

Publications

Tragic Optimism as a Tool in Discovering Meaning: A Probe into the Life of the Protagonist Janaki in *The Silent Raga*

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Abstract:

The Silent Raga is a novel by Ameen Merchant which depicts the life of a Tamil Brahmin girl named Janaki. In the novel, she is portrayed as someone who overcomes the tragic triad of pain, guilt and death as delineated by Viktor Frankl in his theory titled Logotherapy, by adopting tragic optimism, that is, by remaining optimistic in the wake of tragedy. Death of her mother and assuming the role of her mother thereafter, being privy to the fact of the scandalous relationship between her aunt and her father, facing constant mudslinging and being ostracized by the family and community as a result of eloping with a married Muslim man are the gamut of incidents that dot her life in this novel. The stoicism with which she faces these situations and the meaning she thereby succeeds in unraveling after surpassing the tragic triad is the crux of the research paper.

Key words: Tragic triad, Tragic optimism, Logotherapy

Tragic Optimism as a Tool in Discovering Meaning: A Study of the Character Janaki in *The Silent Raga*

Logotherapy is a therapy advocated by the neurologist Viktor.E.Frankl. According to logotherapy, meaning has a paramount role to play in an individual's life. Frankl has stated that the attitude a person develops during times of trials and tribulations enables him to unveil the meaning behind his suffering. He has delineated the concept of tragic triad comprising of pain, guilt and death and has asserted the importance of overcoming them by means of tragic optimism. Tragic optimism is the state of retaining sanguinity during tragic circumstances and thereby unmasking and ingraining the meaning taught by the tragic triad instead of focusing on the tragedy and slipping into a state of depression and anguish.

Janaki is the protagonist of the novel *The Silent Raga* by Ameen Merchant. Janaki was forced to drop out of school at the age of thirteen in order to take over the reins of the household after the untimely death of her mother. Precisely at that time, she discovered the scandalous relationship between her father and her mother's sister named Gayatri. At that juncture realization dawned upon Janaki and she learnt that women were valued as nothing more than homegrown and domesticated beings, always at everyone's disposal. She also learnt that women could be replaced immediately. "Amma out, Gayatri in. Amma out, Janaki in. Janaki out, Mallika in" (SR 47).

Janaki was the namesake of a character from the Indian mythology *Ramayana*, who crossed impalpable limits in obedience and subservience. However, Janaki was made of sterner stuff and she made a clear-headed decision as to never take her mother for a role-model. She decided that she would never acquiesce and endure as much as her mother did.

Janaki turned to music and it was music that provided her the required solace during the dreary hours in her maternal home after her mother's death. She continued to attend veena classes even after being pulled out of school. She used to complete her household chores earlier in order to listen to the radio and immerse herself in music.

Janaki encountered the death of her mother at an early age and experienced the pain that ensued from it. However, she did not allow this tragedy to shatter her and learnt all the household chores diligently in order to take care of her father and her younger sister Mallika. She thereby gave a meaning to her life by filling her mother's shoes instead of harbouring vindictive feelings towards her father for asking her to quit her education or her aunt for being instrumental in the decision. She began discovering joy and fulfillment in the chores she had to do anyway. She thereby developed the attitude of doing it ungrudgingly and eventually found her duties meaningful and thereby emerged out of the tragedy as a classic paradigm of tragic optimism.

Although I had assumed the role of a cook without much say in the matter, over the years I had grown to enjoy it. A well-prepared meal I discovered was like a finely elaborated raga. They both stirred the soul and evoked emotions that escaped words. (SR 117)

Unlike other girls of her age and circumstances, Janaki did not succumb to the pressure of marital proposals that came her way via Gayatri Chitti. She warded off all the alliances by creating a bad impression about her culinary and musical skills in front of her prospective in-laws. Finally, she ended up falling in love with a Muslim film star named Asgar, who was already married. This created a massive scandal and generated many sensational articles in the newspapers. However, Janaki was not penitent about her deed as is evident in the letter she left for Mallika, wherein, she stated that she would not apologize as she had not done anything wrong. She firmly believed that she had the right to live life on her own terms, even if that meant, differing from the beaten track that Sripuram ladies tread upon. She ended up being ostracized by her family, friends and society after this outrageous act and everyone severed the ties they had with her. Revathi's mother strictly forbade Janaki from contacting her daughter, as her marriage to Asgar had made her tantamount to a slattern.

