Misrepresentation of Algerians: Contrapuntal Reading of Albert Camus "*The Guest*"

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Abstract

This study analyzes Albert Camus's short story *The Guest* using both postcolonial theory and contrapuntal reading to reveal its colonial dimensions. Postcolonial theory analyzes texts written during colonial periods, especially from the 18th and 19th centuries, to expose concealed narratives of imperialism. This study examines how the depiction of the Arab prisoner in *The Guest* transforms the colonized image and assesses whether the story supports the French civilizing mission in Algeria. The research shows that the narrative presents Arabs as passive subjects who lack control over their destiny. It romanticizes French colonial endeavors through Daru's character, who expresses sympathy towards the Algerians but remains integrated within colonial frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that, through the humanization of the colonizer, the text maintains a Eurocentric viewpoint, which strengthens colonial power structures instead of questioning them.

Keywords: postcolonial theory, contrapuntal reading, Colonialism, French Algeria, Albert Camus, *The Guest*, representation of Arabs, colonial discourse

1. Introduction

The method of contrapuntal reading critically analyzes colonial texts through simultaneous consideration of both the colonizer and the colonized. According to Said (1994), contrapuntal reading requires the analysis of both imperialistic actions and their opposition to achieve a deeper understanding of texts that traditionally ignored colonial experiences (p. 79). The method reveals how literature conceals imperial forces through its narratives, as seen in L'Etranger, which downplays the French colonial presence in Algeria.

By reading colonial and postcolonial literature contrapuntally, researchers study both colonizer and colonized perspectives together, revealing their interconnected yet frequently opposing histories. Said's (1994) analysis reveals that the traditional Western literary canon has consistently incorporated imperialistic beliefs that suppress or ignore colonized groups' viewpoints. The contrapuntal analysis allows critical re-examination of historical texts so that scholars can reveal their hidden colonial narratives.

Postcolonial theory represents an academic discipline that examines how European colonial rule affected political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social aspects between the 18th and 20th centuries. According to Said (1978) and Fanon (1963), colonialism extracted resources while creating enduring social and economic damage in colonized areas. The theory includes multiple perspectives that demonstrate how structural inequalities, established by imperial powers, created colonial legacies of famine, disease, and poverty.

Colonial powers explained their expansionist policies by promoting colonization as a civilizing mission instead of an act of domination. According to Said (1978), European imperialism defended colonial ambitions by claiming it had a moral responsibility to civilize and educate indigenous populations. France saw Algeria as a core component of its national identity, treating it not as a colony but as an extension of France itself. Césaire (1992) counters the civilizing narrative by showing that colonialism was purely economic exploitation underpinned by a racial hierarchy. The French administration did not predict Algerian resistance because it believed that the indigenous population would not fight for independence.

1.1 The Statement of the Problem

This study applies postcolonial theory and contrapuntal reading to analyze *The Guest*, a short story by the French writer Albert Camus. According to Said (1994), contrapuntal reading enables the discovery of colonial narratives that assert imperial power and suppress native voices. Between 1954 and 1962, during the Algerian War of Independence, the narrative became an important anti-colonial work that challenged French control.

The study's questions connect directly to the broader discourse of colonial representation in literature. This research aims to demonstrate two key points. First, it argues that the imperial references in *The Guest* reinforce the colonizer's authority by presenting a Eurocentric narrative that marginalizes indigenous voices. Second, the portrayal of the Algerian people in the story systematically silences them, denying them agency and reinforcing colonial hierarchies. The narrator's decision to exclude the Arab prisoner's voice aligns with the broader tendency of colonial literature to depict the colonized as passive subjects rather than active historical agents.

A contrapuntal reading of any literary text requires considering two perspectives: the colonizer and the colonized. An independent interpretation of the colonization narrative demands careful analysis of its historical context and a perspective that primarily emphasizes conquest as a means to civilize the so-called "barbarians."

