

## CRITIQUING CAMUS, DENOUNCING ISLAMISM: KAMEL DAOUD'S THE MEURSAULT INVESTIGATION AS DOUBLE-EDGED POSTCOLONIAL REWRITING

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### **Abstract**

*Kamel Daoud's The Meursault Investigation (2015) is a recent addition to the category of postcolonial rewriting, a field enriched with seminal texts like Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea and J. M. Coetzee's Foe. Ostensibly a counter-text to Albert Camus's classic novel The Stranger (1942), Daoud's debut novel is an equally fierce indictment of post-Independence Algerian society, particularly the Islamist sweep over Algeria and its authoritarian interpretation of religion. Narrated from the perspective of Harun, the brother of the nameless Arab Meursault kills in Camus's novel, The Meursault Investigation is for the major part an attempt at the restitution of the dignity, honour and identity of the colonized Algerian subject. However, being a staunch individualist, Daoud does not mouth the patriotic rhetoric of most fellow Algerians, nor does he capitulate to the diktats of the religious fanatics, thus inviting criticism from both the nationalists and the Muslim conservatives. The paper examines this ambivalent self-positioning of Daoud's novel between Camus and Algeria, imperialism and Islamism.*

**Keywords:** *Camus, meursault, algeria, islamism, postcolonial, rewriting.*

“A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete” (Borges 11)

“Writing is compulsorily affiliated to re-writing” (Gamal 1)

“At the foundation of any writing there is a predatory act.” (Kamel Daoud)

The concepts of writing back to the Empire and rewriting canonical Eurocentric texts are well established in Postcolonial Literature and Postcolonial Studies. Postcolonial re-writings of canonical texts such as Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique (Friday, or, The Other Island)* (1967), JM Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) both re-writings of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a counter text to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, have served both as continuations as well as critiques of the canonical texts they sought to rework. A recent addition to this category of writing is Kamel Daoud's debut novel *The Meursault Investigation* (2015).

Albert Camus's classic novel *The Stranger* (1942), is narrated from the perspective of the pied noir<sup>1</sup> protagonist, Meursault; the palimpsest that lies submerged under this canonical tale about Meursault and the post-War European's existential angst, is the story of Meursault's victim, the nameless Arab. The Arab is a marginal figure in Camus's story, a defenceless, voiceless victim. When Meursault is tried following the murder, the fact that he killed an Arab, or another human being, for that matter, appears less important to the Court than his unfeeling, apathetic nature. Meursault is sentenced to death not for homicide, but for refusing to cry at his mother's funeral. As Meursault himself puts it, “... in the speeches of my lawyer and the prosecuting counsel a great deal was said about me; more, in fact, about me personally than about my crime.” (Camus 98). The murder of the Arab is only a pretext for Meursault's trial, condemnation and execution. The Arab himself is rendered almost invisible in Camus's existential tale. He is not even the Other; it is the society, that sits in judgement on Meursault and punishes him for not conforming, which

constitutes the Other in the novel. The focus of the novel almost exclusively remains on the socially estranged, non-conformist hero.

Albert Camus, born and brought up in French Algeria, was not a colonialist. In fact, it was the anti-colonial propaganda of the Communist Party that inspired him to join its ranks. However, his (ambivalent) views about Algerian national independence have invited controversy, even a hundred years after his death. Camus supported Arab aspirations for political rights, but he could not imagine an independent Algeria (Beardsley). Edward Said unambiguously states that in the last years of his life, “Camus publicly and even vehemently opposed the nationalist demands put forward for Algerian independence” (*Culture and Imperialism*: 178). Said makes this observation quoting Camus' own words:

As far as Algeria is concerned, national independence is a formula driven by nothing other than passion. There has never yet been an Algerian nation. The Jews, Turks, Greeks, Italians or Berbers would be as entitled to claim the leadership of this potential nation. As things stand, the Arabs do not comprise the whole of Algeria. ... The French of Algeria are also natives in the strong sense of the word. Moreover, a purely Arab Algeria could not achieve that economic independence, without which political independence is nothing but an illusion. (quoted in Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 179).

