

## **Albert Camus' *The Adulterous Wife*: With Whom Does She Commit Adultery?**

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Adultery is willing sexual intercourse with someone other than one's spouse. In Albert Camus's short story, *The Adulterous Wife*, it is not clear with whom Janine, wife of Marcel, commits adultery (AW, 3-26). Indeed, in her marriage of over twenty years she never commits adultery as it is usually understood. However, her relationship to Marcel, as revealed in their journey into the harsh North African countryside, is crucial to understanding the nature of her adultery. Her relationship to Marcel and response to it also reflects Camus' ideas about a person's place in the world in the here and now. Although the story ends abruptly and ambiguously there is really no ambiguity about her adultery.

The story begins with Janine and Marcel, a French *pied noir* couple, riding through the Algerian countryside in a ramshackle bus filled with Arabs. The bus is slowly making its way on a cold winter day though blowing sand and fog. Marcel is a dry-goods dealer attempting to restore his business in immediate post-World War II Algeria, where both he and Janine were born, met, and married. On Marcel's insistence Janine reluctantly agreed to accompany him on this trip, an attempt to sell goods directly to Arab merchants throughout the countryside rather than through middle-men. As sand strikes the windows of the bus Janine contemplates her husband sitting next to her and their relationship.

With his “tufts of graying hair sprouting on a low brow, a large nose, an uneven mouth, Marcel looked like a sulking faun” (AW, 3). The only active thing about him was “his thick, hairless hands” (AW, 3). Janine thinks back to her active youth twenty-five years ago when she was a champion in gymnastics. At the time she was hesitating between pursuing an independent life or getting married to Marcel, a law-student always eager to be at her side. Concerned about facing old age and death alone she eventually accepted him; “Above all, she loved being loved, and he had flooded her with attentions” (AW, 5). His attention was so intense that he made her aware that by existing for him, he made her existence real. Marcel is for her confirmation of her existence and a bulwark against the inevitability of death.

But after their marriage nothing in their life happened as she expected. Marcel quit studying law to take over the family dry-goods business. Disliking physical effort, he no longer takes her to the beach. Instead, they take routine Sunday afternoon rides. Marcel prefers being in his shop or in the half-shuttered three rooms in which they live above the shop. They have no children. Marcel’s only passion is money. She finds this single-mindedness disconcerting despite his assurances that if anything happened to her she would be provided for. As the years pass “Summer, the beaches, the drives, even the sky were long ago” (AW, 7). Janine and Marcel live a life of habit.

Habit allows Janine to move unthinkingly through her days: “Living life is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit” (MS 5). Consequently “We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking” (MS, 8). The uniformity of habit of mind and behavior allows Janine to skim through her daily routine without reflecting upon the consequences for herself and her relationship to others. Above all, habit provides the comfort of not confronting the finality of death. Janine is

not, of course, unique in adhering to this attitude. When it comes to death, having never experienced it, “everyone lives as if no one ‘knew’” (MS 15).

However, as Janine and Marcel progress on their journey she becomes increasingly aware of a gap between her early aspirations and her experience in the here and now. There is no freedom for Janine as long as she fears death and does not break from the world defined by her relationship with Marcel. She must reach zero point, a place from which the only action is at once a rebellion against death and a commitment to life and all a person can make of it. This growing awareness leads to a moment of lucidity that breaks the hold of habit of mind in order to give her a chance for freedom. At this decisive point “The return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep represent the first steps of ...freedom” (MS, 59). The durability of paralyzing habits dissolves, a new consciousness awakens that liberates the imagination and opens avenues for alternative future action beyond zero point.

But Janine is not yet at zero point, the point at which her adultery is committed. She first experiences greater awareness of her relationship with Marcel, of her alienation from the environment in which she is immersed, and of her fear of death. Only then does she commit adultery in her own way.

As the bus makes its way through the harsh countryside the ingrained habits of Janine’s consciousness become unsettled. Not only is her life with Marcel not what she expected, she finds the harsh countryside is alien to her. She imagined there would be palm trees and soft sand but the desert was “only stone, stone everywhere, in the sky where, crunching and cold, the stone dust alone still reigned, as on the earth, where alone, between the stone, the dry grass grew.” The unexpected continues to assail her consciousness. She becomes aware a French soldier in a

seat across the aisle is staring at her. He is “so thin in his close fitting tunic that he seemed made of dry and crumbling material, a mixture of sand and bone” (AW, 6). He examines her with his clear eyes, staring silently” (AW, 6). She blushes and turns away. She acknowledges to herself that she is “not so heavy but full, fleshy and still desirable – she certainly felt it in men’s gazes—with her rather childish face, her bright, clear eyes in contrast to this big body that was, she knew, warm and welcoming” (AW, 6). Shortly, with a smile, he offers her lozenges in a tin box; she takes one. He “instantly swallowed his smile” and resumes staring ahead (AW, 10).

