Essay

SIGNIFICANCE OF DOUBLES AND OPPOSITIONS IN *THE MEURSAULT INVESTIGATION*

Carmen Sánchez Molina

University of Essex

Abstract

Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* (2013) fits into the category of postcolonial authors responding to canonical European texts. This book is in direct dialogue to Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), where a nameless Arab is killed. By giving voice to Harun, the Arab's brother, Daoud is giving him an identity and providing the point of view of the Other. To do that, doubles and oppositions play a fundamental role. In this essay, we will analyse these references to other texts, such as Camus' works, the Bible, Koran and even *Robinson Crusoe.* Moreover, there are many parallelisms in this book that will help us to understand Harun's life and his resemblance with Meursault

Keywords: Colonialism, Post-colonialism, Camus, Daoud, Doubles, Oppositions.

Introduction

The Meursault Investigation, first published in 2013, is a novel by the Algerian writer Kamel Daoud. The first thing that the reader notices after reading the title of this novel is the name 'Meursault', the antihero created by Albert Camus in his book *The Stranger* (1942). This coincidence is not innocent at all since Daoud's novel is in direct dialogue with *The Stranger.*

In Camus' novel, Meursault kills a nameless Arab. This is the starting point of *The Meursault Investigation,* which follows the story of Harun, Musa's brother, the Arab who was killed by

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj59

Meursault. This classic was always catalogued as a novel about the human condition and absurdism until Daoud would challenge that assumption. This author treated Meursault's crime as a real event and created a response from the perspective of his brother (Dimaggio, 2017).

As Kulkarni (1997) has indicated, some critics such as Conor Cruise O'Brien and Said argue that Camus unconsciously shared the assumptions of colonialism and that in his book, we can see a recollection of French colonialism. However, this has been severely criticised since Camus actively rejected these ideas. Moreover, Shattuck (2016) argues that Camus' novel is a double parable about contemporary events that were taking place in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Meursault corresponds to the figure of the passive citizen unaltered by these injustices, and this idea could have moved Daoud to write this book.

The colonialism implied in *The Stranger* has much to do with Daoud's novel being considered an act of responding or 'writing back'. This refers to postcolonial authors that respond to canonical texts in the European tradition (Karan Ally, 2018). By reconfiguring or reimagining narratives of colonial, or Western texts, it reasserts the voice of the colonized and portrays the version of the history from their perspective (Brozgal, 2016). Daoud is giving an identity to Camus' Arab, and as he signals, he is paying tribute to Camus' work, while also providing another version of the story (Treisman, 2015).

To better understand this idea, it is important to consider Algeria's historical context. France occupied Algeria in 1830 and the colonisation was extended until 1962, after the end of the Algerian War of Independence that took place between 1954 and 1962 (Mir, 2019). Camus' novel takes place during the colonisation meanwhile Daoud's sets immediately after the War of Independence, although is narrated several years later.

In this essay, we will analyse the ideas of doubles and oppositions that appear in Daoud's novel with respect to Camus'. As we will discover, there are many parallelisms in this book that will help us to understand Harun's life and his resemblance with Meursault.

Doubles and Oppositions

These ideas of 'double' and 'opposite' are present from the beginning of the novel. The own Harun indicates that this has much to do with the way it is narrated:

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj59

> The story we're talking about should be rewritten, in the same language, but from right to left. That is, starting when the Arab's body was still alive, going down the narrow streets that led to his demise, giving him a name, right up until the bullet hit him (Daoud, 2015: 7).

Harun says that the story is narrated from right to left, which is a reference of Arabic script in opposition to languages such as French, which is written from left to right. Moreover, this could also mean that the story of Meursault and the Arab is written chronologically backwards, in the same way that the story of French colonization is written from an Algerian perspective (Karan Ally, 2018).

The first similarities that the reader can notice are present in the title and at the beginning of the novel. Musa sounds like Meursault, and this phonetics resonance is responsible for linking the two antagonists (Brozgal, 2016). Moreover, the original title is *Meursault, contre-enquête,* which in English would be counter-investigation, reflecting the idea of opposites. Furthermore, the beginnings of both novels are inversed. While *The Stranger* begins with 'Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know'' (Camus, 1958: 3), Daoud's novel begins with: 'Mama's still alive today' (Daoud, 2015: 1). As we can appreciate, Daoud is mirroring the prose and structure of Camus' novel.

