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Alienation, Absurdity, and Class Consciousness: A Marxist Reading of Meursault in *The Stranger*

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Abstract-- Critics have long interpreted *The Stranger* by Albert Camus through diverse philosophical frameworks, most notably existentialism and absurdism. However, this paper proposes a nuanced reading of the novel through a Marxist lens, foregrounding the subtle yet significant undertones of class consciousness, alienation, and socio-political estrangement. By situating the protagonist Meursault within the framework of Karl Marx's theory of alienation, the study argues that his apparent indifference and emotional detachment are not merely existential traits but reflections of a deeper systemic disconnection shaped by a meaningless and oppressive social order.

Meursault emerges as a paradoxical Marxist figure whose estrangement operates on multiple levels—social, emotional, and ethical. His alienation from society, as well as from his own humanity, can be interpreted as a response to the inherent absurdity and hollowness embedded within the socio-economic structures of colonial Algeria. The paper further explores how this alienation aligns with Marx's notion of the individual's disconnection from labor, society, and self, thereby emphasizing the role of meaninglessness as a product of systemic conditions rather than purely philosophical abstraction.

Additionally, the study briefly addresses the colonial tension between the Arab and French populations depicted in the novel, highlighting how racial and cultural antagonism reinforce structures of power and marginalization. This dimension deepens the Marxist reading by situating Meursault's personal alienation within a broader context of colonial dominance and social inequality. Ultimately, the paper contends that Meursault's silent resistance and disengagement can be reinterpreted as an unconscious critique of a fractured, alienating society, thereby opening new avenues for understanding the novel beyond its conventional existentialist framework.

Keywords-- Marxist Alienation, Absurdism, Colonial Conflict, Meursault's Indifference, Social Estrangement.

I. INTRODUCTION

The philosophical position of Albert Camus has often been debated in relation to political ideologies, particularly Marxism. Although Camus is generally regarded as an existentialist or absurdist rather than a Marxist thinker, traces of Marxist concerns—especially alienation, class hierarchy, and the dehumanizing structures of society—can be discerned in his novel *The Stranger*.

The narrative, presented through the perspective of the protagonist Meursault, reveals a detached individual whose indifference toward social norms exposes deeper tensions within a stratified society.

Meursault's reaction to his mother's death, marked by emotional neutrality, reflects not only his personal philosophy but also a broader sense of alienation from socially constructed expectations. His position as a subordinate office worker further situates him within a structure that resembles the Marxist division between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The dynamics between Meursault and his employer subtly evoke class oppression, where authority and control are exercised by those in power over those who labor beneath them. As Karl Marx asserts, "Capitalism is based on the exploitation of 'the proletariat' by the 'bourgeoisie'" (Proletariat). This framework allows for a critical reading of Meursault not merely as an absurd hero, but as a figure whose existence reflects the quiet struggles of an individual constrained within an oppressive social order.

Proletarian Solidarity and Marginal Lives

The relationship between Meursault and Raymond deepens into a close, meaningful companionship. When Meursault describes his neighbour, particularly Raymond, he notes that "he's not very popular" and that no one is interested in speaking with him (Ward 28). This observation immediately situates Raymond as a socially marginalized figure. Meursault also informs us that Raymond works as a warehouse guard, a position that aligns him with the working class. In many ways, Raymond mirrors Meursault both financially and psychologically, as both men occupy similar positions within the lower strata of society.

Furthermore, Meursault's description of Raymond's living conditions reinforces this sense of economic limitation. Raymond resides in a modest dwelling consisting of a single room and a small kitchen, lacking even basic features such as a window (Ward 28). This stark and unadorned space reflects his inability to accumulate wealth or attain the comfort enjoyed by higher-ranking officials. Their shared material conditions suggest that both men are constrained by a system that limits their social mobility.



Meursault gradually becomes separated from society because he perceives it as utterly meaningless. His emotional detachment is evident in his failure to express remorse at his mother's funeral. Karl Marx's "theory of alienation" describes "the social alienation of people from aspects of human nature as a consequence of living in a society of stratified social classes" (Marx's Theory of Alienation). Within such a system, workers have no control over their property or labor and are often treated as commodities, which leads to their estrangement from society.

Meursault's outlook reflects this condition of alienation, as he experiences marginalization both socially and within his workplace, particularly in relation to his boss. In search of temporary relief, he goes to the beach with Marie, a former co-worker from his office, and spends time in the water. This moment suggests his attempt to escape the pressures of a monotonous and oppressive life, as well as his desire to distance himself from a society he finds devoid of meaning.

