

## **SAMUEL BECKETT: COMMUNICATION OF CHAOS**

**Dibyajit Mukherjee**

Student of M.Phil  
Department of English  
University of Calcutta  
Kolkata-700073, West Bengal, India  
E-mail: dibyajitmukherjee@gmail.com  
Website: www.caluniv.ac.in

*“Chaos was the law of nature. Order was the dream of man”.*

-H.B. Adams

Theatre is not just an imitation of any particular action or emotion. Theatre is related to performance which is in turn related to the expression or the communication of a message. From ancient times theatrical performances have harped on the existence of an order which is often beyond the control of man. “Fate” for example has played an important role in controlling the lives of human beings. William Shakespeare in *King Lear* sounds the note-  
*“As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods ; they kill us for their sport”*. This conception of fate has changed in the course of time. The chaotic nature of the cosmos can be a seen as a substitute to fate in Beckett’s plays as he stresses on uncertainty being the only certainty in his theatre.

After receiving treatment from the hospital, Samuel Beckett embarked on a journey to the prison, to interrogate the unknown person who had stabbed him with a knife. The question he

had in mind and which he obviously asked was – Why? The answer or the words which were communicated to Beckett as a form of a reply was an audacious - “*Je ne sais pas, Monsieur*” (Esslin 62) which when translated into English is “I do not know”. Perhaps these words had made a more lasting experience on Beckett’s psyche than the traumatising experience of being stabbed , which is why majority of Beckett’s audience are confronted with the absolute chaos that the dramatist makes them aware of , that surrounds our daily lives. Optimism and hope are shattered by this man who wants to tell us that “*Nothing happens , nobody comes , nobody goes , it’s awful !*” ( Beckett, Samuel : *The Complete Dramatic Works* 41)

It is very interesting to note that loads of research have been done on ‘Chaos’. In 1969, Edward Lorenz propounded the “Chaos theory” which stresses on the question – can we make a long term prediction of any kind of system? Beckett seems to have an answer for this in his play *Endgame* where we see man at his most wretched form. Hamm has problems with his eyes, Nagg and Nell talk to each other from dust bins, Clov acts as a slave and looks through the telescope at the world outside only to say that it is filled with nothingness:

CLOV : Let’s see [ he looks, moving the telescope.] Zero... [he looks]...zero...[he looks]...and zero. (Beckett , Samuel : *Ibid* , 106)

It is the absolute rejection of the so called human or humane society. The breaking down of morality , order , rules and regulations can be compared to the torment , anxiety , dread and the way Europe was being shattered in the world wars. The “Chaos theory” imparts the notion that chaos is a very natural state of affairs. It is important to highlight this view point with that of the existential notion of not being born but rather thrown into a world of chaos or the Heideggerian concept of “Dasein”. In his 1924 lecture , “*The Concept of Time*”,

Heidegger proposed nothing less than a reconceptualization of what it is to be human. By “Dasein” Heidegger meant the entity in its being which we know as human life ; this entity in the specificity of its being , the entity that we each ourselves are , which each of us finds in the fundamental assertion : *I Am*” (Collins Jeff & Selina Howard , 2010). This world is naturally chaotic , frenzied and unmanagable and it is the nature of human beings to give shape to it by our own system with codes and rules. We are therefore “*thrown into being*”. The “Joker”, acted by late Heath Ledger in the Hollywood film- “The Dark Knight” remarks that these codes which human beings make for themselves is a “*bad joke*”.

Born in 1906, (just a year after the birth of Jean Paul Sartre , the great French intellectual and revolutionary) the Irishman who settled himself in France and was witness to the two ghastly “World Wars” uses confusion as his weapon to spread the message of despair which lurks within the structure of any human society. He had managed to inspire Michel Foucault, another important flag bearer in the long parade of French avant-garde thinkers. To quote Foucault from his 1969 essay “*What is an Author?*”-“Beckett nicely formulates the theme with which I would like to begin- “*What does it matter who is speaking?*”(Foucault :*What is an author?* , 1969) This formulation , which inspired Michel Foucault is primarily the emotion or rather the message that he wants to communicate if he wants to communicate at all. We should not try to see who is the speaker, rather we should see language which expresses the hopelessness to find or assign meaning to anything. Let us look at an example from a dialogue between Hamm and Clov in “Endgame”:

Hamm: Clov!

Clov: (impatiently): What is it?

Hamm: We’re not beginning to...to...mean something?

Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something!(Brief laugh)...(Beckett , Samuel :Ibid ,108)

As an audience , any anticipation to assign a fixed meaning to his plays would be a mistake. Alan Schneider was about to fall into the trap of making sense to the play *Waiting for Godot* and this is noted by Martin Esslin in his book- "*The Theatre of the Absurd*". Esslin writes:

"When Alan Schneider, who was to direct the first American production of *Waiting for Godot* , asked Beckett who or what was meant by Godot , he received the answer , if I knew , I would have said so in the play"(Esslin 44).

An interpretation of another dialogue from the same play would be sufficient to prove that all forms of rationality are like a joke to be laughed at for Mr.Samuel Beckett:

Hamm: ...Imagine if a rational being , came back to Earth , wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough.(voice of a rational being)Ah , good ,now I see what it is, yes now I understand what they're at!(Beckett ,Samuel:Ibid, 98)

From the above lines , spoken by Hamm we are confirmed about the fact that there is no rational being at the moment , as in order to be there , the person has to "*come back to Earth*". This rational being can be compared to a person representing the values of Enlightenment for whom reason is the only mode of cognition. Society is based on the formulation of rules , customs and codes which sooner or later is bound to fall apart. We should remember Yeats when he inked the lines "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". Beckett becomes this dictator of chaos as we see him bombarding our sociological structures of knowledge and ideals like the expectation of

an avatar or messiah who will eventually save us from this misery and fear. We live in a society that starts grooming or interpellating us from childhood. There is a reason why poststructuralist thinker Jacques Derrida calls childbirth a monstrosity-“*I employ these words, I admit , with a glance toward the operations of childbearing-but also with a glance toward those who , in a society from which I do not exclude myself , turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is in the offering , only under the species of the nonspecies , in the formless , mute , infant , and terrifying form of monstrosity*” . The child has to get used to the limited structure of human speech. For example a child born in England or countries where English is considered to be a signifying discourse of the ruling class , has to comprehend the vastness of this world within the letters “A” to “Z”. We try to make sense of the cosmos by merely twenty six letters. Beckett wants to remind us that this process can be a futile attempt as there are more things in the world than are dreamt of, in our philosophy. Communication for Beckett itself is a futile process and he manages to show this in his plays. Let us have a glimpse of this particular situation in his theatre. Since we are not being able to see his plays at this moment it is important that we note the stage directions that should enable us to visualise the invisible message in *Waiting for Godot*:

Vladimir: [without anger.] It’s not certain.

Estragon: No, nothing is certain.

[Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon.]...

Estragon: Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: Yes, let’s go.

[They do not move.] (Beckett , Samuel :Ibid , 52)

The second example will be from his play-“*What Where*”:

V: Good.

I am alone.

In the present as were I still.

It is winter.

Without journey.

Time passes.

That is all.

Make sense who may.

I switch off. (Beckett , Samuel :Ibid ,476 )

The last message is very important which tells us “*make sense who may*”. This line is sufficient enough to let us know that Beckett unleashes on his stage a performance which leads to the free play of interpretations rather than one fixed meaning.

Reknowned scholar and critic Vivien Mercier interprets “*Waiting for Godot*” as a play where – “*Nothing happens , twice*”. The most important feature about this interpretation is the punctuation mark of the comma which signifies a caesura. One interpretation can be made by negating the mark which would tell us that nothing happens in the two acts. Godot never comes and reiteration is seen to be the prime event which is happening in the play just like Vladimir’s poem at the beginning of Act 2:

“A dog came in the kitchen

And stole a crust of bread.

Then cook up with a ladle

And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running  
And dug the dog a tomb-  
[He stops , broods , resumes.]  
Then all the dogs came running  
And dug the dog a tomb  
And wrote upon the tombstone  
For the eyes of dogs to come:  
A dog came in the kitchen  
And stole a crust of bread.  
Then cook up with a ladle  
And beat him till he was dead.  
Then all the dogs came running  
And dug the dog a tomb-  
[He stops , broods , resumes.]” (Beckett , Samuel :Ibid , 53)

This seems to be one interpretation on the surface layer. Excavation of the play will lead us to another interpretation which voices out a situation which is similar to the duck and rabbit diagram that we can find in Raman Selden , Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker’s book of “A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory”, in the chapter dedicated to “Reader Oriented theories”. Here is where one can draw a parallel of Beckett’s plays with that of Derrida’s theory about human language. According to Derrida language itself is “*aporetic*” and a final meaning cannot be ever achieved. He believes that language is always under “*erasure*” which means that a particular word is inadequate yet necessary as the boundary of language is very small. I would also like to suggest that Beckett’s characters are almost live examples displaying the concept of “*differance*” that Derrida uses to explain the

heterogeneous features that govern the production of textual meanings. The first is the notion that words and signs can never fully summon forth what they mean, but can only be defined through appeal to additional words, from which they differ. Thus meaning is forever deferred or procrastinated. It is important to take a look at Lucky's speech in "Waiting for Godot":

"Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine atambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell...as a result of the labours left unfinished crowned by the Acacacademy of Anthropopometry of Essy-in-Possy of Testew and Cunard it is established as hereinafter but not so fast for reasons unknown..."(Beckett, Samuel: Ibid, 42)

We have here a situation that has never hit us before. A sentence which is seventy three lines in length. A situation which can be compared to Derrida's concept of "*differance*" and a notion of Chaos. Theatre has encountered this great chaos which Beckett has unleashed on stage. A kind of chaos which has made us look at further possibilities of what words may mean or what silence may refer to. It does not stop with "Waiting for Godot" but is continued in other plays as well. "*Not I*" is a play which shows us only a mouth and the whole drama goes on for around fifteen minutes with the entire stage in darkness apart from the mouth which is speaking. If we are asked about the identity of the character in this play we will have to remember the answer that Beckett was met with after interrogating the man who stabbed



him-“I do not know”. If we are not happy with this answer then we should console ourselves by saying what Vladimir and Estragon , the two tramps keep saying time and again-“Nothing to be done”. Billie Whitelaw , an actress who performed in Beckett’s “Not I” says that plenty of writers can write a play about the states of mind but the speciality of Beckett is that he puts that state of mind on stage in front of our eyes and a lot of people can recognise including her , as , when she read the play at home she burst into tears when she recognised the inner scream within her. “Not I” has the capability to frighten us and on seeing the play one feels the sensation of being in front of a storm but here the storm is not nature’s but Beckett’s storm of words which he keeps whirling around us. The nature of this chaos can be seen if we quote some lines from “Not I”:

“...start pouring it out...steady stream...mad stuff...half the vowels wrong...no one could follow...till she saw the stare she was getting...then die of shame...crawl back in...once or twice a year...always winter some strange reason...long hours of darkness...now this...this...quicker and quicker...”( Beckett , Samuel : Ibid , 382)

“No one could follow” has a great significance here from the perspective of the audience. This is because theatre is a two way process and without the audience there would be no reciprocation and without reciprocation there would not be any reaction either. Theatre is performance and this performance is done by communication. “No one could follow” has the same connection with the earlier mentioned phrase of Vivien Mercier about “Waiting for Godot” that nothing happens twice. One interpretation of “no one could follow” is that nobody could understand what is happening while the other can be seen as “no one” could follow signifying an affirmative sense that some one could follow. Who is this some one? It is “Not I”. Who is “Not I”? The Derridean “other” by which “I” can be understood. Therefore

we see that to make sense of what is going on in his theatre one has to constantly wage a battle with one's mind as he/she is encountering a message which communicates the free play of interpretations even in the form of a void or nothingness: "*nothing she could tell...nothing she could think...nothing she-...*" Tom F. Driver notes "*His talk turns to what he calls 'the mess', or sometimes 'this buzzing confusion'*". He quotes Beckett-"*The confusion is not my invention. We cannot listen to a conversation for five minutes without being acutely aware of the confusion. It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of*" (Fletcher , John : About Beckett: The playwright and the Work,2003,p 65).

Here we seem to return to that line from "What Where"-*"make sense who may"*. Beckett therefore shows his audience the mess that we are in and how difficult it is to make sense of the things going on around us as it is impossible to understand the grand structure of the chaotic cosmos. Beckett is also very relevant to our society from the few horrible rape incidents that has happened in India in the past one year. The "mouth" in "Not I" keeps screaming from time to time evoking that outrageous imagery of a woman in agony but the nothingness which follows it reminds us that being "human" is just an idea and between the idea and the reality falls a great shadow. This shadow is the voice in majority of his plays.

The Derridean "trace", (non)concept or the "absent present" which we find being communicated to us:

"...in a way...that she might do well to...groan...on and off...writhe she could not...as if in actual agony...but could not...could not bring herself...some flaw in her make-up...incapable of deceit...or the machine...more likely the machine...so disconnected...never got the message...or powerless to respond...like numbed...couldn't make the sound...not any sound...no sound of any kind...no screaming for example...should she feel so

inclined...scream...[Screams.]...then listen...[Silence]...scream again...[Screams again.]..."