More similarities can be found in where the novel is set. Harun retells his story in a bar in Oran, which is directly linked with *La Chute* (1956) by Camus. In this novel, the narrator relates his story to an unnamed person in a bar. Moreover, Harun lived in a village called Hadjout, which was formerly known as Marengo, where Meursault's mother died (Mahon, 2015). Lastly, there is another reference to *La Peste* (1947): ''I love Oran at night, despite the proliferation of rats'' (Daoud, 2015: 49). Both stories take place in Oran and the rats were responsible for transmitting the plague in Camus' book.

In 2015, Daoud gave a lecture at Yale University, where he explained, among other things, the role of doubles and oppositions in the novel. It deals with issues related to the 'Robinsonade', a term that derives from *Robinson Crusoe,* a novel by Daniel Defoe. This is related to our behaviour towards 'the other'. Daoud indicates that we can approach the other in different ways: we can kill and bury him, as Abel and his brother; we can try to convert him, as Robinson Crusoe did with Friday; or we can kill and erased him, as Meursault did with the Arab.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj59

There are many references to Defoe's novel in the text. In the following paragraph, we can appreciate a double critic. Harun is criticising not only that his brother's name was not even mentioned in *The Stranger*, but also the attitude of Crusoe towards Friday. By simply calling a person 'the Arab', Meursault is participating in that colonial discourse that distances and dehumanizes the colonial reality. Camus mentions 25 times the word 'Arab', a multiplication of anonymity that reduces him to an ethnic signifier (Brozgal, 2016):

> My brother's name was Musa. He had a name. But he'll remain ''the Arab'' forever, the last on the list, excluded from the inventory that Crusoe or yours made. Strange, isn't it? For centuries, the settler increases his fortune, giving names to whatever, he appropriates and taking them away from whatever makes him feel uncomfortable. If he calls my brother ''the Arab'', it's so he can kill him the way one kill time (Daoud, 2015: 13).

Following this same idea, we can find more intertextual references to Defoe's novel. Harun says that the author ''could have called him Two P.M., like that other writer who called his black man Friday'' and that Meursault is a ''Robinson Crusoe who thinks that he can change his destiny by killing his Friday'' (Daoud, 2015: 3-4). This statement indicates that Musa was reduced to his role as Arab and victim and nothing more.

In *The Stranger,* the victim was referred to only as 'the Arab' and not naming him deprives him of his identity. Meanwhile the *pieds-noirs* (Europeans born in colonial Algeria) have names, the Arabs are reduced to their ethnicity: ''The only shadowy is cast by the Arabs'' (Daoud, 2015: 2). As Kulkarni (1997) suggests, this implies that the reader does not feel that Meursault has killed a man, he has killed *just* an Arab, as if it was a being unrelated to our world. Moreover, Harun also shares this idea: ''they watched us —us Arabs— in silence, as if we were nothing but stones or dead trees'' (Daoud, 2015: 11).

The dualism between these two novels can also be found in the characters. Meursault has as a neighbour a man called Salamano who mistreats his dog (Camus, 1958: 15). Meanwhile, Harun has as a neighbour a fireman that beats his wife (Daoud, 2015: 72). In *The Stranger,* Raymond suspects that his Arab girlfriend is cheating on him and that is the cause of the conflict. However, Harun states that ''there were just two siblings, my brother and me. We didn't have a sister'' (Daoud, 2015: 7). Daoud gives a new identity to this character: Zubida, who could be one of his brother's girlfriends. Lastly, in Camus' book, there is an Arab that plays the flute (Camus, 1958: 31) which

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj59

also appears in Daoud's. Through this character, once again, we can appreciate how the Arabs are deprived of their identity in *The Stranger:* ''Larbi, who as I recall played the flute… Larbi l'Arabe, Larbi the Arab'' (Daoud, 2015: 62).

Another fundamental aspect of both books is the role of the mother: both Meursault and Harun are deeply influenced by the presence or absence of their mothers, feeling alienated from them. Meursault's relationship with her mother is distant: ''When we lived together, Mother was always watching me, but we hardly ever talked'' (Camus, 1958: 4). In the case of Harun, it is the opposite. Musa's death fractured the relationship between Harun and his mother. Despite loving her, he could never forgive how she treated him. ''She seemed to resent me for a death I basically refused to undergo'' (Daoud, 2015: 36). The few moments she was affectionate, Harun knew that ''it's Musa she wants to find there, not me'' (Daoud, 2015: 36), Harun's mother wanted him to fill the place of his older brother, and this poisoned their relationship (Horton, 2016). For these reasons, Harun states that he understands Meursault more when he talks about his mother than when he talks about his brother.

