

A Reading of The Guest by Camus

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Abstract:

Daru seems to know no company. It is out of obligation for his duty, for he has been posted in one of the remotest areas and given the charge of a small school. Silence pervades throughout the story. What the story is all about is another issue. Written originally in French, Justin O'Brien has translated the very essence of Camus' words. The fact that the story was written amid an ongoing armed conflict and the writer himself was a politically active intellectual who had a say in matters concerning the current state of politics in these nations makes it a poignant document of history in more than one way. The story is a conglomeration of events like slides on the theatre screen which can be interpreted differently with or without being connected with the main plot. It adds not just to the beauty of the narration but also lends the story a representative truthful narration of a real-life scenario where everything seems to happen all at once, and different people can create other stories out of the same material, depending upon their perceptions and preferences. The current research is a somber attempt at analyzing the various facets of people's lives through the differing and ever-changing contours of relations one forms with oneself and others.

Keywords: hospitality, silence, law, decision, muted.

Introduction:

Daru is a fantastic man, almost cast away and balanced in whatever he does. Life is arduous struggles for many people who try to ease off either by being social or with the help of philosophical designs prescribed by various metaphysical services. Still, Daru has none of these to his rescue, yet he seems not at all imbalanced or perturbed. This game of life of which Daru is a mere dice, a speck in the imaginary eternal bonfire of poets, and still he lives his life with complete sincerity and grave preambles. Daru, it seems, gets the message clear that whatever he does or whatever life he has to face, the most important thing is to play his part with conviction. Items in such areas are uncertain, yet if one is lucky enough to survive a reasonable time, he learns of different faces of humanity in his interactions. The various shades of the setting sun make his philosopher's mind find solace in the winter mist. The story has a balanced structure as everything seems to correlate, yet the element of certainty or control, as one may expect from the author, appears to be altogether missing. This may confuse a naive reader as humans have this predilection to define and categorize

everything into verifiable certainties, or else their endeavors are deemed lost. And yet, like the sensible members of the species in different times and languages who speak of similar experiences and complain of the same predicaments, the characters in the story seem to convey no specific philosophy or message apart from being moral and truthful to themselves. And still, one may remark that morality is simply a philosophical jargon of people who think!

And then some people want this very introspective and less expressive existence. They are willingly ostracized like hibernating reptiles; their interests and inclinations are towards docile existence in a cave of their mind. People who may be termed introverts, wherever they live, always look inwards into their soul, being, and consciousness. This breed of freedom seekers, as one may call them, for they look for freedom from the social norms and manacles designed by customary social behaviours, are sometimes the best of humanity.

This dichotomy raises very pertinent questions about being low profile. Is this state of being introverted detrimental to an individual's emotional and psychological well-being, or is it fruitful to dissociate oneself from the surrounding environment as a measurement of replenishing one's resources? Many such people are usually not dull but brilliant minds who look out for alternate mechanisms of defining and establishing a sense of rejuvenation and breaking the old molds of their thinking which have stopped being useful for their sustenance and development. It is evident that they often fail, instead mostly, but one

rarely sees from a distance on gloomy nights the flickering lamps of compassion from such remote dunes.

One exciting thing about this story is the ambiguity that prevails throughout the narrative. There are instances when characters are not aware of the motives of other characters. Things get even more confusing with the introduction of the Arab prisoner. He's a stranger not only to Daru but also to the inspector who arrested him. The inspector is not very sure about what he's doing. His only intention, it seems, is to keep things under control. His conduct with Daru is even more erratic, and he does not seem to feel sorry about it. The Arab himself is an entirely confusing character. The readers have no idea about his motives, inclinations, and individuality. Maybe, Camus is trying to highlight the message of a complete lack of trust between two communities separated by war and mutual dislike.

It seems that Daru's very idea that nations can attack each other violates the sanctity of everyday human existence, bringing in its wake rapes and plunders of local masses, decimating the life stream of people is repugnant to the free spirit of humanity. Humanist thinkers and idealists like Daru in all generations have remained opposed to any such dehumanization, whatever the pretext might have been. And yet he must have known that the world's history is replete with instances wherein masquerading armies destroyed each other and the lives and livelihood of scores of people out of sheer greed and vanity in the wastelands ruined thus. What moral right do such armies of dacoits have in

destroying and debilitating an area's economic, social and moral fabric, like swarms of locusts, which took centuries to stabilize such systems? These are the questions that strike the conscience of a typical reader; these are the observations that baffle a layperson as they go through the story in which Camus has so much to say without making a single direct assertion. Still, there are no ambiguous answers. At least the sophistication of language and aphorism of argumentation, as post-modernists may attempt, cannot hide the bare facts about the inhuman facets of such ventures. Of course, the role, significance, and approach of the writer, as reflected in the conduct of his mouthpiece in the story in these matters, is quite pertinent to the complete and adequate analysis of the short story because, without context, one can hardly trace the strange events of the plot.

