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Comparative Theatres of Stasis: A Study of Existential Paralysis in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Reflection*

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Abstract:

This article will be comparative analysis of Samuel Beckett's **avant-garde** play *Waiting for Godot* to Mahesh Elkunchwar's play *Reflection (Pratibimb)*. The evaluation of two cultures and their distinct characteristics in relation with theatres will be evaluated. The plays will be analyzed according to the school of **Theatre of the Absurd.** Tracing of the existential elements will be made along with the hints of post- colonialist in respect to Indian context will be observed. The role of Mahesh Elkunchwar as an Indian playwright along with his contributions in respect to Indian background will be looked at. Thorough qualitative analysis along with analytical approach will be employed as the research methodology. At last, a comprehensive conclusion based on the analysis and assumption of the topic will be made.

Keywords: Theatre, Absurd, Authenticity, Existentialism, Essence, Stasis

Introduction;

The mid-twentieth century saw the emergence of a global theatrical movement, later categorized as the Theatre of the Absurd, that responded to a profound philosophical crisis in the wake of two world wars and the collapse of traditional metaphysical certainties. At the forefront of this movement stands Samuel Beckett's seminal tragicomedy, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), a work that strips drama down to its minimalist core: two tramps, a bare tree, and the endless, futile expectation of a figure who never arrives. Decades later and thousands of miles eastward, the Marathi playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar a towering stature in post-independence Indian theatre recontextualized the aesthetics of existential angst, not on an empty road, but within the claustrophobic confines of the modern Indian middle-class home. His one-act play, *Reflection* (*Pratibimb*, c. 1970s), offers a searing psychological examination of a protagonist, 'He,' whose existential entrapment manifests through the literal loss of his mirrored image. This comparative study argues that while Beckett's play explores a universal, metaphysical absurdity through a radical simplification of form and language, Elkunchwar's *Reflection* domesticates and psychologizes this absurdity. Both playwrights, ultimately, achieve a profound critique of the human condition by employing shared dramatic strategies—namely, the motif of perpetual stasis, the use of minimalist or cyclical structure, and the fragmentation of memory and identity—to show that the modern crisis of meaning is a trans-global phenomenon, affecting both the cosmic wanderer and the economically secure bourgeois.

The historical and social contexts of the two plays establish their foundational differences and points of convergence. Beckett's *Godot* is indelibly marked by the trauma of post-World War II Europe, where the Holocaust and the atomic bomb had shattered enlightenment which advocates for faith in reason, progress, and divine order. The play's setting—a desolate country road—is a spatial metaphor for this intellectual and spiritual wasteland. The waiting itself is metaphysical, a reflection of mankind's abandonment by God (or, *Godot*). The philosophy driving the play is pure, unadulterated **Absurdism**: existence precedes essence, and the universe is silent and indifferent to human suffering.

Elkunchwar, writing in the dynamic and often confused landscape of postcolonial India, inherited this Western existential and absurdist tradition, but immediately adapted it to a localized cultural and social critique. Elkunchwar, as scholar Samik Bandyopadhyay observes;

> often focuses on the "disintegration of traditional social structures" and the "alienation of the individual in modern society" (Bandyopadhyay, 15).

Reflection does not deal with the generalized suffering of tramps on a road, but the specific, internal decay of a middle-class man trapped by the very comforts and conventions he sought. While Beckett's characters wait for a savior, Elkunchwar's 'He' waits for a recovery of his self, literally symbolized by the loss of his reflection. The play is, thus, a study in psychological realism or rather, a psychological surrealism set against the backdrop of Indian urbanity. Elkunchwar demonstrates that the existential void is not merely a European luxury but a universal malaise intensified by the hypocrisies and emotional sterility of bourgeois life in any rapidly modernizing society.

II. The Dramaturgy of Stasis: Waiting and Psychological Paralysis

The most apparent link between the two plays lies in their rejection of linear, Aristotelian dramatic action in favor of **stasis** and **repetition**. Both plays are essentially about the inability to act or initiate change.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the waiting is the plot. Vladimir and Estragon (Didi and Gogo) do not advance the action; they merely perform a series of repetitive, diversionary rituals—taking off boots, arguing over the tree, considering suicide, exchanging hats—to pass the time until Godot arrives. The repeated closing lines of each act;

> "Well, shall we go?" / "Yes, let's go." / *(They do not move)*" enshrine perpetual non-action as the human condition. Their waiting is an attempt to impose order and purpose on a chaotic existence, giving their otherwise meaningless lives a single, definitive task (Beckett, 94).