2. Literature Review

Roberts (2008) states that "'The Guest' focuses on the ethical dilemmas faced by Daru, a school teacher in Algeria, and the two visitors he receives one day: Balducci, a gendarme, and an unnamed Arab prisoner" (p. 529). He further confirms that "'The Guest' prompts us to keep thinking about the characters long after we have read the story, and to return to them repeatedly to understand their thoughts, feelings, and actions better. In doing so, we open up opportunities to explore our pedagogical decisions, commitments, and relationships in a fresh light. For this reason, 'The Guest' can be seen as a story worthy of continuing engagement by educationists" (p. 542).

On the other hand, Greenlee (1978) explains that "Early analyses of Camus' tale, 'The Guest,' generally reflect the political tensions that rent Algeria in the 1950s" (p. 126). He further notes, "Since these tensions have disappeared, we can read the tale as a personal drama recounting the moral dilemma of its narrator-protagonist. Scrutiny of his censored account reveals his retreat from an action which would compromise his innocence. The story registers the author's awareness of the ambiguities of moral decision and testifies to the refinement of his thought" (p. 126).

Griem (1993) confirms that "A close study of the motives given for the murder in Albert Camus's 'The Guest' may shed new light on the character of the prisoner" (p. 95). He further explains, "One of the police officers' first mention of motive is vague and uncertain, alerting the reader to look for further clues. Further inquiry finds the prisoner claiming he murdered his cousin because the cousin 'ran away.' Suppose the prisoner's act of murder and his later decision to face his trial are seen within an Islamic context. In that case, the story becomes one of two men aligned in an existentialist dilemma—the teacher who allows the prisoner to go free, and the prisoner himself, who chooses to face his accusers with no hope of freedom" (p. 1).

Zidan and Al-Ghalith (2020) argue that Bowles's narrative "implies that imperialism has led to the destruction of the world. However, it fails to imagine a counter-narrative that stems from the local inhabitants" (p. 1).

3. Method

Postcolonial theory analyzes the historical period that succeeded colonial rule throughout different global regions. With the conclusion of European colonization in many parts of the world, researchers now use postcolonial theory to analyze historical texts from that period. Postcolonial theory has shown considerable interest in literary works from the colonial era, especially those written between the 18th and 19th centuries (Fanon, 1963). In this article, the author uses this framework to examine Albert Camus' short story *The Guest*, which reveals hidden colonial elements in the text. *"The Guest" (L'Hôte)* appears as one of six short stories in Camus's 1957 collection *L'Exil et le Royaume,* which examines themes of exile, alienation, and moral ambiguity. Analysis of the historical background demonstrates how Camus portrayed the struggles between colonizers and their colonized subjects.

Alkhatib (2024) demonstrates that resistance literature, including Mahmoud Darwish's writings, enables the oppressed to regain their voices and confront prevailing colonial discourses. This work fits within the postcolonial framework used in this study, which seeks to reveal how *The Guest* reinforces colonial narratives while silencing the voices and autonomy of indigenous people.

4. Discussion

The Guest by Albert Camus encapsulates the broader narrative of colonization in Algeria, illustrating the colonizer's justification for his actions by claiming he invaded the land for the benefit of its people. The story revolves around the supposed civilizing mission of a French school teacher, Daru, who is depicted as being deeply involved in assisting the Algerian people in the occupied territory. Camus constructs a fixed portrayal of the only Arab character in the story, depicting him as a criminal who murdered his cousin in cold blood. The Arab Algerian man is shown as a passive follower, restrained and walking behind Balducci. The narrative discourse follows an imperialist pattern that misrepresents Algerians by showing them as needing the colonizer's direction. According to Qutami (2022), museums and mass media act as oppressive devices which maintain colonial ideologies through normalized discrimination against Arabs. The portrayal of the Arab prisoner in *The Guest* uses a Eurocentric perspective that strips him of his agency and turns him into a passive character, which supports the colonizer's rationale for control.

The Guest is set in Algeria's remote plateau during the Algerian Revolution (1954–1962), which ultimately led to the country's independence. This revolution posed significant challenges for the French authorities, who had not anticipated such a large-scale uprising in Algeria (Fanon, 1963).

