



DISCERNING EQUILIBRIUM IN FOOHOLD BY TAUFIQ RAFAT – BOOK REVIEW

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Abstract

Taufiq Rafat is hailed as a poet who conceived the concept of “Pakistani Idiom” and his unpublished play, Foothold, remains largely ignored. The plot of this play revolves around the journey of Saleem, the protagonist, in a spiritual and postcolonial setting. Also, this play is not devoid of philosophical questions, i.e. the tussle between ambitions and responsibilities. In this regard, the ideas of “Suicide”, “Absurd”, and “Equilibrium” as explained by Albert Camus in *Myth of Sisyphus* and *Other Essays* will be used to interpret the dialogues of the characters. This study approaches Foothold through the lens of Camus’ Existentialism and is a close reading of the play Foothold. Furthermore, little or no research can be found on Foothold and this dearth of criticism leads to the significance of the present research. This study would be beneficial for future researchers studying the works of Taufiq Rafat in a postcolonial setting. It will also be useful for researchers focusing on the application of Camus’ theory of Existentialism on works of fiction.

Keywords

Absurd, Albert Camus, Equilibrium, Existentialism, Foothold, Suicide, Taufiq Rafat.



1. Introduction

Taufiq Rafat (25 October 1927 – 2 August 1998) was born in Sialkot, in the Punjab province of Pakistan. He is the author of *Arrival of Monsoon*, *Taufiq Rafat: A Selection*, *Half Moon: Poems (1979-1983)*, and *Bulleh Shah: A Selection*. His poetry has been included in various early anthologies consisting of poets hailing from Pakistan. Amongst the best known is edited by Kaleem Omar, *Wordfall: Three Pakistani Poets*,

Taufiq Rafat, Maki Kureishi, Kaleem Omar. Moreover, he is credited with developing the “Pakistani Idiom” in his seminal essay entitled “Towards a Pakistani Idiom” which was first published by Vision Magazine (Karachi University) in 1970: “It is not by the use of Hindi or Urdu words that you can create Indian or Pakistani English--The roots of an idiom lie much deeper. ...

It is untranslatable. One has merely to refer to the dictionary to know what an idiom really is: a characteristic mode of expression; a vocabulary of a particular dialect or district” (p.66). Thus, the “Pakistani Idiom” translates the local idiom into English, thence contributing to it as it may not remain the language of the colonizer.

Though, Rafat is known for his poetry and he is credited for postulating the concept of the “Pakistani Idiom”, this unpublished play, 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 edited version performed by student members of the Najamuddin Dramatic Society, Kinnaird College in 2015.

The plot of *Foothold* revolves around a young man, Saleem, who abdicates material belongings, friends and family, to find his true self. For six years, Saleem roams ceaselessly and in the course of these years, he is followed by two disciples, who look up to him and seek answers from him. Saleem is seeking answers from a subjective enlightenment, but towards the end of the play he realizes that all the answers are to be found not in the wilderness, but in everyday life. This is where the idea of “Absurdity”, according to Albert Camus, seeps in. Life without meaning leads to “Suicide”. Here however, Saleem leads a wandering life in the “chaos” of existence without achieving any understanding, but does not

commit suicide. He is helped towards the end of the play by the wise suggestions of the Station Master.

Albert Camus in *Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* states that, “It [suicide] was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully” (1955, p.32). This is where “Absurdity” comes in, accepting life as it is, not expecting it to be grand, as that would result in angst.

Therefore, “Absurdity” and “Suicide” are opposing forces, where the former term means that life has to be lived no matter how, and the latter term suggests annihilation of life. The balancing of the opposing forces is called equilibrium and this research will focus on this process in *Foothold*. Visually, the three friends: Saleem, Mustafa, and Ali can be identified on this scale, where Saleem represents “Absurdity”, and Ali commits suicide. Mustafa holds the middle ground, as Ali calls him the “salt of the earth” in the play *Foothold* (p.31). Towards the end of the play, Mustafa is the one who remains rooted in his identity, and matures as a character. Saleem goes through a six year journey to find a foothold in the same niche which he had forsaken years ago, and Ali commits suicide, soon after Saleem leaves for his journey.

