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Pakistani Sisyphean Heroes in Taufiq Rafat's *Foothold*

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Abstract

The protagonist of *Foothold*, Saleem, wanders off into the wilderness to seek faith like Buddha. He does not give up his quest as he returns home to his family and friends, and learns that faith can be found and practised amongst his community. A close reading of the text proves that Saleem bears the qualities of a Sisyphean Hero as outlined by Albert Camus. Other characters have also been subjected to a similar scrutiny to prove whether they are Sisyphean Heroes or not. Furthermore, the close reading of *Foothold* renders an insight into the generation of the Sixties who experienced decolonization and felt like misfits in their own environment. Saleem is acutely affected by the process of decolonization and hence, he is deeply puzzled with the institutionalized religion in Pakistan. To shape the theoretical framework of this research, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, *The Stranger*, and *A Happy Death* have been used. As there is a dearth of criticism on *Foothold* therefore, the interpretations for this research have been derived from Camus' works. This research will be beneficial to those researchers who wish to study the application of Camus' works in a postcolonial setting. Moreover, the scope of this project extends to Sufism, Mysticism, and Imagism.

Keywords: Existentialism, *Foothold*, Sisyphean Heroes, Sufism, Mysticism, Realization

Taufiq Rafat is known for his poetry and he is credited for postulating the concept of the "Pakistani Idiom", his unpublished play *Foothold*, which is Pakistan's first full length English play, remains largely ignored. Though, it remains unpublished it has been performed thrice. The first performance was in 1969. The second time, students of National College of Arts (Rawalpindi Campus) held a dramatic reading. The most recent production was an

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edited version performed by student members of the Najamuddin Dramatic Society, Kinnaird College in 2015.

Regarding the question about struggle to live or to quit, Camus says in *Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, “Now, to limit myself to existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest escape” (19). This demonstrates that in essence, the real effort lies in standing upright in the face of absurdity, and continuing to live in “chaos” is indeed a quality which can be deemed as heroic. For this purpose Camus chooses the figure of Sisyphus who is condemned to roll the boulder up the hill, only to watch it roll down. In this regard, Philip Villamor, an educationist at Imperial County, California, says, “Imagining this perfunctory punishment gives Camus the opportunity to ponder the pause of Sisyphus at the top of the mountain, and assert that his conscious decision to return to the struggle for its own sake makes him the absurd hero”. Sisyphus, therefore, emerges as an absurd hero for Camus, as he has embraced the absurdity of his situation.

The focus should not be the fact that he is engaged in a fruitless, futile, and repetitive task. The focus should be the fact that he manages to get the boulder uphill, so, if the boulder reaches from point A to point B, it indicates that the mission has been accomplished. From this perspective, Sisyphus’ situation does not look miserable rather, he becomes an absurd hero.

This attitude towards life leads to the fourth key term of this research study: Sisyphus Hero. Camus has raised the stature of Sisyphus, a Greek mortal, who is condemned by the gods to roll the boulder up a hill, only to view it falling back. This was a punishment for him, as he disobeyed the gods and challenged their authority. Traditionally, Sisyphus is seen as a tragic figure who is engaged in a fruitless and futile struggle (49). However, Camus also holds that:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (70)

Therefore, Camus inverts the myth that Sisyphus was a Tragic Hero. He maintains that if he is tragic, it is only because he is conscious of his labour. This labour is as absurd as that of labourers of today, who continue to do the same tasks which they have been doing for a countless period of time. This settles the monotony in life, which may lead to alienation, and anguish. However, it is also to be noted that in a monotonous routine, the mind is also numb. If the mind is not numb, and is constantly struggling for “will to happiness” as Meursault says in *A Happy Death*, then the cyclical pattern of the same tasks does not turn into alienation, and anguish.

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Camus further says, “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up” (72). In doing so, Sisyphus does not give in to the punishment given to him by the gods, giving in would mean surrendering, which is equal to committing suicide. The Sisyphian Hero therefore, keeps struggling in the face of endless tasks, embracing the absurd.

