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The Couch in the Theatre: Beckett as a Psychoanalyst of Modernity

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Abstract

This paper explores Samuel Beckett's theatre as a site of psychoanalytic inquiry, positioning him not merely as a dramatist of the absurd but as a quasi-analyst of modern existence. Through plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Beckett dramatizes psychic mechanisms—repression, denial, displacement, and repetition—that echo Freud's theorization of the unconscious. The paper argues that Beckett's drama not only reflects psychoanalytic insights but actively performs them, turning the theatre into a space where the unconscious of modernity is both staged and scrutinized.

Keywords: Absurd Theatre, Existentialism, Psychoanalysis.

Introduction

'Realism' as a literary technique in theatre emerged in the last half of the nineteenth century owing to the political reforms and technological advances during the era. This movement emphasized on presenting the problems of everyday life through realistic settings. Its motto was to display direct human behaviour and their socio-economic conflict. In a way it mirrored the times and portrayed the mannerisms of the age through its well-defined story, plot and character sketches. It also sincerely followed the rules and regulations of the conventional play. The pioneer of realistic drama, Henrik Ibsen set the characters in domestic sets and deployed ordinary speech to them. He believed these real instruments of dramatization can uncover the psychological and social truths of the society in a better way. However, Ibsen revolted against realism as he turned rapidly towards Symbolism in his later plays such as *'Bygmester Solness'* (1892).

Like Ibsen, the experimentalist Strindberg was initially a naturalist writer who shifted his writings to 'Expressionism' - an event which permitted an artist to distort reality for an emotional effect. In his *'Dream Play'* (1906) he explained "anything can happen; everything is possible and probable" [1]. The play with a nonlinear plot had groundbreaking character treatment. Strindberg defied well defined dramatic personae and instead posed a combination of confused men. In the early Twentieth Century the shock of World War I reconditioned the life of the people who were left distressed and drifting. Along with their haunted psyche, they were haunted with problems like homelessness, lack of jobs, ruined marriages which consistently dampened their enthusiasm towards life. Thus, the Great humour and political beliefs. He deliberately distorted the dramatization by unconventional stagecraft and

character treatment. He wanted the audience to derive their own interpretations from the multiple viewpoints presented in the plays. A similar form of theatre was introduced by Antonin Artaud which is known as '*Theatre of Cruelty*'. Through his dark imagery he presented irrational impulses of the war afflicted people. He wanted people to accept their fears and release their repressed morbidities. Not only dramas but other art forms also experimented with new forms of expressions. This atmosphere was conducive to the birth of '*Dadaism*' which along with other art forms also included collage works and metal sculptures. Jean Arp (1886-1966), an artist of this movement created works of bronze sculptures with natural organic forms. His '*The work "Two Thoughts on a Navel" in the Kawamura collection is composed of a slug-like object that seems to be crawling over a donut-shaped form that can be thought of as a human navel. With the combination of a part of the human body and one of the lower forms of animal life in this humorous work, Arp is apparently poking fun at the concept of human supremacy and expressing a concept that places the human being on parallel with the creatures of nature and the universe*' [2].

Subsequently a new approach was developed and was called '*Surrealist movement*'. It also discarded rationality and involved methods which explored the subconscious. Max Ernst (1891-1976) was one of the representative painters of the movement who employed new methods to express metaphysical world. All these movements in Arts and Literature led to what is celebrated in dramatic literature as the '*The Theatre of the Absurd*'.

Depression of 1930s gave rise to a new theatre known as '*Epic Theatre*' popularized by Brecht. He was inspired by Charlie Chaplin and Karl Marx which enhanced his twisted sense of humour and political beliefs. He deliberately distorted the dramatization by unconventional stagecraft and character treatment. He wanted the audience to derive their own interpretations from the multiple viewpoints presented in the plays. A similar form of theatre was introduced by Antonin Artaud which is known as '*Theatre of Cruelty*'. Through his dark imagery he presented irrational impulses of the war afflicted people. He wanted people to accept their fears and release their repressed morbidities. Not only dramas but other art forms also experimented with new forms of expressions. This atmosphere was conducive to the birth of '*Dadaism*' which along with other art forms also included collage works and metal sculptures. Jean Arp (1886-1966), an artist of this movement created works of bronze sculptures with natural organic forms. His '*The work "Two Thoughts on a Navel" in the Kawamura collection is composed of a slug-like object that seems to be crawling over a donut-shaped form that can be thought of as a human navel. With the combination of a part of the human body and one of the lower forms of animal life in this humorous work, Arp is apparently poking fun at the concept of human supremacy and expressing a concept that places the human being on parallel with the creatures of nature and the universe*' [2].