2. Literature Review

Foothold begins with a scene on a railway station, which is not a destination, but a place of passage,

a temporary stop. This is an existential image of life as it shows that life on earth is the transition phase between birth, death, and re-birth. However, Saleem is reborn by the end of the play as he returns with his lesson learnt at the station that he can be at peace with himself by living in the society to which he belongs, and by being of service to it. As Nageen Zahra says:

“The play reminds us of Buddha’s quest for reality. It is journey of discovering the truth in a modern setting. Saleem goes through anger, taunts and agony but as you reach the conclusion of the play he begins to realise that ‘illumination’ comes through a composed life. This is exactly what the Station Master makes him learn by showing him the railway track and the two lines that run parallel, symbolising a composed and a balanced life.” (2015).

This indeed goes back to equilibrium, balancing of opposing forces, the Absurd and Suicide, the secular and the spiritual life which Saleem embraces by the end of *Foothold*. M. Athar Tahir also talks about Buddha’s influence on Rafat’s works in the Introduction to *Taufiq Rafat: A Selection*:

“He seemed to prefer nature to religion. Yet such boldness could only spring from confidence in one’s beliefs and the ability to correlate to observed phenomena. In ‘Sacrifice’ an ordinary ritual became a metaphor for genocide. The Gandhara Civilization, which flourished in this region, prompted Rafat to time and again return to the person, life, and doctrine of Gautam (not the

anglicized Gautama) who became Buddha.” (1997, p.iv)

This influence of Buddha is an essential part of Saleem’s journey, and it culminates in a similar manner. Like Buddha, Saleem learns that life is to be lived amongst his people, and whatever he has learned in the wilderness, during his meditation periods, is to be applied practically in his own society. As Ahsan Raza, the sub-editor of Dawn newspaper’s Lahore Bureau, says, “The play is reminiscent of Gautam’s quest for nirvana to become the Buddha, or the Sufi acolyte or talib’s to realise mystic ‘Irfan’” (2015). This play therefore, bears both existential and mystic themes, however, it is important to notice that Saleem’s journey culminates in accepting his ordinary life with his friends and family.

Saleem’s return is not just reminiscent of the lessons Buddha learnt through his journey, it is also a humbling experience for Saleem. This humbling is quite different than that of a Tragic Hero who displays hubris in the beginning of the play and is seen to wrestle with his nemesis. The end is cathartic where according to Aristotle the audience feels “pity and fear” for the protagonist. In *Foothold*, Saleem does not show arrogance towards the Divine but seeks religion and God. He does have a tragic flaw like the Greek Hero, that he looks for God in wilderness and in the end he learns that God’s presence can be felt in being of service to His creation.

It is interesting to notice that Camus’ Existentialism has an entirely different

interpretation of Existentialism than his predecessors. “An existentialist could either be a religious moralist, agnostic relativist, or an amoral atheist. Kierkegaard, a religious philosopher, Nietzsche, an anti-Christian, Sartre, an atheist, and Camus an atheist, are credited for their works and writings about existentialism” (“Existentialism”). Though Camus is hailed as an existentialist, he recoils from this label and argues as quoted by Simon Lea, “No, I am not an existentialist. . . Sartre is an existentialist, and the only book of ideas that I have published, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was directed against the so-called existentialist philosophers” (2005). Though, Camus does not accept this label, his works deal with the problem of existence, whether it is worthwhile to live it or extinguish it. The subject matter with which he deals centres around Existentialism and therefore, this theory is laid down as the theoretical framework to study *Foothold*.

