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SATISH ALEKAR'S *THE DREAD DEPARTURE* AS AN ABSURD PLAY

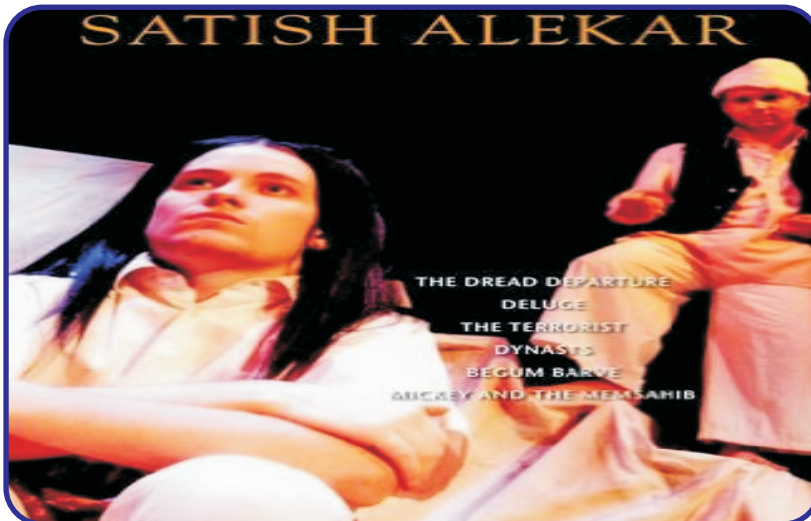
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ABSTRACT

You should not have waited. [1-pg.40]

The scene is of a funeral and the speaker is the young son of a dead father. Everyone is shocked to hear this, a son telling his weeping mother and other mourners who have gathered around his father's dead body waiting for him. According to the Hindu tradition, a son is required to light the fire to his dead father's funeral pyre. This scene is from a play *The Dread Departure* by Satish Alekar. The reader shares the shock of all those present there in the scene. This dialogue underscores the essence of this absurd play with many complicated emotions built in there, in



Mahanirvan or *The Dread Departure*.

KEYWORDS :structure Satish Alekar, human relationships .

INTRODUCTION :

Through its absurd theme and structure Satish Alekar , the Marathi playwright , has commented very effectively ,on the absurdity of the life itself. The focus keeps shifting between the theme of inevitability of death and the perfunctory nature of human relationships. The events in the play appear superficial on the surface but in reality, they bring out the harshest and truest facts of life, facts which we usually try to shun even talk about nor accept or at most, brush it off under the carpet. Written originally in Marathi around 1974, *The Dread Departure* has been one of the most famous plays of Satish Alekar. The play has an interesting premise: to present death and

funeral rituals as ordinary every day occurring and in the process, robbing it off, of the fear, horror and repulsion , normally and essentially associated with it. The treatment meted out by the playwright to the events that occur after the death of the protagonist Bhau, a middle class Marathi gentleman, appear grotesque and soon the absurdity of the rigid customs and ceremonies performed after death becomes obvious. It is the comically ironical depiction of these customs that seems absurd to the modern eye, and this is what Alekar wants to show to his audience. Deploying the technique of the absurd theatre helps him illustrate the degeneration of morality in today's times and days

The play talks about how death is the final departure from this world and imagines how if we are

to witness the happenings after our *departure*; we may get the rudest shock that has the ability to change our whole world view, upside down. This is done through the character of Bhau , a middle class Marathi man, who after he has died, somehow keeps his senses alive and observes all the incidents, that take place. Interestingly, he doesn't appear to be shocked at witnessing the events that happen after his death but only expresses a pensive brooding sorrow, in his commentary. Bhaurao seems resigned to his fate now though we still see him insisting that, his funeral should take place as per the old traditional way and he abhors the electric crematorium. Through this emerges a story of human infallibility, the falling human moral standards and the collapsing of the social and individual relations with a degenerating society.

