

Satyaki Roy

## The Myth of the Middle

*"...To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them...."*  
— Hamlet, William Shakespeare

Few would disagree that "man's search for meaning" deepens with age, lived experience, and a heightened awareness of death. I am on a similar quest as many of my predecessors, often asking myself: "If I were to start over, what would be the most beneficial survival strategy to live a life?" I come across desperate efforts in the popular culture to eulogize the word "balance", which is an overused prefix to the words life, diet, mind, etc. I would like to avoid treating the need for balance as a self-truth; instead, let me delve into a short, panoramic view of how this middle ground, or the lack thereof, affects human lives in the long term. I should clarify that uncertainty, indecisiveness, and vacillation — that proverbial fence-sitting that can project a man as over-critical to his admirers and simultaneously feeble-minded to his cynics — are all part of this mythical "middle ground" I will discourse. During this brief exploration, I will dip into my limited yet cherished pool of memories, readings, realizations, and professional observations.

I will begin by sharing a mental image of a clutter of dots representative of a population of living entities. I imagine these dots move through space and time, shape-shifting all the way. The greyish dots flicker like stars and get left behind, while the red dots seem to expand in volume, perhaps by coalescing with their kins and forming deeper shades. Through evolving space, time, and form, "the old order changeth, yielding place to new". The new species of crimson dots, representing a fitter population, bask in the naive glory of their short-lived existence, encapsulating beauty and the cruel uncertainty of ignorance in an endless loop. In reality, the dots belong to heterogeneous species existing in nature in a dynamic equilibrium. In a simple scenario with two classes, namely, predator and prey, the prey population must remain sufficient to support the predators; conversely, the predators are limited by the availability of food. Therefore, the middle ground represents a proportion that allows the myriad species to co-exist.

In the above example of the clutter of dots, each dot may be a unicellular organism whose biology is fairly well-understood or a complex organism like a human, blessed or cursed, as the case may be, with a hyperactive mind. For the latter, I argue that the middle ground could be a necessary yet painful state. Let me elucidate my point with examples of literary and mythical characters that have served as case studies for human psychology. The first character is Hamlet, who has a dubious reputation for being an overly troubled man in the Shakespearean metaverse, as he debates whether to kill his uncle. Social commentators, psychoanalysts, playwrights, and critics have presented the 'delay' through many lenses. The likes of Sigmund Freud have used Hamlet as a crucible to convey a

tormented being caught between his repressed desire for his mother, this infamous Oedipal complex, and the will to avenge his father. Playwrights have infused a political slant to Hamlet's painfully arduous deliberation, positioning him as a man at odds with the establishment. Readers, such as I, have seen his actions or the lack thereof as common sense, where his humanity would prevent him from murdering another soul, no matter how treacherous or depraved in his eyes, akin to how Brutus would feel guilt at betraying the trust of his best friend, Julius Caesar, to serve the greater national interest. Nonetheless, this 'inevitable dualism' — a phrase used by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay 'The Compensation' — is at the core of Hamlet's eternal appeal and evidence in favor of the pang of indecision in the mind. This is perhaps why the cerebral audience seeks vicarious familiarity as they watch the inner struggle of the archetypal modern man, Hamlet, play out on stage. They seek closure from the dramatic climax, where all the main characters are met with horrible deaths. Unsurprisingly, a thinking man trapped in the "to be, or not to be" question that I began my essay with, gravitates to a resolution, as I discuss later.

Another character I would point my readers to is Apu, a diffident protagonist penned by Indian writer Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and cerebrally portrayed by filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Apu symbolizes the inner conflict of a young man caught between responsibility and aspiration. He struggles as he is called upon to choose between life in a remote village with his mother looking upon him as her pillar of strength after the dramatic decease of her husband and daughter, and the enticement and challenge of the urban life he identifies with. Like Hamlet, Apu too finds temporary solace as he opts for the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" by seeking out a city existence, advancing the storyline of "The Apu Trilogy" to the marital life of Apu. The last of my examples is from the great epic, the Mahabharata, where fate pits warrior Arjuna against his relatives on the battlefield. Like Hamlet and Apu, he feels guilt and turns to his counsel, the god himself, Krishna. With his famous lines in the Bhagavad Gita (meaning the song of God), "do your duty, but do not concern yourself with the results", Krishna advises Arjuna to choose duty over blood relations, transitioning him from his introspective middle path to resolute action.

I see the middle ground as an indispensable component of adaptation and survival. The dots, which are units that constitute the population, beget the tendency of exploration, a state fraught with the same magnitude of suffering comparable to a rite of passage or the growing pains. My thesis is that a living entity combats this suffering in two ways. First, he seeks out a higher purpose to fight this angst, as Viktor Frankl pointed out, "those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'". If successful, they emerge triumphant like Homo sapiens over the Neanderthals or, better still, enlightened with the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold Path, like the Great Buddha. Sadly, the vast majority are not so lucky, capitulating in the face of adversity, that is the middle ground. Second, they form social groups, as the shared dilemma in a population is manageable due to the common ground. From the vantage point of the prey in my predator-prey example, by moving in a herd, each prey gives itself a fighting chance against the attack of the adversary (and adversity), i.e., the predator. To me, this largely explains the evolutionary urge for coopera-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

tion and community formation, i.e., the agency to alleviate the burden of the middle ground (or “to take arms against a sea of troubles”, as Shakespeare put it).

This begs the question: what is the role of certainty (or the resolute action chosen by Arjuna during the Kurukshetra War) in nature and human life? I believe that certainty aids practical decision-making and convenience. Despite the inevitability of the middle ground in the proportion of the existence of species in a population, one should not understate the word “selection” in natural selection, that is to say that nature too picks sides, favoring the crimson dot over the grey. Similarly, any AI learning model marries exploration with exploitation to consider countless alternatives before outputting a single decision as optimal. Elections too seldom have candidates get all or no votes, yet we pick one winner based on the majority. Likewise, society tends to simplify human identity by assigning an individual to a religion, caste, or nationality. These discrete outcomes stem from logical necessities, helping us navigate the complexities of existence. Recall that Robert Frost picked one of the two roads that “diverged in the yellow woods”, feeling sorry all along that his human limitation prevented him from traveling both.

*“...So naughty, frightened little Goldilocks jumped; and whether she broke her neck in the fall, or ran into the wood and was lost there, or found her way out of the wood and got whipped for being a bad girl and playing truant, no one can say. But the Three Bears never saw anything more of her.”*  
— *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*

We must not forget how the Goldilocks story ends. She has been described as not “well brought up”, rude, and playing truant, and rightfully so, for trespassing and helping herself to the bear’s food and amenities. Despite these misadventures, the story ended with her alive, as she, like Frost, took an executive decision and decisively jumped out of the window in the nick of time. If she had not combined exploration with the right dose of timely exploitation of acquired common sense, she would have faced certain death. Luckily, she found her “way out of the woods” and into the hall of immortal fame — a place in the pages of English mythology.