



Meursault as an Embodiment of *Markata Vairagya* (Monkey Detachment) in Albert Camus's *The Outsider*

Dr. Pradip Kumar Behera

Assistant Professor of English, N.C. Autonomous College, Jajpur, Odisha, India

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Abstract— *Meursault, the protagonist in Albert Camus's The Outsider, is emotionally detached. He shows very less concern for life, death, relationship and everything. He intends to get happiness and peace of mind being detached. He holds the belief that emotions are no source of pleasure, but rather a source of trouble. He also regards all emotional expressions as absurd and meaningless. But his detachment turns into emotional involvement and attachment in many cases in the novel. The feeling of unintentional attachment and intentional detachment run parallel in case of Meursault. He shows unintentional attachment and emotion. He is again and again drawn towards sensual pleasure. He craves for physical relation with his beloved Marie. He also possesses the feeling of anger, sadness, anxiety, fear etc. which are the outcome of attachment. He is unconsciously enforced to get emotionally involved with people. He sharpens his physical senses through focusing on their satisfaction. The article discusses how Meursault embodies a type of 'Vairagya' (Detachment) which is described as "Markata Vairagya" (Monkey Detachment) in Hindu Philosophy. Such type of detached person deliberately detaches himself emotionally from people to gain happiness, but unaware, he is drawn into emotional involvement with others.*



Keywords— *Camus, The Outsider, Meursault, emotional detachment, emotional attachment*

I. INTRODUCTION

Albert Camus was a French novelist, essayist, dramatist regarded as one of the finest philosophical writers of modern France. He earned a worldwide reputation as a novelist and essayist and won the Nobel Prize for literature. He became the leading moral voice of his generation during the 1950's. One of the greatest modern writers, he expresses the moral concerns of 20th century. His writings describe the contemporary feeling that life has no ultimate meaning beyond immediate experience and explores the various philosophical schools of thought such as absurdism, nihilism and existentialism. Detachment and indifference towards life is one of the concepts of absurdism. The protagonist Meursault in *The Outsider* by Albert Camus is a detached and indifferent character. But he also shows some unintentional attachment in his action and behavior. He does not seem absolutely detached. He is seen in pursuit of physical pleasure. He is also seen with fear, sadness, anxiety and anger which are the signs of emotional

attachment. The state of intentional detachment and unintentional attachment in a person at the same time is termed as *Markata Vairagya* (Monkey Detachment) in Hindu Philosophy. Meursault in *The Outsider* by Albert Camus is an embodiment of such detachment. So there should a brief discussion on terms 'detachment' and 'attachment' before analyzing how Meursault is both attached and detached in *The Outsider*.

1.1. VAIRAGYA (DETACHMENT) IN HINDU PHILOSOPHY

The concept of detachment (*vairagya*) is common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. "In Hindu philosophy and spirituality, the concept of "Vairagya" holds a central place, signifying the practice of dispassion or detachment from the material world." (Sitaramananda) "Vairagya is a Sanskrit term that roughly translates as dispassion or renunciation, in particular – renunciation from the pains

and pleasures in the temporary material world". (Wikipedia)

"*Vairagya* is an abstract noun derived from the word *viraga* (*vi* meaning "without" + *raga* meaning "passion, feeling, emotion, interest"). *Vairagya* is considered an essential quality for spiritual seekers aiming to attain higher states of consciousness and liberation (*moksha*). It involves cultivating a sense of non-attachment to material possessions, desires, and the outcomes of one's actions. Contrary to a misconception, practicing *vairagya* does not necessitate avoiding responsibilities or abandoning duties. Instead, it encourages individuals to develop an inner state of detachment while actively engaging in the world". (Rashinkar)

1.2. TWO FACETS OF VAIRAGYA (DETACHMENT):

According to Vinita Rashinkar; "In Karma Yoga, there are two facets of *Vairagya* (Detachment). The first one is known as *Phalavairagya* (Detachment from the Fruit of Actions). It is associated with the path of selfless action. The practitioners of this perform duties without attachment to outcomes. The focus is given on the present moment and the process of performing responsibilities. The second one is *Sakamavairagya* (Detachment with Desires). This involves desires for material possessions and sensory pleasures. This type of *vairagya* cultivates contentment. Practitioners engage in gradually reducing and eliminating desires for material possessions and sensory pleasures."

