



Existential Crisis of the Subaltern and the Colonizer: The Search for Self in Camus' *The Stranger* and Wright's *Native Son*

الأزمة الوجودية للتابع والمستعمر: البحث عن الذات في رواية "الغريب" لكامو و
"الابن الأصلي" لرايت

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ملخص

بالتركيز على روايتين رئيسيتين، رواية "الابن الأصلي" لريتشارد رايت ورواية "الغريب" لألبير كامو، تهدف هذه المقالة إلى مناقشة التفاعل بين المستعمر والمستعمر وقضايا الهوية في أميركا في ظل قوانين جيم كرو وفيالجزائرالاستعمارية. وتبحث في كيفية تشكيل القمع الجسدي والنفسي والفصل العنصري لعوامل أزمة الهوية لكل من التابع والمستعمر. وبالاعتماد على نظريات فانون عن المانوية وأزمة النقص والعنف ونظرية الحقل لكورت لوينوفلسفة العبث لألبير كامو، تتناول هذه الدراسة القضايا الوجودية للأمريكيين الأفارقة والجزائريين الفرنسيين، مع التركيز على البيئة المانوية وعواقبها. وتوضح كيف يستخدم المؤلفان العالم المانوي في الروايتين المذكورتين لتصوير الآثار الجوهرية للبيئة القمعية التي تحدد مصائر بيغر توماس ومورسو وسلوكياتهما. ويكشف التحليل أن العالم المانوي في كلتا الروايتين يُشكّل الفضاء والهوية والإدراك الأخلاقي، مما يُعزّز الاغتراب والعنف والأزمات الوجودية. بمقارنة تصوير ريتشارد رايت الصريح للفصل العنصري مع تصوير ألبير كامو الضمني للتسلسل الهرمي الاستعماري، تُظهر هذه القراءة كيف يمكن لاستراتيجيات السرد المختلفة أن تكشف أو تحجب آليات القمع. وفي النهاية، تُجادل هذه المقالة بأن العالمين الاستعماري والعنصري في الروايتين يُمثّلان مواقع وجودية يقع فيها كلٌّ من المستعمر والمستعمر، مورسووبيغر توماس، في فخّهما، وتُمرّق هويتها بفعل الأنظمة ذاتها التي تُعرّفهما.

الكلمات الدالة: الابن الأصلي؛ الغريب؛ الوجودية؛ الأزمة الوجودية؛ المانوية؛ الأخيرة؛ التابع.

Abstract

Focusing on two major novels, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, this article aims to discuss the colonizer/colonized interaction and identity issues in Jim Crowed America and Colonial Algeria. It examines how physical and

psychological oppression and segregation constitute the factors in the identity crisis of both the subaltern and the colonizer. Relying on Fanonian theories of Manichaeism, inferiority complex, and violence, as well as Kurt Lewin's Field Theory and Albert Camus' concept of The Absurd, this study addresses existential issues of African Americans and French Algerians, focusing on the Manichean environment and its consequences. It illustrates how the two authors use the Manichean world in the aforementioned novels to depict the essential effects of the oppressive environment that determines Bigger Thomas' and Meursault's fates and behaviors. The analysis reveals that, in both novels, the Manichean world shapes space, identity, and moral perception, fostering alienation, violence, and existential crises. Juxtaposing Richard Wright's explicit portrayal of racist segregation with Albert Camus' implicit depiction of the colonial hierarchy, this reading shows how different narrative strategies can expose or obscure the mechanisms of oppression. In the end, this article argues that the colonial and racialized worlds in the two novels function as existential sites in which both colonizer and colonized -Meursault and Bigger Thomas- are entrapped, and their identities are fractured by the very systems that define them.

Keywords: *Native Son*; *the stranger*; existentialism; existential crisis; Manichaeism; otherness; subaltern.

Introduction

Colonialism is not simply an act of oppression aimed at occupying a nation and its people; it is a prevalent system of thought grounded in racism, as both its origin and its motive. Through deliberate stratagems and calculated practices, the colonizer seeks to subdue and control the colonized, justifying this domination through racial hierarchies. Every facet of this process is intentional, systematic, and devoid of innocence. Frantz Fanon has extensively studied the colonial structures of colonized societies, using Algeria as one of his case studies to illustrate the profound psychological effects of racism and colonial domination on the colonized. This research examines existential issues of African Americans and the pied-noir as treated in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* respectively, focusing on the Manichean environment and its consequences. The term "Manichaeism" originates from a religion established in the 3rd century AD by Mani, the Parthian prophet in the Sasanian Empire. Manichaeism is based on an intricate binary cosmology defining the struggle between a good, divine world of light, and an evil, satanic world of darkness. (Tardieu, 2008)