Meursault in *The Stranger* is a Sisyphian Hero, as he accepts the murder which he has committed. However, it is important to notice that he is reconciled with the universe for the first time, as the last few lines of *The Stranger* say, “. . . for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly, made me realize that I’d been happy, and that I was happy still” (76). Meursault has gone through various events before he comes to this conclusion. It is to be remembered that he is completely alienated in the beginning of the novel, where it starts with the death of his mother and he cannot recall whether she had died yesterday or the day before yesterday. From alienation to acceptance, Meursault embraces the absurdity of life, and it does not matter that he came to this level of acceptance near his death. The point is that he embraces the absurdity of life.

Regarding the hopeful countenance of Sisyphus, when he beholds the boulder rolling down the hill, Phillip Villamor says:

Like many a mortal, Sisyphus has hope. He has hope precisely because of the beauty and freedom he has had time to experience on earth, and has developed a belief (the truth of which does not matter) that, somehow, there must be a way to make the experience last forever.

This unrelenting struggle indeed is the characteristic trait of the Sisyphian Hero, despite the fact that they are condemned to do the same tasks endlessly. The real struggle is to distinguish between the mechanical way of life and embracing the absurd. Embracing the absurd implies that the human mind is not numb and the same tasks are done consciously, remembering that to remain alive and to struggle is the key to happiness.

Camus also talks about the idea and interconnectedness of happiness and absurd as, “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. . . It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness” (72). The two are related and it is true that the absurd springs from happiness. This logic may be true, as when one is confined to anguish and despair, there lingers a hope, a hope to be happy. The struggle therefore sets off, the will for happiness. And if happiness is the peak of a mountain, when the destination is reached, perhaps, hopes fall, just like the boulder of Sisyphus, which falls back after it has reached its limit. In this way, Sisyphus does not seem as a tragic hero, rather, a practical person who is engaged in a cyclical struggle.

Regarding the unending struggle and the fruitlessness of the labour of Sisyphus, as identified in Greek myths, Camus has reversed the idea that Sisyphus is condemned to push

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the boulder up the hill, and to see it rolling down. However, there are no accounts as to the aspect that Sisyphus is tied in chains and a man with a whiplash is keeping him in check. It is interpreted that Sisyphus has accepted this task willingly. Otherwise it seems that he has the choice to sit and not roll the boulder up the hill at all as no guard is set upon him. In this regard, he is different from The Unknown Citizen, as presented in W. H. Auden's poem "The Unknown Citizen". The Unknown Citizen has performed all those acts which are deemed necessary by the State. On the other hand, Sisyphus had defied the gods, but Camus has raised his stature as a hero. Also, accepting the unending and seemingly fruitless task willingly is a quality of Sisyphus. As he continues to labour, he does not give up his struggles, and thus, makes the fruitless task into a fruitful one.

It is an integral aspect in *Foothold*, whether Saleem emerges as a Sisyphean Hero by the end of the play or not. Also, this play does not only focus on his journey, but also the journeys of the two Disciples. It would also be discussed in this research, whether their journeys bore fruit or were they a waste of time. Apart from this aspect, other characters such as the Station Master and the Vendor would be discussed as Sisyphean Heroes in *Foothold*.

Saleem, the protagonist of *Foothold*, goes on a six year journey to "seek faith" (1.2.36). The question is, how can he seek faith in the wilderness? Probably like the saints and prophets. However, unlike the prophets or saints, Saleem cannot guide his disciples. He advises them as:

SALEEM. There's nothing more to give. The race is cancelled because the going is uncertain. All bets are off. Go back to your village, my farmer friend, and you to your office. (1.1. 10)

Transcendence only comes with acceptance of their circumstances and the will to face them. One may hope to transcend his circumstances by seeking a solution within their sphere of life, and not outside of it. It is only by the end of the play, when Station Master gives them the same advice, but in a simpler language:

