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Countering the Onslaught of Existential Pain: A Study of Samuel Beckett's Play *Krapp's Last Tape*

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Abstract:

Samuel Beckett perceived human condition as meaningless, senseless and gloomy. His human characters fight against the despondent circumstances with varied strategies. They try to counter the lonely and meaningless earthly existence. The present paper undertakes to analyse Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* to find out how Krapp, the only character in the play, tries to counter the ghost of existential anguish with his linguistic sword. He shifts from present to past and then returns to present, and this travelling divides his self in two halves – the past and the present. The dialogues of these two selves, and the present circumstances make him a miserable relic in a state of decadence. Like a disheartened struggling human being he craves for some relief from the tyranny and hence he goes back to past. Krapp rides on the shoulders of words once recorded to avoid drowning in the deep waters of painful existence. To escape from the discomfort inside his heart he also thinks about the outside world. He shifts from one topic of thought to the other but nothing helps him. He finds himself in the wide ocean of loneliness, boredom and uncertainty which finally lead him to existential despair. Beckett's plays create a positive enthusiasm among the audience by showing the repulsive and the unbearable human existence.

Keywords: existence, despair, meaningless, anguish, boredom, linguistic, strategies.

Samuel Beckett (1906-89) is one of the most influential writers of twentieth century. He was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. His oeuvre offers a bleak, tragicomic view of human existence. His incomparable play *Waiting for Godot* (1954) showed a dawn to the genre by bringing in afresh vitality to the world of theatre. Taking a step further from the well established trends in the Existential philosophy of Sartre and Camus, he took the traditional dramatic conventions to pieces and wrote his plays in a new style, and thus expressed his own vision of human existence. Apart from writing drama, he has got the credit of fiction, short stories, and criticism. However, his best contribution is to the field of drama. The plays written by him include *Eleutheria* (written in 1940s, published in 1995), *Waiting for Godot* (1954), *Endgame* (1958), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days* (1961).

Beckett viewed human condition in a gloomy form. He viewed human creature lonely and human existence meaningless. Still his characters try to evolve varied strategies to counter the lonely and meaningless earthly existence. The present paper undertakes to analyse Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* to find out how Krapp, the only character in the play, grapples with, and tries to counter the ghost of existential anguish with his linguistic sword.

Krapp's Last Tape has been hailed as a "brief and beautiful art work [that] revolves round a solitary character, the perfect realisation of Beckett's idea of human isolation" (Brustein 31). The discouraging ambience of the play has been underlined at the very outset by the directions regarding the exterior of the protagonist Krapp. His appearance has been described like this: "White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair" (KLT 215) and this appearance highlights Beckett's vision of the sense of aging, agony and decay in human beings. This exterior serves as the backdrop against which Krapp reviews his past life with the help of the tapes recorded in past.

Being alone, Krapp thinks aloud, and his sense of alienation is thus brought to the foreground. He shifts from present to past and then returns to present, and this travelling divides his self in two halves – the past and the present. The dialogues of these two selves, and the present circumstances make him a miserable relic in a state of decadence. This in turn accounts for his ritualized listening to his 'old self'. Like a disheartened struggling human being he craves for some relief from the tyranny of the present and for the same he searches his past. Beckett's description of Krapp's physical features, hair, for example, highlights the onslaught of time on human existence. Further, Krapp's act of "staring vacuously before him" (KLT 216) stands for his quest. These ritualized looks travel from beginning to the end of the play and thus underline Krapp's need for restoring his lost subjectivity and identity and they are supposed to heal his wound in his fractured self.

It seems that Krapp is fearful of forgetting his past and hence he has codified his memory in magnetic tapes. We meet Krapp, who is sixty nine year old, weary, ill dressed, seemingly tired, with weak eye sight, laboriously walking, white faced, hard of hearing, and crack voiced, in the beginning of the play. He is sitting on a desk with a tape recorder and several reels of recorded tapes and boxes surround him. Krapp's appearance, possible circumstances of his life, and desire for preserving his special moments in the form of recorded tapes –all this speaks volumes about his repulsive existence which is alienated, lonely and painful.

