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Theorizing the Absurd: Waiting for Godot Sixty Years After

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Abstract

The term Absurd is essentially impregnated with various human conditions and situations arousing absurdity and is necessarily present in the post world war generation. Life has become bitter sweet or 'life in death and death in life' to the coming generation. This human predicament sprouted its spears during 1920s, developed during 1940s and perpetuated in the later world. This very notion was enchanted, transported and sometimes devastated by the intellectuals of this world such as T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Existentialists, Expressionists, Surrealists, and Absurdists of the 20th century. And Waiting for Godot is central sun round whom all the absurdist notions move. It transcends time and has the cosmic significance even after 60 years of its publication. It insinuates modernism and perpetuates postmodernism that is nothing but "too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our lives before it." Really in the midst of then terminological mayhem, Absurd is best identified with Waiting for Godot with its sense of nothingness in life.

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The term Absurd is essentially impregnated with various human conditions and situations arousing absurdity and is necessarily present in the post world war generation. Life has become bitter sweet or 'life in death and death in life' to the coming generation. This human predicament sprouted its spears during 1920s, developed during 1940s and perpetuated in the later world. This very notion was enchanted, transported and sometimes devastated by the intellectuals of this world. On the one hand T.S. Eliot beautifully mirrored the inner absurdity of the modern world in his magnum-opus *The waste land* (1921), and Samuel Beckett in his master piece *Waiting for Godot* (1955), on the other. Superficially Absurd means ridiculous, but literally it means 'Sense having nonsense' or 'having everything hath nothing'. That is considered absurd is actually anti-traditional and avant-garde, hence is ridiculed. But originally its significance lies in its crude reality. When Eliot repents for spiritual sterility in the modern world, which is full of fury and mire, Absurd dramatists were preparing a suitable platform to expose the absurdity of modern man's life.

Absurd dramatists even opted the absurd form to expose the absurdity in its most effective way. This includes the writers of both drama and prose fiction; and the most significant of them are French Jean Genet and Eugene Ionesco, Irish Samuel Beckett, English Harold Pinter, American Edward Albee and others. Both mood and dramaturgy of absurdity were anticipated in their works. They were also supported by few other movements like expressionism, and surrealism, along with few other forceful works of Franz Kafka (*The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*). This current movement emerged in France after the world was second, as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and traditional literature, which had the belief that-

'What a piece of work is a man? How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In apprehension how like a God! The beauty of the world!

The paragon of animals'. (Hamlet: 47)

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But after the 1940s existentialist philosophy by Jean- Paul Sartre & Albert Camus opined human being as an isolated existant, cast into an alien universe, having a fruitless search for purpose and meaning and proceeding towards nothingness. They believe that:-

Its an odd world

Full of all things absurd

Most of it obscure

Unseen and unheard. (Brainy Quotes)

This very absurdity has been beautifully penned by Albert Camus in his “The Myth of Sisyphus’ (1942) as -

“In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels stranger. His is an irremediable exile... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting; truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.” (13)

and as Eugene Ionesco added fire to the fuel by stating that -

“ Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost, all his actions become senseless, absurd and useless”. (A Glossary of the Literary Terms: 1)

This very notion seems similar to the following lines by S.T.Coleridge, of his famous ballad *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.-

“Water-water every where

Not a drop to drink”. (Coleridge: 14)

Samuel Beckett (1906-89), the most celebrated author of this vein, is an Irish author, writing in French and then translating his own works into English. His beginning lies in the breakdown of traditional values. His prominent and dominant theme, hence is man’s alienation and search for self; which is the prevailing mode of modern man’s life. His works show the dusk of modernism and dawn of post-modernism and so was honored with Nobel Prize for Literature

in 1969. As we bid adieu to one star, we welcome the other at a transitional point, in the same way the publication of *Waiting for Godot* in 1955, was the appreciated transitional presence on the stage, which bid adieu to the modernism and welcomed post-modernism.

The term Postmodernism designates ‘too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our lives before it.’ The founder of this term is Charles Jencks, but has been beautifully defined by Dick Hebdige in *Hiding in the Light* as:

The collective chagrin and morbid projections of a post- War generation of baby boomers confronting disillusioned middle age, the ‘predicament’ of reflexivity... the collapse of cultural hierarchies, the dread engendered by the threat of nuclear self-destruction... a sense (developing on who you read) of ‘placelessness’ or the abandonment of placelessness (critical regionalism). *Waiting for Godot* beautifully designates all these paraphernalia of postmodernism through a vague and nebulous word as well as term of terminological mayhem ‘absurd’. The play has proliferated at an exceptional rate over the last sixty years because it deals with the notion of man’s existence in this futile world.

