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## 'Philosophy of Life' in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Tendulkar's *The Cyclist*: A Comparative Study

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Comparative appreciation of literature stirs over and above the authors' individualities, ethos, cultural fixations, sociological inhibitions, philosophic preconditioning and genre-oriented limitations towards the exploration of new vistas. The aim of Comparative Study is not to impose either superiority or inferiority of one literature on another; it is to amalgamate literatures, in order to uncover the obscurities of global diversity of literary forms and genres. It leads to the discovery of the oneness of human thoughts. In accordance with the theories of comparative study which proposes that the selected texts should belong to two entirely different nations, languages, cultures, periods, literary movements etc., the article analyses *Waiting for Godot* – a French play (1948) by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), a European playwright, which was translated into English by the author himself; and *Safar / Cyclewallah* – a Marathi play (1991) by Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), an Indian playwright, which was translated into English by Balwant Bhaneja. An attempt is made to bring out their philosophical significance – absurdism, existentialism, nihilism, cynicism and quietism – and the interrelatedness of those.

This article compares these plays on the basis of the authors' choice of characters, parallel plots, dialogues – fragmented and fantasised, unusual themes, backdrop setting, circular structure, cynical tone, theatricality, the author's narrative styles and their experimental techniques and dramaturgy. At the outset, the most striking point about these plays is their innovative formal design. It bespeaks the authors' fascination towards the modernist experiments in dramatic form and style. The duo have formulated these plays in a way that, there is both a certain emptiness precisely at those places – such as plot, character, dramatic speech, setting, themes and motifs etc. – where the critics would conventionally look for meaning; and a cognitive emphasis which changes from the immediate dramatic interest to some ultimate philosophical domains beyond history and society. In both the major characters – Estragon and Vladimir of *Waiting for Godot* and MC or The Main Character of *Safar / Cyclewallah* – are made deliberately to indulge in useless, senseless, endless acts to cast the audience with existentialist thoughts.

The sense of closure and nullity or the absurdism in these plays is further exposed through their repetitive rhythm and monotonous dialogues. In both plays the locales, physical objects, time, and structure are not clearly fixed. They take in non-specific locations, unspecified time, and casual but surrealistic ambience. This negativity inflicts a mood of cynicism in the readers. To put in the words of Abrams, they “project the irrationalism, helplessness, and absurdity of life in dramatic forms that reject realistic settings, logical reasoning, or a coherently evolving plot” (2). Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines these quintet philosophies of life as follows,

*Absurdism*: The belief that human exists in a world with no purpose or order. (6)

*Cynicism*: Not believing that something good will happen or that something is important. (378)

*Existentialism*: The theory that humans are free and responsible for their own actions in a world without meaning. (531)

*Nihilism*: The belief that nothing has any value, especially that religious and moral principles have no value. (1032)

*Quietism*: An attitude to life which makes you calmly accept things as they are rather than try to change them. (1244)

To elucidate, the interrelatedness among these philosophies is evident. They share mutual characteristics with a few notable exceptions and those exceptions are also evenly distributed among them. The idea of absurdism is common in the most existentialist writings and these always lead one to value the nihilistic ideals. And the philosophies of cynicism and quietism are the by-products of the trio – absurdism, existentialism and nihilism. In other words, the sense of absurdism, existentialism and nihilism reinforced in the plays under study encourages the readers to grow either cynical or mystical or quietist about the existence of god and other such entities. When absurdism and existentialism sceptically view the concepts of life and afterlife, nihilism views the same with extreme pessimism. They are highly sceptical about moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history.

The philosophical framework of these plays is such that the temporal circularity is perceived as stasis, a meaningless and everlasting repetition of seasons, actions, dialogues and the cynical attitudes of the characters towards life. Theoretically speaking, such writings focus on religious failure, value destruction and cosmic purposelessness and evoke theological questions such as, What is mankind? Why does it exist? If god has created man, who or what is god? Why has He created the cosmic and so on?