To capture the picture of Krapp's inner life, we need to comprehend his surrounding, and the spectacle used by Beckett. The playwright has made Krapp sit under bright white light while darkness overwhelms the rest of the stage. He performs some odd activities – opens the drawers of his desk and searches for the recorded reels of the tape recorder, finds a banana in it and makes some erotic gestures by sucking it, and finally eats it away, brings out some recorded reels, goes to the dark space on the stage perhaps to have

a drink, brings in a large ledger with him, listens to the voice on the tape recorder recorded thirty years ago, moves forward and rewinds the tapes furiously, looks into the dictionary, again listens to the voice, tries to tape his voice, and when the play ends he is still listening to the tape. This is the total substance of the play. All the activities are odd and hollow, which make boredom and monotony prevail on the stage. The playwright has used these activities to symbolise pain of human existence on this planet of ours. Krapp's world seems to be a concrete form of Beckett's view of life expressed in one of his interviews:

“The expression that there is nothing to be expressed, nothing with which to express, no power to express, no desire to express together with the obligation to express.” (Pattie 31)

Like Beckett's outstanding earlier play *Waiting for Godot* or the latter play *Happy Days*, in this play too there is a little in the name of action. Mere use of words fills the void. Recording the voice on the tape recorder or listening to the recorded voice by Krapp forms the action of the play. Thus past and present are two fragments of his self - the former self is recollected when he was thirty-nine year old and the present self is lived when he is sixty-nine year old. Beckett manages to create two characters needed for a dramatic performance by bringing in the tape recorder. Even then there is no dialogue possible in the traditional sense. Krapp rides on the shoulders of words once recorded to avoid drowning in the deep waters of painful existence. He remains engaged in the voice on the tape for most of the time so that he can evade the boredom and twinge surrounding his present life. Therefore, an analysis of the spoken words in the play is needed to ascertain as to what extent they perform action in the absence of any other activity on the stage. A twentieth century British philosopher of language John Langshaw Austin has propounded a theory called 'Speech-Act theory' in his famous work *How to Do Things with Words* where he holds that there is a rhetorical element to all languages, and that a language can do more than merely stating facts or describing events – it can perform action. The utterances that carry out action rather than merely informing or describing something/someone are 'performative utterances'. If a person makes an utterance that is performative, believes Austin, he is doing something rather than merely saying something. Further, Austin studies performative utterances at three levels—locution, illocution and perlocution. Locution means 'the act of saying something through the words may be artificially divorced from their social context; illocution means what we intend to do in saying something and perlocution means the effect on our listener that we want to have by saying something.

Krapp's language can be analysed with the help of Austin's theory to see how language works and what function language performs in his hands. These are only the issues in total that Krapp touches upon on the stage through the tapes of his past or through his words in present – death of his mother, meaning of the word 'viduity' and his encounters with various women. The first idea that comes to Krapp's mind, as the play opens, is that of the death of his mother: “Mother at rest at last. . . . Hm. . . . The black

ball. . . . (*He peers again at ledger, reads.*) The dark nurse. . . ." (*KLT* 217). He searches for the part of the tape that narrates the event of his mother's death. The tape speaks:

. . . bench by the weir from where I could see her window. There I sat, in the biting wind, wishing she were gone. (*Pause.*) Hardly a soul, just a few regulars, nursemaids, infants, old men, dogs. I got to know them quite well—oh by appearance of course I mean! One dark young beauty I recall particularly, all white and starch, incomparable bosom, with a big black hooded perambulator, [. . .] she threatened to call a policeman. As if I had designs on her virtue! (*Laugh. Pause.*) The face she had! The eyes! Like . . . (*hesitates*) . . . chrysolite! (*Pause.*) Ah well . . . (*Pause.*) I was there when—(*Krapp switches off, broods, switches on again*)—the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white dog . . . (*KLT* 219-20)

While waiting for the fate of his mother in the hospital Krapp's mind runs from pillar to post to escape the inevitable. He tries to divert his attention from the painful idea of the death of his mother. Escaping from what is going 'inside', he prefers to stroll outside: 'a soul, just a few regulars, nursemaids, infants, old men, dogs. I got to know them quite well—oh by appearance of course I mean!' He tries to divert his attention towards the 'dark young beauty' but the threat is posed by 'police', again he concentrates on 'beauty' of her eyes and the idea of death drops in: 'the blind went down' and finally he searches for a relief in the ball and 'a little white dog'. The sentence structures reflect the storm in his tortured mind due to the death of his mother. His situation is of a man in hurry who slips in the mud, the quicker he tries to come out of it the worse situation he finds himself in.

