Existential Experience of a Solitary Heart in Albert Camus' The Stranger

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight the element of existentialism in Albert Camus’ The Stranger. The philosophy of Existentialism emphasizes an individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. Its chief motive is for the assertion of freedom. To some extent, Albert Camus follows the views of Sartre and Kierkegaard in his novel The Stranger. However, the protagonist, Meursault is stranger to the society. He is a detached figure and also emotionally indifferent to others, even to his lover, Marie. He refuses to adopt the moral order of the society. At last, he also accepts the gentle indifference of the world. This acceptance makes him happy.

Key words: Existentialism, freedom, existence, society, rational, choice

The philosophy of Existentialism signifies an individual existence, choice and freedom. It argues against definitions of traditional philosophy. An individual can define his own meaning in life and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the assertion of freedom which has been the result of a search for a new method. It will make appreciable advance in the understanding of basic ideas or in the treatment of fundamental subjects.

Jean Paul Sarte is known as the father of Existentialism who defines to understand human existence rather than the world. Other critics like Kierkegaard, Simon de Beavoir also define it. Their main idea is about human existence and believes that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence. They give importance to the individual’s freedom and decision. They also stress the absurd condition of humanity. Existentialism is an old wine in a new bottle. It has recent origin but the philosophy is old. Critics trace its origin to Socrates, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx, Bergson. Some finds in Judaism and in the Bible. The 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard established the doctrines of Existentialism that influenced the later critics. He stresses the factual existence of the individual.

The fact is man cannot be defined at all whereas he is unique individual, a purely subjective. Only his personal experience can fulfill his religious and philosophical mission. Kierkegaard argues that man is responsible for his position, choice and commitment. It makes a person more human. The novel shares a comparison with philosophies of Nietzsche and Mark who try to find in the economic and social fashion and in psychological fashion respectively, “Basically the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain One’s individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society And lack of belonging” (Jain 15). Kierkegaard accepts that only man’s personal experience can fulfill his religious and philosophical mission and not the abstract mental process. Jaspers defines, “Man is not a self-sufficient separate entity, but is constituted by the things he makes his own” (Mora 45). If a man tries to determine the convictions
of existentialism, he would realize that there is extreme atheist, theist, a Christian, an Anglican and a Unitarian existentialism.

To the some extent, Albert Camus follows the views of Sarte and Kierkegaard in his novel *The Stranger*. The protagonist Meursault is a detached figure. He is emotionally different from others, even to his mother and his lover, Marie. He also refuses to adopt the accepted moral order of society. Meursault’s atheism and his lack of outward grief at his mother’s funeral represent a drastic change in traditional customs in the society. He is so isolated from others, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and also physically at the end.

Everyone in this world is solitary and that involvement in human relationships invariably leads to disaster. Existentialism often associates with anxiety, dread, awareness of death and freedom. Meursault in *The Stranger* believes that society is strange to him. He accepts that he is correct in his decision and he doesn’t believe the meaninglessness in the physical world. He fights for his own freedom and decision. He decides to lead happy life without giving importance to moral feelings. Birth and death are quite natural. Everyone blames even the lawyer divert the case to argue his character in the court. It is not a crime. But the people who attend the funeral become eye-witness and they explain to the judge about the incidents happened at the time. However, his mistress became witness and tells what happened in the next day. The novel portrays the dilemma in absurdity and also pictures the dark sides of human nature such as indifference and insensitivity towards relationships. Meursault doesn’t take his mother’s death into his heart despite a brief leave of absence to bury and continues his routine work.

Existentialism gives importance to liberation of the individual who do not relay on fate, God or chance to guide us through the path of life. Many existentialists believe the greatest victory of the individual is to realize the absurdity of life and accept it. Life is series of choices and humans tries to take decisions without any negative consequences. Some may irrational or absurd without any explanation. In *The Stranger*, Camus includes all the existential themes in a perfect manner. Merusault has the full freedom to take decisions apart from his practical life. He attends his mother’s funeral in an ordinary way. He smokes cigarette and drinks a cup of coffee without showing his emotion. He keeps vigil over his mother’s body. Even that night, he happily arrives back to his working place. He spends whole day with his lover, Marie Cardona in the next day. The two make a date to see a comedy at the theatre and spend that night. When he wakes up, Marie is gone. But he stays there till evening to watch the people pass on the street. He is an ordinary with freedom of choice but he fails to show his emotion in the right place. Existentialism focuses on awareness of one’s choice and passion. Both are psychological feelings that should be understood before taking decisions. Merusault wants remembrance of his life in which he displays existence and passion.

The next theme is contingency. Life is unpredictable, filled with choices and chance to unexpected happenings. In the climax, the protagonist shoots the Arab which is very unpredictable event. After that, his happiness is gone and all of a sudden something occurs unexpectedly. He says, “I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptionalSilence of a beach where I had been happy”( S74). Then Meursault is thrown into jail. The lawyer seems disgusted at his lack of remorse over his crime and his lack of grief at his mother’s funeral. Later, Magistrate cannot understand his action. He also brandishes a crucifix and demands that Meursault put his faith in God. He refuses and Magistrate dubs him Monsieur Antichrist.

Next, he wants to live out of his individuality at the end. He wants a large crowd of spectators of witness of death and also expects them to greet him with trees in spite of being hate by them, “I had only wished them there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate”( S 154).The last theme is reflection. It refers to unawareness of practical events. Merusault leads a pre-reflective life. He absorbs his daily events without reflects on them. People blame the protagonist who behaves normally in the funeral and there is controversy that the protagonist blames the society. The protagonist tries to attain the stage of detachment and freedom from the world of involvement and commitments. His problem is his conflict between reason and unreason, quest for freedom, love and understanding. He tries to maintain the problem of existing in without losing his
individuality. He is interested in the physical aspects of the world around him rather than in its social and emotional aspects.

To conclude, Camus shares the Kierkegaard’s views of existentialism in the novel *The Stranger*. Camus argues that man is condemned to be free and the novel remind us of Kierkegaard’s emphasize on the human conditions such as anguish, freedom, abandonment and despair. In fact, *The Stranger* contains a strong resonance of Camus’ philosophical notion of absurdity. Camus asserts that individual lives and human existence in general have no rational meaning or order. Meursault’s friend Chaplain urges him to renounce his atheism and turn to God, but he refuses and shouts at him. For the first time, Meursault truly embraces the idea that human existence holds no greater meaning. He abandons all hope for the future. He also accepts the gentle indifference of the world. This acceptance makes him happy.

**Works Cited**

