firstly under French and secondly under *pid noir*. They were cruel masters who snubbed Arabs' indigenous existence.

Riggs states, in this regard, that Raymond in 'The Stranger' represents 'French colonialism's violence and cruelty' (184). This review of the literature justifies the area of present research as a research gap.

Analysis and Discussion

Society is a collective body of different institutes: culture, education, religion, economics, law, family, marriage, language, norms, etc. It is believed that modern societies are exploitive in nature against the individual and singular potentials of its subject. No such society favors or allows an individual to flout its norms, be it good or bad. Moreover, all the power that a society exerts to capture an individual psychologically is invested to it by its institutes. Therefore, all these societal institutes go hand in glove for the unification of subject in a single string.

Meursault is the character who struggles hard to preserve his personal norms and singular being while his society, assisted by its institutes, tries its best to normalize him into social robot. Here is given the textual analysis of the novel in this justification.

Culture and Meursault:

Culture is defined as shared attitudes, beliefs, customs and moral values of a society. A society designs its culture and entire subject is considered ethically bound to follow the cultural norms of the society. In the given novel, the presence and enforcement of cultural norms is all pervasive. The story starts with the news of death: 'Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure' (The Stranger 01). Soon after this miserable news the social fellows start behaving in accord with the culture: observing the vigil ceremony, wearing black clothes, showing melancholy etc. Meursault narrates that he went to his boss for getting leave without wearing black clothes and it disturbed his boss to the level of disbelief. The text here goes as: 'Probably, he will do so (express sympathy) the day after tomorrow when sees me in black. For the present, it's almost as if Mother were not really dead. The funeral will bring it home put an official seal on it' (The Stranger 01).

This robotic behavior of his boss attests the claim that in modern societies it is outer presentation only that matters not what is really there inside. To observe vigil, acquaintances from Old Home come; although they remain quite because they has nothing to say yet just to follow cultural norms they sit there silently.

On the other hand, Meursault is internally alive and so he behaves honestly. He had very objective relation with his mother so he does not showoff grief. In his own words: 'When we lived together, Mother was always watching me, but we hardly ever talked', (The Stranger 05). He refuses to have a look of late mother and sheds not a single tear on such a devastating situation. This antisocial behavior of Meursault startles all and they start considering him a thread to social fabric. Meursault being not a social robot dejects these social images and being Camus' hero believes that:

'Lying is not only saying what isn't true. It is also, in fact especially, saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels' (Absurd to Revolt 14).

Showing grief, wearing black and being mourner were socially expected behaviors observed by all; yet, these were just fake images with nothing like true internal feeling and so were rejected by the rebellious being of Meursault. The situation creates social enmity against the honest person: Meursault.

Religion and Meursault:

Another social institute is religion that always plays a very critical role in determining the character of any person. Though it's a code of life for its believers to enjoy successful life, it is often misused by authorities in order to chain individuals and to get personal benefits. Therefore, people observe religious rites just superficially without any internal regard for them. Meursault gets disturbed by the warden's comment that mother 'wanted to be buried with the rites of church' (The Stranger 05) because he knows his mother has never been a religious lady at all in her life time. This hypocrisy just to be labelled religious embarrasses him.

In contrast to his mother, Meursault openly confesses his atheism. Neither the social fear nor the hypocrite religious label could mould his honest expression. On magistrate's inquiry about God he replies that he doesn't believe in God, making magistrate call him 'Mr. Antichrist'. The magistrate finds his life empty without believing in God. He condemns Meursault in these words: 'Do you wish my life to have no meaning?' (The Stranger 43). In opposition, Camus believes that Meursault is the only Christ like character that the modern people deserve. Actually the examining magistrate had no interest in the case of murder rather he wants him to get socially normalized by believing in what other social fellows believe. The same practice in the name of religion occurs in the last chapter of the novel when chaplain

comes. Chaplain acts on the behalf of society in persuading Meursault to remorse on his antisocial being, not on ill deed of murder. In his opinion one must only believe in and seek for God's justice as man's justice in this world does not matter (*The Stranger* 73).

