



Understanding Errors: Withholding Communication in Albert Camus's *Misunderstanding* or
Le Malentendu

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How concealing and divulging verities can affect life and death is evidenced in Albert Camus's play *Misunderstanding* or *Le Malentendu*. The play's tragedy lies in its premise of holding back critical information regarding Jan's identity. Several critics have likened the play to the tradition of the Greek tragedy. There have also been views that underline that the women in the play have gone through more misery in life than Jan. This paper considers how the play, as a model of the absurd, captures the scheme of lack of communication, as a *raison d'être* for the bizarre turn of events wherein "it is not the world but the human condition that is absurd" (MacBride 5).

M. H. Abrams defines absurd literature as "the sense that the human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd" (1). Therefore, we find that in Albert Camus works the spotlight are the circumstances in which human beings are enmeshed. M. H. Abrams also points that such works in literature emanated after World War II in France "as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and traditional literature" (1). Historically wars

have influenced both art and writing. The trauma and depression associated with battles and deaths result in deeper analysis of philosophy. We find Albert Camus works confirm to this idea of human condition that is entrenched in a world that endures anguish. In the play *Misunderstanding* or *Le Malentendu`* (in French), murder as a means to garner pecuniary blessings is tormenting and monstrous. It raises the curiosity of the readers/audience with regards to the need for such a horrendous act. The reason for such inquisitiveness on the part of the readers/audience is the availability of so many other ‘normal’ means of livelihood. Yet the selection of butchering for sustenance is revolting. In such a context, slaughter for income appears deviant, anomalous, redundant and irrational. The theme therefore is not only attention-grabbing but also worth investigating for the philosophy of human existence that it presents for examination. The situation can be paralleled with contemporary instances where people resort to theft and murder for money. Hence, this manner of life is not ingenuous. The ultimate consequence of such operations can be legal action and death by law. Yet there are who people find this mode of living shrewd, effortless and attractive.

The twirl in *Le Malentendu`* is the obscuring of Jan’s identity from his mother and sister—his rationale being to decipher the kind of life they had been leading in his absence. He assumes that he would be able to actualize their dreams of happiness that perhaps may have eluded them owing to lack of assistance from any quarter. Hardly does he know that he was being ensnared into the trap of death that had been the fate of so many other human beings prior to him—people who had unwittingly and innocently died at the hands of his mother and sister. The objective of the whole process of murder was the provision of money to both of them who hadn’t found any other satisfactory, rather, an easy means to survive. The immediate inquisitiveness and question that originates from the play is ‘what could/would have been’ had Jan revealed his true self to the two women who he was visiting after decades. Nevertheless, if he had, it would have killed the absurdity of the play and would in fact have been an oddity in the specific design of the theatre of the absurd. It is the twists and turns in *Le Malentendu`* that provide moments of absurdity and illuminate Camus’s philosophy of human existence, anguish and sense of desperation.

The crux of the plot is the surprise that Jan wants to play on his mother and sister who he hasn’t met for over twenty years. Both of them run a lodge to survive. When Jan returns to meet

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them to unearth their circumstances and what would make them happy, all he encounters is strangeness in the way they communicate with him. He finds talking to his sister Martha peculiar and in fact openly says "I find your choice of words very strange" (29). It would do well to quote a few conversations that the brother and sister have:

MARTHA: Who could ask for more, in a hotel? (She opens the door.)

JAN: Well, I suppose I should be pleased. Delighted, in fact. But you must forgive me if I say that I find it all very strange. Strange people, strange terms, and a very strange way of talking. Not the kind of things to make you feel at home.

MARTHA Perhaps not. But what can you expect, when you insist on behaving in such a strange way yourself? (30)

It is 'strangeness' that imparts coldness as well as seeming unresponsiveness to the behaviour of Martha. Though she appears to be actively orchestrating murder initially, towards the end she is seen as a victim who is denied love and care all her entire life. The feeling of victimization on the part of characters appears in all the plays and novels of Albert Camus since victimization underlines some sort of persecution to the self. Damage to one's consciousness and conscience lead the characters to introspect on their life and being. There is injustice of some nature that is both inexplicable fully and complicated to fight against. There are odds that appear irrational but inevitable. It is this illogicality that emerges as a burden that the characters carry with them through their peregrinations in life. Combating them is problematical because they seem unfathomable and unsolvable. However, the characters continue skirmishing with them atleast in terms of arguments and philosophical juggling since the essence of life is to go on. For those who find it impossible to carry on with such encumbrances, suicide is the easiest option and decision and that is what the mother of Jan resorts to since she becomes and feels purposeless; and all her aspirations have died down.

