



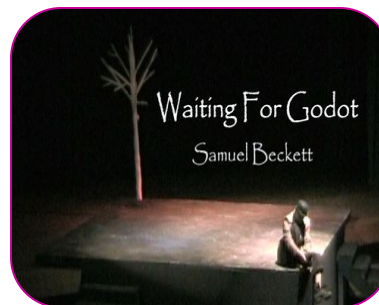
ROLE OF LANGUAGE VS ROLE OF SILENCE AND PAUSE IN MODERN PLAYS: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HAROLD PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY* AND SAMUEL BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*

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ABSTRACT

*Language is one of the most important tools of communication. It is not only an important means of communication but also a medium of exploring ourselves. It is language through which we have been articulating ourselves from time immemorial. Thus throughout the ages language has played a very significant role in our day to day life. Language has been playing the same role still now. But with the advent of modernity or better to say after the happening of the two destructive World Wars, it was felt as if the world was metamorphosed into a heap of broken images. And from then, the language, somehow, begins to lose, gradually, its pivotal role and silence and pause begin to play this role in modern plays. This paper is an attempt to highlight that the functions of silence and pause are no less important than the role played by language in modern plays and in order to establish this point I have chosen two well noted plays of modern period namely-*The Birthday Party* (1957) by Harold Pinter (1930-2009) and *Waiting for Godot* (1948) by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989).*



KEYWORDS: Absurd drama, Language, Silence, Pause, *The Birthday Party*, *Waiting for Godot*.

INTRODUCTION:-

Language is the most important tool of verbal communication. It is not only an important means of communication but also an identity of us, because it is language which helps us to explore ourselves. Without language our condition is just like a deaf as well as dumb. Without it we can never think of our life. Thus, from time immemorial language has been playing a very pivotal role in our day to day life and still continuing its same role. But now-a-days the dramatists focus light more on the role of silence and pause as language fails to communicate properly in the modern plays. The two destructive World Wars have transformed the world into a wasteland and made it a heap of broken images. In such a waste land life has lost its meanings, living in this world is meaningless. This theme of nothingness and meaninglessness of life has been meticulously portrayed in these two masterpieces-*The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Realising the fact that in such a wasteland language cannot communicate properly, both the dramatists have introduced silence and pause in their plays. Though Samuel Beckett is the first to introduce silence and pause in the play but importance of Harold Pinter in using silence and pause in his play cannot be denied. Both the dramatists have adroitly exploited the use of silence and pause in their plays. This paper aims to study how silence and pause are gradually taking the place of language in delineating the condition of modern men and for the purpose of analysing this point I have chosen two renowned absurd plays: *The Birthday Party* (1957) by Harold Pinter and *Waiting for Godot* (1948) by Samuel Beckett. But before focusing light on the locus classicus of the paper, few terms like absurd drama, silence, pause etc are necessary to discuss.

ABSURD DRAMA:-

Martin Esslin, an eminent critic, used the phrase “Theatre of Absurd”, to describe the plays of the 1950s and 1960s. It has been derived from an essay by the French philosopher, Albert Camus, “*Myth of Sisyphus*” written in 1942, who defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. Albert Camus said in the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)-

“In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile.... This divorce between man and life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity” (M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*).

Actually absurd drama is a new type of drama which came into prominence during 1950s and 1960s. This type of drama tries to create something new by subverting the traditional ideas, concepts and thoughts. Apparently the speeches of this kind of drama seem meaningless. Repetition after repetition took place. Plays by Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Arthur Adamov and many others belong to this group. Eugene Ionesco has put it: “Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Ibid).

SILENCE AND PAUSE:-

Silence and pause have been playing pivotal role in modern plays. Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, the two challenging and Noble Prize winning dramatists, who question the tradition and begin to write in a new way which shocks the audience. They make extensive use of silence and pause in their plays.

