



## Study of Samuel Beckett with a New Perspective

Aparajita Bhattacharjee 

Department of English, Govt. Degree College, Dharmanagar, North Tripura, INDIA

Email Id: [aparajitabhattach2023@gmail.com](mailto:aparajitabhattach2023@gmail.com)

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**ABSTRACT:** The term 'absurdity' is very much attached with the playwright, Samuel Beckett of the 1950s. It is a state of mind where nothing is concrete; everything is hazy and fluid. That type of mental make-up is made mainly due to a vacuum created in the socio-political and cultural arena after the World War II and culminated into a concrete shape in the fifties. In the field of theatre Samuel Beckett for the first time exposed the absurd situation of human beings on the stage. Though apparently he is tagged as an absurd dramatist, a question always peeps in the mind of the readers. Should he rightly be called an absurdist? Does he really believe in the concept of absurdity? This article tries to find out a rational answer to these queries analysing his two plays and attaching him with other dramatists of the time. It appears the dramas – 'Waiting for Godot' and 'Endgame' speak of the meaningless journey of human life and it is the destiny. But, perhaps, there is a scope to analyse his dramas from a new perspective which is related to his new dramatic technique and the ending of his plays. Perhaps it can be boldly said that Beckett has not finished the dramas in an absurd manner; a kind of positive outlook towards life is coming out at the end of the plays. Waiting for a meaningful life is very much explicit in 'Waiting for Godot' and in 'Endgame'. His other contemporary dramatists have dealt with the absurd situation of human life of the time in their own ways. Hence, Beckett has not only presented the absurd human condition in vivid manners, but has also tried to hint a way out to overcome the issues.

**KEYWORDS:** Absurdity, Meaninglessness, Purpose, Philosophy, Vacuum, Concrete, Hope, Arena, Shape, Concept, Scope, Perspective, Positive

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The modern period of English literature began in the twentieth century and lasted until 1960s. This period is marked as an abrupt break away from the traditional ways of interacting with the world. There were many cultural shocks with the onset of modernity. The blow of the modern era was the World War I and World War II. World War I began in 1914 and continued until 1919 and the World War II started in 1939 and continued upto 1945. After the two World Wars the contemporary situation - political, economic, military and cultural affected every human being. A feeling of uncertainty is widespread and there is nothing new to heal the troubles

of the world. People start to believe that life has no purpose because of that prevalent critical atmosphere which gives birth to utter frustration, depression and hopelessness. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries philosophical world was characterized by many contemporary thinkers who refused to find the purpose of their existence and the existence of God and began to search for that ideal in themselves. The devastating two World Wars shook the foundations of the western world, causing social upheaval that left immediate and lasting impressions on every aspect of society and culture.

Various cultural, political, socio-economic changes took place during the war and even after that. And a group of



philosophers and writers at the time felt the necessity to speak against the abnormalities they witnessed in their society. Even they also expressed a fighting spirit for the betterment of their lives in the crisis. With the progress of society, especially in the fields of science and technology, there was also a desire for innovation in art and philosophy.

It is observed that the contemporary writers break away from conventional established literary traditions and emphasize self-awareness and disillusionment with the society of the time. The influence of these events in the modern period can be seen reflected in various genres of literature. Especially in the field of theatre the manifestations of contemporary socio-economic political problems of that time are reflected. An area of dramatic activity in post-war Britain is noted in the development of absurd drama which is characterized by the feeling that the human condition is fundamentally irrational, and is described in literary works known as theatre of the absurd. The plays mainly focus on existential ideas and show what happens when human existence lacks meaning or purpose and communication breaks down.

The themes of absurdist drama are the lack of plot in the story of the meaningless world, the location of individual, the degradation of language and illogical activities. The characters of these plays become disillusioned with their lives, religion or society. Theatre of the absurd focuses on the inner psychology of people rather than the external actions. In today's society everyone appears to be happy externally, but their inner psychic world is mysterious and full of despair mixed with fear.

