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ADMIXTURE OF ABSURDIST PHILOSOPHY AND SYMBOLISM IN ALBERT CAMUS'S
THE STRANGER

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ABSTRACT

A great majority of essays and articles devoted to Camus have concentrated on the philosophical value or the political relevance of his ideas. In his novels also Camus gives expression to his philosophy of the absurd and existentialism. However, the imaginative aspect of Camus's literary talent may be traced in the process by which the two images 'sun' and 'sea' recur in the author's work that achieves symbolic force and significance. The range of Camus's imagery is narrow and derives almost entirely from the central experience of his life, his encounter with nature along the North African littoral. This experience is described directly and personally in his formal essays. The use of imagery in Camus's writing is symptomatic of the way in which he exploits his verbal resources in order to convey how powerful the impact of natural phenomena has in human life. Camus also experiences a sort of vertiginous identification with nature. He describes how he feels himself to be assimilated into nature, annihilated by the elements whose vibrating life is everywhere present. The present study attempts to highlight the philosophical and imaginative aspects of Camus's writing.

Key words: Philosophy of absurd, existentialism, imagery, symbolism, nature.

Absurd is a notion which covers the philosophical, the social and the psychological realms. It indicates a way of understanding and experiencing the world. It is a term used to characterize the work of a number of European and American dramatists of the 1950s and 1960s. As the term suggests, the function of such theatre is to give dramatic expression to the philosophical notion of the 'absurd', a notion that had received widespread diffusion following the publication of Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942. To define the word 'absurd' is to recognize its fundamentally mysterious and indecipherable nature, and this recognition is frequently associated with feelings of loss, purposelessness and bewilderment. To such feelings

the theatre of the absurd give ample expression, often leaving the observer baffled in the face of disjointed, meaningless, or repetitious dialogues, incomprehensible behaviours, and plots which deny all notion of logical or realistic development. However, the recognition of the absurd nature of human existence also provided dramatists with a rich source of comedy. The theatre of the absurd drew significantly on popular tradition of entertainment, of mime, acrobatics, and circus closing, and, by seeking to redefine the legitimate concerns of serious theatre, played an important role in extending the range of the post-war drama.

Absurdity is a pointless quest for meaning in a universe devoid of purpose. The feeling of

absurdity is the separation between man his life like an actor walking out on the stage and not recognizing the scenery or knowing the lines of the play he is supposed to speak, a sense of permanent displacement and un-belonging. For Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* explores the landscape of his thought and the metaphysical implications of the absurd. His absurd novel, *The Stranger*, reveals the landscape of the world of his youth and the social definition of the absurd. It meticulously explored the implication of the absurd nature of human condition. The question, which is the central theme of *The Stranger*, is: 'How is a man to live in an absurd universe?' It is almost inevitable and the most important question of our age. In the past, religion provided man with a coherent system of meaning, defining man's purpose in life and helping him to achieve it. As Christianity waned, other systems, from Descartes to Hegel, sought to demonstrate that the world is intelligible and rational. For Camus, this assurance had also died. Man, in his eyes, is destined to find his way without any guide-post or goal. Consequently, those men, who feel that God is dead, and with Him all other absolutes, whether moral or intellectual, find that Camus speaks to their condition. Moreover, to say that the world is absurd does not describe the world in itself as much as our reaction to it. Our sense of its absurdity springs from our disappointed expectations, from the discrepancy between what we want from life, notably order and consistency, and what we actually get. This sense of disillusionment, which is as old as ecclesiastic, typically finds expression in certain common attitudes or judgements about life. To use Camus's own simile, the world appears alien and absurd, as pointless as the spectacle of man silently gesticulating behind the glass pane of a telephone booth. The same absurdity rules in the intellectual sphere. All philosophical systems became questionable and with them all systems of law and ethics that profess to give absolute standards of behaviour. Since general rules provide no guide to specific situations, each moment stands by itself and makes its own laws. The one undeniable and authentic fact is that the experience of the immediate moment. And finally, all life is lived under

the shadow of death, which reduces saint and sinner, sense and nonsense, to the same level. The man who sees the world in this light may respond in one of the three ways: (i) he may take refuge in blind faith, (ii) he may commit suicide, or (iii) he may chose to go on living with lucid awareness and calm acceptance of his situation. For the man who is capable of it, this awareness is a great liberation because if there is no God and any moment is as good as any other and all men die at last, then a man may do anything he likes.

