

A Consideration of Camus's *The First Man* as a Postcolonial Work

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ABSTRACT: Camus wrote *The First Man* last, but perhaps it should be read first. Using the facts of his own childhood in Algeria, Camus constructs the philosophy that he developed in his other works; namely, the idea that the individual exists in a solitary state, but is united with others by virtue of universal nature of this state. The work presents ideas which are not easily explainable within the tenets of postcolonial theory: the complexities of the French-Algerian political situation, the implications of language separated from history, the idea of the private self, and the positing of poverty as an overarching discourse are all elements not addressed. But it is Camus's universal vision of humanity, arising from oblivion and returning to oblivion, that most definitely puts the work outside the body of postcolonial literature.

Albert Camus was killed in a car accident along with his agent in 1960. In the wreckage, investigators found the manuscript for *The First Man*. It was an autobiographical work describing Camus's childhood in the French colony of Algeria. His family considered it a "raw" manuscript—about one-third completed and unrevised (Camus vi). They—Camus's wife in particular—decided not to publish it at the time of the manuscript's discovery, but their reasoning had nothing to do with the quality of the work. Rather, they thought that the prevailing ideology of the "left," the French intellectual society that would have counted Camus as a member, would reject Camus's viewpoint concerning colonialism put forth in the work. Specifically, Camus supported the establishment of a federation government in Algeria which would represent all people equally. Such a proposal directly opposed the call of the liberals in France to grant Arabs their independence outright which would result in the ouster of French Algerians (vi). Camus further rejected the popular advocacy of communism, believing that "ideology must serve humanity, not the contrary . . ." (vi). In other words, Camus believed that no totalitarian regime—which he saw communism as being—could serve humanity, but rather led to humanity serving the regime. The family believed the general unpopularity of both these views was certain to subject Camus's works to attacks aimed at discrediting the writer and his ideas. So, the work remained unpublished (vi).

In 1995, Camus's daughter, Catherine, decided that *The First Man* would have to be either published or destroyed. With communism dismantled nearly worldwide and the legacies of colonialism popularly disclaimed, the climate would seem more favorable now to such a work than then. But, if *The First Man* is examined within the bounds of postcolonial theory as the prevailing literary ideology, its reception will not necessarily be friendlier. Postcolonial theory seeks to examine the binary relationship between the colonizer and colonized, which works to continue imperialistic

authority beyond the actual governmental fact of colonialism. At first glance, *The First Man* would seem to fit neatly into the framework of postcolonial literature: the story was written at the time of Algeria's violent struggle for independence; it is set in Algeria; it contains many descriptions of the domestic conflicts between the French colonists and the Arab Algerians. But, as Camus moves through the events of his childhood he works out a theme that ultimately sets this work outside of postcolonial literature. In *The First Man* Camus sets forth the principle tenets about the condition of humanity that portray the individual as existing in a state of alienation. The idea of this existential state is held to be true universally and it is Camus's support of the universal that constitutes a break with postcolonial thought, which rejects the idea of the universal as being a fabrication of Western ideology. The following discussion will examine some of the features of this theme that are not easily or completely dealt with within the discussion of postcolonial theory.

Before turning to the narrative itself, it should be noted that even the setting of the novel is problematic. In his essay "Orientalism," Edward Said stated that "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Mongia 20). This explanation poses the West against the East (or the colonizer against colonized) in a binary opposition, which serves to consolidate the identity of the colonizer in a positive way against the negative representation of the colonized. Said proceeds from this characterization to demonstrate the way in which this opposition functions to grant power to one group over another. But Camus would stop right there. A brief overview of the situation in Algeria in the latter 1950s and early 1960s shows the reason. Algeria was not merely a colony of France but was *constitutionally* a part of the republic in the same way that Alaska or Hawaii is part of the United States. 1.5 million citizens, almost one-fifth of the population of Algeria, were European with about half of them having been born there like Camus (Brower 300). In the struggle for independence, the structure of the opposition expanded from binary to tertiary: The French, the Algerian French, and the Arab Algerians. In another ten years or so when Arab Algerians began to migrate to France to find work, a fourth position would be figured into the French / Algerian paradigm and the picture becomes even more complicated. As Ella Shohat pointed out in "Notes on

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the 'Post-Colonial,'" the referent perspective implied by the term "post-colonial" becomes particularly unclear in a situation such as this:

Does the 'post' indicate the perspective and location of the ex-colonized (Algerian), the ex-colonizer (French), the ex-colonial-settler (*Pied Noir*), or the displaced hybrid in First World metropolitans (Algerian in France)?

