

# Postcolonial-Feminist Reading of Albert Camus's "The Adulterous Wife"<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The perspectives of postcolonialism and feminism challenge the dominant views presented in Western literature. Their main objective is to scrutinize the effects of colonialism and imperialism on colonized individuals and analyze women's oppression in patriarchal societies. These approaches aim to reveal the power structures, ideologies, and representations that shape literary works. This project will delve into these themes as well. I argue that Janine is oppressed as a female, and that is her husband.

## POSTCOLONIALISM AND FEMINISM

Within feminist discourse, a subset of scholars specializes in analysing the complex intersection of various factors, such as gender, race, and class, in the experiences of women residing in postcolonial regions. These postcolonial feminists have taken issue with Western feminism for its tendency to be overly universal and ethnocentric. In response, they advocate for more diverse and inclusive forms of feminist theory and practice. In my own research, I have applied the principles of postcolonial feminism to investigate the impact of colonialism on Western culture. Specifically, I have conducted a thorough analysis of Albert Camus's 1957 short story "The Adulterous Wife," seeking to uncover how it reflects the legacy of colonialism in Western literature.

### Albert Camu's "The Adulterous Wife" as a postcolonial text

In 1957, "The Adulterous Wife," a short story by Albert Camus, was published in his collection titled "Exile and the Kingdom." The story explores several crucial literary, philosophical, and societal themes, including existentialism, adultery, lack of communication, feminism, and postcolonial perspectives. Camus sets the postcolonial backdrop by introducing a couple of French origin living in Algeria for work. Despite residing in an Arabian country, they failed to interact with the locals or learn their language. The couple, known as Pied-Noir, lived in Algeria during the European colonization of the Orient. Janine, the wife, and her husband Marcel, who is in Algeria for business, are adapting to a new life in the Middle East, albeit with some challenges.

The story revolves around "binary opposition," where opposing terms such as colonizer/colonized, occident/orient, and self/other are utilized. The colonizer establishes their dominance by treating the other as inferior, thereby distinguishing themselves as privileged. The story erases the other and depicts them as serving the colonizers without objection. Home.K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, also emphasizes the oppositional relationship between the dominant culture and the other. He believes that colonial conditions must be eradicated so that nations can relate to each other without contradiction and ambiguity. He further states that cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation. The bus stopped abruptly. The driver fired off a few words in that tongue she had heard all her life without understanding. "What's this?" asked Marcel. The driver, this time in French, said that sand must have clogged up the carburetor, and Marcel *cursed the country again* (My Italics 8).

This passage depicts a French couple who consider themselves superior to the Oriental culture in which they reside. They are focused on accumulating wealth and securing their own lives, and Marcel, in particular, expresses his disdain for the country and its people. This highlights the ongoing conflict between Eastern and Western cultures. Even the Eastern characters are referred to as "Arabs" without being given individual names, suggesting a lack of importance placed on their identities. The couple's names, Marcel and Janine, are living in Algeria and mixing with people they disdain only to gain money and increase their income. "She believed she had discovered his true passion, which was

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money, and she did not like this, without exactly knowing why" (Camus7). For almost all colonizers, the East is the place of economic gain and benefit.

Within his literature, Edward Said explores Michel Foucault's discourse on the misrepresentation of the Orient throughout history Said (1993) posits that the West has utilized this inaccurate image to dominate and reorganize the East. Additionally, he notes that this falsified portrayal of the Orient has been employed for colonial purposes. In the story, the characters symbolize stereotypical figures that personify Western beliefs and values toward the East. "Close the door!" Marcel shouted. The driver laughed, coming back toward the doors. Deliberately, he took some tools from under the dashboard, then, tiny in the fog, disappeared again toward the front of the bus without closing the door. Marcel sighed. "*You can be sure he has never seen an engine in his life.*" "Leave it be!" Janine said. (My Italics 8)

When the bus broke on their way, and the bus driver tried to fix the carburettor, Marcel sarcastically says to his wife that the driver has never seen an engine in his life, referring to the primitivity of the Arabs whom the colonizers always describe as backward and ignorant people. It is a scholarly axiom in the postcolonial theory that the Westerners considered themselves superior to the colonized, as described by Edward Said: "The relationship between the occident and orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony" (Said 5). The couple behaves with the Algerians according to this dogma that they are powerful and privileged over the uncivilized natives.

