Negotiating identity in Albert Camus’s *The Outsider*

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**Abstract:**

Identity refers to the condition of being oneself or itself. It is the way of recognizing a person. Very often a person’s identity is seen to be understood by relating him or her to a certain structure. The same person can have multiple identifications depending upon to which structure he belongs. But the problem of identity occurs when a person does not fit into any pre-established category. This is the very case of Meursault in Albert Camus’s *The Outsider*. He is already designated as a ‘stranger’/ ‘outsider’, and the novella also contributes to the same. My attempt in this paper will be to analyze where he fits and to negotiate how he fits there. His detachment and self-preferred alienation and his stubborn individuality join hands in molding and shaping his identity. The novella reveals how Meursault chooses to appear in the novella and before the readers by drawing strict boundaries around his personality.

Keywords: identity, negotiation, alienation, individuality, detachment.

**1- Introduction**

Oxford dictionary defines ‘identity’ as ‘who or what somebody is’. It is the condition of being oneself or itself. However, very often this ‘who’ or ‘what’ come to associate an individual with some certain situations to make better understanding of his or her identity. Hereby, it becomes understandable that identity gets clarified better while taking in relation to some social constructions. The reason behind establishing an identity is certainly to give a way to look into. So, it would not be wrong to suggest that to identify is to label- either by a name, a designation or a relation. Human is a social animal and hence, its identity is very much influenced by his/her social standing. As Kermit Lansner puts it “…there is no essential core of humanism apart from man’s relation to his natural and social background, and peculiarly human value separate from the web off values which developed in this interaction”(563, Lanser).The same person can be a son/daughter, father/mother, a friend and so on and so forth. The term doesn’t contain a fixed designation. Its meaning becomes ambiguous since the focal point shifts constantly. When one is asked ‘who are you?’ one cannot sum up the answer in one sentence since different people understand us from different social perspectives. My workplace’s identity will not explain me in my family and vice-versa. Therefore, the understanding of someone’s identity is highly depended on the social construction a person hails from.

Meursault, the protagonist of the 1942 novel by Albert Camus *The Outsider* does have an ambiguous kind of identity. His personal behavior comes in direct conflict with his social identity. His action and behavior create
confusing and he does not look like what he is supposed to appear. His passive struggle of asserting his identity is what is being looked at in this paper.

II- Methodology

This study is purely based on library work. The raw materials for this study are collected from the key text and the additional support materials are collected from some other literary works. The study seeks to negotiate the identity of the central character of the novella by considering different aspects of his character.

III- Literature Review

Some important sources that are considered while pursuing the study are:

Harry Slochower’s “Camus’s The Stranger: The Silent Society and the Ecstasy of Rage” deals with how society is responsible for individual crisis. He points out that society does not respond to the individual needs, therefore, the individual should not listen to the society either. Yoshinobu Hakulani’s “Richard Wright’s The Outsider and Albert Camus’s The Stranger” deals with how these two books have some similarities. It focuses on the different aspects of the characters and presents how they undergo similar kind of sufferings throughout. Eamon Maher in Camus’s Meursault: the only Christ that Modern Civilization deserves? Shows how Meursault is perfect for the hypocrite society. He is the only person who this society deserves because he does not care about the society at all.

IV- Analysis

To begin with the title of the novella must be considered i.e. ‘The Outsider’ or ‘The Stranger’. Camus has already entitled Meursault as an ‘outsider’ which makes the reader already biased even before entering into the plot of the novel. Meursault’s portrayal as an ‘outsider’ is due to the fact that he does not show any socially acceptable traits. He is calm at the time of his mother’s demise, he does not show any emotional attachment with the woman he laid with and even his murder of the Arab has no specific reasons on his part. The extreme is seen when he even doesn’t know when his mother passed away “Mother died today or maybe yesterday. I don’t know” (1, Camus). He does neither cry nor does he want to see his mother’s face. He sleeps on that very day and pursues an intimate relation with a woman the next day. All these attitudes he displays make him essentially an alien, an outsider to our society. Camus himself claims that “…he does not play the game and in this sense he is an outsider” (118, Camus). It is just because he does not get involved in the common disposition of emotion, he becomes an outsider. Now, the question arises to where does he actually belong? How he is to be identified?

