

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

November 2013 Vol. II. Issue VI

Managing Editor
Madhuri Bite

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www.galaxyimrj.com

galaxyimrj@gmail.com

An Elaboration of Anguish and Despair Elements in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Dr. Renu Singh

Assistant Professor
Madan Mohan Malviya Engg. College
Gorakhpur- 273010

Abstract-

This drama is written by modern dramatist Samuel Beckett. This title has a confuse meaning. There are anguish and despair elements in this drama. Through my paper, I am trying to find out these themes and elements. The theme of waiting for someone in the drama, combine with that of waiting for a mysterious stranger, which has obvious symbolic dimensions and implications. Godot may be a representative in Beckett's contemporary terms, of some authority who has promised protection to the tramps that may be regarded as symbolic of the ordinary French under the German occupation. Another theme of this drama is *suffering*. The characters of this drama have nowhere to rest their head. Sometimes, we see another theme in this drama like *exploitation*. Thus, *Waiting for Godot* is a many-faced play. Its meaning and implications is complex. It is possible to look upon it as a clever farce, or view it as a tragic exposition of the human predicament. Its theme has a certain topicality, at the same time as they possess a timeless validity and universality.

Key Words- Anguish, Despair, Tragic touches, Mood, Absurd, Phenomenal, God, Absurdity. Suffering, Exploitation.

Introduction-

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906. He befriended the famous Irish novelist James Joyce, and his first published work was an essay on Joyce. In 1951 and 1953, Beckett wrote his most famous novels, the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and the *Unnamable*. *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's first play, was written originally in French in 1948 (Beckett subsequently translated the play into English himself). It premiered at a tiny theater in Paris in 1953. This play began Beckett's association with the Theatre of the Absurd, which influenced later playwrights like Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. The most famous of Beckett's subsequent plays include *Endgame* (1958) and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1959). He also wrote several even more experimental plays, like *Breath* (1969), a thirty-second play. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1969 and died in 1989 in Paris.

Waiting for Godot is an absurdist play by Samuel Beckett, in which two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait endlessly and in vain for the arrival of someone named Godot. To a large number of cultivated readers all over the world, Beckett is known as the author of some powerful and thought provoking dramas. *Waiting for Godot* was written during the half dozen years (1945-50) when Beckett's genius was at its white heat and his output was most prolific. There is

something enigmatic in the atmosphere of the play. Its mixture of comedy and near- tragedy proves baffling, and at first we are sure as to what attitude we should adopt towards the different phases of its non-action. There is a mixture of confusion between reality and unreality in the behavior of the two tramps in the second Act.

Although some critics have expressed only a sense of bafflement with *Waiting for Godot*, many have praised it as a 'revolutionary contribution to modern drama'. Fraser prefers to regard *Waiting for Godot* as a modern morality play, comparable to *Everyman* and *The Pilgrims Progress* of John Bunyan.(1) Martin Esslin appreciates the 'basically the religious quality of the play.' He holds the convincing view that the action of the play is not about Godot but about *Waiting*. (2) One critic of the view that *Waiting for Godot* is a mixture of Absurd and the Absurd: "In this play form and content, absurdity and Absurdity, are organically related.... There is coalescence of the Absurd... and the human condition." Before going through of this drama in the reference of anguish and despair elements, it would be desirable to know the form and content of modern drama. In Renaissance period, England was the center of dramatic activity in the western world and drama in Europe mainly followed along the lines developed in England. In modern times the trend has been reversed. The first major force in modern drama may be said to have been Ibsen who was a remarkable innovator in form and technique. After him, many of the dramatists who have exercised a formative influence on modern drama were from the Continent. One of them, Beckett, was no doubt British, to be precise Irish, by birth, but the fact that he settled in France and chose to do some of his most significant work in French makes him more a continental than a British figure. Modern drama has its roots very deep in time. Twentieth century drama cannot be fully understood until we go back to the end of the nineteenth century and have a look at the innovations in drama and stagecraft which were taking place at that time, for they made a lasting impact on modern drama. Some of the most important forerunners of modern drama were Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg.

Another seminal influence on modern drama, especially modern English drama, was that of the Irish dramatic movement. One of the earliest important forces in this was J.M. Synge. One of the important recent dramatists is Brecht. In contrast with Chekhov, Brecht did not rest contented with the posing and framing of problems; he also suggested solutions to rectify the evils he depicted. The most important influence on twentieth century English drama was, of course, that of T.S. Eliot. He took upon himself the task of reviving English verse drama. He was convinced that the prose drama could never stand in comparison with verse drama. According to him this was one important reason why the play of Shaw could not sustain the interest that the aroused.

Drama of the Absurd- The dramatists who are regarded as belonging to the theatre of the absurd were not the conscious members of any group or literary movement. They only shared certain common attitudes and a similar interpretation of the human predicament. These dramatists wrote round about the middle of the twentieth century. Some prominent names among them are those of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter.

The Angry and the Absurd- The theatre of the Absurd needs both to be compared with and differentiated from angry drama. The angry dramatist is concerned, for the time being at least, with abuses, that can be cured, rather than with ills which are an inescapable part of the human predicament.

