

Role of Existentialism in Shaping Human Behaviour: A Literary Analysis of Camus' The Stranger

دور الوجودية في تشكيل السلوك البشري: تحليل أدبي لرواية الغريب لكامو

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DOI: 10.46315/1714-015-002-036

Received: 20/ 01/ 2026 Accepted: 18/ 04/ 2026 Published :10/ 06/ 2026

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Abstract:

The present research applies Kafkaesque philosophy to examine human behaviour in the modern age through the lens of a literary artwork, *The Stranger*. Modernism became prominent for two contrastive constructions: the poetics of indeterminacy and undecidability as well as nonreferentiality by withholding contextuality. This paper applies Kafka's philosophy of human existential crisis in the modern age and its quest for finding meaning of the self. The present research has taken a qualitative approach to analyse a literary artwork through the lens of Kafkaesque philosophy. An in-depth literary analysis of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus was carried out. The analysis of *The Stranger* reveals insightful understanding of human behaviour and psyche in the modern age. Suffering from disillusionment and inconsistency, the protagonist finds himself lurking in an existentialist anxiety; a sense of panic and worry characterized by continuous questioning of the self "who am I". *The Stranger* can be classified as an existentialist novel that embodies the essence of uncertainty, disillusionment and nothingness. This paper can help scholars of human sciences and literary students examine human ideology and behaviour in the contemporary social working.

Keywords: Existentialism, Human Sciences, Kafkaesque, The Stranger

ملخص باللغة العربية

يطبق هذا البحث فلسفة كافكا لدراسة السلوك البشري في العصر الحديث من خلال منظور رواية "الغريب". برزت الحداثة بفضل بنيتين متناقضتين: شعرية الغموض وعدم الحسم، بالإضافة إلى اللا مرجعية من خلال حجب السياق. يطبق هذا البحث فلسفة كافكا حول الأزمة الوجودية الإنسانية في العصر الحديث وسعها لإيجاد معنى للذات. وقد اعتمد البحث الحالي منهجًا نوعيًا لتحليل الرواية من منظور فلسفة كافكا، حيث تم إجراء تحليل أدبي معمق لرواية "الغريب" لألبير كامو. يكشف تحليل الرواية عن فهم ثاقب للسلوك البشري والنفسي في العصر الحديث. يعاني بطل الرواية من خيبة الأمل والتناقض، فيجد نفسه غارقًا في قلق وجودي؛ شعور بالذعر والقلق يتسم بالتساؤل المستمر عن الذات: "من أنا؟". يمكن تصنيف رواية "الغريب" كرواية وجودية تجسد جوهر عدم اليقين وخبية الأمل والعدم. ويمكن لهذه الورقة أن تساعد باحثي العلوم الإنسانية وطلاب الأدب على دراسة الأيديولوجيا والسلوك البشري في العمل الاجتماعي المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوجودية، العلوم الإنسانية، كافكاوية، الغريب

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1-Introduction

The beginning of Modernism was marked in the late 1920 in the Anglo-American Criticism. However, there has been considerable evidence on the launch of Modernist aesthetics and art techniques with the publication of Boudelaire's poetry in the late 19th century (Lloyd, 2018). The emergence of capitalist-industrial modernity engendered two parallel heated 'isms': (i) **realism** which extended art toward contemporary life so as to project the depriving real truths of life (ii) while **modernism** created a sensation of the new i.e., of realism (Bloom, 2018; Buch, 2024; Cruickshank, 2024). Modernism is, therefore, a radical extension of the ugly; the grotesque, the bizarre- the modern world.

The rise of human sciences, including psychology, sociology and anthropology in the early 20th century allowed for a change in the understanding of art and literary expressions by challenging the traditional frameworks of meaning. In the development of Modernism, the *autonomy of art* became a special characteristic where tradition and law were treated as insignificant to the representation of art. Defined as 'autotelic', art was confronted as having no obligation; and rather only being an 'organic form'. This allowed literary writers to sketch human psyche and behaviour in its most subjective form. It allowed characters to be portrayed as fragmented and evolving so as to highlight the true nature of the human.