What Jan doesn't discover is that both his mother and sister have become criminals in order to earn their livelihood. They spike the tea that they serve to their customers, carry them to

the river nearby at night when they lose consciousness and fling them into the waters. Their comatose state prevents them from struggling to stay alive and they are taken to the bottom of the river to die. This had been going on for several years. Of course, their murdering Jan happens out of their failure to recognize him. Jan on the other hand, withholds this piece of information despite the insistence of his wife to let the mother and sister know his true identity. This lack of communication leads to his fatal death, the same way, customers in the past had been encountering. The justification that the mother and sister seek consolation in is their belief that they are actually relieving their customers of their agonizing lives which is far more excruciating than the process of dying. Their lack of remorse is on account of the belief that life is more vindictive than death. Before killing Jan, they wait for the water in the river to rise and the mother says:

MOTHER: Yes. I don't I mind waiting. It's good to have a rest. We've got a long night ahead of us, carrying that body all along the road, down to the river. It would be bad enough even if I wasn't tired. As it is, I can't remember when I didn't feel this way. My old blood has nothing left to give. That's the real trouble. (She is swaying to and fro on the chair, as if half asleep.) While all the time his mind's at rest. Fast asleep, and finished with the world. No more worries. He'll slip without knowing from a sleep filled with shadows to a sleep free from dreams. No struggle for him. Not like the rest of us. He's spared that torment. He'll just sleep on, with no interruption. Sleep and death. He won't know the difference. (35)

It is this conviction that they use to validate their criminal activities. For both of them, this is their last murder—a murder that changes the lives of all the three women, that is, the mother, Martha and Maria (Jan's wife) forever. Their authenticity of their collaboration is revealed after they realize the identity of Jan. French dramatist, Eugene Ionesco states "People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision" (qtd in Abrams 2). We find this sense of contempt as well as mockery on life and death in some of the dialogues between the mother and the daughter. There is "derision" (qtd in Abrams 2) in Jan's innocent instance of occluding his identity from his mother and sister.

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The mother, who is already fatigued with the way they have been living, is driven to kill herself because in her own words “when a mother fails to know her son, her function in this life has come to an end” (40). It is this moment that makes the mother feel the vacuum in her life and that the several murders have actually done her no good. The moment of realization is so intense that she even feels that her love for her son was stronger in comparison with her love for her daughter. To Martha’s question “What of a mother's love for her daughter?” (40); the mother clearly states, “I don't want to hurt you at this moment, Martha, but the truth is that it's not the same thing. It's much less strong. How could I have strayed so far from the love of my own son?” (40). It is interesting to note that the son had left both of them to fend for themselves and with no sense of responsibility. Nevertheless, this actuality has no consequence on the mother’s love for Jan. No amount of reasoning and reckoning on the part of Martha are able to dissuade her from suicide. It is this point of vacuity and nothingness that animates the theatre of the absurd. The conflict between life and death seem settled. Both are placed side-by-side. Choosing death seems easier as compared with life. According to Ronald D Srigley:

The greater reality in which the absurd man lives is not passive –it acts on him.... The absurd man does not cause these movements, nor can he control them. They strike, amaze, and alarm him, leaving his “reason” for the moment “impotent” to understand their meaning.... The world then seems “dense”, “strange”, “inhuman”, perhaps even “more remote than a lost paradise”.... As disturbing as such experiences may be, the absurd man again resists the temptation, common among existentialists, to understand them as signifying a final confrontation with nothingness. It is not nothingness that the absurd man encounters through the collapse of his ideas but the world itself. (27)

Of all the characters, it is Martha who emerges with plenty of reasoning for the death of Jan. She appears impersonal and indifferent to all the murders that she gives effect to. Her murder of her brother is no different than the ones she has previously committed. She perceives herself as the victim—the one who hasn’t lived life. All the victims on the other hand have lived life to the fullest. She dreams of living in a utopian land but has never been able to escape the bleak reality

of the world. As Brent Slesman points out “Out of this tension between the way one desires the world to appear and the harsh truth of human existence emerges the metaphor of the absurd” (1).

Her brother, on the other hand, had experienced life closely. His death hadn't brought extreme change. Perhaps, it had got him closer to peace than life had to offer to him. She on the other hand would never be happy. She hadn't received true love from anywhere and perhaps would never since she found all expressions of love and kindness, repulsive. There is no clear suggestion of remorse on her part though. Perhaps the murders she committed in her life had affected her psyche in a manner as to harden her. However, the focus is her feeling of lovelessness in her life. Her world is limited to her mother whose departure splinters her conception of life. Her emotional distance that stands out in the beginning gyrates at the end when she realizes that her mother who had been her partner in killing had abandoned her to herself. Surprisingly she succumbs to intense emotional appeal to her mother to help her continue her faith in living and not ditch her to exist by herself. Both of them have been accomplices to cold blooded murders. However, Martha grasps that she had been alone all the while, all her life in all her crimes. Her mother has no qualms about leaving her. It would be pertinent to take note of E. Freeman who states “the tragedy is less that of Jan than of his mother, sister and wife (59). This remark draws attention to the fact that the women have been denied happiness. The emphasis is more on the fate of women than Jan. In the case of the mother and sister, the denial of basics of sustenance leads them to contrive a tempestuous mode of livelihood that eventually consumes their closest relation. Maria's condition is extremely tragic for she wanted Jan to convey his identity to his mother and sister but he doesn't despite all her persuasion. She feels distressed at his stubbornness to screen his identity temporarily but eventually gives in to his conviction that he will be able to discover the circumstances of his mother and sister. It is almost like an intuition for Maria. She is not comfortable with her husband's idea of withholding communication but is impelled by the situation. Her only consolation is the fact that the secret would span a period of just a night. But it turns out that her inkling about the impending doom was right.