An element of Anguish and despair-

The play opens with Estragon struggling to remove a boot. Estragon eventually gives up, muttering, "Nothing to be done." His friend Vladimir takes up the thought and muses on it, the implication being that nothing is a thing that has to be done and this pair is going to have to spend the rest of the play doing it.[6] When Estragon finally succeeds in removing his boot, he looks and feels inside but finds nothing. Just prior to this, Vladimir peers into his hat. The motif recurs throughout the play.

The English edition of *Waiting for Godot*, published in 1956, describes the play as a “*tragic-comedy*” in two acts. The hybrid term ‘tragi-comedy’ is in any case too vague to be an adequate description of the nature and atmosphere of any play. The setting atmosphere of this play is a blend of wit and humour, farce, pathos and even, occasionally, anguish which is akin to the tragic. This drama has the elements of Existentialist and Absurdist touches. Towards the end, there is a mysterious note which is quite akin to the romantic. Now, I will discuss the elements of anguish and despair of this drama in detail;

(i) **Wit, Humour and Farce-**

This drama has many touches which are genuinely comic, whether because of the wit of the dialogue or the humour of character or situation. There is also comedy on the lower plane, comedy of the type seen on the music-hall stage. Quite understandably this occasionally degenerates into the farcical, or it may be more correct to say that it assumes the aspect of the Absurd. Often, Of course, the comedy is not unalloyed with more serious implications, so that the total atmosphere is closer to that in ‘dark-comedy’. The wit is at times a blind for a more profound response. For example, Vladimir is determined not to hear Estragon’s night-mare. The latter pleads with him in vain to hear him, saying that there is nobody else to whom he may communicate his private nightmares. When Vladimir is determined not to hear him, Estragon tunes the table on him by implying that Vladimir is afraid of listening to his dream because he finds it impossible to cope with another nightmare, the universe:

Estragon : I had a dream.

Vladimir : Don’t tell me!

Estragon : I dreamt that-

Vladimir : DON’T TELL ME!

Estragon : (Gesture towards the universe). This one is enough for you? (3)

(ii) **Farcical touches-**

There are several farcical touches in the play. However, most of these have a deeper aim than is immediately apparent. For example, we have a situation where Estragon and Vladimir put on and take off each other's hat as well as that of Lucky again and again. Although this is farcical, it has the aim of telling the reader that in the world of tramps there is no place for significant actions but only for trivial ones. The repetition of the ritual dialogue between Estragon and Vladimir about why they cannot leave is also farcical, though just below the level of farce we have the implication that the tramps are caught in net from which they cannot escape. Perhaps the most farcical situation in the play is the one where the tramps are testing the strength of the cord with which they wish to hang themselves. Estragon, who has removed the cord from his trousers, stands there, pulling at the cord at one end, while his trousers have come down to his ankles. The cord breaks under the strain. One cannot have an uninhibited laugh at the situation for two wretches who find their way to suicide also barred.

(iii) **Anguish and Despair-**

Waiting for Godot has several moments of anguish and despair. Right on the first page we learn that being beaten by unknown men a daily occurrence for Estragon, which he mentions in a most matter-of-fact way: "Beat me? Certainly they beat me." The bodily ailments that afflict them, Estragon's feet and Vladimir's kidneys, are also taken for granted. The tramps resent that they should be asked whether it still hurts. It goes without saying that it hurts all the time. When Vladimir asks Estragon whether his boots are hurting him, he responds: "Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts! A little later Estragon asks Vladimir about his kidney trouble and latter replies in the same words "Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts! In fact his trouble is so bad that it does not even permit him to laugh. Life lies all bleak and barren before them, and the valid comment on it is the one with which the play opens: 'Nothing to be done.' Estragon's nostalgia about the map of the Dead Sea is also touching. Theirs world is a world of negations in which inactivity is the safest course; as Estragon says: "Don't let us do anything. It's safer."

(iv) **Tragic Elements-** *Waiting for Godot* cannot be called on the whole, in the traditional or any other sense, but it has some moments of tragic anguish. It lacks of sublimity which is believed to be the common attribute of most tragedies, yet it depicts a despair which, in view of the slenderness of hope, is nothing short of heroic. Estragon and Vladimir shall come back and wait for Godot again and again, although they seem to know in their heart of hearts that he will never come. There is something very moving in the plight of Estragon, who sleeps on as the boy tells Vladimir that Godot won't come even that day. All through the play, Vladimir has behaved as sober, level-headed and capable of enduring hopeless agony patiently.

Psychological Elements-

In this drama I find out some psychological and philosophical elements which affect the theme and significance of this creation. Without its elaboration in the drama, the search of anguish and despair elements will be uncompleted.

