Kamel Daoud's 'The Meursault Investigation' retells Camus' 'The Stranger' from Arab viewpoint

By Kamel Daoud
Other Press. 143 pp. $14.95

Reviewed by
Glenn C. Altschuler

Carrying the absurd on his back and in the bowels of his land, Harun Uld el-Assas, the narrator of Kamel Daoud's first novel, wants justice.

In 1942, Meursault, a French Algerian, killed Harun's brother, "the way one kills time, by strolling around aimlessly." The dead man's name was Musa, but he was fated to remain "the Arab" forever, because Meursault, like so many colonialists, could give or take away names from "whatever he appropriates."

As perhaps you have already guessed, this novel takes on the events of Albert Camus' novel 'The Stranger' - in which a Frenchman kills an Arab man for little apparent reason - from the Arab viewpoint. First published in Algeria in 2013, 'The Meursault Investigation' retells Camus' novel as though it were a true story, in a confessional monologue addressed to a Frenchman in a bar in Oran (which suggests the setting of another Camus novel, 'The Fall'). Quirky - and compelling - it is a meditation by turns passionate, cynical, and angry on power, freedom, and the indifference of the universe.

Harun is neither a collaborator nor an Islamist. A stranger in his own country, he rebukes an imam who tries to pray for him. What does his God "matter to me," he yells at the top of his lungs, "when we're all elected by the same fate?" (These passages resulted in a Facebook fatwa being issued against Kamel Daoud.)
Kamel Daoud's 'Mersault Investigation' retells Camus' 'Stranger' from Ar...

Harun begins to realize how much he resembles Meursault. He, too, has a complicated relationship with his mother. He, too, has killed someone - a "Frenchman" - not out of bravery or calculation but "because of the general torpor I found myself in." And, like Meursault, he became "nearly stunned by the idea of my own life, the proof of it, its temperature, in contrast with the proof of death, just two meters away from me."

Like Meursault of The Stranger, Harun finds love inexplicable, "a heavenly beast that scares the hell out of me." But Harun is warmer, more passionate, and in the end more life-affirming than the millions of Meursaults he sees in Algiers.

Harun is tempted to climb a prayer tower, belt out invective and sacrilege, list his impieties, "and cry out that I'm free, that God is a question, not the answer, and that I want to meet him alone, at my death as at my birth."

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