

## The Nature of Responsibility in the Agonized World of the Rich Souls in Albert Camus' *The Guest*: A Study in Existential Outlook

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### ABSTRACT

Responsibility and its apposite practice in life has always been the hot issue of the different strata of the world societies. Man has always witnessed the domination of the responsibilities based on the constitutionally made law, which has overshadowed the unwritten socio-ethical norms that can most of the time leave constructive impacts upon individual's mental substratum. This study is an attempt to securitize the pros and cons of the both the legal and arbitrary socio-ethical responsibilities, delving into the contextual core of Camus' *The Guest* from an existential angle, which may provide us with a sound and free atmosphere to give a fair picture of the nature of responsibility. It focuses on the importance of the socio-ethical facets of the sense of responsibility, which may change the mental concept of any unpredicted and unexpected individual. It further shows how the presupposed calculations, which are fossilized on their limited social conditions, may lose their credit and consequently lead to a mental renaissance of responsibility of the world of existential values.

**Key Words:** Camus, responsibility, existentialism, commitment, guilt.

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### INTRODUCTION

Albert Camus an Algerian born writer leads a tough life, especially during his university time. He supports himself though tutoring and doing various odd jobs. He has a deep sense of responsibility about democracy and freedom of human beings in general and the colonized in particular. He does not show any leniency as far as freedom and justice is concerned. As King (2010:1-2) asserts:

Albert Camus (1913-1960), was born to a poor, uneducated family in Algeria. His father died when he was one year old. He was very different from the typical French bourgeois intellectual. Raised by an illiterate, impoverished mother and tyrannized by his grandmother, he was expected to quit school at 14 and join the working class, as his brother did. Albert Camus' love for his widowed mother is a recurring theme underlying his work, as is his love for the beauty of the Mediterranean world. As a journalist he was soon involved in defending the rights of Muslims, a position which led him into conflict with the Communist Party, of which he was a member for a time. There was often tension between Camus and the Communists and their supporters because he saw political causes in terms of people's lives rather than abstract ideals.

### Responsibility

Responsibility may have different connotations under different circumstances in diverse contexts. Therefore, it may be beyond a fair justice to always define responsibility within a few confined words and phrases attested by a selected group of people within a fragment of a given time, which does not exist anymore. Under special circumstances, it may be horrendous to feel the authorized presence of those words and phrases as juries maneuvering over individuals' mental realm. Indeed, the main gist of this study is not to stand against the constitutionally prescribed law, but to have a soft and just approach to the unwritten constructive laws as well. Hooti & Davoodi assert:

The highest responsibility of an individual in each and every society is to stand against any sorts of aggression and infringement towards the universally accepted human values, which are nowadays easily compromised. It is inhumane to give in to defeat when we are fighting for the truth, which is our innate right, and this right cannot be attained easily, we may need to walk on a thorny and tortuous path to make the logocentric superpowers kneel down. (2011:209)

The focal point of the study indeed, is to display the repercussions of irresponsible responsibility and responsible irresponsibility, which mean a culprit may not necessarily be a person who violates the legal law but it may be one who practices the legal law, which leads to disasters and injustice; here the law has been practiced

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without giving importance to the contextual layers of the circumstances. Indeed, based on the nature of practice and violation of responsibility the individual should be awarded or punished.

As Ross asserts:

There is a considerable literature on the concept of responsibility the legal and moral sense. For the most part this literature is concerned with the conditions under which a person can be held responsible. It seems clear that the basic condition is that an offence is alleged to have taken place—an immoral act or crime has been committed. When someone is held responsible, it is always on the grounds that someone has contravened a certain normative system, done something reprehensible or prohibited, and which therefore prompts the reaction in which being held morally or legally responsible consists. The first step in this reaction is to call the person responsible to account, to demand a more detailed explanation from him of what has taken place. If this leads to the assumption that a number of conditions, the conditions of responsibility, are fulfilled, the accused is found guilty and liability established: he receives censure or, in the legal context, is sentenced to some kind of punishment, compensation, or other form of sanction.(1975:13)

### Existentialism

According to Jaspers:

