

The Politics of the Ordinary: Boredom, Routine, and Power in Camus's *The Stranger*

Hajarimayum Sadhana Devi

Faculty, South Asian Institute of Rural and Agricultural Management, Manipur, India

Abstract

This study reconceptualizes boredom in Albert Camus's *The Stranger* as a mechanism of social governance rather than an existential void. Moving beyond traditional readings of absurdism and moral detachment, it argues that Meursault's highly routinized existence reflects a form of political subjectivation shaped by regulated time, normalized behavior, and affective discipline. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, and Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life, the paper contends that the novel dramatizes how modern power operates not through overt coercion but through the subtle management of ordinary practices and emotional expectations. Meursault's condemnation in the trial underscores a juridical logic that penalizes the refusal of socially mandated rhythms of feeling particularly grief and remorse more than the act of murder itself. Through this lens, *The Stranger* emerges not only as a literary exploration of alienation but as a critical examination of the politics embedded in the mundane, revealing how routine, habit, and boredom sustain structures of control and normalize compliant subjectivity within everyday life.

Key Words: Political Affect, Disciplinary Power, Everyday Life, Bare Life, Normalization, Social Regulation, Temporality, Affective Governance, Biopolitics, Repetition.

1. Introduction

Albert Camus's *The Stranger* has most often been read through the enduring critical lenses of absurdism, moral indifference, and existential revolt. Within this established tradition, Meursault emerges primarily as a philosophical agent, a figure whose apparent apathy is interpreted as a conscious or symptomatic refusal of emotional and ethical conventions, thereby exposing the fundamental irrationality of socially constructed values. While these readings have profoundly shaped the novel's reception, they frequently abstract Meursault into an existential anomaly, a man curiously detached not only from societal norms but from the very material and temporal structures of everyday life that actively produce and condition his conduct. Consequently, the text's meticulous, almost forensic attention to routine, repetition, and the texture of boredom is often relegated to the status of atmospheric detail or stylistic idiosyncrasy, rather than being recognized as a central, generative mechanism of the novel's political and philosophical meaning.

This paper proposes a deliberate shift in critical emphasis: from interpreting Meursault's experience as one of existential absence to analyzing it as a site of political production. It argues that boredom in *The Stranger* should be understood not as a mere lack of feeling or meaning, but as a specific form of power operating through the mundane. Meursault's daily existence is scrupulously patterned by repetitive actions, his work, meals, sleep, leisure, and sexual encounters unfold according to regulated temporal rhythms. These routines signify more than personal indifference; they reveal a subject constituted within and by normalized social cadences. Boredom, in this framework, emerges not as an inner void but as the affective residue of a disciplined ordinary life, a state in which social compliance is secured and internalized through the subtle, persistent force of habit rather than through overt coercion.

By refocusing the analytical gaze onto the politics of the ordinary, this study re-situates *The Stranger* within a broader theoretical inquiry into how modern power operates insidiously through the micro-practices of daily

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>

existence. Drawing on Michel Foucault's archaeology of disciplinary power, Henri Lefebvre's materialist critique of everyday life, and Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical concept of bare life, the paper contends that Meursault embodies a mode of regulated existence that remains socially tolerable precisely as long as it maintains functional compliance within productive and social rhythms. His indifference becomes a transgression, and thus unacceptable, only at the moment it disrupts these socially mandated rhythms of emotion most critically in the codified rituals surrounding death, mourning, and legal judgment.

The courtroom sequence renders this latent logic starkly explicit. Here, Meursault is condemned less for the objective act of murder than for his categorical failure to perform the expected emotional responses within the rigid, ritualized time of the institution. The trial thus operates as a supreme mechanism for policing ordinary life, dramatizing how society punishes not merely criminal acts, but more fundamentally, the refusal of its core affective norms. Through this lens, *The Stranger* transcends its classic interpretation as an absurdist fable to reveal a penetrating critique of a form of governance that depends not on spectacular violence, but on the continuous, quiet management of routine, feeling, and social expectation. In doing so, the novel offers a prescient critical account of how power reproduces and sustains itself through the pervasive, often invisible politics embedded within the ordinary.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Discipline, the Everyday, and Bare Life

This paper is theoretically grounded in three distinct but mutually illuminating perspectives, which together form a cohesive analytical framework for understanding how boredom and routine function as instruments of power in *The Stranger*. Moving beyond interpretations that treat Meursault's indifference as an abstract, individualized existential condition, this framework deliberately situates his conduct within concrete structures of social discipline, everyday regulation, and biopolitical inclusion. Specifically, Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Henri Lefebvre's materialist critique of everyday life, and Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life collectively provide a robust and coherent basis for re-conceptualizing boredom not as a subjective lack of meaning, but as a socially produced affect an embodied symptom of regulated existence.