Moreover, this portrait of grief can be linked to the historical context. During French colonialism and the War for Independence, many people died. Harun's mother is one among the many victims that had to keep living after the death of a loved one. Harun indicates that ''Mama's still alive today, but what's the point? She says practically nothing'' (Daoud, 2015: 143). In her inability to tell the story of her dead son, we can see that the pain and violence of colonization are not resolved in a single generation.

This duality can also be found in small details. In *The Stranger,* Meursault drinks coffee multiple times and he mentions that he is ''very partial to *café au lait*'' (Camus, 1958: 6). In contrast, Harun despises this beverage: ''No café au lait for me! I despise that concoction'' (Daoud, 2015: 65). Moreover, Harun is afraid of the sea meanwhile this is one of the few things that Meursault enjoys. Lastly, there is another duality in the idea of religion: while Meursault hates Sundays, ''I remembered it was Sunday and that put me off; I've never cared for Sundays'' (Camus, 1958: 13), Harun does not like Fridays, ''it's Fridays I don't like'' (Daoud, 2015: 65).

Their dislike for Fridays and Sundays is linked with God. For Muslims, Fridays are the sacred day of the week, meanwhile, for Christians, it is on Sundays. Since both characters feel alienated from God, they despise these sacred days. Harun once mentions that Friday is not the day when God

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj59

rested, but the day he decided to run away and never come back. After that, he affirms that he abhors all religions. In the same way, when the priest asks Meursault if he believes in God his answer is no. It is also interesting to mention that Meursault was visited by a priest and Harun by an imam, another duality.

Another link to religion is found in the characters' names. Musa is also the name of a prophet in the Koran, known as Moses in Christianity. Harun is related to the prophet Aaron, who is the brother of Moses (Tilikete, 2015). In the Bible and Koran, Moses stutters and Aaron acts as his mouthpiece. In this case, Musa is dead, so his brother tells his story for him and to alleviate his mother's pain:

> I formed the habit of transforming the content of the articles and embellishing the narrative of Musa's death.… Just try to imagine the level of genius required to take a local news item two paragraphs long and transform it into a tragedy, describing the famous beach and the scene, grain by grain (Daoud, 2015: 120).

Regarding the killings, there is an inversion of the act of violence. This is directly linked with the parallelism between Meursault and Harun. When Meursault kills the Arab on the beach, it is 2 pm, so ''the heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks; beads of sweat were fathering in my eyebrows'' (Camus, 1958: 33). On the contrary, when Harun kills the French, the witness is not the sun, but the moon and Harun's mother. In fact, Harun does not shoot until the French's face is no longer recognizable: ''The darkness devoured what remained of his humanity'' (Daoud, 2015: 85).

Moreover, the depiction of the crime is also similar. In Daoud's book, it is said "I squeezed the trigger and fired twice. Two bullets. One in the belly, and the other in the neck" (Daoud, 2015: 75), meanwhile in Camus' "I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave…Then I fired four more times at the motionless body" (Camus, 1958: 36). The murders are not opposing actions, but the same action seen from opposing sides.

Another fundamental opposition between these novels is that the Arab killed by Meursault does not have a name, but the French killed by Harun does. His name is Joseph. Both Meursault and Harun confront the Other. However, only Harun recognizes the consequences: ''The Other is a unit of measurement you lose when you kill" (Daoud, 2015: 90).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj59

The only line from Koran that resonates with him is ''if you kill a single person, it is as if you have killed the whole of mankind'' (Daoud, 2015: 91). This idea can be linked with another passage from the text, where Harun explains that the name he gives everyone is Musa. He remarks that giving a name to a dead man is as important as giving it to a new-born. Musa could be any Arab and it is a way to represent the consequences of colonialism in Algeria. Anyone could be murdered and then disappear without a trace.