Equilibrium is a state which balances two opposing forces. In this research, equilibrium will be traced in *Foothold* with relation to “Absurdity” and “Suicide”. In this regard, Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, “The mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions. This is where suicide and the reply stand” (p.17). The reply in this quotation will be taken as accepting the absurdity of life and living it nonetheless. While talking about absurdity Camus also talks about life as an “adventure” (p.13) where it is not known, whether

there is a chalked out purpose behind this life, or there is a visible driving force which compels one to live life. This is where a decision has to be made, and accepting it fully, with all the incongruity of life, means accepting the “Absurd”.

Man is bestowed with the faculty of thinking which distinguishes him from other beings. If he ceases to think, Man would not face absurdity and hence, will not be driven to commit suicide to escape the Absurd. On the other hand, that would eliminate the difference between him and other creations of God. Camus says, “The real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions” (p.7). Here is the equilibrium between “Absurdity” and “Suicide”; to think, to observe, and continue living in the struggle. And he also points out that this is not an easy task, but suicide means quitting, giving up. And in doing so, it may also give one a sense of purpose, not to give up.

He further says, “‘Begins’—this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery” (p.8). The importance of the process of thinking is highlighted in this quotation, as well as reflected

in Saleem's journey which is undertaken, as he ponders over life, and reaches a conclusion: in order to fully live life he must return to his family and friends whose happiness and survival depend on Saleem. At this point the larger prospects of quitting, or continuing life emerges. The word "recovery" in this quotation would be taken as acceptance of absurdity in life, and embracing the struggle to live.

Suicide and absurdity, therefore, are two opposing forces. While absurdity is an encounter with a silent universe, suicide is an end to this encounter. As it has already been discussed that the real struggle is to stay there and confront absurdity, till one dies naturally. This is equilibrium: state where opposing forces are balanced. This is the third key term in this research study. Camus discusses equilibrium in various forms. One of them is "leap", where it is regarded as hope, hope to live and face the absurdity. Accordingly, he says in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, "This leap can at least enlighten us a little more as to the true nature of the absurd. We know that it is worthless except in an equilibrium that it is, above all, in the comparison and not in the terms of that comparison. . . . Our appetite for understanding, our nostalgia for the absolute are explicable only in so far, precisely, as we can understand . . ." (p.23). Absurd therefore, has been called as worthless, except in an equilibrium, which can be interpreted as; the absurd can lead to anguish and despair. However, when it is equilibrium with

suicide, then the same anguish turns into hope in the face of immediate death: suicide. Moreover, the zest to comprehend life can only reach its limits till the limits of a human mind, and this idea is far consoling than the fact that this universe does not hold any answers. In essence, the human mind can only understand this universe according to the limits of the human mind.

Camus further builds up the same idea as: "If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living" (p.37). The two opposing forces, "conscious revolt" amounts to the encounter with absurdity, and the "darkness" refers to suicide itself. In the quoted paragraph, it is clear that the two elements, suicide and absurdity, when in equilibrium, may not dictate the "best living", but it may extend to "most living". In this sense, the equilibrium is necessary to ensure life which has its dark recesses, but they can also be countered with hope to live and to seek what is possible.

This philosophy of Camus, of keeping equilibrium is explored in his novel, *A Happy Death*. It was his first unpublished novel and features Meursault, who is very different from the Meursault of *The Stranger*. The protagonist kills one of the lovers of his mistress. However, that

lover, Zergeus, had asked Meursault to kill him as life was worthless for him. Meursault, on the other hand dies a natural death besides a wife, whom he does not love. The deaths of both Zergeus and Meursault can be seen as voluntary death, and a conscious death. Meursault prefers conscious death as he has accepted life as it really is. He says, “What matters—all that matters, really— is the will to happiness, a kind of enormous, ever-present consciousness. The rest—women, art, success—is nothing but excuses. A canvas waiting for our embroideries” (p.72). This will to happiness is therefore the key to live, as it establishes equilibrium between the two opposing forces: suicide and absurdity.

