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CRITIQUING THE POST-MODERNIST CRITIQUE OF 'MEANING' IN LITERARY TEXT
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO 'WAITING FOR GODOT'

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ABSTRACT

Post-Modernism tries to show that looking for the presence of a fixed 'meaning' in a literary text is a futile activity since there is no such thing present there. Contemporary literature, especially 'Absurd Drama', is an effective means to bring forth the absence of any kind of fixed meaning in life as well as in literature. 'Waiting for Godot'—the two act play by Samuel Backet, is presented in the article to show that at least the view--*the absence of fixed meaning*, has to be retained with fixity as a second order statement despite the fact that it is written deliberately with intension to frustrate the attempts to ascribe any fixed meaning to the dialogues uttered by the characters. Meaninglessness of our projects in our lives is an Existentialist theory which stands on certain empirical and rational grounds. This theory has a wide appeal and it influences the common folk and intellectuals alike. But this influence is very largely due to well presented persuasive argument behind it. This latently functioning argument is a second order or meta-theoretical statement about any literary text that could be discerned if examined closely. Without acceptance of this second order statement the text would lose all its importance since it would not communicate the theory of absurdity which it intends to communicate definitely.

'Meaning' is like a taboo word in Post Modernism. It is not to be talked of and one should not search for it in any literary text since it is a meaningless endeavour. This radicalism against the search for meaning in literature is rationally unacceptable and untenable. This small paper aims to show that although the Post-Structuralist idea of deconstruction that stands behind Post-Modernist writing, emerged as a critique of conventional view regarding 'meaning' and 'rationality', is itself a meticulously advocated *rational* view. This paper is a critique of the Post-Modernist critique of the idea of meaning in a literary text. 'Waiting for Godot', which is one of the representative pieces of Post Modernist literature, is made a reference point for this purpose.

'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett is considered to be a revolutionary play in many sense. Any conventional play has a specific setting and background. Even if a play begins abruptly, one can understand the backdrop and the context through the dialogues of the characters on which the play's ground is rooted. However, there is absence of any such thing in this play. Two tramps appear on the scene. Who they are? what they are? and where they are from?-- are questions that are not answered. The scene of the play is a country side. Again, this can be any country side. "Nothing to be done" seems to be the catchphrase of this place. In a story, in which it is very difficult to construe the exact theme and background, this catchphrase

seems to serve the purpose of both. Vladimir and Estragon are present in front of a tree. Estragon is struggling to take off his boots. However, he fails to take them out. And he follows the great words, "Nothing to be done." It is a play where nothing happens. Even the boots do not come out. But this happening of nothing is not a simple case of boredom. All the trivialities that take place during the two acts appear like comic acts of two clowns. However, there is a clear undertone of anguish or agony. Estragon informs that he had spent the entire night in a ditch and he was beaten by many persons. Then, there is a slight hint to a better past life. There was a time when these two tramps were presentable people who used to visit the Eiffel Tower. However, now it seems that they can't repair their fortunes any more. In their beleaguered state, they might not even be allowed in the Eiffel Tower any more. Despite the strong strain of obscurity it can be clearly seen that this play is not a comedy of errors despite its comical presentation. It is not a slapstick comedy of any kind. The two men, though clownish, appear more pitiable than humorous.

Vladimir then takes off his hat, peers into it and feels inside and shakes it. While so doing, he repeats the same words--"Nothing to be done."¹ Perhaps 'Nothing to be done', is like saying that nothing could be done about how things are.

These tramps do not just fool around. They start discussing theology. They talk about the two thieves who were crucified with Christ². Their discussion does not hint towards any kind of pro-theological thesis. Their remarks rather raise doubt on the issue of salvation and freedom through religion. Survival of one person on the cross (i.e. Jesus) was only a matter of chance. Moreover, they further state that only four evangelists talk about the thieves, while the three remain silent. With their skeptical observations it becomes very clear that the theme of the play is not meant to promote theism. In fact, it seems to question the hope of freedom through a religious method. While talking about these things, the two tramps are waiting for a mysterious figure named 'Godot'. Most critics believe that he can be no one but God and his arrival seems to be most uncertain. Estragon thinks that Bible is nothing but a book that is attractive because of its map of the holy land. That is the only value of religious texts for these two skeptics.

