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The war that goes on Stanley Kubrick's Fear and Desire- a Sisyphian struggle for meaning

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Abstract

The Current paper focuses on how the American filmmaker Stanley Kubrick perceived the dangerous outcomes of war almost seven decades ago when the idea of War and patriotism were associated with valor and martyrdom. Kubrick's directorial debut reflects the dangers of war and how brutally it destroys human compassion. It narrates the ever-existing structures of fear, doubt, and death, which are the products of the modern world ridden with wars. It tells the story of four soldiers dangerously trapped within enemy lines. The film Fear and desire was released in 1953, almost seven decades earlier; nevertheless, it carries a prophetic vision as it foreshadows our conflict-ridden current times. Whether the war occurs between two countries or between two ideologies, clashes have become very common during the age to which we belong. Although Fear and Desire was Kubrick's first film, he was still trying to address matters that transcend time and space. What makes the film still relevant is that rather than endorsing or denouncing the institution of War, Kubrick elaborates on how war permanently distorts our perception of reality, thus destroying the human mind's ability to comprehend everyday occurrences.

Key Words: Fear and desire, War and patriotism, The Myth of Sisyphus, the futility of War, zone of death, Korean War, War of the human mind

THE WAR THAT GOES ON STANLEY KUBRICK'S FEAR AND DESIRE- A SISYPHEAN STRUGGLE FOR MEANING

- Dr. Gawtham Jyothsna

Stanley Kubrick was born on 26 July 1928. This year is situated right between the two World Wars. Born at such a crucial time, Stanley Kubrick had the great fortune to witness and explore the political, psychological, social, and cultural changes during this period. His parents were of Jewish origin but were not strictly religious. In the early age of adolescence, Kubrick was always fascinated with the game of chess. He was a master chess player, a passion that shaped his unique artistic control as a director. The game of chess itself is a theoretical representation of war. Kubrick's enormous interest in chess made him adopt themes related to the war in most of his major films. His first film, *Fear and Desire*, is set in a war. Although the film does not explicitly mention the name of the war, it alludes to the Second World War and the war in Korea, which took place when the film was being made.

The film reflects the dangers of war and how brutally it destroys human compassion. It narrates the ever-existing structures of fear, doubt, and death, which are the products of the modern world ridden with wars. It tells the story of four soldiers dangerously trapped within enemy lines. Sergeant Mac, Lieutenant Corby, Private Sydney, and Private Fletcher are the four men lost in the jungle. From the very beginning, Kubrick establishes the idea that war dehumanizes men. After attacking and killing several enemy soldiers so that these men can take their supplies and make a raft to escape from the zone of death, the soldiers encounter a woman.

Mac -one of the soldier-, who is eager to attack, captures her, and she is tied to a tree. Sydney, his companion, stands guard while others return to work on the raft. Although it was Kubrick's first attempt at directing, he portrays the encounter between the woman and Private Sydney, who embodies fear and paranoia created by the modern war as the encounter between the modern man of war and nature. She was happily fishing in the serene lake before she was captured. She is the reflection of nature; she appears as if she is

close, almost an inseparable fragment of nature. The natural joy and bliss that human beings feel on being one with nature are represented through her character. She has no fears of enemy attacks, nor is she eager to escape from the forest even though a war is happening, for she belongs there. But in the company of Sydney, she is traumatized beyond her wildest imagination. She does not speak English, nor does she understand it. But Sydney begins to confess all the thoughts bothering him until now. The woman appears to him like a saviour with whom he can express his views as never before did he find a chance to do that with his superior. Even though she miserably fails to understand him, Sydney becomes stubborn and expects her to understand his blathering. Sydney's incapability to communicate his emotions and his repressed fears and desire reflect the idea that a man returning from war does not know the language of love and affection, in short, the language of humanity, which evolved from nature.

Fear and desire elaborate on how war destroys soldiers' sanity and makes them incommunicable. Private Sydney is the perfect embodiment of a man whose sanity has been destroyed by unnatural or artificial war, and as a consequence, he is incommunicable. The war has dehumanized him. His fear of being killed in an unknown battle as an unknown soldier has taken away his spirit. He is full of doubts and anxieties. All such worries and paranoia result in Sydney shooting the woman when she tries to run away from him. He kills her because he is afraid that she will report to the enemy general for a few minutes ago, in a desperate hope to entertain her, he had made fun of the general. Now he is worried and seriously believes his preposterous fears and firmly feels that the woman, who a little while ago appeared as his savior, would speak against him. This fear is baseless and lacks credibility.

Once her death is acknowledged, he goes insane. He calls himself a fish, implying that he denies accepting reality before his eyes. Therefore, he creates an alternative reality in which he has lost his real identity. His pathetic state is a dire consequence of man killing something that could have been his savior. These self-destructive tendencies speak of the

situation of a modern man who has become the enemy of himself. The worst battle that he has to fight occurs inside his mind.

