



'Existential Crisis' in the Select Plays of Samuel Beckett

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Abstract

Every literature is a product of a particular age. There are different ages of literature, that are noted for the unique features, it, have. Every literature, thus, corresponds to a particular age, that reflects the notions of that particular age. Samuel Beckett is an Irish - French writer, who has created a special position in the heart of every drama lover. The writings of Samuel Beckett are filled with the notches of absurdity, relating to post second world war, that occurred between 1939 and 1945. One of the characteristic features of absurd literature is the notion of 'existential crisis', that dominates most of the select plays of Samuel Beckett.

This research article explores the 'existential crisis' in the following plays of Samuel Beckett - 'Waiting for Godot : A Tragic - Comedy in Two Acts', 'Endgame' and 'Krapp's Last Tape'. The world classic play, 'Waiting for Godot' explains the absurd relationship between the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon. The play also delves into the meaningless master - slave relationship between Lucky and Pozzo and messenger boy and his brother. The next play, 'Endgame' is a one - act play, that explains the family relationship between the unique characters of Hamm, Clov, Nell and Nagg. The last select one - act play, 'Krapp's Last Tape' briefly examines the 'failed' life of the old aged man, Victor Krapp

Keywords: existential crisis, alienation, 'Waiting for Godot', 'Endgame', 'Krapp's Last Tape'

Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart'

- Salman Rushdie

Literature is the amalgamation of reality and imagination. 'Reality' refers to the real things that happen around us like the way of life, birth, death, celebrations. 'Imagination' is the primary characteristic feature, that describes the literary and the non - literary element in an imaginative style. According to the famous critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, there exists two types

of imagination - the primary imagination and the secondary imagination. The primary imagination is the type of imagination, that is found in all human beings. Secondary imagination is the type of imagination that is only found in people with literary creativity like poets, novelists etc. The secondary imagination is the production of fancy and imagination. Though, both these terms seem to be same, both the terms are different in the context one uses.

There are different types of genres in the field of literature. Initially, literary manifestations were shown in the cave paintings. The ancient men used to draw and paint different types



of drawings and paintings, in the walls of the caves, for the proper preservation of messages, which were initially communicated. Then, to the literary scenario, the oral poetry and the written poetry came into being. Many poets and critics defined poetry in their own ways. According to William Wordsworth, "poetry is the spontaneous flow of powerful emotions, to be recollected in tranquility". With the passage of time, the oral words and the written words became unified, through the dramas. By the twentieth century, with the advent of technology, gradually films started to enter into the world of letters and imagination.

Drama occupies a central position in literary studies. Dramas encapsulate and abridge the visual, auditory images and massive responses. As already stated previously, the basic purpose of drama is to enlighten the mind of the audience. Due to the rising popularity of drama, drama lovers across the world celebrate world theatre day on 27th March annually with a particular theme. In 'Curtain: Theatre Studies',

'Drama is not mere a play, but a very serious thing. An actor becomes perfect only when there is absolute concentration, memory and understanding of the situation like a child. An actor in a drama should be careful of two things – one, a character an actor handles must do whatever the character should do without any hesitation. Secondly, he should be unaware of himself and the spectators. Actually, drama is a creativity blended with imitation of the reality and imagination. Drama takes something from nature as a raw material, but, it is not a recreativity, that is something in another form. For example, we can draw a picture or make a statue but the life can be portrayed only through drama. Drama includes place and time of occurrence'

(Pillai 14).

'Existential crisis' refers to the type of crisis, that is related to the existence of human beings. 'Existence' becomes a crisis, when a human being has nothing to live for. In the words, 'existential crisis', 'existence' and 'crisis' refers to the 'existence' and 'troubles' of human beings.

'Waiting for Godot' is the magnum opus play of Samuel Beckett. He has carved a niche in world literature for his writings. In 'Studies in British Literature',

Absurdist position of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Schopenhauer influenced him. It is felt in the feeling of angst, boredom, alienation, meaninglessness and fear. People, Beckett thinks are alone and only the inner man has any importance. Each one is an alien to all others as to a protoplasm. Beckett asserts, 'Art results from the artist's first to rid himself of extraneous knowledge in order to refine his perception to a clear, distilled vision of the fundamental inner being : art comes from the abandonment of the fundamental of the macrocosm for the pursuit of microcosm. Beckett's subjectivism lead him to a morbid preoccupation with nothingness, 'that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express together with which to express, no power to express, no desire to express together with the obligation to express

(Patil 273).

Beckett's writings are essentially absurd in nature. The meaninglessness of life can be found out in his plays. But, through the meaninglessness of the play, the meaning of life can be deducted out. Soren Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism. The rules of logic seems to be broken down in absurdism. In 'The Western Drama',

'Absurd is a term used originally to describe the violation of the rules of logic. It has acquired wide and diverse connotations in modern arts, literature, philosophy and theology. The term 'absurd' indicates man's failure for the failures of traditional values to fulfil man's emotional desires and spiritual needs. The term 'absurd' was first used with its modern implications in the works of Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard who rebelled against Hegelian ideals. He described Christianity as absurd because no man could understand or justify it according to rational principles'

(Tallur 51).



