



Understanding Albert Camus' the Outsider through Derrida's Deconstruction Theory

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Abstract: Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, proposes the Deconstruction Theory that deals with the relationship between text and meaning. The approach vouches for the complexity, instability and impossibility of the meaning of any text. The meaning making of any sort of coded message is an incessant phenomenon that never gets its meaning fulfilled and terminated. Rather, every time the text is given a careful and deep perusal, it deconstructs. This article is a conscientious attempt to bring to front the fact that Albert Camus' *The Outsider* possesses innumerable coils of meanings which are justifiable through Derrida's Deconstruction Theory. The novel sheds light on the prevailing conflict between a radical individual and the age old tradition. This gives birth to numerous questions as to what the author of the novel intends to convey and what the readers are provoked to come in touch with. These issues are carefully investigated and considered in this article with a view to reaching the multifaceted meanings of *The Outsider*.

Keywords: Understanding, *The Outsider*, Derrida, Deconstruction, Meursault

1. INTRODUCTION

"Mother died today, or may be yesterday, I don't know" (Camus, 9). Thus begins Albert Camus' novel, *The Outsider*. The narrator as well as the protagonist of the novel is Meursault who lets the readers know that his mother has died. But he is not sure about the time. He says, "I had a telegram from the home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday." (Camus, 9). What Meursault says triggers a sort of uncertainty and confusion among the readers. They get a tingling sensation of encountering something strange and unusual in the narrative ahead. From the readers' sense of loss or death of one's near and dear ones, it's very expected that Meursault will be sad because of his mother's death. But, he turns to be more of an observer of people's reactions towards him than of someone emotionally exposed. He asks for two days leave from his boss saying "It's not my fault." (Camus, 9) and scrutinizes how his boss responds. He sets for the old people's home where his mother used to be and died subsequently. He catches the bus and obviously gets more concerned with heat, jolting, smell of petrol and the glare of the sky reflecting off the road (Camus, 10) and then falls asleep. Meursault's temperament and activities on his mother's death do not necessarily provide one single and static understanding to the readers. Rather, readers can have the urges of multifaceted explanations of the ways the protagonist behaves. This is where Derrida's deconstructive criticism comes handy to understand the narrative of *The Outsider* in its multiple layers of meanings. In fact, the novel corresponds to Das's (2012) statement regarding the fact that Derrida advocates for the signs, symbols and concepts in the text and its no fixed meaning.

2. DECONSTRUCTION THEORY

According to Derrida, language is not the only reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without our being aware of them (Tyson, 2006). Deconstruction thus offers us a radical vision of the activity of thinking. Tyson (2006) also emphasizes that our psychological structure is constructed with not of concepts, neither of palpable and perpetual meanings; rather it is obviously made of moving, transforming and incessantly changing play of signifiers which, in the first place, on first sight, when we listen to them or read them may look and sound permanent, but as a matter of fact they never act

perpetually on our mind. Das (2012) simplifies Deconstruction as saying that no work of literature whatsoever has been able to express exactly what it wanted to say and thus the critique's business is to deconstruct and recreate them, taking their word as not the root form of their meaning but only the trace of request. Deconstruction suggests that a text never reaches a final meaning; rather it signifies a vast field of possibilities (Rahman, 2015). It is also stated that Derrida takes into consideration Saussure's theory of difference as the basis for meaning and posits that meaning surely is the outcome of difference which in fact ultimately renders meaning impossible (Rahman, 2015).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hefferman (2014) articulates that Meursault, the protagonist of *The Outsider*, rejects the truth of the established religion, expects an unchained and untested life, emphasizes the absurdity of the prevailing life, seemingly rebels against the rules of the world, kills a man, gets brought under trial, receives death sentences after having lived an irrational life in an irrational universe, declares to die happily and thus emerges to be a worth respecting existentialist hero. Mackrell (2012) too comes up with the proposition that Albert Camus' *The Outsider* can be evaluated in existential point of view. Meursault demonstrates the characteristic behavior to authenticate his existence (Rainville, 2014). Considered differently, the novel can be interpreted in some other manners too which has been highlighted by Hefferman (2014) who brings to light that Meursault is found to be displaying misogynistic attitude towards women, showing hatred and disliking to native people and committing homicide to an Arab, which place him to be accused of perpetrating crimes relating to sexism, racism and colonialism. Albert Camus' *The Outsider* contains the issues of the absurd, chance, death, truth in nature, desire to revolt and the unintelligibility of reality (Payne, 1992). Hooti and Torkamaneh (2012) opine that the novel has always been considered an epitome of literary piece that possesses multitudinous hidden and exposed meanings and implications. Focusing on *The Outsider's* being a spokesperson of absurdity, Payne (1992) proclaims that Camus' publishing the novel preceded the publication of *The Myth of Sisyphus* with a view to rendering the theme of the absurd to the readers in advance of the philosophy he wanted to portray in the myth. In fact, in regard to this novel, Albert Camus in the disguise of Meursault has been interpreted in many different ways which in turn have placed the critics in disparate groups. Critics have been of divided concerns in relation to their judgment about Meursault. Some have found him to be a gloomy soulless beast while some have pleaded him to be an embodiment of honesty (Hooti and Torkamaneh, 2012). Moreover, Gnanasekaran (2014) has shed light on the psychological ailment of the protagonist. He concludes that psychologically Meursault is ailed with apprehensions, worries and disorientations; he is thereby lackadaisical in regard to emotional intelligence. He is what he is. He is what he feels. He remains in the things and issues he likes. He says 'no' to the things he does not like. If he feels like sleeping when the dead body of his mother is in front of him, he sleeps. He does not know how to create a false but good impression to the people around (Gnanasekaram, 2014).

