



RESEARCH PAPER

Analyzing Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as a Political Comedy

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ABSTRACT

This study was devised to analyze Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* in the light of Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of postmodernism given in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). This Lyotardian paradigm extends a subversive challenge to all the grand narratives that have been enjoying the status of an enviable complete code of life in the world for a long time. Even a cursory scan over the play under analysis creates a strong feel that Beckett very smartly, comprehensively and successfully questioned the relevance of the totalizing metanarratives to the present times. Being an imaginative writer, he was well aware of the fact that ridicule is a much more useful weapon than satire in the context of political literature. There are so many foundationalist ideologies that he ridicules in his dramatic writing. Christianity as a religion is well exposed; the gravity of philosophy is devalued; the traditional luxury that the humans get from the art of poetry is ruptured and the great ideals of struggle are punctured. He achieves his artistic and ideologically evolved authorial intentions with a ringing success. It is interesting to note that he maintains a healthy balance between art and message.

Introduction

Internalization of knowledge is a continuous process that consciously and unconsciously goes on among speech communities to let them think in contrapuntal terms. Aristotle's critical study of Greek tragedy engaged him creatively and the result was his *Poetics* that is even today the superordinate for all the versions of serious dialogic writings. Freud in the 19th century went for the diagnostic reading of Sophocles' century's old play *Oedipus Rex* and the result was the psychoanalytic theory that is vehemently used today in different disciplines of knowledge. Ibne Tufayl, a Muslim philosopher of Muslim Spain, gave the concept of two types of truths: higher truth and lower truth of life; the former was for the sulphite and the latter was for the bromides of the society (Tufayl, 2015). Henrik Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* (1900) borrows the structures of higher and lower truths from Ibne Tufayl. As the higher truths of life cannot be digested by the ritualistic people, therefore their life becomes a chaos, if they are exposed to them. Ibsen's above mentioned play dramatizes this Tufylian formulation. There are so many other examples that can be quoted here in this context. But let us come to the context of Beckettian dramaturgy and Jean-

Francois Lyotard's theory of postmodernism given in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). It seems that Lyotard consciously or unconsciously drew his theory of postmodernism on the play texts of Samuel Beckett.

Keeping the provisions of Lyotardian theory of postmodernism in mind we can say confidently that it finds its exposition in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett makes use of simple language in his play under examination but he strategically places various grand narratives at different points and on multiple levels to proceed his authorial plan to compose a political comedy. His purpose is quite clear: to expose the pseudo relevance of these totalizing narratives. His mobile imagination tempts him to choose ridicule, not satire, to challenge the all-inclusive image of these narrations. He has a list of narratives at his disposal to aestheticize them one by one shrewdly. No doubt, his message is very strong but it is well harmonized with art. That is a success of Beckett. His political content remains artistic mostly as he knows the art of conveying his message well shrouded in artistic component. He intentionally prolongs the discussion of some narratives and gives a smaller place to other ones. For example, he comicalizes the narrative of Christianity, of waiting and of capitalism to some considerable length but he gives passing reference to the art of poetry as a narrative.

There is a long list of critics and researchers who investigated *Waiting for Godot* from multiple angles. This activity that started with the publication of the play in the mid of the previous century is still going on. Even today we see off and on talented researchers busy in producing meaningful and valuable commentaries on the play. Martin Esslin (2001) wrote a comprehensive book *The Theatre of the Absurd* that places Beckett's plays into the category of absurd genre of literature. To him, the universe of Beckett is full of absurdity and meaninglessness. He traces various aspects of Beckett's theatricality. He says that his characters are thrown into a void, a chaos and a wasteland. Their relationship with the surroundings is not viable. They do exist in this universe but they do not have any program that could sustain them and accommodate them in the barren world. They are alien to the universe; the universe is alien to them and they are alien to each other also. The Beckettian characters have to kill time via waiting; "the subject of the play is not Godot but waiting" (Esslin, p.87). Life is always in a circular move that leads nowhere.