Meursault is a man with very strict and clear individuality. He observes everything but takes part only in those which he finds to be needed. He does not compromise in any situation. In the game of individual versus society, he prefers to remain constant even though it may result in his alienation. The society wins in his condemnation but does not win actually because it fails in forcing him to be a part of it. Emotions and sentiments are something Meursault is found hardly contributing to. When it comes to emotions, indifference is his key. Moreover,
he observes everything on physical terms; in fact, all of his actions are driven by his physical demands. His sleep on the day of his arrival, his having intercourse with Marie and his killing of the Arab are hence inferred.

His attitude towards his mother’s death is interesting. He understands the discontinuity of sentiments and he says “to a certain extent all normal people sometimes wished their loved ones were dead” (65, Camus). He is ready to speak out his mind no matter how he looked. When the priest tried to pursue him to express himself in a more relatable way to all, he refuses and sticks to his own attitude. “He thought for a moment, and then he asked me if he could say that I’d controlled my natural feelings that day. I said no, because it is not true” (65, Camus). He would never let him sink to the codes of the society rather he would prefer to be imprisoned.

Since Meursault acts his own way, he becomes a person who can be defined by his actions. As Sartre says “man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing but what his life is” (7, Sartre). Meursault does not want to make out anything from his life. He is there simply to live and he will do what he needs to be alive and has nothing particularly to offer to be a part of the common. He believes in the basic human instincts and hence his relationship with Marie on the very next day of his mother’s funeral does not need to be justified. His attitude is “I am a sexual being, able to have relations with a being of the other sex…” (9 Sartre). Similarly, when he kills the Arab, he has no specific reasons, no hatred no drive. It is because of the sharp heat that made him to do so.

Moreover, he understands the inevitability of death and its unpredictability and hence, it does not affect him. He can easily accept the idea that his mother is dead and with the same attitude he accepts his upcoming fate also. Sooner or later does not affect him much. Neither does he believe in God or afterlife. He merely believes in his existence and lives by his own understanding. He is in complete possession of himself and is responsible for making his life that way. Meursault has his own understanding of life which appears peculiar to the reader. But he believes that it is he who will choose what to do and how to respond, it is his sole responsibility to make sense of his life. In the words of Sartre, “life is nothing until it is lived, but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose” (10, Sartre). No doubt that he believes in the discontinuity of sentiments but the reason of this discontinuity should not be an outer force. The change he is talking about should be natural and not imposed. For him, what is happening at present has its own merits therefore, he says, “…one would not change one’s life, that everything has some merit and that mine here does not displease me at all”(44, Camus).

Truthfulness is another interesting aspect associated with the character of Meursault. He never lies, he never makes any effort on lying because being true requires no effort but “to lie is to say more than is true and as far the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels”(370, Hakulani). Meursault remains truthful throughout and is ready to face the consequences. He is not pretentious at all and he says what he naturally feels even if it comes in direct conflict with the common. He is strong and determined; determined for himself. He is sure about his life depending upon how he acted “Actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, for surer than he, sure of my present life and of the death that was coming” (70, Camus) because it was he who decided his life. As
Maximiliar Beck puts it “Man stands by himself and for himself. Human existence has no meaning but man himself must give meaning to it. He has to create himself according to his own design” (128, Beck).

Very often Meursault appears before us as an egotist. Nothing can change him or influence him. He doesn’t pass any moral judgment neither on himself nor on others. He does what he wants and he does not try to justify his actions, he simply narrates them. He is no coward and he takes full responsibility of writing his own fate. His ego to remain truthful does not get colored by people’s judgment.

All the traits of Meursault showcase him as a detached individual. He is detached from the social conventions, the religious values, the social codes and any form of moral judgment. He is detached in the sense that he is too much attached to his individuality that he becomes really different from the society. He does not let go off his personality for the society, even though he is constantly under pursuance during the trial period, he remains unmoved. He prefers to remain an alien than to lose his individual identity for the sake of society. His voice can be heard against religious illusions and social hypocrisy. He does not fake to get accepted and he does not pretend to believe in what he does not. He loved his mother but this love did not blur his understanding of the inevitable death. His decisions alienated him from the common society but it was not his fault. What he did was only refusing to compromise because he understood that to be a part, he needs to let go of his individuality. He came to know that to be accepted, he had to lie, and therefore he preferred to remain the way he naturally is. His detachment and alienation are the results of his simply being himself.