The enigmatic encounter with the soldier characterizes her encounter with the Arabs whose language neither she nor Marcel speak. With their heads lowered the passengers “seemed to be listening to the voice of the wind, unleashed across these endless plateaus” (AW, 9). The bus passes on the shoulder of the road mute shepherds, standing still in draped forms; “Beneath the hoods of the burnouses, and behind a rampart of veils, only their eyes could be seen” (AW, 9). Arriving at their destination Janine senses the disconnect existing between herself and the people crowding in on her. She sees the soldier coming towards her. Feeling some bond with the Frenchman she expects a smile or greeting from him but he passes by without looking at her, disappearing into the crowd. Exhausted and disorientated by the alien surroundings, Janine goes directly to their hotel while Marcel deals with getting their luggage off the top of the bus.

Standing in their sparsely furnished room “She waited but without knowing why” (AW, 11). She “felt only her solitude and the penetrating cold, and a heavy weight around the heart” (AW, 11). Hearing the wind in the palm trees like the sound of rippling waves on a river, “Nothing was the way she had imagined, but those invisible waves refreshed her tired eyes” (AW, 11). This moment is a hinge in the story, as indicated by the only deliberate break in the text, a moment when Janine is moving towards a revelatory zero point in consciousness. This

move is intensified by her growing insight into Marcel's attitude towards the local population. He espouses colonialist stereotypical attitudes that display his lack of real understanding of the local people. Just as his own life is prescribed by habits of mind and behavior, he assigns to the Arabs habits that conform to his prejudices. Earlier, when the bus broke down on the road Marcel remarks about the driver's attempt to fix the bus, "You can be sure he's never seen an engine in his life" (AW, 8). Janine emphatically responds: "Leave it be!" (AW, 8).

But the driver does fix the bus. And Marcel cannot leave it be when they go down to the dining-room for lunch. He urges the Arab waiter to hurry with their coffee, commenting to Janine that the Arabs tend to move "Slowly in the morning, not quickly in the evening" (AW, 12). Soon he quibbles with two Arabs over the price he will pay them to carry his trunk of goods, based on the principle Arabs always ask "double so as to get a fourth" (AW, 12). As they make their way through the crowds "Arabs passed by who stepped aside without appearing to see them, holding the skirts of their burnouses before them" (AW, 13). Janine "felt they carried themselves, even dressed in rags, with a kind of pride that the Arabs of her town did not have" (AW, 13). In contrast, Marcel continues with the derogatory remarks. They meet with a merchant in the dark interior of his establishment. Unsuccessful in making a sale, Marcel says to Janine as they leave: "They think they're God almighty but they're in business too! Life is hard for everyone" (AW, 14).

They visit other merchants with some success in sales but this does not change Marcel's outlook towards the Arabs. Making their way to the main square they stop and put down the trunk. Janine notices an impressive looking Arab coming toward them while seemingly looking beyond them. Marcel comments; "Oh well, 'there's one who thinks he's a general" (AW, 15). The Arab walks directly towards the trunk as if not seeing it. Marcel pulls it aside just as the

Arab passes by totally ignoring them. Marcel remarks: "They think they can get away with anything now" (AW, 16). The close but enigmatic contact with the Arabs and Marcel's continual harping about them leaves Janine feeling sad and wondering why she even came on the trip.

Reluctant to return to the dreary hotel, she suggests they visit the ramparts of the local fort for its view of the desert. Marcel reluctantly agrees to go. When they reach the top Janine slowly scans the limitless space and the town below her. She leans against the parapet, speechless. Janine's body is taking her to a greater consciousness of herself in the material world. "Through an absurd miracle, it is the body that also brings knowledge" (MS, 81). A person first confirms their own existence in the world through experiencing the body in the world: "This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists." This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists" (MS, 19). The body is the source of a compelling commitment to life over death: "The body's judgment is as good as the mind's, and the body shrinks from annihilation" (MS, 8).

