The Ambiguous Fate of a *Pied-Noir*

Albert Camus and Colonialism

Mangesh Kulkarni

By locating the political unconscious of L'Etranger *in Albert Camus' complicity in the French colonial project to inhabit, possess and represent Algeria, the colonial critiques of the text overlook the existential preoccupations in the novel which are far more reflective of the times in which the novel was produced.*

> Behind this story there is another one.[1]
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> – Nikolai Gogol.
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> A man does not show his greatness by being at one extremity, but rather by touching both at once.[2]
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> – Blaise Pascal.

GREAT works of art are by definition those which cannot be entirely confined to, or explained in terms of the time and place from which they stem. Their greatness lies in the way they transcend the specificities of their spatio-temporal location and strive towards the horizon of universality. Yet, it is important to know at what angle to its location a work stands. Such knowledge enables us to gain a better understanding of the unstated premises, subterranean tensions and true achievements of the work at hand. This essay seeks to examine Albert Camus' most widely read novel, *L'Etranger* (variously translated as *The Outsider* and *The Stranger*), in the light of the perspective outlined above, by focusing on his status as a *pied-noir* – a European, born and brought up in colonial Algeria.

Camus was for long seen as an essentially *French* writer and his oeuvre evaluated in the context of the mid-20th century political upheavals in France, philosophical currents such as existentialism and contemporary litterateurs like Malraux and Sartre. While this approach has a certain validity and even obviousness – after all, Camus eventually published and settled down in metropolitan France – it also tends to occlude or underplay his Algerian connection which is seen as a secondary biographical detail. However, a closer look at his literary tragectory would reveal the importance of this connection. So far as Anglophone scholarship is concerned, the first major effort in this direction was made by Conor Cruise O'Brien in 1970.[3]

The starting point of O'Brien's critique is that Camus unconsciously shared the assumptions of French colonialism which he consciously rejected. Consequently, his position with regard to Algeria showed strong elements of estrangement, unreality and even hallucination. Drawing on the writings of the French critic Pierre Nora, O'Brien argued that these contradictions arose from Camus' predicament as a *pied-noir* consciously frozen in historical immobility and incapable of directly confronting the problem of the European-Arab relation which continued to work in his subconscious and surfaced in his fiction as an admission of historical guilt. The predicament was particularly evident in *L'Etranger* (hereafter *LE*), where it took on the aspect of a tragic anticipation.[4]

Returning to this theme 20 years later, Edward Said modified and extended O'Brien's critique by discarding its individualist methodological assumptions and by placing Camus' fiction suqarely within colonial discourse.[5] Said found in this fictional world an arresting summary account of the century-long French political as well as interpretive contest to represent, inhabit and possess the territory of Algeria. He too treated *LE* as the focal point of Camus' colonial sensibility.

Before attempting a more detailed examination of these parallel lines of argument, it would be appropriate to provide a thumb-nail sketch of *LE*.[6] The novel is cast in the form of a story narrated by Meursault, a French Algerian clerk living in Algiers. The narrative opens with the news of the death of Meursault's mother in an old peoples' home: "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure."[7] He does not weep at the funeral. The next day he goes swimming and meets a girl he used to know. He takes her to a comic film and then to his apartment.

During a Sunday outing on the beach, Meursault and his friend Raymond run into two Arabs who have a score to settle with the latter. In the ensuing scuffle Raymond is injured. A little later Meursault comes across one of the Arabs quite accidentally. The Arab brandishes his knife and Meursault, blinded by the sun, shoots him dead. During his subsequent trial, Meursault's conduct at and immediately after his mother's funeral is cited to prove his criminal nature. He is found guilty and condemned to death.