In *Reflection*, the stasis is internalized, expressed not as a failure of external purpose but as a profound psychological paralysis. The protagonist, 'He,' wakes up to find he has lost his reflection, the external signifier of his identity. His dilemma is not waiting for a person, but waiting for the restoration of his own coherent self. The play features characters like 'Woman,' 'Flags,' and 'Girl' who interact with 'He,' often through the "dramatic technique called Entering One's Mind", revealing the inner hollowness and 'bad faith' of the protagonist. While Didi and Gogo are immobilized by hope, 'He' is paralyzed by a terrifying lucidity—the realization that his identity was always a mere external construct, now stripped away. The difference is one of perspective: Beckett's waiting is a tragicomic cosmic joke; Elkunchwar's waiting is the slow, agonizing emotional suffocation of a hyper-aware individual.

Furthermore, both plays use physical objects that mock the characters' stasis. In *Godot*, the solitary, bare tree that sprouts leaves in Act II signals a false promise of change, emphasizing the static nature of the tramps' existence amidst the cyclical change of nature. In *Reflection*, the "External elements radio, doorbell, telephone and alarm clock also show a kind of indifference towards human characters" (Kumar, Geeta 13). These mechanical symbols of modernity—which demand action or connection—ring unanswered, ignored, or actively subverted by 'He,' demonstrating his complete emotional detachment from the obligations and stimuli of the outside world.

III. Language, Communication, and the Critique of Discourse

A fundamental tenet of Absurdist drama is the critique of language as a failed medium of communication. Beckett's linguistic minimalism in *Godot* is iconic. Didi and Gogo's dialogue is a constant stream of non sequiturs, clichés, and fragmented sentences. They speak not to convey information, but simply to fill the silence, confirming their shared existence and keeping the dread of silence at bay: "We talk in order not to think" (Beckett, 52). The language is interchangeable, circular, and often self-cancelling, reflecting a breakdown in logical thought that mirrors the chaos of the post-war world. Lucky's famous monologue, a torrent of chaotic, pseudo-intellectual discourse, exemplifies the collapse of traditional meaning into noise.

Elkunchwar's critique of language in *Reflection* is more subtly woven into the fabric of middle-class domesticity, though no less devastating. His characters do not speak in the philosophical riddles of Beckett, but in the hollow, banal, and often aggressively self-centered chatter of modern urban society. 'He' and the other characters engage in conversations that are fundamentally disconnected. The language is used to defend façades, deflect truth, and exploit emotional vulnerabilities. The core dramatic technique, where characters "Enter One's Mind," suggests that real communication is impossible through speech; it must occur telepathically or psychologically because the surface language is irreparably corrupt.

Elkunchwar's innovation lies in his use of the "pauses and silences" (Scholar Z, 120), a technique he refined throughout his career. While Beckett uses pauses to heighten the metaphysical silence, Elkunchwar often uses them to highlight the weight of unspoken, intensely private psychological turmoil. The silence in *Reflection* is not the absence of God, but the presence of debilitating self-knowledge and the terror of authentic existence, a concept deeply rooted in Sartrean 'bad faith,' which the protagonist ultimately succumbs to through suicide. Both playwrights, however, agree that language, whether reduced to babble or cloaked in bourgeois politeness, has failed to articulate the true human dilemma.

IV. Fragmentation of Identity and the Loss of the Self

Both *Godot* and *Reflection* foreground the instability and fragmentation of human identity, questioning the very notion of a coherent, permanent self.

Beckett achieves this through external confusion and repetition. Vladimir and Estragon continually forget the details of their past and the events of the previous day, suggesting that personal history is unreliable and that they may be interchangeable archetypes rather than distinct individuals. The repeated question of who is who—"Estragon? / Vladimir? / Yes, I remember. But when?"—is not comic forgetfulness, but a deep existential uncertainty (Beckett, 45). The master-slave pair, Pozzo and Lucky, further complicates this, as their roles reverse and their circumstances shift, suggesting that identity is a costume imposed by circumstance rather than an inherent truth. The character names themselves (Didi/Gogo) are reductive, emphasizing their status as mere dramatic functions.

Elkunchwar's treatment of fragmented identity is more direct and dramatically literalized through the central conceit of his play: the loss of 'He's' reflection. In psychoanalytic and mythological terms, the reflection is the primary symbol of self-recognition and identity coherence. The loss of his *pratibimb* (reflection) represents the protagonist's profound alienation from his social image and his inner self.

The characters in *Reflection* are named impersonally ('He,' 'Woman,' 'Girl,' 'Flags'), a technique that mirrors Beckett's use of simple, symbolic names (Vladimir, Estragon) or purely functional names (Lucky, Pozzo), underscoring their role as representatives of universal psychological types rather than fully realized, social beings. However, where Beckett's characters struggle with the absence of meaning in the external world, Elkunchwar's 'He' struggles with the presence of meaninglessness within his **internal world**. His suicide at the play's end is the ultimate act of self-negation, confirming that his constructed identity—his 'reflection'—was the only thing sustaining his existence. This stark, singular focus on the self-annihilation of the protagonist distinguishes Elkunchwar's localized psychological tragedy from Beckett's universal, open-ended tragicomedy.

