

RESEARCH ARTICLE



“NOTHING IS FUNNIER THAN UNHAPPINESS”- A CRITICAL READING OF SAMUEL BECKETT’S *ENDGAME* IN THE LIGHT OF ALBERT CAMUS’ *MYTH OF SISYPHUS* (1942)

MAYA N. MENON

Guest Faculty, Department of English, Vimala college, Thrissur



MAYA N. MENON

Article Info:

Article Received:20/08/2014

Revised on: 29/08/2014

Accepted on: 31/08/2014

ABSTRACT

To define the world as absurd is to recognize its fundamental mysterious and indecipherable nature and this recognition is frequently associated with the feeling of loss, purposelessness and bewilderment. It is to such feelings, that the Theatre of the Absurd gives ample expression. Any discussion of absurdity involves the collection of essays called *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) by Albert Camus, who is still more widely known as the philosopher of the Absurd. In Camus opinion the Absurd is the tension which emerges from man’s determination to discover purpose and order in a world which steadfastly refuses to evidence. Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906-1989) was the most eminent and influential writer in this mode whose plays later became the corner stone of the twentieth century theatre. For the accomplishments in both drama and fiction the Irish author who wrote first in French and later in English, was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1969. His philosophy of life which has found expression in his literary works is an intuition rather than a systematic set of believes. Like the German thinker Schopenhauer (1788-1800) whom he greatly admires, he feels that, will is evil and that desire is the source of our misery; such happiness as there is, can only be attained by the abandonment of all desires. But he does not believe in the total renunciation of the physical world. He writes novels which tell of man’s pitiful, but heroic attempts to conquer the ‘silence of which the universe is made’ and plays which portray man’s doomed effort to master time.

(Key words: absurd, bewilderment, intuition, renunciation, doomed.)

© Copyright KY Publications

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a Stranger. His is an irremediable exile....This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.

-Camus, *The myth of Sisyphus* (13)

In this paper my endeavor is to put side by side the absurd elements in Samuel Beckett’s famous play, *Endgame* against the background of Camus’ concept of an ideal absurd hero in his *Myth*

of Sisyphus, with an emphasis on the social significance of the play belonging to the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* is a one-Act play originally written in French as *Fin de Partie* and later translated into English by Beckett himself in 1958. According to Beckett the play is rather difficult and elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw, and more inhuman than his *Waiting for Godot*. The play portrays a universe which is nearing its end, but which could continue repeating itself; the end,

which all seems to be moving towards is both certain and elusive.

Set in a bleak room with two small windows looking out onto an almost lifeless world, *Endgame* provides a stage picture of T.S.Eliot's last lines from the *Hollow Man*: "this is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but with a whimper." The blind character Hamm rules this diminished universe from his centre stage wheel-chair as he barks his orders to Clov, who resentfully follows every order-moving the chair, checking the earth and sky, supplying pain killers and time killers. The only other characters are the Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell - or what is left of them, for without legs or pulse, they are stationed side by side in dust bins, occasionally providing memories of life and love. Clov's opening lines set the tone: "finished, it's merely finished, it must be nearly finished", followed by Hamm's, "and yet I hesitate, hesitate to ...end."⁽¹⁾ Their exchanges, despairing, but often comic, fill the time until Clov, dressed to leave, but with nowhere to go, stands motionless by the door as Hamm awaits the end.

While reading the play, we are to imagine a fallout shelter, perhaps and the last hours of the last morsels of human life, after perhaps an H-Bomb explosion. The idea of the *Endgame* is taken from the game of chess, where the concept designates the last, and entirely predictable, stage of a game. The outcome is usually inevitable; the memorized moves are a mere formality for experienced chess players. Beckett a chess player himself draws a parallel to the endgame of life, in which death is the inevitable outcome. The characters or players enact repetitive rituals that are part of their endgame. Repetitions are the basis of much of Beckett's dramatic work, exposing the ways we while away the time before death..The major theme of *Endgame* is that life is a circular existence without a specific beginning or ending and as such creates a sense of repetitive stasis.