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The Theatre of the Absurd

In 1961, the publication of Martin Esslin's book '*The Theatre of the Absurd*' created an avant-garde genre in the realm of drama which revised all the definitions of a conventional drama. He reconfigured all the dramatic elements such as words, movements, costumes, scenery, sound effects and lighting into a complex unity. He listed few defining playwrights of the movement as Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Harold Pinter. The playwrights universally conveyed their anxiety, awe and incomprehensiveness towards the baffling occurrences that confronted their contemporary world. They unanimously displayed the picture of political, religious, and social forces that caught the world into a maelstrom of conflicting views during the World War. For them, even the language as a medium of communication has become a means of stereotyped and futile exchanges. Thus, they redefined language as an insufficient and unreliable tool of

communication. Amongst them Samuel Beckett was globally acclaimed for his outstanding play 'Waiting for Godot', as the iconic creation of 'The Absurd Theatre'. The setting of the play is minimal minimum and the characters are confined to a single platform and they do not leave their spot throughout the play. These physical limitations reveal their enclosed mental paralysis.

However, 'The Theatre of the Absurd' was not a novel concept but was particularly influenced by the 'Commedia dell' Arte'. It displayed an improvisational style of theatre which began in sixteenth-century Italy and flourished in Europe for 200 years. *However, "The exact origins of commedia dell'Arte are unclear. Most scholars believe it was influenced by ancient Roman and Greek comedy and by the medieval traditions of carnival acrobats and jugglers. Each member of the company played a particular stock character – the tricky servant, the greedy old man, the young heroine – wearing masks and costumes that defined the character's personality. They each had a repertoire of jokes, funny speeches, comic insults, and physical stunts to draw from in their performances" [3].*

Mostly the spirit of Commedia dell' Arte lived on silent films with simple plots. In Harold Lloyd's movie 'Safety Last!' the protagonist is determined to become successful to impress his sweetheart.

However, the new movement of absurdist writings was the result of World War II which slaughtered the long-established notions and stances of Western culture and literature. It communicated and offered the author's most intimate vision of human situation. In this war afflicted world the writers diverted human interest from nature and directed it at man and his mind. Their plays never discussed problems of an individual in a historical, social, or cultural context. Rather they focused on a universal concept of existence. They no longer represented events, narration of facts, or the adventures of characters. They even lacked the conventional structure, with no plot; no story and little development of character. Ironically, the comic elements in the play successfully infused an underlying morbid pessimism about the human condition. In a way these dramas:

"Challenged the audience mind to make sense of nonsense, to face the situation consciously rather than feel it vaguely and perceive, with laughter, the fundamental absurdity [4].

Beckett as an Absurdist Writer

Beckett, since his birth had an ironic association with the term absurd- his life has been a series of absurd encounters in life. Throughout his life he encountered extremely strange and bizarre personalities who shaped his own personality as an 'Absurdist'. He lived amidst his awfully moody and taciturn mother 'May', a schizophrenic friend 'Lucia', a frenzied beloved 'Peggy' and an indifferent wife 'Suzanne'. Similarly, he was an introvert and deserted himself from the crowd. The fact is, for a long time he struggled hard to publish his uncanny works and when they gained international fame, he feared publicity. Therefore, absurdity in Beckett is naturally compelling. It seems Beckett agreed with Albert Camus's definition of human condition in the essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' that "humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that one cannot find a rational explanation of the universe; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd"[5].