## 2. OBJECTIVE

Normally it is accepted that Beckett is an absurd dramatist. Absurdity of life is presented in his dramas. As for example in 'Waiting for Godot', in an outlook, the waiting for someone is meaningless and the play is regarded as an allegory written in heartless modern tone in quest for meaning in this materialistic world. It seems to be clear that the idea 'Godot' refers to the God for whom the two main characters – Vladimir and Estragon have been waiting under a withered tree to meet but they fail to. But if the drama is looked into with an intense positive thinking, it will be observed that though failed to meet the Godot, but waiting is not ended with meaninglessness. There is a sense of hope behind the so-called failure. In another play of Beckett i.e 'Endgame' we have seen in the last scene that Hamm calls for his father, but receives no answer; he discards some of his belongings, and says that, though he has made his exit, and he replaces his stained handkerchief over his face and head, he will remain dependent on the servant Clov.

After departure of Clov, Hamm did not think for death or end. Rather, somehow, he was positive. It is clear now that the subject matter of such plays are tragic and absurd but the target of the study is to find out a ray of hope. So the aim is to think of Beckett from a new perspective and to establish something new and creative.

## 3. DISCUSSION

The most prominent playwright of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Samuel Beckett is closely related with the theme of absurdity. The absurd human condition after the two World Wars which is very much misty and melted has been reflected in literature in different fields. During 1950s the absurd condition of human beings has been presented by Beckett in his theatrical work. Usually for his vivid presentation of absurd human life Samuel Beckett is considered to be one of the most prominent dramatists of the time. Even after that Beckett may be reviewed from a new perspective which will try to highlight the hidden positive outlook of Beckett dealing with the troubles of human life at that time. Beckett's two famous dramas, 'Waiting for Godot' and 'Endgame' are analysed here in order to establish the new perspective in case of understanding his theatre. On the one hand after the devastating World War II everything was not settled rather an unknown fear lurked in the mind of the people that another war might start at any time. Moreover, an economic and mental depression had been deeply affecting the people. On the other hand, reconstruction of nations was going on basing on a new hope related to democratic and socialist philosophy. Again, the Suez crisis and the suppression of Hungarian uprising by the Soviet Union made a tremendous effect in the political and economic ground of the time. The people who had a democratic and socialistic bent of mind were largely influenced, especially the younger generation. Moreover, a situation like cold war had been prevailing.

The writers of 1950s present the critical atmosphere in their own way from their perspective. The Angry Young Theatre group have started to express their anguish and anger against the prevailing system and have exposed their standpoint. The first dramatist of the movement, John Osborne in his play, 'Look Back in Anger' has exposed the sufferings of the younger generation due to socio-economic and political situation in England. The protagonist of the play, Jimmy Porter, fails to get a job having the highest degree from an university. The society does not bother for this problem. The family is ruined because of class conflicted social system and the capitalist economy. The playwright completes the drama with a happy ending in order to show that the people will try to overcome the odds in future. It is quite clear that John Osborne believes in the power of fighting spirit.

Another prominent dramatist of the theatre movement, Arnold Wesker is very much committed in fighting against any type of negative attitude to life. The issue of frustration, depression or apathy has been dealt critically and attacked vehemently in his plays. His first drama, 'Chicken Soup With Barley' exposes his belief that human beings have fight against all odds or negative aspects of life in order to make it a meaningful one. The fighting spirit of Sarah Kahn in the play 'Roots' is the burning lamp to show a ray of hope to the depressed younger generation or the people who are victimised by the negative attitude to life. Harold Pinter, another prominent dramatist of the time is presented to the readers as a supporter of absurdity of life for his play, 'The Birthday Party' but whole life, Pinter fights against the causes behind the negative aspects of life.

