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Humanity in Ruins: Vision of War and Auschwitz in Beckett's Post-war plays

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To talk of war in Samuel Beckett's plays is to dispel the restrictive criticism that his art is completely apolitical and ahistorical and concerns only with the philosophical question of modern man's grappling for meaning of life. Behind the garb of such existential exposition in Beckett's art, there is an exploration of his own experience during the war. *Waiting For Godot* for instance is a product of Beckett's accumulative experience of the war. During the war, because of his involvement in the French Resistance group, he and his girlfriend had to escape and find a refuge in a small village at Rousillon.

In the village, in order to meet their daily food requirement, Beckett worked in potato farm and vineyard of M. Bonelly. The village "stands high on a hill with imposing cliffs of red ocher that fall sharply away its north side. Even the soil in the gardens is red (Knowlson 291). Snippets of reference to the village can be found in *Waiting For Godot* where Vladimir talks of a Macon country where he and Estragon go for picking grapes and describe the place as "But down there everything is red! (57)." Sheltering in the remote village with scarcity of food and money, waiting is not an alien predicament for Beckett. He keenly followed the progress of the war and waited for it to end and in the meantime desperately waited for the little sum of money sent by Frank, his brother, from Ireland every month. Like the experience of Didi and Gogo, the desperate act of 'waiting' is a well-known experience for the French Resistance group, the natives of Vichy and Roussillon and most importantly for Beckett.

Though war is not explicitly described in Beckett's plays, a close reading foregrounds that there has been war and the settings of the plays show an aftermath of a violent war where living beings are wiped out mercilessly. Beckett's stage setting is a world of chaos where nothing but remnant of the catastrophe exists. In *Endgame* the entire human beings has been reduced to only four individuals in the room. Outside of the room, in Clov's word, is 'zero'. There is no life outside of the room and the whole place has been polluted with the stench of the corpses:

HAMM. You stink already. The whole place stinks of corpse

CLOV. The whole universe (114).

The light has gone, the ocean has dried up, no more seagulls on the sea and the air appears grey. The scene presents a typical Post-atomic setting where life ceases to exist. Similarly *Waiting For Godot* also has a post-atomic setting where the two tramps wait for the unknown man on an empty country road. Nothing in the play exhibits life and the conversation on 'corpse' and 'skeleton' show that they live through the traumatic experience of war and violence while impatiently wait for someone to save them. This claustrophobic atmosphere of death corresponds to Estragon's talk of 'Death Sea' when he remembers the Holy Land in the Bible. The reference to the Dead Sea, in the Bible, is an apt expression of the tramps' life, as the Dead Sea is void of life; the tramps too exist without life.

The room in *Endgame* which serves as a refuge ironically becomes an entrapment for the characters. They are trapped within the two high walls as they wait for their end. What separates them from their death is the wall: "Old Wall! Beyond is the ... other hell (104)."

Beckett's description of the world, outside of the wall, as hell, draws a close analogy to the writings of the War poets. Poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen adopts a language that criticise the nightmarish side of war and their experience in the trenches. They present a scathing remark on the violence war brings; blindness, loss of limbs, madness and ridicules those who pretend to live a normal life after the war.

Like the poets' persona, Beckett's characters undergo physical deterioration; their bodies get shrunken and suffer from diseases that dog their existence. Vladimir suffers from prostrate problem and therefore have difficulty in passing urine while Estragon from sore feet. The ailments do not seem to be of a serious ones but one has to understand in their contexts. Estragon tries to remove his boots continuously to find relief because he has a sore foot and being a tramp, who has to travel until Godot arrives; this condition limits his movement (White 10). Hamm is blind and confined to the chair while his servant Clov cannot sit. Like Hamm, Winnie's movement is restricted as she is buried in a mound.

Beckett's characters in order to get respite from their physical impairment and suffering desperately wait for their end to come. Yet in failure to reach that point any time soon, they desire to have a glimpse of it through sleep. Estragon persistently tries to sleep, so does Hamm and Winnie in *Endgame* and *Happy Days* respectively. "If I could only sleep (*Waiting* 65)," Estragon sighs but whenever he does try to sleep, he wakes up to an alarming scream of "There ... there ... Didi is there ... don't be afraid... (65)." They are haunted by the 'dead voices' and nonsensical mutterings. The voices whisper, speak or rather rustle. The tramps admit the voices make 'a noise like wings, leaves and sand (58).' Their sleep are haunted by nightmares and waking moments by fearful visions. Estragon has vision of people approaching:

ESTRAGON. They're coming!