Beckett's Plays without Plot

Throughout his life Beckett experimented with different genres of plays. They include full length dramas, mime plays, radio plays, a movie, television scripts, and an actor less play. His 'Waiting for Godot' received universal acclaim as his masterpiece though initially condemned. It stages two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, desperately waiting for Godot whom they consider as their Messiah. The play essentially lacks a well-structured plot or a properly equipped narration. It is mostly cramped with repetitive tasks and senseless chatter. In this play 'Estragon' keeps on repeating tasks like taking off his boots, putting on hat and repeating questions. Interestingly the play has a cynical pattern, as the play ends on the same existential situation where it has begun. In fact, Act Two of 'Waiting for Godot' is

simply a repeat of Act One and Vladimir and Estragon may wait for Godot for a lifetime. Like Godot, there is no action in the play '*Endgame*' and its opening scene lacks progression.

Clov goes and stands under window left. Stiff, staggering walk. He looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window right. He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left. He goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes six steps (for example) towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, draws back curtain. And so on..... Similarly, '*Krapp's Last Tape*' is full of mindless repetitions where the protagonist is staged fast forwarding through the tape recording of his past. He is listening to the last reminiscence of his beloved. Here instead of a story, Beckett has employed visual elements like movement, light and gestures to achieve his dramatic intentions. These adeptly infused movements of lights and the elaborate description of the movements commune Krapp's mental history. Krapp's action of locking and unlocking the drawer, peering into it, eating banana twice and his entry and exit backstage into darkness, all express the deepest conflicts of his inner mind. Similarly in his drama '*Play*' the characters are found indulging in a talk at break neck speed about a past event that takes us to the dark area of dreams and nightmares. Their monotonous speech divulges the story of lust, infidelity and repentance through the on and of lighting. The language is indistinct but the effects of lights have tried to express the complicated state of his character's psyche.

Beckett discarded any kind of narrative technique to show his characters mental turmoil. He has depicted it in an unusual manner through use of irrelevant words. Lucky's incoherent speech in '*Waiting for Godot*' needs a special mention. The speech is awfully complex and contains words such as quaquaquaqua, acacacademy Feckham Peckham Fulham Clapham. However, the disjointed deliverance gives a vent to Lucky's repressed feelings.

Beckett's innovative techniques have proved that one does not need traditional language to deal with tangible situations of pangs of love, poverty or other social tribulations.; Rather it can be communicated explicitly through symbols and poetic images. In a way he has tried to create a subtext between the audience and the actors through nonverbal clues. Undoubtedly incomprehension and rejection were the first reaction in accepting the weird language of these absurd dramas. But people identified with the words and gradually so with the dramatic ambience deftly presented suggested the sorrow, brutality and despair of the post war Europe. Empathically the breakdown in communication in the plays put forth Beckett's ideology, "*Language is useless*" and "*he creates a mythical universe peopled by lonely creatures who struggle vainly to express the inexpressible*" [6].

Beckett's Quaint Settings

'*The Theatre of Absurd*' took ample of time to gain popularity and had to face a flood of criticism. It was because the writers decided to convey their sense of anxiety and wonder through seemingly ridiculous and unearthly techniques. Beckett has adopted an avant-garde way to present his prototypes. He has placed them in the décor that is wilfully reduced to the barest minimum. The setting is often a pristine stage where the distinction between the stage and the auditorium gets blurred. Neither the plays are set in any defined dwellings nor do the characters belong to a distinct country. Trash cans, giant urns, underground room, wheel chair, ash bins often are the locale of his dramas. However, they symbolically present the immobility and entrapment of the characters. Apart from the setting of the plays the characters are also shown confined to a single platform and they do not leave their spot throughout the play. Their mental paralysis is revealed through their physical limitations in the play. '*Waiting for Godot*' is set in a country road and a tree whereas '*Endgame*' is confined to a small bare room.

Nagg and Nell in '*Endgame*' are spotted detained in trash bins at the front left of the stage. Beckett has reutilized this absurdist template in his next play '*Happy Days*' which pictures a middle-

aged woman 'Winnie' gradually consumed by a mound. The play is perceived through the female's invincible attempts to fill the dark and empty spaces of her life. His consequent drama 'Play' involves three characters two women and a man set in giant urns showing only their faces exemplifying the existing obscurities of the human condition.

Beckett's Nebulous Characters

Till now it is certainly understood that Beckett has introduced new ideas, language and philosophy in order to project the thought process of the people at large. He not only experimented with the settings but his characterisation is also revolutionary. The characters in the plays are mechanical puppets struggling and striving to exist clinging on to the faintest hope and despair. 'Waiting for Godot' had an unforeseen start which bewildered the sophisticated audience of Paris, London and New York but received an astonishing appreciation by the convicts of San Quentin penitentiary without much ado. Where the whole world was mystified with the real identity of 'Godot' the prisoners have easily interpreted it in their own way.

A reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle who was present told that the convicts did not find it difficult to understand the play. One of the prisoners told the reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle that 'Godot is society', another said 'He's the outside'. A teacher at the prison was quoted as saying "They know what is meant by waiting... and they knew if Godot finally came, he would only be disappointed" [7].

Thus, the acknowledgment received in San Quentin dismisses the misconception that such experimental shadowy works of art are ineffective. On the contrary they are realistic psychoanalytic representation and thus hopefully be certified as meaningful and exemplary. Indeed, his exceptional characterisation indicates his acute sense of understanding about human psyche. Undoubtedly every character Beckett penned is evocative of the era he had witnessed. Conclusion is, nonetheless the characters at first instance may seem to be random and coarse but eventually they were able to create powerful impression on the viewers.

He has not invested passages to describe his characters. Their actions only speak for them. Sarcastically their non actions describe their characteristics. However, one can decipher that they are all lost souls in this annihilated world. Unable to cope with the impending pessimism, they are dragging their lives pinning their hopes on to same forlorn mirage until end comes.

Beckett as an Existentialist

'The Theatre of the Absurd' at large has presented the characters who expressed the bleak human prospects. On the contrary, the Existentialists projected them as the ones with arduous survival instincts. Beckett has witnessed the horrors of genocide and destruction, at the same time has emerged from it. Therefore, his approach to life was not absurd but that of Existentialists. Even his characters are existentialist who have accepted transitory and incoherent nature of human existence. Superficially they seem pessimistic and despair-ridden but in reality, they kept struggling hard to get along with the loneliness and boredom. They keep on suggesting that introspection and interdependence are at the crux of survival. The concluding scene of 'Waiting for Godot' exemplifies this persistence and endurance survival instincts.

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

Beckett has deftly adopted the techniques of 'The Theatre of The Absurd' with an existential viewpoint. His works epitomised the philosophy of Existentialism which is based on hope and optimism against the backdrop of despondency and despair. Salman Rushdie once remarked that the books of Beckett "whose ostensible subject is death, are in fact books about life" [8]. Here Rushdie is talking

'about the life where the dignity of man lies is his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusion – and to laugh at it' [9]. The above concept echoing Existentialist Philosophy argues that people are responsible for and the sole judge of their actions as they affect others. As seen in 'Waiting for Godot' two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, are seen frittering away their days, in the reminiscences, sweating to make sense of their existence in this meaningless world. It seems the play imperatively suggests an existentialist outlook - life is essentially difficult and aimless yet the individual should face it with courage and dignity. In tune with these ideals the plays of Beckett deal with "the subject of despair and the will to survive in the face of an uncomprehending, and indeed, incomprehensible world" [10]. Thus, Beckett as a playwright is more appealing and convincing as an Existentialist than an Absurdist.

All around the world Beckett has mesmerized the audience with his multidimensional theatrical images. He demonstrated the hollowness of human existence through the evidences of empiricism of his personal experiences. He has questioned the most fundamental philosophical aspect of human life. His approach is justified through his dismaying experiences during the war and his sanguine answers to the same. "It was in St.-Lô," Knowlson, who reproduces McGreevey's letter, tells us, "That [Beckett] witnessed real devastation and misery . . . people in desperate need of food and clothing, yet clinging desperately to life." One of Beckett's jobs was to exterminate the rats in the maternity and childrens' ward. The building job took six months to accomplish; in January 1946 Beckett finally returned to Paris to begin what is usually referred to as "the siege in the room" where he wrote the works that were to make him famous".[11].

Like him his characters also realize that they are all in exiles, in one form or another but still they continue to hang around still hopeful to pursue their aspirations.

ESTRAGON: *He should be here.*

VLADIMIR: *He didn't say for sure he'd come.*

ESTRAGON: *And if he doesn't come?*

VLADIMIR: *We'll come back tomorrow.*

ESTRAGON: *And then the day after tomorrow.*

VLADIMIR: *Possibly.*

ESTRAGON: *And so on.*

"Above all, the situation presented in the play is no longer doomed to be endless repetition as the absurdist play has imposed on it" [12]. The protagonist of the play 'Endgame' displays a similar condition of variegated images of the same, unforeseeable, sudden, fatal, defeatist experiences.