1.3. THE FOUR TYPES OF VAIRAGYA THAT WE EXPERIENCE IN EVERY-DAY LIVING

Vinita Rashinkar mentions that there are four types of *Vairagya* we experience in every-day living. The first type is *Shamshana Vairagya*. It is a term that is often used to describe a form of detachment or dispassion associated with the realization of the impermanence of life and the transient nature of the material world. The second type is *Markata Vairagya*. It is used to present the paradoxical nature of detachment or renunciation. The third type is *Prasava Vairagya*. It is a term that relates to a specific form of detachment or dispassion associated with the process of childbirth. The fourth type is *Abhava Vairagya*. It refers to a type of detachment characterized by a lack of interest or desire due to unavailability or absence.

1.4. MARKATA VAIRAGYA (MONKEY DETACHMENT)

"The *Markata Vairagya* is used to illustrate the paradoxical nature of detachment in which the practitioners are both attached and detached. The analogy '*Markata*' refers to a monkey, which is known for its restlessness and

constant movement. *Markata Vairagya* represents a kind of detachment where the mind may appear to be renouncing, but in reality, it is still actively engaged in seeking for sensual and material pleasures. The idea is that, like a monkey, the mind can be seemingly detached from one thing but quickly moves on to another, never truly achieving a state of profound stillness or lasting detachment. It suggests a form of detachment in which individual may still be entangled mentally or emotionally with the objects of desire" (Rashinkar). The protagonist Meursault is an embodiment *Markata Vairagya* in Albert Camus's *The Outsider*. He is a person who shows both emotional attachment and intentional detachment in his action and behavior.

1.5. (RAGA) ATTACHMENT:

According to the *Bhagavadgita* contact with sense objects results in attachment. From attachment arises desire for sensual pleasure, material pleasure, anger, anxiety and fear and so on. "Attachment means holding on to things dearly as if one cannot live without them or as if one's very happiness and existence depend upon them. These are the mental bonds one develops with things and objects one believes are important for his/her happiness. They are the invisible strings that tie one to the external world and its myriad attractions through one's sense organs. One's attachments are part of his/her consciousness as well as unconsciousness. They bind one to the sensory world and limit his/her vision, knowledge and awareness. They determine one's actions, reactions, inactions, joys, sorrows, successes and failures. When one is attached to things, they take control of his/her life, body, mind and senses and define his/her life, personality and destiny. A person may be physically, mentally and spiritually attached. The physically and mentally attached person is attached to body, colour, shape, physical fitness, health, sexual desire and all material things. The spiritually attached person is attached to one's guru, religious leader, beliefs, God, gods and goddesses, saints, religious tradition, methods of worship, spiritual practices, places of worship, scriptures, ideals, virtue, morality, spiritual life, afterlife, knowledge, symbols etc". (Jayram)

II. ATTACHMENT IN MEURSAULT

From a simple study of Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus's *The Outsider* it seems he is rather a normal individual. Camus tries to portray him as a common person. Meausault also acknowledges being an ordinary individual: "I wanted to tell him that I was just like everybody else, exactly like everybody else." (Camus, 59) He is a man with physical attachments. Again and again in the novel he is drawn towards the sensual pleasure. For

example, he has a lover named Marie who works in the same office. Meursault meets Marie Cardona the day after his mother's funeral, and he shows his readiness for physical intimacy. Meursault fully acknowledges physical sensations. He and Marie swam together and went to watch cinema. Then they came to Meursault's house and had physical relation:

"The movie was funny in parts but then got really ridiculous. She pressed her leg against mine. I stroked her breasts. Towards the end of the movie, I kissed her, but awkwardly. After we left, she came back to my place. When I woke up, Marie had gone.....I turned over in my bed to see if I could still smell the salt from Marie's hair in the pillow and went back to sleep until ten o'clock".(Camus,18)

There are also some other instances in the novel showing Meursault's extreme desire and act of having physical relation with Marie:

"Yesterday was Saturday and Marie came over as we'd arranged. I really wanted to sleep with her because she was wearing a pretty dress with red and white stripes and leather sandals. You could see the outline of her firm breasts and her sun-tanned face made her look radiant". (Camus, 31)

