

EXISTENTIAL ANGST IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT

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Abstract

The horrors of the two World Wars utterly ruptured the old perceptions of life and God. They created an unprecedented vacuum wherein nothing and no one could revive hope and faith. The questions pertaining to the very meaning and purpose of existence were raised and in turn gave birth to a string of theories and philosophies termed as Existentialism. The Theatre of the Absurd was an inevitable and huge component of this phenomenon and Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' (1949) inaugurated the tradition of presenting the existential theory through drama. The predicament of believing or not believing in the paramount of God was taken up. The play brings forth the revolutionary concept that the existence or non-existence of God is trivial to the life of a human being. It propounds the fundamental doctrines of Existentialism mapped by Jean-Paul Sartre in 'Existentialism Is a Humanism' (1946). The idea of God that connects all was absolutely shattered and human beings were thrown into the space alone, struggling to tackle and cope up with the cruel world. My proposed paper would endeavour to explore these and related issues.

Keywords: *Existentialism, God, Life, Predicament, Samuel Beckett, Theory, Theatre of the Absurd*

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Introduction

‘Imagine yourself on board a train, which is out of control and doomed to end in a fatal crash. Nothing can be done to slow it down or to change the track. Worse still, there is no exit – no one can get out of the train. As a passenger, how would you cope? What would ease your death anxiety? Would denial help? How about illusion? How would you live a vital and meaningful life in spite of the anticipated terror of death? These are the challenging questions confronting all mortals.’ (Wong, 2008: 65)

The quest for meaning is central to man’s existence. It is visible in language, literature and every field of human activity. The ideology of Existentialism focuses on the dissonance between the individual and the universe around him. It questions the very logic and motivation behind the happenings and activities. All rationale and hopes are smashed as the realisation dawns that nothing happens for a reason. There is no reward or punishment predetermined by an omnipotent power that will provide retribution for our actions. Our existence is all we have and no other hope here in this world or the other world. The highly acclaimed work by Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* gave direction to existential philosophy, philosophers and artists like Samuel Beckett.

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The existential philosophy centres around the idea that man is totally free. The existentialists have a strong belief in the freedom of an individual. One has to become aware of one’s existence and also accept the results of their own choices and actions. This freedom is not out of choice, but out of compulsion. The past cannot bind us, nor can the hope of future. Each moment is a new moment. Our existence is all we have. There is no other choice, no other meaning. It is a world of compulsions; we cannot choose not to exist.

The individual’s choice is about existence of the self and also existence of God. Most people’s actions are moulded and guided keeping in mind a supreme power that shall reward or

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punish one's actions and deeds. This gives some logic to the happenings around them. The ideas of one's own existence are directly connected to the ideas about God. Now, when one demolishes the idea of a God-centric world and puts the entire focus on the existence of the individual without any hopes of the future or results of the past, the entire belief system comes crashing and destroys all logic of good and evil, beingness and nothingness. For in that case whatever you do makes no difference. As a result, human life becomes a never-ending array of situations where one is compelled to choose from several alternatives, which gives rise to a feeling of anxiety (Olsson and Algulin 560). Sartre describes this angst:

That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does (29).

The existence loses all meaning as nothing is of any consequence. This philosophy of Sartre is the focal point of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's dramas portray the irrationality and ridiculousness of human existence. The lack of meaning creates an unavoidable void that cannot be fulfilled by any rationale. Beckett's characters are born and live in pain. Between birth and death lie anxiety and despair. Nothingness rules our lives and as a result, even relationships can provide no solace. They become a means to inflict cruelty. Hence,

'All Beckett's work comprises a unity in which certain attitudes are expressed in different ways with much force and rare imagination: life is cruel and painful; failure is no worse than success because neither matters; what is important is to avoid giving pain to others and to share misfortune' (Chambers, 1987: 78).

Beckett's dramas diverge from the conventional literature of his times. The backdrop, plot and characters are not from the real world but they reflect deeply upon it. There is total disruption of regular notions of life.

In his now classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl eloquently argued that "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning" (Frankl, 1985: 121).

Waiting for Godot is a text that throws open immense scope for a multitude of interpretations and there is "a confusing mass of commentary which significantly outweighs Beckett's total

writings” (Innes 430). Nevertheless, most of these critical writings converge upon the interpretation of the concept of God in the text. God here is the Christian image of God as the creator, the protector and the savoir of all creatures. The figure of Godot in the play resembles this image of Christian God. Beckett brings in this concept of God in the form of Godot and constantly questions his existence by showing the fruitless wait of the characters. Martin Esslin’s essay “*Godot and His Children: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter*” (1968) represents Sartre’s notion:

General truths, ethical systems, thus become mere illusions. Each individual has to work out his own salvation by himself, for, encapsulate in his own particularity, he is utterly alone. For him and for him alone, the good, the true, and the beautiful derive entirely from his own experience. (64)

The first performance of the play was a shock. “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it is *terrible*” – was a response by Jean Anouilh, a French play writer (quoted in the afterword to Beckett, original emphasis). There is no plot, no logical chain of events. The characters indulge in no reasonable action. They have no aim in life. Their conversations lack coherence. Their relationships are frivolous and devoid of any warmth. They hang around in utter confusion. The causal sequence too is disrupted. Time and place are totally vague. All dramatic conventions of a regular play are absolutely missing. In spite of this, the play became a huge hit and Beckett was acknowledged as a writer of repute.

