

Meursault's Indifferent Stance: A Conscious Acceptance of Capitalism

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Abstract:

*This paper aims at determining how Meursault's conscious acceptance of capitalism in *The Outsider* turns out to be "inevitability" in a society automated by pre-set rules and conventions. This inevitability springs directly from his perennial concern for upholding his identity as a free human being through "assertion of one's own individual choice". Through an intricate discussion of the text, the paper will trace that most of Meursault's decisions taken in the course of the novel are often stimulated by external factors. The major objective, however, is to prove that whereas most of the characters are simply performing roles even without understanding them, Meursault's case is a deliberate one as a silent protest against the unconscious and essential acceptance of Capitalism. Unlike others, Meursault stands apart with his own conscience and the philosophy of indifference always motivates him not to be one of those who follow the 'conventions' without question. Hence, the absurdities that make him a stranger to his fellow people transform him into a human being, a man with freedom of choice who acts only if he really understands.*

Key words: Meursault's, Capitalism, Unconscious, motivation, freedom of choice

Albert Camus' *The Outsider* gives us an impression of a hard-core capitalist society where everybody is unconsciously reduced to sub-humans with all the values inverted. Conforming to the conventions prescribed by the "law of the jungle" capitalism, individuals often tend to align themselves to the dominant definition of human being with no individuality at all. As they act like machines, their reactions to the different incidents of life often seem to be mechanical devoid of any emotion. Even if there is emotion, it is more than predictable and robotic. However, it is well known that "in the age of capitalism, the struggle is one between the bourgeoisie, which owns the means of production, and the proletariat, which has nothing but the labour-power, forced to sell in order to survive. By creating the modern capitalist system, or capitalist mode of production, and the proletariat exploited by that system, the bourgeoisie has created the means of its own destruction. At the same time, it has reduced the whole of human existence to naked self-interest and the cash nexus that destroys human relations"(Macey, 200:242). Moreover, these sterile, shattered individuals cannot bring any hope to their desolate lives, rather become frustrated and think about dreadful death only. Considering death as their ultimate destination, they try to escape from the burden of asserting themselves as individuals with 'freedom' as well as the social

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responsibilities and negate everything. At one moment in the process of this dehumanization, extreme nihilism replaces all hopes and potentialities and the self is alienated from its own human existence. Although Meursault emerges from this degenerated mass, he asserts his difference from them through his overt and conscious understanding of the invisible and often internalized mechanisms of capitalism. And with this understanding he redefines himself as a human being amongst those who are nothing but some products of capitalism working to sustain it, and again it is this realization that determines most of his behaviours that apparently seem abnormal or absurd.

In the capitalist society, all the institutions as well as modes of life are governed by factors that are beyond question and a person is always expected to shape himself according to the codes prescribed by those institutions to be defined as 'normal' human beings. In such a society, it is tough for a person with a bit critical and questioning mind to survive and we observe an unbearable indifference in Meursault who, unlike others, does not react to life the way others do. For this, Meursault is widely known as an existentialist hero who demonstrates the basic idea of existentialism propounded by Jean Paul Sartre – "existence precedes essence" which means a man can pass his life according to his own wishes and create his own values. But Meursault's ill-fated student life, poorly paid private job, busy office schedule (which are common phenomena in a capitalist society) play a vital role to make him an apathetic individual. Being neglected by a capitalistic society, he keeps himself indifferent towards its long-respected traditions and institutions like family, marriage, church (religion), state, and court.

At the outset of the novel Meursault shows his utter indifference towards the news of his mother's death despite the fact that she was the last person with whom he had a humane relationship. His mother's death does not bring any shock to him; even he does not feel the urge to know the actual date of her death. He works in a business farm as a poor worker and had to send his mother to an old home when he couldn't bear her expenses. Moreover, she might not have got the minimum attention and care she needed from Meursault - her only son because of the latter's tight office schedule. So, "she'd got bored of being alone"¹. This shows how pathetically a man becomes isolated in bourgeois society where relationships are affected by factors like money and self-interest. In this dehumanized society even a son becomes a stranger to his mother. Because of this long period of isolation men do not feel for each other. So, it is not surprising when Meursault says:

"Mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday"².