Foucault's genealogical analysis of discipline is crucial to deciphering how routine systematically governs Meursault's daily life. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) meticulously demonstrates that modern power operates not primarily through sovereign force, but through the meticulous regulation of time, behavior, and bodily habits. This disciplinary modality produces docile subjects who comply through processes of normalization, repetitive practice, and internalized spatial-temporal order. Meursault's strictly patterned existence marked by fixed work schedules, mechanized leisure, and predictable bodily rhythms serves as a literary instantiation of this disciplinary structure. His notable emotional flatness, therefore, does not signal a form of resistance or philosophical rebellion; instead, it reveals a life comprehensively shaped by a regulated temporality in which opportunities for deep reflection, spontaneous deviation, or emotional complexity are systematically minimized (Foucault, 1977).

Lefebvre's critique of everyday life extends and deepens this analysis by explicitly exposing the inherently political character of the ordinary. Lefebvre (2014) contends that everyday life constitutes the primary, foundational space through which social systems secure and reproduce control, precisely because the veil of mundane repetition renders structures of domination invisible and thus naturalized. Routine masquerades as a neutral, apolitical backdrop to living, yet it actively produces political passivity and severely limits critical awareness. In *The Stranger*, boredom emerges precisely as the dominant affective outcome of this managed, repetitive ordinariness. Meursault's habitual actions from his afternoon routines to his casual relationships are not narrated as conscious personal choices but as passively absorbed social rhythms that inherently discourage emotional depth and sustained ethical engagement. His pervasive boredom, then, reflects a profound adjustment to an environment where life is organized fundamentally around cyclical repetition rather than authentic meaning or project (Lefebvre, 2014).

Agamben's concept of bare life provides a further, crucial lens through which to understand Meursault's Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>

ultimate political and juridical position. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben (1998) describes bare life (*zoe*) as a form of existence reduced to its basic biological functions and social utility, a life that is included within the political order (*bios*) solely for management or exclusion, yet is stripped of full moral and symbolic recognition. Meursault exemplifies this condition with striking clarity. He is socially tolerated as long as he efficiently performs his functional roles as clerk, son, neighbor, lover without demanding or performing the symbolic and affective recognition those roles conventionally entail. Consequently, his criminal act alone does not sufficiently account for his condemnation; rather, it is his subsequent and spectacular refusal to conform to the prescribed emotional norms of grief, remorse, and penitence that renders him categorically intolerable to the symbolic-legal order. The trial, therefore, becomes the exemplary site where bare life is put on trial and condemned precisely for its failure to perform the socially mandated affects required for full social inclusion (Agamben, 1998).

Together, these integrated theoretical perspectives reveal boredom in Camus's novel as a specific effect of governance embedded within the fabric of ordinary life. Routine functions as a silent disciplinarian of behavior, a regulator of affect, and an enforcer of social compliance, all while strategically concealing its own political force. Read through this interdisciplinary framework, *The Stranger* thus emerges not simply as a canonical novel of philosophical absurdity, but as a penetrating literary critique of the mechanisms through which modern power operates via the quiet, pervasive management of everyday existence.

3. Methodological Approach: Close Reading and Critical Interpretation

This study adopts a rigorous qualitative, text-centered methodology that is fundamentally grounded in the hermeneutic practices of close reading and theoretically informed interpretation. The primary and unwavering focus remains the literary text of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, with theoretical frameworks serving as analytic supports and illuminating lenses rather than as dominant or prescriptive explanatory grids. Such an approach is intentionally designed to ensure that all interpretations and conclusions are generated primarily from and remain anchored in Camus's own narrative strategies, stylistic choices, linguistic patterns, and structural composition, while simultaneously being critically enriched and deepened by established theoretical perspectives. This balance guards against the potential for the literary work to become merely an illustration of pre-existing theory, preserving the integrity and specificity of the novel as an artistic and philosophical object.

