
**EXISTENTIAL STREAKS IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S KING LEAR AND
SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME**

TANIYA SACHDEVA

Abstract: This research paper tries to explore the existential that is hidden in the works of William Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett's Endgame. King Lear has been interpreted and re-interpreted in several ways, but the modern appropriations and readings of the play focus particularly on the tragic vision of the universe.

Keywords: Existence, Fool, Modern, Tragedy, Universe.

The process of modernization of William Shakespeare's works involves the act of finding new meanings in the old, and in turn liberating it from the clutches of triteness, while making it accessible to the contemporary world. The Shakespeare in the Renaissance age is different from the one in the Victorian age, and is far removed from the one that exists in the modern times, which eventually leads to the creation of these various Shakespeares of our imagination, which change, transform and take shape according to the contexts and times. It therefore seems impossible to find a reason as to how the works of William Shakespeare could survive till the present times, but Mikhail Bakhtin tries to provide a plausible answer: 'He [Shakespeare] has grown because of that which actually has been and continues to be found in his works, but which neither he himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their epoch.... [He] constructed his works... out of forms that were already heavily laden with meaning, filled with it.... [He] included in his works immense treasures of potential meaning that could not be fully revealed or recognized in his epoch' (4-5). This research paper is an attempt to unearth the existential that is embedded in the works of William Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett. King Lear (1603-1606) has been interpreted and re-interpreted in several ways, but the modern appropriations and readings of the play focus primarily on the bleak vision of the world, in which the act of living itself is meaningless, and the modern condition of man can be termed as 'nothing'. Shakespeare subtly yet strategically makes King Lear (when mad), his Fool, and the madman and beggar Tom his mouthpiece for voicing out his views about the condition and position of man in this sterile universe. Imbuing these mad characters with the intellectual ability and power to see through things, Shakespeare unfolds a nihilistic view of the world, where there is no god for redemption, with an assertion that the end is near and is unstoppable. Edgar's realization of the concept of "reason-in-madness" in the hysterical speeches of Lear is a product of Shakespeare's use of madness as a

garb to talk about his real beliefs, and 'contains a great deal of veiled social criticism' (Orwell 116). This mixture of "matter and impertinency" brings on to the fore some important questions, as Lear while wandering in the cold, stormy night comes across Mad Tom, and asks: 'Is man no more than this?... Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art' (63). Reflecting upon man's uneasiness in this world in which he is born, Lear's insightful observation reduces man's stature to that of an animal, 'as man without reason is no more than a beast' (Muir 130). For Jan Kott, King Lear is a play about the disintegration of the world' (178), and could be read 'as a counterpart to the works of Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, and that Lear could be recognized as a stylized and symbolic representation of the grotesque nature of modern cruelty...' (Ioppolo xiii); and the 'actor's task was to demonstrate the blackest depths of the human soul' (Kott 177). Lear's act of facing the wild darkness on the heath bespeaks of man's constant struggle with his existence in a hellish world. He becomes an everyman who is alienated from his surroundings, and is always out there in the dark, trapped in the conundrum called life, while trying to decipher, find meaning and make sense of his existence. Lear's plight mirrors man's increasing isolation and his loneliness in his search, where he is interrogating the nature of man's life by putting these existential questions on the table. The eternal wait to demystify and decode life's labyrinth-like quality remains a failed attempt, but its leftover is a painful yet profound experience. Discontent with society's injustices and hypocrisies, Lear rants against the intrinsic pathos of a dystopic world, a world that is already fallen, corrupted and is corroded from the inside. Lear is living in a space in which only death can bring some respite from earthly suffering, and more so, death becomes a better choice than a life full of misery and despair, as Kent empathizes with Lear's state, believing that the phenomenon of life is all about endurance, and how long one can hold on to it: 'O, let him pass! He hates him/That would upon the rack of this tough world/Stretch him out longer' (115). Shakespeare's Hamlet (1603) is another example of