This study bears on the time of Jim Crow in America and colonial Algeria, two oppressive systems that created rigid racial hierarchies and shaped the environments depicted in the two novels. Despite being set on different



continents and within broadly different cultures, the two novels may suscite comparison at the level of setting, themes, and characters. They portray different types of characters: one focuses on Bigger Thomas, the black man, and the other focuses on Meursault, the French Algerian pied-noir. In this study, Meursault is presented as an Algerian Pied-noir, un colon, yet he will not be treated as a colonizer, but as a native son in a strange land. However, I will refer to him as the colonizer because he is French who was born and brought up in Algeria, the then French colony. Each novel illustrates an unbridgeable gap between marginalized blacks and Algerian natives on one side, and white Americans and the colonizer on the other. Furthermore, though they come from different backgrounds, they deal with approximately the same issues, namely oppression, segregation, violence and existential crises. Both authors portray parallels concerning the type of the issues characters are facing, their social background, and the link between the characters and their milieu. Both of them are native sons in America and Algeria, and yet they are strangers, for they belong to the racial minority. In *Native Son*, the main character, Bigger Thomas, accidentally kills Mary Dalton, the daughter of his employer. In the same way, in *The Stranger*, Meursault kills an unnamed Arab, an Algerian man at the beach who has an issue with his French friend Raymond. This study examines whether their acts result from the oppressive environment that pushed them to become murderers, or whether they are simply characterial traits.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how psychological and physical oppression and segregation are factors in Bigger Thomas's and Meursault's existential crises. On the one hand, it will examine how otherness is enacted in the inferiority complex that the dominant power exerts on the "Other", the "subaltern", Bigger Thomas and how this Manichean world creates an absurd environment for Meursault. On the other hand, it will scrutinize the consequences of belonging to a racial minority in a Manichean world, for both Bigger Thomas and Meursault. It will also study the effects of the psychologically oppressive environment on the psyche of both whites and non-whites.

As the core of this paper focuses on racism and the psychological aspects in Richard Wright's and Camus' aforementioned novels, this analysis draws on specific concepts from postcolonial theory to explore the existential issues of the black subjected races and the colonizer. This study seeks, first, to show how the Manichean world is set in Richard Wright's and Albert Camus'



respective novels, *Native Son* and *The Stranger*. Then, it attempts to portray how the two communities, the whites and non-whites, are separated, focusing on the physical environment. After that, relying on the Fanonian theories and Kurt Lewin's Field Theory, this study also examines the violence of both the colonizer and the colonized and their existential crises. Accordingly, this research seeks to answer the following questions: How is otherness enacted through the inferiority complex in *Native Son* and *The Stranger*? How does the Manichean world contribute to the absurd environment experienced by Meursault? What are the consequences of belonging to a racial minority in a Manichean world for Bigger Thomas and Meursault? How does a psychologically oppressive environment affect the psyche of both whites and non-whites in the two novels?

1. Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical approaches used in analysing the two main characters, Bigger Thomas and Meursault, include Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theory, Kurt Lewin's Field Theory of Behaviour and Albert Camus' philosophy of *The Absurd*. These theories together provide a multidimensional understanding of identity, alienation, and agency in racially segregated environments. Fanon's framework reveals the psychological mechanisms of colonial and racial oppression, Lewin's model explains how individual behaviour is shaped by environmental forces, and Camus' philosophy of the Absurd illuminates the existential dimension of living in an indifferent or hostile world.

1.1. The Manichean world, an institutionalized racist segregation

Frantz Fanon states that "The colonial world is a Manichean world... the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil... he is the enemy of values, and in this sense, he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, ... he is the deforming element... he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces." (Fanon, 1961, p. 41). In fact, Manichaeism is a concept in Fanon's colonial approach; it is an idea controlled by a "Manichean allegory of white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, and self and other" (JanMohamed, 1983, p. 272). The Manichean world, enacted by colonialism, is the sphere where the physical space is split into *good* and *evil*, white and black, and colonizer and colonized, forming what is known as the apartheid system. This binary structure creates physical separation along with psychological trauma for



both the colonizer and the colonized. This concept is evident in *Native Son*, where Richard Wright creates a Manichean world to illustrate how Chicago in the 1950s was physically divided into two separate communities, the white world and the black one. He focuses on the key features of the lives of the non-whites, emphasising on their predicament with poverty, racism, and discrimination. In contrast, Albert Camus focuses on the absurd existence of a Pied-Noir in colonial Algeria. While the theme of racism in his work is less explicit, it remains present in a more nuanced form, reflecting an existential struggle rather than clear social divisions.