The three main characters in this story are Daru, the French schoolmaster; Balducci, the French gendarme; and the Arab prisoner. The story begins with Daru, the protagonist, standing atop the hill where his schoolhouse is located, watching two men approaching the plateau. Daru recognizes the man on horseback as Balducci, a French police officer. Behind him, he notices an Arab prisoner, bound and walking on foot. The weather is freezing and has been snowing for over three days. In response, Daru immediately moves to heat the room to comfort the newcomers. Camus (1957) describes the harsh weather conditions in detail, explaining how "snow had suddenly fallen in mid-October after eight months of drought" (p. 1). The illustration shows how drought led to widespread livestock deaths while highlighting the struggle of local residents.

The timeframe of this short story covers the years from 1954 to 1962, which overlaps with the beginning of the Algerian Revolution. French officials described this period as violent and rebellious since they believed they had exhausted all efforts to civilize Algeria's indigenous population. After more than 100 years of colonial rule, the Algerian people found armed resistance to be their only option to overcome their subjugation and gain independence (Fanon, 1963).

Fanon (1963) confirms, "The potentiality of violence derives from the colonial context which the violent act seeks to uproot. He further explains, “[d]ecolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature…[t]heir first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together – that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler – was carried on by dint of an incredible array of bayonets and cannons” (p. 36).

Fanon argues that "because colonialism is both created and sustained by violence, it can be destroyed only by violence. For Fanon, violence serves a double purpose. First, it destroys the colonial system in the only possible way when just one side holds all the power and the weapons. Second, violence seems to have an important psychological purpose" (Quinn, 2017, p. 10).

The guns and revolvers used by Daru and Balducci symbolize the ever-present potential for violence. By wielding these weapons, the French send a clear message that they are prepared to resort to violence whenever they perceive a threat in Algeria. As a result, the possibility of genuine friendship between the colonized and the colonizer remains unattainable. Furthermore, the underlying tension in their relationship is perpetual and irreconcilable. Camus (1957) attempts in this story to portray the French colonial mission in a positive light by humanizing his protagonist, Daru. He presents an alternative perspective of the colonizer—one that exhibits compassion toward the Arab prisoner and refuses to treat him as a mere criminal. However, the text also highlights Daru’s inner turmoil, revealing the fears and anxieties he experiences throughout the night he spends with the Arab prisoner. Deep down, Daru remains distrustful of the Arabs, reflecting the inherent nature of colonialism, which is built on a fundamental distrust of the colonized. The reference to the colony in this text takes on a distinct form, as the narrator depicts the years before the revolution as peaceful and prosperous in contrast to the chaos of the revolutionary period. Moreover, Fanon (1963) asserts, "the colonialist declares the native to be a corrosive element…distorting everything which involves aesthetic or morals an unconscious incurable instrument of blind force" (p. xxv). In this context, the French authorities perceive the revolution in Algeria as an overwhelming force that threatens to dismantle everything.

In this story, Daru serves as both a schoolmaster and a tool of French colonial administration, working to pacify the local population by distributing food and water during periods of drought while also educating their children. Camus (1957) describes the region’s harsh conditions, stating, "Snow had suddenly fallen in mid-October after eight months of drought without the transition of rain, and the twenty pupils, more or less, who lived in the villages scattered over the plateau had stopped coming" (p. 1).

As a schoolmaster, Daru’s role was to teach France’s geography rather than Algeria’s, ensuring that the new generation remained disconnected from their land's geography and history. Camus (1957) illustrates this in the classroom scene, describing how "He crossed the empty, frigid classroom. On the blackboard, the four rivers of France, drawn with four different coloured chalks, had been flowing toward their estuaries for the past three days" (p. 1). This depiction reinforces the colonizer’s objective of instilling the idea that Algeria is an extension of France and that students must be educated accordingly.

Daru regularly received wheat and food supplies to distribute to his pupils and their families. Camus (1957) highlights this in the narrative, stating, "Besides, he has enough to resist a siege, for the little room was cluttered with bags of wheat that the administration left as a stock to distribute to those of his pupils whose families had suffered from the drought. Actually, they had all been victims because they were all poor" (p. 1). This reflects the colonizers' attempt to present their mission as a humanitarian effort rather than a political strategy aimed at controlling the occupied land and its people.