Satish Alekar has wisely chosen to tell his story through the medium of the absurd drama technique. The parody of the whole situation of a funeral in a Marathi play, and the humor it gives rise to, lightens the burden of the bitter and harsh thoughts of and about life and death. The ironic tone of the play and the black humor turn the ordinary happenings during and after a death/funeral quite sensational and revealing. The theme is insalubrious but Alekar's deft and unique handling of the situation with master strokes of a rare genius, make the play, a one of its own kind. The sardonic humor is an attack on the hypocrisy of a society which is self centered, selfish and cherishes materialism with an attitude of a practical ruthless human being.

The play runs on two levels concurrently. The absolutely horrific situations are narrated by the playwright, in a simple way without any indication of a shock element which normally is associated with such happening and all this is done with a tongue in cheek humor. It is the readers who after the initial disbelief and revulsion, begins to take things in his strand and enjoys the comic-horror of the play , be it the , dead body of Bhaurao talking like a normal person and his insistence on being cremated the traditional way of wood funeral pyre or the son's anger over people who want him to light his father's funeral pyre as an old tradition or Bhaurao's wife Rama's dreaming of a new man ,soon after the demise of her husband ; each incident is built into the plot , by the dramatist, to enhance the theme the absurdity of death and consequently of death.

This is essentially an absurd theme. The technique of the theatre of the absurd helps the playwright to show the degeneration of the society and its moral social and political norms, in the poignant way he wants. This technique stuns, evokes immediate humor or laughter, repulses the reader or audiences but ultimately compels him to reflect deep on and about the problem and malaise , the writer wants him to. Satish Alekar's *The Dread Departure* is a fine absurd play focusing on the degeneration of the values, norms and ethics of the society of his time; but even after 39 years of being originally written in Marathi, the play and its premises still ring true.

The notion of absurd became current mainly due to an essay entitled, *The Myth of Sisyphus* published in 1942 by Albert Camus . It describes an illness of the spirit and furthermore , focuses on a sensibility of the absurd. The genus of drama is thought of as predominantly appropriate for presenting the absurd notions. Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Edward Albee , Harold Pinter and Eugene Ionesco. These playwrights represent man's life both anguished and absurd. **Eugene Ionesco** says in his essay on Kafka,

Cut off from his religious metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost, all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless. [Abrams 1999:86]

The absurd drama technique is used to display the diseases plaguing a society and due their enormity gives rise to feelings of helplessness and frustration. An irrational theatre of this group is meant to be a genuine expression of whatever is incongruous and bizarre. In fact , the genuine display of absurdity is effectively exposed through the best verbal and non verbal communicative activities that are explicitly felt to be eccentric, incohesive and incoherent. The absurd basically reflects in man's response to the world he finds himself in and which appears devoid of any meaning and purpose to him. He is engulfed into a feeling of helplessness and he feels like a puppet that has lost all control over himself and his

surroundings.

The notion of absurd became topical largely because of an essay entitled, "The Myth of Sisyphus" [1942] by Albert Camus. It describes an illness of the spirit and, furthermore, focuses on a sensibility of the absurd. The genre of drama is considered most appropriate for presenting absurd ideas. The leading writers of this genre are Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Edward Elbee, Harold Pinter and Eugene Ionesco. These dramatists represent man's life both anguished and absurd. Eugene Ionesco in his essay on Kafka claims,

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The absurd drama technique is used to showcase the diseases plaguing a society and due to their enormity give rise to feelings of helplessness and frustration. An irrational theatre of this group is meant to be a genuine expression of whatever is incongruous and bizarre. In fact, the genuine display of absurdity is effectively exposed through the best verbal and non verbal communicative activities that are explicitly felt to be eccentric, incohesive and incoherent. The absurd basically reflects itself in man's response to the world he finds himself in and which appears devoid of any meaning and purpose to him. He is engulfed into a feeling of helplessness and he feels like a puppet that has lost all control over himself and his surroundings.

This play *The Dread Departure* too plays on the similar fears of a man but in a different way; it tries to present death and death related Brahman rituals as an ordinary everyday occurrence. The attempt is to remove the horror associated with it. Death, as is no need to mention evokes horror pain and fear; hence commoners generally avoid talking about it. But there have been not a few writers who have tried successfully to attempt to, humanize, death. Neither have they shied away from death nor feared challenging it and facing it head on. from to rob it off its horror and present it as a common occurrence like birth and wedding celebrations. John Donne challenged death and asked of it, to not be proud.