"After we got dressed on the beach, Marie looked at me; her eyes were shining. I kissed her. We didn't say anything more. I held her close and all we wanted to do was catch a bus, go home and throw ourselves down on my bed..... She was wearing one of my pyjama tops with the sleeves rolled up. When she laughed, I wanted her again". (P.32)

"We ran and splashed through the shallow little waves. We swam for a while and then she pressed her body against mine. I felt her legs wrapped around mine and I wanted her". (Camus, 47)

Even when Meursault was in prison after killing Arab, he shows his attraction towards women and Marie:

"...For example, I was tormented by the desire to have a woman. It was natural, I was young. I never specially thought about Marie. But I thought so much about a woman- women, about all the women I'd known, all the circumstances in which I'd made love to them – that I could feel their living presence in my prison cell, their faces arousing my desire".(Camus, 69-70)

"I'd waited eagerly for Saturdays so I could press Marie's body close to mine". (Camus, 69)

As in the case of the attached person, Meursault was also haunted by feeling of fear, sadness, anxiety, emotion, desire for freedom and love for life. The following passages from the novel show it:

".....the chaplain arrived. When I saw him, I started shaking a little. I explained that I wasn't in despair. I was just afraid, which was completely natural". (Camus, 105)

"That day, after the guard had gone, I looked at myself in my metal dish. It seemed as if my reflection remained grave even when I tried to smile at it. I moved it about in front of me. I was smiling but my face still had the same sad, harsh expression".(Camus, 73)

"At the beginning of my imprisonment, however, what I found most difficult was that I had the thoughts of a free man. For example, I was obsessed by a desire to be on a beach and to walk down to the sea". (Camus, 69)

"What I'm concerned about at present is how to avoid the guillotine, finding out if it is possible to escape the inevitable". (Camus, 98)

"Then I explained that one of the characteristics of my personality was that physical sensations often got in the way of my emotions". (Camus, 59)

Meursault is an ordinary man who is prone to pain and anger. The heat and sun are triggers for Meursault to become furious. The blaring sun makes Meursault act in an irrational and absurd manner. This motif is first introduced at Meursault's mother's funeral. Even though his mother just passed away, all Meursault can think about is the heat and that "the sun bearing down, making the whole landscape shimmer with heat, it was inhuman and oppressive" (Camus, 15). Meursault calls the sun inhuman and oppressive. It demonstrates how the sun weakens him and fogs his mind. Instead of focusing on the death of his mother, Meursault is worried about walking in the sun that creates dizziness in his head. The force of the sun also becomes a main motivation for Meursault's downfall. When facing the Arab alone on the beach, all Meursault had to do was turn away "but the whole beach, throbbing in the sun, was pressing on his back" (Camus, 54). As he walks closer to the Arab the rays of the sun becomes physically painful to him and worsens as the Arab draws his knife. The brightness reflecting off the knife blinds Meursault into not knowing what he was about to do. It was at this point that "it seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire" (Camus, 54). The hostile force was too much for Meursault and the sun forces him to fire the revolver, killing the Arab. The sun represents the domineering power of the natural world over human

actions. Meursault is unable to control himself when the sun and heat are strong.

Meursault celebrates every sense of his five senses as harbingers of pleasure in life. He suppresses his mental detachment to enjoy sensory pleasure. He enjoys the *smell* of brine and earth, the *taste* of coffee, cigarettes, and Celeste's meals at the time of mourning, the *touch* of Maries's body a day after his mother's funeral, the *sight* of the countryside:

“Reddish streaks filled the sky high over the hills that separated Marengo from the sea. And the wind blowing from that direction carried with it the scent of salty air. It was going to be a beautiful day. It had been a long time since I'd gone to the countryside and I thought how nice it would be to go for a long walk, if it hadn't been for Mama”. (Camus, 13)

When Meursault is sentenced to death and in jail he comes to realizations. He is an ordinary man with passion. He makes him less of a stranger to himself and others. Being physically isolated from the world allowed him to see how he had isolated himself before. His passion is awoken when he screams at the chaplain and does so with both cries of anger and cries of joy. Meursault has stopped being passive. Now, through words and actions he makes active choices. His perception of people also changed. Instead of isolation, Meursault hopes that a large crowd attends his execution. All these changes are due to a revelation that everyone is elected to the same fate. He concludes that the universe is similar to him, in that it is indifferent to human life. He decides that life has no grand meaning or importance and that everybody knows life isn't worth living. Death is inevitable and the life one lives on Earth has no purpose. He concludes that regardless of his impending death, he does not regret anything from his life and is ready to live it over again.