Existenz cannot be described even in a general way as the immanent modes do. Because it is a possibility in all men, it can only be pointed to and appealed to. But two features of it stand out. First, it is absolutely unique. It is each individual human being as a particular, concrete historical being in so far as he is authentic. In this sense Jasper uses Existenz to refer to individual persons. He speaks of existenz as doing or willing something. Secondly, Existenz is the ultimate source or ground of each individual self. In this latter capacity, it is best thought as a principle of freedom, creativity, or pure spontaneity. It does not refer to an individual, but to a quality of life—authentic existence— in which individuals may or may not participate. In this sense Existenz is a universal structure, and Jaspers describes it by means of historicity, freedom, resoluteness and so on. In addition, he almost always refers to it as “possibleExistenz” rather than as an actuality, because in principle it can never be actualized. (1971: xix-xx)

Existentialism as a movement seems to be pioneered by writers like Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel. The chief concern of this movement is *individual* and its relation to its surroundings or the world around, and of course its concept to *Being* that Heidegger calls *Dasein*. Individual may not realize the importance of his existence until and unless he realizes the importance of his role in each given fragment of life. He may reach the depth of realization of existence if he expects the impending death every now and then. According to Mulhall (2005)

The connection between anticipation and resolution depends on the internal relation between Heidegger's dual characterization of *Dasein*'s Being as Being-towards-death and as Being-guilty (Being-the- null-basis of a nullity); for both characterizations invoke different inflections of a single conception of negativity at the heart of human existence. Together, they entail that human beings properly understand the significance of their existential choices only if they make them knowing that each such moment of decision might be their last, and that each constitutes a situation into which they were thrown and from which they must project themselves. These are simply two interrelated marks of the conditionedness or finitude of human existence – finitude as mortality and finitude as nullity: they envision each moment of human existence as shadowed by the possibility of its own impossibility, by the absence of total control over its own antecedents, and by the negation of competing but unrealized possibilities. Accordingly, human beings cannot authentically confront their concrete moments of existential choice unless they grasp the full complexity or depth of their finitude. They cannot resolutely confront them as the null basis of a nullity without acknowledging the possibility of their utter nullification (i.e. without anticipating death); and they cannot properly anticipate their own mortality without confronting their choice-situations as themselves doubly marked by death – the death of the preceding moment (no longer alterable but forever determinative) and the death of their other unrealized possibilities (no longer actualizable but forever what-might-have-been). In short, the only authentic mode of resoluteness is anticipatory resoluteness: the only authentic mode of anticipation is resolute anticipation.(153)

Indeed, one of the central issues of existentialists is the *Being* attached to *Things* and also the *Being* attached to *Human-beings*. Existentialists believe that the main difference between *Things* and *Human beings* is that *Things* cannot decide or choose; they lack innovations and creativity, while individuals keep on changing with each and every push of time. They do also believe that individuals may be compared to *Things* if they lack decision making power or somehow are deprived of their existential values, which embrace their freedom of choice.

### **The Guest from Existential Outlook**

*The Guest* gives a vivid picture of the nature of responsibility. It shows how trust and respecting others' self-esteem may lead to the awakening of the apprehensively lulled conscience. An awakened conscience feels the need of an honest and unbiased responsibility, which is free from the logically illogical or illogically logical law. The sense of importance accompanied with the freedom of choice and decision making, which gives the sense of existence to the individual, is the central point of Camus' story. It shows that how free and unbiased mental bedrock may lead to a positive and didactic milestone in one's life journey.

### **Communication and Exception**

Communication and more importantly the nature of communication plays a crucial role in Camus' *The Guest*. Communication does not simply mean to exchange a few words with others, but to have a responsible understanding of the exchanged words. The individual may realize the importance of his communication only when if he believes to be an *exception*. Indeed, each individual birth is an *exception* in the world. He has his own concept and picture of the world around. Therefore, each and every individual lives within its own exceptional world of existence. The tragedy of this *exception* pops up when the individual gives a negative sense to his exceptionally possessed values. If he creates the binary opposition and drowns himself within the soft ooze of the weaker and inferior pole of opposition, then, he will inevitably lose the link of communication. As Jaspers (1971) comments:

The MAN who is an *exception* is an exception first to universal existence, whether this appears in the form of the ethos, institutions and laws of the land, or the health of the body, or any other normalcy. Secondly, he is an exception to the universally valid, cogent and certain thinking of consciousness-in-general. Finally, he is an exception to the spirit in belonging to which I am as a member of a whole. To be an exception is actually to break out of every kind of universality.