Using the novel as a replica, Camus explores the triviality of a world in which there is no awareness of the absurd, of the senselessness of the way people live in which the absurd prevails just because conformity to empty convention prevents real feeling and creative thought. Camus presents Meursault as a central figure, a negative energy, who brings out the absurdity of the prevailing viewpoints and actions. He is a man whom the feeling of absurdity has penetrated to the very marrow of his bones. Living as he does moment by moment, he has few memories and no expectations. He makes no demands on others, and allows others to make as few demands as possible on him. His chief virtue is his absolute honesty. Even though his life is at stake, he will not pretend to have ideals or feelings which he does not have. In the novel, Camus introduces persons and situations familiar to him from his life experiences in Algiers and shapes them into critical vision that gives it the compelling distinctiveness that has made it one of the world's most popular novels. Meursault is an amalgam of Camus himself, of his friend Pierre Galindo and of his editor friend and political co-worker, Pascal Pia. The Algerian setting is his home territory. The central incident of the murder of the Arab is drawn from a story told to him at a cafe, and even the courtroom scenes have the authenticity of being drawn by a man who served as a court reporter on the crime beat of a daily newspaper.

The Stranger is not an autobiography; however, there are similarities between Camus and Meursault. Meursault gives an appearance of indifference or detachment, and shows disdain and contempt for convention. His cool exterior covers a deep loyalty to his own sense of things. Though *The*

Stranger is a work of fiction, it contains a strong resonance of Camus's philosophical notion of absurdity. In his essays, Camus asserts that individual lives and human existence in general have no rational meaning or order. However, because people have difficulty accepting this notion, they constantly attempt to identify or create rational structure and meaning in their lives. The term 'absurdity' describes humanity's futile attempt to find rational order where none of such exists. Though Camus does not explicitly refer to the notion of absurdity in *The Stranger*, the tenets of absurdity operate within the novel. Neither the external world in which Meursault lives nor the internal world of his thoughts and attitudes possesses any rational order. Meursault has no discernable reason for his actions such as his decision to marry Marie and his decision to kill the Arab. Society nonetheless attempts to fabricate or impose rational explanations for Meursault's irrational actions. The trial sequence in part two of the novel represents society's attempt to manufacture rational order. Both the prosecutor and Meursault's lawyer offer explanations for Meursault's crime that are based on logic, reason, and the concept of cause and effect. However, these explanations have no basis and serve only as attempts to diffuse the frightening idea that the universe is irrational. The entire trial is, therefore, an example of absurdity, an instance of humankind's futile attempt to impose rationality on the irrational universe. The absurd sequence of events delivers Meursault into the power of a world that believes in absolutes, that has a code of behaviour for loving sons, that knows there is a difference between criminals and other people, and that recognizes a code of law with punishments adjusted to the gravity of each crime. Meursault has killed a man, but he could conceivably be acquitted on the grounds of self-defence. The decision depends on the way the court sees Meursault. Does his pattern of life suggest that the homicide was the act of confirmed criminal? If it does, he is guilty of murder. Unfortunately the court cannot understand the sort of person Meursault is. Everyone expects him to react conventionally and finds it damning that he does not. Consequently, Meursault is right in

protesting that he is condemned less for killing an Arab than for failing to mourn his mother.