However, in this automated society people's reaction to incidents of life are expected to fall in the so called normal patterns the reversal of which results in ultimate recognition

¹ Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. Trans. Joseph Laredo. London: Penguin Books. 1983. P-48

² *Ibid.* P-9

of the person as 'abnormal'. The way Meursault joins his mother's funeral gives us the impression that he is going to carry out merely a formal duty, not to show his last respect to her. He knows very well that "after the funeral though, the death will be a classified fact and the whole thing will have assumed a more official aura"³. Since it is just an official obligation to announce his mother's death, he takes part in every formality of her funeral as passively as he executes his daily routine. So, during the night of the vigil we do not see him mourning for a single moment, rather he keeps himself busy observing the nurse, nature, the caretaker and different unimportant objects as he does on other ordinary days of his daily life.

In addition to this, the sheer indifference in Meursault's boss regarding his mother's death makes it easy for us to visualize the employer-employee relationship in the capitalist society. Under the circumstances of Meursault's mother's death he has to grant extra two days' leave for him, which invites an unwanted situation in a working place. He becomes so worried regarding the extra two days leave that he can not even offer any condolence to Meursault suppressing his disappointment for a while. His strong desire to bring every thing under the strict schedule of his office gives us the impression that after performing office hours accurately if someone gets time to attend mother's funeral then he will attend, otherwise not.

In a life where work does not have any connection with the dreams of the worker, boredom, angst and indifference are the immediate and ultimate conditions encountered by the workers time and time again. Day after day passively doing the pitiable clerical job, Meursault becomes utterly indifferent like Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and does not want to bring any change in his present dreary life. It is well known that "persistent long-term inequality of wealth undermines the motivation of the poor to improve their stance" (Wikipedia, 2009). Even when his boss wants to send him to his company's Paris office with a better opportunity, he immediately refuses the offer saying that one life is as good as another. Seeing Meursault's rigid stand, his boss becomes upset and warns him that his stance is ruinous in the business world. But as soon as he comes back to his work and becomes nostalgic for a while, we get the reason for his indifferent stance. He clearly utters that he was ambitious when he was a student but he had to give up his studies and soon he "realized that none of it really mattered"⁴. Here, the alienation of the producer/worker from his production/work is quite evident, and this alienation is the cause of self-negation in all capitalist societies:

I replied that you could never change your life, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine here. He looked upset and told me that I always evaded the question and that I had no ambition, which was disastrous in the business world⁵.

³ Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. Trans. Joseph Laredo. London: Penguin Books. 1983. P-9

⁴ *Ibid.* P-44

⁵ *Ibid.* P-44

Meursault, does not forget for a single moment that he is an unaided victim like Sisyphus who can only prove his existence by accepting the punishment courageously. He did not have any motive behind killing the Arab and he did it only on the spur of the moment when he could not bear the dazzling sun which was “raining down sheets of flame”⁶. But the court establishes a false connection between his killing and his indifferent attitude to his mother’s funeral. So, they follow the stereotypical regular procedure in which they have to find out a reason of the killing whether it is true or not. In the name of justice they just work like machines following the set rules. As crying during the mother’s funeral becomes the rule of that society, which means one has to express his emotion following the social pattern, Meursault is bound to do the same. When he fails to do that, immediately he is declared a criminal. To Camus, as he says in his ‘Afterword’ of the novel, “In our society any man who doesn’t cry at his mother’s funeral is liable to be condemned to death” (Camus, 1983:118). Actually he satirizes the stereotypical bourgeois society through uttering this extremely paradoxical sentence. Being a part of this mechanical society, Meursault cannot deny its ridiculous justice, rather he consciously accepts it as he does the same attending office regularly, wearing black tie and armband in the funeral and so on. Through this conscious acceptance, he proves himself different from other people of that society. He leads the same monotonous life but he knows very well that he is bound to do this, whereas others become used to it.

Within the course of the novel, our hero Meursault confronts different peculiar and pathetic individuals and introduces them to the readers. Meursault’s description of a peculiar little woman at Céleste gives us a glimpse of a robotic life of an alien individual. When he starts eating, this ‘peculiar’ lady suddenly appears and sits at his table. From that moment onward, Meursault observes her very closely. Being seated, she takes the menu and studies it ‘feverishly’ and calls Céleste and orders her whole meal at once, ‘speaking precisely but rapidly.’ It becomes very obvious that she does not at all want to waste even a moment of her valuable time since she knows that “the worker belongs neither to an owner nor to the land, but eight, ten, twelve, fifteen hours of his daily life belong to him”(C. Tucker 1978:205). So, she has to save every single second of her life to sell. As long as she waits for her *hors d’oeuvre*, she doesn’t spend a single word with Meursault, and keeps herself busy with adding up the bill in advance utilizing her precious time. On the other hand, through this mechanical calculation she becomes successful to avoid any interaction with a human being. Not only that, she gives us the idea that she has become so used to a busy working life that she cannot pass a single second without work. At that point the *hors d’oeuvre* arrives and she gulps it down as fast as she can. After this session when she has to wait for the main part of her meal to be served, another possibility of holding a conversation between them arises, but this time also she maintains her distance steadily. To avoid any talk with a man or to prevent the waste of her time, she starts ticking all the radio programmes for the week published in the magazine which she kept in her bag. It also suggests that she may spend her spare