The exception understands himself as exception only through the universal. Because he is an exception his understand, in his failure, grasps the positive universal all the more energetically. One who thinks from the depth of the origin, loving what he himself is not, only renders what he understands all the clearer and brighter; so clear and bright that one who has succeeded and has become what he understands could never render it communicable. (44-45)

In *The Guest*, Daru, the schoolmaster, is entrusted a responsibility to hand over a criminal to the concerned police authorities, though he tries not to accept the responsibility, but finally gives in to it. The debatable point is the attitude of the schoolmaster toward the Arab prisoner. First of all, he does try to show that he is nothing but a welcome guest. He does so to remind the Arab that he is an *exception*, and as an *exception* he should not debase his existential values. Secondly, he displays his own sense of exception by practicing his own individual values. He does not try to yield to the prescribed, imposed and dictated values. This atmosphere paves the path toward a fair mutual communication based on the mutual respect and as well as self-esteem. This communication leads to a positive self-consciousness. The following dialogue shows the reverent and caring attitude shown by the schoolmaster, which indeed, eventually, leaves a constructive impact upon the Arab prisoner:

"Come," said Daru. The Arab got up and followed him. In the bedroom, the schoolmaster pointed to a chair near the table under the window. The Arab sat down without taking his eyes off Daru.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," the prisoner said.

Daru set the table for two. He took flour and oil, shaped a cake in a frying-pan, and lighted the little stove that functioned on bottled gas. While the cake was cooking, he went out to the shed to get cheese, eggs, dates and condensed milk. When the cake was done he set it on the window sill to cool, heated some condensed milk diluted with water, and beat up the eggs into an omelet. In one of his motions he knocked against the revolver stuck in his right pocket. He set the bowl down, went into the classroom and put the revolver in his desk drawer. When he came back to the room night was falling. He put on the light and served the Arab. "Eat," he said. The Arab took a piece of the cake, lifted it eagerly to his mouth, and stopped short. "And you?" he asked. "After you. I'll eat too." The thick lips opened slightly. The Arab hesitated, then bit into the cake determinedly. The meal over, the Arab looked at the schoolmaster. "Are you the judge?" "No, I'm simply keeping you until tomorrow." "Why do you eat with me?" "I'm hungry." The Arab fell silent. Daru got up and went out. He brought back a folding bed from the shed, set it up between the table and the stove, perpendicular to his own bed. From a large suitcase which, upright in a corner, served as a shelf for papers, he took two blankets and arranged them on the camp bed. Then he stopped, felt useless, and sat down on his bed. There was nothing more to do or to get ready. He had to look at this man. He looked at him, therefore, trying to imagine his face bursting

with rage. He couldn't do so. He could see nothing but the dark yet shining eyes and the animal mouth.(17-18)

The unpredicted and unexpected attitude shown by Daru makes the Arab prisoner reconsider his notions on man's existential values. It gives birth to a new sense of responsibility, which used to be strange to the Arab prisoner.

### Truth and Commitment

It was Søren Kierkegaard, who pioneered an existential concept of commitment. Kierkegaard, as a scholar of theology, believed that a human being becomes an individual through the commitment, calculated religious and ethical preferences. He emphasizes that ethical commitments link man to God and consequently, he gives the paramount importance to the religious faith. Indeed, he means to dig out truth through the different filters of values. As Robinson (2006) asserts:

For Kierkegaard discovering the truth is not just about finding out how things are. It's more like making a commitment and taking specific kinds of action. Philosophy has to be more than just a calm search for objective truth.

