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EXHAUSTION IN MODERN DRAMA: THE MISSING THESIS IN THE DIALECTICS OF THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD



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ABSTRACT

For an absurd playwright, his sense of being is his subject matter and it is this projection of the author's inner world that determines the theatre of the absurd's non-realistic form and that essentially separates drama form existential drama. The strength of absurd drama also reveals its weakness which we perceive in its over-intellectualisation and separation of subject and the object in life and drama. This results in a feeling of exhaustion and a missing vitality in terms of verbal and imagistic dramatisation.

KEY WORDS: *Absurd, Existentialism, Subject-Object, Pauses and Silence, Breakdown of Language, Bad Faith, Loss of Identity.*

INTRODUCTION

The theatre of the absurd is a term applied to certain dramatists of Europe and America who shared a sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of human condition in a universe whose meaning and structure were rapidly disintegrating. These dramatists flourish in the 1950's and early 1960's while going through the theatre one's aesthetic perception is repeatedly knocked at by a feeling that some vitality is missing. What is this vitality can be seen if we turn back the basic dialectics of life and drama, that is, interaction between subject and the object. For an absurd playwright, his sense of being is his subject matter and it is this projection of the author's inner world that determines the theatre of the absurd's non-realistic form and that essentially separates drama form existential drama. The purpose of this paper is to explore this missing vitality owing to the absence of interaction between self and the outer world or subject and the object. Absurd drama was influenced by almost all the



dramatic forms right from ancient times to the modern age, commedia dell'arte, futurism, surrealism, symbolism as well as the peripheral theatre arts of fair, circus, music-hall, and film. It is significant to note that all these art-forms were products of their times and their structures of feeling were governed by their quality of experience in life but in the absurd drama an aesthetic contraction from the dialectics of experience and a philosophic expansion of the writers own subject matter governs the structure of feeling which is primarily of a passivity of self in a universe where even choices are not possible. Here we see how the absurd drama creates its own metaphysical world distanced from the psychological, moral or social expression of self and in the process the absurd drama misses the vital thesis of the outer world and a living dynamics between "me-myself" and outside "me-myself". Beckett's plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are an ample demonstration of the lack of this vital thesis and passivity of self. Beckett has his characters as individuals who have nothing and who are falling to bits. His plays are an expression of a wasteland of words where communication is not possible and man is waiting in his trapped existence to be extinguished gradually.

Before proceeding to a detailed examination of the absurd drama, it is significant to have a look into its immediate predecessor's realistic and existential drama. In the naturalist drama society or environment is made an absolute where individuals are mere objects, while as Raymond Williams points out, in the idealist drama which is based on the isolation of individual, the whole way of life is an illusion or ideology. In both the dramas the humanist sense of totality, that is, the interaction between the self and the society, which had given realism its strength, is lost. Raymond Williams further points out the developments of expressionism has converted even individuals into illusion and illusion has become an expression of illusion. The theatre has become anti-theatre and we are being communicated that communication is an illusion. This drama of illusion is very powerful in Beckett where we see as David H. Hesla points out a system of chaos is created. Although Beckett said somewhere he is not interested in any system and he cannot see any trace of any system anywhere. Yet all his plays are constructed according to the system of anti-thesis in which uncertainty or impotence or ignorance of human existence come out. The structure of *Waiting for Godot* is shapely chaotic. Here the choices are not possible for human beings inhabiting a limbo of futility and isolation. The simple polarity brings out the helplessness of their existence and inaction of the self. The main theme of the play is "wait" or "not wait", Godot will come or will not come. ("He doesn't come but he may still come"); of the two thieves on the cross, one was "blessed" but the other was "damned". The shepherd boy is uncertain whether Godot's beard is black or white, of the two travelers Pozzo seems to be the master mother while Lucky seems to be the servant child until Act II, when the relationship is inverted during the play, Didi and Gogo announce they will go but they do not move. The structure of feeling which is created out of these contraries is that they both are one, comic and tragic anti-thesis combine to bring out the meaning of the play. Thus any illusory world is created with equally illusory individuals. It is trying to communicate the non-communicable. The theoretical basis of the absurd drama leads to the end of the drama. It is a drama of tragic deadlock and exhaustion. It lacks the living dynamics of the realist drama Chekov where social disintegration is a sum of various individual disintegrations where the vital thesis is present and individual as well as society is shown in a process, they both affect each other. The dramatic resolution is a pathetic yet prophetic vision of the writer who grabs the dynamics of the society through individuals. In *The Three Sisters* the flight of the migratory birds may seem "empty" yet it is also a "search for a faith". In *The Cherry Orchard* human beings may have a sense of having achieved "nothing at all" and they may "only philosophize, complain of boredom or drink vodka", yet a faith in "work" remains a key for a happy future. "We must only work and work, and happiness is only for our distant prosperity". Here the very process of stagnation of a society is grabbed and given a

