

## **The Children of Chaos: Rereading Smauel Beckett and Tom Stoppard**

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**Suryendu Chaudhury**

M.A. in English (2019)

Dept. of English, University of Calcutta,

West Bengal, India.

NET Qualified (2019)

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### **Abstract**

There have been certain significant critical responses regarding Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. But there hasn't been any contribution worth mentioning that has traced an evolving pattern in the above mentioned plays. The pattern speaks about chaos. But then again how can it be chaotic and patterned? This paper seeks to provide some perspective. Moreover, in case of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* there have been more instances of intertextual analogies to Shakespeare rather than considering the independent value of the play. This paper seeks to see it more as an independent play.

**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett, Godot, Endgame, Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and chaotic.

### **Introduction**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed not only the most disastrous era of mankind due to the two World Wars but also a huge change in perception of life. There was a huge turmoil and fear that became the part and parcel of life. It was impossible for literature to remain unaffected from it as literature itself is a reflection of life. The beauty and charm of living got fragmented and dismantled and this also became true for the works of literature. New forms of poetry, innovations in novel writing and experimentations with plays emerged and gradually created the new order in literature. Psychological discourse too grabbed the greatest area of interest.

In the emergence of this order in which disorder was causing mayhem, Samuel Beckett's plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* captured the condition of mankind in the most sincere of ways. The two tramps Vladimir and Estragon are the manifestations of an ailing civilization caught on the verge of false hope. Ham and Clov, their successors are the last survivors of the metaphorical apocalypse. Tom Stoppard went to discover the transient phase of emptiness between the apocalypse and another new order through the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

### **Womb and Chaos**

All the above mentioned plays have had their emergence after the chaos created by the two World Wars. If we consider the henceforth chaos that resulted from the wars as the womb then certainly the chaos nurtured and gave birth to these children. Now children here have multiple connotations. Firstly the shaping consciousnesses of the playwrights concerned, then the texts, the central characters in them and finally the readers. Now this entire concept can be linked to how the universe came into existence, whether we apply the Big Bang theory or theological interpretations, all speak of the chaos. But then again the question arises as to where it is all headed to? This paper shows that it is headed from chaos to chaos. But the chaos that built the earth is it different from the one that is specifically being addressed to? Of course it differs too. Because the central figures of the above mentioned plays show a kind of psychological instability which can only be characteristic of a womb which is not meant for proper nurturing but the tumult of chaos. The offspring's show considerable derangement. But again it is normal and natural because it reflects the chaos. This aberration becomes the order of the day. However, since the change is also a part, it calls forth to attention the concept of mutation.

### **Time**

Time is not seen after the modernist period to be linear but as circular and even fragmented. However, the plays considered under study in this paper show not only a linear progression from *Waiting for Godot* to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* but also a circular pattern. Now this cannot be the case because the two movements are antagonistic but here they run parallel!

Though it is stated that the two scenes of the play *Waiting for Godot* takes place on two different days, what is felt after reading the play is the concept of a time loop. The same day seems to repeat itself and there are even the chances of repeating it again and again. In the play *Endgame* the final moments of apocalypse is portrayed. Here time ticks towards doom though it seems that the day or the time both are the "same as usual". The repetitions of words like 'zero', 'finished' and 'end' indicate the time can't progress chronologically. Hamm states "time was never and time is over" (52). Perhaps the time loop in which Didi and Gogo get caught continues and Ham and Clov are none other than the tramps!

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* the concept of time is even more complicated. Time here is caught in a void. Timelessness experienced by Gogo, Didi, Hamm and Clov has moved a state further in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* as Ros and Guil don't experience anything. To be strictly speaking there is "absence of presence....the endless time of never coming back ... a gap you can't see" (116) as pointed out by Guil. According to Ros they "drift down time clutching at straws." (99). However, the sense of progression to be in

reality thwarted we again find ourselves in the same evening in which we saw Didi and Gogo. It comes up to the point of Ros and Guil and the wheel turns inward yet again.

### **Socio-Economic Order**

The war stricken world is perfectly portrayed in the *Endgame* when mankind was caught in the loop of tremendous existential crisis. The world remained crimped like Ham and Clov, neither able to move nor contemplate in a poised fashion. The lack of occupational opportunities had reduced the milieu into tramps like Gogo and Didi. The endless wait for the employer who may be Godot is altogether hopeless. Mindless repetitions of words and phrases dominate the speeches of Didi and Gogo too. Vladimir asks Estragon five times if the latter wants to get rid of Lucky till Estragon gives a reply. The word 'nothing' appears multiple times beginning from the very commencement of the play when Gogo says "Nothing to be done." (1).

