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Happy Days- a Study in Existentialism

Barun Kumar Jha*

ABSTRACT

Happy Days is an interesting play of Samuel Beckett which deserves a serious analysis in terms of existentialism. The play is in search of the meaning of man's existence amid uncertainty in the world. Sometimes it is also interpreted as 'mockery of unhappiness.' This play is certainly different from other major plays of Samuel Beckett in which the protagonist seems a happy character, but, in fact, she frets in fever of the world. She is buried in a mound of earth and consumed by the earth every moment. After all, she gives the gesture of being happy. Both the characters Winnie and Willie are static, helpless and crippled like other characters of Beckett subject to suffering, frustration and absurdity in life. The play also delineates the sub- themes of existentialism like authenticity, death, bad-faith and nothingness with the help of these two characters. Moreover, the play develops in the tradition of absurd play challenging the classical norms of unities and plot. The stage setting in Happy Days seems strange like that of a realistic play reflecting the theme of existentialism. Lastly, the play gives the concept of absurd and cyclical time which presents the uncertainty of man's existence in the world. Thus, the play is a typical one for existentialist study.

Keywords: Existentialism; Nothingness; Authenticity; Absurd; Suffering.

1.0 Introduction

Happy Days is a remarkable play of Samuel Beckett searching for the meaning of existence. The play is sometimes interpreted as "mockery of unhappiness," and certainly different from other plays of Beckett.

Happy Days presents a portrait of man in the middle of an inescapable corruption. The act of eluding anxiety of existence is also a conscious one. Winnie is acquainted with her situation and longing for escape from the painful effects of change. Besides these existential tendencies depicted in the play, Winnie tries to avoid the threat of nothingness. She is trapped in her own consciousness. It is indeed nothingness. As there is no bottom, her journey in her consciousness seems to continue forever. This is the existentialist void.

2.0 Discussion

The play has a strange setting which does not resemble any place in the real world. The play is performed in a barren outdoor setting and Winnie is

buried up to her waist in a mound of earth. Willie is another character in the play hidden behind Winnie's mound. He is barely visible to the audience. When the play opens up, Winnie's extraordinary situation attracts attention due to its being strange. On the left side of Winnie, there is a big black bag which contains a toothbrush, a tube of running out toothpaste, a mirror, a running out lipstick, a hat, a music box, spectacles, a medicine bottle and a revolver. She improvises an existential rite to pass the time and her day with the help of these objects. Objects are a means of getting through so as not to face the silence and emptiness of existence. (Kenner, Huge, 1989)

Happy Days does not contain any evidence of historical background. The background concerning temporal clues is fuzzy and unclear. In the play, only a bell and a simple unchanging light signify time. Despite the absence of a time marker in the worldly sense, there exists a piercing bell. The bell rings arbitrarily and somehow acts as a determiner to define the segments of time. It divides time in *Happy Days* into random days and nights.

Winnie is unable to ignore the bell, so she

*Department of Humanities, LNMU, Darbhanga, Bihar, India

follows it. Otherwise, she will be left with endless time to ponder over the meaning of her existence. Thus, she comes closer to nothingness; what she calls 'wildernesses. She tries to do her best to avoid this horrifying confrontation. She shows her activities in such a way that they are distributed throughout the day, so that she is not left with 'hours still to run, before the bell for sleep, and nothing more to say, nothing more to do.'(Beckett Samuel, 1988)

In short, the concept of time is cyclical, uncontrollable, deteriorative and an anxiety-raiser in the play. It is designed in such a shape and form that it turns out to be a resource for the existential questioning of one's being. Time is to fill in, and to pass for the characters and especially for Winnie in this play. That is why, she gets through by dealing with the objects in her bag, telling the memories which belong to an indefinite date in the past, and quoting from the classics. For Beckett, time in *Happy Days* is one of the necessary means to provide the convenient ground for questioning the meaning of existence. (Lyons et al, 1983)

In the Beckettian world, characters are made suffer. They are overpowered by the heavy burden of existing. There are only two characters in *Happy Days*-Winnie and Willie. Winnie is a female character. Winnie is dominant in language and in action despite her immobility. Willie is Winnie's mute husband. We can examine them in terms of their physical appearance, situation and disabilities. Winnie is the female heroine of the play. *Happy Days* is the single exceptional Beckettian play in which the focus is on a woman. It is a "Female Solo."(Kennedy et al, 1989)

