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EXPLORING SISYPHEAN THEME IN HAPPY DAYS BY BECKETT

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Abstract:-The parallel theme of Sisypheanism has been explored in Happy Days where a lonely woman grapples with the endless series of nothingnesses by taking a nostalgic dip in her past or bygone days or by carrying on repeatedly the same daily rituals. Apart from this, she takes the help of classic texts or quotations to overcome the overwhelming situation, as she is sinking day by day into the mound of earth. The dramatic conflict springs from the indomitable attitude of the woman and the universe that nullifies her human effort. The more the world appears challenging, the more she betrays her courage. Like the mythical Sisyphus she tides over the surrounding nothingness in reasserting meaning out of inherently absurd situation.

Keywords: Authenticity, arbitrariness, nothingness, recollection of past, daily routine, meaning in pattern of repetition, Sisyphean rebellion.

INTRODUCTION:

Exploring Sisyphean theme in Samuel Beckett's Happy Days brings us back to what Albert Camus in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* suggested to overcome the absurd situation into which man of the post-War era was thrown. Here he diagnosed the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs and man was supposed to have been thrown into a godless universe where he himself has to steer the course of action:

“A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe suddenly deprived of illusion and light man feels stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of the memories of a lost home land as much as he lacks hope of the promised land to come.”

To clarify this point he again probed the cause of the prevailing nothingness:

“It is the divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, the fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together.”

Echoing the atheist existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre Camus suggested that, beset with nothingness man should be little inclined to leap or escape, he should recognize the struggle and must experience the sin of living without God. In the version of Sartre an individual must lead an authentic existence confronting the accidental, contingent and the absurd nature of the universe. [P_12Cox, Gary-Sartre and Fiction] As the situation cannot be cured, it must be endured somehow. In the face of the stubborn silence of the universe a man should not hold his tongue but talk. He must feel the thorn at his heart and must not quiet the pain. This is the way a man can grapple with the reality that has gone beyond his comprehension. [p-42, *The Myth of Sisyphus*] In this regard Camus thinks that man without God must not kill himself but live life with the knowledge that he is condemned to death. In such a given situation we have no other option than braving this fact with this knowledge. This is the only possible meaning that stems from his grappling with the unreasonable universe. Camus again insists that, as the world lacks its meaning, man himself must be its meaning provider. He finds meaning in the idea of repetition to extend life somehow_ especially in Sisyphus' repeated task of rolling his rock up the hill to be rolled back again. This is how Sisyphus defies God who imposed upon him the endless punishment. Camus observes that, Sisyphus while walking back again down the hill, is briefly free and is superior to his fate. She is stronger than the rock. Although she is bound to these terms of existence; she is a rebel in running parallel with God.

Unlike the preceding plays like *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* this play has as its central character, a female named Winnie, an average world-loving woman with robust optimism which may be contrasted with the

frequently and life-denying nihilistic utterances of the previous protagonists. The problem of encountering nothingness with which the characters are beset in the previous plays, is dramatized here in a different manner i.e. the way Sisyphus conquered destiny with much vigour and spirit. The gloomy atmosphere of the previous plays is replaced by blazing light but the light is so scorching that it destroys life instead of nourishing it. It is hellish light, not the divine light as mentioned in the Bible. It is neither the 'eye-kissing' or the 'heart-sweetening light' [P-44 Tagore, R, Gitanjali] that Tagore yearned for in his Gitanjali. Rather it is the light which points to the infinite or the vast emptiness or the nothingness.

Being pitted against such a tormenting universe she exhibits her fortitude like Sisyphus in confronting the utter meaninglessness. In so doing her optimistic tone rises from little phrases of consolation to fragments of prayer, hymns of praise, lyric poetry and song:

“Winnie: One cannot sing just to please someone, however much one loves them, no, song must come from the heart, that is what I always say, pour out from the inmost like a thrush.” [P-155, S. Beckett, The Complete Dramatic Works]

Her attitude like Sisyphus makes us forget that she is buried in a mound of earth. She turns over the pages of past literature to cope with the engulfing nothingness. Her constant spontaneous chatter, though apparently boring goes to help her in gaining some kind of control over time and the decay of personality. The running down of the decaying universe has its parallel with the dying universe in Endgame. The dramatic tension stems from Winnie's repeated effort to control the situation and the stubborn or the inexorable universe that lends a deaf ear to her. She struggles to pass time by cherishing objects, phrases, an old tooth-brush and fine quotations. Her unending flow of speech is posited against a physical and mental void dramatized through the two-act structures, with its repetitions and symmetries suggesting an infinite series of the harrowing turn of the wheel under which she is pestered every day. So it is evident that there is a disjunction between her optimistic tone and the gravity of the situation. This disjunction is reduced by her constant effort of distraction through recollection of stories or memories. [P-66 Mc Donald R, The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett]

