

THE WORLD OF BOREDOM AND SORROW: SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT AS AN ABSURD DRAMA

Dr. Rahul Mene

Assistant Professor and Head
Department of English
Shri Shankaracharya Mahavidyalaya
Junwani, Bhilai Nagar (Chhattisgarh)
India

The emergence of the Absurd Theatre in the twentieth century is a unique, historical process. The concept of the Absurd, like that of happiness, is more a precept than a concept. The term absurd emerged first in philosophy and metaphysics. The Absurd Theater is timeless, universal and philosophical, it is not affected by the fluctuations of political and social circumstances. With the arrival of Samuel Beckett, the label 'The Theatre of the Absurd' gained currency. The term 'Absurd drama' has been provided by Martin Esslin, for a group of dramatists in the Nineteen fifties, like Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Genet and Pinter, who shared certain attitudes towards the plight of man in the universe.

The term absurd drama is chiefly epitomized by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him a longing for happiness and reason. The absurd is born of his confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of this world . (58)

The absurdists pronounced this concept of absurdity, and reduced men to a ridiculous caricature, in his futile attempt to search for meaning in a meaningless universe Beckett goes a step ahead of Camus. In his perception of the absurd in not sheltering any illusion of happiness or illusion of triumph for man, indeed Beckett's characters share the contempt of Sisyphus. But at a the same time they are abjectly indifferent to the absurd suffering. Hema Raghavan observes;

"Becketts rebels turn into exiles not in Camus' sense of the term of an alien or stranger, but in terms of indifference and non involvement in the Absurd happenings around him." (115)

Aristotle firmly believed that, a play can never exist without a plot. A well constructed plot cannot begin or end at any point. Beckett's plays end as abruptly as they begin. They have a circular shape, returning to the initial situation again. It reaches a zero point making the preceding action a futile one so that it made no difference even if it had never happened at all. Aristotle compares plot to a living organism. In a good plot no single incident could be cut off without injuring the coherence of the plot. In Beckett's plays there are no 'incidents' or 'actions', which , when omitted harms the coherence of the plot. In fact, it is a play where nothing happens at all. Without resorting to what Aristotle designated as a plot, Beckett proves that a plot-less play can be written. Beckett directly places his characters, in opposition to a well made

fictional plot to show that man ultimately has to extricate himself from the grim and ironic situations created by the institution.

In spite of the rejection of all the conventions, the play *Waiting For Godot* was successful. Esslin says

[...] a truly astonishing reception for a play so enigmatic, so exasperating, so complex and so uncompromising in its refusal to conform to any of the accepted ideas of dramatic construction. (10)

Throughout their lives, human beings always wait for something, an event, a thing, a person or death. To wait means to experience the action of time with a hopeful end in future; *Waiting for Godot* is a dramatic statement of the human situation itself. The play concentrates on waiting, rather than on Godot. Nothing is certain, in the world of *Waiting for Godot* :

ESTRAGON : His name is Godot ?

VLADIMIR : I think so.

ESTRAGON : Fancy that. (41)

The play starts with two tramps Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot on the country cross-roads, where there is nothing except a barren tree, with a hope that Godot will come to save them from misery. Another pair, a master, Pozzo and his servant, Lucky pass on their way. They spend time talking. The first act ends with the messenger coming and informing that Godot would come the next day. In the second act, we find the tramps still waiting. Pozzo and Lucky again pass their way, but now Pozzo is blind and Lucky dumb. The messenger appears only to repeat the promise. The play ends. The action of the play is the same in the beginning, middle and in the end. In this drama if we skip the first scene and read the second one or even vice-versa, we do not lose the track of the story. The second act is nothing but a slightly deviated form of the first act. It is purposely made to be alike, in order to evoke a double theatrical effect of consolidating the essence of experience, just as it happens in poetry through repetition.

The tramps deliberately contradict each other, agree with each other, question each other, so that the conversation goes on. All that Estragon can do is to eat a carrot when he is hungry or pull off and put on his boot. All that Vladimir can do is to remove his hat, inspect it, shake it and put it again. In Pozzo and Lucky episode, Pozzo announces his intention of selling off Lucky, in Act-II not only that he had not sold Lucky but has forgotten even the intention doing so.

Vladimir and Estragon think about suicide and regret that they failed to jump from the Eifel tower. They decide to hang themselves but lack the rope. Vladimir takes out the strap of his trousers but finds it too weak to hold a person. The existence of Lucky and Pozzo also implies the absurd human situation. Lucky the servant is tortured and is unhappy and his master is also unhappy and wants to sell out Lucky. When Estragon tries to wipe Lucky's tears, he is violently kicked by Lucky. In the second act he is beaten by Estragon, but takes to no action even to defend himself. Estragon is daily beaten by the outsiders also whom he did not even recognize Human solidarity is as statement as the statement of man himself.

