

# ***1940s Euro-Asian Philosophical Differences: The Outsider and No Longer Human***

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**Abstract.** Albert Camus' "The Outsider" and Dazai Osamu's "No Longer Human", as literary works of the 1940s, vividly reflect the differences in philosophical concepts between Asia and Europe. Both works depict the survival status, behavioral patterns, and personal thoughts of the protagonists in the stories from the first-person perspective, exploring the individual's resistance against the absurd world from the perspective of European existentialism. And the decline of the individual in the process of integrating with the world under the Japanese Mono aware aesthetics and nihilism. Murso's insistence on self-existence and Yozo's nihilism after reconciliation with the world offer profound reflections on how cultural backgrounds shape the qualities of human thought, making these works classics in literary history. Through them, we can learn about the cultural roots of different regions in the 1940s. They also provide assistance for humanity to find more solutions in the face of the predicament of modernity.

**Keywords:** The Outsider, No Longer Human, Existentialism, Mono aware, Nihilism, philosophical concepts

## **1. Introduction**

The 1940s were a tumultuous era in human history. World War II almost completely transformed the global landscape. The psychological trauma caused by war to people was profound and long-lasting, and it also brought about earth-shaking changes to people's spirits and thoughts at that time. They began to wonder whether their previous beliefs and traditions could enable them to achieve the life they desired. The previous value system started to be questioned after the war, and the familiar world order fell into chaos.

Literature, as a keen reflection of the spirit of The Times and society, often captures such profound ideological changes and integrates philosophical thinking into narratives, thus becoming an important carrier for carrying and conveying human thoughts on the meaning of existence. During this special historical period, Europe and Asia respectively gave birth to two highly representative literary works -Albert Camus' "The Outsider" and Dazai Osamu's "No Longer Human".

"The Outsider" and "No Longer Human" were written in different geographical Spaces, originated from different cultural roots, and have completely different narrative styles and character images. However, both focus on the living conditions of individuals who are unable to communicate

with the group, precisely capturing the loneliness, confusion and struggle that individuals experience. Through the reading and analysis of these two works, we can penetrate the barriers of regions and cultures, gain a clearer insight into the differences in philosophical concepts between Asia and Europe in the 1940s, and thereby deeply comprehend the complexity and diversity of human thought in that era. This difference is not mutual opposition or exclusion, but rather the distinct thoughts and responses made by humans in the face of similar survival predicaments based on different cultural traditions and historical backgrounds. Together, they constitute the diversified structure of human spiritual exploration in the 1940s and provide valuable experience for thinking in the face of modernization predicaments nowadays

## **2. The outsider: absurdity and resistance from the perspective of European existentialism**

### **2.1. The construction of an absurd world**

In "The Outsider", Camus constructed a world full of absurdity. "Today, my mother passed away. Perhaps it was yesterday, I don't know." [1] This is Camus' classic opening in "The Outsider". The protagonist Mersault's life is filled with the irrationality and illogicality of the world. He didn't show the usual sadness at his mother's funeral. In his daily life and work, he was very indifferent to promotion and even showed no concern for his girlfriend's proposal. Mersault was out of place with the social norms and traditional values around him. This difference did not originate from his numbness but from his clear understanding of the absurd nature of the world. Society expects people to display emotions and behaviors that are taken for granted in specific situations, but Mersault rejected this false form and insisted on facing the world with his true self, thus becoming an "outsider" in the eyes of society.

In "On Camus' Concept of Absurdity", it is pointed out that Camus' theory of absurdity is a challenge to traditional rationalist philosophy. In Mersault's world, the established value system collapses, and everything becomes incomprehensible. The rational expectations of people towards the world and the irrational silence of the world itself form a strong conflict, and absurdity thus emerges [2]. The day after his mother's funeral, he went swimming with his girlfriend and watched a comedy movie, as if his mother's death had never happened. Such behaviors are regarded by others as a great disrespect to the deceased. Even in modern society, they are hard to understand. This, however, precisely reflects Mersault's contempt for the hypocritical emotional expressions in traditional funeral customs, and this "outsider" behavior also sows the seeds for subsequent conflicts.