Critical approaches to *The Stranger*, for a long time, had also almost exclusively been focussed on its absurdist, existentialist dimensions and the perspective of the Arab is conspicuous by its absence. In some of the critical approaches to the text, Meursault's sentence is regarded as unwarranted because the murder is, involuntary, even innocent and not premeditated (René Girard 61-65). None of the readings in Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Interpretations* of the novel even barely mentions the silencing of the Arab. The socio-political implications of a French-Algerian murdering an Arab and being tried intriguingly for his behaviour at his mother's funeral are invariably ignored, or if at all considered, examined only from the point of view of the hero, Meursault. René Girard's reading would illustrate this:

Textually speaking, the relationship between Meursault and his murder cannot be expressed in terms of motivation, as would be the case with an ordinary criminal, but it is nevertheless felt to be essential, rather than accidental. From the very beginning of the novel we sense that something frightful is going to happen and that Meursault can do nothing to protect himself. The hero is innocent, no doubt, and this very innocence will bring about his downfall (Girard 63).

Postcolonial criticism reversed this trend of reading *The Stranger* from exclusively Meursault's point of view and of viewing Meursault's tragedy as a parable of the human condition. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes: “True, Meursault kills an Arab, but this Arab is not named and seems to be without a history, let alone a mother and a father; true also Arabs die of plague in Oran, but they are not named either...” (*Culture and Imperialism* 175-76). Following Said, there have been attempts to read the novel through the postcolonial lens: Michael Azar's “The Stranger, the Mother and the Algerian Revolution: A Postcolonial Reading of Albert Camus” (2010), Mirela Karagic's study *Representation of the Other: A Postcolonial Study of the Representation of the Natives in Relation to the Colonizers in The Stranger and Disgrace* (2013) and Ashraful Hasan's “Colonial implications in Albert Camus's *The Outsider* (2014) are examples. Michael Azar raises some pertinent questions about the submerged story of the Arab:

Why does Meursault fire four more shots at an already lifeless body...? Why are there no Arabs present at the trial? Why are so many of them in jail and why are they all nameless? And why is a Frenchman who has just killed an Arab in Algeria sentenced to death by the French colonial authorities for not weeping at his mother's funeral? What kind of social order has Meursault struck out against? (Azar 09)

More than half a century after the publication of Camus's novel, Kamel Daoud, an Algerian journalist-turned-novelist, takes up many of these and other disconcerting questions in his debut novel, *The*

*Meursault Investigation*. Daoud resurrects and foregrounds the story of the murdered Arab, silenced/erased in Camus's novel, seeking to redress a grave injustice done to the Arab as well as Algeria. Adam Shatz remarks how Algerian nationalist critics have long spoken about *The Stranger* as if the murder it described had actually happened and Camus, whose opposition to Algerian independence was difficult for many Algerian writers to forgive, had committed it.

Postcolonial literature is characterised not merely by resistance to colonial subjugation and undermining/marginalisation of the culture(s) of the colonised, but equally by an indictment of post-Independence governments and politics. Postcolonial Indian English writers like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, for example, have been fiercely critical of the ineptitude, intolerance and corruption of the post-Independence Indian administrative machinery. Kamel Daoud's novel is avowedly a postcolonial counter text, deploying the postmodern narrative strategies of intertextuality, irony and subversion. At the same time, it offers a critique of post-Independence Algerian society and politics as well. Daoud is critical of both military rule and Islamism, the two options Algerians had been left with since the end of colonialism (Shatz). This paper looks at how the novel serves as a double-edged critique of Camus and colonialism, Algeria and Islamism.

Daoud's novel may be considered an example of historiographic metafiction, a mode of narration Linda Hutcheon associates with postmodern fiction. Postmodernism's relationship to the "worldly", according to Hutcheon, is still on the level of discourse... After all, we can only "know" (as opposed to "experience") the world through our narratives (past and present) of it, or so postmodernism argues (Hutcheon "Historiographic" 9). The present, as well as the past, is always already irremediably textualized for us (Belsey 46). It is this text-manufactured and mediated account of an Algerian's life that Daoud subverts and reconstructs in his novel.

Intertextuality is obviously a feature of Daoud's novel. A text "cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system" (Still and Worton 1) Graham Allen observes, "the act of reading [...] plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts" (1). Daoud's text offers such an intertextual experience. It is shot through with literary echoes, of *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, apart from *The Stranger*, true to the intertextual character of postcolonial and postmodern texts.

Ahmed Gamal observes that metafiction is markedly criticized for its turn toward textuality and away from history (1). Kamel Daoud's novel escapes this criticism, with its flashes into post-Independence Algerian political and social history and its avowed mission of recuperating the personal and family histories of the nameless Algerian 'Arab', which has been literally erased in Meursault's narration. The blurb of the book, announces it as "a profound meditation on Arab identity and the disastrous effects of colonialism in Algeria".

