

# The Role of Women in L'Étranger by Albert Camus

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## Abstract:

Albert Camus, a Nobel Laureate and pioneer in existentialism literature, has impacted generations of literary enthusiasts globally with his masterpieces, especially the representative work, L'Étranger. Comments on this work, both favorable and unfavorable, have been pouring in over the eight decades since it was published. Even though L'Étranger has been thoroughly analyzed in a number of areas, including the background information that sets the scene and the texts' revolt, little has been researched regarding female characters, how his personal experience and sense of absurdity are connected, or, more importantly, how he is misogynistic. The purpose of this study is to investigate how women, particularly Maman de Meursault and Marie Cardona, are portrayed in L'Étranger. Note that the purpose of this paper is not to critique Camus' misogyny, but rather to examine how his personal history has influenced the way he has created female characters and how this has affected readers and the literary community.

**Keywords:** Albert Camus; Misogyny; Immanence; Transcendence; Feminism; L'Étranger.

## 1. Introduction

Being one of the most famous French authors of the 20th century, Albert Camus' works are always enthusiastically analyzed and studied by scholars worldwide. His first published novel, L'Étranger, also titled The Stranger, was the work that first brought him notoriety. It was quickly followed by literary masterpieces like Le Mythe de Sisyphe (The Myth of Sisyphus) and La Peste (The Plague). Despite rejecting his primary philosophy as "absurdism," Camus maintained the absurdity of his philosophical work and showed an emotional detachment from his surroundings, starting with Meursault, the main character of

L'Étranger. It's interesting to see that academics from all cultural backgrounds are still having intense debates on various facets of L'Étranger. For example, Louise K. Horowitz has posted critiques of Camus' sexual and racial polarization [1], while Daniel Delas has debated whether the work should be classified as a tale, novel, or diary [2]. Just as the title L'Étranger implies, Meursault or Camus himself, a white French man living in Algeria during the colonial period, is a stranger, outsider, foreigner, and a colonizer to the land and to the story.

As the novel receives a flood of compliments and criticisms that accuses Camus of being a misogynist,

the oppression of female characters in *L'Étranger* has not yet been fully in-depth discussed. The purpose of this study is to provide light on how the female characters in the article are portrayed and how Camus's life prior to the publication of the work influences them. Note that this is not an attack on Camus's misogyny and preconceptions of women; rather, the goal is to reveal the characters' deeper meaning and their importance to the story, Camus, and readers.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 . Albert Camus and his Misogyny

Albert Camus, a French-Algerian Nobel laureate, is one of the most influential writers in French literary history. Camus was initially drawn to the theater industry while working in Algeria as a political journalist, playwright, actor, and director. He published two philosophical treatises, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (The Myth of Sisyphus) and *L'Homme Révolté* (The Rebel), as well as three novels, *L'Étranger* (The Stranger), *La Peste* (The Plague), and *La Chute* (The Fall), while actively engaged in the French Resistance during World War II [3]. His profound involvement with his primary themes of absurdity, rebellion, and human existence was evident in these postcolonial works.. Alice Kaplan, a sterling professor of French at Yale University, had thoroughly dug the history and stories behind *L'Étranger* through the lenses of Camus' diaries, and eventually compiled them into the book, *Looking for The Stranger*. She had made it clear that Camus had included a lot of his own experiences into the narrative, as seen by the creative way in which the death of Meursault's mother was set, the use of two names of his Arab acquaintances in the text, etc. More significantly, Camus has described *L'Étranger* as "a book he found in himself" as opposed to being a narrative about him. In other words, Albert Camus had been living with this work for a long time, and his reflections enabled him to reveal the tale of *L'Étranger* [4]. Camus spent days pondering about the Meursault scenario before declaring on May 1st, 1940, that *L'Étranger* was finished..