### **2.2. The spirit of existential resistance**

Existentialism is a philosophical trend that emerged in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Its core focus is on human existence itself, emphasizing the uniqueness, freedom, and responsibility of individuals in the world. In "The Myth of Sisyphus", Camus proposed: "There is only one truly serious philosophical question, and that is suicide." [3] The core of it is an inquiry into the "meaning of existence": If the world is absurd, why do people live on? The answer given by "The Outsider" is "resistance". Endow existence with subjective meaning by adhering to oneself. Facing the absurd world, Mersault chose to resist, although this resistance was tinged with negativity. In prison, he refused to comply with the priest's exhortations on repentance and redemption, and in court, he refused to make false excuses for his actions. This kind of resistance of his is a practice of Sartre's philosophical proposition that "existence precedes essence". After realizing the absurdity of the

world, Mersel still adhered to his choice, believing that people should not be bound by traditional concepts in society, but should find their own meaning of life through their own actions.

Walter Kaufmann believed that the core of existentialism lies in "the individual defining themselves through choice", and Murso's refusal to compromise is precisely the literary practice of this philosophical spirit - he proved with the last clarity of his life that even if the world is absurd, the individual can still gain freedom by adhering to their true self [4]. Xuan Qingkun believes that Murso fought against the oppressive norms of society with his individual free choice. Even in the face of death, he was not afraid at all. At the last moment of his life, he felt a kind of reconciliation with the world [5]. This reconciliation is not submission but a further understanding of society after resistance. He adhered to his own truth in the absurdity, always in a state of confrontation with society, and completed his interpretation of existentialism. This spirit of resistance reflects the pursuit of individual rationality in European philosophy in the 1940s. Encourage people that even if the world is absurd, individuals must rely on reason and resistance to define their own existence.

### **3. "No Longer Human": the descent and self-denial in the context of eastern nihilism**

#### **3.1. The survival predicament under the aesthetics of Mono aware**

In "No Longer Human", Yozo lives in a world full of oppression, and his spiritual predicament is closely linked to the traditional Japanese aesthetic of Mono no aware. The aesthetics of Mono aware emphasizes the perception and sentimentality towards the impermanence and fragility of all things in the world. This aesthetic is characterized by a strong sense of negativity. Yozo was filled with fear of interpersonal relationships and was always reluctant to communicate with others. He tried to please others and integrate into society through performances that were not to his liking, but he could never shake off the loneliness and estrangement in his heart.

Every effort he made ended in failure. From not daring to express his true thoughts at home to the various setbacks and entanglements he encountered with friends and women in society, they all made him deeply realize the impermanence and nothingness of life. The Japanese scholar Kojin Karatani once analyzed that the essence of Yozo's "performative existence" is the product of the conflict between the "job" concept of the Edo period and modern individual consciousness. His pain stems from his inability to return to the traditional "group and self relationship" and to establish modern self-identity, and ultimately, he can only be alienated in the sadness of Mono aware [6]. Dong Xiong'er also mentioned that Yozo's image is a product of the conflict between traditional Japanese aesthetics and modern society. He struggles in an impermanent world but cannot find the meaning of life, and can only gradually sink into endless melancholy [7]. He had deep doubts about his own existence and wondered if he could really live in this society. This self-deprecation was the extreme manifestation of the aesthetic of materialism in him. He internalized his perception of the impermanence of the world into a denial of himself. When this self-denial reaches its extreme, Yozo is unable to find a stable coordinate within the framework of family ethics and social identity. And it is powerless to, like Western existentialists, endow life with new meaning through active choices. The indulgence in "negative feelings" in the aesthetics of Mono aware made him accustomed to internalizing the absurdity of the outside world as his own flaws. He fell into depravity not in pursuit of the pleasure of indulgence again and again, but in an attempt to escape from himself in a brief period of numbness. Every fall is an accusation against "impermanence" and also a tragic outpouring of the aesthetic of nihilism in the modern context.

