

Roaring Reticence: Listening the Unsaid in the Plays of Samuel Beckett

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Abstract: *Theatre of Absurd has always been known for its non linear approach towards everything that constitutes in making a play meaningful. As a pioneer of theatre of Absurd, Beckett's distrust towards language is known to all. Words were always in a line of fire from him. He believed in expressing without expressing at all i.e., through the use of silence. He is well known for his non sequitur, repetitive dialogues and the use of silence in between the lines. This paper examines Beckett's use of silence in some of his plays. His silence was not without a purpose. It always brought out the most sublime emotions of the characters to surface and made the spectators to face the glaring realities of his times, i.e., emptiness, meaninglessness and failures. To Beckett words always fail man as such silence is the best way to discern the forlorn arenas of human heart and psyche.*

Key words: *Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Silence and Pauses.*

*"I use the words you taught me.
If they don't mean anything anymore, teach me others.
Or let me be silent."*

The twentieth- century drama clamored about the unattainable, incomprehensible, and the undecipherable human existence, but the verbalization was not in words but 'silence'. The playwrights of this century had crossed over the purlieu of well defined linguistic codes of human communication and entered into the realms that were extirpated of words, stripped of meaning. They were dealing with avalanche of emotions that were far beyond expression and could not be encompassed in lofty and tortuous speeches. All this does not mean at all that the plays were deprived of words, but it is in the silences that we understand the characters, their despairs, agony, and we can see through the mesh the most poignant of fellow beings. This quality of expression without anything being expressed is well stated in the words of the famous playwright Harold Pinter "I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility." (Gale, 2003, p. 66)

Words no more conveyed anything meaningful, they seemed to be nothing but meaningless blabber that failed to bring to surface even the most commonplace human experiences. Language stopped being a reliable tool that could be used to assimilate and penetrate the crust of dialogues so as to infer the deeper meanings. It was here that the words lost their significance and the use of silence made its way through the mayhem of the catastrophic world after the World War II that was plenteous of miseries and disillusioned souls. Who can be better speakers of those horrors than the one who had firsthand experience of that huge devastation that took its toll not only of human life, but also sabotaged the notion of life as a sublime hammock that swings to and fro to the rhythms of sweet joys and discordant despairs. Instead, the cosmos was engulfed by the thick gray mist of disillusionment, despair and debris of shackled minds and soul. Eugene Ionesco gives word to these thoughts:

The fact of being astonishes us, in a world that now seems all illusion and pretence, in which all human behavior tells of absurdity and all history of absolute futility; all reality and all language appear to lose their articulation, to disintegrate and collapse... (Cole, 2001, p. 145)

Utterances became hollow, language was mutilated and punctured thus losing its essence as a meaningful bearer of messages and when the destruction of language is concerned who can be a finer writer than Samuel Beckett. To write about Samuel Beckett is a voluptuous task in itself. Much has been written about him that each and every time lightens up a new aspect from the life and works of this great author. He was the one who gave a whole new dimension to the world of theatre. His plays herald the theatre of the absurd. *Waiting for Godot* gave a complete novel outlook to the theatre. It played with the nerves of the audiences tickling as well as pinching them, they learned to laugh but not without bearing the pain. *Endgame* made all to enter into a world much gory and destroyed by a catastrophe. To some critics it was a play a shade darker than *Waiting for Godot*. The play hammers us down with its soul shattering desperation and heart ranching desolation. "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (Beckett, 1958, p.18) evokes the starkest reality of human existence. It resonates Beckett's inner turmoil, anxieties and sullen disposition that haunted him throughout his life. The stark image of humanity became an emblem in his works. *Krapp's Last Tape* showcases the boredom and loneliness that are to be endured without any hope of rejuvenation. There is no beginning and hence no ending in Beckett's plays. "It's finished" (1958, p.1) is the first line of his play *Endgame*. It is clear that Beckett's characters are waiting for the death 'the ultimate end of sufferings'. *Act Without Words I* and *II* give expression to the most supreme

sufferings. The intensity of the pathos is made clear by loss of faith in language, the most important tool of communication. Loss has been done and is irreparable.

