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Perceiving Reality through Absurdity: a Prime Projection in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot and Ahmad’s the Thing

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Abstract

This paper offers an in-depth analysis of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot and Ahmad’s The Thing with the focus on the sense of craving to go on and to endure the existence, the ultimate reality of human life. Between these two extraordinary playwrights of Absurd Theatre, one is from the West, and the other is from the East. So, a meticulous survey on these two selected plays unfolds trajectories of convergence. This research will show that though the two plays are of two opposite continents, they are primly projecting the same theme of realizing reality through absurdity using the same structural techniques of absurd drama. The researchers find it remarkable that despite an outwardly hopeless fate, both the plays express the human spirit of continuing life through endurance and invite the audience to win the absurdity of life by enduring it. Such is reality, and, in both the plays, this realization of accepting reality comes through absurdity. However, it is narrative research that follows the descriptive-cum analytical method, and the relevant textual references are given as evidence to support the argument of this study.

Keywords: Absurdity, Endurance, Existence, Reality, New meaning of life and Go on

“Where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know,
you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (Beckett, 1958).

This ultimate longing for going on is the utmost reality of human life. And man can realize this reality only when he goes through absurdity and wins absurdity as “the absurd is not in man [...] nor the world, but in their presence together” (Camus, 1955, p.21). Paradoxically, absurdity strengthens reality. Camus says in his *In The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it (Camus, 1955, p.21). Absurd plays usually focus on this paradox. In this regard, Camus opines, “the irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter, these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable (Camus, 1955, p.21). There is no doubt that the absurd playwrights are looking for ways to discover the new meaning of life from the apparent inconsistency, meaninglessness, and uncertainty of the world through their plays.

They project light on the deep inside of the audience's mind and give them a novel sight of life by crafting the play with a different technique, wrapping reality with the foil paper of absurdity. In the course of the play, the audience unfolds the foil paper of meaninglessness and discover the meaning. Distinguished dramatist Aatur Rahman asserts:

Theatre of the Absurd is a medium for searching the meaning of life of the fallen people courageously. Absurd Theater tries to illustrate the anguish at the loss of certainty of life through a strange, contradictory truth. Such play tries to answer the subtle question regarding life (Rahman, 1973, p. 96).

This subtle question is related to human existence, whether men will go on or surrender to meaninglessness. Sartre's theory of existentialism answers this question. This philosophy is upheld in absurd drama. For Sartre, "existence precedes essence" (Catalano, 1985, p.12), which is only by existing and acting in a certain way, we give meaning to our lives. So, man needs to keep generating himself and his world all through his life. Like Sartre, Martin Esslin also believes that the dignity of man depends on his ability to face the meaninglessness of their existence: "to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions – and to laugh at it" (Esslin, 2004, p. 429). The laughter Esslin talks about comes out of the acceptance of the meaninglessness because it makes people see the reality they were trying to overlook. It takes courage and strength to accept absurdity, as *Waiting for Godot* and *The Thing* show, "This is this, this is that this is all" (Ahmad, 2012, p.22). The audience notices that Vladimir and Estragon mirror the fact that men spend their trivial lives continuing the habit of a 'great deadener.' Therefore, at the moment, while they notice the fact, they take it seriously, because they find resemblance with Vladimir and Estragon. They get caught in an illusion that they might be Vladimir and Estragon or Convict and Man. They can also be seen as guides, who lead the audience to the awareness and acceptance of the absurdity of life. In other words, they help us to face the reality of life, and there is a sense of craving to go on and endure existence.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is considered a mirror that reflects the position of modern man, their

chaotic sense of defeat, and the meaninglessness of the era of confusion and decadence. The playwright depicts the time where human suffering has reached the climax of its existence. Two tramps, two representatives of humanity, are repeating the tiresome exercise of waiting for Godot without any change in routine. The characters seem to represent human destiny vaguely, of course, with a note of 'hope' for a change. In 1995, *The New York Times* published a theatre review by Wilborn Hampton where he states that:

Like all great plays, "Godot" defies easy analysis. Two tramps -- Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) -- wait under a tree daily for the arrival of Mr. Godot. He never arrives but sends a messenger each evening, assuring them he will be there tomorrow. As they wait, they encounter a traveler and his slave. They quarrel, they try on boots and hats, they eat a carrot or a turnip, they urinate, they sing, they play games, they discuss theology and metaphysics, they think (or think they think). They always find something, as Gogo points out, "to give us the impression we exist." It all helps to pass the time (Hampton, 1995).

