

**Kamel Daoud.** *The Meursault Investigation*. Translated by John Cullen. Other Press 2015. 160 pp. \$14.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781590517512).

Kamel Daoud (born June 17, 1970) is an Algerian journalist based in Oran, where he writes for the *Quotidien d'Oran*, the third-largest French-language Algerian newspaper. His articles have appeared in *Libération*, *Le Monde*, and *Courier International*, and are regularly reprinted around the world. His debut novel, *The Meursault Investigation*, was first published in Algeria by Editions Barzakh, in 2013, under the title *Meursault, contre-enquête*. It was published in France, in 2014, by Actes Sud. The English-language edition—deliciously translated by John Cullen—was published in June 2015, in the US, by Other Press, and in England by One World Publications. *The Meursault Investigation* won the Prix Goncourt du Premier Roman (the Goncourt prize for first novel) in May 2015, as well as the Prix François Mauriac and the Prix des Cinq-Continents de la francophonie. International rights to the novel have been sold in twenty countries, and a dramatic adaptation was staged at the 2015 Festival d'Avignon. A feature film adaptation is slated for release in 2017.

In December 2014, Islamist politician Abdelfattah Hamadache, a member of the Free Awakening Front party, called for Daoud to be executed for blasphemy for the publication of *Meursault, contre enquête*, describing Daoud as ‘a deviant creature’ and ‘a collaborator.’ Daoud subsequently defended his book, stating that ‘It was a fictional character in the novel who said these things, not me. If we judge people on the basis of characters in their books, we will be facing dark times in Algeria.’

The title of Daoud’s novel—*The Meursault Investigation*—draws us back immediately to Albert Camus’ short, classic work of fiction, *The Stranger* (1942). It features, as its central character, a French Algerian named Meursault who shoots dead an unnamed Arab on an Algiers beach, is tried for premeditated murder, but found guilty of the capital offence mainly for not having shown proper respect for the corpse of his dead mother at her wake and subsequent funeral. Daoud’s complex, riveting debut novel *The Meursault Investigation* is, above all else, a homage to the Camus book, without which it would be unintelligible.

There are essentially four ways of reading *The Stranger* (published in Great Britain under the title *The Outsider*). [i] It is a novel about the human condition, which is deemed to be absurd, a manner of existing without meaning or value. [ii] It is a novel about non-conformity, about the fate of a young, carefree, secular hedonist living his lifestyle defiantly in a tightly-administered Christian state. [iii] It is a carefully contrived apologia for French colonialism, representing it as a civilising presence, one regulated by a criminal justice system which is impartial as between French and Arab populations (Conor Cruise O’Brien). [iv] It is ‘an element in France’s methodically constructed political geography of Algeria which took many generations to complete’ (Edward Said, *Culture and Colonialism*, 213). Daoud’s novel acknowledges, and engages, with all four readings. The human condition is indeed absurd, in part for the reason furnished by Camus (that we all die), but also because Daoud’s protagonist has spent it ‘pushing a corpse to the top of a hill before it rolled back down, endlessly.’ Non-conformity is an isolating, precarious, self-absorbed mode of existence, but not as dangerous as Camus would have us believe. Moslem Algerians had been viciously dispossessed, and they still remained marginal after a century of French rule, wary even of entering French neighborhoods, but they were counting the days until the French would leave. Muslim Algerians had been brutally subdued, but they retained their own names, language, religion, and other cultural attachments.

*The Meursault Investigation* has been hailed by *The New Yorker* as ‘A tour-de-force reimagining of Camus’s *The Stranger*, from the point of view of the mute Arab victims.’ There are, in fact, many Arabs mentioned in the Camus novel, and they are not all mute by any means. They are: [i] ‘an Arab nurse in a white smock, wearing a brightly coloured scarf over her head.’ This nurse worked at the old folks home at Marengo—where Meursault’s mother spent three years—and had leprosy. [ii] Raymond’s ‘mistress;’ Meursault confides that when Raymond ‘told me the woman’s name, I realized she was an Arab.’ Raymond had assaulted her, and the police had to be called. While the policeman was remonstrating with Raymond, ‘the young woman was crying and saying “He hit me. He’s a pimp.”’ [iii] The woman’s unnamed brother, who challenges Raymond to a fight while they are riding a tram, with the words ‘If you’re really a man, you’ll get off this tram.’ Meursault later shoots this unnamed brother dead on an Algiers beach. [iv] The brother’s closest mate, who plays a flute, and accompanies the brother to the beach, where they have a bloody fight with Raymond and Masson. [v] The brother’s other mates, who accompany him as he tracks Raymond around the town. [vi] Arab men on remand, who talked to Meursault when he was locked up with them following his arrest: ‘The day I was arrested, I was locked up in a room with several prisoners, most of them Arabs. They laughed when they saw me. They asked me what I’d done. I said I’d killed an Arab and they all went quiet. But a short time later, night fell. They showed me how to set up the mat where I would sleep. By rolling up one of the ends, you could make a sort of pillow.’

