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Thinking beyond the Binaries of Good and Evil: Reading Zorba the Greek from a Mystic Perspective

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Abstract:

Arguably, most Modern western literature is characterised by either the absence of God or some kind of nostalgia for an old God associated with centre, authority and absolute which suggested the harmony between the individual and the Nature. Religion has been human being's most important treasure to make sense of this world. But somehow almost all the major orthodox interpretations of religious scriptures like that of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism have stressed the importance of soul at the cost of body because, traditionally, soul has been associated with good, virtue, God whereas body has been associated with evil and with everything negative. This has been justified by the philosophical and theological discourses which have propagated some kind of *mind or spirit/body* dualism stressing *one* at the cost of the *other*.

Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), a Modern Greek writer, offers a fresh perspective in his classic novel *Zorba the Greek* by offering a new vision of life which goes beyond the traditional logic of soul/body division of human being and unravels the mystery of human life in all its splendour. This paper attempts to show how Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek* offers an alternative vision of life when one encounters the *nothingness* of life after the failure of theological discourses to persuade us to live on meaningfully. Hence, the purpose of this study is to read *Zorba the Greek* from a mystic perspective. Here the word *mystic* would be used in its broader secular view of encompassing both the good and evil of life without negating the apparently evil declared by the orthodox interpretations of theological scriptures.

Keywords: Discourse, Theology, Postmodern, Nothingness, Mind/body dualism, Secular, Mystic.

Paul Oliver in his "*Mysticism: A Guide for the Perplexed* " (2009) gives a brief overview of all the strains of mysticism like Buddhist mysticism, Sufism, Christian mysticism, Kabbalah, Hindu mysticism and Jain mysticism. Speaking further of mysticism, he elaborates on how mystics differ from the orthodox normative boundaries by "seek[ing] a more direct and personalized religious experience, which is perhaps not as constrained as the orthodox tradition. In the case of theistic traditions, they may try to gain a direct subjective experience of God, or perhaps a sense of merging or unification with the Divine. In non-theistic traditions mystics may conceive of their spirituality rather differently. They may think of themselves as being in close communion with a spiritual or creative force which pervades the universe." (18-24)

Arguably, main traditions of western philosophy from Plato onwards and orthodox interpretations of religious scriptures have posited some kind of soul/body dualism while approaching the whole problem of being. As a result, soul has been given more importance at the cost of body. Some mystic traditions like Buddhism, Sufism, and Christian mysticism have inherited this dualism and they propound a life of contemplation, seclusion and withdrawal from the world of action. But there are other mystic traditions like Sikh mystic tradition which propounds an active life and at the same time stresses the *Higher Reality* or the ultimate divine law.

Nikos Kazantzakis in his classic novel *Zorba the Greek* offers a fresh perspective on life by surpassing the traditional binaries of good/evil and soul/body dualism. He encompasses in his hero Alexis Zorba both the mystic traditions (theistic and non-theistic) and the whole modern secular life plagued by nothingness and futility. Zorba is the epitome of a human being who has seen into the *nothingness* of life, yet who is capable of holding on to a *centre* which goes beyond the appearance of good and evil. He celebrates life in all its splendour. Zorba believes that “Throughout my life my greatest benefactors have been my dreams and my travels; very few men, living or dead, have helped me in my struggle.” (Zorba, 03)

Kazantzakis takes Zorba to be the person who represents a real human being. In this respect he says, “If it had been a question in my lifetime of choosing a spiritual guide, a guru as the Hindus say, a father as say the monks at Mount Athos, surely I would have chosen Zorba. For he had just what a quill-driver needs for deliverance: the primordial glance which seizes its nourishment arrow-like from on high; the creative artlessness, renewed each morning, which enabled him to see all things constantly as though for the *first time* [*my italics*], and to bequeath virginity to the eternal quotidian elements of air, ocean, fire, woman, and bread; the sureness of hand, freshness of heart, the gallant daring to tease his own soul, as though inside him he had a force superior to the soul; finally, the savage bubbling laugh from a deep, deep wellspring deeper than the bowels of man, a laugh which at critical moments spurted redemptively from Zorba’s elderly breast, spurted and was able to demolish (did demolish) all the barriers –morality, religion, homeland–which that wretched poltroon, man, has erected around him in order to hobble with full security through his miserable smidgen of life.” (Report to Greco, 146)