STATION MASTER. Go back. There is no sense in scampering like a dog behind a car, and seeing hope disappear like a tail-light. (3.1.87)

The Station Master has "two wives and four impossible daughters" (2.1.55). His wisdom unveils as the play proceeds. However, he denies being wise and thereby, is reluctant to give advice to the two Disciples at first:

STATION MASTER. I? A guide? You can see that she who knows me, is laughing at the idea. One should seek counsel from a man who has married off all his daughters. And I am just an old simpleton as I have said. I cannot give you a book of rules on how to be happy. (2.1.55)

Though, he dismisses the fact that he is wise and is hesitant to advice the two of them, eventually, it his advice upon which the two of them act in Act 3. It has already been discussed, both the disciples know that they have to "exorcise the ghost" (1.1.12), they are afraid to take the plunge. They embrace their absurd situations, which will not end their

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problems. However, a true Sisyphean Hero knows that there is no end, the struggle must go on.

Moreover, Station Master can give better advice because of his experiences in life. The same cannot be expected of Saleem because his journey is ongoing. The Station Master does not acknowledge himself to be a wise man, and it is his humility, which raises his stature as a true guide:

STATION MASTER. . . . and while we are trying our damndest we might as well be happy. A longer face will not carry us further. You are smiling. I'm a simple man with little knowledge, and knowledge adds to my simplicity. I'm a humble man with responsibilities.

PEASANT WOMAN. Four, grown, unmarried daughters.

STATION MASTER. And these confirm me in my humility. (2.1.54)

These dialogues signify the Station Master as a Sisyphean Hero as he has accepted his worldly responsibilities, and that he has not only to bear them, but fulfil his duties as best as he can. Also, he does not shy away from his duty as a father of four daughters nor does he refer to them as a burden, anywhere in the text. Just as Sisyphus knows that the boulder signifies his unending task, the Station Master also realizes that his responsibilities towards his daughters and wives, are not easy:

STATION MASTER. Hush, not so loud when you praise my wisdom. It's a well kept secret. (3.1.85)

It is interpreted that the Station Master is a prudent man in the traditional mould, who imparts his wisdom to only those only who are in dire need and most importantly, who ask for it. If he were to bestow his pearls of wisdom on everyone, his words would fall on deaf ears. This also establishes him as an understanding individual who acts as a true guide for the Disciples and Saleem.

The Vendor's biographical information is not provided in *Foothold* and his character serves as a comic relief, reminiscent of the role of a jester in Shakespearean plays. He is also the one who brings news of a murder in the village in Act 1, and so introduces a new thread in the text. The news also greatly alarms the 1st Disciple (as he is running from the law). The Vendor is also the only character who can debate with the Station Master, whom others see as a sage:

STATION MASTER. A cigarette, Laloo.

VENDOR. Here. The day you decide to buy a packet, the sun will rise from the West.

STATION MASTER. You know me, Laloo. One at a time is my motto.

VENDOR. And an excellent one which you have always observed except in the case of matrimony. (1.1.10)

The Vendor perceives all the characters as they truly are, as does the Station Master. In spite of his wisdom the Station Master he is not without his flaws. From the above cited dialogues, it is interpreted that the Vendor has a sharp tongue and an equally sharp mind as he picks faults in the behaviour of the Station Master. These dialogues exhibit his quality as a

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discerning individual, one who understands the struggles of life, yet he has the capacity to face them, and yet, not give up in the face of extreme challenges.

He has not been given as many dialogues as the Station Master, but that does not mean that he is not a wise man. Indeed, he is a Sisyphean as he struggles with the absurdity of life, and does not abdicate from his struggles. Consider the following dialogues:

STATION MASTER. I'm not sure what's done this to you, angling for fish that don't [*sic*] exist, or vending cigarettes that won't sell?

