Rupture of the Meta-narratives: A Post-modern Interpretation of

Camus’s *The Outsider*

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ABSTRACT: *The Outsider,* first published in French as *L’Etranger* in 1942 by Albert Camus has been widely popular throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is a thought provoking text that defies the constraints of time. When it was first published, it puzzled the people as to what genre it should belong to. On the surface it appears to be a sort of a confessional novel, in which Monsieur Meursault goes through a change which brings self-awareness or enlightenment. On another level, the novel asserts the philosophy of Existentialism and a notion of the Absurd. Various interpretations have enriched the understanding of the novel in the context of modern age. There is a certain irony in that a book about an “outsider” unwilling to conform to society’s demands defies conformity to a particular literary genre itself. This paper aims at a postmodern interpretation of Camus’ *The Outsider* by exploring how the religious and ethical meta-narratives have suffered a rupture in the contemporary era through the classic character of Meursault.

Keywords: Post-modernism, Meta-narratives, Temporal Distortion, Distrust of rationalism, Irony, Paranoia.

1. INTRODUCTION

“We have now lost the ability to believe in meta-narratives” claims Jean-François Lyotard, who coined the term “Postmodernism” that first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979, with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* He continues to say that the legitimating function that the grand quests once played in society has lost all its credibility in the post-modern context. In the second section of this paper the term ‘Postmodernism’ is discussed along with its characteristic features like the meta-narratives and grand narratives, temporal distortion, irony, black humor and so on. The third explains the term “meta-narrative” and how it has suffered a rupture in the present times. The fourth section attempts to analyze Camus’ *The Outsider* in relation to these terms especially with a skepticism towards the meta-narratives. Finally a conclusion is provided in the fifth section.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TERM “POST-MODERNISM”

The term ‘Postmodernism’ is difficult to define for the reason that, to define it would itself violate the assertion of the postmodernists who believe that there do not exist any definite terms, boundaries or absolute truths. The postmodernists do not place their philosophy in a distinct category. Their beliefs and practices are personal rather than being identifiable with a particular institution. In this paper, the term ‘Postmodernism’ remains vague, since those who claim to be postmodernists show a discrepancy in beliefs and opinions on a range of issues.

By and large the postmodernists do not attempt to refine their thoughts about what is right or wrong, true or false, good or evil. They believe that there isn’t such a thing as absolute truth. The postmodernists view the world outside themselves as being in error, that is, other people’s truth becomes indistinguishable from error. Therefore, no one has the authority to define truth or impose upon others his idea of moral right and wrong. Their self-rationalization of the universe and world around them pits themselves against divine revelation versus moral relativism. Many choose to believe in naturalism that advocates factual or realistic description of life and evolution rather than in God and creationism. Like Meursault, usually the postmodernists bear an atheistic or agnostic attitude. While some prefer to follow thoughts and practices pertaining to eastern religion, many are naturalists including humanitarians, environmentalists, and philosophers. There are two main historical events that catalyzed the emergence of postmodernism:
1. World War II (1939-1945)
This worldwide military conflict resulted in the deaths of over 70 million people, numerous cities were destroyed and people were left destitute. It is the deadliest clash in human history and a calamity in human civilization. After World War II, the dream of a serene and harmonious society had collapsed in the capitalist world. The trustworthiness of human rational thought and self control are under suspicion, people reflect the society and human nature and are also less confident in their own judgment. This has caused a sense of loss, insecurity and anxiety. In other words, the traditional values and beliefs are re-examined.

Then again, World War II also greatly stimulates the development of technology.

2. The revolution in science and technology since the 1950s
Science and technology in human society have extended rapidly since 1950s, for instance: in 1951, the first commercial computer was invented, 1952 saw the first animal cloning, 1962 launched the first satellite to carry TV broadcasts, in 1969 the original internet was born in America and so on. Every new invention and development has triggered off profound transformation in people’s life styles and ideas, especially in developed countries. Technology has greatly enhanced human power, making people stronger and smarter. At the same time, under the impact of technology, especially the Internet and mass media, people are separated from the reality and are living a digital, virtual life. This kind of identity has broadened our horizons and the clear sense of “self” is disrupted.

In literature the term ‘Postmodernism’ is used to describe certain characteristics of post–World War II literature, relying heavily, for instance, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc. and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in the Modernist literature. There is little agreement on the precise characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature. It is commonly defined in relation to its antecedents of modern and modernist literatures. For instance, a piece on postmodernism tends not to conclude with the neatly tied-up ending as is often found in modernist literature, but often misrepresents it.

