

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5.Issue.1., 2018 (Jan-Mar)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

CULTURAL IMPOTENCY OR LACK IN ALBERT CAMUS' PROTAGONIST IN *THE STRANGER*

S. MANOJ

Assistant Professor of English,  
Agurchand Manmull Jain College (Shift II) Affiliated to University of Madras,  
Meenambakkam, Chennai 600114.  
[manojprof1@gmail.com](mailto:manojprof1@gmail.com)



S. MANOJ

ABSTRACT

A person who lacks certain traits which has been followed by the society is seen as a rebel or a stranger, or an outsider. Why is it so? What makes the particular individual qualify to be branded 'stranger.' This article examines the plethora of questions which strikes the mind when one reads Albert Camus' *The Stranger*.

**Albert Camus**, (born November 7, 1913, Mondovi, Algeria—died January 4, 1960, near Sens, France), French novelist, essayist, and playwright, best known for such novels as *L'Étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*), *La Peste* (1947; *The Plague*), and *La Chute* (1956; *The Fall*) and for his work in leftist causes. He received the 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure.

-Albert Camus, *The Stranger*.

If these above-quoted opening lines by the protagonist are anything to go by, the readers are in store for many more shocking revelations as the book takes its course. The readers sense something strange with the protagonist right from the very first line. Why is it so? Is it because he isn't sure when his mother died? Is it his indifference towards his mother passing away or the nonchalant way in which he admits it? Why the novel is titled *The Stranger* in the first place?

Who regards the protagonist as a stranger?

- I. Is it the author, who sees his protagonist as a stranger because of his unique personality?
- II. Or it is the narrator (protagonist) who feels as a stranger in this world.
- III. Or it is the collective voice of the society which sees the protagonist as a person who is against their norms.
- IV. Or is it we (the readers) who consider him as a stranger in comparison with the people who are part of the society, or the so-called ones who exist around us.

In the first place, the narrator feels little remorse on his mother's death; to him it is a natural process. He doesn't create a lot of fuss about it nor does he look to gain sympathy and use it to his advantage. The narrator all through the book is astoundingly practical in his mannerisms and his approach which makes people turn back and take a note of him. His way of going about life is far different from others' approach to life, as they see and live their life as it is prescribed whereas the narrator lives his life in a nonchalant manner.

The narrator receives a telegram informing his mother's death. He informs his employer and starts his journey to the Home where his mother has been put on board. The reason for putting his mother in a Home in

his words is because, "When we lived together, Mother was always watching me, but we hardly ever talked." And when he reaches the Home, the warden says that his mother was very much happier in the Home. And the narrator asserts his decision not to see his mother by saying, "During her first few weeks at the Home she used to cry a good deal. But that was only because she hadn't settled down. After a month or two she'd have cried if she'd been told to leave the Home. Because this, too, would have been a wrench. That was why, during the last year, I seldom went to see her."

Isn't the protagonist true to himself? He plainly states that his mother didn't feel at home with him and it is clear from the lines that they didn't share a great rapport. He felt that his mother needed people around her and he couldn't be with her as he had to take care of his job. His pay too, wasn't sufficient enough to take care of her. It is not that he was indifferent to her or he cared less for her. He did so to provide her the best environment and he had no qualms about it.

He opines to his employer "Sorry, sir, but it's not my fault, you know," before starting on his journey. His mother's sudden death, to him, is no fault of his. His words express his state of mind which doesn't hold him responsible for her demise. To him, it is absolutely a natural process. In other words, an absurd thing which happens in the life of every one, where in the end in a moment of self-realization he realizes about the meaningless process of life and death.

When he reaches the mortuary, the doorkeeper goes to unscrew the coffin, seeing which the protagonist asks him not to open the coffin and he feels rather embarrassed with himself for it. He almost dozes off in the room, thanks to the doorkeeper who keeps the narrator wide awake with his chatter. As the night arrives the doorkeeper hastens to bring coffee as the narrator wasn't hungry to have dinner. The narrator says, "I drank the coffee, and then I wanted a cigarette. But I wasn't sure if I should smoke, under the circumstances—in Mother's presence. I thought it over; really, it didn't seem to matter, so I offered the keeper a cigarette, and we both smoked." The narrator after having his coffee, felt like smoking, but he was hesitant to do so before his mother's coffin. But it didn't matter as she was no more.