VLADIMIR. Who?

ESTRAGON. I don't know.

VLADIMIR. How many?

ESTRAGON. I don't know (68).

Vladimir also contemplates that they are being surrounded by the people but admits that perhaps it is just a vision. It is significant to posit the query, who are 'they' that the tramps talk about? 'They' can be the enemy soldiers approaching to kill them or the million people who have died in the war or more specifically the victims of concentration camps. The 'They' as victims of concentration camps become more convincing when the tramps talk about 'charnel-house:'

VLADIMIR. Where are all these corpse from?

ESTRAGON. These skeletons.

VLADIMIR. Tell me that.

ESTRAGON. True

VLADIMIR. We must have thought a little.

ESTRAGON. At the very beginning.

VLADIMIR. A charnel-house! A charnel-house! (60).

A charnel house is a building or vault where human corpse and skeletons are piled. It became a common imagery after the Second World War to talk about the horror and violence of the war. Pablo Picasso for instance did a painting with the same name representing the Jewish corpses burned in the concentration camps. Paul Celan's *Death Fugue* also typifies life in the concentration camps by bringing in powerful imageries. The inmates, referred to as 'we,' drink 'black milk', day and night, signifying the black ashes coming from the crematorium. The atmosphere in the camp is polluted with the ashes and the air symbolically becomes a grave for the death corpses. Though Beckett's world is not literally that of a crematorium, there is a similar preponderance of gloom and death. While Celan's inmates breathe and live, at the backdrop of war, in the atmosphere of death, Beckett's characters contemplate and had a nightmarish dream of the same.

The gloom is further adumbrated when Hamm forbids Clov to sing. Hamm and Clov in the midst of their conversations, sometimes forget about the world they live in. In such split of seconds, there is a sign of life and laughter seem to come naturally but as reality comes to haunt their reverie the world suddenly become too unrealistic to remain happy and sing:

HAMM. Don't sing

CLOV. [Turning towards Hamm] One hasn't the right to sing anymore?

HAMM. No

CLOV. Then how can it end? (*Endgame* 127)

The conversation resonate Adorno's oft quoted line "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). Human being have experienced extreme cruelty and witnessed an inhuman side of his being that a serene form of poetry is not possible anymore after Auschwitz. Poetry after this era will only reflect the horror and the barbarism of mankind as a whole. As a repercussion of what they saw and experienced during the catastrophe, when they do sing, their song is about violence and death:

A dog came in the Kitchen

And stole a crust of bread.

Then cook up with a ladle

And beat him till he was dead (*Endgame* 53).

Jackie Blackman claims that a study of Beckett's post-war writings will be incomplete without understanding Beckett as a 'survivor' and one who 'witness' the evils of Auschwitz (72). He identifies *Endgame* to Auschwitz experience. Beckett uses words or sequence of actions that obliquely correspond to the camp but "avoiding any coherent allegory (80)." The poison Zyklon -B was used to exterminate rats and fumigate the clothes of the inmates. These acts of extermination and fumigation of the cloths, Blackman brings out, has a veiled presentation in *Endgame*. Clov spots rat in the kitchen and Hamm orders him to exterminate with the insecticide. The use of the words like "ashes, transports, rat, naked bodies, extinguished and exterminated and phrases such as the whole place stinks of corpses, deployed in *Endgame* places the dramaturgy firmly within an extermination camp aesthetic of horror (80)."

Blackman's observation of Beckett as someone who 'witness' the holocaust is true to the extent that he was in Germany and Europe before and during the War respectively. His touring of Germany, before the outbreak of World War II, made him to experience the fanaticism of the Nazis and also foresaw the inevitability of another World War. By involving in the war, he also understood the horror that war brings to civilization.

The condition of Beckett's characters shares a close affinity with that of the inmates in Auschwitz or the concentration camps. The inmates in Auschwitz are generally referred to as Muselmann. In *The Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), Agamben traces the origin of the term in the Arabic word Muslim meaning "the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God. But while the Muslim's resignation consists in the conviction that the will of Allah is at work every moment and in even the smallest events, the Muselmann of Auschwitz is instead defined by a loss of all will and consciousness (44)."