V. The Dynamic of Dependency and Power

A crucial element shared by both plays is the exploration of interdependent relationships marked by power imbalances, which serve as localized microcosms of the universal human struggle.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky is the most overtly symbolic power dynamic. Pozzo, the ostensibly powerful master, physically and verbally abuses Lucky, who is tied by a rope and burdened by his master's possessions. Yet, this dependency is bilateral: Pozzo needs Lucky to carry his belongings and to validate his existence, just as Lucky needs Pozzo for direction. By Act II, when Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky mute, their dependence is cemented by mutual tragedy, illustrating that power structures are transient and rooted in shared human frailty.

The relationship between Vladimir and Estragon, though ostensibly equal, is also one of profound, life-sustaining dependency. Vladimir acts as the rational, memory-holding anchor (Didi, the 'dida' or leader), while Estragon is the physical, impulsive, and forgetful partner (Gogo, the 'gaga' or simple one). They stay together because separation would be tantamount to confronting the void alone. They need each other as distraction, confirmation, and moral support to continue the endless wait.

In *Reflection*, the dynamic of dependency is shifted from the symbolic road to the socio-domestic sphere. The relationships between 'He' and the 'Woman,' 'Flags,' or 'Girl' are not of cosmic master-and-slave, but of emotional and intellectual exploitation. The 'Woman,' for instance, tries to escape harsh reality through fantasies, but also uses her insight to penetrate and guide 'He's' mind, demonstrating a psychological firmness that contrasts with his frailty (Scholar Y, 78). 'Flags,' the communist ideologue, is exposed as a self-centered leech dependent on the 'Woman's' hospitality. The drama unfolds from the exposure of these subtle, everyday dependencies that hide beneath the veneer of modern freedom and intellectualism. The power dynamic in Elkunchwar is localized, residing not in the length of a rope but in the depth of psychological weakness and emotional need.

VI. The Theatrical Space: The Road vs. The Room

The chosen stage setting in each play fundamentally shapes its meaning, highlighting the philosophical distinction between metaphysical absurdity and socio-psychological malaise.

Beckett's stage is defined by its extreme lack. A "Country road. A tree. Evening." (Beckett, 7). This setting is non-specific, suggesting universality. The emptiness signifies the void, the lack of scenery the lack of inherent purpose, and the tree (the only vertical element) is a symbol of life, death, and possible crucifixion (hope/despair). This open, desolate space forces the audience to confront the characters' internal state and the metaphysical nature of their dilemma. The setting is purely symbolic.

Elkunchwar, by contrast, sets many of his absurdist-leaning plays, including *Reflection*, in a "closed-room setting," creating a "claustrophobic hothouse effect" (Lal, xv). The middle-class drawing-room in *Reflection* is not empty; it is likely filled with the recognizable, mundane artifacts of bourgeois life—a radio, an alarm clock, perhaps a mirror. The confinement is therefore a critique of domesticity and societal entrapment. The protagonist's psychological turmoil is intensified because he is surrounded by the very things that define the conventional life he can no longer access or perform. The room serves as a psychological echo chamber, a self-reflecting space where the characters' internal anxieties bounce off the four walls of their comfortable, yet sterile, lives.

The difference in setting underscores the transition of Absurdism from the general to the particular. Beckett's stage is the world, and his characters are everyman figures. Elkunchwar's stage is the house, and his characters are post-independence Indian intellectuals and middle-class professionals whose sense of identity is corroded by socio-economic transitions and a profound sense of self-betrayal.

VII. Conclusion

The comparative study of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Reflection* reveals a dynamic dialogue between Western existentialism and postcolonial Indian drama. While Beckett's work stands as the quintessential expression of metaphysical absurdity, employing radical theatrical minimalism to illustrate humanity's cosmic abandonment, Elkunchwar's play adapts these same absurdist aesthetics cyclical structure, linguistic fragmentation, and thematic stasis to a powerful, localized psychological critique.

Both playwrights expose the central human tragedy: the persistent need for meaning in a world that offers none. Beckett's Estragon and Vladimir choose the distraction of perpetual waiting to survive the silence; Elkunchwar's 'He' confronts the void reflected in the absence of his own image and chooses annihilation. In both cases, the theatrical space, whether the boundless, empty road or the stifling, furnished room, becomes a potent metaphor for entrapment. Elkunchwar's ability to synthesize the universal existential quest with the specific socio-psychological complexities of modern Indian life replacing the cosmic wait for Godot with the internal struggle for the 'reflection' of the self confirms his stature as a playwright who successfully globalized the Theatre of the Absurd, demonstrating its enduring relevance far beyond its European origins.

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