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The Dilemma of ‘God and Humanity’ as Reflected by George Eliot’s Silas Marner

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: This paper analyses the concept of ‘when God does not make sense’ with special focus on the character of Silas Marner in George Eliot’s novel with the same title. The work opens an examination of the idea of God’s existence and humanity’s response to God’s reluctance to address their concerns. Silas Marner, a devout Christian, is accused of thievery he did not commit and he hopes God will clear him. But God does not come to rescue him and this upsets his spiritual life leading him to commit blasphemy. He is frustrated with God because the whole thing seems illogical and inconsistent with his religious orientation. God’s failure to rescue him, makes Silas angry and generates in him a sense of abandonment. Finally, disillusionment sets in. He loses trust in God and in man. He grasps a labyrinthine thread as he departs into the unknown. He does not know what to do as he is lost in a maze of choices: to insult the betrayer, to commit suicide, to curse the unfair God, or to spend his entire life with a loom. His departure is his final step and it ushers him into a life of spider-like existence – weaving until his back aches and he replaces God with gold. This existence finally is thwarted by the redemptive female figure who comes into his life as Silas comes back to the God he had earlier cursed. His journey away from solar regime to nocturnal has totally transformed him.

Keywords: Silas Marner, loss of faith, labyrinth, spiritual confusion, alienation, God, character-transformation, blasphemy, disorientation.

1. Introduction

“What god have I abused to deserve all this?” is a common and inevitable question many troubled souls – believers and non-believers alike ask when in difficult situations. When human suffering produces such a question, it is possible to say that this is asked at a very crucial moment as it begins to create to break the bond that exists between man and his God. The Lord’s reluctance to explain what He is doing further widens the gap between those that need urgent answers from Divine influence. If some believe God is obligated to explain Himself to them, they ought to examine the following verses as explained by Dr. James Dobson (1996):

Proverbs 25:2 says ‘it is the glory of God to conceal a matter.’ Isaiah 45:15 states, ‘truly you are a God who hides himself.’

Deuteronomy 29:29 reads, ‘the secret things belong to the Lord our God.’

Ecclesiastes 11:5 proclaims, ‘As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the maker of all things.’

Isaiah 55:18-9 teaches, ‘for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’

Clearly, the scriptures demonstrate to humanity that man lacks the capacity to grasp God’s infinite thinking or the ways He intervenes in our lives. Trying to analyse His omnipotence is like an amoeba attempting to comprehend the behaviour of man. Romans 11:33 (KJV) indicates that God’s judgments are “unsearchable” and his ways “past finding out.” Similar language is found in I Corinthians 2:16: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ obviously, unless the Lord chooses to explain Himself to us, which He rarely does. His motivation and purposes are beyond the reach of the ordinary man. The implication here in practical terms is that many of man’s questions – especially those that begin with the word “why” – will have to remain unanswered for the time being.

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Unfortunately, George Eliot's character Silas Marner, does not seem alert to the fact that there will be times in every person's life when circumstances do not add up – when God does not appear to make sense. He is so immersed in the faith and completely wedded to scriptural principles which state, "God loves you and offers a wonderful plan, for your life." Though the statement is certainly true, anything contrary to the "wonder plan," is not welcome to such individuals like Silas Marner. Silas quickly turns his back against his God when he does not receive the answers he desires so much at that critical moment of his life, such a being excommunicated from the church fellowship. In his spiritual confusion, Silas questions existence and the fairness of God when He does not clear him of his accusation of thievery.

This lapse on the part of God according to Silas makes him blaspheme. It could be as a result of the description given to him in the scripture which depicts God as being infinitely loving and kind, tenderly watching over His children and guiding the steps of the faithful. He speaks of 'the people of his pasture, the flock under his care' (Psalm 95:7). This great love led Him to send His only begotten son as a sacrifice for man's sin, that man might escape the punishment he deserves. As for Silas or any other individual in Silas's position, this love does not exist and it is far-fetched as he is left alone to defend himself.

Isaiah's message to mankind directly from the heart of the father: 'so do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand,' (Isaiah 41:10), clearly falls short of Silas' expectations at the time of his own need. He is forced to leave Lantern yard – fellowship and he embarks on a journey into the unknown, completely disillusioned, bewildered, confused, unclear, lost, perplexed, disoriented, and unsure about his future. At this point, God and His proclamations do not make sense to Silas. This even leads him to shun human companionship as he settles on the periphery of Raveloe village.

2. Discussion

A. Disorientation of Silas Marner

During the springtime of his years at Lantern Yard when sorrows and disappointments had not yet blown through his tranquil little world, it was relatively easy for Silas Marner to fit the pieces into place – enjoy fellowship with his friends. One can honestly believe, with good evidence, that it will always be so, as George Eliot explains, 'He was believed to be an exemplary young man, and his neighbours and fellow-churchmen manifested a peculiar interest in him' (P.11). Such an individual is extremely vulnerable to spiritual confusion when trouble strikes at that point. There are simply times when things go awry for reasons that may never be understood. For Silas, it is when he faces betrayal, like Jesus at the hands of Judas, by his best friend William Dane and his paramour, Sara. Stephen and Kramer (1993:54) explain that Christians who lose their faith in God in times of spiritual confusion are like branches cut off from the vine. Any person in Silas's shoes is obviously a victim of such a circumstance that does not measure up to what one has been taught about Christian life.