Janine, surrounded by faces that seemed carved from leather and bone, besieged by guttural cries, suddenly felt her exhaustion. "I'm going to the hotel," she said to Marcel, who was impatiently shouting at the driver. (11)

Marcel's superiority towards the Arabs prevents him from addressing them politely. He keeps shouting at the driver as an enslaved person, and in return, the driver accepts this humiliation and subjugation to Marcel as a non-Arab person. The colonized have internalized their feelings of inferiority and dealt with it unconsciously. "There is, in addition, the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over oriental backwardness" (Said 7). Even the story's setting is portrayed in a classical colonial way, which is the desert, camels, and the palms, i.e. the exotic atmosphere as always drawn in the European culture. "On the bare walls were paintings of camels and palm trees, drowned in a syrup of pink and violet" (Camus 12). The hatred is described not only by Marcel but even his wife Janine, who is full of unjustifiable agitation against the Arabs despite the fact that they served and treated them politely and silently without showing any traces of offense towards the Western aggression as symbolized by the couple. "She despised the stupid arrogance of this Arab and suddenly felt unhappy" (Camus 16).

The other dominant idea in the story is the feminist reflection, as depicted through the sterile relationship between the husband and wife. The introductory lines of the story indicate the sense of unhappiness experienced on the part of the wife who is sitting on the bus contemplating her middle-aged husband "Janine looked at her husband with tufts of graying hair sprouting on a low brow, a large nose, an uneven mouth; Marcel looked like a sulky faun" (Camus 1). The wife spent more than 20 years of marriage attempting to signify her existence linked to her husband's need for hers. Despite her devastation and unhappiness, Janine patiently embraced her role as a wife without thinking of taking action to change her life or gain her freedom. She accommodated herself in this style of life that lacked emotion and sensation, as described by the author. The couple used to practice their physical relationship in darkness.

For more than twenty years, every night like this, in his warmth, always the two of them, even ill, even traveling, as they were now'. Besides, what would she have done at home alone? No child! 'Wasn't that what she was lacking? She did not know. She followed Marcel, content to feel that someone needed her. The only joy he gave her was the knowledge that she was needed. He probably did not love her. Love, even hatred, did not have this closed face.

Nevertheless, what was its face? They made love at night, without seeing each other, groping in the dark. (Camus 21).

The submissive role of Janine might be due to many reasons, like "the social construction of gender" as described in feminist literary criticism. "It questions the long-standing, dominant, male, phallogocentric ideologies (which add up to a kind of male conspiracy), patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature (and critical evolution of literature)" (Cuddon 273). Women were compared to enslaved people in many contexts as they were used as tools for servitude for the patriarchal system. Marcel is using Janine as a means to his end, even in bed. He sleeps with her to fulfill his sexual desire without showing her any kind of passion or intimacy. As a result, she had a sensual desire towards the French soldier whom she met in the bus who looked handsome, young, and packed with vitality compared to her husband. He flatters her, and she accepts this flattery as a woman. She wanted to feel her feminine aspect as a desirable and attractive woman.

Janine suddenly felt that someone was looking at her and turned toward the bench that was her extension across the aisle. He was not an Arab, and she was surprised not to have noticed him at their departure. He wore the uniform of the French legion of the Sahara and a kepi of grayish-brown cloth on his tanned face, which was long and pointed like a jackal's. He examined her with his clear eyes, staring silently. She blushed suddenly and turned back toward her husband, who continued to gaze before him into the fog and wind. She wrapped herself. Up snugly in her coat. But she could still see the French soldier, tall and thin, so thin in his close-fitting tunic that he seemed made of some dry and crumbling matter, a mixture of sand and bone (Camus 6)

Janine is depicted throughout the story as bored and looking for any source of change and amusement; therefore, the French soldier arouses her interest when he pays her a little attention. It is worth noting that Janine did not commit any disgraceful behavior or infidelity as the title suggests instead she had her own dreams of having a romantic relationship that may revive her feminine aspirations and needs. She wasted almost two decades serving her husband's needs and being afraid of loneliness. "Twenty-five years were nothing; it seemed to her only yesterday that she was hesitating between a free life and marriage, only yesterday that she had felt such anguish at the thought that perhaps one day she would grow old alone" (Camus 9). Virginia Woolf emphasized the importance of education for women to liberate themselves from all social constraints in her article, *A Room of One's Own*. She states that women are capable of being creative and dependent, equal to men. If Janine was a strong woman with vision and will, she would not have wasted her life unsatisfied and miserable in the male-dominated society.

She even sacrificed her maternity instinct like any other woman who aspires to have a child and enjoy the experience of motherhood. She could not live her freedom nor enjoy her life in a society that deprived her of her rights as a woman. Julia Kristeva says that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules" (247). Kristeva explains the pivotal role of the woman, which may disturb the patriarchal society if she gains mental and physical freedom. The female character in the story ends up accepting her depression and barren life, unable to make any change in her life. "She was weeping uncontrollably, unable to restrain herself, 'It is nothing, darling;' she said, 'it's nothing.'" (Camus 27). The story closes with the wife crying for her lost years, aspirations, and unattainable dreams as a marginalized woman under patriarchal dominance. She lives her barren life with her husband without any complaints.

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