Samuel Beckett is seemingly regarded as an absurd dramatist and he is considered and commonly accepted as an absurdist for his dramatic works. Beckett is often interpreted as an existential nihilist, that is, in Nietzsche's definition, he would argue that with the "death of God" our moral ideals and values have no final and absolute authoritative basis, and are thereby diminished to nothing. Some of the critics think that Existentialism is the central theme of 'Waiting for Godot'. In simpler terms, it means that each person is responsible for their own actions; no one else pulls the strings or controls their own destiny.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF BECKETT'S PLAYS:

##### Waiting for Godot

Samuel Beckett's 'waiting for Godot' is one of the best examples of absurdist literature, with illegible characters, isolated settings, and dialogue that does not make sense in the traditional drama. The play tells the story of two men mainly, Vladimir and Estragon beneath a dead tree. The men are waiting beneath a tree for a mysterious man named Godot. However, we learn that Godot keeps sending messages that he will arrive tomorrow, but never does. In other words, there is not really anything certain going on in this show.

In Act I at the outset of the drama, the two men are found waiting for Godot. They thought they had met before, maybe under the same tree, but they were not sure. The two soon realize that they are both waiting for a man named Godot, so they cannot leave the tree even if they want to. Both the persons have been talking on different topics, discussing on some common issues, sometimes playing with each other and even fighting in order to spend time but Godot did not appear in front of them. In the mean time Lucky and Pozzo, a master and a slave on the way to the market met with Vladimir and Estragon

who were hopeful of getting pleasure by meeting with the new comer. But Lucky and Pozzo did not stay for long and left the place. And later a boy (supposed to be a messenger of Godot) came and informed them that Godot would not come at that present day and certainly will come the next day. Vladimir and Estragon are supposed to leave the place, seem to be interested to vacate the spot but they do not move.

**“VLADIMIR:**

There's no good harking back on that. Come on.

*He draws him after him. As before.*

**ESTRAGON:**

Wait!

**VLADIMIR:**

I'm cold!

**ESTRAGON:**

Wait! (*He moves away from Vladimir.*) I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. (*He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.*) We weren't made for the same road.

**VLADIMIR:**

(*without anger*). It's not certain.

**ESTRAGON:**

No, nothing is certain.

*Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon.*

**VLADIMIR:**

We can still part, if you think it would be better.

**ESTRAGON:**

It's not worthwhile now.

*Silence.*

**VLADIMIR:**

No, it's not worthwhile now.

*Silence.*

**ESTRAGON:**

Well, shall we go?

**VLADIMIR:**

Yes, let's go.

*They do not move.*” (Beckett, 1955,p.49)

In Act II it is seen that next day Vladimir and Estragon have been waiting for the same purpose at the same spot and time. The other two characters Lucky and Pozzo appear on the stage when Lucky is found blind and Pozzo is found dumb. After a long waiting again the same boy (messenger) arrives and informs that Godot would not come today. Some of the questions were asked to the boy but he did not give response. Apparently being frustrated and confused Vladimir and Estragon are ready to depart but remain static.

**“VLADIMIR:**

We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (Pause.) Unless Godot comes.

**ESTRAGON:**

And if he comes?

**VLADIMIR:**

We'll be saved.

*Vladimir takes off his hat (Lucky's), peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, knocks on the crown, puts it on again.*

**ESTRAGON:**

Well? Shall we go?

**VLADIMIR:**

Pull on your trousers.

**ESTRAGON:**

What?

**VLADIMIR:**

Pull on your trousers.

**ESTRAGON:**

You want me to pull off my trousers?

**VLADIMIR:**

Pull ON your trousers.

**ESTRAGON:**

*(realizing his trousers are down).* True.

*He pulls up his trousers.*

**VLADIMIR:**

Well? Shall we go?

**ESTRAGON:**

Yes, let's go.