Balducci, the French police officer, arrives at Daru’s house with the Arab prisoner, where Daru welcomes them into the heated room and begins preparing tea. As he observes the scene, Daru notices that the Arab prisoner’s hands are bound while Balducci rests on the couch. At that moment, Daru requests that Balducci untie the prisoner so that he can drink his tea.

Fanon (1963) explains the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, stating, "The colonized world is a world divided into two. The broader dividing line is represented by the barracks and the police stations. In the colonies, the official, legitimate agent, the spokesperson for the colonizer and the regime of oppression, is the police officer or the soldier" (p. 3). Therefore, Balducci represents the colonizer and the regime of oppression.

Balducci arrives with a specific mission: to transfer custody of the Arab prisoner to Daru, who is then expected to escort him to the police

station. Camus (1957) details Balducci's instructions, stating, "No. I'm going back to El Ameur. And you will deliver this fellow to Tinguit. He is expected at police headquarters" (p. 2).

Balducci delivers the order to Daru as a representative of the colonial authority, enforcing the regime's demands regardless of Daru's reluctance. In their dialogue, Camus (1957) illustrates this power dynamic, where Balducci insists, "No, son. Those are the orders." "The orders? I'm not . . ." Daru hesitated, not wanting to hurt the old Corsican. "I mean, that's not my job." "What! What's the meaning of that? In wartime people do all kinds of jobs." This exchange highlights how, under colonial rule, any settler may be forced to assume the role of an enforcer of the colonial system, especially when faced with a perceived threat from the colonized. Balducci continues, "O.K. But the orders exist, and they concern you too. Things are brewing, it appears. There is talk of a forthcoming revolt. We are mobilized, in a way." Daru insists he does not want to hand over the prisoner, but Balducci remains firm: "It's an order, son, and I repeat it" (Camus, 1957, p. 2).

This conversation reveals the hypocrisy of the colonizer, who seeks to present himself as humane and concerned for the colonized while simultaneously acting as an oppressor. The contradiction becomes evident in the exchange between Balducci and Daru: "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." (Camus, 1957, p. 2). The reader can perceive this hypocrisy through Balducci's actions—his attempt to tie the prisoner reinforces the colonial mindset that assumes the native is inherently untrustworthy, despite the colonizer's outward claims of fairness and justice.

As part of his duty as a French police officer, Balducci seeks to ensure that the Arab prisoner does not attack Daru or attempt to escape. This is why he initially tries to tie the prisoner before leaving and insists that Daru have a weapon for protection. The old gendarme hesitates: "It's up to you. Of course, you are armed?" "I have my shotgun." "Where?" "In the trunk." (Camus, 1957, p. 3). This exchange highlights the colonial paranoia that assumes the native is a constant threat, reinforcing the power imbalance between the colonizer and the colonized.

Fanon (1963) asserts in this context that "you don't disorganize a society, however primitive it may be, with such an agenda if you are not determined from the very start to smash every obstacle encountered. The colonized who have made up their minds to make such an agenda into a driving force have been prepared for violence from time immemorial. As soon as they are born, it is obvious to them that their cramped world riddled with taboos can only be challenged by out and out violence" (p. 3).

The conversation between Daru and Balducci reveals that the colonizer is primarily concerned with maintaining his presence in the colonized territory and is prepared to use violence if necessary. Camus (1957) highlights this tension through their exchange: "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." 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 Ameur" (p.3). This interaction underscores the underlying colonial anxiety—the fear that the native population will rise against their oppressors. The expectation that Daru must be armed reflects the deep-seated belief that violence is an inevitable tool for maintaining colonial control.

Césaire (1992) argues that "between the colonizer and colonized there is no human contact … but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver…" (p. 42).