So, it seems absurd, and many questions revolve in the audiences' mind. What does it mean? This is typically the major question from anyone who watches the play for the first or dozens time. The truth is that it can mean as much as what we find in it:

Some see in its poetic absurdities and blind resilience a thread of hope; others hear quite the opposite, more a dirge of despair. Certainly, one will find, as Eric Bentley put it, 'the quintessence of existentialism.' "There you are again," Didi greets Gogo at the outset. "Am I?" Gogo responds" (Hampton, 1995).

Thus, they start their journey or once again start from the unending end. If Vladimir and Estragon are there, one of the two possibilities can be taken into consideration. First, their presence in that location should be for a reason which must be 'waiting' for the promised arrival of Godot. Or, second, they are there because they have no other place and option to go to, nor are they capable of moving due to many reasons – physical, emotional, psychological, and economic reasons. So, they preoccupy themselves

with the self-invented illusion, it is the arrival of Godot, and that gives them hope and energy to cope with the difficulties encountering them. They are confused, lost, and uncertain whether the alternatives are better or worse (Cohn, 1973, p.122). They do not know where that road would lead them to. Therefore, they convince themselves that Godot will come, even when this has been repeated frequently without the arrival of Godot. They invent excuses by blaming themselves and speaking of the uncertainty of the exact days where Godot is supposed to arrive, or even suspecting that there must be some kind of misunderstanding regarding the tree, precisely whether there is another tree or the very bare tree nearby for which they keep waiting.

Beckett did not feel that his plays must be taken to mean as nothingness, as he opines, “a sense of restlessness, of moving about in the night” (as cited in Ward, 2015). He says much of this is to be found in his work. There is none the less the sense of having to go on. The researchers find it interesting since, despite seemingly hopeless fate, there is still the sense of needing to continue. If it were hopeless, the characters would not continue to act. There is hope and a desire to continue – to go on.

One can consider *Waiting for Godot* a play where two tramps are waiting for something/someone that will never come, but the researchers find that it is about two men waiting for something/ someone that will come or at least keep their hope alive. It is demonstrated at the end of both acts as well. As long as we live, our life is always a ‘not-yet,’ which will never become an ‘already.’ One can speculate that Godot would mean the possible, for something to happen – not a specific thing of desire but something. It is an imagined never-land, but still a land. The very first sentence of the play, ‘Nothing to be done’, which has been repeated three more times, also makes such a sense that, even though ‘nothing,’ it is to be done. This situation pervades all over the play through the act of constant waiting. The time and space lose their significance in this waiting. Because whatever the situations are, there is always and in all places a symbolic Godot:

Estragon: (*despairingly*.) Ah! (*Pause*.) Are you sure it was here?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said by the tree. (*They look at the tree*.) Do you see any others? (Beckett, 1997, p.44).

[...]

Estragon: You’re sure it was this evening?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said Saturday. (*Pause*.) I think (Beckett, 1997, p.45).

There are two major instances for the continuation of waiting, even after proposing, “Let’s go.” Here, the verb ‘to go’ is representing different meanings:

Estragon: Let’s go.

Vladimir: We can’t.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot (Beckett, 1997, p.84).

[...]

Estragon: Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: Yes, let’s go. [*They do not move*.] (Beckett, 1997, p.124).

In the first dialogue, they cannot go as they have been waiting for Godot. Otherwise, they would have let down the unspecified promise of waiting. Here ‘to go’ means bringing an end to waiting and giving up the hope there. In the second conversation that repeats at the end of each act with the order of characters reversed, in both scenes, they agree to go but do not move. Here, ‘to go’ is, to some extent, equivalent to going on. In other words, they are going, albeit they do not move. Thus, the activities they repeat and the words they utter in the course of waiting “add up to life” (Cohn, 19973, p.132). At the beginning of the play, there is another curious conversation between Vladimir and Estragon that implies a spirit of continuing life:

Vladimir: [...] Never neglect the little things of life.

Estragon: What do you expect, you always wait till the last moment.

Vladimir: (*musingly*). The last moment [...] (Beckett, 1997, p.40).