4. DECONSTRUCTION OF THE OUTSIDER

Meursault's mother dies. He receives the news of his mother's death. He does not feel sad. He does not mourn. He does not cry. He does not show any sign of being in any sort of sorrow. Rather, he is found to be acting only normally. This can be understood in a lot of ways. Meursault may not be able to cry in certain circumstances. He being very practical may possess the thought that crying won't make any difference. He may think that crying at his mother's dead body will never bring her back to life. As Albert Camus speaks for Absurdity of which *The Outsider* is the emissary, Meursault being the protagonist of the novel may very logically believe in the absurdity of human life. He may bear the conviction that his mother being alive or dead does not change the irrationality of the universe. He may feel composed in the thought that his mother has been lucky getting rid of this false universe. He may feel soothing that his mother has gone back to the ideal world.

On Meursault's assisting his friend to inflict physical pain to the latter's girlfriend, multiple questions arise. Why does he help punish the girlfriend of his friend? Does he do this because he is anti-feminist? Is he a misogynist? Does the girl belong to any lower community for which Meursault wants her to be tortured? Is he a sadist? Does he have his own personal vengeance against women folk? Does he do this as a rebellion against the Creator? Does he do this because he believes that torturing the girl or not torturing her does not make any difference as life in its normal shape is itself the most unbearable torture like the one Sisyphus has been destined to suffer? This way, this sort of list of possible queries regarding even one particular happening in the novel may go on and on.

The incident of Meursault shooting the Arab raises quite a number of questions too. What factor can possibly provoke him to shoot a probably innocent man? Does he kill him because the latter belongs to the Orient? Does he fire at the Arab because there remains a long racial antagonism? Does he do this because there prevails a perennial class struggle? Is he instigated to be turned into a killer because he feels alienated from others? Is there any colonial influence which is why Meursault shoots the Arab? Is he provoked by the Sun? Does he suffer any existential crisis? Does he do this because he is angry for life is irrational, the universe is irrational and everybody including himself is irrational? In this manner, questions can be aggregating on the basis of Deconstruction theory which offers that there remains no single and fixed significance of any text.

5. WHAT THE SUN POSSIBLY MEANS

The sun appears to be a recurring agent of chaos to Meursault in *The Outsider*. Almost everywhere in the novel, the protagonist is disturbed and provoked by the Sun, which results in making the former loose temper and do some objectionable offences. Quite from the beginning of the narrative, Meursault starts complaining about the Sun being a disturbing element in his everyday movement. Referring to the Sun, he says, "It was very hot" (Camus, 17). Again he objects, "The sun had risen a little higher in the sky; it was beginning to warm my feet up (Camus, 17)." Many of Meursault's emotional responses are hindered because of the Sun as it is obvious in his narration. When he gets the news of his mother's death and sets for the old house where his mother used to be, he does not have any unperturbed time when he can have some thinking. He complains, "I was not thinking about anything because the sun beating down on my bare head was making me feel sleepy (Camus, 54)." Before he shoots the Arab, he has his thought encompassed by the scorching heat of the Sun which he does not want to shed heat on him. He objects, "I could feel the sun peeling away the last few layers of water which tickled down into my mouth (Camus, 52)." Just before he puts his hand in his pocket and brings out the gun to shoot the Arab on the spur of the moment of being unbearably instigated by the Sun, he reiterates, "The sun was shining almost vertically onto the sea and the glare from the sea was unbearable (Camus, 54)." As a matter of fact, the reference to the Sun and its inciting impacts on the protagonist has been extravagant in the narrative. However, to present a convincing argument about the issues responsible for making Meursault turn into a murderer, it is necessary to come up with majority of the references. He utters again,

I could feel my forehead swelling up under the sun. The heat was pushing full against me as I tried to walk. And every time I felt the blast of its hot breath on my face, I set my teeth, closed my fists in my trouser pockets and tensed my whole body in defiance of the sun and of the drunken haze it was pouring into me. With every blade of light that leapt up off the sand, from a white shell or a piece of broken glass, my jaws tightened (Camus, 58).