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* the game of coin tossing that continues between Ros and Guil take the sense of purposelessness to the pinnacle. The Player and his group also appear to be the mere shadow of their glorious days of the past. The Player states that he has no money to place a wager and hence puts his team member Alfred as bet, which is condemnable.

The crumbling of the entire social structure is portrayed through the crisis of identification that continues from Gogo and Didi to Ros and Guil. Even the overturning of the equation between Lucky and Pozzo is extremely important in this regard. Ethics and manners take a back seat in mindless application of abusive and sexually charged words. In being devoid of an order the plays in question delve into the realm of the absurd. Life itself becomes a series of endless questions to which no satisfying answers could be found. The answers itself seem to pose even more questions, even doubting the existence of the divine presence as is found in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*.

### **Politics at Play**

The political scenario after the Second World War had witnessed many significant changes. While USA and USSR emerged as the two new superpowers, the sun had set over the British Empire. Most of the British colonies gained freedom. The economy and infrastructure of France was destroyed. There was huge loss of life and socio economic order in Germany, Italy and Japan. Through certain subtle references the political instability of the world at large has been expressed in the plays: *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Estragon is a French name, Vladimir is a Russian name, Pozzo is an Italian name and Lucky is an English name. The diversity in names is extremely suggestive of strong

undercurrents beneath. Beckett, himself being an Irish by birth and Ireland being an English colony for long there might have been some concealed feelings in this regard. Though Lucky is mostly kept silent throughout the play, when he speaks it doesn't add much to the credibility of the play. The equation between Pozzo and Lucky is almost overturned in the Second Act indicating a change in the power structure. However, Lucky isn't able to articulate anything further. Further when Estragon repeatedly questions about the rights, Vladimir asserts that they had "got rid of them" (11).

Hamm in the *Endgame* is often worried that if he is in the centre or not. He repeatedly asks Clov about it and urges him to put him in the centre, although the apocalypse is raging outside their residence. To quote from William Butler's *The Second Coming*: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" is indicative of the reality contained within the play. Ros and Guil are the ordinary people unable to comprehend the power structures surrounding them to which they fall prey.

### **Absurd**

The very word says it all. The world inhabited by the survivors of the Second World War was devoid of meaning, hope, purpose and value. Gogo and Didi wait for someone who they name as Godot. They consider the idea of even self destruction but hold it at bay for the sake of Godot. Though Godot doesn't show up in the play and it's uncertain whether there would be any assistance from Godot, yet the two tramps cling onto a false hope. Godot for them is "a leap of faith", an idea put forward by Soren Kirkegard as he described it as a leap made by faith.

In case of Hamm and Clov the apocalypse is raging outside and they too shall get caught in it sometime. A boy is seen outside by Clov but he cannot be the embodiment of any faith as it's too late for it. It's the endgame. The ultimate meaning of life is lost as the very idea to mean something is mocked at by Clov. As Hamm points out "reckoning closed and story ended." (52).

Meaning is perhaps hinted at in death as is suggested by the title of the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. It seems as if we are reading the death of two individuals being reported. The play is a perfect instance that defines the myth of Sisyphus as highlighted by Albert Camus. The only thing that intrigues Ros and Guil is the tossing of coins which shows the futility of the entire situation. The play is a revisiting into the realm of the dead just to listen to the echoes of two subaltern voices of Ros and Guil. It seems that they refuse to submit to any moral code and try to experience each moment even though there's no hope, thereby following the ways of the absurd man as put forward by Albert Camus. Ros and Guil vanish at the end of the play as if they never existed and prove their presence as part of the absence!

### **Dementia and Other Complications**

The realm of the absurd and the apparently meaningless way of life as depicted in the above mentioned plays is pervaded through a medical condition of dementia. This way of looking into the plays gives us a much more psychological viewpoint rather than the usual psychoanalytical one. Gogo and Didi seem mostly to forget things, including their identity. They both are unable to keep track of time and are confused regarding what day of the week it might be. Even Pozzo too states about his memory being 'defective' (31).

Hamm talks about "something dripping" (19) in his head, perhaps its blood. This may be due to some internal haemorrhage in the brain or concussion of any sort. As a result his cognitive functions have become weak. He has lost the ability to contemplate and also to recollect much of the memories. His words are disoriented and his thoughts are distorted. Clov too realises that whatever is discussed by him and Hamm doesn't mean anything. This is also symptomatic of mental derangement. The same questions, words and phrases get repeated without any reason indicating the lack of proper coordination of the neurons.