The analysis proceeds systematically through a detailed close reading of carefully selected textual episodes from *The Stranger* that conspicuously foreground themes of routine, repetition, and temporal regulation. Particular hermeneutic attention is devoted to narrative sequences depicting the rhythms of work, the patterns of leisure, the minutiae of bodily habits, and the formalized procedures of institutional settings, most notably the extended courtroom sequences. These moments are examined not for their dramatic or plot-advancing qualities, but for their narrative emphasis on habitual action, emotional restraint, and the presentation of normalized, unremarkable conduct. Consequently, this methodology deliberately decenters traditionally isolated "key events," such as the murder on the beach, in order to privilege instead the cumulative, often overlooked patterns of ordinary behavior that pervasively shape Meursault's subjective existence and the novel's overarching thematic architecture.

The theoretical concepts drawn from Foucault, Lefebvre, and Agamben are applied in an interpretive, dialogic manner to illuminate how boredom, as depicted in the novel, operates as a socially produced affect. Foucault's (1977) foundational notion of disciplinary time is employed to analyze the text's representation of regulated daily life and the inscription of power on the body through routine. Lefebvre's (2014) critique of the everyday informs the reading of narrative repetition as a literary analogue for the social mechanism through which control becomes naturalized and invisible. Agamben's (1998) concept of bare life provides the guiding framework for interpreting Meursault's specific legal and ethical position, particularly in relation to the trial's logic and the sentencing that transforms him into a political subject. These theoretical frameworks are employed selectively and flexibly, their application always disciplined by the textual evidence to ensure that Camus's novel remains the central focus of the analytic enterprise.

A core tenet of this methodological approach is its conscious avoidance of extratextual biographical speculation, psychological profiling, or normative moral judgments concerning the protagonist. Instead, it seeks to situate Meursault's consciousness and actions within the broader, impersonal structures of social and political power that operate through the governance of ordinary life. By strategically combining meticulous close textual analysis with theoretically informed interpretation, this study aims to demonstrate convincingly how *The Stranger* itself constructs and critiques boredom and routine as potent, yet often invisible, political forces that function to regulate individual behavior and sustain a given social order.

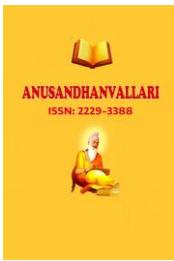
4. Narrative as Apparatus: A Close Analysis of Routine and Rupture

Camus structures *The Stranger* around a meticulously rendered series of ordinary actions that organize Meursault's existence through cyclical repetition rather than linear development or psychological growth. From the stark, iconic opening lines "Mother died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" the narrative immediately foregrounds a world governed by routine: work schedules, meals, sleep, and leisure unfold according to predictable, almost ritualistic patterns that remain strikingly uninterrupted by introspection, moral questioning, or conventional emotional intensity. This sustained emphasis on the mundane does not merely provide setting or character background; it actively constructs boredom as a systemic condition not a personal character flaw or philosophical stance, but an experiential effect of a comprehensively regulated daily life. Meursault, crucially, does not actively rebel against meaning or purpose; he navigates with unsettling smoothness within a social world already pre-organized to minimize ethical engagement and to valorize functional compliance over reflective depth.

Meursault's working life serves as the primary exemplar of this regulated ordinariness. His clerical job demands and rewards punctuality, mechanical efficiency, and a pronounced emotional neutrality qualities he performs not with resentment but with seamless, unthinking aptitude. The narrative records these activities in a famously flat, descriptive, and paratactic prose style, a technique that formally reinforces the phenomenological sense that time itself passes not as a progression toward goals, but as a sequence of undifferentiated, repetitive units. This literary representation aligns precisely with Foucault's (1977) account of disciplinary time, wherein modern institutions secure productivity and docility not through brute force, but through the internalized imposition of schedules, surveillance, and segmented routines. Meursault's pervasive boredom, therefore, signals his successful, albeit passive, adjustment to this temporal-political order; it is the affective signature of his assimilation, not a symptom of his alienation from it.

