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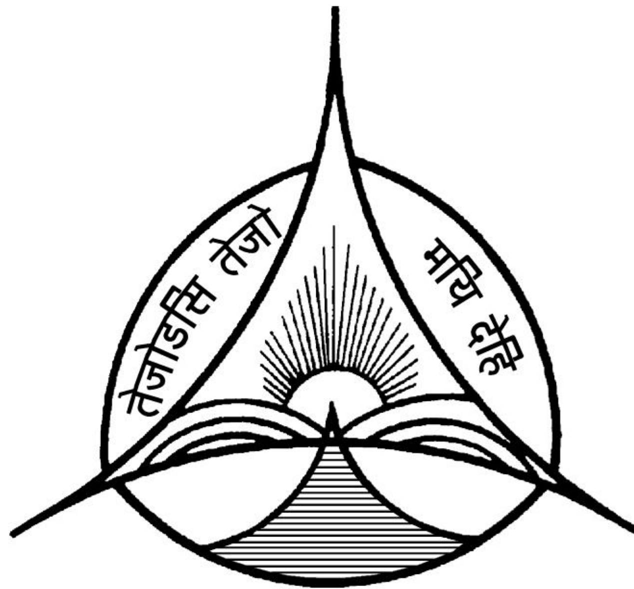

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The Meursault Investigation: A Novel by Kamel Daoud, Translated from the French by John Cullen, New York: Other Press, 2015

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The Meursault Investigation, originally published in French (2013), is a re-viewing and re-telling of Albert Camus's famous novel, *The Stranger* (1942), from the Algerian perspective. It is passionate and subjective but informed and committed. The novel contributes both to the development of postcolonial theories and to the study of the French cultural history of the period in which the novel is set. What is most interesting is the fact that its discourse arrives dialectically from the very historical material it examines. It engages in mimicry that contests both the system of representation and the logic of the masters by exaggeration and repetition.

The protagonist Harun is the younger brother of the unnamed Arab who was killed on a deserted beach by Meursault, the protagonist of Camus's novel. What triggers off the murder is the anger of Meursault's friend Rimon, alias Raymond, against an Algerian woman whom he calls "a whore" for cheating on him. So he elicits the help of Meursault to threaten her by writing a letter, which he does. According to Harun's version of the "origin of his Brother's death" (p. 43), the unnamed Arab was saving the honour of the Algerian woman who had been beaten by Raymond "till she bled" (*The Stranger,* p. 29). For Harun it is a culturally misunderstood act, because in working class Algiers the notion of protecting the woman's honour was strong. He adds "a banal score-settling got out of hand [and] was elevated to a philosophical crime" (p. 19), pointing to the colonial asymmetry of things in Camus's novel.

Daoud's novel, *The Meursault Investigation,* is indeed an investigation into colonial ways of thinking. It prises open that line between epistemic forms of colonial oppression and the ontological experiences of colonial/colonised subjects. It underscores the burden that the postcolonial subject carries. Questions of identity politics, race, gender, journeys, memory, problems of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation are raised while rewriting colonial history.

In his narrative told in a bar, Harun goes back "more than half a century" (p. 1) when his brother was shot dead with "absolute impunity" by Meursault, a citizen of France. He wants to retell the story because while the murderer, the one "who knew how to write" was remembered by all, he was a "good storyteller;" his brother, a poor illiterate, got left out. No one bothered to find out the dead unnamed Arab's identity, his name, where he lived and whether he had family and children. He was seen as a person without history.

This is the incentive for Harun to speak the murderer's language. He says, "to write it too: so I can speak in the place of a dead man, so I can finish his sentences for him" (p.1). "It's simple,"

he says, "the story we're talking about should be rewritten, in the same language, but from right to left" (p. 7), pointing to the erasing of unofficial history by colonial official history. Before Independence, Harun says, "People did without exact dates" (p. 27). His mother and he only got a textual version of the murder of his brother "about a crime committed in a book" (p. 17). There was "no trace in the official reports filed in any police station, none in the minutes of the trial" (p. 47). It was a "denial [erasure] of a shockingly violent kind" (p. 46).