In the cell, he refused the prison chaplain's ministration and through a passionate outburst, affirms the value of his past life – a life lived lucidly, without despair or false hope, in the face of certain death. He accepts his destiny calmly and even happily: "It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realise that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still".[8]

Camus wrote *LE* in Algeria and it was published by the prestigious Parisian house of Gallimard in 1942, the year which marked Camus' migration to metropolitan France. In an enormously influential review Sartre hailed the novel as "...a classical work, an orderly work, composed about the absurd and against the absurd."[9] Camus' rebellious assertion of man's quest for happiness and integrity in defiance of the irrationality of nature and the bad faith of society struck a sympathetic chord in the then prevailing existentialist climate of thought.[10]

Contrary to this received interpretation, O'Brien invites the reader to view *LE* as a projection of the 'myth of French Algeria'. Drawing attention to Camus' presentation of the court as being impartial between Arab and Frenchman, he argues that "...it implicitly denies the colonial reality and sustains the colonial fiction. The impression of radical rejection and revolt which so many readers have received from the novel is therefore deceptive, because, concealed near its heart, there lies the specific social fiction vital to the status quo in the place where the novel is set... what is softened and distorted, by being made non-colonial, is the nature of French rule."[11] In practice, no French court in Algeria would have condemned a European to death for shooting an Arab who had drawn a knife on him and who had shortly before stabbed another European.

O'Brien also argues that the reader's sympathy for Meursault lies in his perception that the latter is punished chiefly for the failure to mourn his mother. This ploy succeeds because the killing of the Arab is made to appear irrelevant: "The Europeans in the book have names...the man who is shot has no name and his relation to the narrator and his friend is not that of one human being to another. He looks at them as if they were 'blocks of stone or dead trees'. When the narrator shoots down this blank and alien being... the reader does not quite feel that Meursault has killed a man. He has killed an Arab."[12]

Said reads in *LE* a recollection of the violence of the French colonial past in Algeria and a poignant statement of the predicament of the *pieds-noirs*, a community with nowhere to go at that moment. To him this predicament is summed up in Meursault's final affirmation of his life which expresses both relief and defiance: "I had been right, I was again right,

I was still right. I had lived like this and could have lived like that. I had done this and had not done that. I had not done that other thing. And so? It was as if I had all along been waiting for this moment and this daybreak when I would be vindicated."[13]

Said views this as reflecting a situation where there are no choices left, no alternatives, no humane substitutes. The *colon* (propertied settler) embodies both the contribution of his community's real human effort and the obstacle of refusing to give up an unjust imperial political system. This is the socio-historical source of the deeply conflicted strength of Meursault's suicidal self-acknowledgement. He finally also understands why his mother, confined to an old persons' home, had decided to remarry: "She had played at starting again...So close to death, mother had to feel free and ready to live everything again."[14] To Said, this is an echo of the unrepentant *colon*'s credo: 'We have done what we have done here, and so let us do it again.'[15]

In support of their revisionist interpretations, both O'Brien and Said cite as evidence Camus' education, intellectual make-up and the elegance of his style, all of which bore the unmistakable stamp of middle class French culture; his consequent alienation from the indigenous Algerian ethos and his complicity in the French colonial project which ran its predatory course for over a century till it foundered on the rock of Arab nationalism two decades after the publication of *LE*. Together with the intra-textual evidence presented above, this constitutes a truly formidable indictment. But a closer look at the way Camus situated himself *vis-a-vis* the Algeria of his youth, the precise nature of his evolving litero-philosophical concerns and the logic of *LE* itself, tell a somewhat different story.

Algeria was conquered by France in 1830.[16] A hundred years later it had a large settler population of European origin (the *pieds-noirs*), numbering nine lakhs, while the native Arab population stood at six million. The former included the propertied elite who had the largest share of power in the colony – the *colons* – but also a large number of poor families. Camus was born in 1913 in a working class family of Algiers.[17] His mother was of Spanish ancestry and his father of French extraction. Like many settlers, the Camus family had been living in Algeria for over three generations.