In fact, this is when he commits the hated homicide. About the Sun being on the normal way of the protagonist and his harsh response, Albert Camus comes up with some explanations. He says that Meursault is a man of truth. He does not hide his feelings. He expresses how he feels, not to hurt anybody but to call a spade a spade. In Camus' language, "He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings (Camus, 119)." Why is Meursault so allergic to the Sun is also answered by the novelist, who argues that the former wants unblemished things in life. Camus (119) exposes, "He is in love with a sun which leaves no shadows." But, a sun that leaves shadows and which is why it is disliked gets on the nerves of Meursault although his day time. His tone sounds very upset and helpless when he complains about this annoying sun under which he gets burnt and from whose circumference he cannot come out. On this, the readers of the novel may have myriad number of queries. Why does Meursault dislike a natural phenomenon? Why should he think that life is only an unmixed blessing? If not absurd, why does nature have to put people into something that they don't like? Is it a revolt that Meursault shows to the universe by abhorring the natural phenomena? Such questions are only logical to be asked.

6. READERS' QUESTIONS TO CAMUS

In the 'afterword' of *The Outsider*, Albert Camus explains the 'extremely paradoxical sentence' (Camus 118), "In our society any man who does not cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death (Camus 118)." He clarifies, "I simply mean that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game (Camus, 118)." What is the game? Camus (118) elucidates, "The answer is simple: he refuses to lie." For the honest readers, this is very soothing as

well as comforting that Meursault does not lie. He does not pretend to be what he is not. The readers feel an affinity of truth with the protagonist. But questions lurk in their minds. If Meursault is man of uncontaminated sense and if he is righteous, why does he not show respect to the feelings of the fellow humans? When Marry asks if he loves her or if he wants to marry her, why doesn't he say 'yes' if he really loves her? No matter how he thinks about life, death, the universe, absurdity or anything, why doesn't he show compassion to the feelings of the person whom he makes love to? To a man with conscience and consciousness, nothing can justify killing a human. The sun shines on him, he feels hot and irritated. He gets rebellious to the total system of the universe, brings out a gun from his pocket and shoots a man four times. What sort of a righteous person can do that? "Meursault does not want to make life simpler. He says what he is" (Camus 118). But the authentic readers are not supposed to be supporting the idea of making life more complex. Just because some people think life to be already complex does not necessarily mean that it has to be made more convoluted and more unbearable. "*The Outsider* is the story of a man who, without any heroic pretensions agrees to die for the truth" (Camus 119). According to Camus, the truth is that human life is completely irrational and it is already inflicted with infinite pain. Nevertheless, the idea of putting people into more severe pain does not seem to be supportable by anyone with some amount of sense. If human life is created basically for suffering, Meursault has every reason to help people forget this sadness to any extent. But, he is found to do otherwise. He, rather, exacerbates the sufferings of himself and other people. If one ventures for coming in touch with the possible explanations of all these riddles, he may not be able to get hold of any static one. There remains an unending coil that presents numerous annotations of the meaning and significance of the novel.

7. DISCUSSION

Like Derrida intends (Das, 2012), *The Outsider* hinges upon versatile intentions every time it is pondered over. Contemplating on the biography of Albert Camus, Genovese (2010) gives a detailed illustration of what pathetic phenomena happened in Camus' life. His father was killed in World War I. He himself was a patient of consumption that compelled him to leave his career of a footballer. He was forced to have his study on a part-time basis. Camus joined the Communists and Marxists in 1935 and felt alienated from the prevalent ethical conflict that disappointed him largely (Genovese, 2010). Meursault's ethical senses are questioned and tried for they do not go in line with the standards of the society. He refuses to act in accordance with the wish of the society and thereby uplifts his authentic self (Rainville, 2004). Sometimes, the novel is illustrated in the absurdist point of view. Camus' *The Outsider* brings into limelight the legendary idea of the hero myth/archetype through Meausault's tour and the exploration of the absurd (Montes, 2013). Additionally, it is reached that Meursault's journey takes after that of Odysseus, who ventures to execute the voyage to find his way home. In the same manner, Meursault is unconsciously groping for a niche in the vast world where he really feels at home (Montes, 2013).

8. CONCLUSION

Critics have always been coming up with newer and unique interpretations of Camus' *The Outsider*. In fact, meanings never cease to emerge from the novel. As Jaques Derrida (year) states that there is no end to meaning, it happens in a comprehensive manner in case of the activities performed by Meursault, the protagonist of *The Outsider*. Every newer as well as deeper reading of the novel gives birth to unprecedented ideas. Different readers reach different conclusions regarding the motto of the novelist. Even when the novel is being interpreted in a certain viewpoint, it is getting deconstructed into something novel and innovative. As a matter of fact, Derrida's theory can be applied to any text for the purpose of having myriad sorts of explanations. In this case, Camus' *The Outsider* is being considered in the light of the deconstructive criticism, which renders the novel a fresh way of seeing into it.

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Citation: Md. Mozaffor Hossain "Understanding Albert Camus' the Outsider through Derrida's Deconstruction Theory" *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 5, no. 12, 2017, pp. 44-48. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0512004>.

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