Beckett is the most famous writer belonging to '*The Theater of Absurd*' and one of the most widely read and talked about author of the century. The language used by him was a jargon of ambiguity full of cynical self-denial, and arcane semblances. In his plays silence cannot be considered as lack of communication but as a novel way to communicate the unsaid emotions, fears and lost hopes. Beckett used this technique of saying much without saying anything at all in many of his plays like '*Waiting for Godot*', '*Endgame*', '*Krapp's Last Tape*', '*Act Without Words I and II*'. He used techniques such as pauses, music and complete silence to articulate all that is beyond the scope of verbal language. Beckett's distrust with language is well defined by McDonald:

"Beckett has registered his dissatisfaction with language, his desire to find expressiveness in the spaces in between words. In a famous letter to Alex Kann, he speaks of his quest to tear holes in language: 'more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it'. Not surprisingly, then, the most expressive moments in his plays often occur in the pauses and silences, indicating, at turns, repression, fear, anticipation or horrified inarticulacy."
(McDonald, 2009, p.150)

Throughout the play Beckett has shown the breakdown of communication in the form of pauses and silence which represent uncertainty and waiting as the characters are not at all sure if Godot will appear at all. Beckett was always vexed by the idea of using meaningful language. The world of *Waiting for Godot* was symbolic of the world that had lost all meanings; as such it was paradoxical to represent the meaningless with meaningful words. His characters speak but not out of obligation to communicate but only to register their being on this wasteland. The long drawn silences of Beckett unsettle us but at the same time stupefy and allure us; we become a part of it. The adherence becomes more self satiating as we appreciate the latent sentiments cloaked in the silence as Aspasia suggests, "In *Waiting for Godot*, the catalysts of speech are 'Silence' and 'Pause,' the very elements which undermine the emotions to which the characters lay claim and which prevent them occupying any decisive area of commitment. Silence breaks the continuity of words and conveys meaning in its totality." (Aspasia, 1982)

ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.

VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: It is not sufficient.

Silence.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Likes ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

Long silence.

VLADIMIR: Say something!

ESTRAGON: I'm trying.

Long silence. (Cluman, 1962, p. 52)

The dialogue above shows Beckett's mastery on how to bind together two extreme opposites' i.e. words and silence, as if strokes of gray and black have been spilled out on a canvas encompassing loneliness of all worldly souls. Many reflections, recollections and images fill our minds in response to the pauses and silences used by Beckett. He uses them with great perfection to showcase the treachery of fate, relationships, and all the physical and metaphysical matters that make this universe as a whole against the man who is helpless and destined to suffer forever. *Waiting for Godot* is a window to see his craftsmanship in the use of silence. The play abounds in silence as Beckett himself confesses 'silence is pouring into this play like water into a sinking ship'. (Fletcher, 2000, p. 52) Words and phrases as spoken by the characters in his plays are nothing but paltry efforts to communicate meanings that can no more be justified. When the existence itself is absurd words are unable to expurgate the gap between what is being uttered and what it signifies. As such, the same routine words are emblazoned with completely different connotations as Fletcher and Spurling note, "Beckett made... impotent, stultified words and phrases express their own inadequacy, trace the outlines of silence and loss." (Fletcher & Spurling, 1978, p.117)

As the title of this paper suggests, silence in the plays of Beckett is not to be taken as unheard whimpers of desolate tramps that inhabit his world, instead it speaks aloud, rather, roars louder and manifests itself better than any verbal expressions. Repetitive use of silence in the plays is a technique that brings out the more humane aspects of the characters, isolating them from the words as well as from each other. Silence has been used by Beckett not to dismantle language, but rather to consolidate the audience/readers of his play with his own view that deriving meaning from language is no more a matter of concern as he himself says, "there is no communication because there are no vehicles of

communication.” (Beckett, 1965, p.64) This wonderful use of silence that says everything is well defined in the words of Leslie as follows:

“Linguistically structuring his dramas with repetition nonprogressional pauses, unanswered questions, and silences, this playwright has authentically portrayed the confusion and uncertainty of experience while implying that less is more. Essentially Beckett dramatizes the anguish of finite man at grips with the infinite, but the word, grasping at the unsayable, remains unsaid.” (Kane, 1984, p.129)

Endgame, another celebrated play of Beckett abounds in silence; it begins where *Waiting for Godot* ends. Like Vladimir and Estragon, Clov and Hamm also communicate only to keep the realization alive that they exist. The play begins with silence with Clov moving around. The play breaks free of all the confines of language and lauds the disintegration by highlighting the silence between the dialogues of the characters. This silence fills in the absence of words and makes their presence felt more deeply. The silence which covers the stage is not unproductive one, and as such, the spectator or reader is not completely baffled so as to go completely astray. Rather, it beckons us to move out of this convoluted structure of language and go beyond that which is unchanging. ‘*Endgame*’ does not come to its end with established dominance of language but in silence that dare challenge it and does win. Beckett presents the impossible dramatic technique of keeping quiet, but still expressing everything. Beckett repeatedly addresses this problem of expression, but he makes clear in his plays that he believes that full communication is ultimately impossible. Hamm would like to be a poetic writer and even in his monologues he searches for the right words:

HAMM: A little poetry. [*Pause.*]
You prayed - [*Pause. He corrects himself.*]
You CRIED for night; it comes - [*Pause. He corrects himself.*]
It FALLS: now cry in darkness. [*Pause.*]
Nicely put, that. (Beckett, 1958, p.83)

There is a meager effort at communication throughout the play. The characters are reluctant to hear each other. The pauses used in the play form the crux besides the themes of loneliness and meaningless of life. The audiences have time for fertile speculation of these blank spaces ‘pause’ in between the words and creating their own meaning, as Beckett simply denies giving any interpretation of any of his works. Beckett again

introduces the silence of insufficiency of finding words to converse with, and to converse to, as one is always indifferent towards the presence of other. One good example of this silence capable of stinging us with pain is when Clov tells Hamm about how he and Nell used to get away with his crying “*We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace.*” (1958, p.56) It is also the silence of expectations of hope, of help, of companionship and most important of a response. Beckett writes of souls that languish into the far horizon with tears unwiped, hearts inconsolable, and minds unburdened. The ‘pauses’ are the reflection of their misery, the ‘silence’ a shroud that envelopes them forever but reveals their heart rendering pathos to us as Max Picard contends, “silence reveals itself in a thousand inexpressible forms: in the quiet of the dawn, in the stealthy descent of night, in the silent changing of the seasons, but above all in the silence of the inward soul.” (Picard, 1961, p.26)

Krapp’s Last Tape, is another famous play by Beckett. In this play the character is even deprived of the companionship that is to be found in the plays mentioned above. Krapp is a victim of his own past decisions. His love relationships, his aspirations ultimately lead him to nowhere. What he concludes from his long willing confinement called life is that his gains are nothing but just beleaguering and pestering old age and a soul fearing the dark and still waiting for it to swallow him into an unknown void. The play opens with a long silence where Krapp is seen performing different rituals.

KRAPP remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh...and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him...remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, takes keys from his pocket, raises them to his eyes, chooses key, gets up and moves to front of table... (Beckett, 2009, p.4)

