



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

EXISTENTIALISM AND MEANING CONSTRUCTION: A CRITIQUE OF CHOICE OF CRIME  
IN ALBERT CAMUS' *THE STRANGER* AND FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S *CRIME AND  
PUNISHMENT*

SANTHOSH PC

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English, CMS College, Kottayam, Kerala.



ABSTRACT

The research paper critiques the choice of crime presented in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus and *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. By focusing on the detachment and solitary meaning creation of the protagonists of both the novels, the paper discovers similarities and differences in the existential questions answered by the protagonists through their choice of crime. In an existentialist viewpoint meaning is constructed by the conscious individual in an attempt to find a rational explanation for his/her existence. The paper reveals different dimensions of the notions of detachment and freedom based on the existential outlook of the protagonists. The protagonist's crimes and their response to the ideas of punishment and repentance which the State and Christianity try to impose upon them depict a conflict between the individual and the society. Analyzing this conflict the paper finds that the deviation of the protagonists from serious consideration of prevailing social principles is a result of their detachment and solitary life. The idea of meaninglessness of existence is analyzed by examining the crimes of the protagonists and the inability of the society in convincing its individual members about the necessity of an active social life to create an environment in the society that makes it possible for every individual to get the freedom of conscious meaning construction.

Key words: existentialism, freedom, meaning, detachment

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Our society consists of a cluster of different patterns based on which a member of the society understands oneself and others around him/her. The meaning of the term 'civilization' includes these patterned styles of life. However, these patterns are not static. Though the process of change is not often noticed, these patterns are being altered every second (by conscious or unconscious human actions). A majority of the people in the society adopts these patterns and make themselves comfortable with an illusion of ease and order. They are ready to allow their individuality to be melted in the wholeness of society. They cannot imagine an existence without the norms and principles of the society of their time.

In every society there have been individuals who are too conscious about their individuality or too indifferent to the society to be part of it and share its norms and principles. Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment* and Albert Camus in *The Stranger* introduce such individuals who reflect a tendency to move away from the people around them. Raskolnikov, the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* is a person who is too conscious about his individuality to be part of it. His preoccupation with his individuality is the cause of his detachment from the society. On the other hand Meursault, the protagonist of *The Stranger* is extremely indifferent to the society. His indifference leads him away from the society and its principles. Though they differ in their attitude towards the society, the intensity of their detachment is more or less the same.

Raskolnikov, the chief character of *Crime and Punishment* is a man of radical thought. He appears to be an atheist in the beginning of the novel and he rejects the whole of that morality which has been built upon the belief in God as a supreme entity and law giver. He divides humanity into those few 'supermen' who are strong enough to dispense with God and to accept the new gospel of 'beyond good and evil' and the common men who are too cowardly to discard the old beliefs and moral values. He willfully murders a pawnbroker woman, not exactly in order to rob her, but to prove to himself that he is 'strong' enough to overstep the ideas of the 'old morality'. What he wants is to conquer the freedom of a 'superman', who is a law unto himself, and to whom all things are lawful. His logic and reason are in agreement with such a step. Yet, after the crime the irrational part of his personality comes forward with its own truth. And this reaction is so appalling that Raskolnikov is driven in the end to a voluntary confession unable to bear the 'irrational' consequences of his crime. Raskolnikov ascribes his collapse to his weakness only, because logically he still refuses to regard himself as a criminal.

Meursault, the hero of *The Stranger* lives a life without meaning or purpose, resigned to the course of events, a stranger to his human self, his will paralyzed by habit, incapable of love and bereft of feeling and memory. A blind combination of circumstances turns him into a murderer. Meursault is tried, convicted of murder and awaits execution at the end of the novel. He has refused apathetically to defend himself seemingly unable to find any logic in defending himself. He thinks that everyone is condemned to die sooner or later. During his imprisonment he begins to discover his humanity and its fragile uniqueness in an unfamiliar world. This discovery gives him the strength to reject the false hopes of salvation offered by the prison chaplain. "Emptied of hope" he lays his heart "open to the benign indifference of the universe" (*Eleven Modern Short Novels*, 618). His rejection of false hopes is not a sign of passive boredom. More than anything else it is the beginning of being conscious of life's absurdity. Meursault is the representative of modern man who is to learn to live in an absurd universe without the constraints or consolation of God or religion.