(Mongia 324)

For Camus, Algeria is the place of "the kingdom and the exile," a sort of "no man's land" in relation to the binary structure of Colonizer / Colonized. Therefore, his perspective cannot be assumed as belonging to a particular camp and presents a circumstance not adequately accounted for within the realm of postcolonial theory.

But the more significant challenges to the tenets of postcolonial theory come from within the text of the story itself. In particular, Camus's claims about the irrecoverability of the past has implications that dissolve oppositions, binary or otherwise. Initially, the notion that the past is irrecoverable could be construed as a rejection of "nativism" or of the search for origins as keys to a past, supplying the individual with identity, which would be very much in keeping with the main tenets of postcolonial theory. But Camus's treatment of history is somewhat different because, not only does he feel that it was not available to the native, he disclaims its impact on any individual altogether. In other words, whereas Orientalism would define that native as lack, Camus would define *all* as lack. In the story, Camus demonstrates this view in Jacques Comery's search for some traces of his father's life, who died some forty years before. When Jacques finds the grave of his father in France, he realizes that his father was twenty-nine when he died, eleven years younger than Jacques. Jacques starts to feel

not the stirring of the soul that leads the son to the memory of the vanished father, but the overwhelming compassion that a grown man feels for an unjustly murdered child—something here was not in the natural order and, in truth, there was no order but only madness and chaos when the son was older than the father.

(Camus 26)

Jacques could find no traces of his father in himself or in the landscape. When Jacques finally locates an old carob dealer who vaguely remembers him, the only thing that the dealer can recall about his father was "No talker, he was no talker" (186). Camus suggests in this fruitless search that humans are without history and face only an eternal anonymity. This is the state of what he called "the first man," being without moorings to a place or a people, "wandering through the night of years in the land of oblivion . . ." (195).

Camus further emphasizes this basic state of alienation by casting off the claims of language. Camus spoke French even though he did not share the history of France. The implication of the separation of language from origin given in *The First Man* runs counter to Foucault's assertion that

language, as the site of discourse, serves as one's source of reality (Webster 65). Rather, for Camus, the language without the history not only does *not* influence the individual towards a particular ideology, it actually intensifies the awareness of alienation. This was shown in the story when Jacques strikes up a friendship with a French boy named Georges Didier who is authentically French and has been brought to Algiers because of his father's work. Didier is deeply and romantically familiar with the history of his family and country.

When he spoke of France, he would say 'our country' and he accepted in advance the sacrifices that country might demand . . . whereas this notion of country had no meaning to Jacques, who knew he was French, and that this entailed a certain number of duties, but for whom France was an abstraction . . .

(208)

Thus, language serves not as the locus of meaning but of ambiguity for Jacques which supports Camus's larger assertion that super-structures such as language and history cannot supply meaning to the individual—not colonial, neo-colonial or otherwise.

A term such as "alienation" discussed above, implies subjectivity for it is a subjective state. Here too does Camus's philosophy differ from positions held by postcolonial theorists. In "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" Dipesh Chakrabarty questions whether a truly private self even exists. He writes that even the "private" self that engages in outpourings in letters and diaries are "in fact, a deferred 'public,' for this bourgeois private . . . is always already oriented to an audience" (Mongia 230). That is to say, even one's inner voice speaks a language that conforms to a particular ideology and therefore does not truly and without outside disposition arise from an inner source. Further, Chakrabarty noted that in reviewing Indian material, "autobiographies in the confessional mode are notable for their absence" (231). Whether this silence on the part of Indians means that they do not actually have private selves or they do not habitually record "private" thoughts cannot be known, which is the larger point. The reasoning is similar to Gayatri Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak (128). No evidence of a truly private self can be provided that is not already part of a discourse and is therefore no longer private.

