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The Rebel Revisited

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The exploration will use Albert Camus's theorization of rebellion as a point of departure without restricting itself to it. Camus has theorized rebellion quite comprehensively in his book *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1951). According to him, rebellion is an act that refuses to submit to injustice. A rebel is committed to universal human dignity and seeks freedom and equality for everyone. Rebellion, thus, implies also an affirmation of all that is good and beautiful. In fact, the refusal of nihilism is a dominant characteristic of Camus's idea of rebellion. Camus also affirms that rebellion is an aspiration for justice and not a passage to nihilism and violence. Nor is it a kind of resentment. Rather, it is a struggle for integrity. The rebel "is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good which he considers more important than his own destiny" (Camus 15). Camus advocates a literary art that neither consents to the given reality nor turns away from it: "Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is" (269).

Rebellion is not an egoistic act. The rebel identifies with and fights for others. He may himself have suffered silently in a certain situation but cannot see somebody else, even his enemy in that situation. Common interest is also not the motive for his rebellion. It is for all humanity that the rebel surpasses himself. Human solidarity, for being metaphysical, is not the aim of a rebel. The rebel considers solidarity for those in chains. Camus points out the significance of "the passionate affirmation" in the act of rebellion (19). Rebellion, though apparently negative as it creates nothing, is profoundly positive. It reveals that part of person which must always be defended.

Rebellion is imminent in societies that suffer from a huge gap between theoretical and factual equality. The absence of rebellion in some societies is due to the acceptance of inequality as part of their sacred tradition; myth answers the objections, if any, raised against the system. Camus notes that a good deal of soul-searching must occur before one accepts or rejects rebellion:

The rebel is [a person] who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacred and determined on laying claim to a human situation in which all the answers are human – in other words, formulated in reasonable terms. From this moment every question, every word, is an act of rebellion while in the sacred world every word is an act of grace. (21)

This allows for two possible worlds: the sacred world and the world of rebellion. The acceptance of one or the rejection of the other means "All or Nothing". Camus believes that modern societies reject the sacred world and accept rebellion more readily due to ever increasing storm and strife of life. He asserts that today "rebellion is one of the essential dimensions of man" (21)). However, Camus also asks: "Is it possible to find a rule of conduct outside the realm of religion and its absolute values?" The answer is: No (21).

Comparing rebellion with revolution, Camus remarks that "revolution is only the logical consequence of metaphysical rebellion" (105). While freedom may be the motivating principle of revolution, nostalgia may also influence a revolution in the initial stage of its emergence. It may also adopt terror and use arms for murder and violence when it is felt

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that justice is being denied. Camus, therefore, adds that rebellion has a limited scope whereas revolution, which has origin in metaphysics, does not respect any limits. Camus asserts: "Revolution is the injection of ideas into historical experience, while rebellion is only the movement that leads from individual experience into the realm of ideas" (106). Rebellion could be a fruitless struggle or protest and may follow no method or reason, whereas revolution attempts to mould actions into ideas in a theoretical frame. Rebellion also often uses murder and violence. Whereas rebellion may often use violence, revolution certainly "destroys both men and principles" (106). According to Camus, revolutions in the 20th century honoured historical nihilism by killing the principle of God. Fascism emerged with the Nietzschean superman and rediscovered God as the master of death. Man, who wanted to be God, arrogated "to himself the power of life or death over others" (246). Revolution, while obeying nihilism, thus turned against its rebel origins: "The revolutionary is simultaneously a rebel or he is not a revolutionary but a policeman and a bureaucrat who turns against rebellion. But if he is a rebel, he ends by taking sides against revolution" (249). Camus notes that rebellion makes a person refuse to be treated as an object; it is in fact the affirmation of a nature which is common to all human beings. If rebellion demands unity, revolution demands totality. Rebellion starts from the negative supported by the affirmative, whereas revolution begins with absolute negation and fabricates affirmation. Rebellion is creative; revolution is nihilistic. This means that revolution has to renounce its own principles, nihilism as well as historical values, if it is to realize the creative force of rebellion. Camus writes:

...let us only note that to the "I rebel, therefore we exist" and the "We are alone" of metaphysical rebellion, rebellion at grips with history adds that instead of killing and dying in order to produce the being that we are not, we have to live and let live in order to create what we are. (252)

As a creative act, art occupies a pre-eminent position in Camus's view of rebellion. Art exalts and denies reality simultaneously. If it demands unity, it also refuses the world for what it does not possess. In this way, art is the highest expression of rebellion. He observes that "[t]hus art should give us a final perspective on the content of rebellion" (253). Naturally, revolutionaries have often shown hostility to art, because revolution imposes a closure with its absolute demand whereas art perpetually rebels. Plato "calls in question the deceptive function of language and exiles only poets from his republic" (253). The history of revolutionary movement of modern times is also full of instances of dismissal of art and aesthetic values. On the contrary, it favours pragmatic values: a shoe-maker prefers a pair of shoes to Shakespeare; another person prefers cheese to Pushkin. Marx also believed that "[a]rt does not belong to all times" but is the privilege of the ruling class only (254). This means that only a revolutionary form of art dedicated to the service of revolution would be acceptable to a revolutionary party or regime. The artist, on the contrary, undertakes to reconstruct the world true to his own plan. Work of art is loyal to its own style which is not imitation or resemblance. Camus cites Van Gogh's appeal for creation: "I can very well, in life and in painting, too, do without God. But I cannot, suffering as I do, without

something that is greater than I am, that is my life---the power to create" (257). Moreover, both negation and consent counterbalance art as no art can survive purely on denial. "Art disputes reality, but does not hide from it" (258).

The artist rejects and retains reality according to need. Total rejection of reality results in a merely formal frame. Art cannot completely reject reality. Literary art neither totally rejects reality nor consents to it completely. Purely imaginary art is neither significant nor communicable. A significant literary creation uses reality but also transfigures it. Reproducing reality without selection will be only a sterile repetition of creation or the act of a monkey. A writer is to choose arbitrarily out of reality. Form and content follow a balance for unity. Camus adds that a great style does not allow imitation; a real creation is rebellious. Creative art is allowed by the order or disorder of a period as ruled by prevailing passions. Further, if war and revolution make creation impossible, the times are unripe for creative art. (Camus believed that it was dangerous to create art in his times.) The artist may have to join with other artists against the forces of destruction. In the process, humility may disappear among artists and the "new conquerors", armed with their laws, may try to convert the world to hell. Camus sounds optimistic in his belief that such hell will remain only for a short period. Even if history ends, art and creation would exist. He observes:

Art, at least, teaches us that man cannot be explained by history alone and that he also finds a reason for his existence in the order of nature. For him, the great god Pan is not dead. His most instinctive act of rebellion, while it affirms the value and the dignity common to all men, obstinately claims, so as to satisfy its hunger for unity, an integral part of the reality whose name is beauty. (276)

Camus believes that all great reformers have tried to create in history the world that Shakespeare, Cervantes, Moliere and Tolstoy tried to create in their art. Their effort was to create "a world always ready to satisfy the hunger for freedom and dignity which every man carries in his heart" (276).

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