Agamben argues that the prisoners are exposed to a situation where an individual either dies or become void of human senses. Such situation is beyond human endurance. It is the point where an individual breaks down to become non-human. The Muselmann has no awareness to his surrounding and to his own existence. Therefore he has no voice to recount his predicament. He becomes a hollow being and is reduced to what Levi calls the "non-men (103)."

Primo Levi, through his own experience of the death camp, gives an account of the extreme situation. As the prisoners enter the camp, they are stripped naked and led to the shower rooms. Along with their clothes, their humanity and sanity were also stripped off: "The survivor is therefore familiar with the common necessity of degradation; he knows that humanity and responsibility are something that the deportee had to abandon when entering the camp (Agamben 59)".

One cannot maintain decency and dignity in Auschwitz. No humanity exists in the camp. To hold on to one's dignity and retain decency is to fail to bear witness to the evils of the camp: "To speak of dignity and decency in their case would not be decent (60)." It is to overlook the inhumane aspect the camp represents and what it did to its inmates. The paradox remains in the fact that in not able to bear witness to its surrounding and the indignity of the camp, the Muselmann becomes a witness to the evils of the camp and what it did to human beings. The Muselman is the product and Auschwitz its production site.

Initially, one dreams of the distant home and hold on to the hope of returning one day. But one gets use to the condition and stops to dream. The inmate resigns to remember the past and think of the future. The inmate tends to show a strange sense of indifference or negation to the surrounding and to one's own life. He becomes a living dead, a moving matter empty of consciousness. He has given up his life even before he walks down the stair leading to the gas chamber. For Agamben, the Muselmann " appears as the non-living, as the being whose life is not truly life; in the other, as he whose death cannot be called death, but only the production of a corpse-as the inscription of life in a dead area and in death, of a living area (81)."

Like the Muselmann, Beckett's characters show a detachment from their surrounding and their own existence. Being subjected under "destructive power of Auschwitz (Anderton 69)" the hollow being is as good not being there because he is not aware of his own existence and cannot bear witness to the reality of violence. Similarly Beckett's characters too have no sense of time, place and are evasive of the violence that they go through or the reality they are in. The conversation between Hamm and Clov shows such evasiveness:

HAMM. do you know what it is?

CLOV. [As before.] Mmm.

HAMM. I was never there.

CLOV. [Turning towards Hamm, exasperated.] What is it?

HAMM. I was never there.

CLOV. Lucky for you

[He looks out of window.]

HAMM. Absent, as always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened. [Pause.] Do you know what's happened? [Pause.] Clov! (*Endgame* 128).

One gathers that there is a process of disintegration within the characters' selves. Hamm's sensory faculties have failed to engage with the reality. His presence is as good as being absent because he is blind to all that have happened and are happening around him. Anderton finds a seemingly close affinity between Beckett's characters and the Muselmann in the following words:

Although the context for Beckett's tale is very different, this depiction of a zombie-like creature is clearly reminiscent of the Muselmann's automatic, desensitised existence. Both are physically present, but their empirical consciousness has failed so that they are effectively removed from the environment. At the same time, Beckett's narrator remains aware of his radical lack of presence, thereby articulating the inability to speak as a conscious witness (72).

The characters do not respond or feel any human emotion. They merely exist or are just there no better than a matter, devoid of consciousness. In Beckettian world, because of what has happened and what the characters experience, they are content to remain as a hollow being. In this way they can merely exist without any obligation to fulfill or duties to attend to. Consciousness, strangely, is a medium of torture for the characters. By being conscious of one's own being is to be aware of the reality; a reality of violence and suffering. Therefore the characters constantly seek an escapade from their consciousness in different forms, sleep and medicine.

The difference between Musselman and Beckett's character however is that the former is not aware of the surrounding while the latter has a sense of awareness but constantly try to evade the reality because it is too much to bear. Winnie, in *Happy Days*, assumes "if the mind were to go," her existence would have been different. She will not care much to the sound of the bell. She can just sleep and wake as she pleases and life would merely consists of opening and closing of her eyes. But she admits her mind won't go – Not quite [Pause] Not mine [smile] Not now (161)," and therefore "sorrow keeps breaking in (152)."