What about his misogyny? In the book of *Rebellious Feminism: Camus's Ethic of Rebellion and Feminist Thought*, the author, Elizabeth Ann Bartlett from the United States, has delved deeply into Camus' unfair treatment of women, so that his style often featured oppression and neglect of female characters. Although there was no direct evidence accusing Camus of being sexist or a supporter of feminism, critics consistently opposed his works as being "patriarchal and misogynistic." [5] Surprisingly, he was once a company with famous French writer, Simone

de Beauvoir. They later went their separate ways because Camus could not treat de Beauvoir as an equal while she commented on his behaviors as "feudal" regarding relationships with women [5]. What's more intriguing is that Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theories on characterization will be used to undertake this research. However, another piece from the 1990s titled "Camus and a Society without Women" by Anthony Rizzuto also makes the suggestion that the predominant subject surrounding female characters appeared to be sterility and fertility, and that dehumanizing and depersonalizing patterns were consistent throughout all of his works [6]. Lastly, Louise K. Horowitz's analysis in "Of Women and Arab" shows how ethnic and sexual distinctions have a big influence on Camus' writings. Arabs and women are shown as victims of sexual objectification or assault, and they are typically left out or neglected [7].

## 3. Methodology

This analysis employs Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist framework from *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) [8], concentrating on her idea of women as the "Other" in relation to men. A key aspect of this examination is her differentiation between *immanence*—where women are relegated to passive and repetitive roles—and *transcendence*, which enables individuals to function as independent agents. These concepts will be essential for interpreting the female characters in *L'Étranger*. More importantly, as mentioned previously, de Beauvoir and Camus had a brief friendship, academic discussions on opposing views might bring out a deeper understanding of the role of women in the essay.

From the viewpoint of the male protagonist, the focus will be on how Marie Cardona and Madame Meursault (Maman) are marginalized throughout the story. The relationships that both Marie and Madame Meursault have to Meursault—Marie as a romantic interest and Madame Meursault as a mother and iconic figure—are what define them. This analysis will look into how de Beauvoir's critique of larger patriarchal forces is reflected in their restriction to these identities..

Finally, by exploring their status as the "Other", this study seeks to illuminate the constraints imposed on women's freedom and autonomy, Camus's indifference to women, and reveal the deeper significance of these characters, their relevance to the narrative, Camus himself, and the audience.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 . Maman / Madame Meursault

A significant portion of Camus' complex feelings towards his mother is projected in Madame Meursault in *L'Étranger*. During childhood, his mother was described as a silent figure, watching him rigorously disciplined by his grandmother with a whip. He was emotionally detached and felt conflicted inside as he was aware of the love, which led him to rebel against his mother, but later sensed guilt as well. Camus explained that, in his time, people who did not cry at their mothers' funerals were to be harshly judged and possibly sentenced to death [8].

*Example 1: "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas." [P1 – Chapter 1]*

This starting point has already set a rather heavy filter to the whole novel by mentioning his mother's death and the impending funeral. His indecisiveness over his mother's passing date is the first significant element that surprises readers and establishes his ridiculous mindset of apathy toward everything. This exemplifies the idea of immanence proposed by de Beauvoir, which assigns women to passive roles. Despite being his mother, Madame Meursault lacks subjectivity from the outset of the text, highlighting her lack of transcendence or free will. In other words, Maman is more of the "Other" figure. Similarly, the majority of Maman's later descriptions are based on the protagonist's recollections.

*Example 2: "Maman disait souvent qu'on n'est jamais tout à fait malheureux." [P2 – Chapter ]*

The description of his mother reminding him to be happy seemed to be the only warm and bright side of his self-reflection in prison. It is not difficult to imagine that Meursault's emotional sustenance, or Camus himself, sought comfort from his mother through his few memories. Madame Meursault possesses an emotional intelligence that is conspicuously absent from Meursault. This distinction highlights the gender gap in emotional expressiveness and highlights the ways in which women's opinions are often marginalized or disregarded in favor of male apathy. At this point in the book, Camus has still revealed a tiny portion of Meursault's heart that still yearns for affection and love from his family. However, Maman's aphorism must always be interpreted through Meursault's story in order to support her status as the "Other."