forward thrust through the very individual who are stagnating. Polarities are present in this kind of drama also but they are vehicles of the interaction between the self and the society, they point towards the potential of the self unlike the polarities of the absurd drama.

When the disintegration of the outer world is complete, it is taken for granted as a dark illusory world where human beings have to make difficult choices and we get the existential drama. But even in the existential drama, though the focus shifts to self, the vital thesis of the outer world is not missing. The vitality of this drama consists in the action of the self retain human dignity and meaning in a meaningless world. This is in direct contrast to the absurd drama where even the possibility an action is tragically comic and passivity of the self is emphasized. Anouilh's *Antigone* is an expression of human dignity through the action a meaning-seeking self in a meaningless world. Similarly Camus' *Caligula* is an expression of human self asserting, probing qualifying itself in an absurd universe. In all these plays active choices are important the outer world may be dark or illusory yet human beings "make" themselves. This vitality which arises out of self's action in respect to something, which may be illusory is missing in the absurd drama because here the dramatist has put his individuals in a world where no action is possible because everything is absurd so here the movement is towards the individuals also being equally dark or illusory or impotent.

The absurdist drama becomes a symbolic drama of illusion against illusion, its form like its subject matter becomes full of artifice where situation is the drama, and no choice or communication is possible. The logical conclusion of such a form without its inner dynamics of interaction even between illusion and illusion is a two and a half minute play of Beckett.

If one ponders on this aesthetic contraction of drama in the absurd theatre one sees its roots in its distance from the felt experience and anguish of the world wars. In the existential drama the quality of experience speaks itself in the choice which individuals have to make in the psychological, moral horror of the external conditions on the self. In the absurd drama that felt experience has been diluted by intellectual extension or transformation of existential into a sort tragic-comic mystery of existence where even individuals are passive and are breathing in a static situation of meaninglessness and illusion. The self does not make itself, it is made and put in track where even death is illusory while in the existential drama self is actively seeking meaning and death is a stark reality which opens the doors of eternal darkness.

The theory of the absurd does not permit the existence of the thesis of objective reality. It also does not permit the possibility of self's action. It presents the human situation with narrow limits set to any significant human action. Polarity in the characters is used to show the conflicts within a human mind and this technique is expanded to present what the absurdist call the mystery of human existence. The two tramps are suffering Time at a place where they are stuck up and waiting for Godot. They feel "lonely" and "dream" about happiness. Vladimir does not know "what to think anymore" Estragon tries to get up but he does not know what to do. It is a situation when the possibility of the interaction of self with outer a reality is lost and self cannot seek meaning for itself. Vladimir is conscious of this eternal situation of spiritual death. He knows waiting is the suffering of existence which is dark and illusory:

They give birth astride of grave ... Astride of a grave and difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the Grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is Full of our cries. (He listens) but habit is a great deadener. (He looks again at Estragon) at me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause). I can't go on (Pause) What have I said? (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 91)