The two characters are waiting for Godot under a dead Willow tree. This tree is nothing more than a bush for Estragon. The two men begin to talk about Godot. Their conversation is full of contradictions. First of all, there is no certainty of Godot's coming although they are waiting there for him only. They are also not sure whether they were present in the same spot yesterday. Then there is complete confusion regarding the day of meeting. The two men do not even know, whether it is Sunday or Monday or Friday. Deconstructive analysis tries to reveal that a text is made of contradictory elements but in this case all kind of conflicting and contradictory elements weave into the very fabric of this text. As discussed earlier, logical consistency is a false criteria to either judge or misjudge literature. A literary text cannot be but like an epistemic system and be written off only by forgetting about consistency.

Estragon wants to sleep but Vladimir does not allow him to. Estragon wants to narrate his nightmares but Vladimir is not willing to listen to them either. Then, they think that it would be better if they part but soon they realize that parting also might be equally bad. The two characters behave almost clownishly. Yet, it is clear that they are not making comedy. Everything that they intend to do is negated very soon. The contradictoriness that is present within becomes very visible.

Endless waiting is definitely the glaring theme in this play. While, waiting Vladimir suggests that they should hang themselves from the branch of a nearby tree. His words seem to show his desperate mental state but his saying in the same line that the branches might break under his weight does not allow to draw this conclusion either. By making this kind of remark he again makes a comical observation and the contradictory thematic elements become visible again. However, it will have to be accepted that these remarks arouse a kind of pathos for the two tramps than humor. This reflects their complete desperation. It also reveals the instable mental state or sort of-madness of the two characters. This madness does not arouse laughter, it arouses pathos.

The ambiguity continues with the text. The two men do not know what they had actually asked from Godot. Perhaps they had said a vague prayer to Godot. Estragon asked what reply did Godot give. Then, again the wordplay begins. Vladimir suggests that Godot will have to think this over in the quiet of his home. Then, the following dialogue arrives where Vladimir suggests that he will have to consult his family:

Estragon: His friends.
Vladimir: His agents
Estragon: His correspondents
Vladimir: His books
Estragon: His bank accounts...³

This meaningless wordplay is typical to the construction of this play. This is what it puts it in the category of 'Absurd Drama'. No clue is left so that anyone construe any meaning out of it. No one can envisage what sort person Godot is. Complete ambiguity shrouds this character named Godot and this long dialogue without any context is brought in purposefully to evoke that it is vacuous of any meaningful content. To reveal the meaningless-ness of human life has been the motive of the absurd drama. By using such techniques this vacuous-ness could be made conspicuous. The catchword of the play is reasserted, 'Nothing to be done' and reminds the reader of this viciousness.

Above scene is followed by the violent arrival of Pozzo and Lucky. In this play that contains not much sense, the violence in Pozzo's treatment of Lucky is most heart rending. M H Abrams, in his essay, "The Deconstructive Angel" blamed Miller for ignoring the fact that a very important role of literature is to depict the experience of life⁴. This fact might sometimes be independent of factors like linearity, context and coherence that is commonly associated with a conventional kind of literature. After confusion and more confusion after their arrival and meeting with the tramps Pozzo makes the following important comment.

'You are human beings none the less..... As far as one can see....Of the same species as myself.....Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God's image.'⁵

This is a sombre piece of observation. This is the recognition that all human beings are of the same family even if they belong from different parts of the world. He states that this applies even to Pozzo, who has been converted to a situation worse than that of brutes. Besides the superficial tomfoolery of these tramps the play is sprinkled with such grave observations, which makes it amply clear that this text has solemn connotations. This inclination of the play cannot be denied by a skeptical reader who might like to refuse any kind of certainty while reading the text. The two tramps keep contradicting each other and hence, go on making this text most vulnerable for a deconstructive reading. When Pozzo inquires about Godot, Vladimir replies that he is their acquaintance but Estragon contradicts him immediately. This contradictory strain is present throughout the text. Following Miller's approach an uncanny critic can use this kind of example to substantiate the disintegrated quality of the text. But on subtler analysis something else also is revealed. This contradictory strain is an essential aspect of the structure of this play and hence, it is not its undoing but rather its unique characteristic. The Pozzo and Lucky relationship is the most poignant aspect of this text.