Here is a moment in the narrative where Meursault, Raymond, and Marie meet Masson, Raymond's friend. Meursault describes Masson's house as a small "bungalow" made of wood (Ward 49). This detail suggests that Masson, like the others, belongs to the ordinary working class. Within this context, an underlying antagonism between the Arab and French communities is also revealed. As they arrive at the beach, two Arab men begin following them, which leads to a sudden outbreak of violence. A knife injures Raymond during the confrontation. Later, Meursault and Raymond return to confront the Arabs again, and in the heat of the moment, Meursault shoots and kills one of the Arab men. This incident reflects not only personal conflict but also a broader tension between these two groups—Arab and French—within the colonial setting.

Following the incident, Meursault is arrested and taken to the police station. He states that he does not wish to hire a lawyer, yet the magistrate insists on appointing one for him (Ward 63). He is then placed in a room with only a lamp on the desk (Ward 64), which creates an atmosphere of discomfort and unease. During the interrogation, the magistrate repeatedly questions him about God, which irritates Meursault, as he does not believe in the existence of God or in life after death. At one point, the magistrate brandishes a crucifix before him and claims that God would "forgive" him if he repents (Ward 68). Meursault finds this display fanatical and responds with indifference, even ridicule.

This scene emphasizes Meursault's adherence to a materialist outlook. He appears to value only physical experiences, which is evident in his relationship with Marie and his enjoyment of sensory pleasures, such as swimming at the beach.

His lack of emotional depth and his rejection of spiritual beliefs reinforce his identity as an atheist. According to the Oxford Dictionary, materialism is "the theory or belief that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications" (materialism). Because of his atheism and emotional detachment, Meursault is harshly criticized during the trial. Even the typist remarks that she has never seen a man as hardened as him (Ward 69), further highlighting society's inability to accept his unconventional worldview.

Secondly, Meursault is portrayed as an atheist. During the interrogation, the judge taps him on the shoulder and refers to him as "Monsieur Antichrist" (Ward 71), emphasizing society's condemnation of his disbelief in God. Furthermore, Meursault describes the harsh conditions of his imprisonment: he is forced to sleep on a mat and is not provided with a pillow. This depiction suggests that he is treated poorly in prison. The authorities further strip him of his personal belongings—his "belt, shoelaces, tie, and even his cigarette" (Ward 78). To Meursault, this act symbolizes the loss of his freedom, particularly the removal of his cigarette, which he considers his only companion. His suffering in prison leads him to recall what a nurse once told him about incarceration:

"No, there was no way out; no one can imagine what nights in prison are like" (Ward 81).

Meursault is later taken to the courthouse at seven-thirty in a prison van. His lawyer initially asks him formal questions about his name and address but soon returns to the subject of his mother's death and his reaction at the funeral. Meursault becomes irritated by the repetition of these questions. When asked why he placed his mother in a home, he replies that he did not have enough money to care for her (Ward 87). This response highlights his financial limitations and suggests that, despite working hard, he earns an insufficient income. His economic condition reinforces the idea that he belongs to the proletarian class.

At the beginning of the novel, Meursault is required to meet the director of the home before being allowed to see his mother's body. This interaction presents the director as a figure of authority and superiority, as Meursault must follow institutional procedures before fulfilling his personal desire to see his deceased mother. This moment reflects a subtle power imbalance between the two. The same tension reappears during the trial, where the director serves as a witness. Notably, his testimony differs from that of others. He claims that Meursault showed no remorse at the funeral and did not cry even once. In contrast, other witnesses describe Meursault as a kind and helpful man, noting that he assisted Salamano in searching for his lost dog and helped Raymond by writing a letter (Ward 99). This contrast highlights the conflicting perceptions of Meursault's character within society.



Meursault feels that the prosecutor focuses more on his indifferent behavior than on the actual crime of killing an Arab man. This suggests that the prosecutor deliberately attempts to construct him as a criminal by emphasizing aspects of his personal life rather than the circumstances of the murder. He informs the judge that Meursault went to the beach with his girlfriend the day after Maman's funeral, spent time with her, and engaged in a sexual relationship with Marie. By highlighting these details, the prosecutor seeks to portray Meursault as morally deficient, thereby reinforcing his image as a criminal.

However, Meursault himself does not perceive his actions in the same way, as he did not intend to kill the Arab man. In contrast, the defense lawyer presents Meursault's case in a highly elaborate manner, asserting that he is an innocent man who has helped others, worked hard, and cared for his mother as much as his financial condition allowed. Upon hearing this summation, Meursault feels surprised because the lawyer omits any mention of his indifference at the funeral, which he considers a significant "omission" (Ward 104). This omission suggests that the lawyer is less concerned with presenting the complete truth and more focused on securing success in the case.