An autonomous form of writing characterized by a hermeneutical vacuum is what essentializes Kafka's (2010) writing as Modernist. Modernism became prominent for two contrastive constructions: (i) **the poetics of indeterminacy and undecidability** (ii) and **nonreferentiality by withholding contextuality** (Rimmon-Kenan, 2003). It is characterized by aggressive provocativeness that seeks to shock and outrage while also seeking withdrawal from the public into obscurity and difficulty. This idea is evident in Kafka's writings especially in his stories *The Metamorphosis* and *The Vulture* where although transformation is natural, he does not make it appear so. Not adhering to natural causations in accordance with the natural and physical universe, Todorov (1957) defines this element as part of 'the genre of the fantastic', which only applies to the world of the reader. In that, a discrepancy between the world represented and the world of the reader exists where no causality can be established. It is thus either a hermetic nonreferentiality; a frustration for the quest for understanding or a mythos which is a mimetic narrativity; or a representation of human fate. It thus questions the notion of objective reality or a stable world of meaning. The work thus confronts the reader as a challenge that forces him to participate and thus continue the writer's activity.

The present research applies Kafkaesque philosophy to examine human behaviour in the modern age through the lens of a literary artwork, *The Stranger*. By examining and interpreting the novel, this paper allows for a better understanding of existential and absurdist philosophies of human beings (Abderrahmane, 2024; Bousmaha & Boulajeraf, 2024; Kabouche & Belboula, 2025). The goal is to help scholars of human sciences and literary students examine human ideology and behaviour in the contemporary social working. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following question:

- How does Camus' *The Stranger* allow for understanding of existential crisis, absurdism and human psyche in the modern age?

1.1. The Kafkaesque in Modernism

It is this problematic nonreferentiality that characterizes Kafka's writings as Kafkaesque (Luch & Yari, 2010). The term Kafkaesque denotes the problematic relationship between reality and language and between language itself. It is as Kafka believes that '*a writer is a man looking from outside life; being dead while still being alive*'. Blurring binaries or realities and language; between thoughts and things; between literal and metaphorical; between the speaker and the spoken, as Kafka continues to pose the question '*who's speaking to us about these things, can't he see that the world he's looking at doesn't make sense*', are all reflections of the Kafkaesque philosophy. Throughout his writings, one of the major Kafkaesque evidences is the presence of nightmares which alludes to a broader reality not being confined to the normative assumptions of the narrated reality. A nightmare engulfs us leaving us no independence of view or action, no possibility to escape or control; as we recognize on waking and half feel while we are in its grip. This idea is what may lead us to categorize Kafka as a poststructuralist as he tries to merge the binaries of the present and the absent; of the existent and the nonexistent; of the real and unreal. Being confined within an absent reality (mentally present which physically absent) and experiencing matters that may have never been encountered by a human being in the physical world are strong evidences of the existence of another reality that is beyond the human recognition or human narration.

1.2. The Metaphorical Vs. The Literal

Another characteristic of the Kafkaesque art is the constant flux between the metaphorical and the literal (Kafka, 2010). Kafka constantly challenges the constraints of the socially constructed reality that confines us to a 'linguistic boat; like distant shores we never reach which is either a dim mythic shape of imagined meaning or odd facts, momentarily realistic

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perspectives'. These make us aware of the unfathomable uncertainty where humans are in constant search for the ultimate truth of reality. The transformation of the human to an animal is thus a metaphorical transformation of reality where humans seek to find out the essential truths of life beyond the constraints of normality and the societal conventions and norms.

As Kafka describes the human situation: "but you sit at your window and dream the message to yourself as evening falls" (Thorbly, 2010, p. 32), "how on earth do we ever know that what we are feeling, thinking, doing is appropriate to the situation we are in" (p. 35). Language and reality are thus contradicted because the moment man makes up to another reality, the language in the former reality does not fit in.

Language covers existence with a familiar and comprehensible surface. Beneath lays for Kafka a magnitude infinitely vast and unspeakably dangerous. What is dangerous is to learn to manipulate the laws of the surface by linguistic technology the price of man's learning is that he will turn his discovery against himself. Thus the difficulties and dangers that arise when we try to answer Kafka is Kafkaesque itself.

1.3. Hybridity

Another significant element of the Kafkaesque philosophy is the presence of animalistic characteristics in the human existence, which is defined as Hybridity. Hybridity is defined as the combination of human with animal features. It questions both of the 'naturalness' which is an epistemological notion and the 'human' which is an anthropological notion that are defined in the narrated reality. Hybrid signals crisis, which questions the position of individuals in the social life. Hybrid is the inside of the character (reasoning) with the outside reference (animal or human body). It contests a boundary between the social norms and the individual (labor; back, mind; head, sin; belly, femininity; absence of phallus). Hence, the bond with the socially constructed/narrated reality is disrupted. It also suggests evolution of ideologies expanding beyond the constraints of normality. Kafka subverts the direct link between words and imaginary by staging the hybrid. He questions the socioculturally determined matters. Taking a deconstructive approach, he transforms rationality into a site of perversity that allows the animal to speak itself as deconstructed human. However, this may be contested especially in the way Kafka makes it impossible for the human to understand the animal communication. From an ecological perspective, Kafka's writing could be considered as an anthropocentric writing that degrades the animal. It hence refers to the inability of human language to represent the animal from the inside.