Beckett also provides a good definition of his brand of absurd comedy when Nell says, "nothing is funnier than unhappiness". Mining laughter from misery is Beckett's theatrical goal. He does this not to alleviate the misery, but to expose

the absurdity of man's condition. Another staple of Beckett's work is his frequent pauses, which speaks volumes about his character's alienation and their gradual silent approach to death. While it is purposely unclear, exactly, what has happened in Hamm's vacant world, it is obvious that not only is he living in his own personal "endgame", a post apocalyptic landscape in which he and others are the sole inhabitants-everyone else has been "finished". His misanthropy is so great that he fears the rebirth of humanity, evidenced by his anxiety over the flea. This anxiety takes off from an idea explored at the start of the play, that existence is cyclical- that the ending is the beginning is the ending. When Hamm suggests that they leave, it is a futile effort; in this cyclical world. There can be no such things such as "leaving" or "arriving" as one always ends up back in the same place.

This play is open-ended. The situation portrayed at the close of play is almost similar to the situation in the beginning; Clov has not left after all, Hamm is seated at the centre covering his face with a handkerchief, and they are doomed to repeat the same day over again. Beckett teases us by briefly resolving the tension over Clov's departure, but he returns and neither death, nor willful escape will ever arrive in his cyclical existence. The child who appears outside is a figure of resurrection and recreation that Hamm and Clov fear, as his ability to procreate confirms their fears that life is indeed cyclical.

At a particular point in the play, Nell states, "nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that", (18). Particular events in the play are comical to the point of absurdity, such as Nagg and Nell's kissing routine, or the routine with Hamm's stuffed three legged dog. This stuffed dog routine is both tragic because it is obviously a daily occurrence, and Clov is telling blind Hamm, what he wants to hear about the dog's appearance to appease him, and also ridiculous because of ridiculous requests Hamm is making. Hamm makes Clov put a ribbon on the dog, identify the color of the dog, make him stand upright on his three legs, and answer him when Hamm asks if the dog is gazing at him. He eventually gets angry, calls the

dog a, "dirty brute" and throws him away. This display of dark humor is representative of the philosophy of the absurd, because, we as the readers are aware that these actions are a daily routine, and we are aware of their ridiculousness and irrationality.

Hamm's speech is the core of the problem in the *Endgame*- the problem of actually being addicted to and in reveling in one's suffering.

HAMM. Can there be misery loftier than mine? No doubt. Formally. But now? My father, my mother, my dog? I am willing to believe, they suffer as much as creatures can suffer.(2)

In these lines, Beckett introduces Schopenhauer view of life as suffering and pain. The will to live is infinite and fulfillment is limited. Man is tossed about in a flood of instinct and desires, and never reaches satisfaction, happiness or peace. Beckett's characters in *Endgame* are aware of their fate as misery. Clov confesses that he has never been happy. Hamm hates his parents for giving him a birth and throwing him into these distressful circumstances.

Beckett's *Endgame* offers an unsettling commentary not only on the human condition, but also on the very nature of existence- the commentary that not only life itself is meaningless, but that our existence in that life as meaningless as well, and our attempts to find ,meaning or shape some kind of meaning existence are completely absurd. Beckett reveals this absurdity through the convention absurdist drama such as bizarre situations, speech, etc., but he also incorporates Biblical allusions and archetypes into his play, not to offer any hope, but rather to drive home the point that there is no solace to be found in life a religion as portrayed by Beckett is simply another meaningless ritual in which human beings participate as a desperate way of coping with life devoid of any value. Beckett's characters are not simply immobile; they are entrapped in endless monotony, powerless to change their situation.

Here I am analyzing Beckett's *Endgame*, in the light of Albert Camus' notion of absurdity of human existence as revealed in his master piece,

The Myth of Sisyphus, (1975).Martin Esslin in his *Theatre of the Absurd* states,

Waiting for Godot and *Endgame*, the plays Beckett wrote in French, are dramatic statements of human situation itself. ...Hamm and Clov..., Nagg and Nell are not Characters, but the embodiments of basic human attitudes rather like the personified virtues and vices in medieval mystery plays.... And what passes in these plays are not events with a definite beginning and a definite end, but the types of situation that will for ever repeat itself. ...that is why, we do not see Clov has actually left Hamm at the close of *Endgame*, but leave the two, frozen in a position of stalemate. Both plays repeat the pattern of the old German student's song Vladimir sings at the beginning of Act two of *Waiting For Godot*, about the dog that came into a kitchen and stole some bread and was killed by the cook, and buried by its fellow dogs who put a tomb stone on its grave, which told the story of the dog that came into the kitchen and stole some bread, and so on 'ad infinitum'. (75-76)

