

BOOK NOTE

Kamel Daoud. *The Meursault investigation* (Translated by John Cullen)

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In 2015, Kamel Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquete* was translated into English by John Cullen, as *The Meursault investigation*. The author, an Algerian journalist known for his controversial political views, retells the story of Albert Camus's classic novel of alienation, *L'Etranger* (*The stranger*). The crucial difference is that Daoud uses the point of view of Haroun, brother to the heretofore nameless Arab whom Meursault shoots in a deserted beach, seemingly on account of the bright sun and an inexplicable ennui. Haroun, presently an old man, addresses a stranger in a bar—a stand-in for the reader—recollecting the fortunes of himself and his mother after the murder of his brother. We learn that his brother's name was Musa, though Haroun sometimes refers to him as "Zujj," the Arabic name for "two," as a nod to the fact that in the original story, Meursault shoots him at two in the afternoon. As Haroun's tale unfolds, many key aspects of Meursault's version are corrected and reinterpreted.

Over the course of its 70-odd-year existence, *The stranger* has achieved fame as the penultimate existentialist novel, celebrating the revolt of the individual against society and its inauthentic games, only later to be attacked as a racist story told by a writer who had allegedly supported the French colonization of Algeria. Alice Kaplan recently came out with a biography of the book: *Looking for The stranger: Albert Camus and the life of a literary classic* (University of Chicago Press, 2016). Of late, more balanced criticisms such as that by David Carroll bring out the Algerian in Camus, rereading his works against the background of his sympathetic journalism about his native country. Daoud's novel is the latest addition to these more nuanced postcolonial reevaluations, particularly remarkable for its ability to mirror Meursault/Camus, illuminating the shadow side—the other, as it were—of the more famous Other of society.

Just like *The stranger*, *The Meursault investigation* is told in the first person. Its first line is also eerily similar, but with a twist: "Maman is still alive today" (Camus's first line is "Maman died today"). It quickly becomes obvious that the mother functions as a symbol for Algeria. Whereas the question of "Algeria is dead," is or is not a pressing issue for Meursault, it remains contentious for Haroun. Just like Camus himself, Meursault is a *pied-noir*, a European settler and French citizen living on Algerian soil, whereas indigenous Arabs like Haroun are colonial subjects of France, who do not have the rights and privileges of French citizenship. Haroun represents the point of view of

the colonial victim. He tells of how, since he was a young boy, his life has been defined by his mother's bitterness over the unavenged killing of his brother.

Compare this with the central drama of *The stranger*, which is its protagonist's overt disconnection from other people, as evidenced by Meursault's dry-eyed composure at his mother's funeral. Its absurd thesis is that this is actually the main reason why Meursault gets convicted, rather than his shooting of the Arab. Critics such as Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edward Said protest what appears to be Camus's callous indifference to the plight of indigenous Algerians. Proof of this, they say, is the fact that Meursault's victim is not even named, being referred to solely by his ethnicity. No mention is made of him or his relatives after the trial.

In Daoud's book, Haroun breaks this silence. He tells of how his brother's body has never even been retrieved. Fixating on Musa's senseless killing, which is compounded by the unresolved mystery of his lost body, Haroun's mother embarks on a years-long investigation of her own which is destined to find no answers. In the meantime, Haroun feels like a poor replacement for the martyred Musa: "... I can't forgive her. I was her object, not her son. She doesn't speak anymore. Maybe there's nothing left of Musa's body to carve up. I recall, time and time again, the way she would crawl inside my skin, the way she would do all the talking for me when we had visitors, her passion and her nastiness and her crazy eyes when she lost her temper" (39). Centrally about the open wound of the French colonization of Algeria, the novel dramatizes the effects of its legacy of violence on indigenous Algerians.

Haroun's mother is not the only significant female character to have an allegorical impact. There is Zubida, who in Meursault's story is the unnamed Muslim woman assaulted by his French friend Raymond. Meursault describes her as a prostitute, sister to the murdered Arab; but Haroun corrects this. She is neither a prostitute, nor a sister of Musa and Haroun. Typical of its self-reflexive style, Daoud's novel remarks on the symbolic implications of Zubida's character:

Oh, right, there's still the prostitute! I never talk about her, because her part is truly insulting. It's a tall tale invented by your hero. Did he have to make up such an improbable story, a working whore whose brother wanted to avenge her?... If you had met me a few decades ago, I would have served you up the version with the prostitute slash Algerian land and the settler who abuses her with repeated rapes and violence. But I've gained some distance now. We never had a sister, my brother Zujj and I, period. (62-63)

