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Meaninglessness of life and existence in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the Theatre of Absurd

Abstract-

The absurdities of life, very often put us to think seriously about the meaning and aim of life. Many philosophers have done that and have suggested ways to overcome these burdens and these include many dramatists as well. The theatre has always taken part in every aspect of human life from domestic, economical to philosophical; the present paper aims to analyze the Absurd Plays with special reference to "Waiting for Godot". Samuel Beckett's play has been linked to Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* by many critics. The circular movements of life and the daily events have been depicted with such a technique and language which baffle the readers and attract them at the same time, they also make it a masterpiece of the genre.

Keywords- Myth of Sisyphus, Absurd Plays, Meaning of Life and Language.

The term "Theatre of Absurd" originated from a number of plays written by Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, Adamov and Beckett. These dramatists were writing plays which were quite difficult for the laymen to understand. The dramatists deliberately opted circumstances, settings and characters which brought out the absurdities of life. The situations in which these characters are stuck are very common and at the same time very different. Their actions and dialogues never contribute in bringing any clarity. The destinies of these characters are the thing which engages the audience. All of us very often wonder about the random events which take place in our life. We try to explore the reasons behind them but fail. Human beings are pestered with many problems of which no solutions seem to exist. Many famous

thinkers have tried their hands in finding the answers. The arbitrariness and purposelessness of human life have been tackled by many philosophers and Albert Camus is one of them.

Albert Camus famous essay “Myth of Sisyphus: essay on the Absurd” (1942), was based on the famous figure of Greek Mythology’ *Sisyphus*. He is the cunning king of *Corinth* and was punished by Hades for chaining *Death* when she came to claim his life. *Death* later escaped with the help of an angle and the wrath of *Hades* fell on *Sisyphus* and he was punished with never ending task of pushing a rock over a mountain which eventually slips down and he again had to push it to the top. Camus finds the human life similar to the punishment of *Sisyphus* as both are “absurd”; the punishment cannot be decoded as something having any outcome, nothing can be achieved or received from it, and so is life which Camus found meaningless.

In his essay Camus has claimed that life has no meaning at all. All the pain and suffering we go through leads to nothingness as whatever time we spend here is the wait for our death and if in the end we are supposed to die, what is the point of living? Camus finds Sisyphus the perfect model of human life as they also suffer without any hope of redemption. Camus has suggested three remedies to survive it- first option is we should surrender ourselves to God and wait for him to salvage us or according to his second option end this life by committing suicide. The third option he gives is we should accept the life as meaningless and purposeless.

The myth found its most emphatic expression in the theory of existentialism, on which arose a new genre of drama called “Absurd Drama”. The existentialism questions the reason of man’s being, it inquires as to why our whole existence in this world seems meaningless. Why do we have no control over most of the major actions of our life? Our birth, course of life and death are some of the major events on which our whole being exists but we are never in driving position when they take place; we are mere victims who suffer

and endure it passively without having any power to change the course of action. These absurdities of life are elaborately discussed by many dramatists in the form of Absurd dramas. Absurd means anything which does not make sense; and these dramas are filled with characters and actions which can be called absurd. Their behavior, dialogues and actions are never intended to be understood easily. Deciphering their intentions leads to efforts of reason where we can understand the relationship among universe, human and circumstances; although even after doing so one cannot be sure of finding any rhyme and reason of certain happenings in their life. Martin Esslin has defined the Absurd Plays as-

A well-made play is expected to have a beginning, a middle, and a neatly tied-up ending: these plays often start at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily. By all the traditional standards of critical appreciation of the drama, these plays are not only abominably bad, they do not even deserve the name of drama. (7)

Absurd plays are generally without any organized form; and the ideas on which they are built also seem blurred. The general structure of common dramas which most dramatists follow is where one narrates incidents which are linear and lead to a concrete climax but here in Absurd Dramas, one is unable to find any progress at all. Most characters are so common that they can represent all of us and yet they are so clueless about the happenings of their life that it seems impossible that anyone of their tribe could have ever lived. They are presented as caught in the nothingness of life in the beginning and are left in the same way at the end. Their conversations do not help readers in anyway; rather, they make comprehension of the play even more difficult. Worton elaborates the usage of language further-

The central problem they pose is what language can and cannot do. Language is no longer presented as a vehicle for direct communication or as a screen through which one can see darkly the psychic movements of a character. (68).

If we look at “Waiting for Godot” we find this play as a piece of writing which raises certain very important questions about our existence in this world but at the same time baffles us as well. Readers are unable to relate any of the incidents with a normal life one leads but an overall glance can lead to the recognition of the patterns. The continuous sufferings and endless pain are depicted through symbolical actions which reveal their impact when these layers of symbols are removed.

Structure wise nothing happens in the play; it has no action either; both the Acts of play resemble each other completely. The only thing which keeps continuing is their wait for “Godot” as he never arrives; the whole play revolves around these two tramps as major characters, where they indulge themselves in similar activities over two days’ span, just to while away their time. These two days represent the whole life we spend waiting for someone to come and save us.

In Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, language is not a means of communication but a means of killing time. At the beginning of Act I of *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon says “Nothing to be done” (Beckett 5). With this Beckett displays his nihilistic ideas. And following a few pages, the same character says “there’s nothing to show” (7). It seems that, according to the writer, the human life is absurd, and thus the works of it need to have absurd style. The place is where nothing to be done and seen, and shown. *Waiting for Godot* means hope for the two aimless characters. Beckett presents the meaninglessness of existence to the audience by using ridiculous characters. (Balkaya, 2)

This play was a complex creation which was not easy to be grasped by masses and received backlash from most of the critics for being incomprehensible. Only after passage of sometime it received warm welcome from viewers. There were many guesses about the

character “Godot”, while some decoded it as “God” and called Beckett a “theist”, Beckett refused the possibility of it and kept the character a mystery, which is never revealed till the end of the play. The character can be decoded as a savior who will bring salvation or it can be interpreted “a fools dream” which would never come true; which shows there is no solution present to take us away from this life and it has to be lived as a futile activity which will give us no result.

There can be little doubt that such a sense of disillusionment, such a collapse of all previously held firm beliefs is a characteristic feature of our own times. The social and spiritual reasons for such a sense of loss of meaning are manifold and complex: the waning of religious faith that had started with the Enlightenment and led Nietzsche to speak of the “death of God” by the eighteenth-eighties [...]. There can be no doubt: for many intelligent and sensitive human beings the world of the mid twentieth century *has* lost its meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. (Esslin, 12-13)

May be we should accept life as a meaningless activity which we go through just to fritter away our time which we are spending on this earth, just like Sisyphus who pushes the stone over the hill again and again in wait of his punishment to be over.

The existential crisis human beings face on this earth makes their life miserable. Even after knowing the real nature of life there is a constant effort to find the meaning in it and hence we aggravate our misery only. There is no way out of this life where one can escape the pain and sufferings, but Camus offers solace by suggesting, “living it to the fullest”. Our stay on this earth is short and temporary and we should try to make it memorable by tasting both sweet and sour. We all wait for one miracle to change our lives, but in reality life is a miracle in itself only to be discovered once more.

References:

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