“I always assumed the worst: my appeal would be denied. ‘Well the, I'll die.’ Sooner than other people, that much was obvious. But everyone knows that life isn't really worth living. In the end, I knew that it didn't matter much whether you died at thirty or at seventy, because in either case other men and women would of course go on living, and it would be like that for thousands of years”. (Camus, 103)

III. DETACHMENT IN MEURSAULT

In the novel, Camus presents the protagonist, Meursault, as an emotionally detached young man. His principal features are his lack of empathy and affection

equally in happy or sad times. This detachment allows Meursault to avoid developing emotional relationships and to react shallowly to different problems. Meursault, a young French Algerian lives, works and loves without passion. The book opens with the death of Meursault's mother and introduces the strange character of Meursault who maintains an absolute silence even on the news of his mother's death. He does not show the least sign of morning. The news of his mother's death is spoken in a matter of fact tone: “My mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I don't know. I received a telegram from the old people's home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Very sincerely yours’. That does not mean anything. It might have been yesterday” (Camus, 3). There is no expression of sorrow or remorse on the receipt of the telegram. He rather seems to be concerned with details like when did his mother die. During the funeral procession, he says that the hearsay makes him think of “pen trays in the office” which is yet another emotional detached reaction. Even with the caretaker at the funeral home Meursault diligently focuses on trivial details: “I like milk in my coffee, so I said yes, and he came back a few minutes later with a tray. I drank it. Then I wanted a cigarette. But I hesitated, because I didn't know if I should smoke in front of Mama. I thought about it; it was no importance whatsoever. I offered the caretaker a cigarette and we both smoked” (Camus, 8). Meursault's social interactions thus inform only on events rather than emotions.

Even in the matters of love and marriage, Meursault shows the lack of emotional attachment. He seems to be exceptionally apathetic to women. Meursault seems to be associated with Marie because of his physical needs but the existence in real hardly matters to him. “Meursault is a man that does not follow defined rules of bad and good, and he does not fit into social categories. He only lives sensual experiences and rejects all phenomena related to the state of mind. He does not even love Marie who has developed strong feelings for him. Meursault only considers her to be a sexual object to satisfy his demands” (Hernandez). When his mistress Marie asks him about marriage, he says that he would marry her but that he does not love her and it does not make any difference to him:

“That evening, Marie came to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said that it was all the same to me and that we could get married if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I replied as I had once before that that didn't mean anything, but said I was pretty sure I didn't love her”. (Camus, 38)

Meursault simply does not make the distinction between good and bad in his own mind. When Raymond

asks him to write a letter that will help Raymond torment his mistress, Meursault indifferently agrees because he "didn't have any reason not to." He does not place any value judgment on his act, and writes the letter mainly because he has the time and the ability to do so. He accepts the friendship of Raymond when he proposes:

"It only struck me when he said: 'Now we're really pals'. He said the same thing again and I said: 'Yes.' It didn't matter to me one way or the other whether we were friends or not, but it really seemed to matter to him". (Camus, 30)

Meursault shows his utter detachment in another incident in the novel. He visits an acquaintance Raymond, who is busy drinking and beating his girlfriend all day long. A group of young Arabs, whose leader is the brother of Raymond's girlfriend, follow Meursault and Raymond, strolling on a beach on a weekend. The Arab is all set to kill Raymond and stabs him in a fight. Hours later, Meursault returns to the beach and with Raymond's pistol. He does not make any distinction between wrong or right and good or bad. He senselessly murders his friend's enemy. When asked whether he regrets the action, he merely replies that he felt annoyed. He does not find his action to be wrong instead he shows an attitude that people do not matter dead or alive and that even a cold-blooded murder is free from the shackles of wrong or right. In the possession of his friends' revolver, Meursault is suddenly afflicted by the physically unbearable weather. The scorching sun and bright sand cause a burning sweat in his eyes. At the moment of utmost vexation the Arab reveals a knife. Its glaring shine falls on Meursault's face which prompts him to pull the trigger and shatter the harmony of the day. With the Arab dead, Meursault indifferently fires four more rounds at the motionless body. As he describes:

