Literature and Social Protest: Understanding Albert Camus' *The Outsider*

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Abstract

There is perhaps no other tool, that can be effectively wielded by man to influence the mind and heart of man, than literature. Since time immemorial, various forms of literature including fiction have been used to protest against evil, raise awareness about the rights of people, generate public opinion and to bring about reforms in society. In these attempts, fiction undoubtedly, has been able to bring radical changes in society. The works of the French-Algerian existentialist Albert Camus have made important and forceful contributions to a wide range of issues in moral philosophy – from terrorism and political violence to suicide, the death penalty, among others. Camus is pre-eminently honoured by people as a writer of conscience and champion of imaginative literature. His works have been able to serve as a vehicle of philosophical insight and moral truth. This paper shall attempt to give an analytical description of social protest in fiction with reference to Albert Camus' The Outsider and find out the nature and effectiveness of social protest in the said work.

Key words: Bourgeois ethics, Conformist society, Social protest, Non-conformity, Social criticism.

The relation between literature and society is deep-rooted and has had always a profound bearing on the mindset of people. Notwithstanding the changes brought in the area of reading by the onslaught of latest technology, literature continues to thrive though in new forms. There is no better example of the closeness of the connection between society and its literature than is supplied by the novel. Every change in the public taste has been followed by a corresponding

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variety of fiction, until it is difficult to specify all the schools into which novelists have divided themselves. Fiction has not been confined to the study of manners and character, but has been extensively used as a tool to propagate opinions and to argue causes and has played a significant role in moulding opinion of people and bringing about change or reform in society.

The aim of this paper is to attempt an analytical description of social protest in literary forms especially fiction, with reference to a social problem or social protest novel like Albert Camus' *The Outsider* and to make an enquiry regarding the nature of such a role which this novel has assumed and to find out whether it has been effectual in enacting the same.

Related with the growth of mid-century realism, "social fiction" is a broad term comprising industrial novels, condition of England novels, social problem novels, novels-with-a-purpose, and the *roman à these* (Keen, par.1). Inspired in different ways by the works of William Godwin, Thomas Carlyle and by religious tracts, the social novel as a genre does not uphold a fixed political position. The social novel, also known as the social problem (or social protest) novel, can be defined as a "work of fiction in which a prevailing social problem, such as gender, race, or class prejudice, is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel". Some more definite examples of social problems dealt with in such works are poverty, situation in factories and mines, the problem of child labour, violence against women, increasing crime and epidemics because of over-crowding, and poor hygiene in cities ("Social Novel," par.1). It is also used to describe mid-19th-century fiction which examined specific exploitation and suffering concerning the working classes. Mostly written from a middle-class viewpoint, it sometimes aimed to bring about legislation and so on ("Social Problem Novel", par.1).

The earliest examples of writers practising this form include Harriet Martineau, in her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-5), Mrs. F.Trollope, in *Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy* (1839-40), and Charles Dickens, in *Oliver Twist* (1837). In the Hungry Forties, the social problem novel became the instrument of Disraeli's Tory "Young England" movement, in *Coningsby*, *Sybil* (1845), and *Tancred* (1847), C. Kingsley offered a Christian Socialist account in *Yeast, A Problem* (1848)

and *Alton Locke (1850)*; and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* ,1848 and *North and South*, 1854-5 presented a more nuanced Christian consideration of the Condition of England and fostered understanding between masters and men on the basis of common humanity and material interests, as a way forward. The social problem novel of the 1830s, 1840s, and early 1850s lost force when the Chartist moment was passed, but the long process of enfranchisement started by the first Reform Bill and the Chartist agitation continued through the 1880s, and late Victorian novels such as Hardy's and Gissing's still engaged in social problems. While the overt "industrial" novel disappeared after the 1850s, the Condition of England remained a theme for British novelists throughout the century till the present day (Keen, par.1).

Possibly, Victor Hugo's 1862 work *Les Misérables* was the most significant social protest novel of the 19th Century in Europe. His work deals with most of the political and social issues and artistic leanings of his time. Among other French writers, Émile Zola's social protest works include *L'Assommoir* (1877) which dealt with life in an urban slum and *Germinal* (1885) about a coal miners' strike, which was described by Zola as throwing up the twentieth century's most important question, namely the clash between the forces of modern Capitalism and the welfare of human beings essential for its development. Both Hugo and Zola were politically active and faced banishment owing to their political positions. Russian author Leo Tolstoy supported reform for his own country, particularly in education but did not consider his most famous work, *War and Peace t*o be a novel nor did he consider many of the great Russian fictions written at that time to be novels ("Social Novel", pars.9-11). Harriet Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* not only depicted the plight of slaves in America, it was able to generate worldwide compassion for them and changed the minds of great leaders as well, leading to the abolition of slavery (Patsani, par.1).