We are all aware of silence i.e. what silence is. Silence is a condition where the speaker does not say any words. It is easy to define plainly but difficult to interpret. It is easier to decode the meanings of words and utterances than the fuzzy meanings of silence. Peter Hall, the stage director well known for having directed many of Pinter’s plays, describes the differences among pause and silence and three dots:

“A pause is really a bridge where the audience thinks that you’re this side of the river, and then when you speak again, you’re the other side. That’s a pause. And it’s alarming, often. It’s a gap, which retrospectively gets filled in. It’s not a dead stop- that’s a silence, where the confrontation has become too extreme, there is nothing to be said until either the temperature has gone down, or the temperature has gone up, and then something quite extreme happens. Three dots is a very tiny hesitation, but it’s different from a semi –colon, which Pinter almost never uses, and it’s different from a comma. A comma is something you catch up on, you go through it. And a full stop’s just a full stop. You stop” (Dr. Mercy George, *Language of Silence in the Plays of Harold Pinter*, 2014).

After evincing briefly all the necessary topics of discussion it’s now the time to look into the locus classicus of the paper. As Samuel Beckett is the first dramatist to use silence and pause in modern plays, therefore, first I am going through Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* and then I shall move on to Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*.

Samuel Beckett (1906-89) and *Waiting for Godot* (1948):-

Samuel Beckett, better known as Beckett, was a Nobel Prize winning Irish playwright. He was one of the most individual voices of post-war European literature. Being an Irish he was well aware of the affect of the two successive World Wars which have left a horrible effect on life and living. The post-war generation throughout Europe and America experienced the terrible shock of disillusion. Being conscious of the modern-age suffering, Beckett tried to explore that condition in the play *Waiting for Godot*. If we go through the story of *Waiting for Godot* it will be prominent to us.

The play *Waiting for Godot* is considered as a play of words rather than a play of story. It is a play on the human condition, a meditation on the human predicament in mid-twentieth century. Thus it is a play about characters, not what happen to them but about them, a portrayal of human beings without any answers or certainties. This is the anxiety that Vladimir and Estragon carry with them (*Waiting for Godot*, introduction-xx). It is a play of two Acts of unequal length and the location is a road with a tree, where two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, are waiting for Godot without knowing who or what Godot is. But they must

wait, it is their motto. The very first line of the play, - “Estragon: Nothing to be done.”- strikes the central theme of the play. This first line very finely delineates the condition of the post war generation. They have neither any work nor any job to do. Their main target is to find out the ways through which they can pass the painful time less consciously. The only means of passing the painful time is talking. The two, Vladimir and Estragon spend the whole play(87-pages) yarning, whining, bickering, philosophising, musing out loud, falling out, becoming friends again etc. Another two characters, Lucky and Pozzo, have also nothing to do. They are also passing the painful time by talking. A young boy appears in each act to inform Didi and Gogo that Godot will not arrive today but tomorrow. A bare tree in Act I sprouts leaves in Act II, suggesting perhaps the passage of time. The play suggests that something important is to come to life but never does. Thus Vladimir and Estragon’s waiting for Godot ultimately ends in smoke.

As this paper strives to explore the functions of silence, pause and language in modern plays, therefore, first I am going to highlight the roles that language plays in this play *Waiting for Godot*.

Language, a means to portray alienation of modern men:-

Language has been playing a vital role in our day to day life from time immemorial. It is the only means of verbal communication, but language is gradually beginning to lose its importance especially after the happening of two successive great World Wars. After these Wars the world was in a state of chaos, the world was broken into pieces and the people felt alienation problem. It seems as if the relation between the God and his disciple is completely cut off, as if God cannot hear his devotees. Beckett has created such a Godless universe, a universe where to continue to survive without hope but without dignity was itself heroic, in his play *Waiting for Godot*. He has shown how the characters are suffering from existential angst and from alienation and Beckett has very finely delineated this theme of alienation through language in his masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*.

