

EXISTENTIALISM IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett, an Irish dramatist, was chiefly known for his absurd drama. The absurd drama is the result of disillusionment and loss of faith. It depicts a world which is devoid of meaning and purpose. This kind of drama highlights the spiritual loneliness, complete isolation, and anxiety. Beckett's plays have existential elements in them. Existentialism is a philosophical discourse that centers on the theme of human existence and stresses the individual experience. Issues related to meaning, purpose, and value of human existence are key concepts of existentialism. It was propounded by 19th and 20th century European philosophers. The reputed existentialists were Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Martin Heidegger, Jean - Paul Sartre and Albert Camus etc. The concept of absurdity is based on the idea that there is no meaning in the world beyond what meaning we give it. The present paper is an effort to analyze Samuel Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot' in the light of existentialism.

Keywords: Existentialism, Absurdity, Essence, Meaning, Purpose, Nihilism.

Introduction

Samuel Beckett was an Irish dramatist, novelist, short story writer and theatre director. He was born on 13th April in Foxrock, Dublin, Ireland in 1906 and died in December 1989 at Montparnasse, Paris, France. Mostly, he lived in Paris and wrote in both French and English. Beckett is regarded as a great playwright, and world figure for his plays. His plays exploit themes on existentialism. These plays exhibit postmodern features. He was honoured with Nobel Prize in literature in 1958. He is popular for his play *En attendant Godot* (Waiting for Godot, 1953). He is regarded as a renowned playwright in 'Theatre of the Absurd' chiefly for his plays 'En attendant Godot' (Waiting for Godot) 'Fin de Partie' (Endgame), 'Krapp's Last Tape' (1950) and 'Happy Days' (1961). These plays are considered to be significant in the so-called 'Theatre of the Absurd'. These plays deal with themes similar to existentialist thinkers. The title, theme, structure, dialogues and actions of Beckett's plays are seen through the eyes of absurdity. 'Waiting for Godot' is a postmodern play heavily relying on individual freedom, paradox, allegory and fragmentation. Samuel Beckett's authority in absurd dramatic writing has been highly recognized, and his influence has been great and felt worldwide.

Theatre of the Absurd

Martin Esslin coined the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' for the first time in his book 'Theatre of the Absurd' in 1961. Esslin maintained that absurdist plays were the fulfillment of Albert Camus's concept of 'the absurd'. This is one reason Beckett is often regarded as existentialist. However, Camus who was an existentialist quit this movement later and developed his own philosophy. He propounded his philosophy of the absurd. Absurdity lies in the paradoxical situation of need to impart

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meaning or purpose to life and the indifference of the universe in response which is devoid of God or meaning. Absurdity is the result of the irrationality of the universe. The playwrights of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' considered plight of human beings as the outcome of purposelessness in life. This awakening results in metaphysical anguish. The major absurd dramatists are Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, N.F. Simpson and Edward Albee. These playwrights believe that our existence is absurd as birth and death are beyond our control and we can't conceive of time prior to our birth and time afterwards the death. So our creations, our so-called balance and order, permanence, neat generalization are doomed to perish as we ourselves are destined to death. The theatre of absurd deals with this kind of absurdity of life. It shows how paradoxical our situation is. The absurdist dramatists employ various devices such as allegory and dramatic expressionism, symbols etc. Their plays remain obscure and these dramatists welcome obscurity as they consider that human life and the world which they represent in their plays are themselves obscure and unintelligible.

Absurd dramatists believe in essential misery, suffering and meaninglessness of human life. Absurd drama lacks action or plot. Little action denotes meaninglessness and absurdity. The final situation is absurd or comic. There is minimum action and speech. This drama explores the spiritual loneliness, complete isolation and anxiety of the people.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical tenet or discourse that employs the theme of human existence and prioritizes personal experience. It refers to essential melancholia generated due to the realization of eternal existence of sorrow and suffering. It advocates for freedom, believes in individualism and human rights with no external barriers. Man is entirely responsible for himself and he himself should set the goals and live accordingly. The chief exponents of existentialism are philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche and novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky who critiqued rationalism and concerned themselves with the problem of meaning. In the 20th century, prominent existential thinkers included Jean- Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel. A primary virtue in existentialist thought is authenticity. Many disciplines outside of philosophy such as drama, art, literature and psychology were greatly influenced by existentialism.

Jean- Paul Sartre maintained that a central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence. The actual life of the individual is what constitutes the 'true essence' instead of an arbitrarily attributed essence others use to define. With the help of consciousness, man creates his own values and determines a meaning to the life. Existentialism contradicted Aristotle and Aquinas who taught that essence precedes individual existence. Jonathan Webber interpreted Sartre's usage of the term 'essence' in a teleological fashion.

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard opposed western materialism, industrial revolution, scientific research and machine culture- the modern evils responsible for valueless and meaningless human existence. He said that machines have enslaved human beings. Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher said that the social and moral values belittle human existence; God is dead and man is in a Godless universe, alone and helpless.

