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DEFLATION OF SELF, ALIENATION, NEUROSIS AND ABSURDITY IN BECKETT'S  
*WAITING FOR GODOT AND ENDGAME*

**ABSTRACT**

The evolution of the Absurd Theatre resulted into the deflation of self in the protagonists. From Greeks to Shakespeare and from Shakespeare to Brecht, dramatists portrayed life-like characters and thus what happens to Oedipus and Lear is partly the result of what they are. In epics, the problem of man is linked with the destiny of the nation, for instance, the fate of Oedipus is linked with the destiny of Athens; he himself is a presence making history. Action and limits, violence and organization, the individual and collective norms-these are the polarities that the epic hero has to experience. On the level of ritualistic pattern, his experience culminates in rebirth. He passes from guilt through suffering to purgation and emerges "a new man" but in the modern drama, the myth of rebirth, renewal, and rededication has degenerated into a grotesque parody of their classical versions. The heroes of the quest are tattered and fallen beings suffering from eternal disillusionment and frustration but an absurdist "gives nothing we can envy or admire; no courage, no gallantry, no glamorous lovers, beautiful costumes, handsome settings or desirable furniture" (Hayman 4).

**Key Words:** Deflation, Purgation, Glamorous, Gallantry, Absurdist, Frustration, Degeneration, Anti-heroism

After World War II, man was confronted with a new sense of uncertainty, anxiety and pessimism, as religion failed to give him moral and spiritual sustenance. In this era of pessimism and nihilism sponsored by Camus, Sartre and Kierkegaard, Beckett was compelled to make new experiments. Religion gives no hope to the tramps and derelicts of Beckett. The alienation of man became an inevitable reality. Modern age was an age in which existence came to enjoy precedence over essence. Truth assumed a life-sustaining illusion. Mind, consciousness and soul are treated as illusive and meaningless things. For the existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers, failure is the fate of man whose every project is doomed. In this situation, action is futile and aspiration absurd. The existentialists thus gave eloquent expression to the current metaphysics of despair. Camus' hero is introspective, subjective and tormented by doubt. The most crucial influence on Beckett was of James Joyce, Proust and the Surrealist, Dali. In 1931, Beckett wrote *Proust* articulating his interest in the study of memory. This great critical work is the result of his deep reflection on the mechanisms of memory. In this essay, Beckett discussed memory in connection with Time and Habit and there he demonstrated his interest in voluntary and involuntary memories and in the mechanisms of remembering. The evolution of anti-hero is an interesting literary trend in art, drama and fiction of the post-World War era. In the contemporary society many changes took place in art and literature as new innovations were made in philosophy and psychology. New ideas were propounded that revolutionized the Western thought. New language, new words were invented to express the inner turmoil of the characters who were suffering from the traumas of war and depression. Freud and existentialists gave new themes and techniques in art and drama. The Greek hero also suffered from isolation as his aristocratic self urged him to revolt against fate and God. However, his identity crisis did not make him a neurotic misfit and inevitably led to the age old questions of meaning, salvation and survival in a spiritual sense. On the contrary, the quest of the modern protagonist leads him into alienation and depression. His despair grows in a degree of intolerable anguish because he "cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing" (Kierkegaard 110). The Existentialists took the cue from Kierkegaard and the concept of the self presented in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is abstract and beset with irreconcilable contradictions. The self, though free, is trapped in a solitude from which there is no escape. Therefore, the most conspicuous characteristic of selfhood is that "man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the being which he is not" (Sartre 17). Man is the being who confers meaning on the

world, but this meaning is never certain. Human reality is a perpetual becoming so that "what is not determines what is" (Sartre 87). Thus, the self at all times confronts its own negation.

