



THEME OF ABSURDITY AND PURPOSELESSNESS OF LIFE IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S PLAY *WAITING FOR GODOT*

ANSHIKA TIWARI

Research Scholar
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow (UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The paper will investigate the absurdity and the purposelessness and meaninglessness of life in Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot. This work is magnum opus in the field of absurd literature. The unique and charming feature of the play is it's use of repetitive dialogues, settings and actions -an essential element of absurdist drama. Beckett presents that everything is superfluous and repetitive, only suffering and pain is permanent. This tragic-comedy in two acts reflects, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!". The portrayal of Vladimir and Estragon is epitome of the meaningless life. Their acts of engaging in foolish and dumb activities like taking out their shoes and hat and the long communication indicate a frustrated, dull and monotonous life that they are living, only to realise that suffering is the ultimate truth.

Keywords: Absurdity, Purposelessness, Nothingness, Waiting

INTRODUCTION:

Samuel Beckett was born on 13th April 1906 in Dublin, Ireland. He was a well-known playwright, author and critic. He is famously known for his play *En attendant Godot* (1948-1949) i.e. *Waiting for Godot* (published in 1952). The English translation of the play is subtitled a tragicomedy in two acts.

He also won Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. He mostly wrote in English and French. he was also a poet and theatre director. the main characteristic of his works include grim situation, black comedy and nonsensical acts and thoughts. He did lot of experiment with his

ANSHIKA TIWARI

1P a g e

style of writing and approaching a minimalist technique by the end of his life. He is regarded as an important figure of the Theatre of Absurd and also one of the last modernist writer. He took French citizenship and decided to permanently settle in Paris. He also became a part of French resistance during the occupation of Nazi's in 1940.

Beckett work can be segmented into three periods. His earlier works, his works from starting of World War II i.e. 1945 to 1960 and from the early 1960's till his death. His approach during the last period tended to be short and minimalist in style. His early works include *More tricks than kicks* (1934), *Murphy* (1938), *Proust*, an essay in 1930.

The most productive years for Beckett was the Second Phase in terms of writing. He turned to writing in French language after the World War II. He also wrote four major plays during this period- *En attendant Godot* (1948-49 *Waiting for Godot*), *Fin de partie* (1955–1957; *Endgame*), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and *Happy Days* (1961).

All these plays are in the genre of Absurdist drama dealing in the dark humour. Martin Esslin posited that they fulfilled the concept of “the absurd” by Albert Camu. he also produced three novels in this period *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951; *Malone Dies*) and *L'innommable* (1953; *The Unnamable*). All three are considered to be a Trilogy.

The last phase includes short pieces like *Breath* (1969), *Play* (1962), *Catastrophe* (1962). His last writing *What is the Word*, a poem 1988 was written during his time in hospital. However, he wrote about despair and purposelessness of human existence but could be considered a comic writer as well.

A review published in The New York Times on April 20, 1956, Brooks Atkinson comments,

For Mr. Beckett's drama adumbrates--rather than expresses--an attitude toward man's experience on earth; the pathos, cruelty, comradeship, hope, corruption, filthiness and wonder of human existence. Faith in God has almost vanished. But there is still an illusion of faith flickering around the edges of the drama. It is as though Mr. Beckett sees very little reason for clutching at faith, but is unable to relinquish it entirely.

Absurdist Drama

The theory of Absurdism is based on the existential philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. This theory considers man as aloof in their alien universe and is bereft of inherent truth or meaning. Camus elucidates in the *Myth of Sisyphus*,

“In a universe that is suddenly divested of illusion and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between

man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of Absurdity.” (Prasad 178-179)

The main content of the absurdist play consists of thought of detachment, isolation and alienation of man in an adversarial and antagonistic universe. The English dramatist was captivated by this theory.

“The dramaturgy of the Absurd was shaped by the comic perception of Ionesco, the use of ritual by Genet and the visual use of the stage by Beckett” (Prasad 179).

An important thing to remember is that absurdism encompasses both, a philosophical stance and theatrical technique. Without both these elements a work cannot truly be considered an absurdist play.

The most important figure practicing the drama of absurdism was Samuel Beckett. His plays depict a Universal human condition. As a result, they are far from realistic settings or a consistent developing storyline. *Waiting for Godot* was produced *En attendant Godot* in French language. It's English translation also became immensely popular and Beckett rose to fame. The play portrays two tramps. they are endlessly waiting for an anonymous person or being, Godot. They remember having an engagement with him, who may or may not exist. His plays are characterized by not much shift in his style. All the features of Slapstick Comedy like Clear but meaningless dialogue, puns, use of physical, verbal and situational are used to convey the pain, alienation suffering and frustration. The simplicity in verbal and visual component making it an impactful and important Absurdist play. Absurdist drama is characterized by minimal exposition and a fragmented plot lacking clear causality. Closure is often absent, leaving endings open-ended. The language used is continually interrogated, highlighting the complexity of communication and mirroring the cultural uncertainty of the postmodern era with accuracy.