Winnie takes the bottle of 'red medicine' as an antidote to the momentary intrusion of sorrow. The label in the bottle reads: "Loss of spirits... lack of keenness... want of appetite... infants... children... adults... six level... table spoonful daily – daily ... before and after ... meals... instantaneous ... improvement (141)." The drug enables her to overcome the reality and feigns her suffering so that she has an exaggerated zeal for life. She envies 'poor Willie' for being able to go on sleeping without interest in life. It is a great gift, Winnie exclaims, to

care less about life. But she cannot just do that yet because she sees her condition and has to put on a struggle to have a happy day- “Woe is me- to see what I see (*Happy Days* 140).” As Winnie puts it, Willie does not see his reality or maybe that Willie too sees what she sees but he is too frustrated to put on a fight, realizing its vanity, to have a happy day. Either way, Willie seems to be a person who negates life through his sleep. While Winnie gives in to the sound of the bell, Willie is strong enough to resist the temptation to wake up even by the alarming sound of the bell.

More than the physical suffering and death of a body, Beckett is emphatically drawing attention to the spiritual and emotional decay of the characters. If Willie gives in to the violence that surrounds him, Winnie and Hamm struggle to surmount the violence in life. Hamm knows that he has to continue with the daily ritual of playing the farcical game, “Me-[he yawns]- to play (93),” until he arrives at the end. The play has a heightened obsession of ending. But the end keeps alluding and he has to continue with the ritual while contemplating on his end to come. It is more like a trial for Hamm and Winnie to test their breaking point or accepting the reality in which they are in. They know their lives have come to a standstill but they cannot give up yet. They cannot go on but they have to go on.

Hamm’s pain killer and Winnie’s syrup serve as an antidote to their suffering and violence of the reality. In fact they are an antidote to their own consciousness, so that they do not bear witness to the reality and also their own existence. While Hamm and Winnie still persevere to arrive at the end and have a happy days respectively, Willie has already given up on his life and eagerly waits for his end to arrive. Though there is glaring contrast amongst the characters in the way they perceive the world, there is a common thread that unite them; not being able to bear witness. Hamm and Winnie fight by numbing their senses and not able to bear witness to the violence that surround them, Willie does not fight but simply accepts the violence. In both the cases, the characters have failed to bear witness. They have become hollow beings, like the Musselman, unaware of the reality.

The characters, in negating the reality, also negate their possibility of salvation. It is apparent, then, that their ailment is not merely physical but also spiritual. Physical ailment cease when one dies but the characters, void of any hope after life, their predicament of ailment transcends physical world. Physical death, in their case, does not give any assurance to the end of their present ailment because they are not certain of what comes next. The characters are in search of salvation or assurance of life after death. This quest is apparent from the conversation between Vladimir and Estragon on Christ’s crucifixion. According to Judeo Christian worldview, no matter how sinful and wretched one may be, one can attain salvation or assurance of life after death by believing in Christ’s crucifixion.

The tramps in talking of the thief are unconsciously comparing themselves to the predicament of the thief. But the fact that majority of the gospels do not mention the salvation of the thief give them a sense of despair. They are individuals who want and try to believe in the transcendental being but again it appears too unreasonable to keep one's hope in what they subscribe to be something that does not exist. All this while, they have been perusing the mystery of salvation through reason and logic. But in failure to take ‘a leapt of faith’, their assurance of salvation cannot come by. Hamm tries to pray but dismisses out rightly that he does not exist. The non-arrival of Godot perhaps represents this unattainable spiritual quest or the absence of God in Auschwitz.

Adorno in reading *Endgame* observes that: “Understanding *Endgame* can only be understanding why it cannot be understood, concretely reconstructing the coherent meaning of

its incoherence (84).” Adorno’s observation has to be understood in the post-war context where human civilisation was ruptured because of the catastrophe and there was loss of words to capture a horrific event such as this. His criticism of *Endgame* holds true to the post war plays of Beckett as a whole in that the dramatist subtly finds a way to say the unsayable. Akin to Europe’s post-war existence, Beckett subtly presents a world of decay, extinction and scarcity. Human beings are reduced only to a countable few, there is scarcity of food, nature has been destroyed and the survivors suffer from incurable diseases. Hamm and Clov debate “Nature has forgotten us.” Their debate on nature is reified when the seed they planted fail to sprout signifying that the sign of life is depleting swiftly. Thus Beckett’s art is a medium to dramatise the unsayable through traumatic characters conversing in broken images and words.

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