

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

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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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