Daoud’s novel doesn’t mention the nurse, the Arab men on remand, or most of the blokes who followed Raymond around town. He tells us that the flute player’s name was Larbi, and that he ‘vanished from the neighborhood to avoid my mother, the police, the whole story, and the story in your book. All that’s left of him is his first name, which makes an odd echo: Larbi l’Arabe, Larbi the Arab.’ Otherwise, Daoud concentrates on the unnamed Arab shot dead on the beach, and the young Arab woman who features in the Raymond episodes. He rewrites the sequence of events as follows: The man shot dead on the beach was Musa, his (the narrator Harun’s) brother. The woman wasn’t his sister, because they had no sister. So, who was she? ‘One of his girlfriends, maybe.’ Her first name was Zubida, and she was one of the ‘few skirt-wearing, firm breasted Algerian women who shuttled between our world and the world of the *roumis* (strangers, foreigners) down in the French neighborhoods. We brats used to call them whores and stone them with our eyes. They were fascinating targets, because they could promise pleasures without the inevitability of marriage.’ The fracas between Musa, Larbi, Raymond and Masson—with Meursault in attendance—had come about as follows:

And there, I’ve always thought, is where the misunderstanding came from; what in fact was never anything other than a banal score-settling that got out of hand was elevated to a philosophical crime. Musa wanted to save the girl’s honor by teaching your hero a lesson, and he protected himself by shooting my brother down in cold blood on a beach. Men in the working-class neighborhoods of Algiers actually did have an exaggerated, grotesque sense of honor. Defend our women and their thighs! I tell myself that after losing their land, their wells, and their livestock, women were all our gang had left.

There are just three things wrong with this version of events. [i] If Zubida was Raymond’s mistress, how could she also have been Musa’s girlfriend? [ii] Isn’t it much more likely that a Muslim brother would protect the honor of his sister, a member of his own blood family, than that a skirt-chasing, binge-drinking, street brawler would have been that concerned about the honor of a woman, who *might or might not*, have been *one* of his girlfriends? [iii] It wasn’t Meursault who stole the

woman's honor, but Raymond. Musa had no reason to want to teach Meursault a lesson, nor for that matter to remain at the beach having cut Raymond in the arm, and slashed his mouth, with his knife. Neither the Camus nor the Daoud version of events is completely credible or coherent, but Daoud's is the less credible of the two.

Ironically, Daoud's novel adds little enough to the meagre information furnished by Camus about the dead man on the beach. We now know his name—Musa, alias Zujj—and we have details of his appearance: 'He was quite tall, yes, and his body was thin and knotty from hunger and the strength anger gives. He had an angular face, big hands that protected me, and hard eyes because our ancestors lost their land.' Musa had been the family's sole breadwinner since their father had deserted them. He worked in the port 'as a porter and handyman, toting, dragging, lifting, sweating.' He smelled of 'rotten vegetables, sweat, muscles, and breath.' He had 'a gift for immobility, the way he'd stand stock-still on the threshold of our house, facing the neighbors' wall, holding a cigarette and the cup of black coffee our mother would bring him.' He went on all-night 'binges,' and gave Harun 'a hiding for some stupid thing I'd done.' He carried a knife, had tatoos on his upper body, and 'When he was alive, he already had a reputation as a quick-tempered man with a fondness for impromptu boxing matches.' But while he was alive, Harun had worshipped him: 'So Musa was a simple god, a god of few words. His thick beard and strong arms made him seem like a giant who could have wrung the neck of any soldier in any pharaoh's army [...] My brother Musa was capable of parting the sea, and yet he died in insignificance, like a common bit player, on a beach that today has disappeared, close to the waves that should have made him famous forever!' And that's it. On the face of it, not a guy you'd want to run into in a dark alleyway! But who knows? Was he religious? Did he hope to start a family? Which soccer team did he support? What sort of movies did he go to? What was his favourite food? Did he have political convictions, or posters on the wall? We are left in the dark about all of that.

Camus' explanation for the lack of detail in *The Stranger* was that 'The true work of art is the one that says less.' Daoud's lack of interest in the dead man on the beach is due to the fact that he had other things on his mind. As he explained to Deborah Treisman of *The New Yorker*, 'The Stranger' is Camus' character, but also a symbol of the philosophical and human condition. I wanted to take another look at that strangeness. I'm not responding to Camus—I'm finding my own path through Camus.' Daoud also acknowledges that his novel functions independently as a portrait of grief, of a mother and son coping with the loss of their loved one, their protector, and their economic support. 'At the center of the novel,' he says, 'is the strong bond between a son and his mother. It's a bond that is complex in Arab culture and in the Mediterranean region. Here, it is strengthened by the characters' shared grief and by the desire for revenge in one and the desire for freedom in the other. The bond between a mother and her son is not always rosy: it's where your bond with the rest of the world is formed. If you stumble here, you will fall wherever you go.' What is more, the bond between a son and his mother 'also reflects the relationship that many Algerians have with their motherland.'