HAMM: *Outside of here it's death. (Pause.) All right, be off. (Exit Clov. Pause.)*

We're getting on. The unwillingness to end or die marks the beginning of the play 'Endgame' with a fairly comical musing on death. The duo in the play finds food as the balm of life - a reliever:

HAMM: *I'll give you nothing more to eat.*

CLOV: *Then we'll die.*

HAMM: *I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time.*

CLOV: *Then we won't die.*

The situations in his plays often reveal humanity buffeted by memories of war, atomic dread, and the 'Death of God' but his characters seemed to exemplify Beckett's synthesis of Existentialism.

Beckett as a Psychoanalyst

We know from Beckett's biography that Beckett sought treatment at London's Tavistock clinic to cope up with the trauma aftermath his father's death. During his treatment under the leading Psychotherapist, Wilfred Bion, Beckett mentioned about some of his memories of entrapment. He also confessed that this led to his tendency to disengage and isolate himself. The treatment not only gave him some mental solace but also helped him to control the panic he was experiencing. Thus Psychoanalysis and subconscious and unconscious drives of mind were living experiences for Beckett. Beckett was also highly influenced by a particular lecture he attended of C.G.Jung. Jung, in this lecture spoke of a little girl, who died when still very young, that "*she had never been born entirely*" [13]. These words made a strong impact on Beckett's mind and deeply influenced him as a writer. He recreated the words in his later play *All That Fall* (1957), showcasing Mrs. Rooney as the protagonist, who quotes: *I remember him telling us the story of a little girl, very strange and unhappy in her ways When he had done with the little girl he stood there motionless for some time, quite two minutes I should say, looking down at his table. Then he suddenly raised his head and exclaimed as if he had had a revelation, the trouble with her was she had never been born!* (195-196).

Furthermore, the impact of his readings of Otto Rank's "*The Trauma of Birth*" during his treatment is visible in his later fictional and dramatic works. Especially in his later works he used Jungian and Freudian texts for depicting realistically the traumatic minds of his characters. He has psychoanalytically dissected his characters, through their nothingness which make them feel not worthy of living in such a hostile world. Remorsefully they admit of being born:

VLADIMIR: *Suppose we repented.*

ESTRAGON: *Repented what?*

VLADIMIR: *Oh . . . (He reflects.) We wouldn't have to go into the details.*

ESTRAGON: *Our being born? Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.*

Similarly, Jung's postulation that how "*in dreams ... our complexes ... often appear in a personified form*" [17] is proficiently picked up by Beckett for his dramatic endeavours. He has personified his own dream images which are the embodiments of his own mental dilemmas and complexes. Even the settings of his plays have sprung up from his lived life which is deeply embedded in his psyche:

"Beckett and Suzanne finally got their own house, but it was unheated and the winter of '43 was by all accounts especially cold and dreary. The village, enticing as it could be in the spring in its mountain setting of pine, oak, and olive (and after the war, a tourist attraction because of its prehistoric caves) was claustrophobic in winter, indeed a kind of prison" [14].

In this prison like setting the characters play their roles finding themselves safe. In a way their repressed feelings have been symbolically showcased before us through these camouflaged objects. Beckett through his works has tried to explain psychic bombarding of the characters – they have deeper entrenchments than mere social and philosophical conundrums. He accentuated that it is the unconscious drives and not the conscious ones that govern the psyche of the people in the post-war period. He had clearly emphasized the idea of the unconscious, "*the part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions*" [15]. It is evident that the nothingness of the characters is not concerned with their physical and the tangible but with the vacuity of their humdrum minds. The opening scene of '*Waiting for Godot*' summaries the whole play in three words:

ESTRAGON: *(giving up again). Nothing to be done.*

Scene after scene the apparent absurdity of the world is stressed by the silences of the characters. However, these silences are governed by the uncertainties in the vortex of their unconscious

mind. This implies that his dramatization was focused on the problems of the mind rather than society. Playwrights have discussed socio –political problems of the impending war but Beckett's success lies in his exploring and exhibiting its impact on mind.

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