Hospitality is one of the significant aspects of the story. Like a simple parable, the report talks about the basic human instinct to respect one's guests, as is reflected in Daru's conduct towards the Arab prisoner. It is a very poignant tale told in the utter silence of desolate mountainous highlands marred by weather extremes, as most of such landscapes have to face perennially. Respecting one's guests, giving them assistance, lending support, and arranging lodgings are common commandments of various religions. Moreover, with Camus, one cannot be sure if it is a religious obligation or sheer love for humanity that the central character of this story behaves in a very dignified and humane manner as the verses below state,

O my love, what gift of mine
 Shall I give you this dawn?
 A morning song?
 But morning does not last long-
 The heat of the sun
 Wilts it like a flower
 And songs that tire
 Are done.
 O friend, when you come to my gate
 At dusk
 What is it, you ask?
 What shall I bring you?
 A light? (Tagore 81)

Daru set the Arab free to choose his path. He had done his duty as a good host, and now it was left to the prisoner to decide his fate. Albert Camus once again keeps all the options open. It is the readers who have to decide on their own as to how the story is going to conclude. As with the complete aspects of the story, the ending remains ambiguous and inconclusive. This is how the readers should approach this story. There is no other way; maybe this is the writer's way- a philosophy that does not prescribe a hard and fast set of rules or perspectives through which things are to be judged, analyzed, and formulated truths.

Is a physically solitary life without much action, in this case, due to job conditions, an appropriate way of living, or is it a futile question for there is no difference as long as a person is happy with his requirements? This can be out rightly debated as has been done so by another set of philosophers who believe that a leisurely existence without the everyday challenges and strife, which are a common outcome of living in a social setting as humans should live, can make a

person dormant and retard his acumen. Even from an evolutionary point of view, new challenges always trigger an organism to adapt better to its surroundings by developing new approaches as manifested in its behaviors.

When the new conditions happen not to threaten the very existence of the species, and when time is lavish, the animal may progressively adapt itself by “retrograding,” by losing the use of some formerly functional characters: for instance, the regression of eyesight in the burrowing mole, and the blindness of certain fish living in caverns where no light ever penetrates. When left to itself, adaptation can produce monsters; its mechanisms, when set in motion, can work unintelligently, as pointed out before. Similarly, an airplane, deprived of its pilot, may keep flying for hours but will crash to earth eventually. The mechanisms of evolution, uncontrolled, sometimes behave like the apprentice sorcerer. (Noüy 72)

And yet Daru is the archetypal good man free from the flaws of artificial social constructs of his time, like racism. Of course, he is a part of the government machinery, owing to being a soldier in one of the armies. Still, the fact remains that he, as an individual, does not subscribe to the notions of inequality or racial superiority, as one can easily decipher from his conduct towards the captivated Arab and even in his altercations with the inspector. He is not the one who can be quickly subdued by threats or even in the name of duty. By this token, he is a lousy nationalist but a good human. World history is replete with instances

when a good nationalist proved to be a bane of humanity. There were times when great generals unleashed all kinds of brutal and destructive forces on the wailing lands in the name of nationalism or God when all they were supposed to do was to stop in the name of humanity. The story carries a subtle message of humanity by center staging the human concerns against the bombastic calls of nationalism.

The story also conveys that what meets the eye often is not accurate. Reality or truth, as one may assume it to be, is a perception resulting from an interplay of multiple factors in a given situation. Things are sometimes not what they appear to be, and a wise man never takes them at their face value. Albert Camus has beautifully depicted this aspect of the human condition through the character of the muted Arab prisoner. This person has presumably committed a grave crime, and this is being established without proof, which is a grave travesty of justice as Camus would like to present it. Camus has not given a definite presentation of the facts. Although one can observe the interactions between Daru and Arab and try to determine what exactly might have conspired with the man, there is no certainty. So, a reader cannot be sure of the Arab's crime or his innocence. The narrative nowhere declares or even hints at it. But an aware reader has enough evidence to glean between the text's lines to conclude that the Arab was probably not guilty of the crime for which he was arrested.

The narration demonstrates the mental mechanism involved in creating a story out of the matrix of multiple dimensions that provide the framework for intricate

interactions between various human values ranging from one end of the spectrum to another. This quality makes it one of the most extraordinary tales in world literature. Having taken no standpoint, the narrator has left the complete arena open for the readers to play with this puzzle of words and create meanings that suit their own interpretations.

And finally comes the question of divine justice. Is there something in this world that keeps track of the deeds performed by a person? To put it simply, would a gentleman performing good acts be blessed for his conduct with natural rewards? This may be a straightforward way of understanding the complex nature of human existence. Religions have always justified this theory, but Daru does not seem to have good rewards in his fate as when he returns to his school, he finds a message on the school board, “You handed over our

brother. You will pay for this” (Camus 343).

Indeed, a very ominous note to look at. This is where the text ceases, and the reader is left alone to contemplate the possibilities awaiting Daru.

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