The similarity in the unconventional attitude, choice of individual freedom, and detachment of Raskolnikov and Meursault is pointed out by Sergei Hackel:

Both *Crime and Punishment* and *The Stranger* are stories of unconventional, solitary young man (with differing notions of individual freedom) who, almost despite himself, in the course of an excessive hot summer, commit murder and are subsequently brought to justice. In each case, the reactions of the prisoner to the law and to its representatives are of particular interest to the author. And in each case the central figure of the book, the murderer, is supported by an intriguing cast of minor characters: a mother, whose death makes no impression on him, a girl friend, who remains loyal to him and visits him in prison... (*Contemporary Literature*, 190)

It should be noted that the difference between the novels lies not in the theme but in the point of view. The narrative method differentiates the novels from one another. In *The Stranger*, Camus uses first person narrative. In the novel the murderer narrates his day to day experience in an indifferent manner as if he is just a passive observer of his own life. On the other hand, in *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky uses third person narrative. It is interesting to note that it is very easy to convert *Crime and Punishment* into first person narrative, since the most important voice in the novel is expressed through the protagonist, Raskolnikov. The narrative strategy in both the novels gives primary importance to the experiences of the

protagonists and as a result, the existential questions raised by the choice of crime willed by them are highlighted.

The murderer's reaction to the murder he commits is a theme that both the authors deal with. Raskolnikov's reaction is positive and complex. His inner life is greatly affected by the murder of the old pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna and her sister, Lizaveta Ivanovna. But for Meursault, the hero of *The Stranger*, the purposeless murder of an Arab has no remarkable importance and the incident does not leave any significant impression in his mind though the murder brings about a change in his mechanical existence since he is put into prison. He is aware that he has violated the law and is ready to accept his position as a murderer, but he does not consider his act of killing as a sin. It should be read with Raskolnikov's attitude towards murder. Raskolnikov, like Meursault, asserts after his trial that a criminal act is not necessarily a sinful one. It is difficult for Meursault to regret his crime. To repent of an action means to acknowledge that an alternative action ought to have been preferred. It implies the search for and preference of the so called good actions. But for Meursault there is no evident difference between his choices of actions. Meursault does not actively participate in the social life around him and he is carried on the surface of the social life by his individual preferences and natural instincts characterized by detachment and freedom of choice, unconcerned by the question of what is to be found in the depths of the accepted patterns of social life around him. He is aware of only the immediate moments and his actions denote boredom to make his individual choices in everyday life. He is lonely in his share of life and even Marie, his mistress is unaware of the meaning Meursault chooses for himself.

A natural consequence of Meursault's essential apathy to people is his exceptional bluntness and honesty in his dealings with them. They mean so little to him and he has nothing to lose. Meursault is free from responsibilities and, therefore, free to exercise his will without reference to the society which surrounds but does not incorporate him. However, to exercise his will and to act in accordance with it requires a conscious, independent effort on his part, and such an effort is beyond him.

Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment* puts in great effort to exercise his freedom of choice in contrast to Meursault. He thinks seriously about the human existence in general. It is evident from his article about crime, published in a magazine. It means that he is able to find purpose in human existence. Whereas Meursault lacks ambition, Raskolnikov is possessed by it. There is a Napoleonic element in his attitude, an inclination to theorize about principles of world order and a readiness to take the initiative in support of them. It is to support his theory of extraordinary man that Raskolnikov accepts the choice of killing the old pawnbroker. At any rate, it can be said that the murder is premeditated, the result, to a large extent of his initiative. Consequently, when his plan fails he experiences pain for two reasons. In the first place, the original plan is prepared by him and he cannot dissociate himself from it. In the second place unlike Meursault, he comes to realize that he is not a lone agent in a world that is harsh and unattractive. People turn out to have more significance for him than he expected. However, his thoughts on the question of a superman morality never liberate him altogether from the claims of alternative moral attitudes. There is a tension within him and his confession, expiation, and regeneration are the ways out of this tension which Meursault never experiences.

The detachment of Dostoevsky's protagonist is different from that of Camus' protagonist. Raskolnikov consciously tries to place himself above the society, detaching himself from the norms and principles of it. The failure to do so leads him to experience remorse and tension which ends in his confession, expiation, and regeneration. On the other hand Meursault is a man who is detached from people. This detachment is a result of his way of life. He lives consistently detached from society as the result of a conscious decision. This may be Meursault's experience of the absurd. Unlike Raskolnikov, Meursault remains detached to the very end, even though society assumes control of his body and intends to kill him. Raskolnikov is brought back from his detached state, mentally and physically to the pattern of the criminal and sinner by the society after his confession. Meursault on the other hand remains detached till the end of the novel, though only mentally.

The crime is the factor which brings both the characters together. Both Raskolnikov and Meursault do not believe in their criminal behavior. In the case of Raskolnikov there is a multiplicity of possible motives behind his choice of murder: money, his concept of Napoleonic Superman, and detachment from and resentment against society. It can also be said that the heat has affected Raskolnikov considerably both before and after the murder. The first sentence of the novel describes the weather as "exceptionally hot" and a few paragraphs later the heat is described as "terrible".