Zorba’s life is not a life lived according to the fictional accounts but his life is a *lived life* –full of experiences. Throughout his life he has killed people, fought wars on the basis of petty nationalism. But what redeems him is his capacity and his insight to look deeper into the shallow facade of religion, morality and petty nationalism which kill humanity on mere ideological basis. He has surpassed all the barriers which divide humanity on the basis of caste, colour, creed, sex and nation. When the narrator questions him about nationalism, Zorba replies, “You say this is right, and that’s wrong; this is true and that is not; he is right, the other one is wrong... But where does that lead us? ...There was a time when I used to say: that man is a Turk, or a Bulgar, or a Greek. I have done things for my country that would make your hair stand on end, boss. I have cut people’s throats, burned villages, robbed and raped women, wiped out entire families. Why? Because they were Bulgars, or Turks. “Bah! To hell with you, you swine!” I say to myself sometimes. “To hell with you right away, you ass”. Now-days I say this man is a *good* fellow, that one is a *bastard*. They can be Greeks or Bulgars or Turks, it does not matter. *Is he good? Or*

is he bad? That's the only thing I ask now a days..." (Zorba, 174) Zorba has matured through his experiences to such an extent that he even surpasses this measure of good and bad as he says to Boss, "As I grow older...I feel I shan't even go on asking that! Whether a man is good or bad, I am sorry for him, for all of them. The sight of a man just rends my insides, even if I act as though I don't care a damn! There he is, poor devil, I think, he also eats and drinks and makes love and is frightened, whoever he is: he has his God and his devil just the same....poor devil! *We are all brothers! All worm meat!*" (Zorba, 175) When the narrator asks him about his country Zorba replies, "My country you say? You believe all the rubbish your books tell you...? Well I am the one you should believe. So long as there are countries, man will stay like an animal, a ferocious animal...but I am delivered from all that, God be praised! It is finished for me..." (Zorba, 179) Zorba has understood the final destiny of man and he is fully aware that it makes no sense to fight on petty issues like nationalism and race when; we are all going to meet the same fate- death. His answer to avoid all types of injustice is to adopt the *religion of Love* that binds all humans together. Though he does not pray regularly in the church, his heart is full of compassion and love and he can't see injustice before his eyes. This can be certified when he saves the 'prostitute' widow from being publically lynched and gets his ear bitten by a local villager. Zorba in a rage shouts, "Are not you ashamed? Fine lot of men you are! A whole village to kill a single woman!" (Zorba, 195) But after the widow is suddenly killed by the local people and Zorba fails to rescue her again, he is filled with remorse and is invaded by the pricks of conscience and refuses to eat anything on the following night. This is Zorba who apparently is an epicurean figure but who refuses to eat anything when he sees injustice taking place before his eyes as the narrator comments, "That evening Zorba would have nothing to eat or drink ... he remained pensive" (Zorba, 200) While referring to Boss he gives vent to his sense of anguish and frustration he feels at his helplessness before the course of events: "I tell you, boss, Everything that happens in this world is *unjust, unjust!* I won't be a party to it". (Zorba, 202) Though Zorba breaks the theological laws, he is governed by the laws of his inner universe to which he is a devout follower. Zorba, like true mystics, has come to a realisation that all human beings partake of God's divinity and the heart of human being is the only place that is sacred and that can contain the highest truths of life. Zorba has learnt a lesson in Turkey from Aga Hassan that "...neither the seven storeys of heaven nor the seven storeys of the earth are enough to contain Him [God]. So be careful...never to wound a man's heart..." because it is the divine seat of God. (Zorba, 210)