To understand the socio-historical context of the two novels, it is crucial to go through the events that paved the way to this outcome. The execution of The Emancipation Proclamation (1863) marked a key step towards abolishing slavery in the United States. However, this abolition was undermined by the Black Codes, which were enacted after the Civil War (1861-1865), that restricted their civil rights and kept the blacks unskilled, unschooled and landless, with no legal protection or rights like white American citizens. Thereafter, between 1876 and 1965, with “separate but equal” (Klarman, 2004, p. 121) motto, the Jim Crow Laws were ratified to legitimize the racial segregation in all public facilities: public schools, public transportation, washrooms, theaters, hotels, restaurants, swimming pools and even in cemeteries, “creating two worlds in which whites and blacks were kept apart from one another as far as possible” (Brown & Webb, 2007, p. 1). Nonetheless, conditions for white Americans were much better compared to those available to African Americans, which resulted in the inadequate integration of the African Americans in America.

In parallel, to exert its domination over the natives of Algeria, the French colonial ruler executed its own form of institutionalized racial inequality through the Crémieux Decree (1870) and the Code de l'indigénat (1881). According to the Code de l'indigénat, all newcomers from Europe benefited from full French citizenship, designated by law as “French citizens”. Meanwhile, the native Algerians, constituting ninety percent of the population, had the status of “French subjects”, a status with reduced rights, and with restricted freedom of movement subject to authorization. The Algerians were referred to, by the French administration, as “Muslims” rather than “Algerians”, which would have had a national, or even nationalist connotation. The Crémieux Decree further deepened this divide by granting French citizenship to Algerian Jews while excluding Muslim Arabs and



Berbers. This system of control was founded on distinctions of origin, backed up by a pervasive inequality in rights which had multiple extensions. Notably, widespread land seizures which played a crucial role in the process of territorial control. These spoliations were a key element in the organization of a system where wealth was systematically extracted by the colonizers.

This latter dominance infused every facet of society, establishing discrimination and creating a profoundly unequal and oppressive environment. It manifested itself as an omnipresent force in every moment of people's lives through discriminatory practices in education and land allocation, often favouring wealthy settlers who acquired land at the expense of dispossessed local populations. However, periodic revolts, which marked the colonial era, disturbed this domination, providing sporadic challenges to the apartheid system. As a result, the French minority in Algeria, for example, lived in a dull feeling of fear. On the whole, both systems, Jim Crow in the United States and colonial apartheid in Algeria, functioned to institutionalize social, economic and legal segregation, visibly creating parallel communities in which one group was privileged at the expense of the other.

1.2. Lewin's field theory, environmental conditioning

Kurt Lewin's Field Theory affirms that behaviour is the product of the individual along with their environment. He explains that the "basic formula that the behavior (B) is a function of the person (P) and the environment (E), i.e., $B = F(P, E)$. This makes it necessary to distinguish the directly observable "symptoms" (B) from the underlying "state of the person" (P) which methodologically always have the position of a "construct." (Lewin, 1961, p. 97). According to Lewin, individual behaviour cannot be solely explained by personality traits, nor by context,—but rather by their interaction between who they are and their environmental conditions. In an apartheid world, these environmental conditions include laws, social expectations, segregation and fear. These forces act on the individual and shape their psychological responses. Lewin's Field Theory is suitable for studying how Bigger Thomas and Meursault are shaped by their environment, pushing them toward violence and emotional detachment as coping mechanisms.

Accordingly, focusing on the effects of the environment on individuals, Kurt Lewin's Field Theory can explain how one's actions are shaped by their



environment, such as seen in characters like Bigger and Meursault. Noticeably, Bigger's actions and behaviour are due to his entrapment in a psychological field dominated by racial oppression and fear. Thus, he reacts with violence as a desperate affirmation of control. Meursault, on the other hand, lives in a field of social alienation and existential absurdity, resulting in emotional detachment and passive acceptance of fate. Their behaviours are not based on their personal choices or inherent personality traits, but rather driven by external forces acting upon them; Bigger's violence and Meursault's indifference are not simply personal flaws, but responses to the psychological oppression they receive from their environment. This reinforces the idea of Lewin that one's actions must be studied within the broader psychological and environmental context. While both characters can be compared in terms of existence, their freedom of choice differs considerably. Bigger has strictly limited options due to his colour of skin, whereas Meursault, racially privileged under colonial rules, finds it difficult to lead a normal psychological state of mind due to the absurdity of this world.