In the same vein, Camus adds that, “Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience” (p.32). Hence, both the terms absurdity and suicide are important for most living, as negating either of them would lose the intricate balance of oppositions. In doing so, the daily encounter with the silent universe, reaches the level of permanent revolution, which is a relentless struggle in itself. As he says, “Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime” (p.39). However, to keep the balance, to maintain the equilibrium is the real

struggle, and so far, Camus’ Existentialism is in favour of this attitude.

It seems that by maintaining the equilibrium, another idea seeps in: acceptance. However, it must be noted that this acceptance is not conformity as conformity means to accept without thinking through. Acceptance achieved through the process of equilibrium implies a daily struggle. As Camus says, “One must live with time and die with it, or else elude it for a greater life. I know that one can compromise and live in the world while believing in the eternal. That is called accepting” (p.50). This acceptance is therefore, embracing the absurd, with all its burdens. Absurd of course carries the notion of anguish, however, as it is previously discussed that the same anguish becomes a source of hope, when it is opposed by suicide, it reaches the state of equilibrium.

3. Research Methodology

Albert Camus’ theory of Existentialism has been laid down as the theoretical framework for this research. Two of his works have been used as secondary texts: *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, and *A Happy Death*. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* is a collection of critical essays which Camus composed to contribute to the philosophical debate sparked by Jean Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir. It provides an insight into the critical aspects of Existentialism as elaborated by Camus. His views on life and death are expounded in his novel *A Happy Death*.

The primary text for this research is the unpublished play *Foothold* by Taufiq Rafat. It was written in 1969 and performed in Alhamra in 1970 for the first time. A dramatic reading of *Foothold* was arranged in National College of Arts, Rawalpindi Campus in 2008. And the most recent performance has been produced by the Najmuddin Dramatics Society of Kinnaird College in 2015. As there is a dearth of criticism on both Taufiq Rafat and *Foothold*, most critical material is cited from the newspaper articles which reviewed the performance at Kinnaird College. This study would be beneficial for future researchers studying the works of Taufiq Rafat in a postcolonial setting. It will also be useful for researchers focusing on the application of Camus' theory of Existentialism on works of fiction.

4. Discussion and Analysis

The over-arching theme of *Foothold* is to seek balance. However, this balance is different in each character's case. Saleem has to struggle to find balance between his spiritual and secular life. The 1st Disciple surrenders himself to the police, accepting the murder he had committed. In this way, he no longer remains a fugitive. The 2nd Disciple has to struggle to remain loyal to his wife, as he was a womanizer. By the end of the play, these three characters go back to where they had come from, as guided by the Station Master, so that they could attain balance in their lives.

Three characters are in a state of equilibrium in *Foothold*: Fatima, Station Master, and the Vendor. However, these three are not without

their flaws, and these flaws humanize them. Had they been presented as perfect and flawless, they would not have had the impact on other characters.

Equilibrium is defined as a state which is achieved after balancing two counter forces. It is not synonymous to being equal, as being equal means being of the same quantity. This implies that it may lead to stasis and monotony, leading to absurdity. To end absurdity, one may be inclined towards suicide. However, Man's Absurd will end with him, and not the absurdity of the universe. The constant struggle to live and develop an understanding of life is the goal. This goal is the equilibrium which can be deciphered in Fatima, Saleem's mother, the Station Master, and the Vendor. It should be noted that these three characters do not talk about suicide. However, they have embraced the absurdities of life. This signifies that they are past the stage of calculating whether life is to be lived or not. They have accepted that their struggle is unending, but they are also not without flaws. These two aspects of theirs keep them in the state of equilibrium. Their struggles, indeed, are their responsibilities, which they fulfil no matter what.