The protagonist of the novel, Meursault, does not bargain here and casts off all the offers of getting physically free on the cast of individual freedom and in the name of religion. Examiner's offer of physical freedom and enjoyment in this world and chaplain's proposal of prosperity in next world works naught on him. He remains true to his feelings and beliefs till the last breath.

Language and Meursault:

Language is not a tool of communication only rather it is also an exploitive apparatus to manipulate individuals. In this way, it works as an active social institute for the automaton of masses. The use of language makes and unmakes personality of its user (Kristeva 272). This exploitation done through language is quite apparent in the dealings of public prosecutor during trial. Meursault describes it as:

I noticed that he laid stress on my "intelligence." It puzzled me rather why what would count as a good point in an ordinary person should be used against an accused man as an overwhelming proof of his guilt. (*The Stranger* 63)

Meursault combats this social tool of language by avoiding its use. Throughout the novel, he remains speechless towards society and the little he utters is very objective and short. So many times he finds something to say but the very next moment he discovers himself empty to speak. For him language is incompetent to transfer true feelings so he remains mute. During trial he wants to say something to judge but couldn't: 'And I've something really important to tell you. However, on second thoughts, I found I had nothing to say'. In reply to Maries question whether he loves him and to that of chaplain he remains consciously mute.

Family and Meursault:

Meursault, the honest being, is quite pure in his relation and response to his family. Even in case of dealing with such a socially sensitive institute, he is very much honest in his expression of feeling without any hesitation or fear of society. He describes his relation with his mother in these words:

When we lived together, Mother was always watching me, but we hardly ever talked. During her first few weeks at the Home she used to cry a good deal. But that was only because she hadn't settled down. After a month or two she'd have cried if she'd been told to leave the Home. (*The Stranger* 05)

He is blunt in his expression and bold enough to present his feelings openly. He had nothing to talk with his mother; therefore, it was needless to keep her with at home. Keeping her at home in solitude was a graver crime than sending her to old home where she could enjoy with her age fellows. Society and all its institutes get annoyed on this act of him ignoring the subjective will he had behind it. Even then he can furnish this justification to judge or can put any lame excuse, he claims what actually was without any fear. Before examining magistrate and during trial his reply remains the same: he had nothing common with mother; our relation lacked subjectivity. Therefore, on her funeral and burial, he shows sheer objective behavior that appears abnormal to the social robots which in any case could not favor the flouting of socially expected and accepted behavior. It is not the matter of good or bad, it's a matter of being honest and pure in dealing as per the level of intimacy. The judges and public were shocked on his abnormal dealing but nobody was ready to peep down into actual matter. Meursault, on the other hand, does not yield before them and stands by his stance.

Marriage and Meursault:

Subsequent to family, another social image that Meursault faces is marriage institute. Society offers this social contract for those pairs who claim mutual love or attraction. Primarily, marriage was, in its essence, meant to maintain love and reproduction along with inevitable

fact of pacifying physical and bodily drives. But in modern era, it has turned to be just a social contract of sheer physical enjoyment, as G. B. Shaw terms it: ‘a legalized prostitution’. Yet it gets currency because society backs it. Meursault turns this hypocrite image away by his vocal disclaimer of love and would-be marriage with Marie: a girl in whom he was just physically interested. Meursault narrates: ‘A moment later she asked me if I loved her. I said that sort of question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn’t’ (The Stranger 24).

Unlike his other society fellows, he does not pretend: he doesn’t misuse the pure concept of love and the holy institute of marriage just to fulfill his bodily needs. Meursault is well aware of the reality of marriage in modern era; furthermore, he believes it to be a social label for secure sex. Moreover, to be true to his feelings that were just physical in this regard, he openly confesses and unveils his position to Marie. The below given set of dialogues between the two elucidates this point. Marie came that evening and asked me if I’d marry her. I said I didn’t mind; if she was keen on it, we’d get married. Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing—but I supposed I didn’t. “If that’s how you feel,” she said, “why marry me?” I explained that it had no importance really, but, if it would give her pleasure, we could get married right away Then she remarked that marriage was a serious matter. To which I answered: “No.” (The Stranger 29)

Economics and Meursault:

Another important pillar of modern society is economics. In modern society every thing is taken as a commodity and valued in accord with its economic worth, even human beings and relations. Meursault is also a member of such a society where people strive for material progress by exerting their fullest and neglecting their internal satisfaction; that’s why, they are successful outwardly yet inwardly they remain vexed. Meursault tears this image of society apart to let his emotion live intact and flourish well. His boss offers him a post in Paris that in his view was a golden chance to get prosperous. As expected, quite contrary to the boss expectation is the Meursault’s view of life: if one is okay with his life, one must enjoy it amply instead of looking for something new. He recounts: ‘He then asked if a “change of life,” as he called it, didn’t appeal to me, and I answered that one never changed his way of life; one life was as good as another, and my present one suited me quite well’ (The Stranger 28).