Here we see in the absurd drama, end begins from the beginning. Human beings are isolated and helpless in their situation. The two travelers Pozzo and Lucky suffer not at one place but in their movement. Lucky goes dumb and Pozzo blind. The progression is negative. "Time is accursed" for Pozzo and Lucky as well:

When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day,
one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we will go deaf, one we
were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not
enough for you? (Calmer) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an
instant, then it's night once more. (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 89)]

Then Pozzo jerks the rope and says "on!" Pozzo and Lucky go away but their experience also strengthens the structure of feeling that life is illusory in a dark illusory world. Raymond Williams points out neither response is significant than the other, in any ultimate way: The travelers fall and the tramps wait on in disappointment.

In Beckett's other play *Endgame* also we see a static world where human action and inaction both become insignificant. The situation is created by contracting the possibilities of human action within a dark tomb detached from life, or a scene within a human skull with its two windows looking out on sea and land. Outside world is seen as cold and dark by Clov. Like Coleridge "Ode to Dejection" human mind perceives the objective reality as cold and frozen because the subject itself is freezing and is not able to communicate with the external reality. Nagg and Nell are shown without legs or suffering from paralysis which has confined them to their dustbins. Hamm is getting blind and cannot move from his chair without Clov's help, while Clov, who is mobile, finds himself equally freezing. The writer has created a world totally meaningless where vitality, objective reality and the possibility of self's action are replaced with coldness, dark mystery and futility of any action. Human beings find themselves checkmated in the chess of life. Nagg and Nell are shown as white-coloured while Hamm is shown as red but both the pairs are heading for the final collapse. One of Beckett's most sensitive critics, Roy Cohn, has described *Endgame* as presented "the death of the stock props of Western civilization—family cohesion, filial, parental, and connubial love, faith in God, artistic appreciation and creation". End in itself becomes a dramatized metaphor in the play. Life is shown as illusory belonging to some dead past. The aesthetic contraction serves to bring out an entombed world which has its captive—a sick and dying life. Everything is coming to an end. Clov finds the food store to be finished while Hamm being himself immersed in misery has lost the feeling for others' miseries. He knows his father, mother and dog are suffering but he does not know why he hesitates to "end". His world is based on painkillers and "outside of here it's death" (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1105). In this world filial or emotional relations are not possible, people are just existing in their pipe holes. Hamm calls his father an "accursed progenitor". He treats his parents very shabbily and asks Clov to give a biscuit to Nagg so that he can keep "quiet", Nagg and Nell cannot kiss each other, "why this farce, day after day" (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1106). Happiness belongs to the past which they vaguely remember. Now Nagg finds himself freezing. In this existence Clov's seeds fail to sprout, "If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. (Violently). They will never sprout! (Pause. Nagg takes biscuits in his hands)". Gradually the life is snuffing out and when Clov looks at sea he feels himself cold while Hamm finds himself freezing (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1114-1115). Hamm realizes in this disintegrating world that human relationships are not possible. He tells Clov 'Get out of here and love one another! Lick your neighbor as yourself!' and that "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on. (Pause). Perhaps I could go on with any story, end it and begin another" (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1115). His story-telling like his desire for painkiller is desperate attempt on his part to keep himself together, as are Clov's frantic

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efforts in climbing the right or left windows to see something in the outside darkness. They both are strangely interlocked with each other:

Hamm: Gone from me you would be dead.

Clov: And vice versa

Hamm: Outside of here it's death! (Pause) and the rat?

Clov: He's got away.

Hamm: He can't go far. (Pause Anxious) Eh?

Clov: He doesn't need to go far. (Pause) (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1115).