Meursault is a person who easily gets used to everything because he is content with himself. While in prison, he understands that to punish is to deprive one of his freedom and thus he accepts it. He knew that his death is approaching but his only concern at that time was how to pass the time. But soon he finds a way for that too. For him a man does not need much to live. Memories will help him through “I realized that a man who’d only lived for a day could easily live for a hundred years in a prison” (77, Camus). Marie is also a part of that memory and his relationship with Marie has no special purpose but to satisfy his physical need. However, he does not refuse to marry her, it is just such that since life is only to live by the individual by himself, there is very little need for intense love.

After discussing the traits of Meursault, it is time to answer the question that was asked in the beginning. From the discussion done so far, it becomes quite clear that Meursault’s identity is empowered by his individuality. All the traits he shows are not dislocating him from the society but are placing him even strongly. After reading the novel, it can be understood that Meursault’s identity can be evaluated from two dimensions: one from the individualistic side and the other from the societal perspective. Developing an individualistic attitude makes it easily comprehensive why Meursault is a man with such a stubborn personality. It is here we come to know that the real Meursault is the one who is highly individualistic, truthful and determined not the one who appears from the social perspective. Since we are told beforehand that he is a stranger, our judgment is automatically prejudiced. Because humans are already fed with the idea of what is right and normal, they tend to judge others immediately. Therefore, one, who does not display the accepted traits automatically falls prey to the societal judgments. The society looks for common and the uncommon and unique is very rare. The uniqueness of Meursault is not something to be celebrated.
or encouraged but something to be veiled and disguised under pretentiousness. But in the absence of any authority he is just an individual, very common and very natural. The condemnation of Meursault is due to his individuality which is unidentifiable by any one from the society. In the story, it appears quite clear that his trial is more for his refusal to cry at his mother’s funeral rather than his killing of the Arab. His personality makes him vulnerable to the social rules.

However, it is also interesting to note that his role becomes a threat to the society. His truthfulness, individuality is somewhat intimidating to the group of which he is not a part. As Camus himself said “In our society any man who doesn’t cry at his mother’s funeral is liable to be condemned to death” (118, Camus). Here Camus talks about the futility of an individual’s life at the hands of the society. From the social perspective, Meursault is a criminal, selfish and disheartened son, an ‘antichrist’ and therefore he deserves to die.

From the individualistic perspective, it can be suggested that Meursault is a free man. He is free from any bondages he feels free to make his own choices. The outer agencies give him no threat since he does not care regarding what other really sees. He makes his decisions and never gets carried away by their results. He is constantly struggling to assert who he is. His denial to accept the common behavior, his consistency regarding his choices and his attitude are not only the way of being himself but are also a way of resisting the societal influence on an individual. By being himself and constantly remaining the same he, in a way, is trying to locate himself within the society. He is finding his identity in the society and is in a constant attempt to live by it.

Since Meursault is not familiar with the rules and regulations of the society, the vice-versa of the title of the novel can also be assumed, i.e. it can be the society which is the stranger for an individual. The society is strange to him; its ideals are alien to him. Therefore the society itself is an outsider. What Meursault displays is a passive threat to the society whereas what the society does is a major threat to his individuality. Wearing Meursault’s glasses makes one to realize that society is the intruder which somehow manipulates an individual to merge his/her identity within it; it is that outsider which interrupts people’s lives through the imposition of rules, regulations and judgments.

Coming to the question where does Meursault belong, it can be said that he belongs to the human race, not the human society. He does not belong to any particular group, he is a common man, who has his own choices, preferences, ways and who cannot be owned by anybody. He is the creator of his own world, he is at the centre of that world, he is a free man, free from any hold, and he is purely individualistic, strong and determined to live his life on his own terms. In the process, he might look cruel and selfish but these traits are measured through associations with some outside agencies only which should not be applied to Meursault. He is the representative of Man, man not as a social being but simply as a Man and he shall be evaluated only as a Man, neither as a son, a lover, nor a prisoner.
V -Conclusion

The identity of a person is always understood in terms of who is looking at him/her. But, irrespective of the observer, every person has an essential individuality. Camus’s Meursault is the representative of that individuality. And the very fact that not associating with any group makes a person looks strange is what one can find in this novella. However, it should be understood that individuality is an important aspect of a person and it should not be compromised under false pressures created by society.

References:


