

From Absurd to Revolt: Examining Albert Camus' *The Outsider*

Pabitra Kumar Swain

Lecturer in English,
Science Autonomous College, Hinjilicut,
Ganjam, Odisha, India

Neeta Dubey

Asst. Professor of English,
SBR Govt. Women's Autonomous College,
Ganjam, Berhampur, Odisha, India
Berhampur, Ganjam, Odisha, India

Abstract

Meursault is distinctive. He won't tell lies. He won't act otherwise. He stays faithful to who he is. As a result, he does not grieve when his mother passes away since he is unaffected. After the funeral, he returns to Algiers and lives his normal life until he is embroiled in a brutal killing. It will not be possible to assess Meursault's guilt or innocence in court based on what he did or did not do. He is accused of being an outsider and strange. Any man who doesn't cry during his mother's funeral could be put to death in our culture. Because he refuses to participate in the game, the book's hero is condemned. He won't tell a lie. He wanders on the periphery of life, alone and sensual, an alien to the civilization in which he lives. And because of this, some readers have been tempted to write him off. Meursault is not interested in making things easier. The moment he acknowledges who he is and doesn't try to disguise his emotions, society perceives a threat. Because Camus Meursault is a poor, naked man who is in love with a sun that casts no shadows, he is not a reject. *The Outsider* is the tale of a guy who, without any pretence of heroism, consents to sacrifice his life for the truth.

Key Words: distinctive, unaffected, periphery

All of Albert Camus's novels and plays are more or less direct dramatizations of his philosophical temperament. Even though we can find direct support for Camus's philosophy in his writings, this doesn't mean that all of the ideas in his writings can be found in his philosophy. Camus, like his talented countrymen Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel, is often misunderstood by people who have only read his books and think they know what he thinks about philosophy from that. This mistake of trying to figure out the whole from the parts has been the downfall of modern French philosophy, but any philosopher who wants to be a literary figure must take this risk. Camus and Sartre are both well-known for their novels, which is how most people know about them. And it seems this public's opinion is mainly based on what they've learned from reading a few plays and novels. So, when we look at Albert Camus' writings, we aim to find examples and support for his philosophical point of view. We shouldn't try to find hidden ideas in these works of literature that would change or shed new light on this philosophy. If there is a 'thesis' to be found in these works, it should be a reflection of his philosophical interests. What's left is the human drama and the sights and sounds of the world. Much has been said about Albert Camus from the point of view of literary criticism and appreciation. It is our job here to clarify the principles and concerns that make up the fixed structure of Camus's thought or philosophy. We have broken up this study of Albert Camus's philosophy into two parts: the early focus on the absurd and the later emphasis on revolt. All of his writings fit into the same category. In this earlier period, there are three works: the novel *The Outsider* and the plays *The Misunderstanding* and *Caligula*. We have literature of the absurd in these works. The focus of our study remains within the boundaries of *The Outsider* only. Meursault's mother has passed away. She had been living in an old people's home not too far from Alger, and Meursault goes there to go to the funeral. During these last years, he didn't see his mother very often. They lived separate lives and didn't have much to talk about. Meursault, tired and confused, sit through the wake and then does what is asked of him during the burial rites. After the funeral, he goes back to Alger right away. The next day, he goes swimming and runs into a little girl (Marie) he used to know. He takes her to a comedy movie and then brings her home with him for the night. The next day, Sunday was boring. When evening came, so did the end of the weekend. On Monday, everything would start up again. The mother's funeral was on Sunday, and work started on Monday. "Really, nothing had changed in my life" (28). Meursault continues to see Marie, his girlfriend. Also, he doesn't care that Raymond, who lives in the same apartment building and is known to be a panderer, wants to be his friend. Meursault agrees to write a note to Raymond so he can carry out a sick plan to get back at her for cheating on him. The project is carried out, the girl is beaten, and the police are involved. Raymond asks Meursault if he will tell the police that Raymond had a good reason to hit the girl. Meursault says 'no problem' and agrees to this as well. Meursault and Marie are asked to go to the beach by Masson. While they are there, they find out that the brother of Raymond's ex-girlfriend, who is an Arab, is waiting near the beach hut. He seems to want to get revenge for his sister. A fight breaks out. Later, Raymond returns to the same spot, but he has a gun with him this time. Raymond tries to start a new battle while Meursault goes with him and is given the weapon. But nothing goes wrong on the way back. Meursault doesn't want to return when it's hot and bright outside. He is pulled back to the big rock where the Arab was. A small spring flows out of the rock and into the sea. Still, the Arab is there. Meursault moves toward the excellent stone, numb from the heat and bright light. The Arab pulls out a knife. Meursault grips the revolver that is still in his pocket. The sun reflects off the Arab's knife. "A shaft of light shot up from