Sergeant Mac is in sharp contrast to the character of Sydney. He is eager to prove that his life has meaning. So he hopes to go on a mission where he and the rest of the soldiers can attack and kill the enemy general. But Kubrick subtly hints that even Mac is committing philosophical suicide, as Albert Camus argues in his work *Myth of Sisyphus* which takes on man's encounter with the absurd. Mac is afraid that in the war, he will lose his individuality. His life would lose meaning. Therefore, he desires the general's death to attach meaning to his existence. Private Fletcher agrees to go along with this plan because he hopes this might help the cause for which they are fighting the war. But that is not what Mac has in mind. He wants to recreate an air of importance around his persona, and this particular action would help fulfill his longing. Their efforts appear futile because even before Mac can get near the general's headquarters; he is shot and severely wounded by the soldiers guarding the enemy general. His death appears like an attempt to create meaning for his life. He becomes a part of the war in which he has witnessed nothing but killing. People from either side had killed and were killed. He did not understand this absurdity. Therefore as he is lying on the raft heavily wounded, he utters, "Nobody is going to cry for me later or cheer for me now. Nobody else is me. I know that it was all wrong; ah, good riddance, what a trade- him for me!" (00:46:49-00:47:09). In the last moments of his life, Mac realizes, or at least recognizes, what he has refused to, until now, that killing human beings for a great cause in a great war is wrong. It has no meaning. However, earlier, Sergeant Mac could not endure the burden of awareness, which would open him up to the world of absurdity, where no actions of human beings would create any meaningful result in a violent act like war; for that reason, he chose to forcibly enforce a purpose with a faint hope to suppress this awareness of absurdity. If Sydney creates an alternative imaginary world that would take him away from the harshness of reality, Mac relies on the false idea of purpose to escape from the world of the absurd in which he is caught up.

Lieutenant Corby has an awareness of absurdity. Just as Albert Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the Lieutenant recognizes the absurdity of their situation and tries to create his meaning. The meaning of this sheer absurd struggle for Corby is to survive. He has yet to taste the high plans of Mac. He knows that going on a mission to destroy the general would be fatal.

He does not want to waste his life on such suicidal missions. Nor does he desire to be a part of a greater purpose, which would bring honor and legacy to one's life. His life is precious, yet at the same time, he does not have any particular reasons to feel so. In an internal monologue, we hear him confessing what makes his life so precious, "Why? The only reason is to hunt for the reason" (00:41:14-00:41:18). But at the same time, he is not a coward and eventually agrees to go with Mac's plan as he respects Mac's purpose. When he finally kills the general, he neither feels proud nor patriotic. He performs this action almost indifferently. There is a sense of detachment in his act. He realizes that war is absurd and no higher purpose can be served through killing.

The men who return to their camp are still determining whether they returned from the war. When Fletcher wonders whether Mac is coming back from the forest or not, in a detached tone, the Lieutenant replies, "Not sure yet whether even we've come back. I think we've gone too far from our private boundaries to be certain about these things anymore-to come back to ourselves..." (00:58:16-00:58:26).

The root cause of such a state of despair and uncertainty is the greater disillusionment that war brings to humanity. Men like the Lieutenant realize that soldiers are not killing monstrous enemies to make the world a better place. On the contrary, they are killing fellow human beings; to endorse this idea more boldly, Kubrick makes the same actor (Kenneth Harp) play the characters of two generals. The enemy general is not an overconfident bloodthirsty monster who desires to destroy all his enemies. On the contrary, he is a sympathetic figure afraid that he might get killed anytime. The biggest paradox of the war is that his own double kills him. Stanley Kubrick offers the idea that after the war, the defeated are already dead, and the victors do not feel the sweet taste of

victory, for after being aware of what they have done; they become fearsome strangers to themselves.

Even though the movie was released in the early 50s when the Second World War had ended and had destroyed the sense of hope and bliss from fellow human beings, Kubrick's *Fear and Desire* does not offer a pessimistic conclusion; there is a glimpse of hope at the end. In the post-climax, every character, even Sydney, to some extent, dares to confront his authentic individual self no matter how grotesque that experience is. Ultimately, they manage to retain their individuality even though all of them have participated in the same war. This confrontation and this prediction bring them closer to their true selves. Although, in the very beginning of the film, in the voiceover, an unknown narrator makes it clear that the forest in which the war takes place is outside history, the statement that comes in the following statement acts as a paradox to the idea raised in the former, "Only the unchanging shapes of fear and doubt and death are from our world. These soldiers that you see keep our language and our time, but have no other country than the mind" (00:01:15-00:01:30). Even after making such a declaration that it is a fictional work, the fiction is not free from the affectation of the real modern world which is infested with the fear of mass destruction and self-doubt after the Second World War. The symbolic portrayal of the two soldiers who survive yet fail to come out of the traumatic experience of the war, in the end, represents not only the state of Europe after the devastating experience of the Second World War but, at the same time, it acts as the after-effects of any internal war that goes on in the psyche of the human beings of the modern world.

The film Fear and desire was released in 1953, almost seven decades earlier; nevertheless, it carries a prophetic vision as it foreshadows our conflict-ridden current times. Whether the war occurs between two countries or between two ideologies, clashes have become very common during the age to which we belong. Although *Fear and Desire* was Kubrick's first film, he was still trying to address matters that transcend time and space. What makes the film still relevant is that rather than endorsing or denouncing the institution of War, Kubrick elaborates on how war permanently distorts our perception of reality, thus destroying the human mind's ability to comprehend everyday occurrences.

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