Ros, Guil, Hamm, Clov, all are troubled by the post traumatic stress syndrome which is largely responsible for their deranged conduct. Ros and Guil are no exceptions. Guil considers he's absorbed in "private atonement for an unremembered past" (6). Like Hamm Ros too is unable to remember the apt words for a situation and turns tongue-tied. This is a clear indication of the affected nerve cells. The Player brings forth the failure of language as a means of communication as he says "we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style." (69). Ros and Guil also engage in the game of questions and answers that leads to nowhere.

Moreover, to all these are added some physiological shortcomings too. Gogo has stinking feet and Didi has stinking breath. Pozzo is blind. Hamm is blind and is bound to a wheel chair, while Clov cannot sit. Nag and Nell have lost their lower halves due to some accident and literally live the life of pets. Though Ros and Guil do not seem to suffer from any physiological ailment the title of the play indicates from the commencement that both of them are already dead.

### **The Pairs and Duality**

It is an easily discernible fact that the chaos portrayed through the seemingly unstructured plays centres around pairs and the concept of duality, although there's no centre in the play. In *Waiting for Godot*, there are two pairs of characters who have the greatest influence in the play, besides the absent Godot: Gogo and Didi and Lucky and Pozzo. It is often debated that in each pair there's duality of aspects. For instance Didi is considered pragmatic, while Gogo is a dreamer. Pozzo signifies the intellectual and Lucky

stands for the sensual. However, this duality is too apparent. The plurality of aspects is the more pronounced in this regard.

In the *Endgame*, Hamm and Clov signify apparently the wit and the labour. But on proper introspection Clov seems to be the wish of Hamm that roams but is bound to the master. Nag and Nell are the parallel existence of the carnal caught up in an otherwise unnatural state in which there's no scope of desire being fulfilled. Finally we have the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* in which apparently Ros seems to be the more stable and intelligent than Guil. However, by the end of the play Ros and Guil seem to be mirror images, or two echoes of the same sound. In order to simplify the complicated, labelling the multiplicity as duality, is rather unacceptable. However, the pairs are significant in keeping the dynamics of the plays.

### **Regarding Godot**

In *Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon wait for it, the apocalypse arrives in *Endgame*. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* the entire action takes place post apocalypse as is evident from the title. Also specific questions concerning Godot's sex and comparison of Godot to some superhuman beings of the comic book world are to be considered because these comic book superheroes are also in a manner born from chaos perhaps as their antagonists (or may be not).

Godot can be compared to almost any member of the fictitious Justice League appearing in comics published by DC Comics. Godot can be an alien like J'onn the Martian, a kryptonian like Superman. Godot can be an invincible woman warrior like Wonder Woman. There is no defining explanation to suggest that Godot can't be a woman. Godot can even be the Dark Knight popularly known as the Batman. However, as it can be understood that all of these superhuman figures or comic book characters follow their own brand of justice which in most cases involves mayhem and violence.

Despite being physically absent throughout the play Godot is the most influential character of the play. Godot can be compared to God, but that is a very apparent connotation. If Godot is androgynous then there is perfection and completion in Godot. Godot is a vacant space, a void, which can be filled in by anyone. If Godot had come then perhaps the mystery and the enigma regarding this name would have evaporated all together. Perhaps Guil remembers of a vision or a dream in which his and Ros's name was called out. It may have been possible that Godot did come just before the apocalypse and even after his death Guil recollects seeing Godot in a haze which is echoed in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

## Conclusion

This paper by applying the above data and interpretative approaches seeks to move beyond the realms of theory and find authentic answers to some deep rooted questions and gaps. However, by doing so it may build up some stepping stone to new ideological discourse (or theory). There is definitely an endeavour to find a channelizing of the absurd in the realm of life. However, there is no attempt to structure the chaos (or unstructured) because it is beyond theory or perspective to do so.

The plays *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* have not been discussed together as a series to a great extent and that too considering such issues. Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard, both having witnessed the devastation created by the two world wars have realized the chaos better than the most and in ways that are never concerned about explaining too much. They have told their fragmented stories based on the splintered reality around them. This paper examines the realm of chaos in reference to the aforementioned plays and tries to identify whether it has some pattern or not and how does that pattern defy our sense of patterns.

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