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Existentialism in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight existentialism in Albert Camus's *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 the some extent, Albert Camus follows the views of Sarte and Kierkaard in his novel *The Stranger*. However, the protagonist, Meursault is stranger to the society. He is a detached figure and he is emotionally indifferent to others, even to his mother and his lover, Marie. He also refuses to adhere to the accepted moral order of society. Through this character, author portrays the meaninglessness in human life.

Keywords

Existentialism; Jean-Paul Sartre; Albert Camus; *The Stranger*.

The philosophy of Existentialism emphasizes on an individual's existence, freedom and choice. It is of 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 the assertion of freedom. Basically, it has been the result of a search for a new method which will make appreciable advance in the understanding of basic ideas or in the treatment of fundamental subjects.

Jean-Paul Sartre is known as the father of existentialist philosophy. He defines human existence rather than the world. He says that man is, "What he makes of himself; which finally lead him to declare that man is a useless passion" (Mora 43). Other critics like Kierkegaard, Simone de Beavoir also defined existentialism. They mainly focus on the question of human existence and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence. It holds that there is no God or any other transcendent force, the only way to counter nothingness. It gives importance to individual's freedom and decision. It stresses the absurd condition of humanity. In these philosophies man is brought into the picture. The essence of their philosophy is human existence. The existentialism describes the ideas of subjectivity, finitude, forlornness, inwardness, authenticity, self-creation, self-transcendence, absolute freedom, estrangement, dread, anticipation, alienation, situation, decision, choice, commitment...etc.

Existentialism is old wine in a new bottle. It has recent origin but the philosophy is old. Some critics trace its origin to Socrates, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx and Bergsion. Some trace its origin in Judaism and in the Bible. Kierkegaard established the doctrines of existentialism that influenced the later existentialists. He stresses on the factual existence of the individual.

To the 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 he is emotionally indifferent

to others, even to his mother and his lover, Marie. He also refuses to adhere to the accepted moral order of society. Through this character, author portrays the meaninglessness in human life. After receiving the telegram about his mother's death, he takes a bus to Marengo. He sleeps for almost the entire trip. That night, Meursault keeps vigil over his mother's body. He smokes a cigarette, drinks coffee and dozes off. He remembers little of the funeral. Even in that night, he happily arrives back to his working place.

The next day, Meursault spends whole day with his lover, Marie Cardona. The two make a date to see a comedy at the theatre and spend the night together. When he wakes up in the morning, Marie is gone. But he stays there till evening to watch the people pass on the street. The following Sunday, he goes to beach with Marie and his neighbor Raymond. They swim happily in the ocean. That afternoon, they run into two Arabs on the beach, one of whom is the brother of Raymond's mistress. A fight breaks out and Raymond is stabbed. For no apparent reason, he shoots Raymond's mistress brother. 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 puts his faith in God. He refuses and magistrate dubs him 'Monsieur Antichrist'.

The novel shares a comparison with philosophies of Nietzsche and Marx, who try to find the meaning of truth in the economic, social and psychological factors. "Basically the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging" (Jain 15). Kierkegaard believes 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" (qtd. in Mora 45). If we try to determine the convictions of existentialism, we would realize that there is an

extreme atheist, theist, a Christian, a catholic, an Anglican, and a Unitarian existentialism.

In this novel, the protagonist is an atheist. His problem is his conflict between reason and unreason and quest for freedom, love and understanding. He tries to exist without losing his individuality. “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).

The novel reminds us of Sartre’s emphasis on the human condition, anguish, and freedom. Meursault tries to attain the stage of detachment from the world of involvement and commitments. He is the stranger to the society. He believes that society is strange to him. Finally he declares that human existence holds no greater meaning. He accepts that he is correct in his decision. He does not believe the meaninglessness in the physical world. Birth and death are natural. But society blames him for the lack of moral feelings. He fights for his own freedom and decision. He decides to lead a happy life without giving importance to moral feelings. It is not a crime to him. But everyone blames him and even the lawyer diverts the case by arguing about his character in the court. People who attend the funeral become eye-witnesses and they inform the judge what happened in the funeral. Even his mistress tells what happened on the next day. So, his lack of moral feeling threatens the society. He is found guilty and is sentenced to death. He has trouble to accept the certainty and inevitability of his fate. His friend Chaplain urges him to renounce his atheism and turn to God, but Meursault refuses and shout 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.

As a matter of fact, man cannot be defined at all. He is a unique individual, a purely subjective being who commits himself or ought to commit

himself by deciding what to be. In his work, *The Single Individual and Crowd*, Kierkegaard stresses that crowd is untruth. He further argues that one is responsible for whatever one is, and self-conscious choice and commitment are the factors that make a person more human.

To conclude, we can say that Camus shares 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-anguish, freedom, abandonment and despair. In fact, *The Stranger* contains a strong resonance of Camus's philosophical notion of absurdity. Camus asserts that individual lives and human existence in general have no rational meaning or order.

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