1.3. Camus' absurdism

The absurdity of this world may be explained through Camus' theory of the absurd that explores the conflict between the individual's desire for meaning and order in the silent, indifferent world that offers none. This tension engenders the "absurd", a fundamental disconnection between the search for meaning and the purpose of life and the irrational, meaningless world. Camus advocates the acceptance of the absurd and living authentically in spite of it. The condemnation of Sisyphus to endlessly roll a boulder uphill is given as a metaphor for the human condition, in Camus' work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he extensively explains his theory of the "absurd". He determines that, even at the core of absurdity, one can embrace life with boldness, freedom, and passion, emphasising the importance of finding value in living life itself, rather than seeking the ultimate meaning. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (Camus, 1955, p. 91).



2. Literary Analysis

2.1. Manichean segregation and spatial apartheid in *Native Son* and *The Stranger*

Richard Wright uses Bigger Thomas to show how individuals are created by their environment, and how the Manichean society leads its subjects to their destruction. *Native Son* illustrates the Manichean form of domination that Fanon examined in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). In the novel, the society is distinctly split between whites and blacks: "We [blacks] live here and they [whites] live there. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't." (Wright, 1940, p. 20). Indeed, the novel echoes a Manichean dichotomy of White/Black, master/slave, rich/poor, oppressor/oppressed, and self/other.

Actually, this Manichean Chicago is split into two compartments which Fanon identifies as the colonizer zone and the colonized zone; this world cut into two is dwelled by two dissimilar species where "economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life" are evident (Fanon, 1961, p. 40). Fanon describes the colonizer's zone as "strongly built... brightly lit" and "the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. ... the streets ... are clean and even, with no holes or stones... it is a well-fed town, an easy-going town" (Fanon, 1961, p. 39). Fanon's description in the quotation above is highly similar to Drexel Boulevard, Forty-Sixth Street, the white neighbourhood where the Daltons live; it is depicted in the novel as "quiet and spacious... The houses... were huge; lights glowed softly in windows. The streets were empty, save for an occasional car that zoomed past on swift rubber tires." The whites "got everything... they own the world" and they "get a chance to do everything." (Wright, 1940, p. 44/22/16).

In contrast to the white zone, there is the black neighborhood, which is a "place of ill fame, peopled by men of ill repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where nor how". This is what Fanon calls the colonized zone; "it is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other ... [this zone is]... "hungry, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light." (Fanon, 1961, p. 39). Fanon's quotation echoes the South Side Chicago where the black people live. All along the text, Richard Wright creates an image of the drastic situation of the wretched lives of the black people of Southside Chicago, who are accordingly deprived of the right to schooling, work, or existence.



The introductory scene of the novel depicts the interior of the dwellings of the blacks, in the filthy, small one-room flat where Bigger Thomas lives with his mother and siblings. The novel opens with the fight between Bigger Thomas and the rat, in which Wright displays the brutality and embroilment of Bigger, drawing attention to the repressive milieu in which a rat has more freedom than Bigger. The limited opportunities for blacks in the Manichean Chicago prevent Bigger from being what he wants to be; his dream of becoming a pilot never sees the light. Gus reminds him that: "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you [emphasis added] go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane," (Wright, 1940, p. 17). In fact, the Jim Crow laws limited the employment of blacks to menial jobs, leaving them with little opportunity for advancement. Evidently, Bigger's misfortune is directly due to this systemic racial discrimination. Being a black man, he is confined to the type of work society deems appropriate for his race. Humann confirms that "his poverty and lack of opportunity are tied directly to his race and class." (Humann, 2007, p. 151).

Apropos Camus' *The Stranger*, there are no explicit indications that the novel is set in a colonized country, yet there exist subtle hints of racial tension. While the white people in *Native Son* are portrayed with little character, the native Algerians in *The Stranger* are entirely absent from description; their most notable peculiarity is their silence. Camus depicts the native Algerians as part of the natural landscape, serving as a passive background for the European drama to unfold. Mary Ann Witt argues that "[t]he native Algerians remain a silent backdrop, part of an enduring natural world on which a temporary, uneasy, and defensive social structure has been placed" (Witt, 1977, p. 39). Interaction between the Algerians and the European colonizer starts through Raymond's relationship with an Algerian girl, described as a "mauresque", who is also denied description or name like the other Algerians, which in turn leads Meursault to get involved in a racial conflict.

In the two novels, *Native Son* and *The Stranger*, the physical and social environments function as existential crucibles shaped by the Manichean order. Richard Wright dramatizes this division explicitly, showing how Jim Crowism in Chicago deprives Bigger Thomas of opportunity and dignity. In contrast, Albert Camus inserts the colonial oppressive hierarchy in the silences, omissions, and backgrounded presence of native Algerians, whose erasure reflects the spatial and psychological boundaries of French Algeria.