Language heightens the intensity and helps to pass time carelessly:-

Another important characteristic of his use of language is that it is replete with repetitions. In this play *Waiting for Godot* it seems as if repetition is the only thing that happens throughout the play. The very first line of the play –“Nothing to be done”- runs like a refrain. Repetition helps to build up the intensity of the recurring elements. In one scene of the play, where Vladimir wanted to know whether Pozzo wants to get rid of Lucky, we find the use of repetition.

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

POZZO: He wants to cod me, but he won’t.

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

POZZO: He imagines that...in that capacity.

ESTRAGON: You’ve had enough of him?

POZZO: In reality he carries like a pig. It’s not his job.

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

POZZO: He imagines that...Anythings else.

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

POZZO: Remark that I ...To each one is due.

VLADIMIR: You waagerrim?

POZZO: I beg your pardon?

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

POZZO: I do. But ...The truth is you can’t drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them. (P, 24-25)

This above mentioned passage clearly shows how the line “You want to get rid of him”- is used repeatedly only to enhance the intensity of the recurring elements of the play. Apart from it, repetition also well serves the characters to busy them and pass the painful time less consciously. This play takes us to an alien land, a land where language has lost its significance, its meaning and it is used strangely for the

purpose of non-communication, and therefore, Vladimir and Estragon use repeated words only to pass the painful time.

LANGUAGE, A MEDIUM TO PORTRAY THE THEME OF NOTHINGNESS:-

Two destructive World Wars have such an effect on life that the people were living in death in life condition. Their condition becomes such that though they think of dying but cannot die. The human life has lost its dignity. They are nothing but 'hollow men' in the language of T.S.Eliot. They become spiritually hollow. To them life is meaningless, living has lost its significance. Thus the theme of nothingness pervades their lives. Samuel Beckett has very finely delineated this theme of nothingness through language. He chooses a language which is devoid of content and which becomes the adequate means of representing the stagnant life of post war generation. The very first line of the play—"Nothing to be done"- upholds the theme of nothingness and it's Beckett's mastery over language to depict this theme. In this play *Waiting for Godot* we find that Vladimir and Estragon are doing nothing rather they are waiting for Godot without knowing who or what Godot is. They think that one day Godot will come and change their situation. But their hope remains unfulfilled as Godot does not appear. Throughout the whole play they are doing nothing except some trivial works and talking. They are repeatedly doing the same thing again and again only to pass the painful time less consciously. Thus throughout the whole play the theme of nothingness runs like a dominant force. From Estragon's speech the theme of nothingness is clear to us- ESTRAGON: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful."(p-34).

This is how language plays its role in this play *Waiting for Godot*.

ROLE OF SILENCE AND PAUSE IN WAITING FOR GODOT:-

From *Waiting for Godot* on, Beckett's plays have exhibited a progressive annihilation of what is presented on stage. He reduced the number of characters as well as the props on the stage. As the numbers of characters becomes less, therefore, automatically the emphasis falls on what the characters say. As language was incapable of communicating with the others, therefore, the role of silence and pause becomes significant. In Beckett's plays silence and pause are as important as the sound. Without silence and pause, Beckett's plays are like a fish out of water. Beckett has used silences one hundred and eleven times and pauses eighty eight times in the whole play *Waiting for Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, P-154). In the play *Waiting for Godot* we find that Didi and Gogo are incapable of keeping silent. They have to talk. In Act II it is prominent through Gogo's speech-

ESTRAGON: "In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent."(p-53)

So they begin to talk about the dead voices. But after a while they stop with a long silence which not only upset them but they could also both be disappeared if they do not follow up with something new to start:

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[Long silence]

VLADIMIR: Say something.

ESTRAGON: I'm trying.

[Long silence]

VLADIMIR: [In anguish.] Say anything at all! (P-63)

When the silences extend far beyond the audience's comfort zone, it creates laughter in the plays of Beckett.

At the end of the Act I we find that Vladimir and Estragon do not want to part with each other but they do so and silence heightens this pathos.

VLADIMIR: We can still part, if you think it would be better.