Mallika, who was Janaki's younger sister, severed all ties with Janaki after her elopement, dutifully obeying her father's words. The numerous sacrifices her sister had to make on her behalf failed to stir any gratitude in her. The fact that Janaki pursued her dreams and chased her own happiness was indigestible even for an educated lady like Mallika. Even when Janaki expressed her desire to meet her after a decade, Mallika was hesitant, as her mind was infused by the ideology that women should never break open the cage and fly away no matter how traumatic it is.

The pain of being ostracized did not put her into the groove of negative thinking. She did not lose a moment raving about the ungratefulness of her sister whom she had tended to, from the time Mallika was barely six years old. She had to forgo her education so that Mallika could carry on with hers, without any impediments. She had shielded Mallika from the ignominy that would arise once she learnt about the true nature of her father and her aunt. In short, Janaki paid meticulous attention in warding off every single undesirable incident and information that might be hurled in Mallika's way. However, she could not count on her support or procure her forgiveness even a decade after her elopement.

Janaki committed to educating herself, teaching music and bringing up her twins. Her piety towards music made her so famous that her picture adorned the front covers of a magazine, which had hitherto featured great writers, politicians, film stars and writers. She did not entertain the idea of being carried away on a guilt trip as she believed in her decision and took responsibility for it. She even bonded with Asgar's wheel-chair bound first wife Zubeida and treated her as a sister. To adumbrate, she did not regret her decision throughout her life and instead, lived up to it judiciously. She fulfilled the roles that life had entrusted her with, with utmost dedication and sense of responsibility. She played a pivotal role in bringing up her younger sister, cared for the creature comforts of her father, been a dutiful wife to Asgar and a virtuoso who empowered her students to an extent that enabled them to represent the nation on global platforms. Janaki thereby succeeded in overcoming the tragic triad of pain, guilt and death by unflinchingly adhering to tragic optimism.

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Dereflect to Reinvent Self: A Study of *Eat, Pray, Love*

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Abstract:

The memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* portrays the life of an American woman in her mid-thirties, nursing her heart after a divorce and a mindless love-affair that followed in quick succession. The protagonist overcomes the emotional and psychological trauma she faced post- divorce, by visiting three countries namely; Italy, India and Indonesia. The voyage prevented her from speculating on her traumatic past and thereby served the purpose of *dereflection*, a tool used in Logotherapy to divert one's attention from the problem. The journey, thereby, enabled her to set out on the path to self-actualization, as is revealed by her choice of nations-the names of which begin with the letter I.

Key words:Dereflection, Logotherapy, self-actualization

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Dereflection is a term introduced by Victor Frankl in a theory propounded by him named Logotherapy. Dereflection is used when a person is overly self-absorbed on an issue, which is termed as hyper- intention. When a person tends to focus excessively on an issue, they tend to miss out on the positive aspects of their lives and thereby sentence themselves to a life of everlasting drudgery. The antidote to hyper- intention isdereflection, wherein the person shifts the focus away from themselves or the problem at hand, to something or someone that makes them feel more purposeful, thereby reverting them back to living a meaningful life. Hyper- intention can have dangerous consequences as the person might end up feeling worthless and eventually contemplate suicide. Dereflection comes to the rescue during such instances of crisis.

The memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* is a compendium ofthe experiences of Elizabeth Gilbert, a woman in her mid-thirties, nursing her heart after a devastating, interminable divorce and a mindless love-affair that followed in quick succession. The title of the novel indicates the tools she employed to dereflect her attention from her devastating divorce, a double heart break and her inability to locate herself in the society.

Elizabeth belonged to a family where everyone had a life charted out neatly and was devoid of any form of confusion. During any get-together, everyone knew where they belonged. However, as a divorced and childless woman, she found herself lost in such social gatherings. Moreover, her family had always sought satisfaction in bearing and raising children and attained a sense of purpose, when they discovered that their children had settled in life. Elizabeth realized that if she tried viewing her life through the prism of societal norms, her life would appear meaningless. In order to overcome the sense of loneliness she was experiencing after her nerve -wrecking divorce, she plunged into another relationship with an attractive man named David with whom, she was madly in love. However, once they attained the crescendo of euphoria in their love life, their relationship that was built on shaky foundations found itself on the rocks. She began speculating on what was possibly wrong, as she had

done everything in her power to make the relationship work. She was the kind of person, who would give all her time, attention and money to the other person, thereby draining herself to such an extent that she became haggard and lost all her enthusiasm. This alteration in her personality would repel her partner away, which would make her shake with trepidation at the prospect of getting separated from her beloved. She would then become clingy, making matters worse and drive her partner further away from her. After reaching the saturation point, she would give up trying, which would restore her aura of happiness and would once again attract her partner towards her, thereby trapping her in a vicious cycle. However, both David and Elizabeth did not desire to give up on each other and thereby persevered in making the relationship work. They decided to remain separate for some time in order to strengthen their relationship.

