



12

**A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHAOS, EMPTINESS, SILENCES, PAUSES
AND GAPS IN WAITING FOR GODOT BY SAMUEL BECKETT**

Mr. Sirsat S S

*Lecturer in English,
Government Polytechnic,
Beed, MS, India*

Abstract:

Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot examines the central issue of unending, pointless waiting and the lack of a definitive meaning or conclusion. Often referred to as a "play in which nothing happens twice," it captures the cyclical nature of human existence and existential emptiness. By avoiding a single definition, the work leaves room for philosophical, theological, and psychological interpretations of the paradox of change and the mystery of existence. The play revolves around Vladimir and Estragon, two tramps who stand in for the common human experience of ignorance, helplessness, and boredom. By blending comic and farcical elements with serious tragic implications, Beckett creates a tragic-comedy that depicts man's persistent drive to exist simply because he happens to exist, even in a world where action has become a form of passivity. Beckett crafts a tragedy-comedy that illustrates man's enduring need to exist just because he happens to exist, even in a world where action has turned into a type of passivity, by fusing humorous and farcical aspects with grave tragic undertones.

Keywords: *Absurdism, Existentialism, Tragic-comedy, Nothingness, Inaction, etc.*

Waiting For Godot, according to Beckett, is a play that is striving all the time to avoid the definition. Beckett also said that this play "One act would have been too little and three acts would have been too much." [Interview with The Times.] Vivian Mercier thus commented upon this play, "a play in which nothing happens twice." It is the peculiar richness of the play like *Waiting for Godot* that it opens with so many different perspectives. It is open to philosophical, religious and psychological interpretations and mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability and necessity and absurdity. *Waiting for Godot* is a play of nothingness. The spectator or the reader is fascinated by the strangeness of what he witnesses, hoping for a climax in the situation or a solution which never comes. The play holds the audience from the beginning to the end, and the audience remains raved to the two tramps that do nothing and say practically nothing. The two tramps are incapable for anything more than mere beginnings of impulses, desires, thoughts, moods, memories and impressions. Everything that arises into them sinks back into forgetfulness before it arises anywhere. They both live to a large extent, in a twilight state and though one of them, Vladimir, is more aware than his companion, complete lifelessness prevails throughout. Their incapacity to live or to end life is intimately linked with their love of helplessness and of wish-dreams. They are full of frustration and resentments, and they cling to each other with the mixture of interdependence and affection. There had been in the past some attempts to do away with theatrical conventions regarding action on the stage.

Waiting for Godot has appropriately been called a tragic-comedy. It is a play which combines comical elements with tragic elements. Samuel Beckett invented this tragic-comic absurdity in an inharmonious way. It is true that the dominant over-all impression of the play is serious and tragic, but the comic elements occupy a considerable position in a play. There is much in the play that moves us,

there is much to amuse also. And then there are certain situations and remarks that simultaneously move and amuse us. Indeed, it is a curious play in which it becomes really difficult to demarcate the serious and the tragic elements from the light and comic ones. Even apart from the situations and dialogue, the characters themselves are partly comic and partly tragic: we commiserate with them and at the same time, we laugh at them. There is a pointless existence. This is inspired of their inaction and the pointlessness of their existence. The two men, Vladimir and Estragon, still want to go on. Millions of people today do not after all give up living even when their life becomes pointless. Even the nihilists wish to go on living. It is not in spite of the pointlessness of their life that the Estragons and Vladimirs of the world wish to go on living but. On the contrary, this is just because their life has become pointless. They are ruined by their habit of inaction or of acting without their own initiative. They have lost their will-power to decide not to go on. Ultimately, they go on living merely because they happen to exist. This is because existence does not know of any other alternative but to exist. The play *Waiting for Godot* deals with man who continues existing because he happens to exist. But it deals with this theme in a manner which is different from all previous treatments of despair in literature.

Beckett produces his farcical effects, not by placing people in a world or a situation. He produces his farcical effects by placing them in a place that is no place at all. This turns them into clowns, for the metaphysical comicality of clowns does consist in their being unable to distinguish between being and non-being. This can be done by falling down non-existent stairs, or by treating real stairs as though they did not exist. Beckett's heroes are indolent or paralyzed clowns. This is because for them, it is not just this or that object such as stairs. But it is the world itself that does not exist. These clowns no longer concern themselves with the world. Thus the persons whom Beckett selects as representatives of today's mind can only be clochards creatures. These creatures have nothing to do any longer. In our world today, millions of people have begun increasingly to feel that they live in a world in which they do not act. They live in a world in which they are acted upon. They are active without themselves deciding on the purpose of their action. They are unable to perceive the nature of that purpose. In other words, action has lost so much of its independence that it itself has become a form of passivity. It has assumed the character of futile action or inaction. Obviously Estragon and Vladimir are representatives of millions of such people. The absurdity in the plays of Beckett portrays the essential existence of man without the past and future of the characters.