Vladimir and Estragon observe that Pozzo's treatment to Lucky is very harsh. Vladimir complains about it and Estragon calls it a disgrace. However, Pozzo gives no certain reply. He talks about his impertinence. He thanks them for their society then, he starts conversing about his smoking habits and how nicotine is absorbed despite of the precautions. Continued sentences only mean something in a phrase, when they are connected to each other. However, very often in this text we come across conversations, where previous sentences have no immediate connection to the following sentences and this makes the text confusing. Again, this lack of logical consistency, which makes the text ambiguous, is neglected to promote the impressionistic aspect of this work of art. The lack of meaning that is generated through these sentences, emphasizes the absurdity of everything that is taking place.

Pozzo is going to take Lucky to sell him in a fair. He utters in contempt that one cannot drive such creatures away. While, Estragon in pity observes that he is crying. With further contempt Pozzo says that old dogs have more dignity. In pity Vladimir makes an attempt to wipe his tears. But he is kicked by Lucky. As a result Vladimir cries in anger. Here we can see utter contempt in Pozzo for the slave. On the other hand, the two men feel pity for him. It is quite evident through their dialogues that the range of emotions that these characters go through. Pozzo's total disdain, sympathy of the two tramps and consequent indignation of Vladimir are quiet obvious for any reader. These cannot be read as anything else by any reader.

Pozzo goes on to make some remarks that seem profound. He states that tears of the world are constant and further states that the same applies to laughs. He observes that therefore they should not speak well of their generation, neither should they speak ill of their generation. There is ambivalence in what he utters.

Are these statements mere verbal nothingness? Do these statements mean something profound? No answer can be given with certainty. Indeed, it is entirely for the reader to interpret the concerned sense of these sentences. However, here too we find certain indicators for meaning. The sentences that talk about tears definitely evoke a sense of pathos, while those that talk about laughter carry a different mood. Pozzo further says that it was Lucky who taught him beautiful things in life. This brutal master then sobs for his servant and utters that he used to be so kind, helpful and entertaining to him. He calls him his good angel. Then, he states that now he has started killing him. Then, he becomes calmer and asks for forgiveness for all that he said. It is evident that even in this atrocious master, Beckett reveals a tender aspect. Any reader, from any subjective criteria cannot miss this.

The absurd wordplay goes on. The tramps call the evening as charming and unforgettable. However, in subsequent dialogues they dismiss it as awful and worse than pantomime.

The reading of 'Waiting for Godot' leaves the reader initially in a fix about its meaning but he is transported to a different state of confusion when he reminds himself that he is reading a text meant for evoking the sense of meaningless-ness and absurdity. A serious critic of literature, however, can't end up just in this sort of confusion.

Certain issues are to be examined carefully. First of all it should be clear what type of meaningless-ness the writer is intending to arouse in the reader. At least two senses could be enumerated at the outset. One, every text is meaningless since no fixed meaning could be attributed to it. It could be called the issue of textual meaningless-ness.

Two, attempt to find a definite meaning in a text is a meaningless exercise since there is no purpose or plan in life: it is meaningless: it is absurd. The two senses are different from one another and need to be examined separately.

Post-Structuralists raise the issue of meaningless-ness of text whereas some existentialist like Jean Paul Sartre tries to show the absurdity of life. Both the issues would be examined in the following paragraphs. It is clear that the proponents of meaningless-ness of literary texts intend to state their view in a categorical way. Their view is that literary texts have no fixed meaning. Post-Modernist writers who are themselves the supporters of this view or in whose literary work this view reflects, have a clear and definite purpose behind their writing and that purpose contains a definite meaning. To show the purposeless-ness of literary writing and to stop the reader to venture to find a fixed meaning in it is their clear intension. These writers want to bring forth and promote a typical chaotic meaning that could be identified by its chaos. The so-called 'stream of conscious style of writing' is given a specific shape so that it could emerge as an inconsistent text and could be called meaningless. Different Post-Modernist writers are typically recognized by thus typical feature. Meaningless-ness is brought to fore with the very definite meaning that it should not be mistaken as a systematic and consistent literary work. Logical consistency is the minimal requirement of meaningful-ness of any text. Lack of consistency in some part of the text could be accepted as a flaw but to maintain it thoroughly is a very consistent attempt and the Post-Modernist writers quite carefully maintain this consistency to arouse in the reader a typical flavour of reading a different type of text. The above quoted dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon show this fact very clearly. The two vagrants could talk about pathetic things, even dirty things, about someone they are waiting for but that would be conventionally meaningful. A Post-Modernist writer can't choose to do that. He is constrained by his clear intension to maintain absurdity to arouse a typical meaning in the minds of the reader. Careful maintenance the chaos in the text is the fixed and definite meaning of such writings. No Post-Modernist writer could afford not to maintain the chaos consistently. They would slip into the category of old-fashioned Modernist writers if they dare to become careless in this regard. It is not strange that the Post-Modernist writers try to evoke a definite typical meaning in and through their writings although superficially they seem to stand firm against the search any fixed meaning (or any meaning at all). It is not strange since it is logically impossible for any communication not to maintain the identity of intension of what is to be communicated. What one wants to communicate through her/his writing is typically

