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## Understanding Society and The Individual Self In Albert Camus's *The Outsider*

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### Abstract:

The relationship between the individual and society is more philosophical rather than sociological because it involves the question of values. It is in society that an individual is surrounded and encompassed by culture, as a societal force. It is in society again that he has to conform to the norms, occupy status, create new identity and hence become members of groups. The question of the relationship between the individual and society is the starting point of many discussions. This paper attempts to explore the issue of difference between the society and the individual self and how societal norms bring out conflicts and restrictions for the individual self through the central character of the novel *The Outsider*.

**Keywords:** society, individual, religion, norms

### Introduction:

Essentially, society is the body of regularities, customs and ground rules for human (or antihuman) behavior. These practices are tremendously important to know how humans act and interact with each other. Man is a social animal and society liberates and limits the activities of man. Society exists only where social beings 'behave' toward one another in ways determined by their recognition of one another. Society is an abstract term that connotes the complex web of inter-relations that exist between and among the members of groups. Social life is the combination of various components such as activities, people and places.

*The Outsider (1942)*, translated from the French, *L'Étranger*, is Albert Camus's most widely known work that expounds his early understanding of Absurdism as well as a variety of other philosophical concepts. (The plot of *The Outsider* centrally revolves around the life of the protagonist, Meursault from the time of his mother's death at the old age home in Marengo to his death by virtue of capital punishment. When Meursault arrives at the funeral set-up of his dead mother, he keenly observes the surroundings including the daylight, the old women's bellies and wrinkled faces of the old men but not the body of his dead mother lying in the casket. He refuses to see his mother for the last time when the caretaker asks him to do so. All he was conscious of was that his back was hurting and how badly tired he was and desperately longing to go back to his place so that he could sleep for twelve long hours. Also the kind of conversation that Meursault and the caretaker had on the night of the vigil did not seem appropriate in the given circumstances. At the death of a loved one, that too of one's mother, the bereaved member should be glistening with tears and sorrows as society expects of any normal being. But Meursault is a person of different taste. He either is emotionally blunt or does not want to reveal any iota of his feelings in front of the general mass or he was just being an escapist at that time. After the burial the very next day, Meursault hangs out with the former typist of his office, Marie Cardona. Moreover, he gets irritated when the owner of the Celeste café enquires about how he "as doing after his mother's demise. It is not that he doesn't miss his mother rather he remembers her in a peculiar way—

### Description:

"It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed." (Camus 24)

No matter how intimate a person is with the other person, his/her death will never make the other person's life come to a halt. Certainly, there would be a relentless sense of void in the heart of the grief-stricken person but nevertheless he will continue to live and move ahead with his life.

Meursault helps his neighbour Raymond Sintes by writing a letter to his mistress upon whom Raymond is planning to take revenge for her infidelity. When Salamano, his other neighbour in the building loses his dog of eight years, and Meursault hears him weeping and is instantly reminded of his late mother. He is apathetic towards Marie and when she asks him if he would marry her to which Meursault replied,

".... it didn't make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to." (Camus 41)

When his boss offers to travel to Paris for around a year, Meursault outrightly rejects the promotional offer. For Meursault, working in Algiers or Paris would mean the same thing. When Marie came to know about this proposition, she stressed that they should, in fact, go to Paris to which Meursault commented that he had once been to Paris and said "Its dirty, lots of pigeons and dark courtyards. Everybody's pale." (Camus 42) Any person would have jumped to this offer to better his prospects in life financially and also benefit a sense of validation and fulfilment. Humans are inherently trained to elevate themselves, time and on, from their current state so that they can have a more grander sense

of the meaning of life. Meursault is not unintelligent; we witness that his boss comes up to him for suggestions, also Raymond and Salamano look up to him when they are in crisis. He is, simply nothing, but complacent in his state of life.

The stark variations between society as a whole and the individual self predominantly emerges in the second part of the novel, which is about the trial scenes in the courtroom and the solitude that Meursault experiences in his prison cell. All the other characters present in the novel represent the society as a single unit whereas Meursault stands alone as the representative of the individual self. He was in prison for the murder of an Arab man with Raymond's revolver. When his lawyer informs that personal investigations were going on and it was reported that Meursault had 'shown insensitivity' on the day of his mother's funeral, he honestly remarks that—

"I probably did love Maman but that didn't mean anything. At one time or another all normal people have wished their loved ones were dead." (Camus 65) One cannot disagree with this statement of Meursault.

When Meursault felt the urge to assert to his lawyer that he 'was like everybody else, just like everybody else' but gave up because he realized no matter how hard a person labours to convince the society, the society will always find a way back to form and pass its own judgement upon the man, Meursault was tired of repeating the same story again and again to different sets of people. The magistrate really tried hard to impose his faith and belief of God upon Meursault which he rejected vehemently. This did not go down well with the magistrate and thus, Meursault was named as 'Monsieur Antichrist' by the Judge. No matter how modern society gets, it will still continue to look down upon and detest atheists. Society, as a whole, has been ingrained to believe that non-religious and anti-religious people always brings in immoral habits whereas the religious class of people effectively spreads awareness about ethical and virtuous ways of living. Significantly, Meursault as a character is amoral. He neither does comment on anyone's religious inclination nor does he imposes his view upon others.

Society cannot acclimatize itself quickly with changes and hence conflict arises but Meursault adapts himself to the confined life of the prison house in no time. He realizes that "a man who had lived only one day could easily live for a hundred years in prison. He would have enough memories to keep him from being bored." (Camus 79) Meursault, before his imprisonment, lived life according to his will unlike others who were conditioned to pass life in accordance to a particular set of societal norms because they always live in fear of being boycotted or condemned by the society.

Meursault's mother's death and the murder of the Arab were two completely different incidents yet the prosecutor tacitly pointed— "The same man who the day after his mother died was indulging himself in the most shameful debauchery killed a man for the most trivial of reasons and did so in order to settle an affair of unspeakable vice." (Camus 96)

This announcement seemed to have a profound effect upon the audience present in the courtroom. Society doesn't harbor people who become a threat to the set of ideals and values that have been long preserved by society itself.

In January 1955, Camus wrote:

"I summarized *The Stranger* a long time ago, with a remark I admit was highly paradoxical—

In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death. I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game."

Meursault even refused to acknowledge the chaplain's ideology on religion and death. Negating a priest brings forth harmful consequences. Towards the end of the novel, Meursault begins to realize the hypocrisy of the moral arbiters of society. He is paradoxically both impenetrably complex and amusingly simplistic with his raw honesty.

### **Conclusion:**

The way a person reacts to ordinary situation determines the opinions of others based on their behavior. Yet when this behavior is abnormal or different from the rest of the society, it causes society to form an opinion based totally on the person's behavior, not on his actual personality. In maintaining the highest levels of honesty, Meursault is shunned by society for upholding their ideals to an extent that they themselves cannot. There is a complete congruence between his emotions, thoughts, and acts, which is unpalatable to those who fall short of these standards. When faced with the realization of their idealized morality they cannot abide it and hence persecute Meursault for the sake of their hypocritical, delusional society as much as for his crimes. It also shows how society is not tolerant and limits humanity by not nourishing individuality. Individuals, in order to look good, should adjust themselves on the mirror that is governed by society.

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