Jungian Psychology:

“The four archetypal personalities or the four aspects of the soul are grouped in two pairs: the ego and the shadow, the persona and the soul's image (animus or anima). The shadow is the container of all our despised emotions repressed by the ego. Lucky, the shadow serves as the polar opposite of the egocentric Pozzo, prototype of prosperous mediocrity, who incessantly controls and persecutes his subordinate, thus symbolizing the oppression of the unconscious shadow by the despotic ego. Lucky's monologue in Act I appear as a manifestation of a stream of repressed unconsciousness, as he is allowed to “think” for his master. Estragon's name has another connotation, besides that of the aromatic herb, tarragon: "estragon" is a cognate of oestrogen, the female hormone (Carter, 130). This prompts us to identify him with the anima, the feminine image of Vladimir's soul. It explains Estragon's propensity for poetry, his sensitivity and dreams, his irrational moods. Vladimir appears as the complementary masculine principle, or perhaps the rational persona of the contemplative type.”(4)

Elements of Freudian Psychology:

A modern famous psychologist Bernard Dukore propagates a triadic theory in Didi, Gogo and the absent Godot, based on Sigmund Freud's Trinitarian description of the psyche in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and the usage of onomastic techniques. Dukore defines the characters by what they lack: the rational Go-go embodies the incomplete ego, the missing pleasure principle: (e) go-(e) goes. Di-Di (id-id) – who is more instinctual and irrational – is seen as the backward id or subversion of the rational principle. Godot fulfils the function of the superego or moral standards. Pozzo and Lucky are just re-iterations of the main protagonists. Dukore finally sees Beckett's play as a metaphor for the futility of man's existence when salvation is expected from an external entity, and the self is denied introspection.”(5)

Philosophical Elements:

Existentialism:

Broadly speaking, existentialists hold that there are certain fundamental questions that every human being must come to terms with if they are to take their subjective existences seriously and with intrinsic value. Questions such as death, the meaning of human existence and the place of (or lack of) God in that existence are among them. By and large, the theories of existentialism assert that conscious reality is very complex and without an “objective” or universally known

value: the individual must create value by affirming it and living it, not by simply talking about it or philosophising it in the mind. The play may be seen to touch on all of these issues.

Much of Beckett's work – including *Godot* – is often considered by philosophical and literary scholars to be part of the movement of the Theatre of the Absurd, a form of theatre which stemmed from the Absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus. Absurdism itself is a branch of the traditional assertions of existentialism, pioneered by Soren Kierkegaard, and posits that, while inherent meaning might very well exist in the universe, human beings are incapable of finding it due to some form of mental or philosophical limitation. Thus humanity is doomed to be faced with the Absurd, or the absolute absurdity of existence in lack of intrinsic purpose.

Ethical:

Just after Didi and Gogo have been particularly selfish and callous, the boy comes to say that Godot is not coming. The boy (or pair of boys) may be seen to represent meekness and hope before compassion is consciously excluded by an evolving personality and character, and in which case may be the youthful Pozzo and Lucky. Thus Godot is compassion and fails to arrive every day, as he says he will. No-one is concerned that a boy is beaten.(6) In this interpretation, there is the irony that only by changing their hearts to be compassionate can the characters fixed to the tree move on and cease to have to wait for Godot.

Christian:

Much can be read into Beckett's inclusion of the story of the two thieves from Luke and the ensuing discussion of repentance. It is easy to see the solitary tree as representative of the Christian cross or, indeed, the tree of life. Many see God and Godot as one and the same. This reading is given further weight early in the first act when Estragon asks Vladimir what it is that he has requested from Godot:

VLADIMIR: Oh ... nothing very definite.

ESTRAGON: A kind of prayer.

VLADIMIR: Precisely.

ESTRAGON: A vague supplication.

VLADIMIR: Exactly. (7)

Much of the play, steeped as it is in scriptural allusion, deals with the subject of religion. The entire play takes place atop a hill, which some may interpret as being closer to heaven (possibly Purgatory), giving the play a purpose as religious parable. Similarly Godot keeps sheep and goats.

According to Anthony Cronin, “Beckett always possessed a Bible, at the end more than one edition, and Bible concordances were always among the reference books on his shelves.(8) Beckett himself was quite open on the issue: “*Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar so I naturally use it.*” (9) As Cronin (one of his biographers) points out, his biblical references “*may be ironic or even sarcastic*”. (10)

“In answer to a defence counsel question in 1937 (during a libel action brought by his uncle) as to whether he was a Christian, Jew or atheist, Beckett replied, ‘*None of the three*’”. (11) Looking at Beckett's entire curve, Mary Bryden observed that “*the hypothesised God who emerges from Beckett's texts is one who is both cursed for his perverse absence and cursed for his surveillant presence. He is by turns dismissed, satirized, or ignored, but he, and his tortured son, is never definitively discarded.*” (12)

Conclusion-

Although it is true that *Waiting for Godot* is a play in which nothing happens twice, but this does not mean an adverse judgment on the play. It is a very well constructed play, but its form and construction are determined by the nature of its theme. It has rightly been said if the play had ten more acts, they would have ended in just the same way, with Godot sending a message that he is not coming and the tramps deciding to leave for the night but with a helpless determination to come and resume the wait the next afternoon. At last but not least we can say that this drama has totally absurdist elements and filled with anguish and despair.

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