Individual human beings find themselves in a state of a paradox (a crisis that needs to be resolved) and hope to find a "truth" (a resolution of the crisis, after making a commitment to particular kind of action). (34)

In Camus' *The Guest*, we see two kinds of commitments of responsibility; one is practiced by Balducci, the gendarme on mission, and the other one is by Daru, the schoolmaster. When the gendarme asks the school master to accept the responsibility of handing over the Arab prisoner to Tinguet police headquarters, it shows his legal commitment and responsibility to complete his entrusted mission. Daru, the schoolmaster, eventually accepts the responsibility, but his acceptance is based on the both legal and ethical commitments. He treats the Arab warmly as his guest, which shows his ethical commitment to every individual as an *exception*. As the times pass by, his ethical commitments surpass the legal commitment. He, very courageously and adamantly tells the gendarme that he will not hand over the Arab prisoner to the police headquarters, though he is faced the discontent and almost fury of the gendarme, but still he stands firmly on his determined decision. The following text gives a vivid picture of different commitments and responsibilities in *The Guest*:

But the kettle was singing on the stove. He served Balducci more tea hesitated, then served the Arab again, who, a second time, drank avidly his raised arms made the jellaba fall open and the schoolmaster saw his thin, muscular chest. "Thanks, kid," Balducci said. "And now, I'm off." He got up and went toward the Arab, taking a small rope from his pocket. "What are you doing?" Daru asked dryly. Balducci, disconcerted, showed him the rope. "Don't bother." The old gendarme hesitated. "It's up to you. Of course, you are armed?" "I have my shotgun." "Where?" "In the trunk." "You ought to have it near your bed." "Why? I have nothing to fear." "You're crazy, son. If there's an uprising, no one is safe, we're all in the same boat." "I'll defend myself. I'll have time to see them coming." Balducci began to laugh, then suddenly the mustache covered the white teeth. "You'll have time? O.K. That's just what I was saying. You have always been a little cracked. That's why I like you, my son was like that." At the same time he took out his revolver and put it on the desk. "Keep it; I don't need two weapons from here to El Aneur."

The revolver shone against the black paint of the table. When the gendarme turned toward him, the schoolmaster caught the smell of leather and horseflesh. "Listen, Balducci," Daru said suddenly, "every bit of this disgusts me, and first of all your fellow here. But I won't hand him over. Fight, yes, if I have to. But not that." The old gendarme stood in front of him and looked at him severely. "You're being a fool," he said slowly. "I don't like it either. You don't get used to putting a rope on a man even after years of it, and you're even ashamed, yes, ashamed. But you can't let them have their way." "I won't hand him over," Daru said again. "It's an order, son, and I repeat it." "That's right. Repeat to them what I've said to you: I won't hand him over." Balducci made a visible effort to reflect. He looked at the Arab and at Daru. At last he decided. "No, I won't tell them anything. If you want to drop us, go ahead. I'll not denounce you. I have an order to deliver the prisoner and I'm doing so. And now you'll just sign this paper for me." "There's no need. I'll not deny that you left him with me." "Don't be mean with me. I know you'll tell the truth. You're from hereabouts and you are a man. But you must sign, that's the rule." Daru opened his drawer, took out a little square bottle of purple ink, the red wooden penholder with the "sergeant-major" pen he used for making models of penmanship, and signed. The gendarme carefully folded the paper and put it

into his wallet. Then he moved toward the door. "I'll see you off," Daru said. "No," said Balducci. "There's no use being polite. You insulted me." (12-14)

### **Guilt**

There is a close link between an existential notion of guilt and the concept of existential responsibility. You may feel the burden of guilt under different circumstances; especially, when one is stuck in the dilemma of the legal and the socio-ethical responsibilities. Indeed, the sense of guilt may be the outcome of one's torturing internal or external conflicts. According to Hooti & Habibi (2011):