"All I could feel was the sun crashing like cymbals against my forehead, and the knife, a burning sword hovering above me. Its red-hot blade tore through my eyelashes to pierce my aching eyes. It was then that everything started to sway. The sea heaved a heavy, scorching sigh. The sky seemed to split apart from end to end to pour its fire down upon me. My whole body tensed as I gripped the gun more tightly. It set off the trigger. I could feel the smooth barrel in my hand and it was then, with that sharp, deafening sound that it all began. I shook off the sweat and the sun. I realized that I had destroyed the natural balance of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I had once been happy. Then I fired four more times into the lifeless body, where the bullets sank without leaving a trace. And it was as if I had rapped

sharply, four times on the fatal door of destiny". (Camus, 53-54)

Meursault is arrested for the crime and during the trial, he makes no effort to defend himself or explain his action. He does not plead for clemency and does not even try a hand at saying a line. In the end, he is sentenced to death, not for killing an Arab in colonial Algeria but because in our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death:

"Then he wanted to know if I had a lawyer. I said I didn't and asked if it was absolutely necessary". (Camus, 57)

"My lawyer placed his hand on my wrist. My mind was a total blank. The presiding judge asked me if there was anything I wanted to say. I thought about it. I said: 'No'. Then I was taken away. (Camus, 97)

Meursault, the protagonist and narrator, is a young man living in Algeria slightly before the Second World War. He finds out that his mother has died and takes a bus to her old people's home. However, he declines the offer of seeing his mother in her coffin; he instead smokes and sleeps until her funeral the following day:

"The undertakers have just arrived. I'm going to ask them to close the coffin. Do you want to see your mother one last time before they do? I said no". (Camus, 11)

"It was cooler now; the coffee had warmed me up and the night air drifted in through the open door, bringing with it the sweet scent of flowers. I think I fell asleep for a while". (Camus, 8)

Having returned to Algiers, he bumps into Marie, who used to be his co-worker, and they go on a date to see a comedy film which shows his indifference towards his mother's death:

"I asked her if she wanted to go to the movies that night. She laughed again and said she wanted to see a film with Fernandel in it. After we were dressed, she seemed very surprised to see me wearing a black tie and asked if I was mourning. I told her that Mama had died. She wanted to know when it had happened, so I said: 'Yesterday'". (Camus, 18)

Meursault shows his detachment towards any prosperity in life. When he is given a proposal by Raymond to go to Paris to work in his company there and change his life, Meursault shows no interest. For him life either in adversity or prosperity is the same:

“Then he asked me whether I would be interested in changing my life. I replied that you can never really change your life and that in any case, every life was more or less the same and that my life here wasn't bad at all”. (Camus, 38)

IV. CONCLUSION

Meursault believes life is absurd and has no meaning, and he remains an outcast because he shows no compassion towards humanity. He is only going through the motions of life without any real feelings or passions. His emotionlessness, indifference and detachment make him a stranger to others. After his trial, Meursault finally acknowledges his position as an outsider or a 'stranger' in society. The concluding lines of the novel are:

“I opened myself for the first time to the tender indifference of the world. To feel it so like me, so like a brother, in fact, I understood that I had been happy, and I was still happy. So that it might be finished, so that I might feel less alone, I could only hope there would be many, many spectators on the day of my execution and that they would greet me with cries of hatred”. (Camus, 111)

The above lines suggest Meursault has at last, come to terms with his emotions. He is also holding him back from knowing who he really is. According to Sartre, “man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself” (22). Meursault in the novel existed in the society as an individual. He had some obsessions and physical attachments. He was attached to physical pleasure. He was also prone to anger, sadness, anxiety and fear like a common human being. But he could not reach the point where he can define who he is since he is detached from himself and does not quite understand what means to be human is. He isolated himself out of passivity or simply not making choices and letting life just happen. Thus, Meursault in *The Outsider* by Albert Camus is an embodiment of *Markata Vairagya* (Monkey Detachment) as described in Hindu philosophy. He is observed both attached unaware as well as emotionally detached.

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