Plays by Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Edward Albee belong to this genre. Various French playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Jean Anouilh are also termed as followers of Absurdist drama.

The term Theatre of Absurd was formulated by Martin Esslin, a critic from Hungary. He also gave this title to his book in 1962 with was on the subject of particular subject. Albert Camu in his essay the *Myth of Sisyphus* written in 1942 describes the human life and his condition as meaningless and insignificant. Attempting to understand and define universe is beyond the limits of human and hence the world is absurd. The common feature of playwrights of this group include confusion, perplexity battlement disorientation and anxiety due to the limits

which human face in this mysterious cosmos. He mentions Eugene Ionesco notion of absurdity which include

"Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. [...]Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless." He has clearly drawn difference between traditional and modern plays in his work The Theatre of Absurd , "The Theatre of the Absurd, however, can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time" (Esslin 22-23).

Waiting for Godot was quite different and fresh form of drama from conventional writings .It was an unusual play. Categorised as play of Absurd, it is considered as one of the landmark and popular plays in this form. The characters used absurd and ridiculous words and language and face difficulty in communication. They are perfect caricature of absurd drama. Like nothing has changed to much reflecting the emptiness of life. The repetitive cycle of life is emphasized. The tramps Estragon intends to go.

ESTRAGON: (having tried in vain to work it out). I'm tired! (Pause.) Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

They keep on discussing the same thing repetitively. The whole story revolves around these two characters and anticipating for arrival of mysterious Godot. The readers are left in bewilderment as to why they are hopeful and waiting and why doesn't he show up .There are no answers to these doubtful questions.

"Therefore, the play opens without any details for the audience, and it continues with a lack of information, without reaching any climax, ending at the same point it starts." (Esslin 21-23)

Plot

The setting of the play is on a country road and evening time. There is a tree without any leaves. Estragon and Vladimir, the two tramps are Waiting for Godot.

VLADIMIR: To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it. (Pause.) For the moment.

ESTRAGON: His name is Godot?

ANSHIKA TIWARI

4P a g e

VLADIMIR: I think so.

As it will take some time for his arrival both of them discuss and enquire about various subjects, for instance Estragon tells that he was beaten by some lot of people in a ditch .They also discuss about Bible, crucifixion of Jesus and Gospel and whether they should hang themselves .They are also confused and not sure as to under which tree they are supposed to wait.

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: (despairingly). Ah! (Pause.) You're sure it was here?

VLADIMIR: What?

ESTRAGON: That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR: He said by the tree. (They look at the tree.) Do you see any others?

Another set of characters Pozzo and Lucky, his servant appears. Lucky has a rope tied around his neck and is treated like an animal. Pozzo informs them that he is going to sell Lucky in the market as he will get a fair price.

Pozzo gives order to Lucky to keep down his stool. The pathetic condition of lucky is evident.

POZZO: "Closer! (Lucky puts down bag and basket, advances, moves stool, goes back to his place, takes up bag and basket. Pozzo sits down, places the butt of his whip against Lucky's chest and pushes.) Back! (Lucky takes a step back.) Further! (Lucky takes another step back.) Stop! (Lucky stops.)"

He takes out a piece of chicken and enjoy wine. Pozzo informs that Lucky has learned everything from him. Vladimir seem to be concerned about the miserable condition of Lucky but he does not seem to do much. Lucky also entertain by performing for them. Lucky is commanded to think. He gives a full-length speech and stops only when,

POZZO: His hat! Vladimir seizes Lucky's hat. Silence of Lucky. He falls. Silence. Panting of the victors..... Give me that! (He snatches the hat from Vladimir, throws it on the ground, tramples on it.) There's an end to his thinking!

A boy arrives on the scene after Pozzo and lucky have left. He notifies that Godot will rather come tomorrow. They choose to leave but continue to stay exactly at the same place.

ANSHIKA TIWARI

5P a g e

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go. They do not move.

Act II opens on the same place, same time, the next day but unexpectedly the tree has grown four five leaves. This hints that probably more time has lapsed than they think.

VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot. (Estragon groans. Silence.) Things have changed here since yesterday.

ESTRAGON: And if he doesn't come?

VLADIMIR: (after a moment of bewilderment). We'll see when the time comes. (Pause.) I was saying that things have changed here since yesterday.

Vladimir and Estragon find the hat of Lucky which he had left yesterday. Afterwards they exchange insults for timepass. Lucky and Pozzo return the next day but they are different. Lucky is unable to speak and Pozzo has turned blind. They collapse on ground. In an attempt to pick them up, Vladimir and Estragon too fall on the ground. Pozzo did not remember meeting them the previous day. They leave and both of them are again waiting for Godot. The boy reappears but rejects that he came yesterday or is the same boy. Again, they are informed that, they should hope Godot to see tomorrow and will not show up today. They attempt to hang themselves again, but fail.

VLADIMIR: It's too short.