Fatima's first dialogue in the play begins:

FATIMA. Excuses! Excuses! Everyone seems to have an excuse ready, and one or two to spare. Missionary! My son a missionary! . . . (p.61)

She thinks that Saleem is evading responsibilities as a son because he financially supports her. She also thinks that this is an excuse because she does

not see why her son, who is well educated, should become a missionary, especially when he is promoted as Head of the Department. She misreads or has chosen to misread the situation as Saleem is not making excuses. He is on a quest, a quest to find faith. To which she replies:

FATIMA. Before you presume to seek the greater truths, you must learn to distinguish between right and wrong in simple everyday things. Truth is a ladder you must ascend rung by rung. You cannot attain the top by a single tremendous leap. If you're going to try it that way you're going to fall off. (p.74)

She highlights the pitfalls of seeking an abstract and subjective idea of faith, which is partially truth. As it is a subjective idea, everybody has different takes on it. Saleem's perception seems extreme to Fatima. Here is tipping the balance off, according to Fatima. However, it is necessary for Saleem to seek faith in any way he chooses, as ultimately it is his journey. This is where Fatima is at fault, but she is a mother, and her anxiety about his well-being is understandable. Also, she's the one who brings about an end to the bickering of Mustafa, Saleem, and Nasreen in Act 3 Scene 2 as she reminds them:

FATIMA. There's no need to be hysterical. You can't bring back the lost days as if they were stray dogs. Be rational. You should do some hard thinking now. We have another chance. It should not be wasted in bickering. (p.103)

Through this dialogue, it is evident that she has a sense of creating balance. It is not possible to

bring back what is gone, however, it is possible to shape the present situation. It is also an exemplary action of hers to get to know Nasreen, the woman Saleem had chosen for himself six years ago. She was opposed to this idea earlier, as she blamed Nasreen for putting ideas of becoming a missionary in Saleem's head, in the first place. And she also considered it indecent to get engaged to someone without the parent's knowledge and consent. Therefore, Fatima is in a state of equilibrium, as she not only has wisdom, but she also accepts new situations in life and handles them in a way which is balanced. If she was not prudent, she may have pressured Saleem to not marry Nasreen, and that would have created yet another conflict.

The Vendor is also in a state of equilibrium as he is not only wise, but can see through the people. Though, he is not a major character, yet he is important. His interjections, "Pan, bidi, cigaret [*sic*]" (p.3) serve as a break from the ongoing serious conversations. And these interjections thereby, create a sense of balance in the play: an equilibrium, which is also the larger theme in *Foothold*. Moreover his dialogue:

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. (p.84)

His dialogue demonstrates that he is in a state of equilibrium. He has managed his modes of survival for all seasons as he's a fish monger in Autumn, Winter, and Spring, and farms mangoes

in Summers. Other than these two professions, he's a vendor all around the year. Yet, he is not focussed on merely surviving in this world. He seems to have a philosophy of life as he understands the difference between right and wrong.

However, that does not mean that he is faultless. He tries to hold the Policeman down so the 1st Disciple can run away in Act 3 Scene 3. He may be at fault. But, he believes that surrendering to the law would not make any difference because the law punishes the poor and lets the rich go. He feels the 1st Disciple will not find justice in this country, so he should escape. However, the 1st Disciple has to surrender so he can stop running altogether.

The Vendor however, has a sharp tongue and keeps the Policeman in check. When the latter boasts about representing the law there, the Vendor replies:

VENDOR. You who have connived at so many rapes and dacoities have become suddenly conscientious. Of course, the money has nothing to do with it. (p.113)

The Vendor gets to the root of all issues and establishes his wisdom. In the above cited dialogue he retorts that as there is a reward placed on the head of the 1st Disciple, therefore the Policeman has stepped forward to perform his duty. Thus, the Vendor is in a state of equilibrium. He is rational and knows the difference between right and wrong. That does

not mean that his character is not without its faults a one level, but at another he is realistic.

The Station Master is also in a state of equilibrium. He understands the characters on the platform waiting for the train, the villagers with whom he is acquainted, the Disciples and Saleem, whom he has met for the first time. It is his wisdom and foresight, which elevates him above all the others. He also gives a counter argument to that of most characters. This creates a sense of balance in the play; threading the theme of equilibrium in *Foothold*. Consider the following dialogues:

PEASANT WOMAN. Better a lot early than a little late.

