

## Reality and Vision of Suicide In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Act without Words I*

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Interestingly in *Waiting for Godot* and *Act without Words I* none of the characters commits suicide, though it is frequently discussed and attempted by Gogo and Didi. They are between eros and thanatos; they cannot determine what is to be chosen—life or death; they cannot determine what is to be done; they cannot even determine if anything should be done or chosen. Their inability to commit suicide, in fact, gives way to their inability to do anything. They are framed within the situation.

However, the problem of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* begins with their world and themselves. In fact, it is the beginning of the play as well. They cannot realise the world nor can they realise themselves—a characteristic of the typical absurdity as defined by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Like Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Gogo and Didi do not know whether God exists or not. Their world without certainty promises only despair. They find a universe without moral restraint, so the universe is meaningless. The characters in the mentioned plays of Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* and *Act Without Words I*, are condemned to move within the fixed framework of futility and hopeless labour. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus observes:

I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying).<sup>1</sup>

Actually, Vladimir and Gogo have no reason to live nor have they any reason to commit suicide. They have a world which cannot be related with their idea of the past. They are driven by a nostalgic longing for the past that is unexplainable through the present. As Didi says:

...[W]hat's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, they have a present that is inexplicable through their idealism. Gogo's boot, Didi's hat, the tree, the place, the day, Lucky and Pozzo, the boy (or boys) and at last, Godot—everything is incomprehensible to them. As a matter of fact, they are captured in the frame of their situation. Hence, for hanging themselves, the first problem to Gogo and Didi is the lack of rope and strong tree, that is, the devices and tools of committing suicide are absent here. Secondly, they cannot leave each other. If one hangs oneself successfully, whereas the other cannot, the other will remain lonely. So, they mar their plan of committing suicide. Thinking and talking of suicide, even trying it, may be a vision to them. It may be a way to pass the time.

In fact, never do Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* think of suicide in a realistic context—though suicide might have been an escape from the *ennui* of life. Throughout the play Vladimir and Estragon invent many devices to prove their existence and to pass the time. Taking off boots, Vladimir's problem with his hat, their effort to commit suicide, their waiting for Godot—all gives way to passing their time. It is an interesting fact that Vladimir and Estragon never search for other devices and processes for committing suicide. Maybe, a knife, a pistol, and starvation could suffice their purpose. Even, when they observe Lucky driven by rope, they forget all about it. They might have taken the rope forcibly for hanging

themselves. In the second act it is easier for them to snatch it because Pozzo is blind and both of the two are helpless here. Moreover, they forget about when the devices are before them. In reality, they are not serious about killing themselves. They are only thinking of it, as many poets thought about and loved to die in imagination, but never committed suicide. Suicide for them, therefore, is just another diversion of fantasy. It is a strong consolation; it helps them to forget the boredom of everyday life where nothing can be done at all.

They find it impossible for the two to kill themselves. They first realize that the only tree in their world, a weeping willow, will not support Vladimir's weight on the noose and therefore will not break his neck. The second day, Vladimir and Estragon cannot hang themselves because they do not have the requisite piece of rope. By the second day, however, they have forgotten that they cannot hang themselves from the only available tree, and therefore their complaints about the lack of a suitable piece of rope are unnecessary. They observe a world that is devoid of the tools required for committing suicide.

Accordingly they come, again and again, to the realisation of nothing-to-be-done. Suicide might have been an end to this meaningless absurd life. They contemplate about hanging themselves on the tree. Suicide can be thought of the ultimate conclusion to a meaningless life. Camus claims that suicide is an attempt to escape from the consciousness of absurdity. But ultimately Camus proposes man to live. They do not commit suicide physically, yet they surrender to the captured situation. Whatever they do is to give the impression that they exist. But this sort of existence only calls for pity. Hanging from the tree would have proved that they have the guts at least to do something. This ontological problem is, no doubt, the main issue of the play. They are indecisive whether to go on this nothing-to-be-done life or to commit suicide. They are tired of living (Estragon says: I'm tired breathing.<sup>3</sup>), yet they come to the realization that 'To be dead is not enough'.<sup>4</sup> They have no doubt that they are living beings. But they need a meaning to exist. So their realization will never let them commit suicide, rather they will be waiting for Godot until he comes.