2- Methods

The present research has taken a qualitative approach to analyse a literary artwork through the lens of Kafkaesque philosophy. An in-depth literary analysis of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus was carried out. Camus was an Algerian-French writer who has held major contributions in Existentialism and Absurdism philosophies. His philosophical niche has largely focused on absurdism- the constant flux between human's search for meaning and an indifferent universe.

3- Analysis

The Stranger is about Meursault, the protagonist, who becomes emotionally detached and alienated after his mother's death. After his mother's funeral, he continues his routine life such as going to the beach, watching movies, eating out and he makes a new girlfriend named Marie. Moving forward with the book, Meursault befriends his neighbor Raymond who is seen as an abusive man towards his mistress. Later, Meursault encounters the brother of the mistress, and in a moment of disorientation, he shoots him five times. The police, who seem to be more invested in his emotional character than the case itself, then arrest him. After days of trial, Meursault is sentenced to death. As he awaits his execution, Meursault reflects on the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. This inevitability of death forces Meursault to confront to the essence of existence. The analysis chapter delineates on Kafkaesque philosophy of modernist absurdism.

3.1. Kafkaesque Existentialism in *The Stranger*

As the title 'The Stranger' suggests, being strange denotes the possibility of being absurd, irrational and illogical. Hence, this novel sketches its protagonist's perception of the self in the parameters of existentialism.

An essential idea of existentialism is based on the belief that existence is prior to essence i.e., human nature is determined by the course of life rather than life being determined by human nature. Consequently, it constructs man as an existent than a thinking subject. Meursault who is the main protagonist of the book is undoubtedly a character who demonstrates the idea of man shaped by life; who lacks rational reasoning; who is devoid of agency; who is led by the norms of society. He merges the binaries of the present and the absent; of the existent and the nonexistent; of the real and unreal. The novel embodies the Kafkaesque philosophy to highlight the protagonist's undecidability, bewilderment and inability to confront to the essence of meaning.

For instance, when he travels to attend his mother's funeral, he finds himself devoid of emotions and connection with his family. His incapability to witness the sheer loss of mother love and need rather portrays him as a mere object than a speaking subject. However, in the light

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of existentialism, human beings who apparently are speaking subjects tend to lose their subjectivity and objective reality as they continue to live in a space that is constructing their existence rather than them being the essential subjects.

Another significant instance is witnessed in how Meursault treats his Marie who wishes to marry him and create a connection between two human subjects. However, continuously, Meursault is incapable of defining the situation of life. He is unaware of the social institutions that he is supposed to abide by. From his ignorance of family bond to his violation of law and to his rejection of God, Meursault is one example of an existentialist who is estranged from the reality of life. Kafka constantly challenges the constraints of the socially constructed reality that confines us to a 'linguistic boat; like distant shores we never reach which is either a dim mythic shape of imagined meaning or odd facts, momentarily realistic perspectives'. Meursault reflects the Kafkaesque paradox of being in a socially conformed society, however, unable to process a likewise behaviour.

The proponents of Existentialism such as Sartre, Camus and Nietzsche have consistently talked about the significance of free will, choice and responsibility. Hence, what we do and act determines our existence. Moreover, they propose the idea that human beings make their existence by choice. Thus, all actions are free choices. With regard to the protagonist Meursault, this idea is highly significant. Finding himself left free in a world, which seemingly makes no sense to him, he constantly commits multiple free choices that may not essentially give meaning to him. The murder that he commits is a crucial free choice attempt which he makes without realizing the aftermaths of violating law and order. As the writer describes his situation, Meursault is completely bewildered and indecisive while making an unforgivable crime. Although he was not involved in the story of the Arabs who wanted to kill his friend, he eventually unapologetically attempts a crime on his own choice. Despite being dragged by any of his friends or being pressurized to attempt a crime, the sense of identity loss is clearly a valid point of his murder attempt. As he makes multiple free choices in a world that is meaningless to him, murdering someone is another incident that reflects the unimportance and insignificance of life.

3.2. Kafkaesque Absurdism in *The Stranger*

Suffering from disillusionment and inconsistency, the protagonist finds himself lurking in an existentialist anxiety which is a sense of panic and worry characterized by continuous questioning of the self "who am I" or "why am I here". As he is taken to the court, he confesses his disbelief in God and rejects the importance of law and order. Throughout his life, his essence

is determined by his existence. He is incapable of finding his own self. As he remains in the prison, life begins to make lesser meaning to him. Finding himself stuck in a cocoon of bewilderment and hopelessness, he begins to show the symptoms of angst that is the anxiety and fear as a result of the paradoxical implications of human freedom.