Daoud does not make any pretensions about his intentions. Right at the outset of the book, he makes it clear that his is a rewriting of the murderer's (Meursault's) tale, "in the same language, but from left to right" (*Meursault* 7). Written as the confessions/ruminations of Harun, the brother of the murdered Arab (whom Daoud names Musa), the narration is addressed to an unnamed Frenchman at a bar in Oran.

In Camus's tale, we do not get to hear the mother's side of the story, beginning as it does with the announcement of her death and being entirely focussed on the existential predicament of its protagonist. "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" is how Camus's novel opens, and the narrative emphasis is on the detachment of the protagonist to the event (Camus 3). Daoud gives a curious twist to this. Harun, the brother of the murdered Arab from whose perspective the novel is written, opens the book thus: "Mama's still alive today. She doesn't say anything now, but there are many tales she could tell" (*Meursault* 1). It is such unsaid, imagined tales that constitute the focus of Daoud's book. However, this should not be taken to mean that the rewriting is done from a feminist perspective. Many of Harun's

observations, in fact, reek of sexism. "The novel brims over with . . . unsettling female images", says Robin Yassin-Kassab. The mother, however, unlike Meursault's, is an exacting matriarchal presence, goading Harun on, in the path of revenge.

Daoud's narration is rambling, self-conscious. The first chapter of the novel can be called a naming act: Daoud gives the murdered Arab a name, Musa. Daoud calls him Musa alias Zuji (which means 2 pm in Algerian Arabic, the time Meursault killed the Arab). "Musa, Musa, Musa . . . I like to repeat the name from time to time so it doesn't disappear. I insist on that, and I want you to write it in big letters. Half a century after his birth and death, a man has just been given a name. I insist." (Daoud, *Meursault* 14).

In a lecture delivered at Yale University on 9 November 2015, Daoud draws attention to the paradox of the White man's desire to classify the world of the colonised while erasing the man, when he encounters the Other. The White man gives names to many things the plants, animals and the insects, but takes away the man's name. For him, the Black is simply the Black, the Arab is the Arab and Friday is Friday. (Daoud "Meursault and the Arab"). So naming Camus's nameless Arab assumes political significance for Daoud. "It's as important to give a dead man a name as it is to name a newborn infant. Yes, it's very important. My brother's name was Musa." (Daoud, *Meursault* 22).

Naming the Arab is the first definitive step towards the reclamation of his identity, an inevitable act for the colonized subject, for, "nobody at all ever tried to find out what the victim's name was, or where he lived, or what family he came from, or whether he had children" (Daoud *Meursault* 4). This profound act of the retrieval of erased subject-hood is punctuated by Daoud's light-hearted take on the closing of bars in Algeria in the name of religion; Harun says he will have to wait till his death to enjoy a drink, for, "in these parts, you get offered the best liquors after your death, not before . . . in a few years . . . the only bar still open will be in Paradise" (*Meursault* 5).

The thorny question of language the charge of inauthenticity that every Francophone writer has to face in Algeria Harun and, by extension, Daoud, are rather painfully aware of. Harun is narrating the story for his brother, which can only be done in the language which Camus and Meursault used to render the Arab invisible. Daoud presents Musa as a real life figure. Any vestige of Musa's existence, Daoud writes, has been wiped out clean: his body was not found; there is no trace of it in the police reports, in the minutes of the trial, in the book or in the cemeteries. In postcolonial Algeria, not just the language of the colonists, even their cemeteries are decolonized/appropriated; we are told of street children playing ball with the disinterred skulls of the colonists.

Citing Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) as an example of the double-coding of postmodern historiographic fiction, Linda Hutcheon says that Rushdie's text

points in two directions at once, toward the events being represented in the narrative and toward the act of narration itself. This is precisely the same doubleness that characterizes all historical narrative. Neither form of representation can separate 'fact' from the acts of interpretation and narration that constitute them, for facts (though not events) are created in and by those acts. And what actually becomes fact depends as much as anything else on the social and cultural contexts of the historian (*Politics* 76).

In Daoud's novel this double codedness, Linda Hutcheon speaks about, assumes a postcolonial valency. Self-reflexivity, a feature of postcolonial re-writings, evidences itself in Harun's description of his narrative as "patched up . . . infinitely rehashed" (*Meursault* 51). Harun, as Daoud metonymically, is conscious of how the act of representation itself is crucial in reconstructing the fact of Musa's life and death and of Algerian social, political and cultural history.