The play *Waiting for Godot* portrays an image of man’s existence, which even after 60 years of its publications seems quite real. Today man has gained material advancement but inner triviality or fragility is still lurking upon his self. The play is a modern allegory of post-war man in a godless, dimensionless and meaningless world. recently Syrian Army attacked on Damascus suburb with chemical weapons, after the Nato’s attack on Yugoslavia and the suffrage in Iraque. Here the lines of W.B. Yeats seems quite applicable, when he says that -

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,

The falcon can not hear the falconer’

Things fall apart; the center can not hold,

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood dimmed tide is loosed and every where,

The ceremony of innocence is drowned. (The Second Coming)

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Waiting for Godot formulates a definition of man that transcends the time. The plays that follow it are also pre-occupied with the feeling typical of our times. *All that Fall* (1959), a radio play, describes man's frustration and absurdity. *Kropp's Last Tape* (1958) is concerned with the perfect realization of Beckett's idea of "human isolation." *Embers* (1959) is a monologue of an old man who is haunted by the memory of the past and feels used, confused, and abused. *Happy Days* (1961) stages the irrationality of human existence without purpose and order. Beckett's world bears a close resemblance to Camus's world depicted in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. Camus's book appeared in 1942, i.e., during the World War II.

The development of the feeling of the absurd passes through four stages: (1) First one recognizes the meaninglessness of life which is shocking. Second is living in conflict between intention (inner voice) and reality. The third is the assumption of heroic dimensions through living the conflict and making it his God. The fourth and final stage consists in the conscious affirmation that nothing happens in life in reality. The sense of anguish at the absurdity of life is the theme of the plays not only of Samuel Beckett, but of Adamov, Ionesco and Genet also. A similar sense of the meaninglessness of life is also the theme of dramatists, like Sartre and Camus. But there is a difference. The theatre of the Absurd abandons rational devices whereas Sartre and Camus express the new content in the old convention. Martin Esslin comments on the plays of Beckett is apt, apposite, and appropriate:

Beckett's plays lack plot even more completely

than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Instead of a linear development, they present their

author's intuition of the human coordination by a

method that is essentially polyphonic, they confront

their audience with an organized structure of

statements and images that interpenetrate each other
and that must be apprehended in their totality,
rather like the different themes in a symphony,
which gain meaning by their simultaneous
interaction. (The Theatre of the Absurd: 44-45)

Waiting for Godot is now recognized as a contemporary classic. It was written in 1948, since then it has been translated into many languages and performed all over the world. The most remarkable thing about the play is its unconventional design. The play is apparently haphazard. But actually it is an extraordinarily powerful play in which form and meaning are skilfully blended. The core of a good play is action or happenings, here the very purpose of the play is to say that nothing happens -nothing really happens in human life. *Waiting of Godot* _ is thus a paradox. It is a drama of inaction. As man is usually ignorant about his real purpose in life and he lives in hope of some revelation in future. We just hang around waiting like the tramps or rush madly about like Pozzo in search of some purpose. We try to get a purpose and order in that world which steadfastly refuses to evidence either.

Waiting for Godot is having four characters, who are not four distinct personalities. They are rather generalized images of all “mankind” (109) which in Lucky’s phrase, “is seen to waste and pine waste and pine” (73). They represent a view of man as a helpless victim of his life.

Non-specific settings are a common feature of Beckett’s drama. The stage -space in the play is absolutely bare. “It is indescribable. It is like nothing. There is nothing. There is a tree” says Vladimir (117). Strange happenings (sudden rise of the moon, sprouting of leaves), strange characters and their irrational behaviour suggest abstract quality of this setting. The text describes it as void or nothing.

The whole plot, which is actually absent moves round the waiting of that person whose identity, is even not sure. Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot, whose arrival is supposed but always suspended as modern man whatever wishes to do or achieve, scatters in silence. Now, united we

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do not stand but fall in this futile world. Even thoughtlessness has become the source of trouble. The following discussion made by Vladimir and Estragon beautifully designates it:

We are in no danger of thinking any more...

Thinking is not the worst.

What is terrible is to have thought. (1954: 62-63)

Eventually the grace of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* pruned the modern man's body and soul alike. Even after sixty years of its publication, we designate its significance and relevance both thematically and stylistically. Really when a man passes through excess deprivation and hopelessness, whether he commits suicide or tries to take revenge but absurdity even does not allow either.

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