### 3.2. The self-dissolution of nihilism

Yozo's experience was a process of self-dissolution, gradually moving towards nihilism. From the initial confusion about life to later seeking comfort in continuous degradation, admitting that he "lost the qualification to be human", every step he took reflected his powerlessness and despair in the face of the absurdity of the world. Unlike Mursoo's resistance, after realizing that he was out of place in the world, Yozo chose to escape and self-negate.

In Japanese philosophy, individuals often emphasize the harmonious unity with the group. When Yozo was unable to integrate into society and find his place in the group, he fell into deep self-doubt, which was a manifestation of nihilism. Ren Jianghui pointed out that Dazai Osamu's works reflect the Japanese rogue school literature's denial of traditional values and its tendency to seek liberation in nothingness. Yozo constantly dissolves himself in the void [8]. Yozo's tragedy is of typical significance in the context of Eastern nihilism. His action is by no means a simple self-pity, but a fundamental questioning of the legitimacy of individual existence. This questioning forms a profound resonance with aesthetic concepts such as "Mono aware" and "Unseen" in Japanese culture. Jean-Francois Billeter stated in "An Introduction to Japanese Thought" that the "nothingness" in Japanese culture is not a passive abandonment, but rather a negation of "absolute reality". Yozo's "disconformity" is precisely the extreme manifestation of this kind of thinking [9]. Behind this extremity lies the deep-seated paradox of the "nihilism" concept in Japanese culture. On the one hand, it inherits the philosophical wisdom of Buddhism that "all phenomena are empty", acknowledges the impermanence and emptiness of the world's essence, and encourages individuals to transcend their attachment to appearances. On the other hand, in the process of secularization, this wisdom is alienated into a complete negation of "all meanings", trapping individuals in the cognitive trap that "existence is suffering". The reason why Yozo's downfall is so shocking is precisely because it demonstrates the destructive nature of this paradox. He keenly perceived the hypocrisy and absurdity of social norms, but was unable to find an appropriate way to reconcile and coexist with the world. He wanted to use self-dissolution to avoid being out of place in this world, but in this confrontation, he completely lost himself. This kind of sobriety is precisely the typical projection of Eastern nihilism in modern individuals. It is not a numb acceptance of existence, but rather, after realizing that everything is meaningless, one still cannot escape the mental torment brought by the lack of meaning, and ultimately heads towards destruction in the struggle between resistance and compromise.

## 4. The cultural roots of the different philosophical concepts in Asia and Europe

### 4.1. The European rationalist tradition and the rise of existentialism

European philosophy has a long tradition of rationalism. From the pursuit of truth and essence in ancient Greek philosophy, to Descartes' establishment of the subject status of reason by "I think, therefore I am", and then to Kant's criticism and construction of human reason, reason has always been the core driving force for the development of European philosophy. Under this tradition, individuals were endowed with the ability to think rationally and make independent choices. When people in the 1940s were confronted with the absurd realities brought about by wars, social unrest, etc., existentialism emerged.

The absurdity of the 1940s better reflects the practice and application of reason by existentialism. Unlike traditional rationalism, which focuses on abstract theories, existentialist rationality places more emphasis on playing a role in concrete life. When people are confronted with predicaments

brought about by various changes in society and family, existentialism encourages individuals to rationally analyze their own situations and think about what choices they can make to resist this absurdity. This kind of rationality no longer exists in theories as knowledge, but is integrated into an individual's daily life and manifested in every resistance against fate. It enables individuals to avoid losing their way in a chaotic world, always maintain their autonomy, and even resist the world.

