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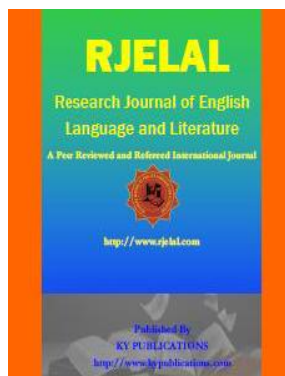
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MEURSAULT AS A NIHILIST IN ALBERT CAMUS' *THE STRANGER*

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ABSTRACT

Since its emergence in the mid-19th century Europe, the Nihilist movement transcended the literary realm and established itself as a significant ideology with philosophical and political valence. Albert Camus is a well-known writer whose writings express the concerns of the twentieth century and whose characters often reflect existential tendencies and nihilistic attitude towards life. The following paper seeks to study the nihilistic attitude of Meursault, the protagonist of Camus novel *The Stranger*. The nihilistic attitude of Meursault has been studied along three lines – his indifference towards familial attachment, his detachment towards love, his attitude towards death.

Key Words: nihilism, indifference, detachment, existential, death

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INTRODUCTION

Albert Camus was a French novelist, essayist, dramatist regarded as one of the finest philosophical writers of modern France. He earned a worldwide reputation as a novelist and essayist and won the Nobel Prize for literature. He became the leading moral voice of his generation during the 1950's. One of the greatest modern writers, he expresses the moral concerns of 20th century. His writings describe the contemporary feeling that life has no ultimate meaning beyond immediate experience and explores the various philosophical schools of thought such as absurdism, nihilism and existentialism. In this paper, we trace the evolution of the protagonist Meursault as a nihilist in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*.

Nihilism is literally the belief in nothing. Originally, the term was used to attack accused heretics during the middle ages. Subsequently, the

term, however, was applied to a particular branch of philosophy- a radical form of scepticism maintaining the non-existence of any objective basis for truth. As per this stand, it demands the complete rejection of all established views. It is the philosophy of negation that argues that life is without objective meaning, purpose or intrinsic value. Nihilist hero highlights the central theme of negation, including the negation of one's responsibility for creation. A nihilist hero is unable to bear the burden of responsibility and often negates the world he lives in.

The Novel: *The Stranger* is one of Camus' best-known novels and is often taken as an example of an existentialist novel as it concentrates on the absurdity of life and death, as well as society. The novel at the same time has strong hints of nihilism with its central character Meursault possessing characteristics of a nihilistic hero. Camus contributes

to the final piece of the nihilist portrait with his literary character Meursault. Intimately involved in the resistance newspapers during the war and the philosophy that reduced the centre of western civilization to chaos, Camus writes with a brutal honesty and brings us to the final code of the nihilist movement. The novel tells the story of a young French Algerian who lives, works and loves without passion. The book opens with the death of Meursault's mother and introduces the strange character of Meursault who maintains an absolute silence even on the news of his mother's death. He does not show the least sign of mourning. He, then, visits an acquaintance Raymond, who is busy drinking and beating his girlfriend all day long. A group of young Arabs, whose leader is the brother of Raymond's girlfriend, follow Meursault and Raymond, strolling on a beach on a weekend. The Arab is all set to kill Raymond and stabs him in a fight. Hours later, Meursault returns to the beach and with Raymond's pistol murders the Arab cold-bloodedly – a murder that brings no remorse in Meursault. Meursault is arrested for the crime and during the trial, he makes no effort to defend himself or explain his action. He does not plead for clemency and does not even try a hand at saying a line. In the end, he is sentenced to death, not for killing an Arab in colonial Algeria but because in our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.

Meursault quintessentially appears to be a nihilist, a man mentally at odds with the universe. A French Algerian living in Algeria, he appears to be a strangely dispassionate and detached member of the society. He is strangely divorced from the society and himself. So strong is his detachment that matters of significance are treated with seemingly great level of indifference. The news of his mother's death is spoken in a matter of fact tone: "Maman died today. Or yesterday, may be, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours' that does not mean anything. May be it was yesterday" (33). There is no expression of sorrow or remorse on the receipt of the telegram. He rather seems to be concerned with details like when did his mother die. During the funeral procession, he says that the

hearsay makes him think of "pen trays in the office" which is yet another emotional detached reaction. Even with the care taker at the funeral home Meursault diligently focuses on trivial details: "I like milk in my coffee, so I said yes, and he came back a few minutes later with a tray. I drank the coffee. Then I felt like having a smoke. But I hesitated, because I didn't know if I could do it with Maman right there. I thought about it; it didn't matter. I offered the caretaker a cigarette" (34). Meursault's social interactions thus inform only on events rather than emotions.

Even in the matters of love and marriage, Meursault shows the lack of emotional attachment. When his mistress Marie asks him about marriage, he says that he would marry her but that he does not love her and it does not make any difference to him. He seems to be exceptionally apathetic to women: constantly objectifying and acting passively towards them. This negation of emotion is a significant aspect of a nihilist. Meursault seems to be associated with Marie because of his physical needs but the existence in real hardly matters to him.

Meursault emerges as a moral nihilist in the novel. Moral nihilism, also known as ethical nihilism says that no action is necessarily preferable to any other. A moral nihilist would say that killing someone for whatever reason is not inherently wrong or right. Meursault has the same idea. He senselessly murders his friend's enemy and when asked whether he regrets the action, he merely replies that he felt annoyed. He does not find his action to be wrong instead he shows an attitude that people do not matter dead or alive and that even a cold-blooded murder is free from the shackles of wrong or right. In the possession of his friends' revolver, Meursault is suddenly afflicted by the physically unbearable weather. The searing sun and bright sand cause a burning sweat in his eyes. At the moment of utmost vexation the Arab reveals a knife whose glaring shine in Meursault's face prompts him to pull the trigger and shatter the harmony of the day. With the Arab dead, Meursault indifferently fires four more rounds at the motionless body, which he describes as "knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness" (40).

Meursault's action is condemned and he is blamed for not being affectionate towards the society: "Gentleman of the jury, the day after his mother's death, this man was out swimming, starting up a dubious liaison, and going to the movies, a comedy for laughs" (41). Meursault's character is so affectively assassinated that the jury focus more on his indifference than on the actual crime. Muraj comments: "Meursault's rebellion is an exercise to show that he negates societies norms, which from a moral perspective are just as arbitrary and absurd reasons to convict him as his own explanation" (40). Meursault's negation thus renders him a stranger to the convention. Sartre writes that Meursault is one of that terrible innocence who causes scandal in society because they do not accept the rules of the game. He lives amidst outsiders, but for them he is an outsider. Meursault shows the same indifference towards his life as he shows towards other people. He finds himself open to the gentle indifference of the world that is to execute him. He negates everything, finds death trivial, life listless and society much less human than we can identify with:

I open myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself- so like a brother, really – I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators on the day of my execution and that greet me with the cries of hate (45).

Nihilism develops such historic responsibility that Meursault finds himself in a loveless and indifferent world. He is a mirror of his society, incapable of judging it based on its crimes any more than it is capable of judging him for his. Meursault's freedom is at a point where he realizes that everything is permitted in the name of negation.

CONCLUSION

Muraj remarks: "The evolution of a literary nihilist is rooted in human nature and in social history of the century that produced him. A nihilist hero accepts death and negation to create his standards for living. His indifferent life amounts to an indifferent death" (44). By these standards,

Meursault evolves as a nihilist hero, a man who is indifferent to the world around, the passion around and also to himself.

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