The question then arises is how does the play manage to grab the attention of the audience? The mystery is unraveled when we put the play in the context of Sartre’s existential philosophy. A conventional drama pursues a plot revolving around a chain of events that happen in the day to day outside world. It is set in a particular time and place frame. But when we examine the locale and chronology of Beckett’s play, we realize that the scene portrayed here is a reflection of the people’s inner world and reality. It brings on stage the feeling of shock and helplessness that comes with the realization that no one and nothing can help. What we are and what we are here for are perennial questions faced by an individual. The wars destroyed everything and threw into face the fact that we can do nothing about our existence. We are just dropped down here with no other option but to drag on.

Beckett challenged the established drama practices by bring in the Theatre of the Absurd where he presents the absurdity of our existence. He captured the very essence of his Age and

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pioneered in putting it on stage. Actions and dialogues hold no significance at all, neither do the characters.

The issue of God's existence is central to all philosophies and ideologies. In Sartre's "atheistic existentialism", he very conspicuously denies the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient power. For him, the pertinent problem is that of human existence. *Waiting for Godot* too shares this concern but the way it toys with this predicament is intriguing and enigmatic.

Godot evokes a very varied set of interpretations from critics and readers. But what is common is that he is portrayed as a kind of superior power. His delineation resembles the image of God. Nowhere does he appear as a character on stage nor is he involved in any action indirectly. We learn about him only through the dialogues of Vladimir, Estragon and the Boy. There are conflicting questions and puzzling answers about Godot. The messenger boy, who is seemingly sent by Godot, narrates stories about him. Godot treats him well and gives sufficient food to him. Godot is quite fond of the boy but not of the boy's brother who is beaten up by Godot (44-45). The second time Vladimir and Estragon meet the boy, they find out that Mr. Godot has a white beard and that "he does nothing" (84-85). Thus, the figure of Godot is present as well as absent in the entire play. The play very cleverly evades the answer about Godot's, and indicatively about God's existence. Neither are the characters anticipating with hope and certainty that he will turn up. The mumbo jumbo of the tramps revolves around some theological topics and even Biblical concepts but lead to no definite idea or conclusion.

Gunter Anders, in his essay "Being without Time: on Beckett's Play *Waiting for Godot*" (1965), refers to this anomaly of Godot's absence – presence as a demonstration of God's existence "ex absentia" (145). According to him, "it was merely the absence of attributes that was being used to define God, here God's absence itself is made into a proof of His being" (145). He adds that "the demonstration of God's existence can be formulated as: "He does not come, therefore He is"(145).

If we look at this phenomenon from the viewpoint of Vladimir and Estragon, they represent the perspective of a common individual who takes for granted that God has to be waited for. And since everyone is waiting for God, there must be one. This is a very complex view that implies that Godot or God exists for those who wait for him and does not exist for those who do not! Faith and beliefs are certainly there but human beings also have intellect and consequently, everyone needs to decide for themselves whether they do believe in God or not, and if they do, what kind of God? Sartre demonstrates through the following example:

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“You are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do; there are no signs in this world.” Catholics will reply: “But there are signs!” Be that as it may, it is I who chooses what those signs mean. (33)

Vladimir and Estragon decide to wait for Godot. But again, there is a choice not to wait for him as he might never show up. One of them wants to go away:

ESTRAGON: Charming spot. [He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.] Inspiring prospects. [He turns to Vladimir.] Let’s go.

VLADIMIR: We can’t.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We’re waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: [Despairingly.] Ah! [Pause.] You’re sure it was here? (6)

And again, the futility of existence is drawn upon by pointing out that though they have an option of not waiting, they seem to have nothing else to do but that. And this remains in spite of the fact that they know nothing about Godot or his arrival:

POZZO: [Peremptory.] Who is Godot?

ESTRAGON: Godot?

POZZO: You took me for Godot.

ESTRAGON: Oh no, sir, not for an instant, sir.

POZZO: Who is he?

VLADIMIR: Oh, he is a ... he is a kind of acquaintance.

ESTRAGON: Nothing of the kind, we hardly know him.

VLADIMIR: True ... we don’t know him very well ...
but all the same ...

ESTRAGON: Personally I wouldn’t even know him if I saw him. (15-16)

They are confused about time, place and the very existence and identity of Godot. They have altogether no idea of why they want to meet Godot. Most of the human beings believe in the existence of God, but the Version of God changes from person to person. There is no clarity as to why they believe in God, or what would they do if he actually arrives. The cruelty of war and absence of any assistance to save them from it led them to reassess their values, traditions and beliefs. They felt forsaken, dejected and cheated. This in turn led them to review their entire existence that they had centred around a higher authority that would do justice and hold them in arms when they called out. So, the very definition, the very signification of existence of human

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life and God was put into discussion. And this existential angst is given a shape, form and life in *Waiting for Godot*.

Conclusion

Turmoil and shock are shared responses to the plays of Beckett. His works revolve around a world that is collapsing and confusing. The faith in religion and the cognizance of an omnipotent power are all gone and there is nothing to fill the vacuum. Life has lost meaning and there is nothing to comfort humanity. These are the situations that are delicate as well as formidable and Beckett takes up the task to delineate them on stage. The endeavour is not only commendable but also puts him immediately on the list of renowned dramatists of the world.

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