When one speaks of the theatricality of a play, action is the *sine qua non* of any dramatization. But the select plays brim with *jeu de theatre* instead of action. In actual performance, stage-remarks and the non-verbal activities replace a good deal of action and yet the plays are rich in theatrical vigour. Juxtaposing two – the stage-space and the referential-space constitute the play with contrapuntal dramaturgy. With theatrical space, the biblically alluded spaces in *Waiting for Godot* and the surreal places in *The Cyclist* are admirably juxtaposed.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, to begin with, presents two tramps – Estragon and Vladimir who are waiting for an uncertain meeting with an unknown person called Godot under a seemingly surrealistic tree. From their mysterious-cum-jeering conversation, it is comprehensible that they are waiting even without knowing whether the time and place are correct or the person for whom they are waiting does really exist. They choose to wait though they are amply sceptical about the arrival of Godot. The unanticipated arrivals of Pozzo – Lucky and the messenger boy from the Godot render the storyline both comical and complicated. The visits made by the shepherd boy with the negative message of Godot – the embodiment of absence—at the end of both acts and references to his brother, another absent character, also remain confusing. The entire play is set under an imaginary tree enrooted on the stage and takes place for the two subsequent evenings.

On the other hand, although *The Cyclist* by Vijay Tendulkar has characters in abundance, the entire play revolves around the Main Character (MC) or The Cyclist. Determined to go on a world tour, MC begins his voyage with a cycle which has no wheels similar to the tramps of *Waiting for Godot* who choose to wait under the leafless tree. The mirthful conversation among Ma, Pa, and MC grows cryptic with the intrusion of Man (Johetey Uncle, Passer-by, Sage, Crowd, Bandit, (Speaking) Lion, (Ghostly) Figure, Mermaid, and again Man (Jogeshtey Uncle)

respectively. Though these encounters of MC with unknown or seemingly unrealistic lives turn it obscure, the fact that MC finds himself eventually at the same place from where he began his journey suggests that his voyage is interior or endless one and not exterior or physical one. Unlike *Godot* which is told from an objective point of view, MC becomes both the narrator and character in *The Cyclist*. For MC, who starts his journey with the intention to visit unknown territories of world, *a banner with three XXXs* becomes the motivation factor behind his journey. His endless travel and the tramp's waiting could be juxtaposed as they bear no results. *The Cyclist* script with a minimalist setting consist the wheel-less cycle just as the sole prop is the tree in *Godot*.

As Beckett's craftsmanship allow even the contradictoriness to coexist in *Waiting for Godot*, the symmetrical structure of the play balances the asymmetrical actions of the pairs. To simply state, the play is being constructed on sets of binaries – two acts, two major characters – Estragon and Vladimir, two wanderers – Pozzo, wealthy landlord and Lucky, docile slave (Act1) and two messengers – the boy and his brother. Here, the waiting and the changelessness of the tramps are proportionate to the wanderings and changeability of Pozzo the blind and Lucky, the dumb (Act2). Though tremendous changes occur in temperamental, biological and situational levels throughout the play, they never assist one in understanding the play in totality unless the changes are studied from these philosophical perspectives.

*The Cyclist* narrates even the disjointed but prodigious events in a sequential manner with comicality and that marks Vijay Tendulkar's dexterity. In other words, *The Cyclist* is peopled with both real life characters – Ma, Pa, MC etc – and eerie characters – ghostly figure, speaking lion, Mermaid (a woman in fish's torso) god of earth and sky and so on, and creates an ethereal effect which places the audience in a fantastical disposition. The climax divulges the secret that the whole play takes place in the MC's reverie. Close analysis of the play reveals the author's ingenuity in checking the ways of human heart which travels to places far away.

The dialogues that are marked by total obscurity remain excessively orthogonal. In *Godot*, Vladimir's philosophical questions and Estragon's nonchalant replies; the uncouth situations that are presented incoherently; and the meaningless wandering of Pozzo and Lucky and the tramps' waiting for nothing altogether help the reader to attribute the qualities of absurdism, cynicism, existentialism, nihilism and quietism to this play. The repetition of negative expressions such as "Nothing to be done", "I don't know", "What about hanging ourselves?", "I don't understand", "Don't let us do nothing", and "Wait" suggest the nullity or negativity that dominate or characterises the plot. For instance the tramps who are trapped within this unchanging circularity of time converse thus,

VLADIMIR: It's always at nightfall.

ESTRAGON: But night doesn't fall.

VLADIMIR: It'll fall all of a sudden, like yesterday.

ESTRAGON: Then it'll be night.

VLADIMIR: And we can go.

ESTRAGON: Then it'll be day again. (Pause. Despairing.)

What'll we do, what'll we do! (Becket 101).