Pronko's *Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in France* (1962) discusses the nature of avant-garde theatre which revolted against the traditional theatre. Beckett's theatre is remarkable for dehumanizing characters and excessive pessimism. His main tools are diffuseness of plot and verbal aridity. Language is obscure and lyrical. There is a breakdown of communication. He deals with the themes of metaphysical despair and anguish. The Nihilism depicted in *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* reveals man's absurd condition. Indeed he is thrown in a wide world to suffer alone. Absurdity means living in a universe where life is meaningless. He talks about the potential of man who can bring drastic changes in society but the "absurd theatre aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams" (Esslin 123). The protagonist is anti-hero, he is confused and bewildered. Pronko too does not take up the issue of the corrosion of self of the protagonists of Beckett. Wylie Sypher (1962) depicts the causes and the symptoms of the loss of self in a character due to his fragile nature and temperament. He argued that the main cause of the deflation of self of a protagonist is the materialistic growth of culture and civilization. Mental pain and anguish result into the loss of self. It leads to self- disintegration.

The plays of Beckett and Ionesco don't depict logical situations. There is no conventional characterization. The situations are not described coherently. Beckett's protagonists are helpless creatures, trapped and anti-heroes. Beckett is famous in the world for *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*. Beckett discusses sight versus blindness and body and soul. He also depicts the various levels of time and their connectedness. Man doesn't want to wait, still he has to wait. He doesn't want to go yet he has no choice but to continue the journey of life. Vladimir and Estragon, or Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov, Pozzo and Lucky, Nagg and Nell are typical modern anti-heroes. They are a puzzle for the audience. Beckett is an unconventional dramatist who evolved new theatrical devices to portray characters suffering from the corrosion of self. His vision of life is nihilistic and pessimistic. The characters are confused and bewildered and are seen waiting for Godot who never comes. There is a strange juxtaposition of illusion and reality. They don't know why they are waiting. "Will Godot bring salvation? or Death?" (*Godot* 123).

Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* under the influence of Joyce as he borrowed from him the new images and symbols to articulate the psychic pressures of man. Beckett used the multiple patterns of language and images in his dramas. Anthony Cronin was the biographer of Beckett who talked about the influence of Salvador Dali. Beckett imitated the techniques of the "surrealist paintings" (Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 210). He evolved disorientated use of language. Daniel Albright wrote *Beckett and Aesthetics* (2003). He observed that Beckett was impacted by Surrealism when he wrote his plays. Albright believes that "all plays of Beckett reveal the impact of the Surrealists. He also borrowed from Proust and Joyce" (Albright 10). *Waiting for Godot* is built on the theme of the corrosion of self. In Beckett's play, nothing happens. Beckett borrowed the concept of "formal thought disorder" from Freud and Dr. Karen Horney. He used it as a tool to evaluate Lucky's mental disorder. Beckett's world illuminates how "the self and non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever" (Knowlson 2). In *A Piece of Monologue* Beckett writes thus: "Birth was the death of him. Again Words are few. Dying too. Birth was the death of him. Ghastly grinning ever since. Up at the lid to come. In cradle and crib" (Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* 425). There is no consistent and rational thought, incoherent and non-sense talk is very common. The tramps of Beckett waste their time in discussing superficial aspects of things. Beckett himself summed up his attitude in 1949 when he observed thus:

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 the obligation to express. (*Godot* 23).

Sartre and Camus believe in existence rather than essence. Existentialists like Camus and Sartre observe that the only reality in this world is anguish and helplessness of modern man to confront the void alone. They describe the emotional despair of dealing with the absence of moral order. This chaos leads to a psychic dislocation of the characters in Beckett. They are seen lost and bewildered. Beckett observes that man doesn't want to go on but he must go on. One requires purpose in a purposeless universe. Beckett writes in *Waiting for Godot*, "Let's go" (*They do not move*). In Beckett's theatre, the metaphors of "memory", "silence" and "wait" are predominant as his plays give a challenge to investigate the philosophical, psychological and psychoanalytical problems confronted by the protagonists. Pountney (1988) is right when he observes that each play of Beckett is an integral whole, the job of a critic is to explore the hidden layers of memory,

trauma and the intellectual confusion of the protagonists. Beckett's plays explore the nature of cognition, perception, consciousness, memory, temporality, being and non-being. There is a serious attempt to respond adequately to the three questions with which *The Unnamable* (1953) opens: 'Where now? Who now? When now? In an interview with Charles Juliet, Beckett observed thus:

It is not easy to dramatize the theme of negation as it involves a big challenge for the playwright. The theme of "negation" is no more possible than affirmation. It is absurd to say that something is absurd. It is not so simple to protest and to go against the tradition. New gestures, language and themes have to be invented (165).