In "The Philosophy of Being", Karl Jaspers emphasizes that the resistance of existentialism is not a negation of reason, but a critique of the alienation of "instrumental reason" [10]. Camus' philosophy of the absurd is precisely the continuation of this criticism, which demands the reconstruction of the individual's survival foundation where reason collapses. Camus' philosophy of absurdity and Sartre's existentialist philosophy are essentially creative transformations of the European rationalist tradition in times of crisis. They retain rationalism's respect for individual subjectivity, but abandon its blind superstition about the absoluteness of truth. It continues the methodology of grasping existence through reason, but adjusts the function of reason from explaining the world to responding to it. In their philosophical framework, reason is no longer a rule that regulates people, but a tool guiding them on how to face and resist in difficult situations. When people in the 1940s were lost in the trauma of war and social alienation, this rational-based existentialist resistance provided a possible path for individuals to seek a feasible development path from the ruins. It neither returns to the dogma of traditional rationalism nor falls into the nihilism of irrationalism. Instead, on the premise of acknowledging the finiteness of reason, it adheres to the defense of individual freedom and dignity by reason, ultimately providing a highly realistic philosophical answer to the existential meaning of modern individuals.

#### 4.2. The perceptual thinking and nihilistic concepts of oriental philosophy

The formation of the ideological thread of Oriental philosophy, especially Japanese philosophy, is deeply influenced and permeated by the interweaving of diverse cultures. The Buddhist view of "impermanence" holds that all things in the world are in a state of birth and death, with no eternal and unchanging entity. This concept of the world's fluidity is reflected in various aspects of Japanese culture. Confucian collectivism emphasizes the individual's responsibility and belonging to the family and community, placing the value of "harmony" above individual will, and shaping society's high regard for "sociability". The native Shintoism, on the other hand, advocates a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, regarding all things in the universe as spiritual beings and encouraging individuals to perceive the rhythm of life in their integration with nature. The integration of these three has given birth to a unique thinking paradigm of Japanese philosophy. It is different from European philosophy in that it does not pursue the rational deconstruction and logical deduction of the world, but pays more attention to the sensory experience of individuals in specific situations, and regards the integration of human beings with nature and society as the ideal state of existence. Under the thinking guidance, an individual's understanding of the world often begins with an intuitive feeling in their heart.

This way of cognition in this cultural context makes the relationship between individuals and the world present a special vulnerability. When setbacks from all aspects of life shatter the appearance of "harmony and unity", what individuals feel is not only the impact of specific events, but also a profound understanding of the essence of "impermanence". The spiritual trajectory of Yozo in Dazai Osamu's works is precisely the tragic manifestation of this cultural gene. Since childhood, he has had a keen insight into the "harmonious appearance" among people, but he has been unable to find a balance between emotional experience and the rules of reality. When he tried to please others with funny performances to maintain "harmony", he felt extremely alienated because he couldn't be



sincerely engaged. When he sought solace in love, his belief in "impermanence" deepened because of the other's betrayal. When he placed his ideals in artistic creation, he began to doubt his own value due to the indifference of society [11]. The requirement of "harmony and unity between the individual and society" in Japanese culture has here transformed into a heavy spiritual shackle. Yozo was neither able to fully integrate into society nor reconcile with it through appropriate means. He could only constantly deplete himself in the aesthetics of mono awareness and nihilism.

## **5. The contemporary significance of the philosophical concepts of the two works in the context of modernity**

### **5.1. Implications for the spiritual predicaments of individuals in modern society**

The philosophical concepts reflected in "The Outsider" and "No Longer Human" offer significant enlightenment for understanding the spiritual predicaments of individuals in modern society. In today's society, people are confronted with numerous pressures such as a fast-paced life, fierce competition, and complex interpersonal relationships. Many people, like Murso and Yozo, feel lonely and lost in the world around them. Only by learning to gain experience from the stories of the two main characters can the philosophical concepts of the two books be reflected in an individual. Murso's spirit of resistance reminds us that even if life is full of absurdity, we should hold fast to ourselves, not be swayed by external pressure and norms, and bravely pursue freedom and truth. Yozo's downfall warns us that we should pay attention to the emotional needs of the individual, actively seek harmonious coexistence with society and others, and avoid falling into the abyss of nihilism.