Time can exist only on the assumption that events in time are significant. Time in Beckett's plays is the total dramatization of Eliot's lines :

Time present and time past,
And both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past. (42-44)

All time is irredeemable. But Eliot's concept of eternity is religious, whereas Beckett's operation of time is futile. Time sense in Beckett's plays is mysterious. Time is not a moving stream, it has

rather become a ‘stagnant mush.’ Vladimir tries to confirm the relationship between yesterday and today. Pozzo bursts out :

VLADIMIR : Dumb! Since when?

POZZO : Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time ! One day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll all go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the some day, the some second, is that not enough for you? (89)

Beckett’s heroes, quite often and quite conveniently forget things. Vladimir and Estragon can hardly remember where they were the day before. They struggle to recollect which day they were to wait for Godot :

VLADIMIR : He said Saturday (*Pause*) I think

ESTRAGON : You think

VLADIMIR : I must have made a note of it.

ESTRAGON : (*Very insidious*), But what Saturday ?

And is it Saturday ? is it not rather Sunday ?, or Monday ? or Friday ?

VLADIMIR : (*Looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in landscape*) its not possible.

ESTRAGON : Or Thursday? (15)

Vladimir and Estragon try to keep on talking to each other in order to escape the absurdity at least for the moment. On the other hand, their dialogue only add fuel to the flames. The boredom and monotony, the anguish and suffering of the characters are reflected in their dialogue :

VLADIMIR : You are right, we’re inexhaustible.

ESTRAGON : Its so we won’t think.

VLADIMIR : We have that excuse.

ESTRAGON : It’s so we won’t hear.

VLADIMIR : We have our reasons.

ESTRAGON : All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR : They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON : Like leaves.

VLADIMIR : Like sand.

ESTRAGON : Like leaves.

(*Silence*)

VLADIMIR : They all speak together.

ESTRAGON : Each one to itself.

(*Silence*)

VLADIMIR : Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON : They rustle.

VLADIMIR : They murmur.

ESTRAGON : They rustle.

(*Silence*) (63)

This passage is characteristic of Beckett’s style, which makes no attempt for any communication. This in itself proves that, in the deeper most selves of their own, they are absolutely convinced with the abundance of absurdity that surrounds them. But at the same time they do not put a stoic resistance to the absurdity. On the other hand, because of the weakness of the will they become, quite unintentionally of course, the exact targets of absurdity. In their heart

of hearts they realize this also. But then, they are virtually incapable of providing for themselves an outlet or a way.

Pozzo is more impervious to communication than the two tramps. He digresses and Vladimir and Estragon keep on repeating their question, trying to pin him down to the point. In this context, Ronald Hayman's Statement is worth quoting, "No question can be answered and no action can be taken without a maximum of interlocution, in incomprehension and argument"(8). The ultimate question or interrogation of man finally remains unanswered and hence the incomprehension. Pozzo avoids answering because he does not have a plausible answer in his mind. He fulfills the situation with a sort of rhetorical jargon Beckett makes use of interruption-Lucky's long speech, Vladimir's songs, Estragon's story about an Englishman at brothe-everything gets interrupted. We welcome these interruptions, as we know, that these will go on for ever without an end, like Lucky's speech, which (retests me) agony of lost meaning and the failure in language. As Esslin puts it

In a meaningless universe, it is always foolhardy to make a positive statement. 'not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever that is the thing to keep in mind even in a heat of composition', as Molly Puts it, summing up the attitude of most of Beckett's characters. (43-44)

The play is made up of nothingness, the spectator is fascinated by the strangeness of what he witnesses, hoping for a turn in the situation or a solution, which never comes. The play holds the audience from beginning to end and the audiences remains riveted to the tramps who do practically nothing in order to reach a desired future. The two tramps are incapable of anything more than mere beginnings of impulses, desires, thoughts, moods, memories and impressions. Their incapacity to live or to end life is intimately linked with their love of helplessness and of wish dreams. The play deals with the absurdity of man's existence in this universe. Evans Lloyd explains about the play nicely: "Nothing is asked to be laid at the door of the play. 'Is Godot' Good ? some one is supposed to have asked Beckett and received the answer – 'if you like'"(197).

Works Cited

A. Primary Source

Beckett Samuel. Waiting for Godot. London: Faber and Faber, 1977.

B. Secondary Sources

Camus, Albert. The Myth of Sisyphus. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1975

Eliot, T.S. Four Quartets. London: Faber and Faber, 1978.

Esslin, Martin. The Theatre of the Absurd. New Yark: The Overlook Press, 1973.

Lloyd, Evans Gareth. The Language of Modern Drama London: J.M. Dent, 1977.

Raghawan Hema. Samuel Beckett: Rebels and Exiles in his Plays. India: Lucas publications, 1988.