Guilt can be interpreted differently in different contexts and circumstances. When one's conscience cannot put up with the burden of a wrong deed, this sad and tormenting weight which does not leave the conscience in peace can be called the sense of guilt that one is undergoing. But again it might be interpreted further, the sense of guilt may show up when one blames himself for doing something wrong, but sometimes you feel the guilt without having a direct link with any wrongdoings, for instance, if a member of your family commits a crime, you feel guilty at being a part of such a family, or sometimes it happens that your family members keep on looking at you as a criminal, while you do not have such a feeling about yourself, here again you start feeling guilty at being a member of such a family, which has created a sense of non-belonging in you. This sense of guilt can be more colorful and heart lacerating when it is mingled with shame. (11)

Camus' in his *The Guest*, displays the internal conflict, which pokes the schoolmasters' conscience whether to hand over the Arab prisoner or not. Finally, he comes to the conclusion not to decide about the Arab's impending destiny. This decision frees him from the shackles of the burden of guilt.

It also gives a clear picture of the internal conflict, which torments the Arab prisoner's conscience, how to show justice on the given choices by the schoolmaster. He is faced with a challenging self-conflict. This self-conflict creates a major sense of guilt in him. Hence, he tries to release himself from the torturing burden of guilt by giving birth to a conscientious and honest sense of responsibility. The following text may give a clear and challenging panorama of the whole issue:

Daru surveyed the two directions. There was nothing but the sky on the horizon. Not a man could be seen. He turned toward the Arab, who was looking at him blankly. Daru held out the package to him. "Take it," he said. "There are dates, bread, and sugar. You can hold out for two days. Here are a thousand francs too." The Arab took the package and the money but kept his full hands at chest level as if he didn't know what to do with what was being given him. "Now look," the schoolmaster said as he pointed in the direction of the east, "there's the way to Tinguit. You have a two-hour walk. At Tinguit you'll find the administration and the police. They are expecting you." The Arab looked toward the east, still holding the package and the money against his chest. Daru took his elbow and turned him rather roughly toward the south. At the foot of the height on which they stood could be seen a faint path. "That's the trail across the plateau. In a day's walk from here you'll find pasturelands and the first nomads. They'll take you in and shelter you according to their law." The Arab had now turned toward Daru and a sort of panic was visible in his expression. "Listen," he said. Daru shook his head: "No, be quiet. Now I'm leaving you." He turned his back on him, took two long steps in the direction of the school, looking hesitantly at the motionless Arab and started off again. For a few minutes he heard nothing but his own step resounding on the cold ground and did not turn his head. A moment later however he turned around. The Arab was still there on the edge of the hill his arms hanging now, and he was looking at the schoolmaster. Daru felt something rise in his throat. But he swore with impatience, waved vaguely, and started off again. He had already gone some distance when he again stopped and looked. There was no longer anyone on the hill.

Daru hesitated. The sun was now rather high in the sky and was beginning to beat down on his head. The schoolmaster retraced his steps at first somewhat uncertainly then with decision. When he reached the little hill he was bathed in sweat. He climbed it as fast as he could and stopped. Out of breath at the top. The rock-fields to the south stood out sharply against the blue sky but on the plain to the east a steamy heat was already rising. And in that slight haze Daru with heavy heart made out the Arab walking slowly on the road to prison. (28-29)

### **Conclusion**

This study was an attempt to show the significantly important impact of the sense of responsibility. It tried to portray the veiled layers of valuing the ethically and socially constructive role of responsibility and commitment. The

study managed to show the high ethical and social understanding of Daru, the schoolmaster, who very aptly recognized the importance of the Arab prisoner as an exception, and did not try to treat him as a criminal. Indeed, this unexpectedly altruistic mode of communication, which the schoolmaster chose to reciprocate with the Arab detainee led to a mental renaissance in the Arab's world of existence. The paper looked at the issue of responsibility from an existential outlook and strived to open a new window to the existential world of responsibility. The study reached its closing mode by the following comments of Judt on Albert Camus:

What Camus really wished to do-or have the freedom to do if he so chose-was condemn the condemnable without resort to balance or counter reference, to invoke absolute standards and measures of morality, justice, and freedom whenever it was appropriate to do so, without casting fearful glances behind him to see if his line of moral retreat was covered. He had long known this, but as he confessed to his *Carnets* on March 4, 1950, "it is only belatedly that one has the courage of one's understanding." (1998:117)

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