Camus' father was killed in the battle of Marne during first world war, and his mother had to do various menial jobs to support the family. He completed his high school education on a scholarship and entered the University of Algiers in 1933. He graduated in philosophy by writing a dissertation on Plotinus and the North African Saint Augustine. During Camus' formative years, relative political calm prevailed in Algeria. Though leaders like Messali Hadj and Ben Badis had begun to articulate a nationalist agenda, there was as yet no groundswell of opposition to the colonial regime. Algeria was officially viewed not as a colony but as an integral part of the French Republic, and the policy towards the native Arab population was one of assimilation. As the noted historian Rudolf Von Albertini has remarked "...until well into the second world war there was a pro-integration feeling among educated Algerians...".[18]

Camus himself favoured the policy of assimilation. He liked to view Algeria as part of a wider Mediterranean culture. In a lecture on this theme, delivered in 1937, he said: "North Africa is one of the few countries where East and West live close together. And there is, at this junction, little difference between the way a Spaniard or an Italian lives on the quays of Algiers, and the way Arabs live around them. The most basic aspect of Mediterranean genius springs perhaps from this historically and geographically unique encounter between East and West."[19] However, he was not blind to the harsh reality of imperial governance, exploitation and social discrimination which the Arabs suffered. He consistently advocated genuine democratisation coupled with economic reforms and social justice to promote lasting integration.

Camus' commitment to the Arab cause was one of the major reasons behind his decision to join the Algerian Communist Party in 1935 which at that time followed an anti-colonial policy. Half of his party activity comprised the recruitment of the Arabs. In 1936 a Popular Front government led by the socialist Leon Blum assumed power in France and proposed the Blum-Viollette Plan which entailed enfranchisement of a section of the Arab population. His faith in the necessity of assimilation led Camus to campaign for this plan which was vehemently opposed by the *pieds-noirs* and eventually failed to secure the necessary legislative support in France.

The Blum-Viollettee Plan had been opposed by Messali Hadj who led the *Etoile Nord-Africaine* – an Arab nationalist organisation closely allied with the Communist Party. He held that it did not go far enough in the matter of enfranchisement. The party soon began to distance itself from Hadj and did not protest when the government arrested him and banned his organisation in 1937. Camus resented this and pleaded for a more sympathetic attitude to Hadj and his cause. He also criticised the soft-pedalling of anti-colonialism by the party. This resulted in his expulsion from the party in November 1937.

In 1938 he joined as a reporter a newly started liberal left-wing paper, *Alger Republicain*. This gave him an opportunity to expose instances of colonial injustice. He wrote an incisive investigative report on the starving Berber peasants in Kabylia – a mountainous area not far from Algiers.[20] Camus highlighted the fact that the Berbers were trapped in a miserable situation. As there was little employment outside an unremunerative agriculture, the economic infrastructure was poor; while medical and educational facilities were lacking. He suggested the setting up of public works and provision of loans and technical assistance to the peasants. He emphasised the need to devolve power to the region as a precondition for the successful implementation of such an ameliorative programme.

The foregoing account makes it quite clear that Camus viewed Algeria as a land belonging equally to the *pieds-noirs* and the Arabs. He also strove to redress the wrongs done to the latter and to put them on an equal footing. In the 1930s when *LE* was conceived, no great anomaly was involved in adopting such a position. It must be remembered that at this time Ferhat Abbas – a prominent Arab leader who was to become the first president of independent Algeria in 1962 – could openly proclaim: "If I had discovered the Algerian nation, I would be a nationalist...But I would not die for an Algerian fatherland because such a fatherland does not exist."[21] Hence, to read in *LE* the expression of unconscious guilt over the state of European-Arab relations, as O'Brien does, seems far-fetched.

Said's assimilation of Camus' position to that of the *colons*, is even more bizarre. Not only did he not belong to that class, he loathed them. In his very first novel, *La Mort Heureuse*, which was published posthumously, Camus satirised typical members of this class: "...Mersault had had time to know the mayor, who had 'presided over the destiny of his commune' (as he said) for the last decade, and this semi-permanent position inclined him to regard himself as Napoleon Bonaparte. A wealthy grape-grower, he had had a Greek-style house built for himself, and proudly showed it to Mersault."[22] In a similar vein he wrote "...of a contest between Morales and Bingues, two rich Spanish landowners [in Algeria] whom a series of speculations had transformed into millionaires... When one bought a car, he chose the most expensive make; but the other, who would buy the same make, would add silver door-handles."[23] Camus' relationship with Algeria, which he viewed as his motherland, was thus a great deal more complex than O'Brien's or Said's portrayal of it.