*Example 3: "Pour la première fois depuis bien longtemps, j'ai pensé à maman. Il...et que l'étais encore." [P2 – Chapter]*

The reflection opens with Meursault not mourning, but simply thinking of his mother for the first time in quite a while. This is also where echoed with the previous ex-

ample, by mentioning Meursault felt happy again under the influence of maman's philosophy on life. Notable is Meursault's comprehension that his mother may have been "liberated" in the final stages of her life. She tried to "recommence" her life with a new fiancé as she neared death, having lived a large portion of her life in monotonous and passive positions. According to de Beauvoir's analysis, this might be interpreted as a last-ditch attempt at autonomy to escape the impermanence that defined her life and a bid to achieve transcendence through making a fresh start. Meursault, or Camus intended for him to understand this decision, as his mother accepting freedom from social obligations.

### 4.2 . Marie Cardona

Meursault started romantic flirting with Marie Cardona right on the next day of his mother's funeral, even telling Marie about maman's death without giving any grief tone, which highlights his emotional detachment. He perceives life events as simple occurrences, neglecting the emotional richness that usually accompanies these experiences. This perspective aligns with de Beauvoir's critique of immanence, indicating a reluctance in Meursault to face deeper emotions.

*Example 1: "J'ai retrouvé dans l'eau Marie Cardona...j'ai cherché dans le traversin l'odeur de sel que les cheveux de Marie y avaient laissée et j'ai dormi jusqu'à dix heures." [P1 – Chapter 2]*

In addition, in the depiction of Marie, her physicality is emphasized, including more intimate parts like breasts, heartbeat, and waist. The graveside burial of the preceding chapter stands in stark contrast to this part. There isn't a genuine emotional connection in Meursault and Marie's physical exchanges. His depiction of these incidents indicates a naive understanding of intimacy, which is consistent with de Beauvoir's theory that women are frequently objectified and have their subjectivity overlooked in stories that are dominated by men.

*Example 2: "J'ai eu très envie d'elle parce qu'elle avait une belle robe à raies rouges et blanches et des sandales de cuir...et c'était bon de sentir la nuit d'été couler sur nos corps bruns." [P1 – Chapter 4]*

Yet, another section where Marie's physicality has been exposed in full view to the reader through the written words. In de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other," women are often defined in relation to men and their desires. Given that Marie is primarily viewed via Meursault's masculine gaze, her attractiveness and the limits placed on her identity are highlighted. In the future, Meursault has only shown that he has sex desires for Marie Cardona; nevertheless, he said nothing when he kissed her on the

beach and hurried home to have sex. Meursault enjoys the physical side of their relationship, but he is unable to emotionally connect with Marie as deeply. Their relationship remains superficial, characterized by physical intimacy but devoid of genuine conversation or emotional bonds.

*Example 3: "Le soir, Marie est venue me chercher et m'a demandé si je voulais me marier avec elle... «C'est sale. Il y a des pigeons et des cours noires. Les gens ont la peau blanche.»" [P1 – Chapter 5]*

This scene in which Marie proposes to the protagonist became a crucial and memorable moment in the novel, leaving a deep impression on many readers. Meursault's reaction to Marie's marriage proposal—"cela m'était égal" (it was all the same to me)—illustrates his emotional detachment, underscores de Beauvoir's concept of women being secondary to men's desires and decisions. His lack of enthusiasm and emotional investment in the subject of marriage point to a broader indifference toward interpersonal relationships and social standards. Marie questions Meursault about whether he would accept a similar proposal from another lady. His apathetic response, "naturellement" (naturally), confirms his belief that relationships are transactional, which causes Marie to become uncertain, uneasy, and confused. Subsequently, Meursault appears to prioritize sensory encounters over affective bonds in his response to his observations of Paris, which highlights his general existential turmoil and detachment from conventional norms. The implied social constraints placed on women and the challenges they face in attempting to build genuine connections with emotionally distant partners are what draw a lot of attention to this area.