known to the writer at least in part. Even if someone wants to communicate about the impossibility of communication of any matter, she/he knows it clearly in advance. There would not be any literary writing possible if the writer has no intension to create a literary text through her/his writing and to have such a definite intension implies a clear identification of the theme by the writer. Without this identification no distinction is possible between a literary text and a text written by the same writer for some other purpose (e.g. sending a message to a friend, writing down the recipe for a new dish etc.). The writer even if she/he is a devout Post-Modernist does distinguish between his literary writing and other writings. Even if she/he writes words on a piece of paper without any purpose, she/he could and does distinguish it from her/his that (so-called) meaningless writing which she/he identifies as a literary writing.

It is important to acknowledge that a good literary text could come from the mind of a creative writer in a state of his mental aberration but once it comes up the writer also could identify it as a special writing not to be left and lost in vain. To capture that peculiar mental state in its purity and to bring it into the public domain could be a sincere and honest attempt of the writer. That is perhaps the reason of the style of writing often called 'the streams of consciousness. Those Post-Modernist writers deserve applaud who venture into it. But it is also to be noted very seriously that the writes should not (and need not) be the thinkers of their own writing at the second order of reflection. It is not necessary for a writer to know the logic of any literary writing; especially that of 'stream of consciousness' type writing. Any type of literary writing presupposes the maintenance of identity of the writer's intension. This could be the intension of writing a literature consistently and systematically and it could also be the intension of writing a literature to show the inconsistencies and chaos in our thoughts pouring in the mind ceaselessly. A writer of 'stream of consciousness' style need not bother about the logical presupposition (of maintenance of identity of intension). Logic of writing literary text takes care of itself since the writer is human being who can't escape rationality. A human being qua human can't help thinking rationally. So a writer, who is also a human being) can't help it.

Those writers, who also want to become the logicians of literary writings, either fail to see and acknowledge the logical requirement of literary writings or try to do logic-chopping in vain. That Post-Modernist literature, which intend to bring forth the absurdity and chaos in our serious systematic thinking also is welcome and deserve applaud but those works of literature, which tries only to ridicule literature for their meaningfulness, definitely ridicule themselves as meaningless.

Another sense of meaningless comes from the Existentialist Philosophy like that of Sartre. Man is condemned to be free as Sartre observes. Man is not free to freely enjoy his freedom: he is condemned for it since he can never choose not to choose and he has to between the alternatives neither of which he likes. Life is meaningless from the very beginning since one has to do what one never planned or even thought to do. Moreover, the finality of death proves the absurdity of all the project man undertakes in life. Depiction of this theme is to bring a very important truth of human life. Existentialist literary works like 'Nausea' present this truth in a powerful manner⁶. A departure from the conventional style and ethics of literary writing contribute in giving power to such literary work. Absurdity of life and anguish emerging inevitably from it can't be presented in a soothing and aristocratic style. Words too need to be the bearer of sense of absurdity and anguish. However, such works don't question the logic of literary writing. So the criticism made against the Post-Modernist writers doesn't apply to the Existentialist writers.

There is a paradox in the Post-Modernist critique of 'meaning'. It attempts to throw off 'meaning' from its traditional seat could succeed only if its traditional seat is allowed at the second order of reflection.

Work Cited

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