ESTRAGON: It's not worth while now.

[Silence.]

VLADIMIR: No, it's not worth while now.

[Silence.]

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

[They do not move] (P-47)

Beckett has described his play *Waiting for Godot* as a tragicomedy and his use of silence sometimes creates laughter. So his silences are termed as comic silences.

Pause, another important tool of communication, is adroitly used by Beckett in his play *Waiting for Godot*. The pauses Beckett proposes are hints of defiance against the sole sovereignty of language (Plays of Pauses, Arif & Afia). Pause helps to amplify the meaninglessness of a phrase or conversation. In one scene of the play we find that Vladimir and Estragon after passing time with Pozzo and Lucky feel that the time has passed rapidly. Here the use of pauses only amplified the situation.

VLADIMIR: That passed the time.

ESTRAGON: It would have passed in any case.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but not so rapidly.

[Pause.]

ESTRAGON: What do we do now?

VLADIMIR: I don't know.

ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: [Despairingly.] Ah!

[Pause.] (P-41)

This is how language, silence and pause have played a significant role in the play *Waiting for Godot*.

Harold Pinter (1930-2009) and *The Birthday Party* (1957):-

Harold Pinter, a ground breaking dramatist of the twentieth century, is the first to show that comedy can not only create laughter but also can create menace. And, therefore, his plays are known as comedy of menace. But my intention is not to portray that menace but to study how language, silence and pause play their respective roles in the play *The Birthday Party*. *The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full length play, shows the destruction of an apparently innocent character named Stanley, through violent verbal assault; a destruction which, however, results not in death, but rather in an implied rebirth, a "conversion". Now I am going to study how language functions in this play.

Language, a weapon of domination:-

The most significant role that the language plays in this play *The Birthday Party* is its use as a tool to dominate the other. Pinter has used language as a power, as a force to dominate the other. To Pinter language seems to have taken on a life of its own, and with this life a power, a demonic and threatening usurpation of reality. It is only in postwar drama that language actually becomes the active antagonist, the dramatic locus of social coercion and conformity (Jeanette R. Malkin, *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama*, 1992). In the play *The Birthday Party* we find that it is Goldberg who plays with the words. He has adroitly used the words in this play. Thus in this play we find that through language Goldberg and McCann have ultimately succeeded in dominating their victim named Stanley. It is often said that Stanley is not so much tortured by Goldberg and McCann, as through language. It is language which tortures Stanley so much that he loses his individuality. Language is not only used as a tool of domination but it can also victimise the speaker (ibid, 1992). Thus in this play when Goldberg and McCann were using verbal assault upon Stanley, it

seems as if language has possessed Goldberg and McCann. Language, as Whorf wrote, “is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity...”. The form of the play is static and as Esslin points out, “The characters remain seated almost throughout the action; the drama is entirely in the language, the evocation of moods.”(Ibid, 1992).

Language, a tool of creating menace:-

As *The Birthday Party* is termed as a comedy of menace, therefore, it, apart from creating laughter, can also create a menace or a kind of fear and the best tool of creating fear is language. Harold Pinter has woven the language in the texture of *The Birthday Party* in such a way that automatically menace is created out of it. It is prominent from the text. In one scene of the play we find that Meg is talking to Stanley about the arrival of two strangers in her boarding house. This information creates not only an anxiety but also menace in the psyche of Stanley. Thus, language succeeds in creating menace in the play *The Birthday Party*.

Language, a tool of verbal violence:-

Language is one of the most important in elements in drama. And so far the post war drama is concerned, language becomes very vital. Language does not remain language; it becomes a power, a force to dominate others (Jeanette R. Malkin, *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama*, 1992). It becomes the main tool of verbal violence and traditional language being inappropriate to expose that violence the dramatist uses the language which is a collage of various elements. In the play *The Birthday Party* Pinter’s use of language is not plain but a mixture of many elements. His language is a mixture of jargon (“What about the Albigensienist heresy?”), cliché cuts (“Mother defiler!”), pathos (“You betrayed our land”), and trivialities (“Which came first? Chicken? Egg?”). Austin E. Quigley, in his book *The Pinter Problem*, writes: “ In *The Birthday Party* conflict is waged not in terms of quality of usage but by the sheer weight, variety, and quantity of usage. Stanley is confronted by two visitors, who... verbally bludgeon him into submission and silenced by sheer number and variety their accusations.”(Ibid, 1992)

This is how language has played its significant role in the play *The Birthday Party*.

