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# Research Chronicler

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Prof. K.N. Shelke

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A detailed still-life composition featuring a quill pen as the central element. The quill is positioned diagonally, with its tip resting on a scroll of aged parchment. The scroll is secured with a red wax seal and a red ribbon. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder casts a warm glow. In the foreground, a glass inkwell with a quill inside and a red wax seal are visible. The entire scene is set on a dark wooden surface.

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**Theatre and Phenomenology: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* within the Apparatus of Merleau Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception**Nandini Sharma<sup>1</sup>& Dr. V. Premlata<sup>2</sup>*Dept. of English Studies, Dayalbagh Educational Institute (Deemed University), Dayalbagh, Agra (U.P.) India***Abstract:**

Phenomenology as a philosophy is very much popular in twentieth century. It can be understood in two ways as a disciplinary field in philosophy or as a movement in the history of philosophy. It studies conscious experience from subjective point of view. Theatre of Absurd also deals with the existence of the man in this world. The proposed paper endeavours to deal with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological approach and put the influential play of theatre of Absurd, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* within its framework.

**Key Words:** Phenomenology, Absurd, Philosophy, Conscious, Existence**Phenomenology: A Historical Perspective:**

In 1918, Europe was devastated by the worst war in history. The social order of European capitalism had been shaken to its roots by the huge destruction brought by the war stirring its political balance as its terrific consequence. The ideologies and the cultural values were also shaken and were in deep turmoil. The First World War itself was responsible for the crisis of ideologies. It was the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, who developed a new philosophical method.

Edmund Husserl rejected the concept that objects stand independent in the external world and they are reliable. Husserl says that we tend to feel certain of how things influence us or lay impact that appeal to our consciousness. Husserl opines that realities that our mind perceives should be treated as pure phenomena and this is the whole source of data we require to begin with. Husserl called his philosophy by the name of

"Phenomenology". As phenomenology is the science of pure phenomena.

Phenomenology is derived from the Greek word 'Phenomenon' means 'which appears', and logos means 'study'. It is the study of the structures of experience and consciousness. Phenomenology, as a movement was inaugurated by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), in the Introduction to the Second Volume of the First Edition of his *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901) as a new way of doing philosophy. Phenomenology became one of the strong philosophical currents at the onset of the twentieth century which revived our living contact with reality. It sought to reinvigorate philosophy by returning it to the life of the living human subject.

There have been several major figures who have contributed immensely in the development and growth of the philosophy of Phenomenology such as Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Levinas, Ponty, Gadamer et al.

### Maurice Mearleu Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Brief Overview

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908- 1961) was a French philosopher. He was highly influenced by Edmund Husserl who is considered as a father of Phenomenology and Martin Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty has written many works and his best known works are *The Structure of Behavior* (1942), *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). His other work *The Visible and the Invisible* (1960) is an uncompleted work and it was posthumously published in 1964.

In his seminal work *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau Ponty introduced an approach which considered inner/subjective and the outer/objective experiences as part of the same process. According to Ponty, phenomenology is the method of defining nature of our perceptual contact with the world. He states while explaining the intimate relation between the body and world:

Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism; it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system" (1962:203, 235).

According to Merleau Ponty, body perceives the world. As he says "my body, as it were, perceives the world for me" (3). He views that body is already in the grip of world. "The thing... is not first of all a meaning for the understanding but a structure accessible to inspection by the body" (3) Ponty says that meanings or structures are the immediate objects of perception. The world has its perceptual 'syntax'. So it has a logic

and language that is wordless logic and silent language. And these meaningful structures, according to Ponty are for body not for the intellect or understanding.

He states "you can perceive a world because your body is already attuned to the world."(3) We are in the world or we have our existence in this world because we in our bodies are 'alive to' the world. Indeed, we live the world and "in order to perceive things we need to live them". (4) According to Ponty "body is a living interpreter of the world". (4) Body is the medium of our communication with time as well with space. (210)

### *Waiting for Godot: A Phenomenological Reading*

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), was an Irish dramatist and novelist. His masterpiece play, *Waiting for Godot* (1953) was originally written in French, and translated into English in 1956.

*Waiting for Godot* follows two days in the lives of a pair of men who divert themselves while waiting expectantly for someone named Godot to arrive. They admit that they would not even recognize him if they were to see him. To occupy themselves, they eat, sleep, converse, argue, sing, play games, exercise, swap hats, and contemplate suicide — anything 'to hold the terrible silence at bay.' They are alone in the beginning and are alone in the end, leaving one question before the spectators 'when will Godot come?'

"Looking at the sky" , this action is a representation of deep sinking thought, perhaps of waiting for a hope, for a new beginning, self analysis of one's existence,

which arises a multiple questions and analysis without delivering a single word to the reader . We perceive that bodily actions are somehow more effective and expressive factors than words.