Endgame deals with an 'endgame', the final game in the hour of death. *Endgame* takes place in a claustrophobic interior, bare room having only two small windows. It has only one Act that shows the running down of a mechanism until it comes to a stop.Yet *Endgame* groups its characters in symmetrical pairs. Hamm is paralyzed and can no longer stand. His servant Clov can walk, but he is unable to sit down. In two ash-cans that stand by the wall are Hamm's legless parents Nagg and Nell. There is a blind master and slave in *Endgame*. Hamm is the master and Clov is the servant. They also find it difficult to part with each other. Hamm is selfish and domineering. Clov hates Hamm and wants to leave him, but can't do it. He has to obey Hamm's orders. "Do this, do that and I do it. I never refuse. Why?" Clov says. Will Clov have the force to leave Hamm? This is the source of the dramatic tension of the play. Hamm will die as Clov is the only one left who can feed him. But Clov also will die, as there is no one else left in the world and Hamm's store is the last remaining source of food.

Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, being more aware of reality, adopt a more serious attitude towards life and death. Both of them realize that death is inevitable. In their situation death is more welcoming to them and it is the only way to put an end to their sufferings. They are waiting not only for the end of their lives, but also for the end of the whole world. Hamm is very much disturbed at the very sight of a flea and asks Clov to catch and kill it, for he fears, whether "humanity might start from there all over again". (33) They fear the cyclical repetitive nature of life. At the close of the play, unlike Lucky, Clov has made up his mind to leave his master and let him die.

CLOV. I say to myself- sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you- one day. I say to myself- sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go- one day... (Pause). Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don't understand, it dies or it's me. I don't understand that either.... I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed, I only see my feet, if I open my eyes and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit. (Pause).... Its easy going. (Pause). When I fall I will weep for happiness.(80-81)

It is about a kind of feeling, of deadness and a sort of mechanical senselessness that Albert Camus wrote in his *Myth of Sisyphus*. It is one of the great, seminal heart-searching of our time. In this philosophical essay, Camus tries to analyze the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs. This philosophical treatise is the soliloquy of an artist facing the idea of death. He develops two key concepts in this essay, the 'absurd' and the 'revolt'. The absurd is an absence of correspondence between man and the world. There is a wild longing for clarity and order in the human heart. But the universe is irrational and it refuses to yield to any rational analysis. The absurd 'emanates' from the confrontation of the two- the unknowable world and the truth seeking man. As I quoted in the opening of this project, Camus observes that, the divorce between man and his life, and the actor

and his setting, truly constitute the feeling of absurdity. To explain away the man or the world through a leap of faith is also a means of dodging the question. Camus calls it 'philosophical suicide'

The only way left is to accept the Absurd, without taking refuge in illusions of faith or ideology. Camus 'revolt consists in continuing to live without hope, with illusory comforts of another world or the saving grace of God. Revolt, for Camus means dying unreconciled and not of one's own free will. It gives man a freedom, similar to the freedom of the condemned prisoner. The full awareness of our mortality ought to give us a sense of freedom and courage. The absurd hero dies not with a whimper, but with a bang; Camus gives four examples of the 'absurd hero', Don Juan, the conqueror, the actor and the artist. Each of them is intensely conscious of the utter futility and impermanence of his activity. Yet each with a passionate tenacity accepts the present and goes on with his activity with no regrets for the past, nor hopes for the future.

Camus says, to commit suicide means to agree with absurdity, it means to give in, because the sense of life is looked for in another world. It is notable that despite the adverse circumstances they had to face, none of Beckett's characters has committed suicide. It seems that it is impossible to escape from the absurd fate, to stay here means to face it; to commit suicide means to consent to it. Beckett's characters such as Hamm, Clov, Nagg, Nell, Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky are all those who faced the absurd fate boldly.

The only way how to paralyse absurdity is not to ask for reasons. Camus' Sisyphus is a typical absurd hero personifying the real quality of an absurd life. He is absurd through his passion and suffering, through his eternal fate and work that can never be finished. "The gods has condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that, there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour." (19). We see the great effort recurring in him again and again; he tries to move the boulder and push it up the hills thousands of times. Finally at the end of his long exhausting effort, he reaches his aim. However at the same

moment, he sees the boulder rolling down back to the lower world from where it will have to be lifted again and so he returns back to the bottom. "It is during that return that pause, that Sisyphus interests me.... I see that man going back down with a heavy, yet measured step towards the torment of which, he will never know the end. That hour... is the hour of consciousness." (20) this moments of consciousness open up the world of the absurdity, the world of never ending effort to go on, the world from which it is impossible to escape, the world of estrangement, loneliness, waiting and continual endurance. Sisyphus' activity is carried on without hope and without illusions. His action is its own end. This provides a basis for values. His acute awareness makes him superior to his predicament.