In the above quoted text from *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp tries to escape from the painful situation by using the phrase 'wishing she were gone'. Since in the present case the speaker and the listener are the same person separated by a time span of thirty years, the locution of the sentence is that he wishes that his mother dies soon though he may or may not want her to die. The illocution is that Krapp wants to escape the pain of the impending reality by pronouncing his fear in words, and the perlocution of the sentence is that he is attempting to escape the pangs of his feelings towards his beloved mother as he knows that there is no possibility of her survival. By his wish he wants to distance himself from the inevitable pain. By the linguistic web of his wishes he tries to evade the time of the death of his mother, the departure which he describes as "Farewell to . . . love" (*KLT* 217). However, the words that he pronounces do not really come to his rescue, the words refuse to be 'performatory' and he is compelled to jump to another issue—sexual love, which is altogether different in nature and ethos. Here Krapp's language is not true to its meaning. Words that he speak do not have an inherent meaning as neither do they signify any logical idea nor do they succeed in the purpose for which they are employed – that of rescuing him from the onslaught of existential pain that persistently knocks at the door of his consciousness.

The failure necessitates Krapp's escape into another domain which is sexual love. He recalls a nurse of the hospital where his mother was on her death bed: "one dark young beauty I recollect particularly . . . incomparable bosom . . . whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me . . ." (*KLT* 219). The escape into the idea of 'incomparable bosom(ed)' nurse proves transient and Krapp is pulled back to the bitter reality mercilessly when "the blind went down . . . All over and done with at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me" (*KLT*, 220). But, again, rather than confronting the potentially painful idea of the death of his mother, Krapp jumps to the 'dog' and the ball it played with: "Moments. Her moments, my moments. (*Pause.*) The dog's moments" (*KLT* 220). 'Death' gets replaced by 'ball': "In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid, rubber ball. (*Pause.*) I shall feel it in my hand, until my dying day" (*KLT* 220). Indeed it is not the ball that has made indelible impression on Krapp. It is the idea of death that strikes his mind time and again to which he refuses to listen to. That is why he replaces 'death' with 'ball' to comfort his painful self. His words mean something else than they appear to mean. In Austinian sense, the locution of the sentence, 'I shall feel it in my hand, until my dying day' is that Krapp says that the experience with the ball is unforgettable. In reality it is not the ball that is unforgettable. The illocution of the sentence is that he is unaffected by the death of his mother as he wished her to die. However, the perlocution of the sentence is just opposite to the idea conveyed in words – that he cannot forget the ball. Actually it is the unbearable pain of the loss of his mother that he cannot forget. Thus there is again a gap in what he says and what he means. The language gets disintegrated as there erupts a gulf between the words used and the idea intended. The difference between the linguistic and semantic meaning creates a vacuum and leaves Krapp disillusioned as he is again exposed to the harsh reality: "Ah well. . . . (*Pause.*) Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence . . ." (*KLT* 220).

Krapp's world is filled with disillusionment up to the brim due to insignificance of his life which he tries to come to terms with. A kind of fragmentation exists between his past self and present self. He cannot identify himself with the voice recorded thirty years ago and also rebukes himself for the activities that he did then: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway" (*KLT* 222). Nor does he find comfort in his present self. To evade his present he listens to the tapes recorded in the past but there too he does not find any relief. He is so estranged from his own self that through language he tries to evade all possible associations with his self. That is why he shows lack of interest in the event of the death of his mother. He rewinds the tape and listens to that segment of the tape which talks of the ball that he gave to the dog, and ignores his mother.

When Krapp fails in obtaining relief from the deliberate ignorance of meaningless existence, he again seeks refuge in words. While the tape narrates him the state of his mother's widowhood with the help of the word 'viduity' he switches the tape recorder off and approaches dictionary to know the meaning of the word 'viduity', a word he

himself once used and recorded in the tape recorder. He reads the meaning of the word from the dictionary aloud:

KRAPP. (*Reading from dictionary.*) State—or condition—of being—or remaining—a widow—or widower. (*Looks up. Puzzled.*) Being—or remaining? . . . (*Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.*) ‘Deep weeds of viduity.’ . . . Also of an animal, especially a bird . . . the vidua or weaver-bird. . . . Black plumage of male. . . . (*He looks up. With relish.*) The vidua-bird! (*KLT 219*)

Krapp gets puzzled and confused by the definition of the word he himself once used. Perhaps the recollection of the state of his mother is intolerable to him and this makes him move to the next definition: “the vidua or weaver bird” and now he looks up with ‘*relish*’ as the new definition allows a bit of relief and escape from the painful thoughts of the past. Here too the escape aspired through the play with the word ‘viduity’ allows him nothing more than a little escape and Krapp has to confront his painful self again. Words lead him to only one destination and that is disillusionment.