*Death be not proud, though, some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so*

American poetess Sylvia Plath romanticizes death as her bride-groom, who has come to take her away in a carriage. Death as a phenomenon has been challenged with the vivid imagination of our literary artists.

The concept of death has always been mysterious to us humans, even fascinating, if one can be frank enough to admit, apart from the usual fear it brings to mind. Death its inevitability, is what is more frightening for the humans. One who is born is doomed to death; love, money, good fortune, nothing can be guaranteed in life but, death is. Also the perennial or existential question that if everything is going to end in death, then what is the use of living a life? And there should be no question about living it to the fullest or enjoying it. The next crucial query may be this: if death is unavoidable and it shall capture us unguarded, then, after death what? One of the most quotable quotes about it is from the classic absurd play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, which goes something like this.

Is there anybody out there?

A clear reference to our being completely oblivious about what might ensue, after death. Is there an afterlife as some religions preach or is it only darkness after our last breaths? Does death silence everything; even our minds? When everything is going to end in oblivion then life is no precious gift but a sentence in the prison house called world, to be spent without much ado, to be endured with a lot of helplessness and going through its everyday living becomes a meaningless ritual. The idea of the absurd takes root from this mode of thinking.

Nevertheless the menace of death pervades the play throughout, evoking feelings of despair and huge disappointment with man's selfishness, greed and general hypocrisy. The situations in an absurd play are grotesque and comic, and at some points are reduced to farce, [especially the part in this play where, the two men are fighting over the crows for eating their dead fathers' ritualistic rice balls first!] The dialogue is full of clichés and here singsongs are used to convey the undertones of the message of the play and sentiments of the people participating. The characters are caught in the same repetitive situations, apparently engaged in silly pursuits. The plot is cyclical and defies the normal convention of a well made play that is typical of an absurd play. Despite being realistic the said play seems to defy all logic and appears as dismissal of realism. In effect it is a very harsh attack on our hypocrisies and the rigid 'after death' rituals our society witnesses on a daily basis. A lot of people and the playwright himself think of them as meaningless and which the playwright seems to be advocating to do away with. In brief, 'The Dread Departure or Mahanirvan', appears outwardly to be a non sense which makes all the sense to a discerning eye.

A dead man talking, feeling things around him, expressing his desire to be cremated the traditional way and not in the new modernly built electric crematorium, all this amuses the reader no end. His rejection of the new technique is symbolic of him rejecting the new value system, which was trying to gain fast a foothold in the society. His death at best only amuses his neighbors and they quickly get to, 'action'. The action of cremating a dead body which happened to be of their neighbor, a man whom they met and dealt with on a daily basis, read the news paper borrowed from him and peeped in his window at odd hours of the day. But after his death they swiftly make the move to dispose off his body and even fight among themselves over trivial matters, like the quality of Sholapuri counterpanes, the pot which they would prefer to be of slightly baked mud and also seeming anxious to find unadulterated kerosene, to burn the body better. In the talk that goes on, we never find a single mention of their sorrow over the loss of their friendly neighbor and a reminiscing of a few of his good qualities. Compassion is what is lacking in their exchanges. This was the case of Bhaurao's neighbors but even his only son lacks it. We know this when he conveys his displeasure over the late cremation of his father. He was gone out for playing the final games of Prisoner's Games, somewhere in Gangapur or Sholapur. He is furious and demands to know from his mother and others present as to why they didn't hurry up with the burning of the body of his father as the delay might lead to the decomposing of the corpse. This indicates the ignorance of a modern day son about the ritual of the son lighting the pyre of his father; he is also devoid of any grief and pain over his father's death. Nana, the only son of Bhaurao seems to be incapable of emotional feeling. This is what the writer seems to focus upon, the lack of emotional feeling for a fellow being among friends, neighbors, and relations like son or even a wife! The natural human capability of feeling love for someone, care for someone, honoring someone, all seem to have died in the age of the machine, or at least all such emotions are now centered upon the personal mileage that can be had from the people one loves. It's called the Money Matter or simply put, how that person whom I show I love or care for is or could be beneficial for myself. All human relationships today are based on selfishness, greed and a hidden malice. Rama, Bhaurao's wife initially is mournful for her husband and her condition is pitiable. But soon enough, as soon as, the bier of the dead body of her husband is being carried away, she has a glimpse of a man in dark suit and shades, who is third from the left among the pall bearers and immediately she confesses that she saw in him, her real love, her savior. The kind of the Knight in the shining armor, who would come and sweep her off her feet and rescue her from her ordinary life and its associated drudgery, this is symbolic of a woman's desire for better circumstances and the element of sensuousness, in her bored life. Bhaurao who adjusts with everything and accepts the sharp comments of his son about himself, like, he should not forget that he is dead now or that how difficult it is becoming to put up with him and the stench his cadaver gives rise to. He also pleads to his father about not minding to get burned in an electric crematorium and is

