

A CRITICAL STUDY OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT- AN ABSURD PLAY

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Samuel Beckett's world famous play *Waiting for Godot* set a new trend not only in the Theatre of the Absurd, but in the general drama in the world. It affected the playwriting business world wide. Beckett is one of the main exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd. He is so famous that he is called the 'father of absurd theatre.' His plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* have established a new trend in drama firmly. In a long series of strange works Beckett wrote fable after fable of persons trapped by perfectly logical, demoralizing absurdity. The Theatre of the Absurd is based on Existentialism, Dadaism, Surrealism, the Italian tradition of Comedy and the like.

ABSURDITY- DEFINITION:

The term 'Absurd' was used to describe the violation of the rules of logic. But later it acquired a wide connotation in the fields of arts, literature, philosophy and theology. The 'absurd' means man's failure to fulfill his material desires and spiritual needs. Soren Kierkegaard used the term to describe the incongruity in Christian religion. Jean Paul Sartre spoke of pointlessness. Albert Camus expressed that the disparity between man's intention and reality repeatedly checkmates the individual. All these thinkers are of the philosophy of Existentialism.

The 'absurd in life arose due to various reasons. First of all industrialization in Europe led to urbanization creating a massive imbalance in social life. Mass exodus led to existential crises. Industrialization led to the creation of science and technology. The same spread to the rest of the world.

The existentialist writer Albert Camus in his book *Myth of Sisyphus*, speaks of man's absurdity. The feeling of absurdity, Camus says, can strike any man in the face of any street corner. So absurdity is a universal phenomenon

"The Absurd," for Camus, "is an absence of correspondence between the mind's need for unity and the chaos of the world the mind experiences, and the obvious response is either suicide or, in the opposite direction, a leap of faith."¹

The 'absurd' means out of harmony with reason or property: incongruous, unreasonable and illogical. Eugene Ionesco said "The Absurd is that which is deprived of purpose...cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."² The absurd involves the existentialists' purposelessness, angst and dread. It is Sartre's 'bad faith.' In Martin Esslin's view it is the inevitable devaluation of ideas, purity and purpose. Still man strives for his own ethical and material system. So he achieves his own human dignity in the face of absurdity. It is said, "Clearly the idea that man is absurd is by no means new. An awareness of the essential absurdity of human behaviour has been inherent in

the works of many writers. Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, Chaucer, Erasmus, Cervantes, Moliere, Swift, Pope, Butler, Anatole France, Balzac, Dickens, Chesterton, Belloc – to cite only a few they have all shown an acute sense of man's comicality."³ The term absurd is a strange word. Many people view the word in many ways. It is evading a definition as such. According to OED "Absurd" means 1) (of an idea, suggestion etc..) wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate. 2) (of a person) unreasonable or ridiculous in manner. 3) (of a thing) ludicrous, incongruous (an absurd hat: the situation was becoming absurd) absurdly adv. Absurdness n (F absurde or L absurdus (as AB - , surdus deaf, dull))."⁴

Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* in 1948. It was staged in Paris in 1953 for 400 performances. Roger Blin directed the play playing the role of Pozzo himself. Then it was translated into many languages of the world. Jean Anouilh, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams and William Saroyan appreciated its worth. Now it is world famous.

FORM OF THE PLAY:

What is unique about *Waiting for Godot* is its innovative formal design. As Beckett learnt the perfect fusion of structure and content in his study of Proust and Joyce, Beckett used the same in *Waiting for Godot*. He wrote of Joyce's *Work in Progress*: "Here form is content, content is form. His writing is not about something: it is that something itself."⁵ He used this to convey man's sense of mystery, bewilderment and anxiety when confronted with his complex conditions in the modern world. In fact, he was interested in stories failures. Beckett's constant search for a new form led him to devise an interiorized and auto-referential style. *Waiting for Godot* shows his skillful blending of form and meaning, dramaturgic structure and cognitive experience. According to Javed Malick, "The play is formulated in such a way that, on the one hand, there is a certain emptiness precisely at those places—such as plot, character, dramatic speech, setting etc—where one would conventionally look for meaning, and, on the other, the cognitive emphasis moves from the immediate dramatic interest to some ultimate philosophical horizon beyond history and society. There is an indefinite place for an uncertain appointment with somebody called Godot who never comes. His identity—indeed, the very reality of his existence—is in serious doubt. In the course of the play, he is perceived in various ways: saviour, god, a vindictive tyrant, a rich employer, somebody who has the tramp's future in his hand...at least (their) immediate future."⁶ Martin Esslin thinks Beckett's plays lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Critics asked Beckett as to who Godot would be. But the author said, if he knew who Godot was he would have said so in the play. In fact, Godot does not represent any one idea, ideal, and person. He represents just an absence. The play is about waiting. It is observed "Yet whether Godot is meant to suggest the intervention of a supernatural agency, or whether he stands for a mythical human being whose arrival is expected to change the situation, or both of these possibilities combined, his exact nature is of secondary importance. The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting - an event, a thing, a person, death."⁷ Godot is the absent figure whose non-presence is the play's centre. He is the name for that emptiness. He is a void.

Likewise the tramps who wait for Godot and the two wayfarers who they encounter have no fixed individual identities, barring a few biological, temperamental and situational traits. They are perceived "'at this place, at this moment of time,' not as four distinct personalities but as two

radically truncated and generalized images of all mankind, which in Lucky's phrase is seen to waste and pine."⁸ Incapable of any significant action or initiative, they imply an utter pessimistic view of man as a helpless victim of his ontological existentialistic fate.