the steel, and it felt like a long, thin blade hit my forehead (59)" Meursault fires four more shots, like four sharp knocks on the door of sadness. Meursault is arrested and charged with murder. After a year in jail, the trial begins. During the trial, the prosecutor called Meursault a hardened, heartless criminal. He said that Meursault had sent his mother to a public home, rarely visited her, didn't cry or want to see her body at the wake or funeral, smoked and drank coffee during the path, and didn't stay at his mother's grave after the burial. Also, the day after his mother died, Meursault went swimming, saw a funny movie, and began a secret relationship. And the fact that Meursault was friends with criminals like Raymond showed that he was a bad guy. Meursault was at the centre of the whole thing. He was the one who wrote the letter, testified for Raymond, and carried the gun to where he knew the Arab's body was. How did Meursault defend himself? He "tried to explain that it was because of the sun" (99), but he couldn't say what he wanted to, and he heard "people tittering" (99) in the courtroom. Meursault was found guilty and sentenced to be beheaded "in the name of the French people" (103). This is the story of the 'stranger,' but there's much more to it. This list of the different things that led to Meursault's death sentence. These innocent and careless things that Meursault did have all of a sudden been put together, interpreted by a prosecutor, and confirmed by a jury. Meursault is now seen as a 'monster' whose death had been ordered by society. He has learned that familiar paths walked at dusk in the summer can lead to prison and peaceful nights of sleep. The rest of the story is about how Meursault adjusts to his fate of dying and how he eventually rebels against it. The most important thing for us to figure out about *The Outsider* is whether or not Meursault is a hero of the absurd, as we have come to understand that term from *The Myth of Sisyphus*. If he is, then *The Outsider* is a complete and dramatic example of the themes and effects of the absurd. It shows those 'absurd types' that were only hinted at in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Jean-Paul Sartre says in "Explication de *L'Étranger*," which is a critique of both *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* that Camus's novel tries to show how the absurd feel, while *The Myth of Sisyphus* tries to show what the stupid is. Sartre loves not only how original the work is but also how well it was made: ... bit by bit the work organizes itself under the eyes of the reader, it reveals the solid sub-structure which supports it. There is not one useless detail, not one which is not taken up by what follows and thrown into the discussion, and the book closed, we understand that it could not have begun otherwise, that it could not have had another ending. In this world which is presented to us as absurd and whose causality has been carefully weeded out, the smallest incident has weight: there is not one which does not help to lead the hero toward the crime and toward the capital penalty. The Outsider is a classic work, a work of order, written about the absurd and against the absurd. (Sartre 110-111) This is a very high compliment and Sartre's idea that the novel is a direct literary expression of the philosophical ideas of the Absurd backs it up. But even though Sartre thinks Camus' intellectual and literary works are two sides of the same coin, he is bothered by the fact that Meursault doesn't rebel until the book's last pages and is only an absurd hero for a short time (Sartre 109-110). This lack of coordination, which Sartre sees, can't be explained by the fact that Camus missed his mark. Instead, it can be explained by the fact that Camus did not write *The Outsider* with this mark in mind. *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* were both published in 1942, the same year as each other. Sartre thought that *The Myth of Sisyphus* explained and justified *The Outsider*. But this does Albert Camus a little bit of a disservice. *The Outsider* was finished