Despite their different narrative strategies, both novels portray environments where the marginalized are denied full humanity, and where space becomes a means of domination. These Manichean worlds set the ground for examining how colonial absurdity and racism function as political realities and existential forces that define and distort the self.

2.2. Native sons yet strangers in hostile worlds: colonial absurdity and racial terror as existential crucibles

The portrayal of Algerians in *The Stranger* is disturbing. First, they are called Arabs instead of Algerians. Second, they are denied description and voice. On the day of the murder, after assisting Raymond in his revenge, Meursault sees the Algerians, whom Raymond is involved with, across the street from his house. He identifies them as part of the physical environment; they are often linked with the weather, such as the sun's oppressive force and heat. On their way to the beach, "the morning sun hit [him] in the eyes like a clenched fist" (Camus, 1942, p. 32), and when he sees the Algerian group of men, Meursault describes them as "They were staring at us silently, in the special way these people have—as if we were blocks of stone or dead trees." (ibid). This association of the sunlight and the gaze of the Algerian men that are both striking Meursault, along with the expression "these people", show that the colonizer does not consider the natives as fully human or as human beings at all. Meursault perceives the natives as a mute, fixed part of the background: "They were exactly as before, gazing in the same vague way at the spot where we had been" (ibid). This description gives the impression that the Algerians happen to be there and have no part in the plot but to serve as a stimulus for the French drama to take place, and this goes in line with Fanon's statement that "The Algerians... make up the landscape, the natural background to the human presence of the French" (Fanon, 1961, p. 250).

The native Algerians are merged in the natural setting rather than developed as interactive characters. In fact, all the Algerians in the novel remain unnamed and voiceless, serving more as symbols than as active contributors in the narrative; their most significant presence is the killing of the Arab, on the beach by Meursault, an act described not as a human conflict, but as a reaction to the scorching sun. Moreover, Meursault is not worried about killing a man, but about disturbing the balance of the day: "I shook the sweat and the sun. I understood that I had destroyed the balance of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I had been happy" (Camus, 1942, p. 39). This portrays the distortion of Meursault's mindset and his absurd



indifference. Perri Giovannucci suggests that the "balance of the day" is the actual tension that exists between the "two claimants of nativist legitimacy, and it is "shattered" by a colonial gunshot". He claims that " the pied noir's nativist claims to Algeria are based upon such acts. Pied noir nativism is contingent upon the displacement of the Algerian natives" (Giovannucci, 2008, p. 51). Therefore, for Meursault to affirm his nativism, he must annihilate the Algerian man, and thus the act of killing becomes an act of affirmation of nativism. Meursault's act of affirmation is as much as committing the "crime in which all the pieds noirs have collectively participated". Giovannucci argues that Meursault's death is like the death of their "preconscious recognition", denying the acknowledgement of their shared crime.

Moreover, another scene worth mentioning is the time of the prison visits, when Camus contrasts between the Algerian visitors and the French ones, stressing the racial disparity in colonial Algeria. Through the first-person point of view, Meursault notes that: "The native prisoners and their relations on the other side were squatting opposite each other. They didn't raise their voices and, in spite of the din, managed to converse almost in whispers" (Camus, 1942, p. 47), making a low, murmuring sound. On the other hand, the French visitors stand and engage in loud, dynamic conversations. As a deduction, it may be argued that this difference emphasises the submissive role of the colonized, as they have almost a peripheral presence in the French world, while the French characters dominate the space with their voices and movement. This contrast between the colonizer and the colonized affirms the cruelty of the colonial world, where the natives are reduced to silence even in moments of personal communication, where one needs to have a voice.

One can observe that the depiction of the native Algerians may raise the question of whether this is an open critique of colonialism or just an unconscious reflection of Camus' own pied-noir standpoint. Either way, some critics, such as Conor Cruise O'Brien, argue that Camus' works, particularly *The Stranger*, implicitly critiques colonial injustice by exposing the dehumanization of the native Algerians under the French colonial system, while others believe that he unintentionally reproduced the colonial mindset by rendering them silent and only significant as part of the setting. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said suggests that Camus' narrative aligns with the colonial world of Algeria, reinforcing the erasure of natives' voices. However, Said labels Camus as a "universalist" (Said, 1994, p. 172) whose



moralism polishes the oppressive structure of colonialism, revealing an inherent colonial mindset. Assia Djebar also argues that Camus' *Appeal for a Civilian Truce in Algeria* rhetoric is emblematic of the silencing of Algerian voices. The scene of the prison, where the Algerians whisper and the French yell, could be interpreted as a subtle observation on how the colonial world suppresses the colonized. Nevertheless, Camus doesn't condemn French colonialism in *The Stranger*; this novel is mainly focused on the absurdity of one's life in an indifferent world that leads to the alienation of the individual. In his later works, like *The Just Assassins* (1949) and *Algerian Chronicles* (1958), he engages explicitly with colonial injustices. *The Stranger*, whether intentional or not, echoes the racial and social divisions of colonial Algeria.