According to Jenn McKee “Camus, with this play and others, tries hard to create a modern Greek tragedy.... But many critics condemn this play...as unproducable—a play that should be read, not performed” (68). This view is reminiscent of the plays of Bernard Shaw that are generally perceived as fit for reading and intellect rather than performance. Of course, this

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view is worth contending. It is true that the tragic element in the play is conspicuous but restricting or confining it to reading alone would be reducing its periphery. Theatre expands the ambit of imagination as well as interpretation. The effect of the visual is competition to imagination. Enactment creates layers to the plot in terms of delectability. For instance, sound effects, like that of the waters, before Martha and the mother carry their prey's body, would heighten the maliciousness of the incident and subsequently the seriousness of the lack of communication. Of course, the sound of the waters can be imagined. Nevertheless, seeing and hearing it live would improve the effect of imagination.

It would be too reductive to assume that it is merely the lack of communication that contributes to the absurdity of the plot. The play has many facets to it. Communication or rather the lack/inadequacy of it has a major role to contribute to the philosophy of human existence, condition and desperation. Here it would be relatable to refer to Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* where he states: "A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity" (8-9). We find that Martha's situation confirms to this view. She is perpetually in a dreamland fancying happiness and peace that constantly evades her. She believes that her future is bright and that her last murder would be succeeded by cheerfulness and tranquility but she finds that her dream is violently torn after her mother decided to kill herself.

In her effort to logically convince her mother, there is a sense of dissociation when Martha suggests that their aim is to procure money from the diabolical act of murder. It doesn't make a difference if it is her brother or somebody else. Also that he was never present when they needed him. He left them to themselves. There is an insinuation that perhaps Martha knew of Jan's identity. The mother remarks in one context "You knew who he was!" (42). The implication is that the murder of her Jan was avertable. Perhaps, Martha had veiled the secret from the mother because for her the connection made no difference. Her aspiration was to

eventually lead life in a utopian land that had been hitherto denied to her by life even if it meant murder of her own brother.

MARTHA (raising her head abruptly) No! I had no idea. My memory had nothing to play with. It was bound to be like that. You said so yourself: the world isn't reasonable. But you were right to ask. Because if I had known who he was, it would have made no difference. I feel sure of that now.

MOTHER I'd like to think that isn't true. There must be limits, even for murderers. (42)

The drawing of line “even for murderers” (42) is only in the instance of Jan, obviously because of the relationship he has with the mother. If it had been somebody else in place of Jan, the event would have made no difference or impact on the mother. In the first place, the manner in which the two women had been carrying out the murders had crossed all boundaries of humanity. However, the awareness of imposing confines on the method of murder happens only in the case of Jan. It is here that Martha highlights that their ulterior motive is to make money and not draw lines or choose their prey. The feeling of agony and desperation is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* where one of the character remarks “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful” (xiv). Nevertheless, in *Le Malentendu*, the character of Jan comes and goes and creates awfulness by obscuring his identity. Therefore, comparatively there is a paradox in the situations in the two dramas. French dramatist, Eugene Ionesco states “People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision” (qtd in Abrams 2). We find this sense of contempt as well as mockery on life and death in some of the dialogues between the mother and the daughter. There is “derision” (qtd in Abrams 2) in Jan's innocent instance of occluding his identity from his mother and sister.

In Martha's evocative appeal, she attempts to bring to the fore the fact that it was pointless to understand errors. The lack of communication that led to the catastrophic episode had no substance in their lives because they had been starved of both love and money. What was essential for them was to focus only their intent of survival which anyway held no water. Her views border on irrationality. The sense of disconnection is apparent and also understandable. However, it is difficult to sympathize with her since the atrociousness of the several murders is unspeakable. One wonders as to how and why the mother and the daughter did not choose a normal means of sustenance. Perhaps if the mother or the daughter had been a

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little more sensitive to the immense suffering they were causing to the families of the bereaved, they would have ceased to lead a life of murder. The only person with whom the audience/reader is able to sympathize with is Maria who also becomes a victim for no fault of hers. Though she tries to convince her husband to communicate his being their relative, he disregards her; as if he was fated to die a fatal death. It is this existence of unjoined dots in the play that create climactic moments of absurdity delineating how the deficiency of communication leads to an irreversible tragedy.

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