ESTRAGON: You could hang onto my legs.

VLADIMIR: And who'd hang onto mine?

ESTRAGON: True.

VLADIMIR: Show me all the same. (Estragon loosens the cord that holds up his trousers which, much too big for him, fall about his ankles. They look at the cord.) It might do in a pinch. But is it strong enough?

ESTRAGON: We'll soon see. Here. They each take an end of the cord and pull. It breaks. They almost fall.

VLADIMIR: Not worth a curse.

They again take decision to leave but continue to stay one more day perhaps in hope and wait for his arrival.

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ANSHIKA TIWARI

6P a g e

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. They do not move.

The overall story line revolves around Godot, the mysterious and puzzling character. The course of life cannot be precisely predicted and remains entirely uncertain. There are numerous questions which remain unanswered. Godot appears to have white beard and does nothing, according to information provided by the boy. Each character in the play gives the impression of living in the prison of his mind which is his own creation. Each person is restricted to a state of inactivity and lack of progress due to their own inability to take actions.

After Pozzo appears in Act II he is crying for help and shows sign of frustration and powerlessness.

POZZO: (suddenly furious). Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer.) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.

Thus, in this play nothingness infiltrates in plot, character, language, theme and action. The motive of purposelessness and nothingness is foregrounded in the words of Estragon nothing to be done. The repetition of words and sentences corresponds to the entanglement and confusion in human life. The characters display state of forgetfulness. They are full of bitterness, displeasure, and helplessness include code. There is no rational structure, plot and development. The play begins with Vladimir and Estragon waiting and also ends in waiting. Like, life witnesses a full circle so does the play. It ended from where it began. *Waiting For Godot* delves in fixed state.

In an article published in Utah Shakespeare Festival entitled, 'A Play in Which Nothing Happens Twice' Beckett is quoted about the character Godot, he answers "If I knew who Godot was, I would have said so in the play." Or "If Godot were God, I would have called him that." One can conclude that Beckett conveys nothingness through nothing.

Waiting For Godot was first enacted on stage on 5th January 1953 in French latter in English in 1955. Peter Hall, the director of the play

"film is simile Lifelike; theatre is metaphor, about life itself each and even".

In an article published by Zaenal Makhfuddin and Prof. Dr. Fabiola D. Kurnia, entitled

"Meaning Of Life in Samuel Beckett's Waiting For Godot", they comment that, the Absurdity is reflected when we become aware of the setting less setting, plotless plot, characterless characters, actionless action and truthless

ANSHIKA TIWARI

7P a g e

truth. I think that the whole play is packed with absurdity, because whatever happens, but does not take any motion, is the activity of absurdity to the readers and to the audiences. When they finish reading or coming out of the theatre are marred with the thought of foolishness of life. Nothingness denote absence, emptiness, void, the condition or property of non-existence. Nothingness theory is "the connection between the evolution of the universe and human thought" (Corey, 1989).

Thus, this drama is about sorrowful and pathetic waiting of the two characters Vladimir and Estragon in a hope for Godot's arrival. The main theme revolves around how to endure a hopeless situation. The emptiness and meaninglessness of life creates impacts on the characters life. Like in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he gets punishment of rolling a big rock up to the mountain top but ultimately is would fall back down and he is enchained in this world. In the same way Vladimir and Estragon has this nonsensical and ridiculous task at hand to wait for Godot. They are waiting and waiting endlessly. include they are full of the dejection and despair.

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer [the questions of suicide]." (Camus 395).

The conduct and manners of characters are equally absurd and has no concrete reason to explain all this. Vladimir neglect Estragon pain and the only sense that is reflected is that they are tired, disinterested, restless, disappointed, vexed and aggravated.

The suffering of human existence is permanent and the ultimate truth. An attempt to find meaning in life will lead to a dead end.

"We will never find in life itself the meaning that we want to find. Either we will discover that meaning through a leap of faith, by placing our hopes in a God beyond this world, or we will conclude that life is meaningless". (Camus 19)

The characters in *Waiting for Godot* suffers due to uncertainty and ambiguity. There is vagueness about who they are waiting for, what they are waiting for and yet remain at the same place. This absurd act is like their punishment.

CONCLUSION

ANSHIKA TIWARI

8P a g e

Thus, this play showcase almost all the features of an absurdist play through its main characters Vladimir and Estragon .There is a popular remark about Waiting for Godot that it is a play where nothing happens twice .the second act mirrors and reflect the First Act. Vladimir and Estragon waiting, Pozzo and Lucky's arrival and boy conveying the message from Godot are all repetitive acts. They are waiting for tomorrow but it never happens. The title of the play delineates the central theme of waiting. The play largely reflects the emptiness in life. The main characters are vulnerable, powerless, weak and miniscule Infront front of this vast universe. Beckett directed and guided the way for various other dramatist to reflect and ponder over the unpredictability of existence of human life. The play depicts a realistic facet of life; a predicament of modern man.

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