This feeling of betrayal eventually builds a barrier between Silas and God. The moment this barrier is built, it becomes extremely difficult to regain trust in God. Silas Marner remarks, 'I now know there is no just God who governs the world righteously except a God of lies who bears witness against the innocent' (Eliot, 1967: 16). Silas or any other person sharing a similar predicament seems to miss that the scripture tells us to expect hardships and suffering but encourages humanity to remain faithful, joyful, and thankful. In Dobson's worlds, 'God makes sense even when He does not make sense. Like Wariinga in Ngugi wa Thiongo's Devil on the Cross, Silas too has many questions running through his mind. One such question is, 'what god have I abused to deserve this?' Usually, individuals in such a state of affairs fail to maintain their spiritual ground. Silas Marner too fails to remain faithful as confusing times rip through his soul. He gives way to despair. He is completely disoriented and his only action is to leave the village he lived in. Ella Watson Morehead (1994:97) affirms thus:

In the shame of accusation he fled from his home and began the life of a weaver in Raveloe. As a means of livelihood, and preliminarily as a means to forgetting the injustice that had caused his removal to the unpleasant surroundings of Raveloe, Silas Marner devoted his entire time to weaving, and gave himself up to almost total seclusion. Year after year, he lived in solitude, and in proportion as the monetary rewards of his work increased, his life narrowed and hardened itself into a mould that had no relation to any other being.

This robotic posture conjures the image of a spider. At this point, one may ask an existential question – Does Silas live?

B. Silas's Spiritual Confusion, Loss of faith and Trust

Deeply shaken by his ex-communication from Lantern Yard fellowship, Silas Marner embarks on a journey away from the presence of God into darkness. This movement could be described as a spiritual departure from solar regime to nocturnal. Silas is in the 'belly of the whale' as he is surrounded by spiritual darkness. He has to leave behind what he knows, and enter into a strange territory. In Kafkan terms, Silas is in a predicament. He cannot please everyone and his girlfriend has enough reason to put to an end their engagement as she could not marry a thief. Silas cannot do anything right because he is in a maze of confusion as he draws the Mandala to locate the centre:

Poor Marner went out with that despair in his soul – that shaken trust in God and man, which is little short of madness to a loving nature. In bitterness of his wounded spirit, he said to himself, "she will cast me off too." (Eliot 1967: 61)

Silas Marner's loss of faith and trust not only in God but also in his fellowmen gives birth to the idea of alienation. According to St. Augustine, man is separated from God because of his sinful nature and is only reconnected to God through believing in Jesus Christ. As for Silas, he is accused of a thievery he did not commit and he is punished wrongfully. He becomes a victim of alienation and according to Macquarrie (1973:316), "away from God, man is imprisoned in darkness, alone and lost in a vast alien world." Andre Malraux (1966) echoes Macquarrie's view when he says, "When man loses God, he is nailed on a cross of despair from which he feels he will never be taken down. Time will not redeem him nor does history justify the passion of his existence. Once he sees himself as only part of nature and yet somehow alien to it, he ceases to be heroic."

Malraux further postulates that since man is no longer a Son of God, he feels himself alienated in the universe. Silas Marner has been such a figure in Raveloe for fifteen good years with lack of social intercourse and the only bridge back to the Raveloe community and God comes by way of 'human gold,' the discovery of a two-year old baby in his dwelling, who becomes his child. The philosopher Nietzsche further explored this mood of forlornness of man after the death of God.

C. The Jobian bewilderment of Silas Marner

Like Job who was afraid that God had abandoned him yet appealed directly to God (his witness and advocate) and to God's knowledge of his innocence: 'Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high.(Job 16:19) rhymes with Silas Marner's declaration when he is accused of a crime he did not commit:

God will clear me; I know nothing about the knife being there or the money being gone. Search me and my dwellings; you will find nothing but three pounds five of my own savings. (Eliot 1967:13).

The above excerpts by both Job and Silas clearly show how the two characters had cast all their hope for any fair defence upon their God in heaven. But what they receive is contrary to their hope. Silas is found guilty of the offence he did not commit and he is excommunicated from the fellowship in Lantern Yard. God, in Silas Marner's eyes, has abandoned him much as he seems to abandon Job who laments thus:

..... then know that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me..... His anger burns against me;..... he counts me among his enemies (Job 19:6-11).

Job, like Silas Marner, felt that God was treating him as an enemy when in fact God was his friend and thought highly of him. (1:8; 2:3). In his difficulty, Job pointed at the wrong person when he remarked that:

He has alienated my brothers from me; my acquaintances are completely estranged from me. My kinsmen have gone away; my friends have gone away. (Job 19:13-14)

In fact, it was Satan, not God, who was Job's enemy which of course was the same with Silas Marner and other human beings who are caught in this same web. He had considered God his enemy until the coming of a redemptive female figure Eppie in his life. Silas Marner, like many afflicted people, had long given up on God after he was accused of the theft he did not commit. He is like a transformed man in Morneau Rogers' book 'The Incredible Power of Prayer' who, upon his encounter with Roger, remarked, 'I gave up on religion and God a long time ago. But today you have given me something to think about.... (Morneau, 1997:72). A great transformation had taken place in that individual's life like that echoed in Silas Marner's in his encounter with Eppie.

Silas Marner's journey is cyclical. He had indeed moved from solar regime to nocturnal and returned again came back to light. His loss of faith and trust in God gave birth to the idea of alienation in the text.

3. Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated the predicament humanity finds itself, through the protagonist when he realizes that God has abandoned them. Marner's accusation and the subsequent excommunication, even after his declaration that God would clear him give birth to his loss of faith and trust in both God and human beings. Humanity in this state begins to peregrinate in the mind and one becomes unsure of the path to take in order to escape the insults, humiliation, insults, hatred, hurt and betrayal. Silas chose to insult the seemingly unfair God and depart in a state of confusion. It seems Silas, like any other ordinary human believer is one of those who read the context of the Bible and who thought that God would intervene in their situations as He intervened to save Daniel (from lions), and Meshach, Shedrack, and Abednego (from Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, but the truth is that he did not fully understand the essence of Divine power.

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