In the same vein, *The Outsider* is an assertion of radical opposition from Albert Camus. Camus sets Meursault's story in French-occupied Algeria in the 1930's and through the story, wants to show that society would inevitably harass someone who refuses to enact the game of conventional social behaviour. Camus has his unconventional, individualistic protagonist condemned to death in a

court of law not for what he did but for who he is. The premise is of course unbelievable, the more so because Meursault is a French Algerian who murdered an Arab. No jury would have even heard about Meursault solely on the basis of his inner life. Camus's solution was ingenious: he made his protagonist commit an "innocent" murder that carries no explanation or motivation. In other words, the murder is a ploy to get the protagonist into court (Ryken, pars.5-6).

"Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: Your mother passed away..."(Camus 13). The hero, Meursault is sensual and well-meaning, profoundly in love with life, whose least pleasures , from a bathe to a yawn, afford him complete and silent fulfillment. He lives without anxiety in a continuous present and has no need to think or to express himself (Connolly 8).This is how he lives: in the present over which he has no control. There is a sarcastic, rather touching humour in these dry terse statements, very effective in their restraint. One may question as to who this man is, with such elementary reactions, so manifestly a stranger in the world and yet so close to us? Camus has already provided the answer in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: Meursault is each one of us, the human animal of our time par excellence. He is man the absurd, man born into an oppressive universe, man the robot, man without hope, love and God. He could well have been Don Juan, a rebel, a hero, or merely a victim - and in fact he is the epitome of man, the embodiment of human misery in the mask of a humble Algerian employee. With superb creativity, Camus describes Meursault's day-to-day existence and the way in which he is gradually and unintentionally brought to the threshold of death. After each warning signal, there is a breathing space in which he has the impression that nothing has really happened (Cruickshank 165). "It occurred to me that somehow I'd got through another Sunday, that Mother now was buried , and tomorrow I'd be going back to work as usual. Really, nothing in my life had changed" (Camus 32). And in fact, life recommences its course. Meursault's boss offers him a job in Paris, his mistress asks him to marry her, but it is all the same to him. It doesn't make any difference whether it is Paris or Algiers, marriage or an affair. Then one Sunday, as he is taking a walk in the suburbs of Algiers, something happens, in which a fight breaks out between some friends of Meursault's and two Arabs who have

followed them to pick a quarrel. At first, everything seems to disappear in the glare of the sun: a revolver is shoved into Meursault's hands, but he does not use it; the episode is finished and he will take his siesta and forget it. Then he sees one of the Arabs lying on the ground and steps forward to avoid the sun. The Arab draws a knife, and Meursault loses his head: "Then everything began to reel before my eyes...Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver...with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began... I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the supreme calm of the beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more...and each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing" (Camus 64).

Meursault's guilt, lawfully, is not to be doubted: he has killed a man and that is for nothing. It is an utterly unwarranted , motiveless crime. Meursault finds himself in prison. His past will be brought to bear on his future, and the most insignificant details of his life will be seized on by the prosecution. Meursault is innocent as a man, but in the eyes of the law his act has revealed him as he really is: a born criminal. There is thus a dichotomy in Meursault's experience of his own life and the way in which society sees it. Meursault is present at his trial without really being involved in it as he cannot identify himself with the person described by his accusers. He learns that he never loved his mother: the concierge "said I'd declined to see Mother's body, I'd smoked cigarettes and slept, and drunk coffee. It was then I felt a sort of wave of indignation spreading through the courtroom, and for the first time I understood that I was guilty"(Camus 91).

Thereafter, a series of trivial acts are given a significance Meursault neither anticipated nor intended. A particularly unfavourable impression is produced on the public and the jury when they learn that Meursault went to a Fernandel film the day after his mother's death. From that moment, all evidence in favour of the accused is of little help since his behaviour when his mother died proves that he was already a criminal by nature. Thereafter, it all moves very quickly, and for a moment Meursault hears again all the familiar sounds of the town he loved: "The shouts of newspaperboys in the already languid air, the last calls of birds in the public gardens...the screech of trams at the steep corners of hills," and he is astonished to see that "familiar paths may lead as well to prison as to innocent,

carefree sleep." There is one incident when the chaplain visits Meursault in his cell. Meursault had raised no protest when the death sentence was pronounced, but now something shatters inside him: "He [the chaplain] seemed so cocksure, you see. And yet none of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair. What difference could they make to me, the death of others, or a mother's love, or his God, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to 'choose' me? His turn too would come like the others. And what difference could it make, after being charged with murder, he were executed because he didn't weep at his mother's funeral?"(Camus 118).Thereafter, it doesn't matter much whether he regains peace of mind, sleeps quietly, rediscovers the sights and sounds of the countryside, can savour the fragrance of the night and the earth, the salt tang of the air, the drowsy calm of summer, and that, evidently purged of evil by his angry outburst, he can accept the "benign indifference" of the world (Camus 120). He now hopes that the crowd will condemn him on the day of his execution. He has given up human friendship, refusing to look beyond his death. He has stopped being a victim, and may even believe himself a hero. He has, in a way, made an attempt to rise above the society which has condemned him (Cruickshank 166).