Samuel Beckett's typical way of blending conventions and modernism, realistic tradition and avant-garde absurdist experimentation provides a distinct identity to his plays. He is concerned with the essential sense of absurdity with inherent in everyday life, to which man remains faithful. At the same time, his plays are conventional in the sense that cause and effect are delinked, actions are unverifiable and situations unpredictable, the messages in his plays are uncertain and the characters are untrustworthy.

Waiting for Godot, despite its serious and tragic implications, is a funny play. This play contains a number of comic and farcical elements. The purpose which the two men - Vladimir and Estragon - serve in the play is obvious. In the first place, they serve to focus our attention on the central image of the play which is "waiting". The two tramps represent the ordeal of waiting. This ordeal is one which is experienced by almost every human being at one time or the other and in many cases, all through life. In addition to the ordeal of waiting, these men represent ignorance, helplessness, impotence, and boredom. They do not have the essential knowledge. They do not know who exactly Godot is. They do not know what Godot will do for them. They do not know what would happen if they stopped waiting for Godot. Thus they are ignorant. Being ignorant, they are unable to act. Being unable to act, they find themselves helpless and impotent. This leads to the feeling of boredom and the difficulty of passing time. They are forced to resort to various devices to pass time. But each attempt in this direction fizzles out. The entire experience of Vladimir and Estragon has a universal application. It is this fact which lends to the play a wide appeal.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the feeling of uncertainty it produces, the ebb and flow of this uncertainty - from the hope of discovering the identity of Godot to its repeated disappointment - are themselves the essence of the play. There is an endeavour to arrive at a clear and certain interpretation by establishing the identity of Godot. *Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story. It explores a static situation. 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.' On a country road, by a tree two old tramps, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting. That is the opening situation at the beginning of Act I. At the end of the Act I, they are informed that Mr. Godot with whom they believe they have an appointment, cannot

come. But that he will surely come tomorrow. Act II repeats precisely the same pattern. The same boy arrives and delivers the same message. Act I ends with lines

Estragon : Well, shall we go ?

Vladimir : Yes, let's go. [They do not move.] (Beckett, 59)

Estragon and Vladimir have rightly been compared to the famous Hollywood comedians of the nineteen thirties, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. They give rise to a lot of mirth by their gestures, actions, movements, and by their conversation. Many of their actions are borrowed from the circus. For example, Estragon's amusing efforts to take off his boots, Vladimir's repeatedly peering into his hat, the two tramps permuting hats, the futile attempts of the tramps to hang themselves, and the immobility of the tramps even after they have decided to move away- these actions are borrowed from the circus. In a nutshell, we see that a play has a manifold appeal. That is the reason why the audience is caught from beginning to end. This remains riveted to the two tramps who do nothing. They say practically nothing. But it is not only thematic variety that accounts for the popularity of this play. There are a couple of other ingredients too. *Waiting for Godot*, despite its serious and tragic implications, is a funny play. This play contains a number of comic and farcical elements.

Act II ends with the same lines. The sequence of events and the dialogue in each act are different. Each time, the two tramps encounter another pair of characters, Pozzo and Lucky, master and slave, under differing circumstances. In each Act, Vladimir and Estragon attempt suicide and fail, for differing reasons. But these variations merely serve to emphasize the essential sameness of the situation. The problem of communication is a common theme in the play. Absurd plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee. Beckett uses the method of Harold Pinter of concealing the characters to suggest their depersonalization. Stage setting in Beckett is reduced to simplification and generalization: low mound with one tree, an unfurnished room, and three unlocalized urns. Beckett's setting is a realistic representation of a room, of a boarding house or a deserted hotel. Beckett turns beyond the absurdity to reveal the banality and mystery of man's life. This uniqueness of Beckettian plays lies in his peculiar ways of using common man's language.

Beckett achieves the absurdity and the depersonalization of his characters by presenting them as bear and abstract figures bereft of any specificity. Beckett's technique of concealing the parts of their body - burying them in the dustbin, heaps of sands, concealing the parts of the body, and face through make-up, physical handicapped - carries his plays very near to the "puppet theatre." Beckettian plays are distinguished from all others' by their sense of mystification, suspense and ambiguity. This springs from the gap between the text and the subtext, from the surface action and the underlying meaning, built illusions, hidden realities and a multiplicity of meanings and significances. All this tends to present the gloomy picture of an enigmatic universe. Words are used not only as weapons of domination and destruction but also as tools of deception and misdirection. The audience or the reader finds himself in the baffled condition. Therefore, the plays of Beckett never seem absurd but the audience or the reader makes it so. The truth is obscured and the audience is in the predicament just like the characters of Beckett. In *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and Clov respectively through their contradictory versions of the past, truths and half-truths, tease not only their partners but the audience.