This small passage which has been quoted bears astounding resemblance to the helpless woman in Delhi who was being raped mercilessly . Should we call this a normal event? No , we should not but we must realise the nature of this chaotic system whose rules are made and broken by us. Beckett therefore calls his plays the expression of the "mess".Interestingly , Beckett shows us that sometimes the constitution of chaotic systems can be silence. Silence is also a weapon and when he makes silence speak in his plays, we the readers or audience are confronted with the free play of interpretations that our brain starts

indulging in. John Fletcher notes in his book "About Beckett: the playwright & the work"-  
*"His ultimate aim in the theatre , he confided , had been to give expression to the flat , toneless human voice"*(Fletcher , John: *Ibid* ,2003 , p 61). The play "Come and Go" expresses this flat tone in the voice of three girls who keep pondering about each other but finally decide to join hands. Is this the symbolical act of human beings creating order and uniting themselves after realising the chaotic vacuum and darkness that lurks outside? Make sense

who may. When we say we are happy and content are we really so? Can happiness be achieved according to Beckett? In *Happy days* we have two characters-"Winnie" and "Willie". The former is a woman of about fifty and the latter is a man of about sixty. Winnie is stuck in a mound of Earth but she appears happy with her lipstick , nail file and the revolver which she kisses. Is she kissing the symbol of destruction? It can be assumed that the revolver makes her feel safe in a world where she is sinking as we will see in *Act Two* where the mound has risen upto her neck. "Strangeness," Beckett informs us, "was the necessary condition of the play— of Winnie's plight in the play". Strangeness is a way of being for Beckett and he is communicating this message repeatedly. "Breath" is a play which

ends in twenty five seconds and we hear the sound of “an instant of recorded vagitus” and then the inhalation and exhalation of somebody accompanied by an increase and decrease in the intensity of light. For the audience interpretation is again let loose and things start falling apart as the conventional centre undergoes a rupture. His plays should be read and seen with Derrida’s notion of the centre that he notes in his seminal essay “Structure , Sign and Play in the discourse of Human Sciences” where he states that as the centre is at the centre of totality the centre does not belong to totality and therefore the totality has its centre elsewhere. “The centre is not the centre”. Similarly for Beckett , communication is not communication as he believes in the confusion and mess that lurks within language itself. Language can never be used to communicate one holistic meaning but to signify innumerable interpretations.

Interpretations which resemble the characters in his play-“Quad” where they are moving about randomly in that small area which has been lit up and sometimes disappearing in the darkness , in chaos. The chaotic structure , or the bombarding of the stage with words is the prime aspect in his short play-“Play” where the characters ‘w1’ , ‘w2’ and M are speaking from their respective urns and sometimes they speak together causing an intolerable cacophony which is put forward before the audience. Thus we see that theatre or performance on stage for Samuel Beckett does not impart any particular kind of a message. It however refers to a chaotic structure and keeps harping on the notion of ‘time’. Lucky in “Waiting for Godot” keeps saying “time will tell”, ‘W’ in his play “Rockaby” keeps repeating the phrase “time she stopped”, ‘Flo’ , ‘Vi’ and

‘Ru’ talk about a particular point of time in their lives and observe how it has changed. The word communication comes from the latin word “communicare” which means to share. It will be clear to us from this paper that how Beckett’s theatre communicates a chaotic notion

about our existence. The character of 'Lucky' according to me can be the best example of what Beckett communicates to us. Lucky is silent and always bearing the burden of 'Pozzo' but when he speaks he voices out the storm or chaos within each of us. The silence here is the silence before the storm. The pendulum is always swinging in Beckett's theatre to and fro, from the side of silence to the side of chaos. Words for Beckett become the very stuff of his "mess", the fabric of the life and the torment of the audience and readers. We wonder how he can show us with so much ease this chaos which we fail to grasp. To define Beckett's theatre in the words of T.S.Eliot I would like to quote few lines from "Burnt Norton"-

"...words will not stay in place

Will not stay still".

The stage is not a place for semiotic capture for Beckett. Instead it shows us the play of signifiers.

## **References**

1. Beckett , Samuel . The Complete Dramatic Works .London : Faber and Faber ,2006.
2. Esslin , Martin. The Theatre Of The Absurd .London : Methuen , 2001.
3. Fletcher , John . About Beckett : the playwright & the work . London : Faber and Faber ,2006.
4. Collins , Jeff &Selina Howard . Introducing Heidegger .London : Totem Books,2010.
5. Lodge , David . Modern Criticism and Theory , A Reader . London : 1988.