The misfortunes into which Meursault is led by his lazy desire to please and by his obstinate truthfulness gradually force the felt but unspoken philosophy of his existence to come to light and finally to express itself in words (Connolly 8). In his long essay on suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus says that the Suicide is a coward, he is one who forsakes the struggle with fate; the Condemned Man however, has the chance to rise above the society which has condemned him and by his courage and intellectual liberation to overthrow it (9). The Bourgeois Machinery with its decaying Christian morality, and bureaucratic self-righteousness which condemns the Outsider just because he is so foreign to it, is typical of a European code of justice applied to a non-european people (9). The protagonist's journey through the conformist society offer us a powerful view of the world from the margin, and is in no doubt an example of social commentary. The novel is very different in its approach to social criticism. The majority of Meursault's first person narration is unemotional, detached and matter-of-fact.

Meursault gives as much emotion to phrases such as "Mother died today," as he does to seemingly trivial actions such as "I took the two- o'clock bus. It was a blazing hot afternoon" (Camus, 13). This approach, however, does not take away from its ability to offer us an 'outsider' perspective on the world. It instead does the opposite, as Camus uses these techniques and this characterisation to portray Meursault as a true outsider, who lives his life in a way that no-one else does – completely removed from things he considers unimportant. Algeria was in the middle of violent civil conflict at the time the novel is set, and this does not get mentioned by Meursault, showing that he is not focused on such matters. For the most part then, one can even go as far to say that 'The Outsider' is not a criticism of society until the closing chapters, when Meursault is deemed a "monster" not because of the freak murder of the Arab at the beach, but because he did not cry at his mother's funeral. Society could not accept Meursault for being an outsider and for burying his mother as done by a merciless criminal in the words of the prosecuting lawyer, and so he was sentenced to death and removed for his non-conformity and oddness. Even in his final hours, society tried to make him conform by way of religion, which caused Meursault to explode in an outburst of joy and anger as he claimed that he was correct or right all of the time as the absurd world around him meant nothing.

Therefore, the stranger or the outsider is "man confronting the world", "the stranger is also a man among men", "the stranger is, finally, myself in relation to myself, that is, natural man in relation to mind." But that is not all, there is passion of the absurd, who will not commit suicide, who wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusion, and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. The stranger Camus wants to portray is precisely one of those terrible innocents who shock society by not accepting the rules of its game. He lives among outsiders but to them, too, he is a stranger. That is why some people like him- for example, his mistress, Marie, who is fond of him because he is strange or odd. Others like the courtroom crowd whose hatred he suddenly feels mounting towards him, hate him for the same reason (Sartre 110-111).Camus himself says in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "a man is more

of a man because of what he does not say than what he does say"(Quoted in Sartre 115). In the struggle between the two selves, the authentic self of Meursault maintains its supremacy over the authorized self till his life's end. However, each time his authentic self is threatened by social forces, he invents ways to defend it. At the end, by its courage and intellectual liberation tries to nullify the social forces, making Meursault no longer the victim but the hero.

The reader's responses to the protagonist Meursault inevitably has a wide range. One cannot avoid feeling a bond with him in his rejection of his society's depravity. Mainly, one is repelled by him even as one finds him intriguing. However, there is Camus's own statement about how he himself regarded his protagonist in his preface to an American translation of the novel: "One would . . . not be much mistaken to read *The Stranger* as the story of a man who, without any heroics, agrees to die for the truth. . . . I have tried to draw in my character the only Christ we deserve". In turn, we need to "be ourselves" as Christian readers (Quoted in Ryken, pars.5-6).That a new creed of happiness, charity and justice should be brought to men is what gets revealed in the novel. *The Outsider* is only a stage. He is negative destructive force who shows up the unreality of bourgeois ethics. It is not enough to love life, we must teach everyone else to love it, we must appreciate that happiness is consciousness, and consciousness is one, that all its manifestations are sacred, and it is from these newer schools of novelists and poets in all countries that one day we will learn it (Connolly10).

Novels of social protest work to examine the empty spaces of disillusion. Writing, as representation, such as the social protest fiction works as a tool of protest because it can erase formal boundaries that in real social space create isolation and oppression. To conclude, we can say that *The Outsider* most certainly, is a strong example of social protest and criticism, but in a unique way. It is not a protest in the form of verbal and open denunciation of conformity but it is a subtle tale of the conformist society cleansing itself of an outsider who did not go out of his way to rebel, but simply chose to live his life the way he wanted. It has achieved the goal of criticising our conformist society in a way that is different and awe-inspiring.

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