*They do not move.*”. (Beckett, 1955,p.125)

The characters - Estragon, Vladimir, Lucky and Pozzo etc are like mechanical dolls that talk incoherently. The literary work is totally based on the trust that the universe is irrational and it does not have meaning and the pursuit of order and harmony can bring the individual into conflict with the universe. There are several major themes in the play - analysis of waiting, the absurdity or purposelessness of life. Other themes of the play include the passage of time and how waiting occurs pain over time. The play consists of a dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon who await the arrival of the mysterious Godot who keeps sending messages that he will appear, but does not. Apparently, the term ‘Godot’ may mean God; in this play both of the characters feel that life is totally meaningless and hopeless and they did not hence any purpose to live for. So, they are waiting for the God to end the waiting journey and have a purpose in life. Or in another way Godot may mean a purpose or a reason to live life for which the characters are waiting. The setting of the drama- ‘Waiting for Godot’ by Samuel Beckett is quite associated with the theme of the drama. Two persons named Estragon and Vladimir are under a big tree in a winter evening by the side of a country road. The atmosphere is almost dark; it is an isolated place in winter season and the tree has no leaf and it appears to be a dead one. Estragon and Vladimir have been waiting for an unknown person named Godot in total uncertainty. This is the situation at the starting of the play. Again, when the Act II starts next day at the same place and in the same time, there is no basic change in the setting; only there is a change: the tree has four or five new leaves. It gives a clear indication that the tree is apparently dead, but actually it is not. An indication of regeneration is quite clear. It is a positive signal that in near future the tree will be full of leaves meaning thereby full of life. Life portrayed in the drama is absurd and sterile; but through the germination of new leaves in the tree, Beckett perhaps tries to indicate that human life is always vibrant though at present for the time being it appears absurd or purposeless. Thus, it is proved that the dramatist is in fact in favour of vivacity of life and against any kind of confused state. Though both of the characters Estragon and Vladimir were apparently hopeless and were purposeless in their lives but if we look into the matter deeply, we can see that Estragon is totally suffering from hopelessness but Vladimir has still some hope to have a purposeful life again. And many times, we see that in the waiting process Estragon lacks patience and he was doing restless activities. But Vladimir is too much patient to wait for Godot. When the messenger of Godot arrived and told them that Godot will not coming on that day still Vladimir did not change his mind for waiting. So,

through these characters Beckett shows us the purpose in purposelessness.

In another case we have seen that Vladimir is very much positive character comparing to Estragon, he doesn't like silence, he remembers everything happened in the past, and after he offers radish and carrot to Estragon, even Vladimir does not like to be fully alone. In some instances, we have seen, how he compelled Estragon to be with him always, so that he would not feel alone. So by these features of Vladimir, we can easily say that Beckett did not present absurdity fully in his play waiting for Godot. As with any literary work, interpretations vary, but for me the main idea of the work is the search for the meaning of life. We all want our lives to have meaning, and that is what Godot represents for Vladimir and Estragon. This is exactly what Beckett wanted to reflect in his new perspective on life.

## 5. ENDGAME

It is the fact that after the World War II human society was in disarray in every field. There was no peace in mind and troubles are explicit in every sphere of our society. Internally and externally the people of that time were shaken and have lost their common belief in normality of life. Samuel Beckett has tried to present that uncommon absurd condition of human life in his writing specially in his drama. And that has been done in an artistic manner in his drama 'Endgame'.

Samuel Beckett's 'Endgame' is an absurd tragicomedy in one act about a blind, paralyzed, tyrannical old man, his elderly parents, and his aging, vacillating, restless, and slavish companions in the world. The story is set in an abandoned house in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. It is mentioned that they are hoping an unspecified "end" which seems to be the end of the relationships, death and the end of the drama itself. Much of the play consists of short conversations exchanged between the characters, such as jokes, and trivial movements on the stage. The plot is held together by a gruesome narrative development within the story. The title of the work refers to the game of chess and frames the characters playing a losing game against each other or against their fate. In this drama four characters are very much prominent-Hamm the so-called master of the family though old and Blind, Clov the servant on whom all of the characters are dependent for their livelihood, Nagg the father of Hamm who is almost collapsed physically and Nell the old mother of Hamm also physically in bad condition. Financially the family is not in trouble but all these characters are physically not in normal position. All other characters depend on Clov the servant of the house who is to some extent in a better position. It is observed that

the relationship among them is not at all normal. As a son it is not expected that Hamm would remain undisturbed by the death of his own mother. Even after that in the emotionally bankrupt family the old husband's attachment to his wife shows a positive note. In this play Nagg and Nell i.e the father and mother of Hamm, both are legless and stay in trashing in superficial level; we can see how depressed and meaningless lives they have. But we can also notice that in this painful condition of life still they are happy with each other by telling stories each other about their past memories. Even after the death of Nell, her husband Nagg weeps and expresses his deep sorrow though that type of feelings is not found in Hamm for the loss of his mother. So, we cannot say here that Beckett only talks about inhuman, irrational troubles of human lives, he also talks about some humane positive feelings even in crucial atmosphere.