VENDOR. I'm perfectly clear in my mind about this; you can't confuse me. The weather is neither good or bad. What's good for the mangoes is bad for fish. (3.1.84)

The Vendor has not kept all his eggs in one basket. He has means of survival for all seasons. He has an orchard which would bloom and bear fruit in the rainy season. He would catch for fish in the dry season. And in all seasons, he remains a Vendor. All these activities of the Vendor are not merely means of earning money and surviving. They allow him to experience different kinds of lifestyle. This enriches his understanding of the world and of life itself. He is seen to be juggling all the balls. He has embraced the absurdity of life that it is not the same at all times. Instead, he has learned the art of adapting to the changes in life and living life, rather than deciding to quit it when he cannot sell cigarettes, or angle for fish.

Saleem and his journey have been elaborately discussed in this text. Saleem has everything to make him contented: a good government job, caring friends, and a fiancé. In the village he has a mother, whom he financially supports. However, Saleem is discontented with this life as he does not connect to his surroundings. He feels alienated in his own environment. He blames his parents for his condition:

SALEEM. Most of our frustration is a result of our foolish upbringing. We think and speak more readily in a foreign language. That is not a matter for pride. We despise our own traditions. That is not a matter for pride either. But it's upto us to change all that and adapt ourselves to the new conditions. . . (1.2.29)

“Change” is the key word here. Saleem wants to change his state of frustration and replace it with peace. This is not an easy task as he utters “I am different, therefore doomed” (1.1.7). This feeling of doom has emerged as he has been wandering from six years and is unable to reach a conclusion, to find a foothold.

Through this dialogue, it is evident that Saleem wants to shake off the garb of the grafted culture of the mission schools, which taught them a language and traditions of a foreign country. After the British left the subcontinent, the situation became absurd for people like Saleem, who had been preparing to work and live with the British. This instability that followed Independence has also seeped into civil life, and is a constant source of unease. Therefore, the conflicts of the world have been internalised in the characters of Saleem and Ali. Though, Mustafa has been to the same school as them, he does not suffer from the same problems of frustration as they do.

It may seem that Saleem's journey was a waste of time after all, as he came back to his old life. But, that is not true. Saleem has his own journey to complete and no matter how

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much his mother lectures him about faith, Saleem has to undertake the journey himself, as he says:

SALEEM. I must prove it myself. (2.2.73)

This is the characteristic of a Sisyphian Hero: he knows what might be the end, yet he ventures to seek the end himself. Saleem had merely ideas about faith, glorified ideas about seeking faith in the wilderness. But he goes forth nevertheless. It is detrimental to his mental health, but if he does not go on his quest, he would always regret it. He explains his situation to Ali: "SALEEM. I'm a misfit here". (1.2.28)

He would always be a misfit if he does not seek faith in the way he has planned. He further says:

SALEEM. I've no idea what I seek, but I shall never be happy until I do find it. (1.2.34)

This dialogue establishes the urgency of his need. This is not ambition. It is an essential journey which must be undertaken to ensure that Saleem gains peace of heart. As such Saleem's journey is not a waste of time. It is essential to reconcile him to his own surroundings, and most importantly to himself.

Saleem has his doubts during the journey, that he is different and therefore doomed. His feeling of doom springs from the apprehension that he may not find a substantial conclusion, to end his journey. In this context, substantial implies enlightenment. As Saleem sets forth for his quest, it is interpreted that he expected to arrive at something larger than life. He does find enlightenment, but that is not larger than life. It is, to go back and assimilate in his surroundings, and become a useful member of a society. That means a balance between secular and spiritual life would be achieved. Therefore, it is essential for Saleem to come full circle; to undertake this spiritual journey, and to return home:

SALEEM. I stand rebuked. And yet how far this is from what I dreamt. I have learned to envy those who do not think beyond necessity, whose faith is embedded in the clear print of the scriptures. (2.1.56)