in 1939, a year before *The Myth of Sisyphus*. However, if we look closely at *The Outsider*, we can see that there is a much more significant gap between these two works. This is because *The Outsider* fully reflects a state of mind that was still exploring the ideas beginning to grow in his early essays, *Noces*. So, if we want to understand this first book of Camus in terms of his philosophy, we can't do what Sartre does and try to fit it into a framework that wasn't clear at the time. There's no doubt that the Absurd themes are present here, like absurdity, rebellion, finding freedom, and the way death changes things. However, if you look closely, you'll see that these themes are presented in a way that doesn't fit the ideal pattern that *The Myth of Sisyphus* suggests. Camus's "absurd line of reasoning" has led us to discover that "everything starts with the conscience and ends with it" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 27). The problem and threat of the absurd don't show up until we realize it, until the 'awakening.' This is what Sartre and other people who have studied *The Outsider* have missed. Even though Camus changed his mind later, Meursault is a paradox because he has complete apathy for the absurd hero from the start. Still, he also doesn't have the ridiculous hero's awareness of the absurdity of his life and the desire to rebel against it. This last stage does show up, but not until the very end. Now that we have a better idea of what *The Outsider* is about, we can see it in its own right. Meursault is a stranger to the world from the first second to the last. This is because he doesn't care about anything. Even though his mother had died, not much had changed in his life. When Marie asks Meursault if he loves her, he says, "That kind of question really didn't mean anything" (38). She asks him to marry her again, and he says, "It didn't really matter, but if it would make her happy, we could get married right away" (38). His boss offers him an appealing job in Paris, but Meursault doesn't care either. He doesn't care that Raymond asks him to write the letter, and he later agrees to be his witness in court. Even after the murder, people still act this way. He doesn't want an attorney and doesn't seem worried before the trial. And finally, after being found guilty, Meursault admits to himself that he didn't care much about what the prosecutor had told him: Of course, I had to own that he was right; I didn't feel much regret for what I'd done. Still, to my mind he overdid it, and I'd have like to have a chance of explaining to him in a quite friendly, almost affectionate way, that I have never been able really to regret anything in all my life. I've always been far too much absorbed in the present moment or the immediate future, to think back. (126-127) These things, including this last promise, happen before Meursault's 'awakening.' Meursault acts as if he were in an absurd world, but he has no idea that he is in a fantasy world or what that means. From the privileged position of seeing the story through Meursault's eyes, we move from one moment to the next with him, constantly feeling like something is off but also understanding and caring about his decisions and actions. Also, Meursault's behaviour doesn't bother anyone else, not Marie, Emanuel, Celeste, Raymond, Masson, and Salamano. Within this drifting, monotonous rhythm of work, love, sun, and sea, they live together with ease and understanding. In this situation, Meursault is no stranger than Marie or Salamano. On this level of his normal, boring life, Meursault is just like any other man. From this point on, society could have judged and condemned any man, not just Meursault. But what has happened is that Meursault's life has led him to do something that forced him to make a decision. Because of his crime, Meursault's life must be judged clearly and honestly. His life must be considered based on an absolute moral standard, and a clear judgment must be made. When this new part, the need to make an ethical decision, comes into the story, it changes the flow of the story quickly.