Rounding up the important feminine presence in Daoud's book is Meriem, who seeks out Haroun and his mother in the course of her academic research into Meursault's story. Through her, the protagonist learns that Meursault has actually written a memoir—entitled *The other*—in which Musa's murder is nonchalantly described. It is through his memoir that Meursault has achieved fame. Through the encounter with Meriem, who later becomes Haroun's one-time lover, Haroun is introduced to intertextual reading. This brings him to a stunning realization:

Meriem...patiently explained...the context it was written in, its success, the books it inspired, and the infinity of commentaries on every one of its chapters. It all made my head spin.... My reading progressed slowly, but I was held as if spellbound. At one and the same time, I felt insulted and revealed to myself.... I was looking for traces of my brother in the book, and what I found there instead was my own reflection, I discovered I was practically the murderer's double. (130-31)

Thus, through education, as symbolized by Haroun's relationship with Meriem (who quickly exits the stage once her role is done), the colonial subject begins to see himself, but through the colonizer's funhouse mirror. He sees both distortion and identity. The first half of the novel presents the postcolonial critique, making explicit the silences and absences in Camus's writing, exposing them as products of privilege. However, the second half reveals an intimate affinity between Haroun and Meursault. For just like Camus's absurd hero, Haroun is apprehended for a wanton ethnic killing, and is condemned not so much for the act itself as for his alienating differences from the rest of society.

One night, Haroun crosses paths with a Frenchman skulking in the courtyard of the house he and his mother have occupied, after its owners—French citizens—fled the Algerian revolution. Whereas Meursault shoots his Arab at two o'clock in the afternoon on a deserted beach, under the bright sun, Haroun shoots his Frenchman in the dark at two o'clock in the morning. Just like Meursault, he witnesses firsthand the absurd hypocrisies of the prosecuting authorities. He is judged for not having fought for the rebel side during the war of liberation: "This Frenchman, you should have killed him with us, during the war, not last week!" an army officer castigates him, implying the patriotism somehow transforms the meaning of murder. Daoud thus echoes Camus's existentialist criticism of how inauthentic society perverts moral principles. Just like Meursault, Haroun is condemned for his nonconformity, for his atheism. Apparently, the regime that has replaced the French one is no more palatable than its predecessor, and just as alienating for Algerians. But whereas Meursault was condemned to die, Haroun is unexpectedly released, after having been shamed for not fighting in the war, for not being a good Arab. He wonders, "Tell me, is that a nationality, 'Arab'? And where's this country everybody claims to carry in their hearts, in their vitals, but which doesn't exist anywhere?" (138). Daoud leaves Haroun in the bosom of the Absurd, contemplating his fate as the perennial outsider. The last line echoes Meursault's sentiments: "I, too, would wish them to be legion, my spectators, and savage in their hate" (143).

Daoud's uncannily self-reflexive novel is equal to the greatness of the classic that inspired it. Perhaps it may even exceed it, for providing a more complete picture of Algeria, and for arguing validly that the experience of otherness does not arise in a vacuum. It always bears the heavy weight of history. This is something Camus himself well knew, judging by his journalistic essays and editorials on the Algerian question from 1939 to 1958, in which he thoroughly denounced colonial injustices and called for democratic reforms (David Carroll. 2007. *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, terrorism, justice*, 21). Though *The stranger* does not seem to overtly decry the sins

of colonialism, it shows that society equally victimizes Arabs and pied-noirs alike. For example, Carroll (2007, 28-35, passim) notes that the legal absurdity of Meursault's case serves to obscure the sins of French colonial Algeria as well as of World War II Vichy France. In the end, as Meursault is convicted, he loses the privileges of French citizenship and is thus treated like an Arab: oppression is primarily racial. George Heffernan [2014, "'*J'ai compris que j'étais coupable*' ('I understood that I was guilty'): A hermeneutical approach to sexism, racism, and colonialism in Albert Camus's *L'Étranger/The stranger*"] meanwhile argues that it is possible to read the novel as condemning sexism, racism, and colonialism as "illegitimate prejudices," primarily by attributing these to Meursault as an unsympathetic point of view character. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Algerian question remains peripheral to *The stranger*. The genius of *The Meursault investigation* is to remind us that what is peripheral is really, and has always been, central. Indeed, two are mirror images.

Noelle Leslie dela Cruz

De La Salle University, Manila