his philosophizing capacity playing with the idea of an existential angst, when his titular character Hamlet introspects in his famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be, that is the question". Hamlet assumes the form of a modern man, who is incessantly suffering, and is lost in the grim jungle of the modern age, and considers the possibility of sleeping/dying to escape the "grunt and sweat under a weary life". This automatically fragmented modern man is denied the wholeness of a self, and thus at best can become a shadow (reference to "Lear's shadow"). The tragedies of Hamlet and Lear stand for the modern human experience, in which the floating, confused and incomplete selves are imprisoned in a brutally tragic world, and madness becomes man's overriding characteristic, as Lear puts it: 'When we are born, we cry that we are come/To this great stage of fools' (92). In the introduction to *King Lear*, Ioppolo comments: 'With the application of postmodern theory, *King Lear* began to serve as Shakespeare's most extreme example of the cultural, political, personal failures caused by strictures inherent in the modern age... The physical blinding of Gloucester and the spiritual blindness of Lear are still relevant to a postmodern and post-theory world' (xiv). Moving towards a minimal use of costumes and sets, Peter Brook modernizes Shakespeare's theatre, and in his view, it becomes a play, which 'is directly related to the most burning themes of our time... our notions of progress, our way of living our lives...' (xiv); which 'refuses all moralizing'; and which 'as a vast, complex, coherent poem designed to study the power and emptiness of nothing' (181). Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) is a play in which the physically and psychologically hollow and handicapped characters, Hamm and Clov, are desperately waiting for the finish line – the end of unhappiness. Hamm and Clov are like Vladimir and Estragon, who live in a dysfunctional family structure, with a couple-like dependence, persistently bickering with each other. The other crippled characters, Nagg and Nell, symbolise the deformity that constitutive of the fragmented vision of the modern world. Evoking the agony of life, all the characters of the play seem to be stuck in time, which is accompanied by the impossibility of living without pain-killers, and the denial of regeneration and procreation due to the dominating presence of these rotten corpses. Jan Kott in an essay compares *King Lear* with Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*: 'King Lear makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies: of the heaven promised on earth, and the Heaven promised after death...of cosmogony and of the rational view of history; of the gods and good nature, of man made in "image and likeness". In *King Lear* both the medieval and Renaissance orders of established values disintegrate. All that remains at the end of this gigantic pantomime is the earth –

empty and bleeding' (105). The heath which figures in *King Lear* literally stands for a tract of level wasteland—uncultivated land—with sandy soil and scrubby vegetation. The heath therefore resembles Waiting for Godot's iconic tree and *Endgame*'s bare stage and can be seen as a landscape (both literally and symbolically), in the way that one is stranded on a foreign land from where there is no return, or it can be a modern, claustrophobic purgatorial space negating all kinds of reformation. Beckett also plays with the idea of nature, which conventionally signifies rejuvenation, but in the play, it represents geographical and spiritual barrenness, referred to in the seeds that "will never sprout", and the "nature has forgotten us". *Endgame* projects a timeless zone, a rattrap /mousetrap, where the monotony and drudgery of everyday existence, visible in "Why this farce, day after day?" contribute to a dismal image of zilch ("zero"); where 'all life long the same questions, the same answers' (13); and where the vicious and repetitive circle of no real beginning and end leads them to a road which goes nowhere, though there is a continual stress to "move", yet "nothing stirs" and "it's the same" with a sense of infinite emptiness and "extinguished light". On similar lines, Lear, who is unable to bear the torture anymore, calls out to the gods to defend Cordelia, but meets disappointment. Muir in this particular context insightfully explains: "There are many passages which appear to repudiate any idea that the gods answer prayers; that the direction of the tragedy is "annihilation of faith in poetic justice and, within the confines of a grim, pagan universe, annihilation of faith in divine justice" (138). It could therefore be deduced that the universe of *King Lear* stinks of the presence of an absent god, and an imperfect moral framework. Then, Lear's waiting for the gods is not much different from Beckett's characters, Vladimir and Estragon's endless wait, who are also "waiting for god(ot)" in a godless, hopeless, and moral-less cosmos reeking of existentialism. The decentralizing of god puts man in the centre, who now has reason with him, but even this reason would not suffice in the chaotic modern terrain. Jonathan Dollimore devises the idea of "existential humanism", in which man comes to the centre, but is 'in a condition of tragic dislocation' in a hostile 'universe which thwarts his deepest needs' (60), and where god would not redeem man, but he must seek his own redemption. 'The fundamental flaw is not in them but in the world they inhabit: in the political state, the social order it upholds...' (64), which concretizes the fact related to man's impotence and inability to bring about any change; thus the 'emphasis being instead on a modernist angst and man's thwarted spiritual potential' (65). Grigori Kozintsev's adaptation of the play points at the