It shows life in its real attire – changeless, meaningless and purposeless. Each day goes and another day comes but it does not make any commendable change in humanity. Either the characters get old or die away. But the life continues as it is and is a breathtaking static activity.

In *The Cyclist*, MC's psychic dilemma starts when he encounters three road-junctions. His efforts to seek help from a Passer-by and a Sage from America; his confrontation with A, B, C of the crowd who charge him with having killed their *murgi* (hen) and the landlords of the earth and heaven who accuse him of trespassing into their property on the way to new countries; his quarrel with Bandit for an alarm clock followed by his tricky conversation with Lion and Figure at the long forest; and his eventual defeat by a woman (Mermaid) who lives in the sea and calls him Sindbad, all these propose that the MC is on his world tour. But the sudden appearance of Jogeshtey uncle, his neighbour, into the scene reverses the storyline. In the denouement, MC is seen where he was in the beginning of the play and the conversation between Man (Jogeshtey Uncle) and the MC reveals the truth that the journey is not geographical but psychological.

MAN: Uh! What the hell's this racket? At this late hour? Always the same, day or night... shouting, quarrelling... what's up this time? Go on, to your bed. Quiet now [...]

MAIN CHARACTER: But Jogeshtey Uncle. I am not... you are our neighbour.

MAN: Yes I am. You doubt that?

MAIN CHARACTER: Who called you... in my consciousness...?

MAN: Conscious...? What consciousness? In the dead of night you shout as if the house's on fire and now you're getting cute? Go on, and sleep [...]

MAIN CHARACTER: Sleep? I am on my journey... journey of my world ... on this bike.

MAN (moves towards the cycle looking at it from top to bottom): On this? ... On this bicycle? There are no wheels on this bicycle, you stupid son of a bitch. Did your father ever ride a bike without wheels? How can one travel on a cycle with no wheels? Idiot! If I hear that racket again...! Enough of your world tour and our sleepless nights! (Tendulkar 40).

Obviously the duo's plays defy "paraphrasing and discussion in terms of the conventional categories of plot, character, theme or even 'meaning'." (Malick 29). Certain emptiness exists at the very centre of the plays – both formal and semantic. The plot is being organised around this vacuity. The same vacuity confronts the characters as well as the spectator while trying to understand the notion of existence. Uncritically identifying these plays as an expression of the common human condition or perceiving the tiresome experience of the characters as a universal phenomenon true for all human beings at all times and in all situations would lead to the misconception of their philosophical significance. Kenneth Tynan says:

They are essentially western, addressed to and written by members of a sophisticated intelligentsia in countries with a high standard of living. The question they pose could be summarized thus: once a man's physical needs are satisfied, what is the purpose of living? (If they are not about the universal condition, then) Whose perception of human condition does it express? (Malick 31)

Tendulkar, supporting this argument, asserts, "It unravels man's dehumanizing (due to westernisation) through a series of encounters ... I write to let my concerns vis-a-vis my reality – the human condition as I perceive it (Qtd in Bhaneja ix)." Referring to the meaningless nature of his play he comments thus, "it is a jungle in which you can always enter, but has no way out (Qtd in Bhaneja xi)."

Thus the select plays reveal human's dehumanization with the advent of modernity, through a series of confrontations which seem to be real but keep on getting increasingly surrealistic and illusory. But the critics claim:

Despite the apparent Beckettian structure, Tendulkar's play [*The Cyclist*] is neither negative not nihilistic, it is an honest search... to comprehend the mystery called life. It either could be an open-ended journey to a place which is different from where one started or it could come full circle, and end where it began (Bhaneja xi).

This remark well suits Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Both the plays remain unique in terms of their setting and casting. *The Cyclist* with a few changes in names of the personae and *Waiting for Godot* even without those changes can be enacted worldwide. Both have no restrictions in terms of locale, race, colour, and nationality. With slight modification of the cultural and geographical references given in the original texts, these can be adjusted to any region, religion, and community of the audience. To crystallise the philosophical tactics, the intimate study of the texts is a requisite. These plays suggest how man is destined to start his journey without any clues and to wait hopelessly till death. Whenever he attempts to understand the nature of life, he is left in a void. Nothing comes to his rescue. And thus, the cycle of life teaches him to get used to it. Thus the plays show how the absurd nature of human life or the meaningless existence of man on earth makes him grow cynical about everything and ultimately turns him into a nihilist or a quietist.

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