In his novel, Camus gives expression to his philosophy of the absurd. The novel is a first person account of the life of Meursault from the time of his mother's death up to a time evidently just before his execution for the murder of an Arab. The central theme is that the significance of human life is understood only in the light of mortality; and in showing Meursault's consciousness change through the course of events, Camus shows how facing the possibility of death does have an effect on one's perception of life. As a sequence of events, after the killing of the Arab and before his trial Meursault passes the time in prison sleeping, by reading over and over the newspaper story about the unrelated murder of a Czech, and by recreating a mental picture of his room at home in complete detail. After his trial, he no longer indulges in his memories or passes the time in the frivolous way he was accustomed to spend Sundays at home. At first, he dwells on thoughts of escape. He cannot reconcile the contingency of his sentence with the mechanical certainty of the process that leads inevitably to his death. When he gives up trying to find a loophole, he finds his mind ever returning either to the fear that morning would bring the guards who would lead him to be executed, or to the hope that his appeal will be granted. In order to distract himself from these thoughts, he forces himself to study the sky or to listen to the beating of his heart, but the changing light reminds him of the passing of time towards dawn, and he cannot imagine his heart ever stopping. In dwelling on the chance of an appeal, he is forced to consider the possibility of denial and thus of execution. Therefore he must face death, whether it come now or later. Now he begins to see the value of each moment of the life before death. The meaning, value and significance of life is only seen in light of death, yet most people miss it through the denial of death. The hope of longer life brings Meursault great joy. And perhaps to end the maddening uncertainty and intensify his awareness of death's inevitability, as a gesture of hopelessness, Meursault turns down his right to appeal. Soon afterwards, the prison chaplain insists on talking to him. Meursault admits his fear but denies

repentance and has no interest in the chaplain's belief in an afterlife. He responded furiously at the chaplain's persistence for he realises that the chaplain has not adequately assessed the human condition. The chaplain's certainties have no meaning and value for Meursault. On the other hand, he is absolutely certain about his own life and forthcoming death. His rush of anger cleanses him and empties him of hope, thus allowing him finally to open up completely and for the last time to the benign indifference of the universe. The idea of death makes one aware of one's life, one's vital being. When this vitality is appreciated, one feels free for there is no urgency to perform some act that will cancel the possibility of death, seeing as though there is no such act. In this sense, all human activity is absurd, and the real freedom is to be aware of life in its actuality and totality, of its beauty and its pain.

Meursault is always aware of the meaninglessness of all endeavours in the face of death. He has no ambition to advance socio-economically and hence he declines promotion offered to him. He is indifferent about being friends with Raymond and about marrying Marie, etc. However, his awareness is somehow never intense enough to involve self-awareness. He never reflects on the meaning of death for him until he is in the prison awaiting execution. Of course, the meaning of another's death is quite different from the meaning of one's own death. With the former, one no longer sees that person again and with the latter one's very consciousness just ends. Death marks all things equal, and equally absurd. And death itself is absurd in the sense that reason or the rational mind cannot deal with it. It is a foregone conclusion and yet it remains an unrealised possibility until some indeterminate future time. The meaning of death is not rational but existential; its implications are to be found not in abstraction but in the actuality of one's life, the finality of each moment.

A major component of Camus's absurdist philosophy is the idea that human life has no redeeming meaning or purpose. Camus argues that the only thing in life is the inevitability of death because all humans will eventually meet death, all lives are equally meaningless. Meursault gradually moves toward this realization throughout the novel,

but he does not fully grasp it until after his argument with the chaplain in the final chapter. Meursault realises that just as he is indifferent to much of the universe, so is the universe indifferent to him. Like all people, Meursault has been born, will die, and will have no further importance. Paradoxically, only after Meursault seemingly realizes, it he is able to attain happiness. When he fully comes to terms with the inevitability of death, he understands that it does not matter whether he dies by execution or lives to die a natural death at an old age. This understanding enables Meursault to put aside his fantasies of escaping execution by filing a successful legal appeal. He realises that these illusory hopes which had previously preoccupied his mind, would do little more than create in him a false sense that death is avoidable.

A great majority of essays and articles devoted to Camus have concentrated on the philosophical value or the political relevance of his ideas. The imaginative aspect of Camus's literary talent may be traced in the process by which the two images – *sun* and *sea* – recur in the author's work that achieves symbolic force and significance. The range of Camus's imagery is narrow and derives almost entirely from the central experience of his life, his encounter with nature along the North African littoral. This experience is described directly and personally in his formal essays: *L'Enversetl'endroit* (Between and Betwixt) (1937), *Noces* (Nuptials) (1938), and *Le Minotaure ou la Halted'Oran* (1945). The use of imagery in Camus' writing is symptomatic of the way in which he exploits his verbal resources in order to convey how powerful the impact of natural phenomena has in human life. Camus also experiences a sort of vertiginous identification with nature. He describes how he feels himself to be assimilated into nature, annihilated by the elements whose vibrating life is everywhere present:

The violent bath of sun and wind exhausted my life-strength. Now, spread out to the four corners of the world, forgetful, having forgotten myself, I have become the wind and, within the wind, the columns and arch here, the stone slabs smelling of the sun

and the pale mountains set around the deserted city. (Nuptials).