His leisure and most intimate bodily habits further entrench this structure of impersonal control. Activities such as swimming, eating, smoking, and his liaison with Marie are narrated as discrete, recurrent sensory events. They provide fleeting physiological pleasure but are denied any narrative consequence that might lead to emotional deepening, relational commitment, or personal transformation. They exist as variations within a fixed cycle, not as catalysts for change. This pattern embodies Lefebvre's (2014) critical insight that everyday life systematically absorbs individuals into naturalized cycles of repetition, a process that pacifies by making domination invisible and by severely circumscribing the horizon of critical awareness. Within this textual economy, Meursault's boredom crystallizes as the dominant affective outcome of an existence organized fundamentally around recurrence a life where minor variations in sensation never coalesce into meaningful transformation.

The murder of the Arab on the beach constitutes a violent, yet profoundly ambiguous, rupture in this seamless routine. Significantly, even this extreme act is framed not through the lens of intention, malice, or moral conflict, but overwhelmingly through the discourse of uncontrollable bodily sensation and oppressive environmental agency. The "inhuman" sun, the "dazzling" light, the "burning" blade, and the physical "veil" of sweat and salt dominate Meursault's perceptual field, effectively displacing the possibility of ethical deliberation. Rather than interpreting this as an act of existential rebellion or authentic choice, the text suggests it reveals the violent potential latent within a life of disciplined passivity. The murder underscores how extreme sensory overload can



momentarily short-circuit the mechanisms of bodily regulation, yet it does not represent a dismantling of routine. Instead, the event starkly exposes the terrifying fragility of the normative order when confronted by the unassimilated immediacy of the body and the natural world.

It is in the protracted trial scenes that the implicit political stakes of Meursault's ordinariness are rendered devastatingly explicit. The court's prosecutorial focus shifts decisively away from the material circumstances of the homicide and onto the forensic dissection of Meursault's everyday conduct, most notably his behavior before, during, and after his mother's funeral. His failure to perform the expected rituals of grief to cry, to view the body, to express a conventionally structured sorrow is meticulously reconstructed not as personal eccentricity, but as evidence of a "criminal heart" and a fundamental threat to the social and symbolic order. Drawing on Agamben's (1998) paradigm, Meursault is put on trial less for taking a life (*homo sacer* as the one who may be killed) than for his life itself—for existing as bare life (*zoe*) that refuses the performative scripts (the *bios*) required for full political and moral personhood. The legal process thus functions as the supreme mechanism for policing the boundaries of ordinary life, punishing with exemplary severity the individual who refuses to produce socially sanctioned affect.

Through these interconnected narrative patterns, *The Stranger* meticulously reveals a modality of power that operates not through the spectacular drama of sovereignty, but quietly and insidiously through the management of routine, the inculcation of habit, and the production of boredom. Meursault's ultimate condemnation exposes a social system that readily tolerates and indeed depends upon regulated, functional indifference in its subjects, but which reacts with juridical violence against any deviation from prescribed emotional and symbolic expectations. In doing so, Camus's novel moves beyond existential parable to deliver a penetrating critique of a modern form of governance rooted in the biopolitical management of everyday existence itself.

5. The Politics of Affect: Boredom, Conformity, and Social Regulation

The foregoing analysis demonstrates convincingly that *The Stranger* functions as a potent literary critique of modern forms of governance that operate without the need for spectacular display or overt physical violence. Within the world of the novel, power does not primarily manifest as the capricious will of a sovereign or the blunt instrument of the law; instead, it functions with insidious efficiency through the silent orchestration of ordinary habits, the precise regulation of time, and the internalized enforcement of social expectations. Meursault's life, for most of the narrative, remains conspicuously unremarkable precisely because it conforms so seamlessly to these structures of the everyday. This conformity reveals the novel's central political insight: control in a modern, disciplinary society is maintained not through the repression of a pre-existing human essence, but through the prior production of normalized subjects for whom routine is synonymous with existence itself.

Boredom is not a marginal detail but plays a constitutive role in this sociopolitical process. As the analysis reveals, boredom emerges as the definitive affective condition produced by and within repetitive, regulated routines. It is the phenomenological experience of a life in which time is segmented, action is habitualised, and ethical engagement is systematically pre-empted. This affective state serves a dual function: it signals the subject's successful adjustment to a disciplined temporal order while simultaneously ensuring the perpetuation of that order by draining life of disruptive passion or profound questioning. Meursault's profound indifference is, therefore, socially tolerated even functionally encouraged as long as it remains within the bounds of accepted behavioral patterns, such as his reliable work ethic. His apathy becomes transgressive and politically legible only at the precise moment his emotional conduct visibly deviates from collective, ritualized expectations, specifically in the codified contexts of mourning and legal judgment. At these junctures, his failure to perform is recast from a private quirk into a public threat.