Waiting for Godot has given many different interpretations. The play is full of obvious Christian echoes. But it contains less marked historical and anthropological allusions. Each member of the audience picks up the echoes to which he is most attuned. One interpretation is that the two tramps are two parts of a person or of a community seen subjectively. Vladimir represents the more spiritual part and Estragon the more animal. Pozzo and Lucky make up a person or a community seen objectively. Pozzo is the exploiter and the user of ideas. Lucky is the exploited and the creator of ideas. The themes of the play are themes of Waiting, Ignorance, Impotence, Boredom. This is a new kind of play. It has achieved a conspicuous success on the stage. It has proved itself to be world theatre. Its tremendous success is a matter for surprise because it is an uneventful play. It is a play in which "nothing happens, twice." There is no story and no message. Besides, the play has no spectacle, no star-part, no sex, not even a woman in the cast. The play is successful because it depicts a situation which has a general human application.

Existence must be endured. In this process, Beckett's characters reveal unexpected virtues: charity, compassion, love, and a firm resolve to endure. Estragon is the smaller of the two tramps. Though eager enough to die, he will not hang himself first. This is because Vladimir's great weight might break the branch. Vladimir might thus be left to face the world alone. Vladimir is deeply protective, watching over Estragon as a fond parent watches over a sleeping child. In the whole of Beckett's work, there is not one unfeeling man or woman. All the characters suffer and their anguish which becomes Beckett's anguish, finds an echo in us. This becomes our anguish. Each spectator or reader comes to a play by Beckett by a different road because each has led a different life. Godot sounds as if he might have some significance. But he does not even appear on the stage. Watching the play on the stage, we realise that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting. They say that they are waiting for Godot. They cannot say who or what Godot is. They are not sure that they are waiting at the right place or on the right day. They also do not know what will happen when Godot comes, or what would happen if they stopped waiting. They have no watches, no time-tables. There is no one from whom they can get much information. They cannot get the essential knowledge. They are ignorant. Without the essential knowledge, they cannot act. So they are impotent. They produce in us a sense of baffled helplessness. All that Estragon and Vladimir do is to seek ways to pass the time in the situation in which they find themselves. They tell stories. They sing songs. They play verbal games. They pretend to be Pozzo and Lucky and they do physical exercises. But all these activities are mere stop-gaps. These are valuable only to pass the time. They understand this perfectly. Here we have the very essence of boredom - actions repeated long after the reason for them has been forgotten. They talk purposelessly in itself. But it is valuable as a way to pass time. There is also a presentation of waiting, ignorance, impotence.

Beckett makes us aware of the primeval nothingness and emptiness, the essential aloneness that underlies all absurdities, illusions and fantasies. His uses of the alienation effect achieved through the minimal stage devices deviation from conventionalism, creates an aesthetic distance that impels the reader or the audience to probe into and ponder the ambiguities and ambivalences of existence. Beckett's plays are distinguished from all others' by their sense of mystification, suspense and ambiguity. This springs from the gap between the text and the sub-text - surface action and underlying meaning, built-up absurdities, illusions and hidden reality, words used for surface and significances. All this tends to present the picture of an enigmatic universe. Words are used not only as weapons of domination and destruction but also as tools of deception and misdirection. The truth is obscured, the audience is baffled. Beckett shucks the audience off its illusion, jostles it off its complacency, absurdity, and provokes it to think and wonder. The audience leaves the theatre not with a clear-cut message, but with a sense of confronting a riddle.

Beckett also transcends both realism and absurdism through a creative fusion of the real and absurd, the actual and the imagined, the apparent and the mysterious. His plays depict the behavioral incongruity in socially identifiable situations, ideological inharmonic in apparent actions and inarticulateness in everyday speech. Beckett's plays are not mere abstract speculation or metaphysical reflections, but concrete artifacts that have both social credibility and philosophical validity. Samuel Beckett builds up a universe that encompasses life in all its totality and the world in all its variety. There is life in both its inward and outward manifestations, in its social, psychological and metaphysical dimensions; and there is the world that baffles understanding and threatens to submerge the individual in the vast ocean of illusions. And the resulting image is the essential ambiguity of human existence.

