



Mental Sublimation: The Anchor of Survival in Albert Camus *The Plague*

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Abstract: In the novel *The Plague* the onset of calamities leads to the realisation about the purposeless futility of life. In such situations the hardest constrain for mankind is to learn adaptive traits in order to cope with the adversity. However the biggest hinderance in such conditions is the helpless situation mankind finds itself in. Although the resolution to fight the constraints can be achieved through the process of sublimation. In the psychological domain sublimation refers to the productive distraction that allows individuals to constructively engage themselves in their futile situations. This process invariably makes individuals more resistant to the trauma experienced by the unproductive environment. The paper would help to study a contrastive analysis between individuals that practice sublimation and those that don't. Thus allowing the reader to perceive the benefits of sublimation in adverse circumstances.

Index Terms - Psychoanalysis, Absurd, Camus, Sublimation, Language, Culture

Camus in his work *The Plague* represents the futile condition of mankind. In normal life this core principle is avoided due to our focussed attention on our pleasure engaging sublimations. However sometimes the act of over engagement restricts us from identifying the odd changes in our situations. In the novel *The Plague* the seat of unusual changes initiates with the death of rats. Hence Rat in the novel metaphorically is an element of ignorance.

The strength of this metaphor magnifies in the first half of the novel. Leading to the downfall of mankind. In the novel this is accounted through the figure of the absurd protagonist, Dr. Rieux. His personality in the novel relates to the key principles of the absurd hero Sisyphus that Camus discusses in his philosophical text *The Myth of Sisyphus*. James O' Brien in the introductory part of the Penguin Edition of *The Myth of Sisyphus* highlights the chief characteristics of absurd lifestyle as “simultaneously awareness and rejection of death” (XV Brien).

Both the traits are evident in the protagonist Dr. Rieux, as even his close associates do agree that his inclination is more towards abstractions than feelings. On the psychological domain this play of engagement helps the conscious mind to engage in multiple level of ideas that help in the act of mental sublimation. Thus helping to

overcome the constrain experienced due to the restrictions imposed on the citizens of Oran at the outbreak of the *The Plague*.

Although before the outbreak the society around whom the protagonist is surrounded varies in their sublimation practice. Earlier at the time of normalcy the society's engagement is more towards the blind adherence to physical activities. That provide a sense of emotional comfort to the citizens. This comfort in physical engagement is described by the narrator in the first half of the novel. "Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, doing business'. (2 *The Plague*)

In such situations the society deliberately overlooks and avoids all signs of awareness that could disrupt their general course of work. Freud in his study describes the act of engagement of conscious mind as sublimation. He further categorises the domains that help the masses to enhance their constructive productivity.

Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life '(Freud 1930: 286).

Kendra Cherry in her article "Sublimation in Behavioral Psychology" elaborates that sublimation is a self defence mechanism with which the conscious promotes the positive reinforcement in behavioural action. This positive reinforcement is through conscious effort of substituting negative acts with positive reinforcement. Hence sublimation helps to counter check negative stimulus of the body such as anxiety. This justifies the conscious act of the citizens to ignore the odd situations in their surroundings. As a result they are often found giving excuses "Aye, they're coming out, you can see them in the dustbins by dozens. It's hunger, that's what it is, driving them out" (7 *Plague*). This ignorance in behaviour runs in stark contrast to the protagonist whose constant engagement with abstractions allows him to address his beliefs without any feeling of guilt.

Unlike the protagonist the citizens are unable to cope with the break from their sublimation acts and are influenced adversely. Thus for the society the seizure of all physical activities instills the realisation of futility in life. This break in the performative construct disrupts all binding institutions in the society. Especially the institutions that instills the emotional intensity among the individuals with deprived sublimation acts. This can be noticed in the religious institution where Father Paneloux, justifies the cause of stagnation with anecdotes of past events. These references hold man responsible for the present state of stagnation.

Whereas in reality like the Sisyphus the source of meaning lies in the continuous representation of beliefs into practice. Even in the twentieth century after the two catastrophic world wars, art represented the stability in the cyclic word play of ideas. The tenets of these practice were mainly situated in the Absurd writers that gave irregular word play an act of mental stability. The works like *Waiting for Godot* resonate this mental engagement in the word play. Such indefinite acts of sublimation helped the companions in the play to engage themselves in adverse desolate situation. It also gave them the patience to adapt to the meaningless waiting for their unidentified guest.

Similarly in the novel Religion is replaced by the unevaluated principles of superstition that include the forecasts of “Nostradamus and St Odilia”. This is because mental sublimation acts like a metaphorical light that emerges in the act of discovery of unknown bounds. These instincts have been stated in Freud’s psychoanalytical study of artists who have been able to fulfil deep seated desires through the technique of sublimation in their art. The chief artist Freud studied in this analysis was Leonardo Di Vinci whose artwork represents the mental engagement of his ideas in the paintings created by him.