From now on, the world we liked, whether it was Meursault's, Marie's, or anyone else's, is set against the world of the legalists and ethical absolutists. Meursault stays the way he is because he is caught in the web of the solute judgment. Until now, Meursault hasn't been considered strange, but now he is. His lawyer is shocked and annoyed by how calm his client is after he is arrested. The examining magistrate thinks Meursault is a 'case-hardened' criminal because he is honest about his feelings. During the trial, the prosecutor seems to mean it when they say that the accused person is a heartless monster. And as Meursault listens to the prosecutor and looks at the faces of the people in the courtroom, he realizes that he is a 'stranger' in this world of absolute moral standards: His tone and the look of triumph on his [the prosecutor's] fact, as he glanced at me, were so marked that I felt as I hadn't felt for ages. I had a foolish desire to burst into tears. For the first time I'd realized how all these people loathed me.... One stepping into the box he [the doorkeeper at the old people's home] threw a glance at me, then looked away. Replying to questions, he said that I'd declined to see Mother's body, I'd smoked cigarettes and slept, and *drunk café au lait*. It was then I felt a sort of wave of indignation spreading through the courtroom, and for the first time I understood that I was guilty. (*The Outsider* 112)

The pieces of Meursault's life that made sense on their own were put together under a moral judgment, and Meursault realizes that a life like that under a moral judgment means guilt. He didn't think of himself as a criminal, even though he knew that was what he was. Still, "it was an idea I could never get used to," he said (*The Outsider* 87). To sum up, what we've learned so far, we can say that *The Outsider's* hero is not an example of or an explanation for the ideas that Albert Camus later wrote about in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Meursault lives with the indifference of an absurd hero, but he doesn't have the awareness and anger of a fantastic hero. This shows that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is not yet philosophically precise. People who have tried to find a direct link between the novel and the philosophical essays that came after it have only managed to mess up the proper structure of this novel, which deals with the absurd in a way that is separate from the essays. Reviewing Meursault's indifference and the moral absolutism that forces him to give up, we can see that the absurdity we are shown is not that of a man facing a senseless and broken nature that is foreign to him as a person. Instead, the absurdity is in society's attempt to apply absolute moral standards to the uncertain and uncharted course of human life. It is not a strange universe that has put fixed moral values into something like human life, which doesn't have any limited moral values. *The Myth of Sisyphus* has shown the split between man, who wants unity, and the world, which is falling apart, both from a philosophical and a personal point of view. *The Outsider* has shown the difference between trying to live honestly in line with the uncertainty of human life and explaining that uncertainty in general moral terms that are always right. The themes in *The Outsider* are more like those in *Noces* than in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The Arab being killed by Meursault is the main event of this short story. This action is what starts the whole system of moral legalism and creates the strange difference between what we know Meursault to be and what the court says he is. Understand that the trial is not about whether or not Meursault killed the Arab. There is no doubt about that. During the trial, the question will be whether Meursault's life shows that he is a 'case-hardened' criminal. Camus has made it so that Meursault's life shows that he is guilty, which is the perfect absurd situation. It's not the murder that shows he is guilty; it's his whole life. This means that if absolute moral standards are used to judge life, that life is guilty and terrible. We still need to understand clearly that Meursault, even though he killed someone, still has the innocence that has been a part of him from the beginning. In other words, the murder was in line with everything else that Meursault did. Why did Meursault shoot this man he didn't know? The answer is "because of the sun (99)," but there is no way to explain this in a court case where all actions are described as being done on purpose. We are sure that Meursault's eyes are susceptible to bright light. This is something we were told at least fourteen times before the murder. Also, Meursault's own feelings during the beach trip add to this. He had had too much wine at lunch and was a little tipsy. This way of thinking is shown clearly when Meursault and Raymond meet an Arab a few minutes before the final meeting when Meursault is alone with an Arab: The sun glinted on Raymond's revolver as he handed it to me. But nobody made a move yet, it was just as if everything had closed in on us so that we couldn't stir. We could only watch each other, never lowering our eyes; the whole world seemed to come to a standstill on this little strip of sand between the sunlight and the sea, the twofold silence of the reed and stream. And just then it crossed my mind that one might fire, or not fire-and it would come to absolutely the same thing. (72)