Zorba holds a very different and unique concept of beauty which is against all *essentialist* views of beauty. He does not believe that only a *young white middle class* woman can be beautiful. He has freed himself from the dogmas of gender bias, racism and elitism. While making love to an old widow Dame Hortense, he is delighted and never feels that the old widow is not beautiful as the narrator comments, "Zorba was on fire...it was certainly not this mummified and outrageously old woman he was seeing before him, but the entire 'female species', as it was his custom to call women. The individual disappeared, the features were obliterated, whether young or senile, beautiful or ugly-those were mere unimportant variations. Behind each woman rises the austere, sacred and mysterious face of Aphrodite...that was the face Zorba was seeing and talking to, and desiring. Dame Hortense was only an ephemeral and transparent mask which Zorba tore away to kiss the *eternal* mouth." (Zorba, 232) Though not a *learned literate*, Zorba

holds a sweep on the philosopher like thoughts of his friend referred throughout the novel as Boss. As the narrator Boss says, “Zorba was the man I had sought so long in vain. A *living* heart, a large voracious mouth...not yet severed from mother earth...It is he who has discovered the truth, I thought. His is the right path.” (Zorba, 233) The narrator goes on to say that “His (Zorba’s) body and soul formed one *harmonious whole*, and all things—women, bread, water, meat, sleep—blended with his flesh and became Zorba. I had never seen such a *friendly accord between a man and the universe*.”(Zorba, 242)

Maria Hnaraki in her article “*Speaking without Words: Zorba’s Dance*” says, “The popularity of the novel *Zorba the Greek* is attributed to the fact that it urged American and European intellectuals discover what they were not, what their repressed self was; in other words, it offered westerners a *prototype of liberation*.”(3-8) Peter Bien argues how Zorba’s actions are immediate reflections of Nietzsche’s ideas. (49-50) To Reed Merrill, Zorba is the Nietzschean “superhuman” who knows that there is not a true, reasonable, permanent, ordered, or good world for us. (19-20). Peter Hartocollis argues that Kazantzakis does not kill “his” God, as Nietzsche would do, but, instead, wishes to save Him, thing which derives from Kazantzakis’s wish to kill the awesome father of his childhood, whom he continued to hate and fear most of his life.(209-210) He reads Kazantzakis from a psychoanalytical point of view. One can have reservations with Reed Merrill’s argument but there is no doubt that Zorba has killed his God. But it is the traditional orthodox theological Christian God which he has killed as he says to Boss, “... I don’t believe in anything...or anyone; only in Zorba. Not because Zorba is better than the others; not at all, not a little bit! He is a brute like the rest! But I believe in Zorba because he is the only *being* I have in my power, the only one I *know*. All the rest are ghosts. I see with these eyes, I hear with these ears, I digest with these guts. All the rest are ghosts, I tell you... Don’t listen to what the priests tell you.” (Zorba, 269) Zorba has fully realised his own inner potential i.e. the potential of human *being* to work wonders- the potential to see world full of beauty and perfection. He conceives God as a *being* with human characteristics as he says, “I think of God as being exactly *like me*. Only bigger, stronger, crazier. And immortal into the bargain...” He sees *forgiveness* as the essential characteristic of God, “because God is a great Lord and that’s what being a Lord means: to forgive.”(Zorba, 311)

Zorba’s notion of paradise is also a fluid one. He does not believe in the theological paradise. While having a discussion with his bookworm friend Boss he says, “Each man has his own particular paradise. For you, Paradise will be stocked full of books...For someone else it will be full of casks of wine, of rum and brandy, for other piles of money...” (Zorba, 321) He has a peep into the absurdity of life and it can be argued that his life straddles between the absurdity of human life and the perfection of it. He gets a glimpse of divinity amidst the absurdity of life and holds on to that spark of divine which frees him from all the deep anguish he feels himself in. Maria Hanaraki quotes Nikos Dimou saying that, “The original Zorba, the hero of Kazantzakis’s novel, is a passionate but not a jovial person. In his depth you can find a lot of despair. His merry-making is tinged with a strong taste of regret. You can hear this in Greek songs. You can feel it in the deep, serious expression of a male solo dancer. He is not having fun. He is expressing the beauty and agony of living. Indeed, Zorba transforms his metaphysical questionings into structured, rhythmic movement: Who made the world? Why? Why do we die? Where do we come from and where do we go? (Hnaraki, 09) There is no doubt that he raises all