In this drama it is seen that Hamm is totally depended on Clov for feeding, dressing, medicines and entertainment too. But Hamm always tortures Clov by rebuking and treating him badly; even Clov does every help to Hamm as his servant. So in this way we can assume that in abnormal confused life, Clov somehow found his purpose of living and the purpose is to serve Hamm. But at the end of the play Clov tried to go away from the slavery because he thought that that was not a meaningful life for him and he wanted to leave. But as a blind when Hamm found that Clov left him alone he also became hopeless that he will not be able to live alone now. But Beckett has given an impressive twist there. At the end of the play somehow Clov did not separate himself from his master, Hamm. Though the life enjoyed by Clov is monotonous and boring and full of hatred, his staying in the house indicates that he has a kind of soft corner for his old blind master in his heart. Again, repeatedly instructed by his master to murder him, Clov did not respond to that type of inhuman order. Clov's unwillingness to murder Hamm also exposes the presence of fine human values or relation even in the post-world war collapsed in human society. So, in this way Beckett shows some hope in the then hopeless era.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Samuel Beckett is commonly regarded as the most famous absurd dramatist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Almost all of his play's focus on the perplexed state of mind in that critical juncture. As we see in the famous drama, 'Waiting for Godot' that the waiting is unsuccessful and ends in utter despair. But if we try to look into the drama from a new understanding that it is the fact that Vladimir and Estragon have failed to meet Godot, but they do not end the waiting. They stand there and there is no sign of returning from the place. Apparently, they are frustrated

but do not give up their hope of meeting with the expected person. Again, everything is not lost; as if nothing is happened or everything is stagnant. It appears the tree under which they have been waiting is dead. But actually, it is not; buds come out as is seen in Act II. It reminds us P.B.Shelley's famous poem 'Ode to the West Wind'. The poem was ended with a note of hope referring to an universal truth that "if Winter comes can Spring be far behind". Similarly, a hidden hope in the dramas discussed here also refer to the story of 'phoenix bird'. Apparently, the dramas speak of the sterility or stagnation of life but indication is clear that new things are coming out from a sterile thing. Moreover, the drama, 'Waiting for Godot' - a tragicomedy clearly indicates that the dramatist is not interested to present it as an absurd drama. It is, infact, a type of drama where tragic and comic elements are perfectly mixed up and that type of drama ends with a comic pleasure. In 'Waiting for Godot' the readers are always reminded of the critical confused tragic situations of the time, but it ends with a positive note which may not be explicitly visible. 'Waiting for Godot' may be called an absurd play as it mainly describes the absurd situation of human beings of contemporary era. Similarly, though the play- 'Endgame' is not tagged as a tragicomedy by the dramatist himself, the scene of the drama clearly indicates the human life is in a confused state of mind tormented by troubles in life. Even after that human life is not only a field of confusion, doubt and mental agony. Rather it is a mixture of tragic and comic elements of life. At the end of the drama Clov, the servant could not leave the house keeping his master in deep crisis .

Perhaps for this Beckett cannot be accepted as a person who believes in absurd theory of life. Many writers have delineated the warfront, but for this they should not be regarded as believers in war. Like other dramatists of the time Beckett perhaps believes in change of life for betterment.