Facing the predicament of modernization, "The Outsider" and "No Longer Human" do not offer a standard answer. However, their value lies in presenting this predicament, making every person who feels lost in modern society realize that loneliness and struggle are not individual cases but the spiritual pain of The Times. The examination and reflection on an individual's state itself is the beginning of getting out of a difficult situation. The way out of the predicament requires a continuous search by integrating the philosophical theories of different eras with the current situation.

### **5.2. Perspectives for cross-cultural philosophy research**

The two works come from different cultural backgrounds, and the differences in philosophical concepts they embody provide a unique perspective for cross-cultural philosophy research. The Outsider is rooted in the European existentialist tradition, and its philosophical core is characterized by a distinct individualistic feature. The Japanese philosophical traits reflected in "No Longer Human" demonstrate the cognitive logic in East Asian philosophy that "relationships take precedence over the individual". Its perception of the world relies more on emotional resonance rather than rational analysis, and its pursuit of meaning often points to the survival wisdom of "finding a place in compliance". When two philosophical concepts are studied simultaneously, cross-cultural philosophy research acquires a profound value that transcends the "ordinary". The "individual awakening" in European philosophy and the "relational self-awareness" in East Asian philosophy are not two opposing poles, but rather two complementary wisdoms for humanity to deal with the predicament of survival. At the same time, it allows us to see the multiple paths to solve the survival predicament, revealing that the answers to global philosophical issues are never within the

logic of a single culture, but are hidden in the differentiated inquiries of different civilizations about the essence of existence.

## 6. Conclusion

The European philosophy, which is represented by existentialism, emphasizes "the individual's independence from the world", establishes meaning through rational resistance, and its underlying color is an absolute defense of "human subjectivity". The Oriental philosophy takes the integration of Confucianism and Buddhism as its core, emphasizing that "the individual depends on the world", and achieving peace through the integration of emotions or the acceptance of nothingness. Its fundamental feature is a profound reliance on social relationship networks. The collision and exchange of different cultures and philosophical concepts do not mean that one concept replaces another, but rather that a more inclusive ideological system is formed through mutual learning. Combining "rational resistance" with "emotional integration" might lead to a more suitable way of survival for modern individuals, which can not only maintain their independence and dignity but also bring peace and meaning in their connection with the world.

"The Outsider" and "No Longer Human" present the profound differences in philosophical concepts between Asia and Europe in the 1940s in literary form. The absurdity and resistance of European existentialism and the decline and self-denial of Oriental nihilism are all influenced by different cultural roots and historical development contexts. Against the background of modernity where global issues are increasingly prominent, the philosophical concepts carried by the two works still hold significant contemporary value. Despite being in a world of absurdity, Murso never gave up his self-restraint and resisted the pressure and norms of the mundane world. This reminds people in modern society that even if life is full of all kinds of uncertainties and absurdities, one must never easily abandon principles and bottom lines. Yozo's downfall reflects the dangers that individuals may face when they neglect their inner emotional needs and their connection with society is broken. His tragedy warns us that human beings are inherently within society and cannot exist independently of it completely. In modern society, although the independence and freedom of individuals are emphasized, this does not mean cutting off connections with others and society.

These works inspire us to reflect on the way individuals survive in the world and how to seek a common home for the human spirit in the collision and exchange of different cultures. The common destination of the human spirit needs to be explored in the dialogue of multiculturalism. No matter what kind of philosophy it is, its reflection on the relationship between the individual and the world ultimately points to humanity's yearning for a better life and its inquiry into the meaning of existence. As the literary classics of different cultures during the same period, the philosophical concepts carried by "The Outsider" and "No Longer Human" provide valuable ideological resources for this exploration. By delving deeply into and understanding these concepts, we can draw strength from the wisdom of different cultures and jointly address the challenges of modern society. At the same time, the philosophical concepts and spiritual thoughts that have emerged today can also be summarized and organized in the same way. This not only enables a better understanding of reality but also makes outstanding contributions to the further development of humanity.

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