Catherine Worth (1990) elaborates the theatricality and the on-stage performance of *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days* in her book *Waiting for Godot and Happy Days: Text and performance*. Worth analyzes the texts from so many angles. The ambience of the play is the special focus of this book. The pairs of characters are discussed symbolically here and they depicted as disintegrated pieces of a dry and insufficient life on the globe. The evening/twilight is interpreted as the time of confusion and uncertainty. The tree that shows some leaves in the second act also works as figurative material. Her take that what happens in the text of the play is further emphasized in its theatrical production. While writing on the role of setting, language, style and rhythm, she points out various aspects of the play that are foregrounded. As far as the action of the play is concerned, she believes that everything seems to be frozen here in this play: "time is slowed down to the crawl" (p.15). Her investigation of the play is remarkable but she does not discuss it as a political comedy.

While commenting on the theme of stillness and barrenness in *Waiting for Godot*, Arnold P. Hinchliffe (2018) in his book *The Absurd: The Critical Idiom Reissued* holds that

there is devaluation of everything in the play. There is the devaluation of language that ultimately reaches the border of breakdown. Even then he continues to damage it so effectively that the permanence of inertia-stricken existentialism is projected artistically. With reference to action and activities in the narrative under analysis, he says "idleness is a positive statement of existence and the heroes that follow subscribe to the basic human maxim...nothing has any real existence" (p. 49). He says that reason that is always considered a quality feature of human life "is transmuted into the still vaster reality of the irrational" (p. 58). There are so many examples of chaos and absence of meanings in this narrative that one seems to be at wit's end. Perhaps the tone is much drier than the content and material found here. It is certainly a very significant study like the other ones reviewed above but the political aspect of the play was not touched upon. Hence the present piece of research.

Theoretical Framework

Jean-Francois Lyotard is considered a very strong voice in the paradigm of postmodernism/poststructuralism. His version of postmodernism that he presented in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) informs the present research project as a theoretical frame work. He sees no relevance of the traditional narratives to the present times. He believes that these narratives that remained in vogue for a long time in all the sociopolitical walks of human life have lost their relevance and weight in the new span of existing history. These historical narratives of science, religion, philosophy etc. are now unable to keep on their totalizing role that have been responsible for the setting up universal moralities by ignoring variations at local and individual levels. Quite contrary to these foundationalist hierarchies, he promotes the petite and micronarratives. There are reasons of his attitudinal thrust against these narratives that always enjoyed grandeur and status. These structures levy an artificial unity over knowledge and reality by turning their critical eye from the so many schisms beneath the smoothness of the institutional weave. These hierarchical pyramids damage the health and full growth of individuals and cultures. People generally have been considering them as the complete codes of life but in fact these ideologies are the power houses of terror that go to every extent "not to find truth, but to augment power"; these "humanist narratives of legitimation" are unacceptable to the contemporary mind (Lyotard, 1984, p. 46). In the prevalence of the totalizing knowledges and imaginations, the oppositional and alternative orientation that seems healthy and also the need of the contemporary times is either blanketed over or ignored very tactfully.

Lyotard not only explains the operations and ill impacts of the totalizing narratives explicitly he also recommends a set/ a variety of options that should be launched by the oppressed individuals on the individual level against the exploitative agencies. He develops his anti-foundationalist theory called paganism. The oppressed are advised not only to resist the oppressive practices, they are also asked to develop a guerrilla like image and behavior. They are expected to be all the time mentally ready to attack the hegemonic universalities. Their flexibility to advance for attack or retreat for safety both are very important moves on their part. As knowledge is the medium of hegemonic powers, therefore jokes, skits and literature especially should be used to attack the coherence of the oppressive ideologies. Political literature is known for such activities that softly but effectively pursue its targets through the use of irony, black comedy and the modes of subversive ridicule. Ridicule has been a weapon available with the socio-politically

sidestepped and cornered junta. This artistic strategy of smile, laughter and ridicule works very successfully if it is managed aesthetically.

Data Analysis

Lyotardian version of postmodernism is quite distinguished from the other thinkers and philosophers. His postmodernism challenges the famous and routinely observed sociopolitical narratives of modernism. The thrust of modernism lies in the celebration of traditional grand narratives that continued to get support from all the sections of all the societies since centuries. Modernism was desirous to see the continuation and extension of these ideological structures as a blessing for the present-day humanity as it was the panacea for all the social concerns in the past tense. Lyotard very systematically and effectively challenges this totalizing conduct and character in his postmodern aesthetics. The in-depth study of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* creates a very strong impression that this text is a suitable candidate for the application of Lyotardian version of postmodernism. The close study of the play under discussion creates a strong impression that Beckett quite exhaustively exemplified the Lyotardian concept of postmodernism here.