This brings us to a consideration of the pre-history, thematic structure and logic of *LE*. The novel was part of the first phase of Camus' literary career. His major preoccupations during this period involved existential themes such as man's solitude, suffering, mortality and his search for a meaningful relationship with the universe. These derived partly from his reading of modern writers like Dostoevsky, Gide and Malraux, but to a considerable extent from the contradiction between his zest for life and his early encounters with poverty and disease – Camus contracted TB at 17, and

it was to be a lifelong handicap. The tensions generated by this central contradiction were all too evident in the two books that he published prior to *LE*: *L'Envers et L'Endroits* (1937) and *Noces* (1939).[24]

In the first of these collections of lyrical essays, Camus foregrounded the duality between man's enjoyment of the beauty of nature and his despair at the inevitability of suffering and death. A courageous and lucid awareness of this duality was seen as the only authentic way of coping with it. The hope of an after-life, offered by religion, and the temptation to lapse into a facile pessimism were both firmly rejected. The search for a happy and meaningful life led Camus to a pagan exaltation of nature. In *Noces* he celebrated the sun-drenched Algerian landscape and formulated an ethic centreing on the sensual enjoyment of the present.

Simultaneously, with these essays, Camus was trying to give a concrete fictional form to his understanding of absurdity. The first outcome of this attempt was the novel *La Mort Heureuse* which was composed between 1936 and 1938. Patrice Mersault, the young protagonist of this novel set in Algeria, kills a wealthy cripple and takes his money to escape from the dull routine of his office. He then wanders through central Europe, returns to Algiers and finally dies of tuberculosis, thereby fulfilling his destiny of becoming 'a stone among other stones'. Camus rightly considered the novel unfit for publication as it had a disjointed and incoherent plot, some of the rhapsodic excesses of the essays were carried over into the narrative, and it had too many autobiographical overtones.

It was in *LE* that Camus hit upon the right form to articulate his vision. He used innovative stylistic devices such as short, staccato sentences, a vague time-sequence and the conversational perfect tense ('I have done') instead of the literary past tense ('I did') to subvert the objective, sequential narrative and an omniscient narrator characteristic of traditional fiction. The emphasis throughout was on 'saying less'. The result was a self-aware, polysemous fable of absurdity – a modern myth of unmatched power and beauty.

As the dominant reading of the novel goes, by pitting an innocent man against the blind forces of nature and the perverse hypocrisy of society, it tests the limits of human endurance and affirms the value of a rebellious and authentic life in the face of impending death. Something like this was said by Sartre in his review of *LE*, and in a preface to the American University edition (1956) of the novel, Camus went so far as to canonise Meursault as 'the only Christ we deserve'.[25] Interestingly, this reading also forms the backdrop to O'Brien's and Said's deciphering of the text's political unconscious. In other words, the plausibility of the received interpretation of the novel becomes the major intratextual precondition for the very possibility and effectiveness of the colonial critique.

Central to the critique is the claim that the colonial bias of the novel can be detected through the silences and slippages which are evident in the way the text frames the contradiction between Meursault's juridically imputed guilt and his existential innocence. The marshalling of extratextual evidence, in turn serves to validate the claim. As we have seen, much of this evidence can be questioned, supplemented and/or reinterpreted so as to generate a different exegetical outcome. The extratextual prop of the critique thus weakened, its intratextual component becomes vulnerable to the charge of tendentious overinterpretation. A case in point is both the critics' emphasis on the elision of racial bias in the novel's depiction of the Law Court as an omission of strategic significance. The logic of the novel itself supports the commonly held view that the court represents a site of bourgeois bad faith. To read into it an attempt to cover up racial injustice seems both arbitrary and unnecessary.