It is clear from his previous argument with his mother that religion is not merely following the daily rituals of prayers, and going for pilgrimage. It is something more, and this something other than what is written in the scripture is what Saleem seeks. It is important to notice that Saleem is seeking faith not in the religious sense, but in the spiritual sense. This is evident from the first scene of the play where it begins with a muezzin's call. If Saleem was seeking faith in the religious sense, he would have gone to offer prayers. Instead he philosophizes about the sun falling behind the hills. Moreover, the Station Master provides a solution to his anguish as Saleem cannot find faith from the "clear print of the scripture":

STATION MASTER. You seek a faith outside experience and analysis; but all the faith you need is in the Book, a beginning and a way. The foolish climber makes no preparation and tries to reach the top in leaps and bounds. Men who conquer mountains begin on hills. There's no short cut to faith. (3.3.117)

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The Station Master identifies the loopholes of Saleem's dream that this six-year journey would quench the thirst for transcendence. He portrays the entire journey of seeking faith, a life-long process, and even then there is no end to this path. His metaphor of leaping on the mountain being unprepared is apt in Saleem's situation as Saleem sought faith, and that too in the wilderness. He presumed that he would find it there. Contrary to his plan, faith and peace was to be found where he belongs. This was a shortcut that he was seeking, and the Station Master highlights that it cannot be so. In fact, it is a lifelong process and in doing so, he should neither neglect his worldly life, nor his responsibilities.

Although, Saleem is a Sisyphean Hero, he is not without his flaws. He asks Mustafa to take care of his mother in his absence, whereas it is his responsibility. However, it is this responsibility which prods him back after six years. According to Camus' conception, a Sisyphean Hero's strength lies in the unending struggle, as he refuses to give up and strives to roll the boulder up, only to watch it falling down. However, this suggests movement, which is better than being static. It may be argued that since it is endless, this task is fruitless. However, it does have an end which comes when one dies naturally. And this task is fruitful because the searcher takes responsibility to roll the boulder up with all his might, and this is within his reach, this is possible.

Not only the characters, but the play's structure is also a journey uphill and downhill in the sequence of scenes presented. *Foothold* begins at the railway station, which shows the present time. Scene 2 in Act 1, is a scene from the past, six years before Saleem decides to seek faith. The past scenes are set in Mustafa's drawing room. The play follows the same sequence in all the three Acts. The fluctuation of time and setting bears a similarity to the journey of Sisyphus, as the boulder is pushed up the hill, but it also falls back.

In this research both the Disciples, the Station Master, the Vendor, and Saleem have been interpreted to be Sisyphean Heroes. However, Mustafa, Ali, and Nasreen, in contrast, display no Sisyphean qualities. Mustafa does not ponder over the baggage of his past and does not have to struggle to prove himself either to the world or himself. Ali, on the other hand, has a deep understanding of this world and is acutely aware of his frustrations which he puts on the canvas. But he gives up painting, the thing in which he has faith, and soon commits suicide. Nasreen's case is different from these two. She neither thinks, nor considers spiritual aspects, but perceives the world as it is. She only thinks of ways to climb the social ladder. That is why she decides to marry Saleem. It has been postulated earlier that had she been really in love with Saleem, she would not have cheated on him in his absence.

A Sisyphean character is capable of understanding the complexities of life, and embraces the incomprehensible nature of this universe, as well as his life. However, it is proposed in this dissertation that a Sisyphean character also does not shirk from his duties and responsibilities. It is also posited that a Sisyphean hero is willing to struggle, which means that they will not give up.

It is postulated that the Station Master must have gone through a similar cycle like that of Saleem, and he may have come to the conclusion that faith indeed is balance. Since,

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no biographical information has been presented in the play of the Vendor, the same cannot be assumed for him. However, his understanding of life in its various shades is reflected through his dialogues, “. . . What’s good for the mangoes is bad for fish” (3.1.84). Saleem and the Disciples also go through a journey which changes them, and this change would be useful to them when they would return. Through these postulates, it is concluded that the Station Master, Vendor, Saleem, and the Disciples bear Sisyphean qualities.

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