*Example 4: "En même temps, je la regardais et j'avais envie de serrer son épaule par-dessus sa robe...que je serais acquitté et qu'on prendrait encore des bains." [P2 – Chapter 2]*

As another scene that aligns with de Beauvoir's notion of women as the "Other," Meursault's gaze again made Marie seem more like an ordinary presence just for satisfying his visual enjoyment rather than a romantic partner. Moreover, the yelling out question on getting married echoed with the previous scene, where Meursault still presented indifference by replying "Tu crois?" and even emphasized that saying this sentence is just for the sake of saying it, without actually wanting to confirm the issue with Marie. Marie was objectified by Meursault because of his shallow attraction and lack of deep emotional connection, which allowed him to satisfy his needs at the expense of Marie's uniqueness, or immanence. Their divergent perspectives on their relationship highlight the absurdity of life and highlight the tension between hope and apathy.

## 5. Discussions

The examination of female characters in *L'Étranger* through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist theory offers significant insights into how women are portrayed in Camus' novel. By concentrating on the ideas of immanence and transcendence, it becomes clear that female figures, especially Madame Meursault and Marie Cardona, are predominantly assigned passive roles. Their identities are largely shaped by the male protagonist's narrative, reinforcing de Beauvoir's concept of women as the "Other."

The image of Maman runs through the whole text secretly. From the outset of the novel, Meursault's emotional detachment regarding his mother—evident in his indifferent reaction to her death—sets a tone for her marginalization. The narrative continuously emphasizes Madame Meursault's lack of free will, focusing instead on how Meursault's memories are used to create her identity. In addition, there have been numerous text interpretations of Maman in *L'Étranger*. For example, Terry Otten's 1975 analysis of the mother's significance and Salamano's bond with the dog represents his inability to comprehend the elderly's mental state when faced with death. But during the second part's execution, he has a hint of tender compassion and recollections of Maman that let him regain some of his emotional distance from herself [9]. There is a tiny part of Meursault's heart that still yearns for attention and love from his family, even amid the strange and uncaring society that Camus depicts.

Marie Cardona, on the other hand, represents the theme of objectification through male desire. In the novel, her physicality is emphasized much more than her emotions or inner thoughts. Meursault's disinterest in her marriage proposal and his focus on her physicality further support de Beauvoir's argument that women are often defined by their relationships with men and reduced to objects of male desire. Despite making multiple significant appearances, Marie's voice is underutilized, and Meursault ignores her emotional demands. This is consistent with de Beauvoir's notion of women's immanence, which holds that female characters are confined to passive, repetitious roles that never allow them to go beyond their relational or bodily identities. Peter A. Agwu made the interesting discovery that Camus himself liked to date attractive women rather than opinionated ones [10]. This further demonstrated the lack of immanence in his writing's female characters by being projected onto Marie's persona. However, it should be noted that while Camus' work reflects the limitations on women in his narratives, *L'Étranger* can also be seen as a criticism of social norms. The absurdist framework of the story challenges the sig-

nificance of human relationships, emotions, and social expectations, which may explain Meursault's detachment. Yet, this does not excuse the novel's failure to give women the same agency as male characters.

## 6. Conclusion

In this research, analysis of texts have reflected not only Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism, but also reinforced critics by a range of literature scholars. For instance, Anthony Rizzuto and Elizabeth Ann Bartlett have identified themes in his works—not just in *L'Étranger*—of the dehumanization and depersonalization of female characters. Although Camus does not impose sexual discrimination in his writings, the lack of depth and subjectivity offered to his female characters reveals a broader patriarchal background where women's functions are limited to their interactions with the male protagonist. This is comparable to the criticisms of Louise K. Horowitz, who maintains that racial and gender divisions have an impact on Camus's writings. Madame Meursault and Marie Cardona are restricted to positions that perpetuate their status as the "Other," objectify them, and deprive them of the subjectivity and individuality afforded to male characters. While this may reflect broader existential themes in Camus' work, it also perpetuates patterns of marginalization and objectification that require further critical examination. This analysis highlights the need for continued feminist discourse on the role of women in literature, especially in works by well-known male authors like Albert Camus, who, either intentionally or not, contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal dynamics in their storytelling.

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