these questions as argued by Dimou, but Zorba does not stop here. In his initial attempts he tries to answer these questions in human language either by completely negating the God or banishing him from the universe. But the more experience he gains, the more he takes recourse to mystic language. Either sad or cheerful, whenever he feels the divine within, whenever he contemplates deeper and deeper on the fundamental questions of human life, he takes his *santuri* and dances to the full of his heart. While talking to narrator he reveals how he danced with his *santuri* when his son died. In the Zorbian world, there can be no response to such deep agony of losing a child than to dance and celebrate the divine 'justice'. He comes to realise that "there is providence in the fall of a sparrow". (Shakespeare, Hamlet, 73) He never feels himself out of the cosmic rhythm. He has freed himself from the traditional God associated with fear that sits in heaven and commands with an Olympian distance the universe- to move on.

Zorba is not afraid of suffering because he knows that it is suffering which takes him to a higher plane of existence where everything vanishes except the joy of pure bliss as he says to Boss, "Life is trouble...Death, no. To live-do you know what that means? To look for trouble." (Zorba, 110) The narrator in this respect comments aptly "... like the great Philosophers [Zorba] is dominated by the basic problem of mankind. He lives them as if they were immediate and urgent necessities..." (Zorba, 134) But Zorba maintains such a poise of his being that "like the child he sees everything [as if] for the *first time*. He is forever astonished and wonders why and wherefore? Everything seems *miraculous* to him, and each morning when he opens his eyes he sees trees, sea, stone and birds and is *amazed*." (Zorba, 139) Seeing all the wonders of world he cries, "what is this miracle...what are these mysteries called: trees, sea, stones, [and] birds?" Zorba is capable of thinking on the highest problems and ultimate questions that have plagued human beings since the dawn of creation as he says to Boss, "Can you tell me, boss ...what all these things mean. And above all why do people die?" Although the narrator Boss is a scholar who has read so many books, he fails to answer his metaphysical questions and this makes Zorba angry who retorts, "Well all those damned books you read – what good are they?... I want you to tell me [also] where we come from and where we are going to?" Finally, the narrator learns the key to the mystery of life from Zorba and comments, "[Because of Zorba] I felt deep within me that the highest point a man can attain is *not knowledge*, or virtue or goodness or victory but something even greater, more heroic and more despairing : Sacred Awe." Zorba has understood the secret of life—that it is full of suffering yet worthy. Behind this fleeting and ephemeral phenomenon, he is capable of seeing the eternal law, the eternal joy that is why he feels himself in harmony with all the elements of universe. He has seen the glimpse of Divine and that gives him edge over the others.

Like a true mystic, Zorba knows that the ultimate Truth cannot be explained or conveyed through human language and it can only be acted either by wild cries of joy/pain or through the dance which he occasionally performs. In this respect Maria Hnaraki quotes Peter Bien saying, "It is the dancing, however, which Zorba manages to drag his boss in too, which acts as the intensively as well as impressively emotional and passionate act: Kazantzakis sees on the music-dance blaze-up of Zorba the contact with the timeless, a moment that transcends every cultural civilization. Indeed, on the last day in Crete, the boss learns from Zorba a remedial lesson in dancing." (Hnarki, 07) While Zorba dances, the narrator comments, "one felt that in this old body of his there was a soul struggling to carry away this flesh and cast itself like a meteor into

the darkness...” Zorba’s dance frees him from the tangles, twists and “knots of Contrariety” which his mind generates out of deep thinking. (Leaves of Grass, 93) He mounts higher than the binaries of good and evil and his final position can be summed up in the words of Kazantzakis who says, “I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. *I am free.*” (Kazantzakis, Saviours of God, 63)

Conclusion

Zorba the Greek offers a hope of life amidst the absurdity and nothingness of modern life. Zorba knows that life is full of suffering yet he chooses to live because he thinks life to be worth living. Zorbian attitude to life is the attitude of a child who sees everything, as though, for the first time and wonders at all the things of life. Every human being in the religion of Zorba is a mystic universe *in itself* and that connects Zorba with the perennial mystics of all time because, above all, he respects human life in every form as it comes to him.

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