Continuously living in a confined zone of restrictions, life begins to make lesser meaning to him. Sartre defines this situation as 'nausea' which is a person's realization that the universe is not properly ordered or rational (Gale, 2016). When Meursault witnesses the Chaplain's attempt to turn him toward God, he abruptly rejects his belief because of his sheer loss in reality and existence in the first place.

From media trying to write his story to the priest making his story to the witnesses judging it, he realizes that his essence is unworthy of existence; his subjective agency has no significance and that this world is shaped by institutions, laws and orders that by themselves are irrational. In Hegel's Social Philosophy, this process is defined as 'alienation' (Hardimon, 1994). Sayers (2011) further claims that the self is rather a historical and social creation, which "develops through process of alienation and its overcoming, self-estrangement and self- recognition, a fall into division and reconciliation" (Sayers, 2011, p. 62). He finally realizes that life has no essential meaning. He abandons all hope for future and accepts his fate in a meaningless world. The end of the story with Meursault being in jail rather reflects the monotony of life and the continuous sufferings of human beings.

Although the world sees him as a strange subject, it is only the reader who can finally draw a connection with the protagonist. Although the world makes no sense of his essence and treats him as a strange being, it is only the reader who can understand his sense of bewilderment and his constant struggle to make sense of his surroundings. All actions that he commits are drawn by sheer innocence which Meursault is himself unaware of. It is only at the end of his story when people are judging him as a person that he realizes that his life has no essence and that living in a meaningless world would only draw meaningless conclusions.

The table below demonstrates evidence from literary text to highlight the key notions of Kafkaesque philosophy in Camus' *The Stranger*.

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Table 1. Key Notions of Kafkaesque Philosophy in The Stranger

Key Notions	Example No. 1	Example No. 2	Example No. 3
Meaninglessness	“nothing mattered”	It meant nothing	
Absurdism	“For a moment, I had an absurd impression”	“I had only a little time left and I didn’t want to waste it on God.”	One must imagine Sisyphus happy
Indifference	“benign indifference of the universe”	“Maman died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know.”	“I’ve never cared for Sundays.”
Temporal dislocation	“yesterday” “tomorrow”	“I had lost the habit of analyzing myself ... I noticed that the passing of time made little difference to me	

4- Discussion

The rise of human sciences, including psychology, sociology and anthropology in the early 20th century allowed for a change in the understanding of art and literary expressions by challenging the traditional frameworks of meaning. *The Stranger* can be classified as an existentialist novel that embodies the essence of uncertainty, disillusionment and nothingness. An essential idea of existentialism is based on the belief that existence is prior to essence i.e., human nature is determined by the course of life rather than life being determined by human nature. This idea is significantly portrayed in *The Stranger* and Meursault demonstrates the idea of man shaped by life; who lacks rational reasoning; who is devoid of agency; who is led by norms of society. The proponents of Existentialism such as Sartre, Camus and Nietzsche have consistently talked about the significance of free will, choice and responsibility. Moreover, they propose the idea that human beings make their existence by choice. Thus, all actions are free choices. This idea is vividly portrayed in Meursault, who he constantly commits several freewill choices, which may not essentially give meaning to him. Meursault can therefore be described as a completely bewildered and indecisive man who makes an unforgivable crime.

In a nutshell, we may refer to the first point drawn above. As existentialist philosophers believe that human existence is shaped by life and that human beings are only existent rather than being speaking subjects, we may validate this point with reference to Meursault’s end where his existence was constantly being shaped by life. Throughout the continuous actions he is forced to make, despite being uncanny and absurd, his existence is subjected to them without

realization. However, it is only through his actions that he later comes to the realization of his essence. Being in the zone of angst and nausea, he finally understands the equally insignificant and absurd reality of life which is strange, thus, giving birth to a stranger.

5- Conclusion

The Kafkaesque philosophy is an avant-garde of Modernism literature and art. By bringing into light the animal imagery and connecting it with human traits, Kafka strongly condemns the constructed realities and conventions of law and language that appear to be anthropocentric in nature while neglecting other means of existence. Confined within a Marxist world and writing during a war period certainly lends Kafka a new lens of projecting the world that is characterized by denounced humanitarian beliefs and expansive existential philosophy where man is in constant struggle for finding the real truths of life. However, as Foucault claims that reality is subjective, reassuring this philosophy in his writing, Kafka certainly lends himself a status of being a poststructuralist writer.

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