Social relation and Meursault:

Societies define some standardized patterns for its subject to follow; moreover, flouting members are excluded from main stream with a tag of “other”. Though the label is socially promoted yet in essence, being rational, diversity is natural to human beings. Society conspires for normalization and those who keep singularity dear to themselves revolt against this universality. Quite in line with it is the Meursault’s society that leaves no room to adjust its variant members. Salamano and Raymond are two stereotypical examples in this regard whom their society throws out of main line; moreover, these “others” are socially defined and ruthlessly dejected ones. Nobody tries to understand their situation rather all are focused to just condemn them.

For Meursault, both these are normal human beings to have friends with and agreeable neighbors to live by. To add, Salamano is socially devastated person who need considerable sympathy from social fellow to get normal and Meursault did this in opposition to his cynical society and it’s so called moral values. Moreover, Raymond needs Meursault’s help that is feasible to him so he does. It’s Meursault, a socially rebellious figure, who believes in liberty of thought

and action; on the other hand, it's society that peeps deep into private life to normalize individuals to their roots. Neither Meursault nor this research asserts that Raymond's actions are morally justifiable yet it is stated confidently that one should not be socially marginalized.

Conclusion

Man is born bestowed with uniqueness of bodily structure and singularity of mental faculty. However, primarily his energies abound in quantity yet crude in quality. Inevitably, this situation demands first hand pruning. In this regard, history attests a perpetual existence of a foreign body that strengthens constructive potential of man along with cutting evil energies down. This custodian took many a shape: groups, tribes, societies, nations, governments, laws, norms and such like. Whatsoever its construction was, it's supposed and proposed duty never varied in nature: a helping hand in shaping individual's abilities in a positive way.

The study maintains that the essence of establishing social institute is wellbeing of the crown of the universe: man. Religion is a code of life: it offers an exemplary path of successful life for individual; laws are made to secure individual's rights; family ensures individual's protection; individual's wellbeing is an expected outcome of societal norms; language paves way of individual's expression. Simply speaking, the whole fabric of society should work in collaboration for the individual's goodness. If these institutes perform their best humanity will prosper; but, unfortunately, in modern societies the case is other way round. Contrary to proposed employment, modern societies like that of Meursault are overpowering in their nature. Individual's progress gets hindered if a society does not permit liberal expression of individualistic potentials.

Meursault tries his level best to preserve his singularity while not overtly disturbing or challenging the social setup but soon individualism comes face to face with normalizing society. His society employs all its institutes to check his drive of individualism but all goes in vain. Thereof, this implicit rejection of social setup by Meursault soon gets explicit. Both parties put their utmost to justify their stance yet the rule of "might is right" works and society wins over a vulnerable individual. Yes the individual wins morally and spiritually because of his stand against dictatorial body of society. His society, when fails in psychologically enslaving him annoyingly determines to rub his very physical existence. The capital punishment was not against his ill deed of murder but against his antisocial being that threatens the social setup.

To conclude, the researcher would like to comment that each individual in this universe is a complete world in his/her own-self; moreover, that world inhabits variant potentials; colored with the liberal expression; guided by the social set up and facilitated by societal institutes. To live, not to just spend, a life of spirits individual requires enough social room for constructive expression. Anyhow, individual should not flout constructive social norms for baser emotions; at the same place, society should not be too definitive towards individual's action for the sake of social automaton. To add, individual must be liberated but should never be invested with absolute freedom; similarly, society must be a guide for individual but should never be inducted with dictatorial powers. Positive individual-society relation empowers the both; contrarily, negative relation deteriorates the both.

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