Again, their view of life is not to resign from life but to resume it. Vladimir, at the very outset of the play, clarifies it: "All my life I've tried to put it [Nothing to be done] from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle."<sup>5</sup> After some time Gogo comments that Didi always waits till the last moment. The big nothingness in their world has nothing to do with their life. They are hopeful in the depth of their minds of a bright future. So, Didi says in the end of the first act, "Tomorrow everything will be better."<sup>6</sup> That is why they notice that the tree has sprouted leaves in the second act. Whether one says that in the two acts in the play nothing happens twice or everything happens twice, Vladimir and Estragon are sentenced on the stage (symbolic of the life itself). They cannot escape it. They are habituated to such absurd life—to talk, to eat, to wait and to live an meaningless life. Camus rightly puts it: "We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking."<sup>7</sup> In this way all the character hopes to carry on living.

Moreover, suicide itself may be considered as a vigorous aspect of life. When Gogo reminds Didi of their plan of hanging, Didi tells him that it them an erection. Suicide is considered in sexual term here. Though suicide as a sexual term may seem to be funny, it is, in fact, their view of life. They never consider suicide as the annihilation of life; rather their thought of suicide strengthens their bond and increases their yearning to live, as sexuality begets new life.

In the mime play, *Act without Words I*, the only character is captured in the dust, symbolic of the uncomfortable life. In the beginning the man is seen trying to escape from this captured life, but he never can—he is repeatedly thrown in the dust whenever he tries to escape. Gradually he becomes hopeless to flee, and surrenders himself to the situation.

In this play we find several steps. The entire action of the play takes place in a desert under the scorching sun, suggested by ‘dazzling light’. The unnamed man is directed by a whistle to move right or left. He can never escape the unbearable sun, though he is given a tree for shade. When he becomes intolerably thirsty he is shown water. But whenever he wants to catch it, it is lifted up somehow. He is forced to go without food and drink. The play seems a behaviourist experiment within the framework of the Greek classical myth of Tantalus, who stood in a pool of water which receded every time he bent to drink it, and stood under a fruit tree which raised its branches every time he reached for food. The mythical Tantalus was punished for his own act. Whereas Godot’s existence remains uncertain, in *Act Without Words I* there is a God-like force, represented by a sharp whistle which will not permit the man to leave. The play is a parable of resignation from life; a condition one reaches only after a series of disappointments. The man has learned hardship that there is nothing he can depend on in life other than himself, even to commit suicide.

Interestingly he cannot commit suicide also. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, he has all the tools to kill himself—tree, rope and noose, and box to stand on it. Yet he cannot commit suicide because whenever he needs the tools they somehow become unreachable. As a result, he has to submit to the situation without any effort to live or die. In this dumb show the man is not allowed to commit suicide, yet he is not allowed to be living. He is only granted inertia. At last he is seen to lose hope to quench his thirst with water in the carafe. He remains defeated, having opted out of the struggle. We observe here a man in frustrated efforts. The man in *Act Without Words I* possesses only two natural tools, mind and hands, which distinguish him from other animals, he tries to survive, to secure some water in the desert. The mind works, at least in part: he learns – small cube on large; he invents, or is given inventions – scissors, cubes, rope; he reacts and tries to end his life. But when he learns to use his tools effectively, they are confiscated: the scissors, when he reasons that in addition to cutting his fingernails, he might cut his throat; the blocks and rope, when he discovers that they might make a gallows.

However, the man’s effort to commit suicide is not a vision, rather he tries to escape a life that seems to be a nightmare. Yet he is seized in ‘no-exit’ situation. He can neither act nor kill himself. *Act Without Words I* is, actually, a microcosm of the hell, which is clearly illustrated in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Huis-Clos*. Though many movements are shown in this play, ultimately the world is static—in the sense that the man cannot change it, nor can he change himself there.

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