dismal reality of a post-war landscape, which is sitting on a nuclear bomb, while anticipating its end any time. Albany, Lear's son-in-law, in a similar manner prophesizes about the doomsday, when there would be abuses of mankind in the modern age, and humanity would be a thing of the past devoured by ravenous devils that reside within: 'Humanity must perforce prey on itself/Like monsters of the deep' (79). The muddy, rocky, rugged and uneven terrain in the film creates an atmosphere of sublime darkness descending upon the mankind in general. Mark Sokolyansky applies his critical lens and explains how this black-and-white film retained its "ascetic spirit", the theme of "desolate nature" with the presence of the "stone [as] a key image throughout the film" (205). Dmitri Shostakovich's music is inseparable from the haunting vision of the play, with its musical

twists and crescendos painting a picture of thundering doom, as Kozintsev notes: 'In Shostakovich's music I can hear a ferocious hatred of cruelty, the cult of power and the oppression of justice... a fearless goodness which has a threatening quality.' In both play and movie, one is forced to foresee a future, in which nothing happens, and the last resort is to either keep waiting remorsefully, or to instantly end one's life, as Lear cries out, when "the strings of life begin to crack", and dies of heartbreak: 'No, no! No life?... Never, never, never, never, never!' (114). These heart-wrenching lines in Lear, similar to Endgame's "Why don't you finish us?", and "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished...", for R.A. Foakes find 'its culmination in death and the bleakness of 'never' (78), and for G.K. Hunter, it expresses his 'rejection of a world full of unimportant somethings' (26).

References

1. M.M. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from Novy Mir." *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ninth edition, USA: University of Texas Press, 2004, pp. 4-5.
2. Jonathan Dollimore, "King Lear and Essentialist Humanism." *Shakespeare's Tragedies*. ed Emma Smith. MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 60-72.
3. Grace Ioppolo, Introduction. "King Lear," By William Shakespeare. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008, pp. vii-xvi.
4. King Lear. Org: The Complete King Lear Site. "Shakespeare's King Lear on Film: Grigori Kozintsev's Epic Russian King Lear Adaptation." n.d. Web.
5. King Lear. Dir. Grigori Kozintsev. Perf. Ellen Burstyn Jüri Järvet, Elza Radzina, and Galina Volchek. Lenfilm, 1971. Film.
6. Jan Kott, "Shakespeare Our Contemporary," Trans. Boleslaw Taborski. London: Methuen, 1965.
7. Kenneth Muir, "King Lear." *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1979, pp.117-141.
8. George Orwell, "Selected Essays," London: Penguin Group, 1957, pp.11. William Shakespeare, "King Lear," ed. Grace Ioppolo. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.
9. G.K. Hunter, Introduction. "King Lear," By William Shakespeare. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 7-55.
10. William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," Eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. The Arden Shakespeare, Third ser. Volume one. London: Arden, 2006.
11. Peter Brook, "The Empty Space," London: Penguin Books, 2008.
12. R. A. Foakes, Introduction, "King Lear," By William Shakespeare. The Arden Shakespeare, Third ser. London: Arden, 1997.
13. Samuel Beckett, "Endgame," London: Faber &Faber, 1969. Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
14. Mark Sokolyansky, "Grigori Kozintsev's Hamlet and King Lear." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

* * *

L-61, Vijay Chowk, Laxmi Nagar,
Delhi-110092/Assistant Professor at Delhi University
taniyasachdeva@gmail.com