⁶ *Ibid.* P-60

time of the whole week listening to radio only, not interacting with friends or family. Not only that, it gives us the impression that she would listen to only those programmes which would not interrupt her working hours. So, she might not listen to the radio for any recreation but to keep herself busy with something which would give her a feel that she is not wasting her time without doing anything. Finally when she leaves the place without wasting fraction of a second and saying anything to anybody, even our absurd hero, Meursault is bound to call her robot:

“Then she stood up, put her jacket back on the same precise, robot-like movements and left”⁷.

Meursault's neighbour Old Salamano's 'dreadful' old age leaves us utterly horrified at the thought of the miserable destiny that is in store for every individual in a capitalist society. If we look at his past life, we see that he had to work on the railways where strict schedule was supposed to get priority over everything. As a result, he became very used to this routine life and could not come out of it in his later retired life. It becomes very clear when we see, for long eight years, he has been taking his dog for a walk following the same schedule and even he has not changed his route for once. This dog has become an inseparable part of his life though he calls it a “filthy, lousy animal”⁸. Now, to Salamano life means only killing time with a filthy dog. So, at last when he loses his dog, he feels very deserted and asks Meursault what he would do. Actually he wants to say he does not know anything more than this tedious life. So, the labour power he sold to capitalist system now ensures him the necessary “means of subsistence” and a routine life only.

Old Salamano's maltreatment with his dog makes him a cruel master who dominates his subordinate very pitilessly. In his old life the spaniel becomes the only companion with whom he can at least pass his dull life. So it appears that in his utter loneliness he would treat his sole companion in a better way and care for its comfort. But his treatment of this dog suggests that he has internalized the ideals of capitalism which has taught him to be a cruel master. So he suppresses the dog with the same cruelty that he may have faced in his working life. He beats the dog everyday and thinks as a master it is his duty to suppress his subordinate. Thus, he does not feel at all sad for his cruelty. We find a beautiful description of his absurd routine:

“When the dog wants to urinate, the old man won't give it time and drags it on, so that the spaniel scatters a trail of little drops behind it. But if the dog ever does it in the room, then it gets beaten again. It's been going on like that for eight years”⁹.

Old Salamano's wretchedness after losing his dog indicates very clearly that he has turned into a perfect alien. In his young age he wanted to work in the theatre but for

⁷ Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. Trans. Joseph Laredo. London: Penguin Books. 1983. P-46

⁸ *Ibid.* P-31

⁹ *Ibid.* P-31

money he had to end up working on the railways. And now he does not ‘regret it’ and vainly tries to console himself that his job has at least ensured him ‘a small pension’ for the rest of his life. But though he is not regretting, we see how poorly he passes his life. He has been living with a dog for eight years. “After living with it for so long, the two of them alone together in one tiny room, Salamano has ended up looking like the dog”¹⁰. Now both of them have the same skin disease called ‘manage’. So, “they look as if they belong to the same species”¹¹. In his early life, he sacrificed his own pleasure for earning money but that money could not give him any peace in his old age, rather he has become more alien to his own life. At the end he gets an abandoned, monotonous, boring, charmless life where a ‘filthy, lousy animal’ becomes his only reason of living. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx talks about such poor individuals in the following manner:

“--the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an alien object. For this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own”.(C. Tucker 1978:72)

As has been shown, Meursault cuts himself off psychologically from the people around him, and this is a step which he takes deliberately knowing that this is going to be the final stage of capitalism—a stage where everything will be conditioned by money or naked self-interest. While people around him act like passive followers of the invisible force called capitalism, Meursault is acting according to the directions of his conscience and it is this conscience that makes him look ‘abnormal’ in an absurd society. Meursault consciously alienates him from everything but his own self. So, he chooses to live with freedom of choice as a human being, essentially different from others who have become only pseudo-human.

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¹⁰ *Ibid.* P-30

¹¹ *Ibid.* P-31