It is within the context of this particular experience of nature the Camus's references to nature need to be set. The images of sun and sea figure predominantly in Camus's work because they are obviously the representative images of the type of landscape in which he was born and spent the formative years of his life. Moreover, in his autobiographical essays "Sun" and "Sea" are frequently set in contexts, which lend them emotional overtones that prefigure the symbolical significance they attain later, in his imaginative writing. Camus's allusions to the sun constantly evoke a tonality of violence. Camus is assaulted and dazed by the sun, he is permeated by it, a porous vessel receptive to its heat.

The 'sea' features in Camus's personal records as the constant solace, the source of refreshment in the burning climate. It is the arena of youth and hence, of life, in so far as life can be equated with youthful vigour and the beginning of the sexual cycle. It is the scene of easy, animal joy, of the arrogant play of the muscles. The waters of the sea, glimpsed at the turn of each street in Algiers, are a reminder of relief from the dust and the hot stone. It also conveys the notion of permanence but in the context of perpetual renewal. In general, one may say that physical relaxation and mental serenity are associated with evening and moonlight in Camus's work, while violent sensation and the impulse to destroy are related to the intense heat and light of a Mediterranean day. Nor are the images that define the sun restricted to those which suggest simple violence; occasionally, they reflect the sense of destruction. Hence, when the sun rains down its light on the stony fields near Oran, it is described in a destructive image. Then again, the sun is not infrequently associated with silence, the absence or negation of specifically human activity. This is the case when Camus depicts the deserted sea off Algiers at midday, or the ruins where the presence of the sun and the brooding silence of nature, intensified rather than broken by the passing wind, confirmed the transience of man's achievement. The sun and the silence, in a sort of elemental union,

preside over the empire of things, where man figures almost as an accident. The significance of such an experience is extended by a comment that Camus makes in one of the essays:

But to be pure was to find once more that homeland of the soul where one's link with the world becomes perceptible, where the beating of the blood overtakes the violent pulsations of the two o'clock sun. (Nuptials).

Albert Camus's first novel, *The Outsider* (*The Stranger*, 1942), crystallizes this tendency more precisely in a series of related acts and offers a striking example of the process by which the sun is transformed into a symbol. The series of events in this novel begins when the central character, Meursault, with two acquaintances takes a walk along a beach near Algiers after enjoying an early lunch. It is not quite midday but already the glare of the sun off the sea is described as unbearable. They saw at the distance two Arabs with whom Raymond has already been involved on account of maltreatment of a former Arab mistress. As the Arabs draw nearer and at this Meursault observes: 'Le sable surchauffe me semblait rouge maintenant' (The overheated sand now seemed red to me). By referring to this phrase Meursault gave an obvious physical reference to the intense light of the sun on the sand foreshadows in a figurative sense, i.e. the violence that is to follow. The colour of the sand under the sun's rays suggests the shedding of blood. A scuffle took place between the Arabs in which Raymond and Masson are involved and blows are exchanged. Then the Arabs retreated cautiously. After quite sometimes when the two friends in the company of Meursault reached the beach another round of fight took place. At this time the oppressiveness and fatality of the situation are suggested by references to the sun. Raymond, wishing to tackle his Arab foe on equal terms, hands his revolver to Meursault, but the Arabs scuttle away suddenly and again the fight is averted. Raymond and Meursault return to the hut but Meursault, reluctant as ever to communicate with other human beings and dazed by the sun returns along the beach for a solitary walk. In the course of this walk the sun is described in terms of a hostile