In the study Freud states that the conscious artistic engagement of Leonardo allows him to promote mental sublimation. Thereby enabling the artist to engage in his unrecognised desires. Thus art as an image promotes free interplay of ideas that reveal in each coming age a new perspective. Thereby each viewer is able to perceive the image without any fixed values of identification. Even in the 20th century the artists of the Modernist Movement promoted unidentified representation. This made the viewers engage in the unrecognised act of sublimation. As the art helped them to identify with their inner desires while engaging them in positive mental activity of exploration. The other domain that fails in providing respite is the performative art. In the novel there is an incident where the characters Cottard and Tarrou go to see an Opera performance. This performance is based on the mythological tale of Orpheus readapted in an Opera form by the composer Gluck. However the Opera fails to strike a cord with the audience. As the art represents a concrete mirror reflection of the plight of the viewers. Where the society like Orpheus was a victim of the situation.

This process of suffering becomes a disturbing echo of reality when later in the story the same agony is noticed in the cry of an innocent boy, a victim of the plague. Where the child fatally under the garb of the disease experiences the same trauma of pain with no source of sublimation. This reflective imitation at the time of the chaos hinders the psychological stability of the individuals. In the present situation art is an act of normal schedule because its pre-defined essence losses it value. Based on the dress code of the audience, one can assume that the

art performed on stage is distinctly classified for the rich and affluent individuals. However the fatal harm on the actor disrupts the art of sublimation as it defines the exact situation in reality. Even in the Elizabethan age, theatres during the time of the plague were not a source of collective sublimation for the audience.

On the contrary Dr. Rieux, is able to experience a sense of blissful experience when he goes for a swim with his companion Tarrou. This is possible because they are in close contact with elements of nature. Where the water unlike the fixed representation of society provide free engagement of psychological sublimation. The free play of experience allows the individual to identify and adjust to reality in the midst of silence.

This beauty of multiplicity has helped even the peripheral individuals to rise above the constrained domains. A theoretical approach is noticed in the essay by Helene Cixious. In her work “The Laugh of the Medusa” the borderless expression of female identity is studied with the help of the image of mythology. Where Medusa instead of confining to a concrete belief of ideas chooses to address her thoughts with the ambiguous expression, laughter. The emotion laughter indicates or reflects the attainment of sublimation. As sublimation helps her to uplift her depressed state from the surrounding constraints. Hence Laughter acts as a pleasing sublimation that reflects ideas with multiple perspective.

Even writers like Maya Angelou in her essay “Home” highlights the power of words. In her essay she confesses about the hard decision she made while choosing the appropriate words for her novel *Beloved*. In her discussion she concludes that words carry greater meaning when they involve a greater play of words. Thus the power of engagement is a key factor in the attainment of sublimation.

Unlike the successful advancement of an argument, narration requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary. And, unlike visual media, narrative has no pictures to ease the difficulty of that step. In writing novels the adventure for me has been explorations of seemingly impenetrable, race-inflected, race-clotted topics. (Morrison)

This establishes that pleasing and layered aspects provide a calm composure to the mind. In the words of Tarrou scope of possibilities is the only means to represent calmness and restraint at the time of calamities. Where the human tendencies seems to shift towards bleak oblivion at the sight of the depressing episodes. The new scope of imagination allows individuals to adjust better with adversities around. This is why Tarrou suggests that the Saint is also possible without the experience of God. “Can one be a saint without God? that’s the problem, in fact that only problem. I’m up against to-day” (244 *Plague*)

Towards the end of the novel most natives of Oran rejoice the return of normalcy in their lives. However the only individual who reacts differently is Dr. Rieux. As he is able to experience awareness due to the act of sublimation that enables him to identify with the continuity of the cycle even though normalcy is established. Just as a true Sisyphus, who endures all obstructions. This eventually paves the route to sustenance in adverse situations. That is the reason despite losing his close associates to plague he is happy because he sees a possibility in the general drama of pain.

Even in the technique of the narrative Dr. Rieux uses a free interplay of expression through third person narrative voice. This technique allows him to disclose his identity only towards the end of the situations. Thus allowing the reader to experience the narrative and personally bond with the events of the play. This technique resonates with the Puritan voice of John Milton who in his third narrative voice allows Adam and Eve along with the reader to experience a probability of hope despite the uncertainty in their path to redemption. Hence multiple possibilities and engagements for Adam and Eve act as mental sublimation that allows them to reconcile with the tears of pain on leaving the eternal land of Eden.

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