STATION MASTER. A good maxim for those with time to waste. (p.46)

Since, the Peasant Woman wants to escape her present circumstances and live in the city, she along with her husband arrived quite early at the railway station. While she defends her actions, the Station Master shows that this was an act of wasting time because the train would either be on time or it will be late.

Another dialogue which shows his perceptiveness:

STATIONMASTER. . . .Then the bazaars where civilization buys a million things you never dreamt existed; all of them wonderful and most of them useless. . . (p.47)

His statement rings true as most of the stuff available in the markets is to keep up appearances and to show a wealthy lifestyle. Some of the

articles for sale in the market might be considered useless because they are not life giving and life producing, neither are they necessary for survival. However, it may be argued that what is useful and what is useless is entirely subjective, and what may be useless to some, may be useful to others. Nevertheless, the Station Master's financial background must be considered when this dialogue is being interpreted as he has two wives and four daughters to support, and for him most of the material sold in city markets is useless. This also exhibits a difference of rural and urban mind-set of the characters in *Foothold*. By these two contrasting images, a balance is created, adding to the theme of equilibrium in this text.

Moreover, wisdom is defined as:

STATION MASTER. To be always right and always proper is not the end of wisdom. Wisdom is to know when to be wise. . . (p.54)

And also:

STATION MASTER. It will come at the proper place and time, and not before it's due like a six-month baby. (p.56)

These specific dialogues reveal the wisdom of the Station Master. He has recognized that being wise does not mean to be always proper. Being wise in fact means to know when one should display his wisdom. He has practised the same in *Foothold*, as he does not lecture the two Disciples and Saleem from the start. He only makes them see the other side of the mirror when they ask him repeatedly. Even in this dialogue there is a contrast between when to be wise and when to

play the fool. Playing the fool is yet another foil of being wise under the guise of a clown. *Foothold* reminisces Shakespearean fools especially the fool in King Lear. This contrast strengthens the theme of equilibrium in this play.

Though, the Station Master is wise, he has his flaws. He is rather unkind towards the woman folk, and despite that, he married twice. As he says:

STATION MASTER. . . .If only women would leave us alone half our troubles would be over. . . (p.45)

This might be his present stance because there is no peace in his house, and his four daughters are unmarried. Probably, in the past, he was in the same situation as Saleem. He might have gone off in search of a truth, but he returned to his family and his job. However, in *Foothold* he comes across as a person who is in a state of equilibrium as he is shouldering his responsibilities as a father and husband, regardless of his shortcomings.

5. Conclusion

The Disciples, and Saleem are not in a state of equilibrium. Yet, they are Sisyphean Heroes. They are not in a state of equilibrium because their journeys have just begun, and they have to face the struggles of their daily lives, which they had abdicated. And as it has been stated before that equilibrium is a state in which two opposing forces are balanced. These three characters have not encountered the opposing forces in their lives; between the absurd and the desire to quit (suicide) as they have shied away from the burden of the

consequences of their action. However, it is expected that they will be in a state of equilibrium when they would return to their normal lives. Also, the balance is not restricted between the absurd and suicide. It is also a balance between secular and spiritual life. The fluctuation of the scenes in *Foothold* between the Past and the Present, also creates a structural equilibrium.

These two key terms: Suicide and Absurdity, are posited to be opposing forces which are in a state of equilibrium. This can be pictorially represented as Ali is on one extreme end: Suicide, and Saleem is on the other: Absurdity. In the middle, the Station Master represents the golden mean, as he is interpreted to be in a state of equilibrium. It is also postulated that Fatima, the Vendor, and the Station Master are in a state of equilibrium as they have realized that life is an unending struggle and they have to find balance in what is “useful” (p.74) and the ordinary.

It is also hinted that these three characters have a balance in their lives, yet they are not without their flaws. It is interpreted that these flaws humanize them and makes them relevant to the viewers as well. It is also expected that Saleem and the Disciples would reach the same balance, once they go back to their previous lives.

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