These visual elements suggest that despite her advanced age, Winnie is well-groomed and she is still taking good care of herself since she is interested in a life full of 'heavenly' days, which explains why she criticizes Willie's lack of interest in life and pities him: "Poor Willie – (rummages in bag) – no zest – (rummages) – for anything – (brings out spectacles from case) – poor dear Willie." (Beckett Samuel, 1988)

It is apparent that Winnie is also disabled like other amputated characters of Samuel Beckett in his other plays. However, this time the disability of Winnie is quite strange for the audience to comprehend and it gives a meaningful logical explanation. Unlike Hamm, who is paralyzed and

blind, Winnie cannot walk because her feet are buried in earth. Later in the play, she cannot move even her body apart from the changes in her facial expressions. She is totally immobile. She is not in a confined place. She is exposed in the external space, but she is again imprisoned. This situation does not change throughout the play. Above all, she dreams of being free and able to walk one day again: "Yes, the feeling more and more that if I were not held – (gesture) – in this way, I would simply float up into the blue. (Pause) And that perhaps some day the earth will yield and let me go, the pull is so great, yes, cracks all round me and let me out." (Beckett Samuel, 1988)

In contrast, she decays. Her situation becomes worst moment after moment and the earth goes on swallowing her, prohibiting her movement more. Even at the very beginning of the play she already knows that one day she will not be able to put on and take off her hat: "To think there are times one cannot take off one's hat, not if one's life were at stake. Times one cannot put it on, times one cannot take it off. (Pause.)" (Beckett Samuel, 1988)

Thus she comes to realize the fact that one day she will fail. Her words will also fail, and her endurance will not stand against time. Now, she understands that she will confront the undeniably unpleasant facts of existence; her efforts to fight against them and to avoid them are abortive and exhausting. For her, the aim of enduring by resisting in tenderness turns out to be the source of all her pain, anxiety and suffering in the end. Therefore, unlike what she reports verbally, it is difficult to believe that she is happy and living 'happy days, heavenly days'. Besides, she is deeply aware of her own human condition of existence, and unhappy about it while waiting for an end.

Willie is the second character of this play. He lives out of sight behind her wife's mound of earth. It is clear from Winnie's sentences that he lives in a hole, which is invisible to the audience. Winnie tells Willie: "Do as I say, Willie, don't lie sprawling there in this hellish sun, go back into your hole. (Pause)"(Beckett Samuel, 1988)

He is rarely seen to read a yellowish old newspaper, and his murmuring from the paper is notice as 'Wanted bright boy'. At the closing of the play, he appears crawling in a full evening dress towards his wife, Winnie. Most of the time, he sleeps, and seems to have a minor role in comparison with

Winnie. The reason for Willie's being on the stage can be best explained with Winnie's presence. He is extremely inactive, impotent, mute and invisible. He is like a symbol of negation. However, the significance of Willie cannot be undermined in the play in unfolding the portrayal of Winnie. Charles Marowitz in his review of *Happy Days* states, "The role of Willie, despite its brevity, is strategic."

In this vein, he is very important in revealing the barest minimum of the play. Like all other characters of Beckett, Willie in *Happy Days* is again an extremely reduced character. First, he is physically disabled and cannot walk properly. He just crawls on his four limbs like animals. "Indeed, Beckett has said that he wishes to portray impotence in his works." (Kennedy, et al, 1989)

So, he is a good example of Beckett's achievement of his aims. However, he just crawls, he is better than Winnie since he has at least a limited facility of movement. Besides Willie's limited ability to move, his language is also reduced to the minimum. He almost never utters a word. It results in a play of one character's constant monologue, a 'female solo'. Willie is muted by Beckett. He demonstrates just frequent instances of grunts and groans occasionally. Despite his rare utterances, he is significant, because Winnie asserts and exercises her existence by addressing Willie. This is because; he is there on the stage not as a speaker but as a listener to Winnie.

Thus, Winnie and Willie demonstrate all pros and cons of the Beckettian characterization in terms of their appearance, the situation in which they are living, suffering due to existence which they are exposed to, their lessened relationship, reduced mobility and language.

In *Happy Days* Winnie and Willie are on the stage to mirror the futility of man's existence. Existence routines to precede essence. Winnie attempts to invent. She tries this by asserting her existence through her use of language and the presence of another character, Willie. Winnie's affirmation of being is better realized in her situation of difficulty and suffering. Sartre says that man is proclaimed to have no 'pre-determined purpose or meaning.' Man has to discover his existence in confrontation with the difficulties and challenges in the world. This is the situation of Winnie in *Happy Days*. She has no pre-determined meaning in her life. She is deprived of purpose. She has a big challenge

posed by her existence. She is buried in earth and is completely immobile. In these circumstances, she finds herself questioning herself although she tries to avoid this to some extent.

