

Absurdism and Existentialism: Critical Responses to French Colonial Rule  
Ryan M. Phillips

Colonialism, as a whole, is a racist enterprise. In the political and historical sense of the word, it is “the subjugation of one people by another for the advantage of the dominant one” (Alatas 23). Historically, colonialism has exhibited several defining traits. The first is exploitation by which the colonizing people use not only the native population as a labor force, but also the conquered land’s natural resources for their own monetary gain. A second trait is tutelage. “The people dominated are considered a kind of ward within a tutelage system. They are taught certain things, they are asked to do certain things, they are organized towards certain ends and purposes laid out by the subjugating power” (23-24). A third trait of is conformity. As a matter of practice, for example, when colonizers took over a land and its people, they imposed their language, religion, customs, and even dress on the natives in an effort to force their assimilation into the subjugating peoples’ culture. This process, thinly veiled as an altruistic endeavor, was often referred to as *Mission civilisatrice* or “The Civilizing Mission.”

At its core, colonialism is catalyzed by mankind’s intrinsic need to segregate and isolate, to categorize and to establish distinctions. It’s a subliminal way to identify “Other” in terms of “Self.” The Arabs in Camus’ *The Stranger* operate as Other. They’re a marginalized people who live on the periphery. So much so, in fact, that they are the only characters in the story without names or voices. They are identified exclusively by their ethnicity and mannerisms, pit as the enemy in the battle of Them vs Us. For example, following Raymond’s assault on his girlfriend for cheating on him, his girlfriend’s brother and a few of his friends begin following Raymond, ostensibly to avenge her honor. As Raymond, Meursault, Marie, and Raymond head to Masson’s

beach house, they notice the Arabs following them, silently staring “but in that way of theirs, as if [they] were nothing but stones or dead trees” (Camus 48). In all, the Arabs’ roles in this novel are decidedly limited and unflattering. They are reduced to knife-wielding thugs, victims of homicidal violence, and prisoners.

I’m not entirely convinced that Camus’s novel is a critical response to French colonialism. In some way *The Stranger* seems to belie colonialist sentiment—an almost subconscious allegiance (despite the author’s conscious actions). Surely, Camus could have been merely using Meursault’s tale as a proverbial mirror to reflect the many injustices in French-colonized Algeria. But who can say for sure? Whatever Camus’ personal beliefs on the matter, it seems to me that both existentialism and absurdism oppose everything that colonialism stands for. Colonists enter a foreign land professing to know the way, the truth, and the light in a world where the existentialist and absurdist insist none exists. They bring education, customs, and religion in a world where the existentialist and absurdist maintain there is no God. They bring answers and order and purpose in a world where the existentialist and absurdist swear there is only chaos. In a world where the existentialist and absurdist argue that man’s life and fate are his own to accept and do with as he wishes, colonist’s grab the reigns of other men’s fates and steer them in whatever direction they see fit. So, in this sense, colonialism and existentialism/absurdism are diametrically opposed.

## Works Cited

- Alatas, Syed Hussein. "Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems." *Southeast Asia Journal of Social Science* 28.1 (2000): 23-45. Web. 1 Sep. 2019.
- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. New York: Vintage International, 1989. Print.