In Meursault's case, by contrast, there is a singular lack of motivation for the crime. It is entirely by chance that he has become involved in someone else's feud. A casual Sunday outing brings him into contact with his victim. His attitude before the murder should be compared with that of Raskolnikov who carefully rehearses his murder. During the outing a gun is handed to Meursault, though not at his request. Later, overwhelmed and stimulated by the sun's rays, and hardly aware of the Arab's presence, his grip closes on the revolver. The narrator (Meursault) describes the experience: "the trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm" (*Eleven Modern Short Novels*, 579). Though he is the murderer of the Arab, Meursault's body and gun seem to be acting independently of him.

The crime and the attitude towards crime of the protagonists of the two novels may make us think that the detachment from an active social life and an obsession to an overwhelming active personal life lead a man to follow his own principles and moral standards without considering those of the society. The result may be very strange behavior and actions from the individual. In exhibiting their inhuman nature in committing a serious crime, murder, Meursault, the protagonist of the novel *The Stranger* and Raskolnikov, the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, indifferently propagates their detachment from the society. The society with its rigid laws and principles awakes to the existence of these solitary young men only when it is forced to acknowledge the serious crime of the young men and prescribes the kind of punishment which it imagines the young men deserve.

The protagonists of the novels encounter Christianity after their crime. Murder is a sin in Christianity. But Raskolnikov and Meursault do not accept their act of murder as a crime or sin. Meursault commits the murder as part of his indifference to the absurd human existence in this meaningless world (in Meursault's view). The idea of sin and crime do not have any significance for Meursault. Raskolnikov commits the murders thinking himself to be the superman of his theory about human beings which divides human beings into 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'. So Raskolnikov too does not consider the murders committed by him as crime or sin. However, at the end Raskolnikov yields to the society and accepts the ideas that he is criminal and sinner. Meursault on the other hand, till the end is convinced about the meaninglessness of human existence and considers himself to be free from the burden of crime and sin.

While examining the personal as well as the social life of the protagonists of the two novels, the similarities and differences in their detachment exhibits their meaning construction through the choice of crime. It shows their obsession with the idea of personal freedom. The detachment and freedom are related to the protagonists' attitude towards murder and their unique notions of crime and acceptance of punishment prescribed by the society. A comparative enquiry into the detachment and freedom of choice of the protagonists may cast light on the solitary life of young members of our society. The young people with missing links in their relationship with society and a potential to turn against it and who are obsessed by their indifference and their own philosophical outlook are often born into the consideration of the society only after the harm is done. The existing social conventions and inadequate laws force the society to prescribe punishment for their actions without understanding their way of meaning construction.

The philosophical outlook which links Raskolnikov and Meursault is the concept of existential freedom. Through the character Meursault, Albert Camus presents the absurd nature of human existence in a world which lacks any meaning except that which is given by the conscious human beings. Meursault brings in the idea that there is no inherent meaning in human existence and he indifferently chooses his actions randomly exercising his free will. On the other hand, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* finds that human existence is meaningful in itself. He thinks that a majority of the human beings are weak to choose their

actions depending entirely upon their own free will. However, according to him, there are a few individuals who can exercise their free will to do great things in the world. He points out Napoleon as an example to justify his idea of existential freedom reserved for the few supermen of the world. Drawing a parallel between the superman and himself Raskolnikov makes use of the freedom to act according to human will and becomes a murderer. Meursault considers the idea of existential freedom as a general characteristic of human existence. Raskolnikov on the other hand reserves it only to a few individuals whom he likes to call 'Superman'. In Meursault's world no human being has any special significance than any other human beings in the world. Everyone is conscious of the imminent death and this consciousness brings in a sense of equality among human beings. So in his world, every individual can choose actions based on his own free will. Raskolnikov on the other hand thinks that ordinary people should live within the framework of social norms and principles. This difference in the idea of existential freedom introduced through Raskolnikov and Meursault points out the meaning construction through the choice of crime in the society.

**Works Cited**

1. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. (1866). New York: Oxford UP, 1981. Print
  2. Hamalian, Leo, and Edmond L. Volpe, eds. *Eleven Modern Short Novels*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970. Print
  3. Unwin, Timothy. *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel*. London: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print
  4. "Existentialism A Philosophy." Allaboutphilosophy.org 2002-09. 2Feb 2009  
<http://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existentialism.htm> Web.
  5. Jones, Malcom V, and Robin Feuer Miller, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print
  6. Hackel, Segei. "Raskolnikov through the Looking Glass: Dostoevsky and Camus L'Etranger." *Contemporary Literature*. Spring 1968: 189-209
-