It has become very much clear that the dramatists have presented the then time from their own perspectives in their literary works. It has been a trend to treat the issues prevalent at that time and to dramatize these from their own outlook. At the very beginning of the 20th century we find the two prominent dramatists of English literature, John Galsworthy and George Bernard Shaw have talked of the socio- economic and political issues of the time like class conflict, ruthless treatment of the poor by law, inhuman treatment of the women, romantic idea of love and war etc in their plays. In 'Justice' Galsworthy depicted how the institution called justice turned into a machine to crush the poor people. The play 'Silver Box' shows how law motivated by class consciousness treats

poor and rich differently. Due to that type of writings the rulers were bound to correct the system and the provisions of law. Similarly, Bernard Shaw vehemently criticised some irrational conventional concepts like love, marriage, war, progress of human society etc and presented his ideas in a new way. Both of them, in fact, have composed plays to correct the society and to improve human life. In the thirties the committed playwright Bertolt Brecht attacked the unscientific and inhuman philosophy of Hitler and Mussolini and warned about the disaster in future. His dramas like 'The Life of Galelio', 'Mother Courage' and others are the dramatic presentation of his revolt against the fascistic attitude of the rulers and his commitment to remove the burdens on common human being imposed by the autocratic rulers. Time passes and the situation of the world has been changing rapidly. People of the world have to witness the devastative World War II. The war has a tremendous effect on human society in every field. A huge wave of depression has fallen on human beings. A large section of people are affected by the depression created by the war. After that war people in different countries have tried to deal with the big threat in their own way. A section of people has been regrouped to reconstruct their society with a positive outlook while many are overflowed by the negative spirit, a depressive mentality. A democratic thought swept over the world and as a result many colonies were liberated and turned into democratic countries. A ray of hope prevailed in some areas. A spirit of reconstruction for the betterment of human society prevailed all over. A new better society based on the spirit of democracy, socialism, equality and progress is targeted. But on the other hand, a negative attitude towards life is created by the wars. There seems to be no certainty and stability in life. A deep sense of depression looms over the human society and it affects largely. These two opposite trends are reflected in literature, specially in the field of theatre. In today's world each and every human being as if represents Sisyphus, the great mythological figure. Sisyphus was destined to roll a rock upto the top of the mountain that he could not keep it fixed at the top because it was rolling back down every time. Every time he would fail but he continued to make it a successful one. As a result Sisyphus' effort would be considered as a matter of utter frustration. That type of frustration is supposed to be reflected in the absurd drama. But Sisyphus also may be considered as a representative figure of fighting spirit who is not at all interested to be cowed down by any crisis or trouble in life. That type of spirit may be identified in 'Waiting for Godot' and 'Endgame' also from a new perspective. It is understood that a subdued sense of hope has been flowing in the text of Samuel Beckett though

apparently the whole body of the text shows the absurdity of human being. The waiting for meeting with Godot on the part of Estragon and Vladimir in 'Waiting for Godot' and Clove's soft heartedness for Hamm in 'Endgame' clearly indicate a ray of positivity amid the sterile absurd human society.

So, we can easily assume that if 'Waiting for Godot' had two characters killing time in a series of intermittent then second play is about the 'end game' that is the last game in the house of death which turned to be hopeful ending instead of destruction and it is the destiny. But perhaps there is a chance to analyse his dramas in order to frame a new thinking. It appears the dramas – 'Waiting for Godot' and 'Endgame' speak of the fruitless journey of which is germinated for his new dramatic technique and the ending of the plays. Perhaps it can be boldly said that Beckett has not finished the dramas in an absurd manner; a kind of positive outlook towards life is coming out at the end of the plays. Waiting for a meaningful life is very much explicit in 'Waiting for Godot' and 'Endgame'. Samuel Beckett has only vividly narrated the absurd human condition and has tried to hint a thin way out to overcome the issues of the contemporary time as other dramatists have dealt it in their own way. Samuel Beckett who is commonly regarded as the master artist in presentation of absurd human life may not be only recognised as a great dramatist of the world for the purpose, He also may be accepted as one of his contemporary dramatists who have been focussing on some positive aspects of life which will help for the betterment of human society. Perhaps, Beckett is giving more emphasis on positive human spirit which will turn human life more meaningful fighting against all obstacles in life.

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