In this case then, the challenge is delivered to Camus by theorists such as Chakrabarty. How can one posit a state of alienation as the medium of humanity when the inner or private self cannot be validated? Although Camus describes the state directly, he also confirms it, not through narrative, but through the evidence observable in the actions of others, particularly his mother's. In the story, Jacques's mother, Catherine, is hearing-impaired and therefore shy of company. Also, as a widowed mother living in her mother's home, she is a person without a real sense of place. After a long day of working as a scrub woman, she habitually takes her seat before the window of their shabby apartment and watches without commenting on the life going on in the streets.

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When she is thus occupied, Jacques notes that:

she no longer seemed to be thinking of him nor for that matter of anything, and she even looked at him from time to time with an odd expression, as if—or so at least it seemed to him—he were now in the way, were disturbing the narrow, empty, closed universe which she circled in her solitude.

(Camus 56)

Using his mother as an example, Camus lifts the idea of alienation from being an internal state to an external one; her separateness is observable and does not require interpretation. Camus does not need to prove the existence of a private self in order to assert alienation. The fact that Jacques cannot interpret his mother's feelings or thoughts reinforces Camus' argument about isolation as the essential existential state. The private self is walled off from public view and it is the wall itself that becomes significant as an assertion of the solitary condition of the individual.

Another discrepancy between the tenets set forth in *The First Man* and those of postcolonial theory concerns again the idea of discourse. As was stated above, Foucault's use of the term "discourse" contains the implication that language provides meaning and thereby, a means of political control (Webster 65). The character Jacques then, since he speaks French, would be influenced by the ideology of France through the language even though he was born in Algeria. But Camus proposes another discourse that overrides language: Poverty. Jacques grows up in such extreme poverty that many choices—including how one would interpret the past—simply aren't available. "Remembrance of things past is just for the rich. For the poor it only marks the faint traces on the path to death" (Camus 80). In this passage, Camus goes on to say that for the poor, remembering is just an unnecessary burden: "And besides, in order to bear up well one must not remember too much, but rather stick close to the passing day, hour by hour . . ." (80). He is pointing out that the exigencies of living made it impossible for these people to entertain philosophical principles. Poverty simply crushes them. Because it so completely surrounds their lives, it acts as a discourse that supersedes the discourses of nationality or ethnicity.

Underlying Camus's argument that the individual exists in an isolated state is an idea that constitutes *The First Man*'s most vital break with postcolonial theory, and that is the idea of the universal. As was stated earlier, Camus would not define just the native as lack, but *all* as lack. Though the work does present Arabs as the stereotypic "Other"—silent, nameless, mysterious, anonymous—Camus does not single them out as a group inhabited with these qualities; rather, he uses them as examples much as he did his mother to point out the very basic disconnectedness of all humans. The term "all," of course, implies a universal condition that is rejected roundly in postcolonial theory. In his essay, Chakrabarty objects to the idea of the universal because the concept assumes that the process of discovery is complete. Only when all conditions are provided for, can an idea be called universal. The problem for Chakrabarty is that these ideas

proceed from European history which locate Europe at the top of the teleological ladder; the other cultures land on rungs further down.

Only 'Europe,' the argument would appear to be, is *theoretically* (i.e., at the level of the fundamental categories that shape historical thinking) knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton which is substantially 'Europe.'

(Mongia 225)

Calling something "universal" really means "true for Europe," while it pretends to be true for all humanity.

Again, as with the discussion above concerning the debate about the existence of the private self, the argument for the universal is difficult to make in a Western language. But Camus meets Chakrabarty's case for indeterminacy by centering his claim on a universal event: Death. To Camus, death is a fact that overarches all other considerations—language, place, history, poverty. It is the final and ultimate discourse that shapes the individual's life. In *The First Man*, death emphasizes the condition that he calls being "the first man," without origin except the oblivion to which one returns (Camus 196). Camus describes this idea directly in the story when Jacques returns from his visit to his father's grave and suddenly realizes that the failure to find meaning *was* the meaning:

And yet now he knew from the bottom of his heart that Saint-Brieuc and what it represented had never been anything to him, and he thought of the worn and green-encrusted gravestones he had just left, acknowledging with a strange sort of pleasure that death would return him to his true homeland and, with its immense oblivion, would obliterate the memory of that alien and ordinary man who had grown up, had built in poverty, without help or deliverance, on a fortunate shore and in the light of the first mornings of the world, and then alone, without memories and without faith, he had entered the world of the men of his time and its dreadful and exalted history.