Meursault is more aware than ever at this moment of how meaningless and uncertain human life is and how he has nothing in common with this other man. When Meursault comes back to the hut with Raymond, he doesn't want to go inside. Instead, he goes back to the beach to walk in the hot, bright Algerian sun. From this point on, all we can see is the agonizing play of heat and light in Meursault's confused mind and his uncontrollable need to return to that one excellent spot on the beach: the big rock where the spring trickles out. The Arab was still there, but he was "dark and blurry from shaking in the heart" (74). The heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks; beads of sweat were gathering in my eyebrows. It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother's funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations- especially in my forehead, where all the veins seemed to be bursting through the skin. I couldn't stand it any longer and took another step forward. I knew it was a fool thing to do; I wouldn't get out of the sun by moving a yard or so. But I took that step, just one step, forward. And then the Arab drew his knife and held it up toward me, athwart the sunlight.... I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly, of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging my eyeballs. Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so, with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began. (75-76) Yes, it all starts with this sound: the unstoppable movement of morality's machinery, which turns a life that is innocent and silly into a guilty and wrong life. This happens not because of bad intentions, criminal tendencies, or hatred of Arabs but because of the sun, which is hard to believe. Yes, and everyone in the courtroom laughed. Meursault is still the same in prison, where he is waiting for the end and has only a tiny chance of being tried again. His only regret is that he no longer has freedom, but he knows that anyone can get used to anything in the long run. This is the same careless Meursault who went to his mother's funeral a few months ago. He still lives and thinks in the present moment, but now he is also thinking about the fact

that he will die. There is no way out, and it doesn't help to say that he'll be in the same situation in thirty years because those thirty years are precious and can't be replaced. Meursault is trying to make his thoughts fit with his fate. By doing this, he is preparing himself to wake up and rebel. The prison chaplain starts his revolt in Meursault. After the prisoner turns down his visits, he shows up at Meursault's cell out of the blue, wanting to talk to him. Meursault says he didn't call the chaplain because he didn't believe in God. The chaplain asks him if he is "really so sure" about what he said. The chaplain talks incessantly. Meursault ignores the priest and waits for him to leave. The priest talks about how Meursault's guilt weighs on his heart. At this point, the prisoner starts to get a little bit curious. He says it wasn't God who condemned him and said he was a sinner, but rather people who found him guilty of a crime. And this was what mattered. The chaplain starts to bother Meursault, but the chaplain is upset. He can't believe Meursault doesn't want to live on after death. Meursault shouts that the only kind of afterlife he would want is one in which he could remember his life on earth. He tells the chaplain to go, but the man keeps talking. He calls him "my son" (114) and tells Meursault, "I'm on your side" (115), but Meursault is too hard-hearted to see this. Meursault's anger reaches its peak, and "something seems to break" (115) inside of him. The 'stranger' finally wakes up and says everything that has been going through his mind. Meursault has finally told the truth about his lack of care and why he doesn't change his mind even when he's dying. This is because death is at the root of this lack of respect. This "dark win" in the future of all lives gives us absolute freedom. This freedom doesn't mean we can do whatever we want, but it does mean that what we do doesn't matter in the end, whether it's good or bad. Meursault has shown that he doesn't believe in the illusion of moral absolutes. He has also reaffirmed his love for the present moments of life that can't be replaced, and he has become aware of how much freedom death gives to the living. The priest has left, and Meursault is calm but tired. He sleeps. "Stars were shining down on my face when he wakes up. He could hear faint sounds from the country, and the cool night air, which smelled of earth and salt, blew on his cheeks. The tremendous peace of the summer night when I couldn't sleep washed over me like a tide (153)." Meursault is at peace now. He thinks about his mother and realizes why she took a fiancé in her old age and tried to start over at home for older people. "With death so close, mother must have felt like she was about to be set free and ready to start over" (154). And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if the great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly, made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still. For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration. (154) Meursault had found peace with the world and unity with his fellow people through the 'dark wind' of death.

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