*Waiting for Godot* is one such example of perception through bodily actions it takes us to the analysis of abstract elements without conventional style of writing with linguistic expressions. Merleau-Ponty is a great example who perceived this concept and gives importance to body rather than intellect. He says that it is the body which perceives the whole world. In *Waiting for Godot* we find that there is less use of language but they present their views through the different actions which are performed by the body. In the starting of the play we see that the two men are there who don't speak but through their bodily activities throws the light on the very theme of the play that is 'waiting'.

Estragon is trying to pull his boots but without success. He exalted but tries again and again. The other man Vladimir does the same with his hat. It sets the atmosphere and theme on which the whole play depend "nothing to be done". Their actions of body show the anguish and futility of life. They don't have words or a good language to communicate with the other characters. They speak less and whatever they speak, forget and repeat. As "he searches for the words" to speak but "he takes off his hat again, peers inside it. He knocks on the crown as though to dislodge a foreign body, peers into it again, puts it on again". (86)

Their actions are repeated, through the bodily gestures they speak more. Their inner

thoughts and anguish represented through their body only. It is the body of these characters which perceives the world for them. They don't know what they are doing but their body knows and it reacts according to the situation. Like they suddenly burst into laughter. "Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted."(87)

It is through their body, we can analyze the theme of the play.

He rises painfully, goes limping to extreme left, halts, gazes into distance off with his hand screening his eyes, turns, goes to extreme right, gazes into distance, Vladimir watches him, then goes and picks up the boot, peers into it, drops it hastily.(90)

It presents the theme of 'waiting'. They are waiting for someone whom they don't know. They look at the tree then look around and try to recognize the place. They have forgotten that it is the same place where they were yesterday. It is their body itself which knows their existence in this world.

Sometimes there are silences and gaps and these are filled by the bodily gestures and activities. Like "Estragon gently, you wanted to speak to me? (Silence. Estragon takes a step forward) you had something to say to me? (Silence. Another step forward).Didi..." (95) Whenever the character sits in solitude or when there is silence, the existential anguish is more represented and reflected through body, gestures, more than any possible words.

It is the main worry of these characters as they want to leave that place but they

cannot. Their body is the presence in this world. Like they want to run but come back.

Together make a sudden rush towards the wings. Estragon stops halfway, runs back, picks up the carrot, stuff it in his pocket, runs to rejoin Vladimir who is waiting for him, stops again, runs back, picks up his boot, runs to rejoin Vladimir. Huddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace, they wait. (103)

When the character imposes a feeling of superiority on the other, and the element of suffering reflected in the other character is clearly seen in his bodily actions like Lucky is silently following, Pozzo's dance commands reluctantly. The feeling of superiority in Pozzo is highly reflected through his bodily actions of kicking, jerking of the rope in which no speech is used. Pozzo's weeping face reflects the deteriorating condition of mind and it requires no words to convey his inner conscious state of mind.

The arousal of emotions in the spectators is successfully achieved without using lingual support by characters, their bodily actions itself arouse mixed emotions in the readers, like the feeling of disgust, pity, fear of existence, inferiority, absurdity of life, weird silence that arouses anxiety in the readers. The silences and gaps in the play are not nearly without a purpose but they highly reflect the feeling of the characters represented by their bodily actions. According to Merleau Ponty "in reality this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner language". (210) Like 'looking at tree' and 'looking at the sky' are

the few examples through which Beckett is able to highlight the theme of 'waiting' which is an ever ending process for these two characters. The different themes like purposelessness, futility of life, frustration, lost in their own self, innocent waiting, blankness, and feeling of reluctance are clearly shown through their 'body'. Like reviving the hope of existence is reflected by the character's foetal posture, "...he resumes his foetal posture, his head between his knees". (166)

#### **Conclusion:**

The concept of Phenomenology reflects our intense and deep rooted perception of the objects around us. Samuel Beckett intricately applies this in the *Waiting for Godot* where the perception plays major role in relation to body. Beckett unveils the concept of perception and *Waiting for Godot* is a powerful source to witness how bodily expressions speak more than words. The abstract revelations are reflected through the actions and Beckett gave life to the concept with a beautiful plot and characters.

*Waiting for Godot* is an absurd play through which Beckett has projected the themes like waiting, the repeated actions, the meaninglessness, the absurdity of life, the feeling and being suspended in time instead of moving forward in a meaningful directions. These themes are brought out by the bodily expressions without the help of language. The play can be well defined in terms of consciousness as the words are not capable of expressing the inner self. In the terms of Merleau Ponty 'flesh' is the best medium to have this world and to reflect this world also. He disregards the use of

theatrical language as it tries to break logical sequences and associations so as to express the movement and fluidity of consciousness. Beckett believes that the subject's perception of a particular object destroys its relation to the object by transforming the object into a mere intellectual pretext.

As Merleau Ponty believes that subjects and objects are not different but the parts of the

whole. Thus Beckett's play reveals that it is not intellect but the 'body' as subject understand the meaning. Merleau Ponty and Beckett both believe that the intellect is not able to establish the continuity with the world. Beckett through his work *Waiting for Godot* establishes that it is the body which is continuing its contact with the world.

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