

Sisyphus as a Tragic Hero and the Karmic Philosophy: A Re-Interpretation of the Existential Prototype

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Abstract

The existentialist philosophers like Camus have used the myth of Sisyphus as a prototype of the modern man, who is destined to a fate in which he stands to ultimately lose the game. But, it is also emphasized that the grandeur of the man lies in the brilliance with which he fights and finally falls. At the level of the myth, it appears to be a perfect idea projecting the destiny of mankind, which is rooted in nothingness. But this myth can be understood at another philosophical pedestal as well, comparing it with the Karmic philosophy. This article brings out the philosophy of time which is embedded in this myth and with the help of which, a new dimension can be added to the already prevalent meaning of the myth. Moreover, the article also attempts to find affinity between Sisyphus and the tragic hero, who is another version of the Karmic philosophy.

Keywords: myth, Sisyphus, existentialism, death, time, tragic hero.

The Myth

The Myth of Sisyphus is an article by Albert Camus published in 1942 which introduces his philosophy of the absurd, man's futile search for meaning in an unintelligible world devoid of God and eternal truths and values. Emphasizing 'revolt' rather than 'suicide', Camus goes on to compare the absurdity of man's life with the situation of Sisyphus, a figure of Greek Mythology, who was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll down again. The essay concludes: "The struggle itself is enough ...to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy".

Looking at the myth carefully, it becomes clear that, while Sisyphus stands for the destiny of a man who is in search of meaning, at another level, it can be seen as a complex metaphor for human love for the certain, and fear of the uncertain, unknown, and beyond our grasp. Certainty belongs only to something that has stopped evolving, that has been, and is now placed on a table, beyond any further modification. Or in other words, it can be called past. Past enfolds the reality whose romance has left. Images remain which contain ideas, but ideas as a motivating force have departed. Past is like a boiled vegetable, now fit to be eaten, to give us energy. Past is a storehouse of human desires whose shapes were reduced to reality. The glamour or the romance of passion

has left now. Past is what remains behind. A mass of time. Like a home, which casts its pull on the imagination of people who are enjoying their lives in foreign lands.

If past belongs to the realm of the certain, the future belongs to the unreal estate of uncertainty. It is like stepping out of the warmth of the home. Who wants to take the risk? Isn't it better to be where one is, rather than trying to be what he is not, and, who knows, he will be, or won't be, what he wants to be. Future is a mirage. A conundrum. A mess up of possibilities. Past is the dried up cake, fit to be eaten up. But present is there which is to be dressed like meat. And as we tread on the stomach of the present, and think we are going into future, actually we are treading on the past. Our movement forward is not possible without a reference to the past. No one can move on one foot alone. Of our two feet, one stays behind, while the other goes forward. It is a sort of a reconnaissance mission. As soon as the step going forward is firmly settled, message goes around to the other one, to charge up. We never move out of our past. In fact, past is always in the progressive tense. As you are moving into future, you are creating nothing but past. Look at a man extracting juice from apples. The roughage that flushes out of the juice machine, is the past, the juice the present, and the man who will drink it, is the uncertain future.

Time as the Connecting Link

It appears that the boulder has a unique significance, more than being a physical entity, it has to be perceived as the present, and the man is sentenced to push it upwards towards an uncertain future, but it slides down into the past. The two states of the present and the future are illusory, shapeless, and uncertain, whereas the state of the past is more pervasive. Here, the boulder projects the idea of the present being prone to either being pushed into future or allowed to slide back into the past. And man remains caught in this back and forth movement of time. The present which has to be pushed into the future has a natural tendency, if not forced up, to glide into the past.

The present is what is in the hands of man, but it is also an illusory entity. The boulder is the present moment, which is charged with such speed, that it takes no time to die, and live only in the past. How many moments can be trapped in the boulder of the present? And it is all an uphill task. Beyond the summit, you can't see anything. And, certainly, beyond the summit, there is a fling back across the top. The valley. The Abyss. The Unknown. In fact, the boulder is pitched between the two unknowns. One is the past, some of which he knows, just the recent past, but, he is absolutely unaware of the unknown lying next door. So, one finds the present moving forward only with a pushed on motion, unwilling and in a state of shocked surprise.

This idea contravenes the general assumption that men always look forward with hope to accomplish things left half done and it is hope which colors the future with rainbow colors. The fact is that such behavior shows how ignorant man is of the essential movement of time. He is

sitting in a train, scarcely knowing how small tools working in a mechanism, and moving in sync, carry him along over long journeys. Here, we are dealing with the internal dynamics of time. How moments move, how fast they are, yet it is the human mind which forces them up, and they slide from his hands into the used up things, thrown into the basket of the past.