2.3. Violence, agency, and existential assertion: disruption as resistance in Meursault and Bigger

Mary Ann Witt suggests that, in *The Stranger*, the colonizers see the majority race, native Algerians, as a passive yet threatening presence, and the majority race in *Native Son* is seen as an "aggressive force of nature" (Witt, 1977, p. 39). Both protagonists struggle against these forces, which eventually lead to their destruction. Furthermore, Witt considers that Meursault is influenced by the French dehumanisation of Algerians, yet he rejects colonial society, which aligns with the natural world of the colonized. This interpretation is compelling; it effectively shows how nature is employed metaphorically to explore racial power dynamics and the protagonists' existential struggles. Indeed, both Bigger and Meursault face forces greater than themselves—Bigger faces an oppressive, Manichean society, and Meursault faces both colonial norms and his own detachment. However, the alignment of Meursault with the "natural world of the colonised" (Witt, 1977, p. 39) is debatable. While rejecting societal conventions, his indifference does not mean solidarity with the colonized. His detachment is more existential than political. Similarly, Bigger Thomas rejects the passivity of his community, not the Black identity, as a consequence of the limited options imposed on the African Americans.

Steven Rubin argues that the murder is an accident only to a slight extent, for this act has been the dream of Bigger Thomas for a long time (Rubin, 1981). This claim made by Rubin appears to rest on an assumption that is not sufficiently supported by textual evidence. Meeting Mr. Dalton makes Bigger Thomas swim in an awkward wave of odd feelings that make him want "to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him



feel this. If not that, he wanted to blot himself out" (Wright, 1940). This citation proves that the act of violence is not a dream, but rather an outcome of a lived situation, like this unpleasant moment that increases Bigger's inner conflict and which puts him in a state of emotional and psychological turmoil. In fact, as much as he wants to blot out Mr. Dalton, he wants to blot out himself. His wanting to blot out both, Mr. Dalton and himself, results from this overwhelming sensation of unease and self-loathing, rather than any premeditated desire for violence. One can consider this as evidence that the murder is not the fulfilment of a long-held dream, as Rubin claims, but an impulsive act engendered by Bigger's lived experiences and the oppressive circumstances he has to endure.

Bigger's struggle extends beyond the limited white society to encompass his immediate environment, his family, the gang, and above all, himself. His inability to escape the repugnance of life causes his anxiety and frustration to ascend which leads him to sense a feeling of a looming catastrophe. After the fight with Gus, he feels that he needs "to hide his growing and deepening feeling of hysteria; he had to get rid of it or else he would succumb to it" his internal struggle results in losing his "self-trust". Eventually, he comes to the resolution that "Confidence could only come again now through action so violent that it would make him forget" (Wright, 1940, p. 35).

Nevertheless, the murder of Mary Dalton is the only act that provides Bigger with a sense of meaning in his life, a sense of freedom to act. The Bigger we have known before the murder was "a meek black boy", but now he becomes a man of action, considering his options: "He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands" (Wright, 1940, p. 160).

Richard Wright presents Bigger Thomas as a black man who is driven by his frustration in this environment that leads to his ruthless end: he accidentally kills Mary Dalton, then deliberately kills his girlfriend Bessie after raping her, as if to confirm the stereotype imposed on him – because he is black, he must have raped the white girl, Mary, and then killed her, and, finally, he is sentenced to death for these aforesaid deeds. Bigger is shown as psychologically damaged by the "master/slave relationship", where the oppressor "turns bestial or cruel - even while maintaining a veneer of civility" (Elder, 2010, p. 31). This psychological bewilderment causes Bigger's



unstable identity, which is an amalgam of pretending to be rough amongst his peers, of total submissiveness in the presence of whites, of being a rapist (the stereotype imposed on blacks), and of the real Bigger who is afraid, anxious, and angry. Wright blames the Manichean Chicago that he employs in *Native Son* for the dehumanization of both, the whites and blacks who, as claimed by Elder, undertake a psychological impact. The societal disharmony dramatized by Wright echoes the psychological one on the African Americans, and thus the broken psyche reflects the fractured society.