The trial sequence serves as the novel's masterful exposition of how institutional machinery actively defends the sanctity of ordinary norms by forensically transforming personal affect into juridical evidence. The prosecutor's case is built not on a reconstruction of the murder's intent, but on a damning narrative of Meursault's emotional Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>

life or perceived lack thereof. In this courtroom theater, emotional conformity is explicitly posited as the ultimate measure of social belonging and moral personhood. Its absence is pathologized and criminalized, treated not as a difference but as an existential threat to the communal fabric. Through this chilling legal logic, *The Stranger* exposes governance as a totalizing system that disciplines not merely external actions but the very terrain of interiority the realm of feelings, sympathies, and normative responses. The law here operates as the guarantor of a shared emotional economy.

Consequently, Camus's novel extends far beyond an existential meditation on individual alienation. It offers a sustained and prescient critique of a capillary, biopolitical form of power that works silently and continuously through the minutiae of everyday life. In this framework, habit, routine, and socially implanted expectation emerge as far more effective regulators of human conduct than overt force could ever be. *The Stranger*, in its stark, minimalist prose, thus illuminates the political anatomy of the ordinary, revealing how the most potent mechanisms of control are often those that have ceased to be visible as control at all, having been naturalized into the very rhythm of breathing, working, and feeling.

6. Conclusion

This study has posited and sought to demonstrate that Albert Camus's *The Stranger* stages boredom not as a metaphysical or existential void, but as a form of political production an affective state actively generated by specific social and temporal arrangements. Through its unflinching focus on the mechanics of routine, the cyclical nature of repetition, and the strict regulation of time, the novel constructs a portrait of a mode of existence fundamentally shaped by processes of normalization and a quiet, pervasive discipline. Meursault's signature indifference, therefore, emerges not as a deliberate philosophical stance of detachment from an absurd universe, but as the symptomatic affective outcome of ordinary social structures engineered to minimize and pre-empt deep ethical questioning and sustained emotional engagement. His consciousness is less a tabula rasa than a product shaped by the very rhythms it unthinkingly follows.

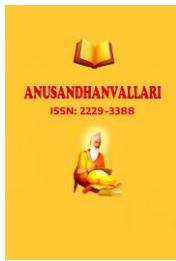
By centering its analysis on the novel's depiction of everyday practices from work and leisure to bodily habits and the institutional response to their disruption, this investigation reveals the precise mechanisms through which power operates within Camus's narrative world. It is a power that flows through the channels of ingrained habit and collectively enforced expectation, rather than descending from a singular, sovereign authority. In this light, ordinary life is exposed not as a neutral backdrop but as the central, dynamic mechanism through which social control is continuously exercised, seamlessly sustained, and fiercely defended when threatened. The courtroom drama, far from being a distraction from the murder, is the logical culmination of this politics of the ordinary, putting the unremarkable life itself on trial.

Consequently, read through the integrated theoretical lens of Foucault, Lefebvre, and Agamben, *The Stranger* transcends its canonical interpretation as a seminal text of literary absurdism. It is re-framed as a penetrating critique of a modern form of governance deeply rooted in the biopolitical management of the everyday. The novel illuminates a world where the regulation of time, body, and affect constitutes the primary mode of social ordering. Within this system, boredom functions as the silent signal of successful compliance the proof of a subject smoothly integrated into the normative rhythm. Conversely, any deviation from prescribed emotional scripts, as embodied by Meursault's recalcitrant honesty, is met not with understanding but with exemplary punishment, revealing the violence latent in the defense of the ordinary. Thus, Camus's masterpiece endures not only as an exploration of individual alienation but as a stark diagnosis of the quiet, insistent politics embedded in the fabric of daily life itself.

References (APA)

[1] Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>



Anusandhanvallari

Vol 2024, No.1

November 2024

ISSN 2229-3388

University Press.

- [2] Camus, A. (1989). *The stranger* (M. Ward, Trans.). Vintage. (Original work published 1942)
- [3] Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage.
- [4] Lefebvre, H. (2014). *Critique of everyday life* (Vol. 1, J. Moore, Trans.). Verso. (Original work published 1947)