The play *Waiting for Godot* has a symmetrical structure as if a formula. This is the device of coupling. It has sets of binaries. It has two acts, showing two consecutive evenings in the life of its central characters. It has two sets of characters and each set is a pair. Even the messenger boy has a brother. Next, the relation between and within these pairs is not one of identity and harmony but one of contradictions and tensions. This leads to a pattern of binary oppositions. Both Estragon and Vladimir are conceived so indivisibly that they function as separate units: while Pozzo and Lucky are physically tied to each other. Vladimir and Estragon cannot part company though they want it. So the play has two agential units and the two units are in contrast to each other, each epitomizing a mode of being which is counterpoised to the other. The tramps are in perpetual waiting as if imprisoned in space. Pozzo and Lucky are in perpetual wandering as if confined in a temporal prison. If the tramps have mutual love and care for each other, the other two exploit each other.

THEATRICALITY:

Aeschylus said plays should be written for stage. This is because of the reason that theatre's language employs a variety of means—sign-systems, setting, lighting, movement and gesture. These are stage directions. In so far, *Waiting for Godot* is concerned, verbal text is very sparse with pauses. Only the gestural elements must refill the play's performance. The actors should be resourceful. The play includes vaudeville and circus items such as cringing, crouching, huddling, staggering, tumbling and falling. Music hall experience, verbal duets, enacting conjugal situations as those of Laurel and Hardy interest spectators. For ex:

- Poor Pozzo.
- I knew it was him.
- Who?
- Godot.
- But it's not Godot.
- It is not Godot?
- It is not Godot.
- Then who is it?
- It's Pozzo"⁹

The characters abuse each other and do child-play. Pozzo's performance, and Lucky's dancing and thinking are a kind of micro-performance. Ibsen, Brecht and Pirandello propounded all this.

PLOT CONSTRUCTION:

There is a roadside tree. The time is the evening of a summer. Estragon meets Vladimir and says 'Ts nothing to be done.' They are tramps, in fact. Actually Vladimir wanted to say the same. They are happy to meet each other. They embrace. Vladimir asks where Estragon spent it. Estragon says he spent the previous night in a ditch and some beat him. Estragon says he has some pain in his toes. He suffers. Vladimir looks at his hat funnily. Estragon looks at his boot funnily.

Vladimir says a thief was saved. They adopt nicknames. Vladimir is Didi and Estrogen is Gogo. Vladimir wants to tell the story to pass time. Estragon says they should go. Vladimir says 'They're waiting for Godot.' They don't know whether they had to wait at the spot, where to wait, whom to wait and why to wait. Estragon sleeps.

Vladimir cannot tolerate loneliness. Estragon dreams. Both tell stories to pass time. They want to speak to each other. But they do not have enough interest. They want to commit suicide. Truly Estrogen wants to hang himself. But he does not want to die first. Vladimir is also weak. He says Estragon is his only hope. Vladimir asks 'what do we do?' Estrogen says nothing. Vladimir says they have to wait. 'For whom?' Estrogen asks. Vladimir says for Godot. Vladimir gives the impression that they have met Godot previously, though they do not remember it. Godot for them appears a human figure. Later Estragon falls (a fright). Vladimir believes Godot is nearly, shouting to his horse. Estragon feels hungry, eats a turnip and carrot. He says he asked Vladimir a question. But he does not know what was it. Estragon feels as if tied to Godot. Vladimir does not know whether the man to come is Godot. Now Pozzo and Lucky appear. Estragon wants to know whether Lucky is Godot. Vladimir says no. Pozzo introduces himself, and though Vladimir says he knew him. Pozzo is proud of his status, land and knowledge. He wants some recognition. He makes Lucky dance and think. Lucky kicks Estragon. Vladimir puts a hat to Lucky so that he may think. Once they depart, Vladimir and Estragon talk of waiting. A boy comes. The Vamps seem to go home. They are together for 50 years.

Act Two of the play is just a repetition of the Act One. There are a few changes, however. For example, if Vladimir and Estragon appear as they were, Pozzo and Lucky get a reverse in their lives. Pozzo turns blind and Lucky looks after him. This reminds us the characters Hamm and Cloe. Lucky's abstract speech has certain undertones that life is subject to change. Finally, the boy-messenger is different in the second act. This boy is the other boy's brother.

Samuel Beckett's characters are schizophrenic. Their nature is fragmentary. They are divided amongst themselves. They have a warring self. The conflict is between their inward and their outward. Their self is torn between the 'yes' of the will-to-live and the 'no' of the will-to-cess. The two tramps waiting for Godot, Mr. Hamm writing his own story, the old man Krapp trying to understand his past, Mrs. Rooney's attempts to communicate with the people she met, or Henry's musings in, display man's search for the self though it is elusive. Finally his characters try to find out their 'me.'

In so far language is concerned, Beckett does not find human language to be sufficient for his purpose to express the inexplicable. In Martin Esslin's view, "Language in Beckett's plays serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language. Where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meanings - and the impossibility of ever attaining certainty is one of the main themes of Beckett's plays. Godot's promises are vague and uncertain. In *Endgame*, an unspecified something is taking to...to...mean something?' Cleverly laughs: "'Mean something! You and I mean something!'"¹⁰

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6. Javed Malick, (ed), *Waiting for Godot*, p. 15-16.
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8. Javed Malick, (ed), *Waiting for Godot*, p. 73.
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