Beckett's heroes are all Sisyphusean type of men waiting for the fulfillment of their fate, which seems to be eternal through their suffering and hoping. They are creatures grounded in absurdity; there is no meaning in their being and that is why their lives involve mere waiting for the end, for death. Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* are seen waiting for the arrival of Godot. Beckett himself is not much bothered about whom or what Godot is? His central concern as he says is the idea of waiting. The whole play also can be regarded as Beckett's attempt to portray man's inability to be a nihilist even in an utter hopelessness..

Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* also can be compared with Greek hero Sisyphus. The blind master Hamm and his servant Clov are anxiously waiting for the end of their life. Waiting for them is an activity. Like Sisyphus, Hamm and Clov are very much aware of the real nature of human life. Both of them are very much in reality and they both suffer consciously and in and between them, an active intelligent makes moves and counter moves, as in a game of chess. Just like Sisyphus, who is well aware of the futility of his action, Hamm and Clov are also aware of the futility of their existence. They have nothing else to rely upon, in their life further, because, the whole world itself is nearing its end and they anxiously wait for the end of human life. Yet they live and face the absurd world and are not ready to consent to it.

However we cannot but appreciate Beckett's heroes for their power of endurance. Even in situations of utter hopelessness they go on living. They even utter jokes, help each other; remain together despite their extremely opposing temperaments. None of his characters commit suicide. Vladimir's concern for Estragon, his sympathetic attitude towards Lucky, his helping mentality all deserves our appreciation. The kind of life that Hamm's old parents live in their ash bins is also worth noting. They still relish the happy moments of their early life and even speak a love duet, and try to kiss each other. When the whole world and the human era seems to be at the verge of extinction, they keep on recollecting old stories and funs, sitting in their ash- bins. Man's will to leave, his ability to mine out laughter from misery, with a totally harsh uncertain universe, turns out to be the basic themes of Beckett's plays.

For Beckett, the recognition that, reality is ultimately devoid of meaning is a positive act. But it enables us to extract maximum value from our lives, to experience the fertile diversity of existence in a phenomenal world. Alan Schneider in his reminiscence, *Waiting for Beckett*, states

Beckett's plays stay in the bones. They haunt me sleeping and waking, coming upon me when I am least aware. Sometimes a stray bit of conversation heard by accident on a bus or in a restaurant brings home, one of Vladimir's and Estragon's little canthers. Sometimes I find myself like Clov or like Hamm or more often like both simultaneously. Sam's characters seem to me always more alive and more truly lasting than those in the slice - of- life, realistic dramas with which our stages today abound. His words strike to the very marrow- the sudden sharp anguish of a Pozzo or a Hamm crying out for an understanding in an uncertain universe; Clov's detailed description of the bleak harsh landscape of our existence on earth. While against and in spite of the harshness and the uncertainty, there is a constant assertion of man's will and spirit, his sense of humour, as the only bulwarks against despair; the constant glimmer of

hope, even in the dark depths of that abyss, in which we find ourselves. (Calder 51)

However, Samuel Beckett is not a didactic writer concerned to communicate a message in dramatic form. He has rightly described himself as a man, whose world has no outside. Once he said that it was impossible to talk about his writing because he was constantly working in dark. But for Beckett and Sartre, an existential man must face the human condition. He must find at the root of nothingness. Depending on himself he must create himself in a succession of choices.

Conclusion:

Ultimately a phenomenon like the Theatre of the absurd does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces but expresses modern man's endeavor to come to terms with the world in which he lives. It attempts to make him face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause maladjustments and disappointment. There are enormous pressures in our world that seek to induce mankind to bear the loss of faith and moral certainties by being drugged into oblivion - by mass entertainments, shallow material satisfactions, pseudo explanations of reality and cheap ideologies. Today when death and old age are increasingly concealed behind euphemisms and pretensions, the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever. For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, with out fear, with out illusions- and to laugh at it and thereby to render meaning to the 'meaningless'.

WORKS CITED

- Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame: A Play in One Act*. Newyork: Grove Press Inc., 1958. Print.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Penguin modern classics,.from French by Justin O' Brien, 1975.Print.
- Beckett, Samuel, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.Print.
- Calder, john, ed. *Beckett at Sixty*. London: Calder and Boyars,1967.Print.

Drabble, Margret, ed. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 6th Edition. Newyork: oxford University Press, 1932.Print.

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: penguin Books.1961.Print.