It was at this juncture, when Elizabeth was drained financially and emotionally due to her divorce and the rupture in her relation with David that she decided to embark on voyage to Italy, India and Indonesia. She realized that she had hit the nadir in her life and had to work on mending herself and understand her true nature in order to arrive at a permanent solution. She decided to shift the focus from the issues that had been pulverizing her and dive into the pleasure of indulging in activities that struck a chord with her. She decided to take a break for a year and spend four months each in Italy, India and Indonesia respectively. Ironically, the names of the three countries started with the letter 'I' which symbolized that she had actually commenced on a quest for self-actualization.

Her decision to visit Italy was made on the grounds of her love for the Italian language. She wanted to savour the language by remaining in a country where Italian is ubiquitous. She felt as if everyone in the universe was conspiring to fulfill her desire to learn Italian. Learning a language proved to be beneficial in channelizing her attention away from her divorce and David. She then used food as another tool of dereflection. She began to drown herself in the gastronomic pleasures of relishing delicious food and pampered her taste buds to such an extent that her grief-stricken lanky body turned rotund. The change in her lifestyle altered her appearance which made her feel like a different person.

The lesson she learnt in Italy was *Bel far niente* which translates into 'the beauty of doing nothing'. According to the Italians, the goal of all work is to end up experiencing the beauty of doing nothing and it is an accomplishment. She realized that Italians valued pleasure immensely, as the concept of *Bel far niente* was ingrained in their collective consciousness and thereby, they never experienced the urge to remain busy round the clock.

Another insight she received in Italy was that, every person had a word for themselves and one should strive to find the word that suited them the best and get aligned to it in order to feel fulfilled. Elizabeth racked her brains to get hold of that word but to no avail. She thereby decided to be on the look out of that word and grapple it the moment she came across the same. Moreover, the realization that David and she would never be happy together dawned upon her in Italy, after she had spent a considerable amount of time in dereflection. She realized that she could find happiness without him and since she loved him in a sickeningly excessive manner, their relationship would always remain strained and therefore it was infructuous to hope for a compatible relationship. She thereby sent him an email stating that she desired to end their relation to which he readily agreed.

The next part of her journey was to India and the methods she employed for dereflection were prayer and meditation. Her constant practice of yoga and meditation enabled her to forgive herself and her ex-husband. She was even able to let go off the emotional pangs that made her yearn for David, as she realized that his purpose in her life was to make her so uncomfortable being her usual self, that she would be forced to reinvent herself. It was through him that she learnt of the ashram in India, in which she now resided. His role was to enable her to get into touch with a part of her own veiled higher self and having accomplished that, she felt that it was time for him to leave her mind. She left India having forgiven herself, the people who caused her misery and with the knowledge that the reservoir of happiness lied within her and she did not have to beg for it from other people. India also brought home the fact that she was a complete person and did not require any extraneous being to complete her. Moreover, she found the word that described her- *Antevasin* which meant, 'one who lives at the border'. Elizabeth realized that she neither wanted to seek pleasure mindlessly nor remain abstemious. She wanted to be somewhere between the two and therefore the word was a perfect fit for her. She wanted to live her life which was someplace between pleasure and abstinence.

Armed with her newfound knowledge, she set forth on the last leg of her journey. As predicted by a Balinese medicine man years ago, she travelled to Indonesia. As foretold by him, she ended up finding the love of her life in Bali. However, she exercised all her wisdom when he proposed to her and did not melt away into his life instantly as she would have done earlier. Instead, she weighed all the possibilities of them having a life together carefully and decided not to settle down with him. It was only when he suggested that they make a home which was somewhere between his place of work and hers did she decide to try and make the relationship work.

She thereby had evolved into a detached person by the end of her voyage and began a new life in the balanced state that existed between a sensuous and an abstemious person. She came into contact with her true nature, understood herself thoroughly and began aligning her decisions to suit herself, as a result of adopting the technique of dereflection.

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