When Daru asks Balducci about the crime the Arab prisoner committed, "After all," he said, turning around toward Balducci, "what did he do?" Before the gendarme responds, Daru asks, "Does he speak French?" Balducci answers, "No, not a word. We had been looking for him for a month, but they were hiding him. He killed his cousin." "A family squabble, I think one owned the other grain, it seems. It's not all clear. In short, he killed his cousin with a billhook. You know, like a sheep, kreeck!" Balducci makes the gesture of drawing a blade across his throat (Camus, 1957, p. 3). This depiction reinforces the colonizer's perception of Arabs as uncivilized. The narrative frames the Arab as a barbarian who kills his own family members without remorse, presenting him as a figure devoid of morality or emotion. This characterization aligns with colonial discourse, which seeks to justify domination by dehumanizing the colonized. Césaire (1992) critiques this colonial narrative, stating, "Colonization: bridgehead in a campaign to civilize barbarism, from which they may emerge at any moment the negation of civilization, pure and simple" (p. 40).

The tension between the colonized and the colonizer becomes especially evident throughout the night after Balducci leaves the plateau. Camus (1957) illustrates Daru's unease, noting that he "listened for a long time to the prisoner breathing, soundlessly, almost without moving, in the darkened room" (p. 4). The reader is left questioning the source of Daru's anxiety: Does he distrust the Arab prisoner, fearing an attack at any moment, as the colonial power structure suggests? Or is his unease reflective of a more profound moral hesitation that reveals an internal conflict about the colonial order?

Fanon (1963) explores this psychological burden on the colonizer, arguing that the colonial subject becomes trapped in an inescapable state of tension between domination and the fear of uprising. The narrative thus leaves room for interpretation: Is Daru's hesitation a product of colonial paranoia, or is Camus subtly portraying a humanized colonizer who sympathizes with his prisoner? Daru resists delivering the prisoner to the police headquarters as if attempting to prove that the colonizer possesses a sense of humanity and moral responsibility toward the colonized.

5. Conclusion

Postcolonial analysis coupled with contrapuntal reading shows how *The Guest* contains pervasive colonial discourse throughout its narrative. Imperial rule receives fictional validation in colonial literature through depictions of colonized people as lesser beings who require Western leadership. In *The Guest*, the Arab prisoner exhibits no agency and undergoes dehumanization as a passive entity who remains nameless and voiceless throughout the narrative. The depiction of the Arab prisoner as a "barbaric native" supports the European reasoning used to legitimize French colonial authority in Algeria.

The story depicts Daru as a French schoolmaster facing moral challenges because he is a colonizer who shows resistance to his designated role in the colonial hierarchy. The depiction of the colonizer in human terms ultimately hides the violent nature of colonialism. While Daru's hesitation to hand over the prisoner shows his sympathy, it fails to confront the structural realities of colonial oppression. The colonizer faces a moral challenge as he navigates between the imperial system that gives him power and the ethical contradictions it creates. Fanon (1963) and Césaire (1992) identify this contradiction as the crucial element of colonial rule, which enables oppressors to claim moral high ground while maintaining an exploitative structure.

The narrative portrays the colonial mission favorably through Daru's character, who acts as a kind teacher offering food and learning to the native people. The presentation reflects the colonial myth of the "civilizing mission" by framing occupation as legitimate through humanitarian pretenses. Postcolonial theorists such as Said (1994) and Fanon (1963) argue that colonial rule maintains a fundamental nature of violence and oppression despite any individual benevolent acts. Through its educational system, colonial powers enforced structural violence by making Algerian students learn French geographic lessons, which removed their native history and identity to create allegiance to their colonizers.

The Guest serves as an example of colonial literature's contradictions because it recognizes the difficulties of imperial control but does not question its basic principles. Camus creates a narrative that shows ethical virtue in colonizers while muting colonized voices, which strengthens colonial structures instead of breaking them down. By employing a contrapuntal reading approach, we can uncover concealed imperialist foundations, which demonstrate how literature functions to both criticize and support colonial power structures. The analysis demonstrates dual issues within the story: it inaccurately represents Algerians alongside upholding the Eurocentric noble colonizer myth.

The conclusions of this analysis extend past *The Guest*, demonstrating why colonial texts require postcolonial scrutiny. Literature has traditionally served as a fundamental force in constructing imperial narratives, a fact that requires examination if we intend to dismantle colonialism's persistent effects in both culture and academic thought.

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