The confrontation with the nothingness is developed through the interplay of hope and despair. The opening section of the play presents an epitome of the play: her persistent fears and consolations. She begins with words of praise: 'Another heavenly day' and sends fragments of prayer invoking Jesus Christ and the eternal world:

“Winnie: Hail holy light. [Long pause. She closes her eyes. Bell rings loudly. She opens her eyes at once Bell stops. She gazes front. Long Smile] Someone is looking at me still. [Pause.] Caring for me still. [pause] Eyes on my eyes. [pause] this is what I find so wonderful.” [P_160 S. Beckett The Complete Dramatic Works]

But neither the providence nor a divine messenger comes forward to help her just as her unseen life-partner, Willie who has lost his zest for life cannot respond to the call of his wife. The threads of her despair is interwoven with the threads of corresponding consolation: 'can't be helped, or 'just can't be cured'. [P-139, S. Beckett, The Complete Dramatic Works] Again these consolations are in turn accompanied by the feeling of inadequacy and fear, which further leads to consolation. Her failure to read the words on the tooth-brush leads to further consolation through quotation of a fragment from the classic on the sorrows of seeing: 'the woe is me_ to see what I see' and the invocation of the blind Milton's holy light. But the allusion to light brings her back to the bedrocks of life. Again that fear is also counter-pointed by a further series of consolations for cheering herself up: 'can't complain, 'so much to be thankful for.....no pain'. [P-139, S. Beckett, The Complete Dramatic Works] This see-saw pattern of consolation and despair recalls the constant wavering of Vladimir and Estragon between hope and despair in waiting for Godot. But the way Winnie braves the situation without any companion outshines their effort. Her constant trial is at par with that of Sisyphus who found much satisfaction in raising the stone uphill.

However, these fluctuations define her Titanic struggle in her paradoxical ecstasy of suffering. She is exposed to extreme deprivation from the outset, yet her condition deteriorates. By act-2 she is buried up to her neck and she appears to be losing her companion. In spite of this she continues her endless monologue that confirms her existence: 'no change, no pain'. She is found to have parallel with a figure from Dante's Inferno who had to endure endless torture while cherishing a private vision of paradise. In fact, there was nothing of the paradise but the hellish torture. To increase her torment, the cause and the duration of it cannot be explained or rationalized. The Beckettian universe is so arbitrary that it has gone beyond the scope of rationality to deal with any problem. Thus the play creates a mythic dimension for the humble woman trying to get through her minimal day with as much grace as possible.

The handicapped woman copes with the situation by embracing the left over possessions, words and memories, in this desert of solitude accompanied by a barely present companion. Still she cherishes her fascination with the tooth-brush and the undecipherable writing on it. With the progress of Act-1 things get more and more attention and the process of discovery seems delightful to her: the conjuring up of the old things points to the vanished glory which is now recalled for prevailing over the overwhelming situation. The instruction on the medicine, the choice quotations from the classic, even the wordless objects and all the contents of her bag are the treasure trove for her existence. These are her survival kits. Her daily ritual is not only a way of keeping her appearance but also a way of ordering the otherwise infinite waste of time. Her spectacles provide another occasion for looking at herself: 'taken off, polished, put on once more'. Like tooth-brush it also helps her to structure the empty hours. [P-79, Kennedy Andrew. K]

At every step of her life there is a blow of fortune. Nor the earth that encompasses her is neutral. It presses against her and tortures her: 'the earth is very light today.' But the physical discomfort is continually turned into a source of delight: 'Perhaps someday the earth will yield and let me go; the pull is so great, yes, crack all around me and let me out.' P-26. Although she exercises the slightest control over the cosmic change, she like Sisyphus carries on her daily ritual with repeated effort. The

ritual celebration of each day suggests a way of taming the threat of infinity. Her world of thought and talk is the source of inexhaustible consolation for Winnie. Her cheerfulness in the face of death and nothingness provides a kind of catharsis. Although her life does not consist of happy days, she refuses to be dismayed [P-83 Esslin, Martin, The Theatre of the Absurd]

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