Likewise, *Waiting for Godot*, Sayeed Ahmad’s *The Thing* (1961) is one of the milestones in the genre of absurd drama, which happens to be the first drama of the playwright as well. This drama is unique in

terms of its subject matter, artistic ambiguity, and its complex depth of introspection and presentation. In the play, a group of people is waiting for an inevitable cyclone at Char (Island) Alexander that covers the total skyline as well as the entire horizon of the play with its devastating potency of obscure existence. Standing in front of absolute destruction and death, their behavior is abnormally normal – an unusual naturalization manifesto. Feelings of passing the time, keeping the life goes on, overwhelm all the characters. Like Vladimir and Estragon, Ahmad, Headman, Munir, Man (Whistlemanfluteman), U. Peng, U. Nen, Drummer, The Girl (Nivedita), Convict are continuously keeping them engaged in one or other task just to pass the time. The following dialogues illustrate this classic human spirit of bearing life:

U. Peng: Let us all play the fool.

Munir: Let us start. Hurry.

Headman: Where is the piece of wood?

[...]

Munir: Can you help me find the wood?

Man: Of course, Why not? That is what I have been doing all my life—finding things for others. I know it is difficult.

Munir: Why did you do that?

Man: It passed the time (Ahmad, 2012, pp. 20-21).

In his book *Absurd Theatre*, Kabir Chowdhury, a renowned academician, and translator, asserting the resemblance between these two plays asks categorically:

Can you remember Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*? A similar situation happens with Sayeed Ahmad's play *The Thing*, where some people are waiting for the furious storm - the annihilation of the people is certain. They are going to face the inevitable disaster. Sayeed Ahmad's *The Thing* is the representation of a helpless absurd-condition of people in the style of absurd European drama" (Chowdhury, 1989, p. 87).

Although this play is based on the cyclone and thunderstorm of 1961, the playwright does not depict a picture of the story of this disaster in a realistic way; rather, following the dispassionate absurd style, he offers it as conjunction with dramatic anxiety and

compactness in the style of existential expression as Kabir Chowdhury states:

There is no story or event and discarding the traditional realistic way of presentation, he has introduced a new kind of drama to the Bengali audience-reader that is based on incomprehensible dialogue, existential philosophy like the absurd Western drama" (qt. in Ahmad, 1989, p.2).

Bazlul Karim, director, and actor of Drama Circle, the first group theater in the former East Pakistan comments on the play's modern style, in the introduction of the book *Complete Works of Sayeed Ahmad*:

The heir to James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, has influenced *The Thing* only in respect of structure and dialogue, which are commonly adopted and accepted methods of absurd style for making it an absurd play. Here the comments of a character follow the thoughts of another character, and replies come not in sequence but after intervals ... as if the senses and comprehension are playing on the stage through some human beings (qt. Ahmad, 2012, p. XII).

The researchers agree with Bazlul Karim and find that *The Thing* is unique because of its diverse appeal. It is noteworthy that *The Thing* offers the task of waiting not as 'inaction' rather as vigorous 'action' retaining elements of traditional plays, historical sense, and conscious awareness of the minds in an agreeable way while combining some aspects of absurd plays as well (Ahmad, 2012).

There is neither a definitive ending nor beginning in the narrative or storyline of the play. The situation of *The Thing* describes the mysteries of anxiety, the strange-absurd world, and the uncertain preparation of a few people waiting in an island who are also like a human symbol. They incarnate an absurd condition of helpless life in Alexander Island, in Bangladesh, in the sub-continent, or somewhere in the world. It seems they are submerged into immobile helplessness. But Ahmad's characters' indomitable spirit of mobility always alleviates this immobility and wins the helplessness, absurdity. Such is human spirit. Human beings prefer to keep them alive, active as the characters of this play do:

Munir: That game they will be in heaven too.
 Ahmad: That makes a man immobile. We must have something active (Ahmad, 2012, P. 18).

This longing for activity and continuing life amid all absurdity is the reality. Ahmad has upheld this reality through absurdity using local and familiar settings and real characters, not surreal. He can depict life in its totality. He shows that human being is an unpredictable one and his fate is dictated by his surroundings, there is no escape from it through the character Ahmad's speech: "[...] we have got to put up with reality. Her voice cannot escape our ears" (14). He tries to go deep into the philosophy of life like Beckett. Therefore, in Ahmad, characters are threatened by real hazards and absurdity. Still, they accept reality and keep going on.

Headman: [...] We must not be ashamed of viewers. We know what we are doing. Let us feel active, alive, and grateful. Come on, dance, let us dance (23).