There is no escape from this existence except that. However a change comes in the situation when Clov locates "a small boy" outside the window he wants to tackle this "potential procreator" with a gaff but Hamm tells him "If he exists he will die there or he will come here. And if he doesn't (Pause)" (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1116). This is a turning point in the play towards the dissolution of human personality itself. Clov thinks Hamm does not believe him and Hamm realizes "It's the end, Clov, we have come to the end. I don't need you anymore. (Pause) (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1117). Clov, the active and mobile self, thinks of leaving Hamm but his search seems to him like "a little tale of black dust" between his legs, "I say to myself that the earth is extinguished though I never saw it lit (Pause) It's easy going. (Pause). When I fall I'll weep for happiness. (Pause. He goes towards door)" (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1117). While Hamm, the creative and stationary self, finds himself amid "Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended" (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1117).

The isolation among individuals and dissolution of self is complete. Hamm fails to get any response from his father or mother or Clov. He even throws away his toy dog. He is "discard" from everyone. In the end he is left to himself to diffuse into nothing, "old stencher! (Pause) You ... remain. (Pause He covers his face with handkerchief, lowers his arms to armrests, remains motionless. Brief tableau)" (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1117).

Since the quality of life's experience is intellectualized through artistic contraction and then subjective magnification the objective thesis is absent in the absurd theatre and finally the structure of feeling which emerges is of dissolution of self into the illusory world which the writer has created. The past is dead, the present is suffering and the idea of future is a torture for the illusory self in Beckett. Vladimir says "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think, or I do, what shall I say of today?" While Pozzo doesn't "remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today". Similarly Nagg and Nell's faint memory of Ardenness makes them love artificially. Nell tells Nagg "Why this farce, day after day?"

What we call illusion and lack of objective thesis and lack of self's action, Martin Esslin finds to be the mystery of existence which Beckett is "probing to a depth in which individuality and definite events no longer appear and only basic patterns emerge." Esslin also thinks Beckett whole endeavour is to name the unnamable. In this way Martin Esslin's thesis is that Beckett is creating a new kind of consciousness "which faces the mystery and terror of the human condition in the exhilaration of a new-found freedom". He quotes Beckett for to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, that is, when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seekers". But as we have seen the basic pattern or structure of feeling which emerges is of uncertainty and dissolution; or illusion (self) merging into a bigger illusion (existence). And there cannot be any effort to name the unnamable or to concretise the abstract without any reference to concrete or objective reality the absurd drama becomes a drama of illusion against illusion. Throughout our exploration of the absurd drama in Beckett we do not find any creation of a new consciousness rather

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we see a passivity of self slowly dissolving the self itself. What enters the soul in this new condition is not "peace" but despair from the outer illusory world. No doubt, tragic and comic exist together in Beckett as parts of the dialectics of life which rejects tragedy and views tragedy as antithesis for future happiness, instead tragic and comic in Beckett are vehicles of uncertainty or helplessness of human existence. Godot may come or may not come, one thief was saved, another was hanged. Hamm can think but cannot see while Clov can see but cannot think. Here the comic element is the fun arising out of a tragic situation. In Brecht we have what Raymond Williams calls "Complex seeing". Complexity of action in *Mother Courage* reveals the mother as an isolated yet heroically persistent figure "she has to persist, and she has to be isolated so that the full action can be shown. This is the triumph of Brecht's dialectical form which gains its vitality through the anti-thesis and thesis of the tragic and the comic in life and though an interaction of self and the reality outside self, and the both affecting each other with the creation of a forwarded humane dramatic thrust. This living dynamics is absent in Beckett's theatre which like Sartre recognizes nothingness at the root of our being but fails to recognize nothingness at this very root, liberty and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices. Absurd theatre then becomes an example of what Sartre calls "bad faith" — "the first act of bad faith consists in evading what one cannot evade, in evading what one is. This bad faith results in the passivity of self and lack of concrete reality outside us. This is the missing thesis in the dialectics of the theatre of the absurd, since this thesis is missing and self is simply dissolving into illusion no revolt, whether social, existential or messianic, is possible and the absurd theatre remains a theatre of pauses, silences, illusion and ultimately dissolution.

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