Not only do the characters forget, but they talk about forgetting. The characters' amnesia repeats the existential theme reiterated in the half-told stories from the Bible and the unfinished rituals. The repetition is significant and meaningful: without the repetitions of the second act, for example, many of the ritual elements would not be noticed. Something is happening; however-Estragon and Vladimir are performing their lives. The audience must have Act II in order to perceive this self-performance. Is the audience also experiencing amnesia? If they don't recognize themselves on stage, they don't recognize their own story. Godot is the quintessence of harmony between Absurd form and Existential argument. When we think of the play *Waiting for Godot* as an Absurdist play, the answer can be negative. It is because; there exist a logical argument in the dialogue of the play. This is also because the forms, images and symbols of the play underscore this same argument, categorizing Godot as Absurd fails to adequately take into account the play's richness and complexity. The protagonists try

to invent an idealized self to save themselves from being entirely overwhelmed by his fundamental feelings of isolation and littleness. In pursuit of false images or illusions, the protagonist gets strangled from the real self. The protagonist wants to reduce anxiety by his impotence.

The Beckettian concept of absurdity helps the reader to correlate the diversity of artistic expression. It defines the condition of man, today, in the past and into the future. It expresses man's confrontation with absurdity. The style of absurdist drama will change many times but content will remain very much the same until man ceases to be man by becoming God, or by losing his power of reflection and becoming beast. Hence, absurdity and the absurdist drama are not new, these are as old as tragedy, as old as farce, because farce and tragedy, indeed, the double mask of absurdity. One interpretation is that Pozzo represents mankind, and Lucky represents Christ. Another possible interpretation is that Pozzo and Lucky represent human life. Here Pozzo represents the physical aspect of the human personality. Lucky represents the spiritual aspect of the human personality. This is in time brutalized by the treatment it receives. This is also reduced to the incoherence represented in the play by Lucky's outburst when his "thinking hat" is put on his head. Pozzo himself in the course of the play turns blind. This perhaps is an indication of the transience of human power and domination. Seeing Pozzo blind, Vladimir tries to fit this fact into a time scheme. Pozzo becomes furious with him. So he says,

"Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time? It's abominable They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (Beckett, 89).

Beckett wants to express human beings waiting for the arrival of someone or something with whom they may or may not have an appointment. Are we not all born into this world without knowing what our purpose is? Are we not all trying to give our life some purpose, trying to while away the time in some fashion? Are we not all subject to the most sudden reversals of our fortunes, hale and hearty one day, blind and helpless the next? These are only a few of the themes of *Waiting for Godot*. This play is not like the conventional well made drama, re-enacted story. This type of play is essentially lyrical. This kind of theatre which confronts its audience with a concrete pattern of poetic images demands a positive effort of interpretation. It appeals at the same time to a very deep layer of the subconscious mind. At times, we all feel as Beckett does so much in the contemporary world. He gives unreason to do so. But in the sum of everyday living, we give this mood the lie. Beckett is what in the modern times we call a genius. He has built a cosmos out of the awareness of a passing moment. But what saves humanity is its mediocrity. What saves humanity is its persistence in becoming wholly involved in the trivia of day today physical concerns. Out of these arise all our struggles and aspirations, even to the most exalted level. It is this 'stupid' appetite for life, this identity with it, which is its glory, sometimes called divine. A pattern of uncertainties and questions, an action demonstrating the absence of action - here we have the essence of *Waiting for Godot*. The stark view of life is transmuted by the creative quality with which it is communicated. Vladimir is the searcher after a kind of truth. He has an inkling of what this entire means. But hurriedly he reverts to his former comfortably vague optimism in which tomorrow will be a better day instead of being simply a part of the agonizingly persistent human tragedy. This kind of human tragedy is represented by Pozzo and Lucky.

References

- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber. 1956. Print.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. (Le Mythe de Sisyphe). Paris, Gallimard. 1942. Print.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theater of the Absurd*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1980. Print.
- Feder, Lillian. *Books Abroad*. University of Oklahoma Press. Vol. 48, No. 1, Winter. 1974. Print.
- Holman, C. Hugh, and William Harmon. *A Handbook to Literature*. New York: Macmillan. 1986. Print.
- Interview with The Times of India. "The Speaking Tree, 31 August 2008, Sunday. Print.

- McMillan, Dougald, and Martha Fehsenfeld, 1988. *Beckett in the Theater*. London : John Calder. Print.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1980. *The World As Will and Idea*, quoted in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Print.
- Taylor, John Russell. 1966. *The Penguin Dictionary of Theatres*. Print.
- The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 2000. OUP. Print.



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

To Cite the Article: S., *Sirsat*, "A Critical Study of Chaos, Emptiness, Silence, Pauses and Gaps in *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett". *Literary Cognizance*, II-2 (September, 2021): 46-51. Web.