It is also possible to argue that the deeper 'intention of the text' is to project Meursault's guilt. This is exactly what the well known critic Roger Shattuck does: "A small leap of association permits us to read beyond the highly-charged literal meaning of *The Stranger* to discern a double parable about contemporary events that were taking place in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Meursault stands for the citizen whose passiveness and stunted imagination allow him to yield to outside pressures to carry out inhuman action. And readers who sympathise unthinkingly with Meursault stand for potential accomplices and collaborators in his actions."[26] Not being a realistic novel – though, strangely Said seems to hold the contrary view – *LE* is open to such an allegorical interpretation. But on such an interpretation the colonial critique loses its *point d'appui* and is rendered quite simply redundant.

Despite these aporias, the colonial critique is not altogether devoid of insights. The shadowy anonymity of the Arabs in the novel, highlighted by O'Brien, is of particular interest. Camus seems to be assimilating them to the forces of nature. He can do this with comparative ease due to his perception of the Arab as the Other. His view of Arab Otherness was at that time rooted in socio-cultural dissimilitarity and distance rather than in political hostility. In fact, as we have seen, he frequently championed the Arab cause, though within the colonial framework. There was a certain duality in this position. But in that period of relative political calm it was a non-antagonistic one. Besides, Camus with his penchant for 'touching both extremities at once', thrived on such dualities, using the resulting tensions to give life to his aesthetic projects.

While they overstated their case, O'Brien and Said were quite correct to problematise Camus' fiction from the perspective of colonialism. In so doing they rightly foregrounded his *pied-noir* heritage. However, the contradictions they claimed to discern are more true of his later writings – especially *La Chute* (1956)27 and *L'Exil et le royaume* (1957)28 – which reflect the deepening socio-political crisis in the Algeria of the 1950s, than of *LE* which it still seems valid to read primarily as a classic fictional statement on the languages of absurdity and the absurdities of language.

Notes

1 Nikolai Gogol, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* (tr Ronald Wilks), Penguin Books, London, 1972, p 160.
2 Cited in Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1961, p 2.
3 See Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus*, Fontana, London, 1970.
4 Ibid, p 25.
5 See Edward Said, 'Narrative, Geography and Interpretation', *New Left Review*, No 180, March-April 1990. A slightly altered version is available in Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London, 1994, pp 204-24.
6 See Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (tr Stuart Gilbert), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1982.
7 Ibid, p 13.
8 Ibid, p 120.
9 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'An Explication of *The Stranger*', in Germaine Bree (ed), *Camus*, Parentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1962, p 121.
10 For a brief account of the reception history of *LE* see Mangesh Kulkarni, 'Hello, Stranger', *The Sunday Times of India*, December 13, 1992.
11 Conor Cruise O'Brien, op cit, p 23.
12 Ibid, p 25.
13 Cited in Edward Said (1994), op cit, p 223.
14 Ibid, p 224.
15 Ibid.
16 An account of Franco-Algerian relations between 1830 and 1960 may be found in Edward Behr, *The Algerian Problem*, Penguin Books, Harmond sworth, Harmond, 1961.
17 For biographical details see Herbert Lottman, *Albert Campus: A Biography*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979.
18 Rudolf Von Albertini, *Decolonisation*, Africana Publishing Company, New York, 1982, p 334.
19 Albert Camus, 'The New Mediterranean Culture' in Philip Thody (ed), *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, Vintage Books, New York, 1970, p 194.
20 See Albert Camus, 'Misere de la Kabylie' in *Essais*, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, Paris, 1965, pp 903-38.
21 Cited in Edward Behr, op cit, pp 44-45.
22 Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1974, p 87.
23 Ibid, p 88.
24 Translated as *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and *Nuptials*. These are available in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*.
25 See Albert Camus, 'Preface to *The Stranger*' in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p 337.
26 Roger Shattuck, 'Guilt, Justice, and Empathy in Melville and Camus', *Partisan Review*, LXIII (3), 1996, p 448.
27 Translated by Justin O'Brien as *The Fall*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1973.
28 Translated by Justice O'Brien as *Exile and the Kingdom* Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1974.