But Daoud's first novel is mostly, almost obsessively, about Harun, Musa's remaining brother and Daoud's own fictive alter ego. Its seventy years later, and he sits in a run-down bar in Oran, getting drunk and talking his head off to anyone who will listen. He has lived in Oran—the location for Camus' *The Plague*—for several decades, and he likes it there: 'The sea's down there, far away, crushed underfoot by the harbour. It won't take anyone away from me and can never reach me.' As a child, he was allowed to hear only one story at night 'the story of Musa, my murdered brother, who

took a different form every time, according to my mother's mood.' He acquired a new status following his brother's murder, becoming known as 'the hero's brother.' He spent the second half of his childhood and part of his youth in a kind of village called Hadjouk, formerly known as Marengo—where Meursault's mother died—seventy kilometres from the capital. His mother and he ended up occupying a house which had belonged to settlers who had left in a hurry. 'It's a three-room house with wall-papered walls, and in the courtyard a dwarf lemon tree stares at the sky.' At the age of fifteen, when they withdrew to Hadjouk, he became 'a stern and serious scholar. Books and your hero's language gradually enabled me to name things differently and to organize the world with my own words.' He went back to Algiers to learn a profession (government land administration), and then returned to Hadjouk to practise it.

At the age of twenty seven, he murdered a French Algerian, Joseph—sometimes called Joseph Larquais—shooting him twice, once in the abdomen, then in the neck. He was driven to it by his vengeful mother, who had never ceased to be tormented by Musa's murder. He had shot the Frenchman during the first few days of Independence, when the line between combat and murder still remained blurred. He was arrested and interrogated by an officer in the Army of National Liberation, accused not of having killed a Frenchman, but of having killed him at the wrong time: 'This Frenchman, you should have killed him with us, during the war, not last week!.' Harun himself doubt that morality and justice can be decided by the dates on a calendar, but in any event *his* war had started long before theirs: 'The truth is—we started the war—in a way—before the people did. Of course, I didn't kill a Frenchman until July 1962, but our family had known death, martyrdom, exile, flight, hunger, grief and pleas for justice at a time when the country's war leaders were still playing marbles and lugging baskets in the markets of Algiers.'

Following his release—'to live in the shame of my alleged cowardice'—he moved to Oran, 'a sort of tumbledown, inefficient hell.' He never married, but had one brief, intense relationship with Meriem, a teacher writing a thesis on Camus. In this city, he says, 'I'm marginal enough [...] as it is.' He's surrounded and hemmed in by the sounds and rituals of Islam, and he can't bear it: 'My neighbour's an invisible man who takes it upon himself, every weekend, to read the Koran at the top of his voice all night long. Nobody dares tell him to stop, because it's God who's making him shout [...] his voice is nasal, plaintive, and obsequious. It sounds as if he's alternating roles, from torturer to victim and back.' Harun has no time for their God, or for organized religion: 'As far as I'm concerned, religion is public transportation I never use. This god—I like travelling in his direction, on foot if necessary, but I don't want to take an organized trip.' In fact, the only god he really recognizes is himself: 'I was the only one who knew the sorrow and obligation of death, work, and sickness. I alone pay the electric bill. I alone will be eaten by worms in the end. So get lost! And therefore I detest religions and submission. Who wants to run panting after a father who has never set foot on earth, has never had to know hunger or work for a living?' It comes as no surprise, then, that Harun comes to see himself as 'the murderer's [Meursault's] double.' He ends up a bar drunk, in a country where all the bars are being closed down. 'You can't imagine,' he moans, 'what an old man has to put up with when he doesn't believe in God, doesn't go to the mosque, has neither wife nor children, and parades his freedom around like a provocation.'

In conclusion, *The Meursault Investigation*, as I see it, does not work convincingly as a rewriting of *The Stranger*, especially of its first six chapters. The Musa tale is pallid, attenuated, and dull by comparison with the Meursault story. On the other hand, *The Meursault Investigation* works terribly well as a narrative of the mother-son relationship in a culture where this relationship is intense and far-reaching; it provides a more poignant and elaborated account of that relationship than that

painted by Camus. But inspired by Camus' master text, Daoud's novel truly comes into its own as a narrative of a man's alienation in an independent Algeria in thrall to Islam. If *The Stranger* is to be read as a study of non-conformity, and the consequences of non-conformity for the non-conformist, then Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* constitutes a memorable contribution to that genre.

**Joseph Mahon**, National University of Ireland, Galway (retired)