Role of Silence and Pause in *The Birthday Party*:-

Silence and pause are the part and parcel of postwar drama. Without the help of these postwar drama cannot express the meaning completely. Therefore, silence and pause really have an important role to play in the postwar drama.

Role of silence:-

I have already discussed about the concept of silence. Pinter himself gave a more profound interpretation to silence. He was conscious of the two types of silences-“one when no word is spoken...the other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed”(A Study in Dialogic Art,P-69). In the play *The Birthday Party* both the silences play a pivotal role. The absence of any words becomes more embarrassing and more obvious; it widens the space between characters to such an extent that it seems to acquire the status of a character. In this play silences make the half of the character of Stanley.

A silence is a dead stop. It falls when confrontation at the psychological level becomes quite extremely heated up. Nothing can be spoken by anyone until the dramatic tension dissipates or mounts up in such a way that something quite new happens (Ibid, 38). Thus silences mark the end of one movement and the beginning of another. In Act III of the play we find the same thing. In this scene we find that Goldberg and McCann are ready to take away Stanley and at that time Petey’s question “Where are you taking him?” is followed by a sinister silence:

GOLDBERG. Still the same old Stan. Come with us. Come on, boy.

McCANN. Come along us.

PETEEY. Where are you taking him?

They turn. Silence.

GOLDBERG. We are taking him to Monty (*The Birthday Party*, P-85).

Silences have also adroitly exploited by Pinter as a tool of non verbal communication. Pinter says that his characters communicate what is unsaid through silences because disclosing any personal information results in emotional insecurity. Pinter has the unshakeable belief that communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility (*A Study in Dialogic Art*, P-78).

Role of Pauses:-

A Pinterian pause is a remarkable landmark in modern play-writing. In Pinter "dramatic pause is essentially a means of implanting a dramatic impression". Instead of giving any details of a character's inner-goings, a pause is used to denote the silent interplay of the consciousness and the sub-conscious (Ibid-38).

The famous Pinter pause also heightens the effects of noncommunication (Burkman, P-5). Apart from these roles pauses also contribute to the rhythm of the dialogue. They also indicate something of what is going on. Pinter has also used the pauses to create suspense. In the beginning of play it becomes prominent. (Language of Silence, 2014) Meg repeatedly asks Petey to become sure about his presence.

MEG. Is that you, Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

PETEY. What?

MEG. Is that you?(P-9)

Thus, both silences and pauses have played a vital role throughout the play.

CONCLUSION:-

After coming to the conclusion it can be said that both the dramatists Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter have adroitly exploited the use of language as well as silence and pause in their plays-*Waiting for Godot* and *The Birthday Party* respectively. Beckett is the first dramatist to use silence as a written form of communication and Pinter has also acknowledged that he was influenced by Beckett. In Beckett's play repetitions, silences and pauses emphasize the non-communication which has a comic effect upon the audience but in Pinter's play silence and pause emphasize non verbal communication. In the dramatic world of Harold Pinter silence and pause are more important than words because in Pinter's theatre disclosing any information or sincere emotions results in an emotional insecurity. Pinter also proclaims that he does not know his characters. And, therefore, we do not find the complete details of any characters. In Pinter's theatre the value of non verbal communication is as much as the verbal communication. In view of the aforesaid discussion it is prominent that the role of pauses and silences are no less important than the role played by language. Finally, it can be summed up by saying that in postwar drama the role of silence and pause can compete with the role of language.

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