To be precise, Postmodernism in literature can only be understood in relation to Modernism. It can be considered as a continuation of Modernism by other means, in the matter of its style, but not its substance. Basically, Postmodernism rejects that which Modernism, resting upon the bedrock of Enlightenment ideas, accepts. Explicitly, the Enlightenment ideas consist of particular values and beliefs like a stable, coherent, knowable, conscious, rational, autonomous self. The knowledge produced by science is the “truth,” and is eternal. Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true and in a world governed by reason there can be no disparity between what is true and what is right.

Modernity is principally about order, about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. The supposition is that creating more rationality encourages creating more order. Thus modern societies rely upon continually establishing a binary opposition between “order” and “disorder,” so that they can emphasize the superiority of “order.” But to do this, they have to have things that represent “disorder”. Modern societies thus continually have to create “disorder.” In contrast, Postmodernism doesn’t lament the idea of fragmentation, incoherence, but rather celebrates it. If the world is meaningless, there is no point in pretending that art can make meaning. Nonsense is just to be played with then. In other words postmodernism is distrustful of the rationalism of modernism that did subsist from 1890s to the mid-20th century as well as of the ideology of the Enlightenment of the 18th century. The following diagram represents the similarities and dissimilarities in Modernism and Postmodernism:

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<tr>
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<th>Modernism</th>
<th>Postmodernism</th>
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<td><strong>Similarities</strong></td>
<td>In opposition to fully developed modernity and disgusted with the banality and “dehumanized” quality of life in industrial capitalism; present a fragmented view of human subjectivity.</td>
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<td><strong>Differences</strong></td>
<td>Creating order out of chaos</td>
<td>Acknowledging disorder</td>
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<td>Grand-narrative</td>
<td>Mini-narratives</td>
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Fig. 1. Similarities and differences between Modernism and Postmodernism.
Postmodernism is characterized by various elements like Irony, Playfulness, Black humor, Pastiche, Intertextuality, Metafiction, Temporal distortion, Technoculture and Hyperreality, a sense of Paranoia, Maximalism and Minimalism, Faction, Fabulation, Magic Realism and most significantly parodies of all sorts of Metanarratives. Irony, Sarcasm, Satire indicate mockery of something or someone. Ironic literature exploits, in addition to the rhetorical figure, such devices as character development, situation, and plot to stress the paradoxical nature of reality. The use of irony or sarcasm for censorious or critical purposes and is often directed at public figures or institutions, conventional behavior, political situations, etc. Black Humour in the present context is a kind of humor that makes light of otherwise solemn subject matter. Temporal Distortion is a general term for any change in the “normal” fabric of space-time.

This paper discusses one significant characteristic feature – a skepticism towards the meta-narratives which is to be dealt with in this paper in relation to Camus’ The Outsider. In literal terms, a metanarrative means a “big story”. It represents, in short, an explanation for everything that happens in a society. In Sociology, the concept of a metanarrative is sometimes referred-to as a “high level theory” or, more-usually, a perspective or an ideology. Sociological perspectives such as Functionalism, Marxism, Interactionism and Feminism are all examples of what post-modernists call metanarratives, precisely because they attempt to account for all aspects of a society in terms of the perspective and the various theories it proposes.

3. THE META-NARRATIVES.

According to John Stephens a meta-narrative "is a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience". The prefix ‘meta’ means “beyond” and is here used to mean “about”, and a narrative is a story. Therefore, a metanarrative is a story about a story, encompassing and explaining other 'little stories' within totalizing schemes. The issue of the death of meta-narratives is central to the concept of postmodernism. Before Lyotard, one fundamental premise of modernism is that the knowledge produced by science is “truth”, and is eternal, it will always lead toward progress and perfection, which means all human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science and then improved. However, Lyotard separates knowledge from scientific truth and argues that science cannot explain everything in the world and science is as same as other narratives.

Meta-narratives are the entire philosophies of history, which form the ethical and political guidelines for society and generally have power over what is considered as truth. Meta-narratives roughly associate themselves to the everyday notion of what principles a society is founded upon. They form the basis of the social bond. The meta-narratives of the Enlightenment were about grand quests. The evolving liberation of humanity through science is a meta-narrative. To seek for a universally valid philosophy for humanity is an example of a meta-narrative. The problem with the meta-narratives is that when they are concretely formulated and implemented, they are disastrously agitated. Marxism is the classic case of a meta-narrative based on principles of liberation and egalitarianism which, when implemented, became distorted to absolutism under Stalin in the Soviet Union. The Postmodern society has made the conception of real progress difficult to sustain, meaning is challenged and fragmented, and it is difficult to see a way out of the chaos. Are nationalism, politics, religion, and war the result of a primitive human mentality? Is truth an illusion? How can Christianity claim authority or dictate morals? The list of concerns goes on and on especially for those affected by a postmodern philosophy and lifestyle.