(196 - 197)

Certainly the meanings surrounding death—the idea of an afterlife, what that afterlife looks like, and so on—are subjects of discourse. But for Camus, the event itself is absolute and universal and so has a pervasive affect upon individuals' lives.

This sort of vision—dominated by death and meaninglessness—is nihilistic in scope, which ironically jibes quite well with the deconstructive framework of postcolonial theory. But Camus does not end his vision there, leaving the individual in a desolate state. Jacques's mother did turn from the window once in awhile to offer her son a loving gaze, a reassuring pat. Camus uses these kinds of gestures to show that while the individual is solitary in existence, he or she is also united with others by the very fact that everyone shares this same circumstance. In an interview, Camus's daughter described Camus's belief about one's essential state as being "solitaire et solidaire," alone yet united (Wilkinson 5).

Oblivion is a universal state and rather than seeing it as a threat or a condition acceding moral neutrality, Camus sees it as a calling to humans to rise above fate by recognizing the terms of existence. By doing so, they take fate in hand.

This idea is developed more fully in the essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (Chakrabarty surely shudders at the word "myth") than in *The First Man*—it most likely was contained in the two-thirds of the novel that didn't get written—and so a brief discussion of that work will be included here. In that essay, Camus recounts the Myth of Sisyphus, a man who challenges the gods and thereafter is condemned to roll a boulder to the top of a mountain, whereupon it falls back to the bottom so that Sisyphus must repeat the task endlessly. The tale is usually told as a parable about the futility of the labors of Man, but Camus interprets it differently. At the point that Sisyphus turns and begins his descent after the rock, Camus sees him as victorious because he was cognizant of "the whole extent of his wretched condition" (90). This awareness allows him to take events fully in hand. The gods no longer dictate his actions; he retrieves the rock and heaves it up the hill of his own volition. The futility and his eventual annihilation hold no threat because he continues *despite* of his awareness. Camus concludes the essay by saying: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (91).

This "humane stoicism" informs the beauty of the language in *The First Man*. It is what gives Jacques pleasure in his friends, the glances from his mother, and the visits to the beach in spite of the grinding conditions of their lives. Jacques does not succeed in forming any of the usual connections in order to identify himself amid his surroundings—he discovers no origins, history, or religion that give him a sense of order or place. Instead, he finally realizes the certain oblivion into which he will return and like Sisyphus, finds peace. The concluding paragraph of the story beautifully describes Camus's full vision of humanity as Jacques reflects on his past, much like Sisyphus gazing at the rock at the bottom of the mountain:

he, like a solitary and ever-shining blade of a sword, was destined to be shattered with a single blow and forever, an unalloyed passion for life confronting utter death; today he felt life, youth, people slipping away

from him, without being able to hold on to any of them, left with the blind hope that this obscure force that for so many years had raised him above the daily routine, nourished him unstintingly, and been equal to the most difficult circumstances—that, as it had with endless generosity given him reason to live, it would also give him reason to grow old and die without rebellion.

(*First Man* 284)

Camus is saying that the individual is destined for annihilation. This knowledge acts as the ultimate discourse and is the only source of meaning in anyone's life.

The First Man was written last but perhaps should be read first. Using the facts of his own childhood in Algeria, Camus constructs the philosophy that he developed in his other works; namely, the idea that the individual exists in a solitary state, but is united with others by virtue of universal nature of this state. The work presents ideas which are not easily explainable within the tenets of postcolonial theory: The complexities of the French-Algerian political situation, the implications of language separated from history, the idea of the private self, and the positing of poverty as an overarching discourse are all elements not addressed. But it is Camus's universal vision of humanity, arising from oblivion and returning to oblivion, that most definitely puts the work outside the body of postcolonial literature.

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