irritated to hear his refusal each time. The rotting corpse of Bhaurao has to be kept on the attic of the home as the old crematorium has closed down and the new has not opened yet. After bribing the watchman of the older facility, Nana the prodigal son arranges for the last rites of his father. The father follows him out and eats away the Basmati rice balls, meant for the crows, who when eat the balls it is thought that, their moksha has been achieved. Nana's donning up a toga and impersonating of a crow to calm the two warring sons who are arguing about who would eat the rice balls of their dead father first, is a farce, which stuns our innermost nerves. Even death can't silence the beast in us! We remain the same old selfish selves of ours even when the saddest moment of our lives keeps staring at us. Even when what is required of us is a show of decorum, a display of maturity and understanding for other humans like us. Human emotions failing everywhere and a cruelty setting among the modern folks who think nothing of a fellow human being, is the true picture of the society today, this play presents us with. A sort of complete degeneration seems to have taken over people in general and the old traditional camaraderie among the people or more especially neighbors is absent in today's times.

But the piece de resistance comes when Bhaurao with an earnest wish to meet Rama his wife, one last time, begs to his son and finds out that she was already in love with another man, the third man from the left, in the dark suit. She is already contemplating the escape in the wild with her man who seems handsome to her. The farcical element reaches its height when we see Nana, the son of Rama speaking of arranging a match between his mother and her new paramour, asking also if she knew him before her marriage to his father. This event in the play throws light on the despicable levels of moral degradation of the society where a widow, begins to dream of the new man, who is the pall bearer of her husband's dead body! Alekar makes masterly use of the absurd technique and finest theatrical craftsmanship to illustrate his point.

The characters of Bhaurao and Nana are portrayed with sincerity of a craftsman who believes in genuineness and accuracy of portrayal. All these characters are picked up from a lower middle class Marathi society. They lack the normal human fellow feelings for each other, compassion is a word not found in their dictionary and they appear self centered to the core. At his father's refusal to be burnt in the modern way through electricity, the son is exhausted to the core, trying to convince him. Nana is further aghast when he hears his father say that, the new modern system of burning the cadavers are for the modern people like him[his son]! He asserts further that he would be burnt by the logs of wood and not the current running through the electric wires.

Coming to the themes of *The Dread Departure*, what it necessarily conveys is the collapsing of the modern social structure. It is quite frightening a phenomenon. In the world of literature there has been a shift from classicism to romanticism and from romanticism it has moved to realism and finally it has culminated in absurdist expression. Literature reflects the spirit of the age and every work of literature is the product of that age. It is shaped by social, political and cultural changes taking place therein. After the two World Wars there were revolutionary changes in all the fields of human life. The traditional value-system was subverted by those epoch-making events. The long cherished ideals of truth, beauty and morality were rejected. The romantic attitude towards life was also destroyed. The notions of love, affection affinity, devotion were uprooted. Since then the society has been a witness to the total loss of aesthetic attitude towards life and art. We find uncontrollable growth of population, unemployment, poverty, privation, rapid urbanization, rising prices of commodities, spread and growth of slum areas, loss of familial relationship, extreme individualism, solipsism, selfishness, sexual exploitation, moral and material corruption, subversion of moderate and restrained sensuality, lack of space, growing illicit sexual relationships due to the fall of the moral structure and consequent feeling of alienation.

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