The Home has arranged for a vigil before his mother's funeral, it was scheduled to happen in the same room where the coffin was kept. The doorkeeper brought chairs for the inmates, and cups to serve coffee. The narrator with the presence of the inmates felt, "For a moment I had an absurd impression that they had come to sit in judgment on me". This line foreshadows the very execution of his which is going to take place in the end. The inmates who were close to his mother cry their heart out, while he doesn't shed a drop of tear. When a woman who was close to his mother sobbed without a pause he reveals "I wanted her to stop crying, but dared not speak to her". His reaction to the particular occasion during his presence with the coffin which contained his deceased mother has been observed and gauged, on which the very judgment is passed upon in the very end.

One also encounters various other instances where Meursault (Protagonist) is indifferent to his girlfriend (or at least we can assume that she is) Marie when she questions whether he loves her, to which he answers that it doesn't mean anything. He also adds that it would be the same even if it's any other girl, and if people like one another they can be together, and marriage is no complex thing but union of two people. His girlfriend is of the opinion that he is one strange person and that's one valid feature of his which pulls her more towards him. When his boss offers him a chance to work for the Paris branch terming it a chance for a good life he answers that he is already having a good life, or to him it is so. To him life is all the same but with little change in details. He also says that Paris is all dark, dirty and dull when his girlfriend shows her inclination for a scenic Paris.

Our protagonist regrets his mother's death only when a character named Salamano weeps for his lost dog, that's ephemeral too, which is expected of a person who is as detached as Meursault. His association with a guy named Raymond Sintes is but the death knell to him. He goes to Masson's beach house on the invitation of Raymond and Masson. There they exchange blows with two Arabs, one of whom is fooling around with Raymond's mistress. One of the Arabs slashes the hand of Raymond and cuts his mouth too. Raymond is taken away to a hospital. Meursault returns with a revolver from Raymond and shoots an Arab five rounds when he is been shown a knife. He has no valid reason for shooting the Arab but the sun which was way too hot to bear.

When Meursault faces charges of murdering the Arab he is called an antichrist by the magistrate because he doesn't believe in God. The court proceedings go from the charges of murdering an Arab to the accusation of not crying during his mother's funeral. His act of going for a movie with Marie the very next day after his mother's funeral adds up to the charges. Almost everyone who gives witness unknowingly make the case against Meursault strong. And many of the witnesses view Meursault as someone who has been so cruel to his mother by sending her to a Home. Meursault is sentenced to be beheaded for the heinous crime of his alleged indifference to his mother's death and killing an Arab, which is secondary.

He is finally met by a chaplain who promises a happy afterlife for him if he repents, but Meursault is in no mood to believe all that foolishness regarding afterlife. He strongly believes that death is inevitable and no one can escape that. For Meursault, the world is meaningless and purely physical. To him human existence holds no greater meaning. We live and die. And when Meursault is executed he expects quite a gathering "with howls of execration".

#### REFERENCES

- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. NEW YORK: VINTAGE, 1942. Print.
- Heffernan G. (2011) "Mais Personne Ne Paraissait Comprendre" ("But no one Seemed to Understand"): Atheism, Nihilism, and Hermeneutics in Albert Camus' *L'étranger/The Stranger*. In: Tymieniecka AT. (eds) *Destiny, the Inward Quest, Temporality and Life. Analecta Husserliana* (The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research), vol 109. Springer, Dordrecht
- Hudon, Louis. "The Stranger and the Critics." *Yale French Studies*, no. 25, 1960, pp. 59–64. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2928902](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928902).
- Cruikshank, John. "Albert Camus." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 18 Jan. 2018. Web. 21 Jan. 2018.