Both characters lack a guiding moral or ethical foundation, whether grounded in religious belief or secular philosophy, as they are estranged from God and socially accepted principles. In *How Bigger Was Born*, Wright states that "[a]ll Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless". He explains that certain circumstances created types of personalities that "were mainly imposed upon men and women living in a world [...] whose metaphysical meanings had vanished; a world in which God no longer existed as a daily focal point of men's lives; a world in which men could no longer retain their faith" (Wright, 1940, p. 14).

Meursault is driven by the force of indifference, which stems from his absurd existence in a colony. His actions are also caused by his alienation in this meaningless world. Camus does not consider Algeria as his country, it is his home; along with that, he was not born in his mother country to have the love and patriotism that one has for one's own country. In his "Appeal for a Civilian Truce in Algeria", Camus states: "I have passionately loved this land where I was born, I drew from it whatever I am, ... it is for me the land of happiness, of energy, and of creation" (Camus, 1995, p. 140). According to this quote, he does not consider it his country, but rather the land where he was born. Consequently, he is lost between the two countries; he is native to Algeria by birth and France by origin, yet belongs to neither. Therefore, one can say that Meursault too suffers from this rootlessness that created in him this feeling of indifference.

3. Discussion

Although *Native Son* and *The Stranger* are set in different geographical and cultural contexts, Jim Crowed America and French-colonial Algeria, both depict protagonists whose lives are shaped by oppressive social structures and profound alienation. Bigger Thomas and Meursault are each product of environments that deny them belonging, whether through racial segregation



or colonial hierarchies. Their respective trajectories explore the limits of personal agency within systems that impose both physical and psychological constraints, making both characters, in different ways, native sons who remain strangers.

One can simply say that Camus is a native son of Algeria but does not truly belong to it; he is caught between his attachment to the land of his birth and his French heritage. Algeria was his home, and he had an emotional connection to the land itself, yet he was not an Algerian in the national logic. Anyway, this in-betweenness is reflected in Meursault's alienation and indifference. He is one of the French settlers in Algeria, yet he does not entirely conform to its principles or expectations. His indifference towards his mother's death, his relationship with Marie, the death of the man he kills, or even the political context echo Camus' own reluctance to pick a side with either the colonizer or the colonized. The killing of the Algerian man is not driven by personal hatred or ideological conviction, but rather by an existential impulse, reflecting Camus' struggle not to embrace colonial rules, nor fighting against them either. Camus is just like Meursault, caught in a liminal space; he remains a Stranger, not belonging to either Algeria or France.

This reflects Camus' ambiguous position regarding colonialism in Algeria: he neither entirely supported the French colonizers nor allied with the revolutionaries. He called for a "Trêve Civile" instead of independence. This can be interpreted as a reluctance to see the existing order dismantled, along with his fear of change and his attachment to his comfort zone. Camus' deep tie with Algeria is shaped by his identity as a Pied-noir. He advocated for reform, yet within the colonial framework which is unrealistic at a time when independence was necessarily inevitable. In contrast to figures like Frantz Fanon and Jean Paul Sartre, who saw decolonization as necessary and just, Camus could not embrace the revolution which would mean the end of the world he knew. His rejection might be seen as an implicit support for upholding the status quo.

Meursault's condemnation is not for killing a man, for in a colonial situation, no colonizer is punished for killing a colonized, otherwise all the narrative becomes unrealistic even as a fictional account. Meursault is condemned for not being a good colonizer. The prosecutor accuses "the prisoner of behaving at his mother's funeral in a way that showed he was already a criminal at heart" and that he "is morally guilty of his mother's death ...[and]



unfit to have a place in the community" (Camus, 1942, p. 60/64). As a pied-noir, Meursault is expected to act like one, yet all his actions do not reflect this. Instead of professional progress, he rejects a promotion to Paris; he focuses on the heat instead of grieving his mother's death and cleansing himself of any ambiguity surrounding her passing, with a swim, a beautiful girl and a comic film the following day. Rather than defending his mother country, he shows no interest in the French institutions present in Algeria like the church or the law until he faces the consequences of his actions. He lives in his own bubble, challenging the colonial approach by not abiding by the rules of societal colonialism and not embracing the role of the colonizer imposed on him.