The crisis in identity related to structural imbalance, cultural imperialism, geographic displacement, political hegemony, the privileging of official history, and the psychological impact of these systems of knowledge in constituting the colonial subject is vital to postcolonial theories. All these are played out in Harun's revisionary story. An ironic humour is everywhere in the story through binaries and reversals.

Harun says very early in his narrative, "I am going to take the stones from the old houses that the colonists left behind, remove them one by one, and build my own house, my own language" (p. 2).

But the task is not easy if one is emerging from the weight of colonial history. Harun knows there are shades of grey in the colonised land and its people. The old song and the local favourite, *Beer is Arab and Whiskey's Western*,is indicative. Re-singing the song with its colonial accretions, Harun tells us that the song is originally from Oran and is therefore, Oranian. It goes, "The beer's Arab, the whiskey's European, the bartenders are Kabyles, the streets are French, the old porticos are Spanish...and I could go on"(p. 22). There are no pristine, precolonial spaces anymore. Harun, while describing the village Hadjout (after the colonisers left), says that it has grown in an unruly fashion, with unfinished buildings and lost fields. This is the havoc left behind by the colonisers that makes it impossible to put the individual back where he belongs.

One of the first things Harun does is to give his unnamed brother, the murdered victim, a name and an identity. His name is Musa (Moses). For Harun, Musa is not a name without a face. He says that in the Arab neighbourhood, unlike in the French part, they were "Muslims, we had given names, faces, and habits. Period" (p. 60). He describes his brother as tall, who had eyes that were hard because his "ancestors had lost their land" (p. 9). Musa alias Zujj in Algerian Arabic means two. The significance of this number runs as a recurrent motif throughout the narrative with its underpinnings of colonial binaries: Harun and his brother, the connection between Musa and Musa, between Musa and himself, sand and salt, Musa and Meursault, the coloniser and the colonised, and official and unofficial history.

Independence did not help matters towards development and freedom. The political turmoil created by the clash of the OAS and the FLN *djounoud* continued in a different avatar. Harun says, "the Truths that Independence only pushed people on both sides to switch roles" (p. 11), robbing them of their identities and reconstructing them as military nationalists or religious fundamentalists. If Monsieur Meursault is alienated from himself and his surroundings by his perspective of existentialism and the absurd, Harun is alienated from the options that he is

offered, viz. a kind of nationalism or a kind of religious fundamentalism pointing to the fact that the colonised subject is always dragged into some form of identity politics. Harun opts out of both stating that he never felt like an Arab, "Arab-ness is like Negro-ness, which only exists in the White man's eyes" (p. 60). Both are alienated figures in their own ways.

The book achieves its most important goal in that it questions and destabilises the colonial discourse. Inevitably for a project as ambitious as this, however, there are problems. The author tends to use stereotypes that needlessly oversimplify complex dynamics. The coloniser and colonised binaries are disconcertingly polarised. The idea of a move beyond it is not addressed, or, pointed to. The mirror image is central to the novel in further elaborating the colonial/postcolonial binaries. The novel's opening line—"Mama's still alive today," is opposed to Camus's novel, "Mother died today." Meursault murders an Arab without a name at two in the afternoon because he had too much sun in his eyes; Harun murders (as restitution for his brother's murder) the Frenchman with a name, Monsieur Joseph Larquais, also at two but in the morning because he had too much moonlight in his eyes. Harun sees himself practically as the "murderer's double" (p.131). Where Meursault is visited by a priest while in prison, Harun is hounded by "a whole pack of religious fanatics." Meursault is given the death sentence not for killing an Arab but for not showing enough grief at his mother's funeral. Harun is interrogated—but released later—not for killing the Frenchman but for "not having done so at the right moment" (p.107). If he had killed him before July 5th when the war for independence was on, he could have become a national hero.

Yet there are still other problems involved in describing the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Although Daoud's miming of this relationship is appealing, it risks becoming ethnocentric. But nevertheless, although Camus's novel, *The Stranger* was published a good seventy years before *The Meursault Investigation,* the two books enrich each other. As much for the richness of its historical detail as for its sharp theoretical insights, Daoud's *The Mersault Investigation* forms a sequel to Camus's *The Stranger*. The book is easy to read, elegantly written and philosophically rich.