After the murders, Meursault and Harun are detained and processed. In Camus' novel, Meursault is tried for murder, but this is secondary. The victim's humanity is marginalized, and Meursault is more judged for not crying in her mother's funeral than for killing. Outside the courtroom, the Arab was an outsider because of his ethnicity; on the inside, the proceeding's focus on Meursault's behaviour has the same effect (Robinson, 2009).

In the same way, when Harun is processed, he is not primarily judged for the murder. Harun killed him a few days after independence was declared. During the interrogation, it was obvious that Harun was being judged for killing the French for personal reasons and not for the Revolution. If the killing had taken place a week before, he would not have been judged. Moreover, the victim is once again forgotten: ''The Frenchman had been erased with the same meticulousness applied to the Arab on the beach'' (Daoud, 2015: 97).

Harun recognizes himself in his brother's killer since both have committed a senseless crime. In the book, Meursault is the author of *The Other,* not Camus. When Harun read the book, he discovered his reflection in it. ''I was looking for traces of my brother in the book, and what I found was my own reflection, I discovered I was the murderer's double'' (Daoud, 2015: 131).

The last duality can be found in the ending of both novels. Meursault is condemned to death; Harun continues with his life after leaving jail. Meursault hoped for his execution that there was ''a large crowd of spectators… that they greet him with cries of hate'' (Camus, 1958: 65). In the same way, Harun says: ''I too would wish them to be legion, my spectators, and savage in their hate'' (Daoud, 2015: 143).

Conclusion

When we think about *The Meursault Investigation,* we need to keep in mind a mirror that reflects the image of *The Stranger.* Doubles and oppositions play a fundamental role in Daoud's rereading

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj59

and rewriting of Camus' book. It can be appreciated in the multiple references to Camus' novels and other texts, such as *Robinson Crusoe,* the Bible, and Koran. Daoud changes the point of view of this famous murder and reconfigures the characters, the act of violence, and even small details that could be easily unperceived.

Thanks to these doubles and oppositions, Daoud is giving voice to Harun and, consequently, to the Other. This book, as others from postcolonial authors responding to Western texts, offers an opportunity to analyse violence present during the French colonization and the postcolonial context of Algeria. Moreover, Daoud is asserting that behind every person there is a story. The detachment produced by the murder in *The Stranger* is another proof of the indifference towards the Other. By giving a name to Camus' Arab, Daoud is giving back not only his identity, but also his humanity.

References

Brozgal, L. (2016) "The Critical Pulse of the Contre-Enquête: Kamel Daoud on the Maghrebi Novel in French." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 20, no. 1, pp. 37–46.

Camus, A. (1958) *The Stranger.* Translated by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Vintage Books.

Daoud, K. (2015) "Meursault Et L'arabe: Une Robinsonnade Malheureuse." Lecture in University of Yale.

Daoud, K. (2015) *The Meursault Investigation*. Translated by John Cullen. London: Oneworld.

DiMaggio, K. (2017) "When One Novel Talks with Another: The Dialogue Between Camus' *The Stranger* and Kamel Daoud's *the Meursault Investigation*." *The International Academic Forum*.

Horton, S. (2016) "Solidarity and the Absurd in Kamel Daoud's Meursault, Contre-Enquête." *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* XXIV, no. 2, pp. 286-303.

Karan Ally, H. (2018) "The Stranger and the Other: Radical Alterity in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation*." *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 6, no. 2, pp. 259-280.

Kulkarni, M. (1997) "The Ambiguous Fate of a Pied-Noir: Albert Camus and Colonialism." *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 26, pp. 1528–30.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5526/esj59

Mahon, J. (2015) ''Review of Kamel Daoud. *The Meursault Investigation*.'' *Philosophy in Review* XXXV, no. 5, pp. 247–51.

Mir, S. (2019) "Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Globalization, and Arab Culture." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1, pp. 33-58.

Robinson, C. (2009) "Theorizing Politics after Camus." *Human Studies* 32, no. 1, pp. 1–18.

Shattuck, R. (1996) ''Guilt, Justice, and Empathy in Melville and Camus.'' *Partisanm Review,* LXIII, 3, pp. 430-449.

Tilikete, F. (2015) ''Meursault, contre-enquête ou la nécessaire réécriture.'' *Africa Review of Books/Revue Africaine des Livres* vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 19-23.

Treisman, D. (2015) *This week in fiction: Kamel Daoud.* The New Yorker.