Beckett depicted the Freudian concept of death consciousness in the life of his protagonists. He projected his new vision of human sufferings in his plays. Samuel Beckett lived a traumatic and mysterious life. In his youth, Beckett actually suffered from depression and was admitted in the hospital. His friend Dr. Geoffery Thomson has made many observations about the dementia of Beckett. He had remarkable knowledge of variety of psychological ailments such as dementia, depression and neurosis. This episode tells about his understanding of abnormal human psychology. He used all these traumatic experiences freely in his novels and plays. His *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are plays about human suffering involved in human existence. Samuel Beckett repeatedly quotes Giacomo Leopardi's poem *A Se Stesso* in his *Proust* where he discusses the notion of desire. In *Proust*, Beckett refers to Leopardi who believed that the only solution is the removal of the desire of living. The question of the "ablation of desire" (*Proust* 18), which Beckett refers here is the same one that riddled Leopardi and Arthur Schopenhauer. Beckett fully agreed with Proust that wisdom consists of the "ablation of desire" and in "obliterating the faculty of suffering" (*Proust* 63). Beckett was greatly influenced by Proust who excavated the inner heart of his protagonists. Beckett borrowed many techniques from Proust and brought many changes in the form of drama. Beckett believed that suffering and boredom are two different aspects of the vast plane of Habit. It is only suffering that represents the "omission of that duty to Habit". "Suffering opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience" (*Proust* 28).

In 1920s when Beckett was suffering from severe depression, he read the works of Arthur Schopenhauer who believed in pessimistic and nihilistic philosophy. He opined that the world was grounded in suffering. Human desires bring pain and torment. Beckett appreciated Schopenhauer's "intellectual justification of unhappiness", he explored the mystery of human suffering in his play *Endgame*. Beckett imagined nightmarish situations for his characters, trapped them to find out how they might deal with them. Beckett depicts human condition as an inevitable part of human existence. Human condition is absurd and hopeless; Beckett expresses the experiences of sufferings through the metaphors of "silence", "waiting" and "memory" in his plays. His characters suffer from misfortunes as meaningless waiting, disillusionment of hope, and abnormal relationship. They are doomed to live in a meaningless and godless universe. They look helpless and feel trapped in a Godless universe where sufferings are an inescapable reality.

Beckett confronts the futility of existence and the tragedy of the human condition. Beckett wrote *Endgame* dealing with the absurdities and predicaments of life. The main message of his *Endgame* is that the end is in the beginning of life and "man must go on endlessly as there is no pause for him" (Beckett 126). Beckett conveys "a view of life which sees birth as intimately connected with suffering and death and which sees life as a painful road to be trod" (*Endgame* 2). Beckett illustrates the defeated strength of 'spirit' and his protagonists experience pain and anguish. The world of Beckett is dominated by degeneration; the characters have no option but to continue the journey of life. The plays of Beckett deal with the gradual corrosion of self of the protagonists. Beckett's representation of the mind is based on the truth that the world is subject to death and decay. Paradoxically the mind of man is trapped within a body that is essentially perishing. Beckett took the meaning of suffering from Leopardian concept of "sufferance" and he changed it into the "suffering of being". In both cases a pain is interwoven with the desire to cease desiring. Beckett gives expression to the "ablation of desire" (Proust 18). It is a state of mind which exposes the nature of human agony. Beckett in *Proust* theorizes that "whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable" (Beckett 17). The alienating speech of both Clov and Hamm and Nell and Nagg defines their Lacanian lack-of-being. Clov, for instance, is angry, frustrated and dissatisfied with his attempt at speech. The failure of language is evident in the fragmentary quality of Clov and Hamm's conversation which only approximately succeeds in giving expression:



**Clov:** [*Sadly.*] "No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we."

**Hamm:** "We do what we can."

**Clov:** "We shouldn't."

[*Pause*]

**Hamm:** "You're a bit of all right, aren't you?"

**Clov:** "A smithereen" (Beckett, *Endgame* 123).

Hamm and Clov are forced to desire an impossible "Once!" a never-achieved unity that will remain forever inaccessible and will inevitably keep causing pain. The characters are thus trapped into a desire for an irremediable past. In Hamm's case there are painful childhood desires related to his "accursed progenitor" (96). In Nell and Nagg, it is more a desire for the happiness of their youth (*Endgame* 185). The sense of loss permeates all the dialogue evoking nostalgia for a previous sense of a holistic self "We change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (97) death is inevitable in life as no one can escape it: "I see my light dying" (98). When Nagg says that he had lost his tooth the day before, all Nell can repeatedly sigh out in uncritical nostalgia is an elegiac: "Ah yesterday!" (99). Nell's speech reveals an inexorable desire for a sepia-tinted past which, by contrast, highlights the present "Desert!" (103).

Love, marriage, domestic happiness is missing in the world of Beckett. In Beckett's plays, love can only coexist with dissatisfaction and suffering. His characters are doomed to loneliness and frustration and there is no remedy for it. Death is the central issue in *Endgame*. Nell dies in the course of the play. Nell's death is symbolical of the end of reproduction. The play begins with the word "finished" referring to the termination of life. The characters are just anti-heroes who are confused and bewildered. They are not free. Their language is absurd and there is no communication between them. The activities of the characters and their dialogue express the negation of life. Lack of understanding is another of the features of Beckett's characters. Even when there are two or more characters onstage, they are unable to understand each other. For instance, when Vladimir wakes Estragon up, because he feels lonely:

**Estragon:** [*restored to the horror of his situation.*] "I was asleep!"  
[*Despairingly.*] "Why will you never let me sleep?"

**Vladimir:** "I felt lonely."

Estragon: "I had a dream."

Vladimir: "Don't tell me!"

Estragon: "I dreamt that."

Vladimir: "DON'T TELL ME!" (Beckett *Godot* 17).

Estragon is not happy with the fact of being woken up by Didi, who was in need of his company. In return, Estragon wants to tell his nightmares instead of listening to his companion. Nobody can judge the content of his nightmares but Vladimir is not interested to listen to them. Estragon has no courage to learn something painful since nightmares are characteristic of troubled psyche and point to repressed memories. It is evident that there is failure of understanding and communication between them. That is the reason why all Beckett's characters suffer from absurdity of life. Man is depicted as a restless human creature, always crying and endlessly striving for nothing in particular. It is a world far beyond any labels of good and evil. Beckett wrote in *Proust* (1931) thus: "Hopelessness and fruitless struggle at the end leads to habit and boredom" (Beckett 28).

Characters of Beckett are anti-heroes. They submit to the absurdity of their existence, and fill their lives with meaningless void: Krapp is listening to his tapes, Hamm is telling stories, Didi and Gogo are waiting, etc. Nevertheless, all of them go on. Beckett's characters do not know what to do, they are bored with their whole existence and they can only wait. In *Endgame*, the life of Clov and Hamm is grey, based on certain ritual actions such as looking through the window with a magnifying glass, asking for pain-killers, telling stories etc. They are at the end of the road, doomed to suffer the corrosion of self. Consequently, the fear of death has to do with the fear of the pain and anxiety of the process of being born. Beckett's plays take this agonizing circular pattern of the trauma of birth. The structure of his plays is cyclical; this structure is created through language repetitions, actions, and the use of the present continuous tense.

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