When neither the jugglery of words nor the thoughts and recollections of his mother – ‘the personified love’ as she was to him, fail to deliver dividends, he turns to another kind of love – the erotic love, with a fresh hope. He tries to leave behind the thoughts of his mother and for this he furiously winds the tape forward thrice until he reaches the part of tape that he needs to escape into – narration of the events of his sexual pleasure. He listens to the event he recorded when he was thirty nine: “my face in her breasts and my hand on her. . . .” (*KLT 220*). But even in his erotic experiences, with which he seems to be comfortable with, he finds presence of void and silence: “Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhibited” (*KLT 221*). Finally he admits that even the erotic experience was disenchanting: “I thought I was hopeless and no good in going on and she agreed” (*KLT 221*). He admits despair and hopelessness not only to himself but also to his partner in sexual act. It seems that his words of admission have left him more disillusioned than the actual relationship. However, now at the age of sixty nine, he wants to relive the experience and for this he rewinds the parts of the tape that give him relief and thrice he listens to words he wants to get hold of. Thus he tries to raise his own spirits through the sounds of the words uttered by the tape recorder.

Krapp has tried to arrest happiness in the form of words through the recordings of his past experiences. But whatever he has listened to, from the recordings of the tape or has spoken in response to the recordings is a void of emotion. His perceptions have not reached any conclusion regarding his life except that his former selves are silly and conceited. Like Krapp, the readers/spectators are also left with a sense of disillusionment, and a void shrouding their consciousness about the meaning of human existence. Krapp’s recorded words have not served the purpose and after listening to the tapes he finds himself in the same bleak of ennui he was earlier in. The possibility of obtaining happiness from his last encounter with a woman, that he listens to on the tape, also proves futile. Neither the sexual act could give him happiness in the past nor the

sounds of words recalling the encounter in the present. Consequently he does not want those years to revisit him: “Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn’t want them back” (*KLT* 223). He even hates recalling his past now. The moot question remains: ‘Does Krapp get some relief from his attempt at integrating his past and present self?’ The answer is provided by John Erikson in his comment on Krapp’s attempt at self-reconstruction:

But this attempt only works against itself. While Krapp thinks he is articulating his life, that is, joining elements of it coherently, he only disarticulates himself into separate parts. At the same time the past takes on a greater sense of presence than the present itself. Although his voice and certain memories retain their sensuous strength in the old tape, the present Krapp becomes even more a ghost of what has been recorded: a strange reversal, since the disembodied voice would seem more the ghost. (Erikson 185)

Krapp, who set out to reconstruct his identity by resurrecting his past self in the present, indeed ends with an unsuccessful attempt at escaping from his self even, past as well as present. His endeavour leaves him in a vacuum signified by the unique silence with which the play ends. Krapp’s final comment appears to be: “Nothing to say, not a squeak. What’s a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool. (*Pause.*) Revelled in the word spool” (*KLT* 222). Thus neither words nor efforts have been able to repair Krapp’s life of the disillusionment and disintegration that has been suffering from throughout.

In this play the authority of verbal signs, their interplay or even repetitiveness in the form of disconnected voices underscore disintegration of language as a medium of communication to one’s self as well as to others. The rewinded tapes to hear the choicest words about one’s past and the dominant mode of articulation with the narcissistic ‘I’ at the centre bring Krapp’s narcissism to the fore. Krapp’s preoccupation with himself through the recorded words or pronounced in the present, his lack of emotional relationship with women in the past, his lack of ties with the outside world in the present reinforce the element of narcissism in his personality which has otherwise been seen as a “screen for emptiness” by a Structuralist critic Julia Kristeva in her work *The Kristeva Reader*. The critic opines that “Before calling itself ‘death.’ The libido undergoes a first threat to its omnipotence—one that makes the existence of *other* for the *self* appear problematic” (Kristeva, 240) which in turn explains Krapp’s busy business with words about ‘himself’. However, his repeated memories, too much obsession with self and confused replication of words leave him in the whirlpool of void only.

Thus, it can be said that in Beckett’s dramatic world man is found deprived of all anchorage while he drifts in the wide ocean of loneliness, boredom and uncertainty which finally lead him to existential despair. Here all is meaningless - be it the substantial world or the language man speaks. The words are devoid of meaning, and this nothingness of human existence Beckett ventures to depict through the objective co-relatives of his dark images and a language that is devaluated. His dramatic world gives

an excellent expression to the inexpressible. He puts language to diverse experiments like use of repetitiveness, incoherence, lack of semantic logic and deliberate violation of rules of grammar. Thus his plays create a positive enthusiasm among the audience by showing the repulsive and the unbearable.

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