Jean-François Lyotard brought this term too into prominence in 1979, in his classic work The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, in which Lyotard summed up a range of views which were being developed at the time, as a critique of the institutional and ideological forms of knowledge. He claimed that the postmodern was characterized precisely by a suspicion of the grand narratives like Progress, emancipation from the Enlightenment, Marxism etc. which had formed an essential part of modernity, its precursor. The notion of legitimation in the Enlightenment was linked to what Lyotard calls ‘Meta-narratives’ or ‘Grand narratives’.

Lyotard and other postmodernist thinkers observe this skepticism toward meta-narratives as an extensively positive development for a number of reasons. First, efforts to construct the grand theories are likely to dismiss the existing chaos and disorder of the universe which is very much the characteristic of the nature. Second, being oblivious to the variety of human existence, meta-narratives are created and reinforced by power structures and are therefore untrustworthy.
4. EXPLORING POST-MODERNISM IN CAMUS' THE OUTSIDER

The postmodernists are skeptical toward the idea of a meta-narrative. In this context, Jean-François Lyotard observes,

“Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. … The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language...Where, after the meta-narratives, can legitimacy reside?”

Commonly Albert Camus' The Outsider is considered a good instance of the Existentialist philosophy as it asks us to be responsible for our own being and to take life seriously in a godless world. But a postmodernist interpretation of the novel gives way to a serious questioning of various meta-narratives: of religious beliefs like “facts of faith”; the theory of Redemption of Christianity; of the power structures and of the institution of marriage. It starts with the classic opening lines:

Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know.

The technique of ‘temporal distortion’ seems to be at work here that presents fragmentation and a non-linear narrative. It is employed for the sake of irony. Irony is projected towards Meursault who is genuinely apathetic to his mother's death and doesn't try to hide it. Meursault applies for a leave, obviously his employer is annoyed as he cannot refuse it. “Sorry, sir, but it’s not my fault, you know”, is the immediate response of Meursault which contributes to arouse ‘Black Humour’ right in the beginning of the novel.

Later when his boss offers him a post in Paris, he is again indifferent, saying that one life is as good as another. He repeats this performance when Marie, his beloved, asks him if he wants to marry her, he says he will if she wants to. Meursault’s plain statement that he doesn't believe in God is another indication of a fastidious move towards Postmodernism. The judge is astonished, saying that all men believe in God, and that without that belief his life would become meaningless. Meursault is just annoyed by the whole performance: the values of his society, including Christianity, mean nothing to him (for him, God is Dead). This is the typical alienated view of the universe and towards religion: without God, without inherent order, without a center.

When Meursault shoots an Arab on the beach who was bothering his pal Raymond, he seems to blame the hot sun and brightness of the day as much as himself. He worries about destroying "the balance of the day". Interestingly, he blasts the Arab's dead body four more times for no particular reason. He is indifferent even towards a murder. When interrogated by the police, his indifference to his mother's death becomes a major issue. The judge tries to convince him to embrace God and to repent his sins. Meursault’s plain statement that he doesn't believe in God is another indication of a fastidious move towards Postmodernism. The judge is astonished, saying that all men believe in God, and that without that belief his life would become meaningless. Meursault is just annoyed by the whole performance: the values of his society, including Christianity, mean nothing to him (for him, God is Dead). This is the typical alienated view of the universe and towards religion: without God, without inherent order, without a center. Not only Meursault is indifferent towards the state of affairs but he seems to be an outsider to his own sense of existence. He ponders:

And, on a wide view, I could see that it makes little difference whether one dies at the age of thirty or threescore and ten—since, in either case, other men and women will continue living, the world will go on as before. Also, whether I died now or forty years hence, this business of dying had to be got through, inevitably.