Along with its indictment of Camus and his erasure of the Algerian Arab, the novel also offers a powerful critique of the post-Independence Algerian society, particularly the Islamist movement's hijacking of religion. The country's post-Independence enthusiasm has consumed itself; it is a land where women look upon their bodies only as sin or shame. "God, how I loathe the city of Algiers," cries Harun

(*Meursault* 139). Harun cannot make sense of the shuttering of the country's bars in the name of religion: "Why is it (wine) treated as though it's of the devil, when it's supposed to be flowing profusely in Paradise? Why is it forbidden down here and promised up there?" (*Meursault* 51).

This disenchantment with Islamism develops into a distancing from and an abhorrence of institutionalised religion(s). "As far as I'm concerned, religion is public transportation I never use" (*Meursault* 65). He loathes Friday, God's day, disapproves of the practice of veiling and finds "strange redundancies, repetitions, lamentations, threats and daydreams" in the *Quran*, which appears to him like "a soliloquy spoken by some old night watchman" (*Meursault* 71). If it is a single priest who visits Meursault in his cell, a whole pack of religious fanatics hounds Harun, whom he drives away shouting that he has so little time left he does not want to waste it on God. He goes to the extent of imagining that his neighbours envy his independence, by which he means freedom from the shackles of religion. Harun's is a personal engagement with God; he feels like climbing to the top of the prayer tower and bellowing out "I'm free, and that God is a question, not an answer, and that I want to meet him alone, at my death as at my birth" (*Meursault* 139), a remark that has autobiographical echoes. Daoud himself once remarked that he preferred to meet with God on foot, by himself, rather than in an "organized trip" to a mosque (Shatz). An ex-Islamist, Daoud is no longer a practising Muslim and describes himself as philosophically close to Buddhism.

The novel does not drum up patriotic or nationalist sentiments. Harun does not take part in the Algerian War of Liberation. Instead he avenges the colonist's injustice to his family by murdering a French, whom he does not know, against whom he does not hold any grudge. The intermediary state in which Harun finds himself, much to the annoyance of the new lords of the land, i.e., neither with the mujahids, nor a sympathiser of/collaborator with the colonists, allegorises the liminal self-positioning of Daoud's book. There is an ambivalence about the object of its critique, directed as it is against both the French settlers and the new rulers of the land. As Yassin-Kassab rightly points out, the novel constantly plays between imprisoning dualities: French imperialist or Algerian nationalist, French or Arabic, man-written or God-written, Meursault or Harun.

By a curious twist of events, Harun is arrested not for committing a murder but for not committing it at the right moment, i.e., during the War of Liberation at a time when Frenchmen and Arabs alike were dying more or less everywhere in the country. But in the first days of Independence, the killing was gratuitous, absurd. The patriotic rant of the colonel who interrogates Harun strikes the reader with its absurd, farcical overtones: "This Frenchman, you should have killed him with us, during the war, last week... It makes all the difference" (109). Before 5 July 1962, Harun, killing a Frenchman, would have been a liberator rather than a murderer. If the gratuitousness of the murder of Musa appeared unconscionable to Harun and the reader, Harun's gratification of revenge, a postcolonial attempt at the restitution of the dignity, honour and identity of the colonized, has been divested of its political and cultural significance by the grandiloquent rhetoric of patriotism.

At the heart of many postcolonial rewritings is "the paradox that in the very act of offering a more authoritative, a more informed account of their history, they also fundamentally question all claims to authority" (Innes 57). Daoud is fiercely critical of the Islamist movement's authoritarian imposition of its monolithic perception of Islam. His criticism of post-Independence Algerian society is mostly targeted at the ubiquitous and tyrannical presence of religious orthodoxy in the public sphere. Much to the chagrin of the Algerian nationalists Daoud considers himself an Algerian, not an Arab. He refused to sympathise with the Palestinian cause on religious grounds. In the column titled, "Why I Am Not 'in Solidarity' With Palestine", published during the war in Gaza, Daoud said he did not like the implication that he had to be in solidarity with Palestine because he was a Muslim. At the same time, he was not in solidarity with Israel either. He opposed Israel's bombing for anticolonial and humanitarian reasons, not religious or ethnic ones. What he resented, in the call to solidarity with Palestine, was not the cause itself but the pressure to

unify under the banner of Arab and Islamic identity (Shatz).