Deleuze who introduces the idea of time in critical appreciation can help elucidate this theory. Not only literary creation, even the real human actions are under the spell of time. Time is what gives life to things, and then, destroys them. Time is the agent of cosmic powers who wish to govern the human mind with its threatening sickle. Like Janus, time too is double-faced. It reflects January, the beginning of life, as well as December, the end. Things are made up, and they fall into the spell of time. Sisyphus too is under this spell. He is born to be destroyed sooner or later. But how to mark this intervening time? Before the present turns past, and the future flies in, he has to do something. In the absence of clarity of vision, he is just dragging on. Going up, and sliding back.

Sisyphus

Looking at this posturing of time, and the absurdity of human action, it can be surmised that life is a sentence. Man did not want it. It was imposed upon him. Looking at the philosophy of 'Karma' propounded by Lord Krishna, life after life after life is the result of human action. Undirected unawakened action leads to life after life, and suffering after suffering. Unless man, by his action, can deliver himself from this cycle of time, which takes him in cyclic moves. So, up to that time, he is trapped in the cycle of life and death. He has to be born, to grow up, and has to suffer and die. And, the absurdity of his situation lies in the fact that he is unaware of the internal dynamics of his human condition. He is engaged in pushing up a boulder, which slides down. He pushes it up. And it goes down again. He cannot detach himself from this destiny. Camus, perhaps, never knew that he was foraying into Hindu philosophy of 'Karma'. What has bound Sisyphus? Greeks might believe it is the angry gods. But, the theory of Karma believes that he is there because of himself. And, he is bound in this meaningless activity, of life after life, death after death, because, he is unaware, unawakened, a fused bulb which cannot house the electric current, and light up.

Men, in general, have no such philosophical leanings, except an overpowering feeling that all suffering is God-given. It is destiny. It is fate ruling the human beings. Or at the most, we can think of furies. In case of Oedipus, the Rex, the entire focus of Greek philosophy is on Fate, which wanted to teach him a lesson. Why the Fate was so unkind to him? How had he earned the rage and rancor of the Fate? These questions need a philosophical enquiry and wait for an Indian scholar to go into these causes of his suffering. Because, no doubt, it appears that gods are angry with man, and are punishing him, by inflicting suffering on him, who can deny that God is a kind father?

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

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Why will He inflict suffering on his sons and daughters unless they have done some grievous wrong? Herein lies a link to the suffering of Oedipus. Herein also lies the link to the absurdity that Camus talks of in case of Sisyphus.

The Existential Hero

‘Karmic’ philosophy and Aristotle’s concept of the tragic hero, more specifically what Shakespeare thinks, appear to be congruent, when we consider Sisyphus as the existential hero. Tragic hero is essentially a man, from high strata, who has a maddening passion, or a vaulting ambition, as a result of which, he suffers from ‘hamartia’, and takes a wrong decision, after which, his entire life is full of suffering. Suffering is the subject of this story. Why suffering? As a result of an action which is determined by a flaw in the character. This is where Shakespeare differs from the Greek tragedians, who put Fate in a dominant role dispensing good or evil to man. Sisyphus represents the man who signifies to the whole modern world its absolute meaninglessness. What is the meaning that the past holds for man? Perhaps, past is the story of human failures. And, it is only in future that the hope lies. But human mind finds the movement forward, very difficult, and that is why, it finds it easy to slide back.

It is often said that distance lends charm to things which are otherwise prosaic. The past too envisages an invisible border which divides the now and the then. The distance between the living present and the apparently dead but seething past helps human mind to grow fond for its memories. In the past, we have seen people reveling even while describing tragedies. Past is homely, and this homeward motion is most natural, even when a boulder is pushed up with force.

Giving a new orientation to the past, redefining the systems already prevalent, can give a new dimension and a new meaning to life. But, is man aware of it? He is pushing on with time, with his life, and it is only suffering; still he is bound to this movement, he has no will, nor any power, to deliver himself from this existential trap. Herein lies sympathy for the tragic hero. Tragedy is writ large on the walls encircling human existence. Defeat is pre-written, and the beauty of a man’s life lies in making this defeat meaningful. So that, the dead bones leave a story behind. Doing something other than merely dying by inches. Doing good. Living good. Thinking good. Being good. These are the essential questions before the existential hero bewitched by the idea of life.

Conclusion

The article amalgamates the existentialist ideas of Camus, the idea of absurdity of human action, with the ‘Karmic’ (action) philosophy of Lord Krishna and comes up with a fresh perspective on the Absurd. It is not difficult to apply Aristotle’s idea of the tragic hero to Sisyphus, because, even ‘Karmic’ philosophy believes in the theory of action. And, as discussed above, tragic

hero also emerges out of the 'karmic' considerations. He is responsible for his actions. And his action bring ruin upon him. Thus, it can be safely argued that the trap Sisyphus is in, makes him a tragic hero, because, much less than being a sentence, it is a self-inflicted punishment. If it is suffering, it is never unmerited. The article also tries to re-evaluate the idea of Fate in the context of eastern philosophy. There is no evil fate waiting to waylay a good human being. Sisyphus is a construction of time. It is a collision of tenses. Man's mind is the real stage on which the time dies.

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