It is also notable that when the verdict is announced, Meursault asks the lawyer whether there is any possibility of changing it. The lawyer, however, refuses, stating that he will not go against authority (Ward 106). This response reflects the rigidity of the legal system and its alignment with institutional power. Even after hearing the verdict, Meursault attempts to rationalize his actions, insisting that he killed the Arab in a moment of anger. Interestingly, the lawyer frequently uses the pronoun "I" while presenting the case, which suggests that he seeks to appropriate Meursault's voice and exclude his personal perspective.

Furthermore, the judge declares that Meursault will be executed by decapitation in the "name of the French people" (Ward 107). This moment underscores the oppressive nature of the judicial system, where the jury appears to uphold bourgeois values. As Richard Posner observes, the trial can be seen "as a sinister farce in which the defendant is condemned not for having murdered the Arab but for rejecting the bourgeois values" (Palais de Justice). Consequently, many critics have questioned the fairness and objectivity of the legal procedures depicted in the novel.

There is a clear conflict between theism and atheism presented in this context. Albert Camus himself admitted that he did not believe in God ("Remembering..."), and he projects this disbelief onto Meursault, who is also portrayed as an atheist. Meursault has no sense of hope in his life. When the chaplain requests to meet him in prison, he repeatedly refuses, as he does not wish to listen to any religious sermon.

Instead, he remains preoccupied with the idea of appealing his sentence and escaping the inevitability of his fate. As he articulates, "All I care about right now is escaping the machinery of justice, seeing if there's any way out of the inevitable" (Ward 108).

At times, in frustration, he even expresses a desire to "reform the penal code" (Ward 111). When the chaplain urges him to have faith in God, Meursault firmly rejects the idea, stating that he has no belief in God and no interest in religious preaching. The chaplain also speaks about the afterlife, but Meursault strongly denies its existence. Furthermore, when the chaplain insists that God will forgive his sins, Meursault responds that he has no understanding of sin at all. These instances reinforce his atheistic worldview.

This perspective can be connected to Karl Marx's critique of religion. In *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx argues that "Man makes religion; religion does not make man" (Karl Marx). While the chaplain firmly believes in God's mercy and forgiveness, and the jury members also appear to uphold religious values, Meursault remains detached from such beliefs. It is significant that others address the chaplain as "Father," whereas Meursault calls him "Monsieur" (Ward 120), reflecting his refusal to grant religious authority any special respect. Similarly, when the chaplain attempts to embrace him, Meursault strongly rejects the gesture. This behavior highlights his resistance to religious ideology.

Karl Marx's concepts of alienation and meaninglessness are reflected throughout the text. Meursault is judged not only for killing the Arab man but also for failing to mourn at his mother's funeral. As a result, he begins to see himself as a "stranger" to society. His sense of estrangement stems from his belief that the world is meaningless and that life lacks inherent purpose. This frustration leads him to detach himself from societal expectations. Marx also argued that "in a hierarchical society, the people who are workers become commodities themselves" (Apply Marxist Theory). Meursault's experience reflects this condition, as he works hard yet earns very little and receives minimal respect from society. This reinforces the idea that he belongs to the proletarian class.

A similar theme appears in *The Meursault Investigation* by Kamel Daoud, which re-narrates the story from a different perspective. In this novel, the character Haroun, like Meursault, is also portrayed as an atheist, further extending the exploration of alienation and disbelief.

Toward the end of the novel, when the "sirens blasted," Meursault reflects that "they were announcing departure for a world that now and forever meant nothing to me" (Ward 122). Paradoxically, he experiences a sense of relief, as he feels liberated from the burdens of his existence. Ultimately, he attains a form of acceptance in the face of death.



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As he states, “I felt that I had been happy and I was happy again...” (Ward 123). This realization parallels the idea of finding meaning in struggle, similar to the myth of Sisyphus, where acceptance of one’s fate leads to a sense of contentment despite the apparent absurdity of life.

II. CONCLUSION

Meursault’s gradual detachment from society, the persistent maltreatment he endures, his firm disbelief in God, and his ultimate transformation into a “stranger” collectively reveal the structural forces that marginalize him. His experiences reflect the workings of a hierarchical social order in which individuals are judged not merely by their actions but by their conformity to dominant moral and ideological norms. Through this lens, Meursault emerges as a figure oppressed by the ruling class, whose authority is maintained through legal, social, and religious institutions.

While Albert Camus may not explicitly advocate Marxism, Meursault’s characterization allows for a Marxist interpretation in which his alienation, economic condition, and resistance to societal values expose the oppressive mechanisms of class structure. Therefore, Meursault can be understood not simply as an absurd hero but as a symbolic representation of the oppressed individual, whose indifference becomes a subtle form of resistance against the dominance of the ruling class.

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