While thus far the journey has taken Janine to a state of suffocating anxiety she is now achieving greater personal insight from her encounter with the material world; she begins to confront her fear of death. As Janine is entering a new emotional space, for Marcel there is nothing to see. He wants to go back to the hotel to get out of the cold but Janine cannot take her gaze from the horizon; "suddenly it seemed to her that something was waiting that she had not known until today and yet has always longed for" (AW, 18). In her heart "a knot tightened by years, habit, and boredom was slowly loosening" (AW, 18). She saw in the distance an encampment of nomads. She envisions "Since the beginning, on the dry earth of this measureless land scraped to the bone, a few men ceaselessly made their way, possessing nothing but serving no one, the destitute and free lords of a strange kingdom" (AW, 19). Filled with a

sweet sadness she closes her eyes: “She only knew that this kingdom had been promised her from time immemorial and yet that it would never be hers, never again, except in this fleeting moment when she opened her eyes once more on the suddenly still sky and its streams of fixed light, as the voices rising from the Arab town fell suddenly quiet” (AW, 19).

Marcel insists they leave. She acquiesces, her exaltation leaving her. She feels “too tall, too heavy, too white for this world she had just entered” (AW, 20). She asks herself: “What would she do from now on but drag herself into sleep, into death?” (AW, 20). They return to the hotel, eat dinner, and silently go to bed. She is feverish with a cold; “vast solitudes whirled within her” (AW, 20). She falls asleep asking herself again why she had come on the trip. She awakes later in the night with the realization that the foundation of her existence is Marcel’s existence. “The only joy he gave her was the knowledge that she was needed” (AW, 21). But this need is based on their mutual fear of death. She draws back from Marcel now knowing she is not happy, that she is going to die “without being delivered” (AW, 22).

Janine experiences a surge of conscious rebellion, a rebellion against a life of repressive habit and fear of death.

Her heart was in pain, she was suffocating under an immense weight, which she suddenly discovered she had been dragging around for twenty years. Now she was struggling under it with all her might. She wanted to be delivered, even if Marcel, even if the others never were. Awake, she sat up in her bed and listened to a call that seemed very near...she was no longer even certain of having heard anything except a mute call which, after all, she could readily dismiss or receive, but whose meaning she would never understand unless she answered it at once. At once, yes, that at least was certain! (AW, 23).

She leaves bed, rapidly dresses, sneaks out of the hotel and heads for the fort. As she starts up the stairs of the fort “The burning air in her lungs became so sharp she wanted to stop. A final burst hurled her in spite of herself up to the roof, against the parapet that pressed her belly. She

was breathing hard and everything was swimming before her eyes” (AW, 24). She is cold but “a spark of warmth began to glow amid her shivers. Her eyes opened at last on the expanse of night.”

Breathing deeply she forgets “the dead weight of beings, the insane or static life, the long anguish of living and dying” (AW, 25). Janine reaches her own zero point, a moment when her body, in the world in the here and now, achieves a lucid consciousness of organismic intensity:

After so many years fleeing from fear, running crazily, uselessly, she was finally coming to a halt. At the same time she seemed to be recovering her roots, and the sap rose anew in her body, which was no longer trembling. Pressing her whole belly against the parapet, leaning toward the wheeling sky, she was only waiting for her pounding heart to settle down, and for the silence to form in her. The last constellations of stars fell in bunches a little lower on the horizon of the desert, and stood motionless. Then, with an unbearable sweetness, the waters of the night began to fill Janine, submerging the cold, rising gradually to the dark center of her being, and overflowing wave upon wave to her moaning mouth. A moment later, the whole sky stretched out above her as she lay with her back against the cold earth (AW, 25).

Janine returns to the hotel and to bed. Marcel awakens, gets up for a drink of water. As he gets back into bed he looks at Janine and is baffled. She is uncontrollably weeping. She tells him: “It’s nothing, darling” (AW, 26). End of story.

“It is nothing.” Indeed, it is nothing in that Janine does not technically commit adultery. However, by her rebellion against death, a death personified in her relationship with Marcel, she commits adultery, not with another man, but with freedom. In saying no to death she is valuing freedom as her very being. She joins the free lords of a strange kingdom promised to her. For Janine the lucidity achieved at zero point is a freedom “which a human heart can experience and live” (MS, 60). Her tears are tears of a joyous deliverance.

### **Camus Works cited**

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