During the trial, a naive Meursault seems to be taken aback at the Prosecutor's version of the incident that took place on the beach.
He began by summing up the facts, from my mother’s death onward. He stressed my heartlessness, my inability to state Mother’s age, my visit to the swimming pool where I met Marie to my rooms. I didn’t quite follow his remarks at first, as he kept on mentioning “the prisoner’s mistress,” whereas for me she was just “Marie.” Then he came to the subject of Raymond. It seemed to me that his way of treating the facts showed certain shrewdness. All he said sounded quite plausible. I’d written the letter in collusion with Raymond so as to entice his mistress to his room and subject her to ill-treatment by a man “of more than dubious reputation.” Then, on the beach, I’d provoked a brawl with Raymond’s enemies, in the course of which Raymond was wounded. I’d asked him for his revolver and gone back by myself with the intention of using it. Then I’d shot the Arab. After the first shot I waited. Then, “to be certain of making a good job of it,” I fired four more shots deliberately, point-blank, and in cold blood, at my victim.

Meursault believes that a man can just get used to anything. Towards the end, he becomes reconciled to his coming execution, thinking more about the "wondrous peace of this sleeping summer" than his crime. Looking up at the stars, he lays himself open to the "benign indifference of the world." His last wish is for there to be a crowd of spectators at his execution who will greet him with cries of detestation. The estranged Meursault has no desire to be popular or even liked by the masses.

In the character of Meursault, Camus tells the story of a “man who, without any heroic pretensions, agrees to die for the truth”. Meursault has an absolute value of honesty in that he simply refuses to lie. In his Afterword, Camus says that his outsider is condemned to death for not crying at his mother's funeral, for not playing the game. He wanders at the edge of the society, solitary and sensual. Also, his other refusal is to lie. Unlike all of us in our daily lives, who lie to make life simpler, Meursault doesn't want to make life simpler because he distrusts rationality which is the very basis of nature. Camus seems to conclude that The Outsider is the story of a man who agrees to die for his own version of truth, and that he is the only Christ we deserve in the Postmodern era.

Meursault is asked to tell the court that he regrets his actions, but says instead that he feels more annoyance with what he did than true regret, and, as Camus says, refusal to adhere to society’s strict regime and its expectancy paired with his allowance of events to occur as if he were an observer rather than a participant is what deems Meursault an “outsider”, and ultimately his freedom is taken from him because it is felt that he does not use it in an acceptable fashion. A sense of paranoia pervades throughout the novel which is another recurring theme in postmodernism.

Meursault is a character who perfectly fits into the category of a Postmodern. He is skeptical about the meta-narratives of religion of Christianity when he refuses to repent for his “sins”, he is a disbeliever of the whole philosophy of existence when he is indifferent towards even the most important events in his life. He does not even show his conformity with the legal system when he is taken for a trial. The institution of marriage does not hold any authenticity in the view of Meursault. Thus for Meursault, as for a postmodernist, no ordering system exists, so a search for order is fruitless and absurd.
5. CONCLUSION

Camus’ major work *The Outsider* emphasizes the theme of segregation and alienation inherent in much of his writing that brought him into prominence as a leading exponent of the dilemmas of the contemporary era. His views on the apparent meaninglessness of life contribute to the purpose of his work to work out an acceptable set of standards in the absence of religious faith. Primarily a moralist Camus denied the title of a philosopher. Above all, he insistently dissociated himself from the existentialist school led by Jean Paul Sartre. His works reflect his attempts to grapple with intellectual and spiritual problems to which he found no permanent solutions, except in the assertion of human solidarity. His integrity, his feeling for human suffering, his condemnation of violence, his challenge to various forms of cruelty, tyranny or oppression— all these qualities gave him a position of outstanding influence. To these he added considerable gifts as a writer.

Although there is no general concept or organized principles for it, this extremely complex, contradictory, ambiguous and diversified trend of thought called “Postmodernism” really inspires us to reflect upon a variety of phenomena around us. It is a way to understand and interpret the contemporary life, to explain social changes, to encourage us rethink and rediscover our life as well as ourselves. Scrutinizing the critical tendency to label Camus as "postmodern," and delineating what it might mean to read it more "postmoderly," it is feasible to say that he should not be labeled a "postmodernist," but rather recognized as the producer of a text that might be termed "post-modern."

Through this paper, an attempt is made to show how the ethical, moral, social, religious and other meta-narratives have suffered a rupture and are constantly being questioned in the contemporary era through the character of Meursault. All such meta-narratives have persistently been the guiding principles of the society since its establishment. But Post-Modernism has immensely influenced the common man who is losing faith in the established norms and belief in religion and Meursault’s character holds a mirror to this transitional phase of the society. There is a need to realize the same and transform ourselves so that the faith in mankind is restored.

REFERENCES