Existentialists held that man is because man exists. Man is more important than all rules, regulations, laws or values. Man's existence in reality is miserable, lonely and alienated; the desire for happiness is a myth and there is no escape of man from suffering. Nothing can relieve and alleviate man's suffering. Man should be free to do what he wills and desires. Death is inevitable and essential part of life. So, themes related to alienation and suffering abound in existential literature. Meaninglessness and absurdity of human life are given emphasis in such kind of literature.

Existential Elements in 'Waiting for Godot'

The literature which is concerned with the problem of man's essential misery, suffering, sorrow, frustration, failure, loneliness and alienation is said to be existential in nature. Existential literature deals with man's melancholy, the meaning of existence and the problem of death. Given, 'Waiting for Godot' has ample existential elements.

The existentialists defend individual's freedom of choice. In the play, 'Waiting for Godot', two central characters, Estragon and Vladimir, choose to wait for a Mr. Godot whose identity is unclear to them. Estragon talks about his incapability and ignorance to recognize Mr. Godot. He says, "personally I wouldn't know him if I ever saw him". Estragon and Vladimir have chosen waiting. Vladimir says, "He didn't say for sure he'd come."

Estragon : "let's go !"
 Vladimir : " We Can't"
 Estragon : "Why not?"
 Vladimir : "We're waiting for Godot."

The play 'Waiting for Godot' deals not only with existence but also with momentary and internal time. The time mentioned in the play is in relation with man's mental condition. The tramps have major problem of time passing. Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly think and complain of the boredom due to the slowness of time passing. They do their best to kill time, but all their efforts remain futile and in vain. This condition renders them helpless and hopeless. They are very much frustrated due to their miserable and pitiable existence. Estragon says: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful."

The distinction between clock time and eternal time is one of the themes in the play. In the waiting, the passage of time is relative to one's mental condition. The wait attains eternity and universality. We wait for something or the other. In waiting, the tramps have almost attained a God-like timelessness. They had begun to doubt their existence and identity after they doubted even time.

The play presents the ordeal of waiting, ignorance, and boredom. The tramps are not fully aware of the lack of action in their lives and hence the meaninglessness of their existence. Despite, they go on living. We after all, do not give up living despite life's absurdity and meaninglessness. People actually do not wait for anything. So 'Godot' is nothing but a symbol of life which goes on pointlessly and aimlessly without having any meaning. This play is about the meaninglessness of life. The way two tramps pass time symbolizes boredom and insignificance of human life which has endless suffering. Estragon and Vladimir interact and communicate without any serious meaning or intention. Nothing happens when Estragon takes off his boots and gropes inside in the expectation of something to fall out. Vladimir imitates this action with his hat and gets frustrated with no result. They suffer intensely and incessantly. The laughter is mingled with pain. Estragon's feet cause long torture for him resulting in a miserable and sorrowful life. In the play, life is presented as meaningless and hence miserable. Hope is lost due to the futile actions and efforts. Very little happens because nothing meaningful takes place. And final situation is absurd or comic. The condition of the tramps is pitiable and miserable because Estragon suddenly offers the suggestion:

"Let's hang ourselves immediately!"

The Pozzo- Lucky interlude enhances the tragic quality of the play. Lucky remains in a sad plight. He is no better than a beast of burden, and there are sores on his neck. This play shows that humans live hopelessly and helplessly in a universe without a benevolent God.

In an existential play, language becomes ineffective and fails to communicate. In 'Waiting for Godot', simple misunderstandings, double-entendres, monologues, clichés, repetitions of synonyms, inability to find the right words, telegraphic style, Lucky's farrago of chaotic nonsense and the dropping of punctuation marks are present. These indicate that language has lost its function as a means of communication.

Conclusion

The play 'Waiting for Godot' presents the ordeal of waiting, ignorance and boredom. It deals with the problem of man's essential misery, suffering, frustration, loneliness, alienation and failure. This play depicts the life which is meaningless and insignificant, hence absurd. The manner in which the tramps pass time symbolizes boredom and futility of human actions, insignificance of life and the endless suffering associated with existence. These tramps still want to go on living because they happen to exist. Beckett presents the inability of a man to be a nihilist even in a situation of utter hopelessness. We learn in the play that time, reality, memory of the past and even existence have no meaning or significance. Acts in the play, are meaningless; time does not flow; existence remains an impression or perhaps a dream, happiness, in reality, is absent. The tramps can't communicate and interact as language fails to remain as means of communication. There is no hero, no story in the play but endless and tedious waiting which renders life miserable, meaningless and hence absurd. 'Godot' symbolizes rest, peace, happiness, death, heaven and even God. The endless waiting symbolizes the futility and meaninglessness of human existence. Above discussion proves the presence of existentialism in Samuel Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot'.

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