While Meursault's violence—either psychological (directed inward) or physical (against the Algerian man he kills), stems from his indifference as a response to the absurd world he lives in, Bigger Thomas turns to violence because it is the only action that affirms his existence in this world that has condemned him to invisibility. Due to his strangeness in the irrational world in which he lives, he finds refuge in violence. Ironically, the only meaningful act in his life is killing; "He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (Wright, 1940, p. 93). In this matter, Fanon affirms that "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon, 1961, p. 94). Though Wright's purpose is in no way to advocate murder, this violence is necessary for Bigger's agency in this oppressive world that offered him nothing but violence. Therefore, it may be argued that Bigger's "criminality, his impulsivity, and the violence of his murders are therefore not the consequence of the organization of his nervous system or of characterial originality, but the direct product of the colonial situation" (Fanon, 1961, p. 309).

As for Camus, he explains this world as one that causes the feeling that would deprive the mind of rest, "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world". A world that is stripped of "illusions and lights, [where man] feels an alien, a stranger... This divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (Camus, 1955, p. 05). Meursault's existence is absurd, and he reacts to it with carelessness, denying all conventional norms of society. For Meursault, "What difference could they make to me, the deaths of others, or a mother's



love, or [her] God; or the way a man decides to live, the fate he thinks he chooses" (Camus, 1942, p. 75). This is why, by the end of the novel, Meursault achieves consciousness of his existence; he comes to accept the absurdity of his existence in this meaningless world: "It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe" (Camus, 1942, p. 76).

On the other hand, Bigger Thomas lives the same experience: his death sentence makes him attempt to understand the absurdity of his existence in the absurd world. Like Meursault, having rejected the comfort of spirituality, he is doomed to die alone, just as the life he leads. However, after his conversation with Max, he understands that he is not the first one who has lived this experience. This insight enables him to extend a long-delayed act of solidarity to Jan, whose support Bigger had consistently spurned. Thereafter, Bigger reaches a state of mind beyond fearing life or death. He eventually accepts the fact of what he did, though self-destructive, was the only conceivable reaction to the relentless injustices and absurdities that defined his life. Although driven by different forces, Bigger and Meursault follow a similar pattern of being alienated and frustrated with social conventions and standards, then they accidentally kill a person from the opposite race, and eventually these murders lead them to discover a feeling of meaningful existence and agency.

Conclusion

This article has tried to study how psychological and physical oppression and segregation are the factors behind the existential crises of the Other and the colonizer. It has examined, first, how the dominant power imposes and enforces otherness upon the subject races, the "subaltern", Bigger Thomas. Thereafter, it has scrutinized the consequences of being from the racial minority in a Manichean world, of both Bigger Thomas and Meursault. It has examined the outcome of the psychologically oppressive environment on the whites' and non-whites' psyche. Besides, it has sought, first, to show how the Manichean world is set in Richard Wright's and Albert Camus' respective novels, *Native Son* and *The Stranger*; and how the two social groups, the whites and non-whites, are separated, focusing on the physical environment. Additionally, trusting the Fanonian theories and Kurt Lewin's Field Theory, it has also studied the violence of both the colonizer and the colonized and their existential crises.



Camus and Wright seem to share the same opinion according to the reactions of their respective characters, Meursault and Bigger Thomas. However, the pattern of their actions and their motivations differ significantly. While Meursault's realisation of the absurdity of the world pushes him to kill a man, Bigger Thomas, ignoring the philosophical dimension of his defiance, is driven by fear, hatred, and a natural desire for freedom. Eventually, after his actions, he gains a deeper understanding of himself, his existence, and his immediate environment, transforming his act into a protest not only against white oppression but also against the very structure of existence itself.

This analysis has sought to address the conflict between human nature and the environment, examining whether individuals shape their surroundings or whether the environment shapes them. This analysis of Meursault and Bigger's characters demonstrates that they are both influenced by their oppressive and alienating environments rather than being solely the result of their own choices. Both Meursault's emotional distance and Bigger's ferocity are not typically human flaws but reactions to the absurd and uncaring world and the institutionalized racism of a Manichean society. Therefore, this study affirms that their acts are the results of this oppressive environment that has pushed them to become murderers; they are simply character traits. The narratives of Camus and Wright demonstrate how much the environment's power and drive define the limits of a person's identity, freedom, and even morality. By examining these characters, one comes to understand how the environment both defines and limits the human spirit. In the end, Bigger and Meursault are strangers despite being native sons.

Taking everything into account, the psychological perplexity engendered by the fractured society based on racial segregation led to Bigger Thomas' and Meursault's existential crises. Wright's and Camus' aims are to affirm that a sociological detachment reflects a psychological one. Both Jim Crow and Colonial Algeria deny self-fulfillment for their subjects; Bigger and Meursault are the products of their oppressive environment, with Bigger Thomas ending up on an electric chair and Meursault under a guillotine. Eventually, both Bigger Thomas and Meursault reveal how colonial and racial systems distort human subjectivity, making identity and morality functions of domination and alienation.



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