The silence as seen in this play is on the level that most of the time Krapp remains silent as if his pool of words have run dry. He keeps listening to the old reels of tape that are memoirs of his failings and disappointments. The voice of young Krapp on the reels is the only reminder of his past and his trust for language and his connection with the present. As Kennedy states, “the past and the present fuse in old Krapp as listener to young Krapp as performer. The old man’s silence is that of total isolation, merging, for a moment, with the total silence evoked in the tape.” (Kennedy, 1989, p.73) Another example of silence comes when Krapp listens to “Extraordinary silence this evening. I strain my ears and do not hear a sound.” (Beckett, 2009, p.6) One of the most important tapes of ‘love making’ in the play also echoes the silence, loneliness and anguish of Krapp as he says on the tape “Past midnight”, soon after the most intense moment “Never knew such a silence. The earth must be uninhabited.” (2009, p.9) Beckett chooses silence as the

best carrier of expressing or shoving out even the most muted emotions. As Morris opines, "Silence stands in opposition to every voice, weak or strong, ordinary or unique, prosaic or poetic, modern or postmodern. The basic opposition between voice and silence matters here because suffering, like pain, with which it so often intermingles, exists in part beyond language." (Morris, 1998, p.195) Silence speaks of the doomed future and the sorrowful present of Krapp. *Krapp's Last Tape* portrays the extreme loneliness and fragmentation of identity which a man devoid of religious, social, or biological purpose endures. The play ends with Krapp sitting motionless staring before him with the tape 'running-on in silence' (Beckett, 2009, p.12)

Beckett continued to move forward by making more novel additions to the aesthetics of silence. He wrote two completely silent dramatic pieces, *Act Without Words I and II* that added another new dimension to his multifaceted oeuvre. Beckett moved a step ahead as complete silence took the central stage instead of broken, meaningless and punctured dialogues. He chose mime as a medium for both of these dramatic pieces. *Act Without Words I* was staged for the first time along with *Endgame*. Beckett describes the play in his letter to Barney Rosset as "in some obscure way, a codicil to *End-Game*, and as such requires that this last extremity of human meat - or bones - be there, thinking and stumbling, and sweating under our noses, like Clov about Hamm, but gone from refuge." (Qtd. by Jonathan, 2008, p.397) Silence speaks of the events of human life that cannot be completely comprehended. It speaks of things that would lose their essence if communicated verbally in an attempt to extract connotations from them. Throughout the play the mime is offered different props, but they are snatched away when he thinks of making proper use of them. In other way, as evident in other plays of Beckett, destiny is always cruel and never gives respite. At the end of the play the mime becomes completely passive and the play ends with the actor looking at his empty hands. The mime is deprived of shadow, of water, of everything thing needed for survival in the sunny desert. He is not even given chance to end his life. He has to survive and suffer. The silence in the play encapsulates all the pathos that would have lost their zest had they been presented in words. Beckett completely abandoned the smart clinches and dialogues of his previous plays for the most overpowering and towering silence, for his knew that the gloominess and stark realities of life can only be uttered through unmitigated silence. If we reflect seriously upon our temporal life we will definitely come up to the conclusion that array of words spoken, and events defined all this will ultimately lead us to silence. Words are but predecessors to the final silence. Beckett taught us that silence is the purest and most unadulterated form of communication as it echoes all that is painful, as Khaled opines, "In classical drama, stage music needed silence to be heard and felt; but in Beckett's drama, silence itself becomes a kind of music, a kind of melody that issues from the depth of human suffering and originates in the most painful states of anxiety, alienation, and fear." (Besbes, 2007, p.146)

Throughout his long writing life Beckett conducted a war on words that led him to startling innovations in the forms of language. He went on experimenting to the end, never content with the increasingly minimal, pared down fictions that characterized the second half of his writing life. Nothing satisfied him for long. Words, the enemy, continued to signify beyond every defeat he inflicted on them. His fictions are the progressive record of his fight to subdue language so that the silence of the real might make its presence felt. If we just take the time to listen to his words and silences and how they relate to each other, we would recognize the incredible compassion of a man who stripped the stage bare, stripped the language bare, stripped the human soul of all its trappings and still encapsulated our souls into a realm where the wind, the barren landscape, the single leafless tree, the tramps and the mimes all bring out the most towering human emotions to light through the language of silence and pauses. Silence is the best way to communicate the stings and whimpers of life. Beckett's silence speaks volume about this ineffectual life, where we suffer, laugh, cry and still live to tell the tale.

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