Daoud said in an interview that what interested him most about Camus' book is its take on religion. "The most powerful scene in *The Stranger* is the confrontation between the priest and the condemned man. Meursault is indifferent with women, with the judge, but he becomes choleric in the face of the priest. And here, in my novel, is someone revolting against God. Harun, for me, is a hero in a conservative society" (Shatz). This explains why Daoud's book stirred a hornet's nest in Algeria. Though adored by liberal French-speaking Algerians, Daoud is reviled among both Islamists as well as the nationalists and leftists, who see him as hostile to his own society. On 16 December 2014, Salafi leader Abdelfatah Hamadache declared a fatwa condemning Daoud. The Algerian novelist Rachid Boudjedra, who himself has fled Algeria to escape the Islamist threat, has denounced Daoud as one of those writers trying to get a literary visa, who go to France and lick their boots (Shatz).

By contrast, the western critical reception of the book, judging by the endorsements that constitute the peritext<sup>2</sup> of Daoud's book, has been overwhelming; this might raise sinister doubts about Daoud's replication (?) of neo-Orientalist stereotypes about Islam and the Muslim world. "A stereotype is an oversimplified and usually value-laden view of the attitudes, behaviour and expectations of a group or individual. Such views which may be deeply embedded in sexist, racist or otherwise prejudiced cultures are typically highly resistant to change, and play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of members of the culture to others." (Edgar 380-81). Edward Said's *Orientalism* and much post Saidian scholarship have illustrated with countless examples how stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims have long fed the popular literary imagination and the western media under the guise of truthful representations (Said *Orientalism*, Kahf, Shryock, Macfie, Salaita). Since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, there has been a proliferation of texts claiming to "unveil," get "behind the veil," and "expose" the "hidden world" of Islam and Muslim societies. Fatemeh Keshavarz, an Iranian writer, calls this mode of writing New Orientalist. She writes: "Out of the post Cold War, and now post 9/11, a need to refashion the "enemy" of the West, a popularized version of the Orientalist approach to the Muslim Middle East is emerging." In these Neo-Orientalist narratives, Muslims are portrayed as dogmatic, intolerant, regressive, barbaric and anti-modern. In Daoud's portrayal too, the Algerian Arab invariably appears dogmatic and obsessed with religion.

It may also be observed here that the primacy of individual liberty is a leitmotif of the book, a principle fundamentally associated with Western Enlightenment thinking and hailed by the liberal Western readership. *Wall Street Journal* review draws attention to the contemporary resonances in the book, given the role of political Islam in the country in recent times. It praises the novel as a "shrewd critique of a country trapped in history's time warp" (emphasis added). *The Economist* review perceives in the book "a lamentation for a modern Algeria gripped by pious fundamentalism". According to *The New Yorker*, Daoud "seeks not to re-indict the colonizing French but to relate all the disappointments that the dream of free Algeria has produced for the 'natives', particularly their degradation by political Islam" (emphasis added). Interestingly, Daoud's book had been well-received to admiring reviews in Algeria before its publication in France and before being nominated for the Prix Goncourt in September 2014, when it stirred controversy back home. However, just because the book was well-received in France, one cannot say Daoud misrepresents his society, culture and religion. His denunciation and rejection of organized religion stems from his distasteful experience of the Islamist (mis)appropriation of religious faith and unleashing of terror and violence in the name of religion. To cite an instance, more than 70 journalists were murdered by Islamist rebels during the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, the so-called Black Decade. It is the betrayal of hope and the collapse of illusions about a tolerant, pluralistic, egalitarian post-Independence Algerian society that is possibly at the root of Daoud's assault on both the Algerian nationalist and religious sentiments.

In sum, Kamel Daoud's postcolonial rewriting of Camus's *The Stranger* is double-edged: an

impassioned response to the erasure of the colonized subject's personal and national history in the celebrated French text and a fierce critique of life in Algeria after the colonisers had left. If anger and indignation characterise the first, it is a sense of hurt, disillusionment and betrayal that underwrites the second. The novel, it would appear as one progresses with the text, is more a critique of Islamist Algeria than of Camus and *The Stranger*.

### Notes

- 1 Pied noirs were mostly the descendants of the poor and dejected French refugees, settled in Algeria after the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. However, the condition of even the poorest of the pied-noirs was better off than that of the Arabs.
- 2 According to Gerard Genette, peritexts comprise a series of features which first catch the readers' attention before they engross themselves in the book: the cover, the title and subtitle, pseudonyms, the name and status of the author, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, maps, endorsements, blurbs, and notes. (See Gerard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge UP, 1997 for details)

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