The Theatre of the Absurd, depict terrible things about our existence. In Beckett's theatre and specifically in *Waiting for Godot* and in Ahmad's *The Thing*, we are also confronted with the awe-inspiring- drama and comedy of life.

In Beckett's plays, one of the most apparent troubles with characters like Estragon and Vladimir, Ham and Clov, Winnie, and Willie are the sharp contrast between limitations and aspirations, desirability and availability (Shalghin, 2014). They represent their fellow humans not only in misery, confusion, incapability, despair but also in hope. They struggle to do something, to change something, to go beyond, and to act. These characters are not thoroughly isolated images, they have much in common with us, and they expose our selves and our acts. 'Waiting' of Beckettian characters is but an actual sketch of our real condition, we wait, desire and expect a drive or a change to take place in the long run, and like them, our life is endlessly set by uncertainty and denial; hope shapes the details of waiting along with frustration and hope. Our real-life experience helps us to realize that Godot is an illusion of Vladimir's and Estragon's minds. They invented Godot and attributed qualities to him. They made-up Godot, and they believed their imagination.

This is remarkable because it demonstrates that despite an outwardly hopeless fate, there is still the sense of needing to endure existence and to continue. Such a demonstration is remarkable in Ahmad's *The Thing* as well. In Ahmad, too, all the characters carelessly use words just to keep the conversation alive, not worrying much about what those words mean. This is, actually, a kind of revolt against the meaninglessness of the world as Camus proclaims that the only way to live is to revolt relentlessly against meaninglessness.

Furthermore, at the end of the play, everything is destroyed by the cyclone except the ruins, memories, emotions, their inexplicable time-consuming yet inconsistent conversations, childish humor, fatigue, frustration. And, it is noteworthy that the all-powerful cyclone cannot able to destroy the spirit and the determination of the seafaring warriors of going beyond and not to yield to the death by not paying any attention to the lethal despair, misery and idiosyncratic ways of acceptance. Ahmad's philosophic characters have epitomized this spirit in their utterances as well:

U. Peng: A bud blooms in time; a leaf flutters in the breeze. Don't be impatient, U. Nen. We have only one life. Let us hold it tight, not run wild and lose it.

Headman: Very true. We will be patient and maintain the dignity of our race (Ahmad, 2012, p.7).

In this 'great stage' of the world, man thinks of himself as rational beings and behaves as such, continuing his habits until death. But the fact is, men are always just one-step away from nothingness. *Waiting for Godot* and *The Thing* makes the echo of this truth. *The Thing* and *Waiting for Godot* remind us of Shakespeare's *Lear*'s condition that our lives are not as stable as we might take them to be. As we see that Oedipus, though battling against the vicissitudes of life, cannot escape 'piercing pain' in the 'flesh' and 'soul': "O agony! Where am I? [...] What fate has come to me" (Sophocles, 1979, p. 62). Uncertainty, suffering combined with appalling conditions entangle human beings in web and chance becomes the ruler of life as Oedipus said, "Chance rules our lives, and future is all unknown" (Sophocles 52). Like *Lear* and Oedipus, all the

characters in Ahmad and Beckett are going through the same helplessness. So do the whole of humanity. The control men believe to have over their lives is an illusion, because everything can be taken away within a minute for a simple mistake or by the all-powerful Nature, like, by the cyclone in *The Thing*. This utter helplessness and absurdity make men numb for a while. Still, it actually strengthens them tremendously to ignore the absurdity and go forward in search of a new meaning of life. Such is the human spirit. Men cannot live in the status quo. So, reversal comes in the plot of life through absurdity. Men realize that life should be going on. Human beings never feel such a huge life force unless they go through this feeling of meaninglessness and helplessness. As if absurdity is functioning as a catalyst to realize this reality of life. Both of the playwrights portray this reality of life to show the audience that it takes courage and strength to accept absurd reality. Whatever the situation is, human beings are capable of continuing life. Such is human life, and it is beautiful, even in absurdity. So, men may not have direct answers to all questions. Still, they should continue asking questions, facing the reality of absurdity, and, consequently, appreciate life boldly. To convey this message, both the plays expose the strength of the human spirit. The characters do not just struggle with the hostility of life they undergo; they struggle with the harsh reality of absurdity as well. Thereupon, they discover the novel sight of life and express the sense of craving to go on and endure the existence. The truths they tell are not only regarding the world on stage, but also regarding the world of the audience as Esslin opines that though the Theatre of the Absurd represents the absurdity of the human condition it teaches the audience to face it and keep life going on.

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