‘Waiting for Godot’ was composed between October 9th, 1948 to January 29th, 1979. It was first enacted in 1953 in French. The play was translated into English by Samuel Beckett himself. The English version of ‘Waiting for Godot’ came out in 1955. Beckett himself once remarked, ‘I am not interested in stories of success, only failure’. In ‘Waiting for Godot’, two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for a presence called ‘Godot’. Parallel to the story of Vladimir and Estragon is the story of Lucky and Pozzo. All the characters in the play seem to suffer to existential crisis. In ‘The Western Drama’,

‘The stage is indescribable. It is like nothing.

The strange rise of the moon, sprouting of leaves and arbitrary behaviour lead to abstract setting. So Vladimir asks, ‘And where

were we yesterday evening according to you? Estragon says, How do I know? Once Didi says, ‘In an instant all will vanish and we will be alone. Once more, in the midst of nothingness. This is why the tramps don’t know where to go. So, they do not move at the end. They have nowhere to go. Nothingness is absolute emptiness, a vacuum, an absence. There is a kind of claustrophobia. Beckett’s characters are imprisoned in a little space. His characters are trapped. They exist have bad dreams and exhaustion.

Time is in tension with space in Beckett’s drama. Time does not exist for them. His characters exist in static, perpetual present. They contrive many games and routines to experience the passage of time. They wait for the night. They want deliverance. Martin Esslin thinks Vladimir and Estragon live in hope : they wait for Godot, whose coming will bring the flow of time to a stop. Tonight perhaps we shall sleep in his place in the warmth, dry, our bellies full on the straw. It is worth waiting for, is it not? So time is a source of hope and despair. Hours are long. Time is a habit and deadner through its repetitive and cyclical’

(Tallur 108, 109).

‘Endgame’ is a popular one act play of the writer, Samuel Beckett. It was staged for the first time in 1957. The protagonist of “End

Game” is Hamm, a blind and paralyzed man, who is in the wheel chair. Clov, another major character is Hamm’s servant. Nagg and Nell are the parents of Hamm. One of the most peculiar aspects related to Nagg and Nell, is that, these two characters appear in the ashbins. The tone of the play, ‘Endgame’ is that of dejection out of ‘nothingness’ of the war. The major theme of ‘Endgame’ is that of the ‘existential crisis’.

Hamm in the play suffers from the existential angst and existential crisis. He is blind and paralyzed and appears in the wheel chair and he, thus becomes the synonym of human sympathy for every spectator of the drama. He is exerting his power on his servant, Clov, who is the only moving character in the play. In ‘The Western Drama’,

‘It is observed that the play depicts something more than Beckett’s autobiography. It displays man’s experience of temporality and evanescence; his sense of the tragic difficulty of becoming aware of one’s own self in the kindless world of experiments. There is the difficulty of communication. The play depicts the fact that all relationships fail finally. Martin Esslin observes, ‘In Endgame, we are also certainly confronted with a very powerful expression of the sense of deadness, of leaden heaviness and hopelessness, that is experienced in states of deep depression : the world outside goes dead for the victim of such states, but inside his mind there is ceaseless argument between parts of his personality that have become autonomous entities. The play witnesses conflicts between man’s fears and anxieties’

(Tallur 119).

All the characters in the play, ‘Endgame’ seem to have experienced the circle of ‘existential crisis’. All the characters seem to express their anger and disgust through the evocative dialogues, throughout the play.

The final select play, ‘The Krapp’s Last Tape’ explains the ‘existential crisis’ of Victor Krapp, an old aged man. Victor Krapp, has, nobody to wait for in his life. In ‘Damned to Fame’,



'This play, which he eventually called 'Krapp's Last Tape', is unusual in Beckett's theatrical opus for its tender lyricism and for a poignancy that verges on sentimentality. Rehearsing many years later with the San Quentin Drama Workshop, Beckett commented : A woman's tone goes through the entire play, returning always, a lyrical tone Krapp feels tenderness and frustration for the feminine beings. And, if the old man, Krapp, who listens to the tape recordings he made in his younger days, is fascinated by his recollections of the various women he has known in his life, he is obsessed by the eyes of one woman in particular. The eyes of one woman are the touchstone for all the others, even for a woman whom Krapp encounters casually by the side of the canal, commenting

admiringly : 'The face she had !!!!! The eyes !!! Like chrysolite !!'
(Knowlson 397).

To conclude, existential crisis exist in 'Waiting for Godot', 'Endgame' and 'Krapp's Last Tape'.

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