presence. The heat that emanates from it makes his body tense aggressively. The image employed here by Camus to describe the reflections of light, suggesting precisely the hostile nature of the sun. The protagonist longs for shade and he sees ahead of him the rock behind which the Arabs had disappeared and there he encountered Raymond's attacker lying alone. The encounter between the two becomes the central point of a complex of images of light. Here the sun and the impulse to violence are invariably associated. The destructive act takes place under the impact of the sun. The shape of the Arab dances before Meursault's eyes in the flaming air and the sea is like a molten metal. Such an image of the sun recalls to the protagonist the heat on the day of his mother's funeral and this allusion further emphasizes the association between death and the sun. The blood pounds in Meursault's veins and the beads of sweat cover his eyelashes like a mist. Under such an influence Meursault perceived that the Arab is attacking him with a long glittering blade and hence he fires his shot. Here, it will be seen how the sun, in its direct or indirect manifestations, provides a sort of baleful focus for these three related episodes and how the images of the light increases as the events reach their destructive climax. The sun symbolises violence and destruction and the key to this symbolical use of it lies in the metaphorical intention that animates Camus's work. The entire novel, in a different perspective, is an allegory of that absurd universe which Camus had described in philosophical terms in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Meursault is the symbol of man perpetually estranged in the world. The notion of the absurdity of life, which is the central and governing irony of so much of what Camus has written, is underlined here and given it a dramatic colour.

In *The Stranger* sea-bathing is one of the main delights of the protagonist. The sea is the scene of his first tentative caresses of his girlfriend, Marie and it is a source of intense physical pleasure. As the action of the novel unfolds, the sea ceases to be merely a place where physical restraints disappear. While awaiting trial in the prison, the sea, to Meursault, in a symbolic sense, is identified with his longing for freedom. He associates the condition

of being free with the sea, the pleasure it offers – the motion of running down to the sea, the sound of the waves, the sensation of his body slipping into the water. Hence, the sea becomes a symbol of freedom as contrasted with the confining walls of his prison-cell.

Besides the sea and the sun, Camus uses some other symbols in his novel. The court, for instance, symbolises society as a whole. The law functions as the will of the people, and the jury sits in judgement on behalf of the entire community. In the *Stranger*, Camus strengthens this court-as-society symbolism by having nearly every one of the minor characters from the first half of the novel reappear as a witness in the courtroom. The court's attempts to construct a logical explanation for Meursault's crime symbolise humanity's attempts to find explanations for the irrational events of the universe. These attempts, which Camus believed as futile, exemplify the absurdity Camus outlined in his philosophy. Another symbol Camus uses in the novel is the crucifix that the examining magistrate waves at Meursault, representing Christianity, which stands in opposition to Camus's absurdist world view. Whereas the philosophy of absurdism is based on the idea that human life is irrational and purposeless, Christianity conceives of a rational order for the universe based on god's creation and direction of the world. The crucifix also symbolises rational belief structures in general. The chaplain's insistence that Meursault turns to God does not necessarily represent a desire that Meursault accepts specifically Christian beliefs so much as a desire that he embraces the principle of a meaningful universe in general. When Meursault defies the magistrate by rejecting Christianity, he implicitly rejects all systems that seek to define a rational order within human existence. This defiance causes Meursault to be branded as a threat to social order.

Camus projected Meursault in *The Stranger* to be far more interested in the physical aspects of the world around him than in its social or emotional aspects. This focus on the sensual world results from the novel's assertion that there exists no higher meaning or order to human life. Throughout the novel, Meursault's attention centres on his own

body, on his physical relationship with Marie, on the weather, and on other physical elements of his surroundings. For instance, the heat during the funeral procession causes Meursault far more pain than the thought of burying his mother. The sun on the beach torments Meursault, and during his trial Meursault even identifies his suffering under the sun as the reason why he killed the Arab. The style of Meursault's narration also reflects his interest in the physical world. Though he offers terse, plain descriptions when glossing over emotional or social situations, his descriptions become vivid and ornate when he discusses topics such as nature and the weather.

The novel achieves an artistic integrity, the perfect combination of plot, character, style, structure and theme. This artistic unity creates, within the little world of the novel, that coherence and intelligibility which Camus cannot detect in the real world. In this sense, any artistic creation is a standing rebuke to life. Meursault does not protest at any time against the absurdity of his existence; however, Camus, in the very act of writing the novel, does it. The novel seems to be a text where there is a perfect blending of philosophical and imaginative faculties of the novelist.

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