The existential pain of man can be felt in Beckett's *Happy Days*. In the play, Winnie is exposed to this pain of existence no matter how well she enacts a happy woman passing through heavenly and happy days. This is especially obvious as Winnie tries to cling to language in order to escape this unbearable pain. She superficially continues her happy mood, whereas the pain caused by her existence invades her being more and more. References to happy days in the beginning are sufficient but their number of usages decreases towards the end of the play. The number of pause and silence also increases from the beginning towards the end as if she was about to be defeated by intolerable pain. She accepts the strangeness of the situation in which she exists. The attitude of her mute husband towards life and conversation dissuades her in keeping the dignity of being happy. Her fear and pain owing to her existence find a way to the surface. This is evident when she is in tears. We have the witness of Winnie's existential pain in Act II.

Winnie expresses that the sadness that comes after singing is like the one after sexual intercourse. After asking, Willie whether he has ever run across that, her statement hits the target, 'Yes that one knows is prepared to face'. This means Winnie knows the pain of existing and she is well aware that she is also prepared to confront it. 'So little to say, so little to do, and the fear so great, certain days of finding oneself' (Beckett, Samuel, 1983)

Moreover, Beckett deals with the existential theme of facticity through the monologue of Winnie in *Happy Days*. Winnie is so addicted to facticity that she thinks nothing strange exists and happens on the stage. Even though the burning of a parasol on an extremely hot day is extraordinary for an ordinary man, but Winnie's parasol's burning down in a hellish heat becomes ordinary for her. It makes her an extraordinary character. Indeed its basic reason is that she cannot change this oddity which has already come into being. This is what existentialists call facticity.

Happy Days is another play about filing time and waiting for the arrival of an end that is most probably death. However, Winnie still has an appetite for life: "That is what I find so wonderful, that not a

day goes by-(smile) to speak in the old style – (smile off) That is what I find so comforting when I lose heart and the brute beast."

All in all, death is explicitly mentioned in *Happy Days* and is inserted into his universe in order to provide man with a better understanding of non-being. In this vein, a better comprehension of the existence of being can be achieved.

Moreover, Winnie ignores despair and becomes more authentic in *Happy Days*. Winnie appears a happy character in this play. Winnie is more authentic and more defined being than Hamm and Clove. She knows that life is filled with suffering, so she tries to live as happily as she can.

In *Happy Days* Winnie and Willie are forlorn being. Winnie is half buried in a mound of earth and forced to face painful situation alone. She does and gets help or guidance from anyone. There is no one or divine being to help her. God is in the old style for Winnie. It means God belongs to the past, not to the present.

The theme of existential despair is quite expressed in *Happy Days*. Despair is the outcome of the unpredictability and uncertainty of man's life and the absence of probabilities. Winnie tries to hide her despair to a great extent, but Samuel Beckett shows it in the course of the play in an implicit way. First of all, there is loss of belief in God, loss of objects owned by the characters, which creates a strong mood of despair, since there is an often repeated distinction between 'the old style' and the one which may counteract it.

3.0 Conclusion

This play does not tend to end and reduce everything to non-existence. The play shows Winnie's discomfort, tenderness and anxiety due to the existence of nothingness. She knows that there is nothingness, but seems to escape it. Her ignorance of no-thing- what Winnie experiences and even suffers from is her own consciousness. In *Happy Days*, the consciousness of female character turns out to be an important figure since it forms Winnie's own nothingness from which she has been escaping. The inescapable captivation of Winnie's consciousness is revealed through her internal conflict of self. She

regards total silence, which refers to her not 'being in tongue' as the wilderness. So, in Winnie's language 'wilderness' has the same meaning with nothingness. She is apparently thankful. When she does not know about or confront nothingness, "Ah well, not to know, not to know for sure, great mercy, all I ask." Nothingness can also be observed on the stage in terms of setting. There is almost nothing to be seen in earthly sense. The fewness of the objects reminds the reader and the audience of 'nothingness' since the setting looks like a symbol of reducing all to the level of nothingness.

Nothingness does not prevent her from waiting for annihilation. This is the other way of nothingness. "In the long run, then, Winnie awaits annihilation and regards the day of its coming as happy days." It can be said that in the short run she is just waiting standstill for some sort of lifeguard to save her.

In short, *Happy Days* investigates the theme of nothingness through the existential perception of Samuel Beckett. The playwright certainly demonstrates the negation of being is necessary.

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