Religion has been popular among the masses around the world in one way or the other. Even in the presence of anti-religious historical periods, it maintained its image and role. Generally speaking, all the past archives of history had been informed by religiosity. Almost all the religions present themselves as a complete code of life to humans; hence it had been providing cushion to all the sociopolitical practices. Using Saussurean terminology we can claim that religion stands for paradigmatic relations that oversee and control all the syntagmatic relations on all the nodal points of human existence since the birth of human interaction. We would like to make a mention here of Christianity especially that is still the most widely observed religion in the world. Even to the die-hard elements of the society, Christianity is a panacea to the society and the individual. But Beckett in his play *Waiting for Godot* looks at it from an alternative point of view. Estragon and Vladimir quite playfully revisit the religion of Christianity. In their reworking of the traditional religiosity of the west lies the seeds of political sensibility of the author of the play *Waiting for Godot*.

Political irony and ridicule, not satire, are two very important techniques available with Samuel Beckett. Vladimir seeks permission from Estragon to let him tell the story of 'two thieves'. Estragon asks Vladimir not to tell the story but the latter goes on with it. "There were two thieves who were crucified along with Christ, the Saviour of Mankind". Vladimir further says that "it is supposed that one of them was saved but the other was consigned to hell". This text is self-referential, it awakens the rational mind of the reader. Christianity is not presented here as a system of spirituality. It is presented as the synonym of the story of 'two thieves'. The story of two thieves enters into a whole-part relationship with Christianity. Implicationally the story of 'two thieves' stands for the religion of thieves. The other way to ridicule Christianity is the other exchange of dialogues between the two characters. Estragon does not allow Vladimir to tell the story as it has no appeal for him. Why it has no appeal for him? Estragon is living a hellish life and this story of two thieves that was propagated as a blessing for humans in the entire past offers him no relief or the promise of relief. Vladimir ridiculously downgrades the historical grand narrative of Christianity by informing Estragon that "It (Story of two thieves) will help to pass the time".

Is Christianity just one of the petty tales to pass time? This is the question that crosses the mind of the reader.

It is generally believed that literature is a political document. The same stance is adopted by Breton (1968) with reference to *Waiting for Godot*: He says, "It seems at least highly probable that such a play as *Waiting for Godot* will be scrutinized and re-scrutinized for ideological and sociological clues and will be valued as the evidence of the mood of fifties" (p. 265). In all the previous centuries and even today humans generally believe that man is the supreme creature on the globe. The universe is created to serve him as he is its viceroy and he is supposed to conquer it. Nothing is impossible to a willing heart and fate is a toy in the hands of man are some of the traditionally famous slogans of philosophers to make mankind proud of itself. To expose and ridicule this centuries old norm, Beckett strategically uses 'Nothing to be done' as the refrain of *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir and Estragon, the central characters, are unable to commit suicide in the present. In the past they were somewhat in a better condition: 'they were respectable in those days'. At that time, they could jump 'hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower'. But 'now it's too late'. That is why Eiffel Tower is of no use for them now. All the past successes, great guts and passions, conquests, achievements, heroisms, battles and isms in all the walks of life are punctured through the 'nothingness' of the play under analysis. The reader/audience of the traditional play texts/theatrical productions are engaged successfully to enjoy the mockery of the mocked heroism because "the theatre has absorbed Beckett in the way that Ibsen was once absorbed. *Waiting for Godot* has passed into the public consciousness" (Worth, 1990, p.9).

Different religions have been selling themselves as a complete code of life for centuries. Humans did absorb some of the features of these religious codes into their routinized practices which led to their customization and nativization. These socialized practices of religions had become, in fact, those elements that propel their social life in different directions. One of these norms is pilgrimage: the religious devotees used to form a group and covered a long distance to offer their prayers at the tomb of the saint/prophet. Even today it is a very favorite ritual to pursue pilgrimage to distant areas for their spiritual uplift. Beckett very strategically embeds this religious and spiritual activity to ridicule its traditional worth. The ritual that was in part whole relationship with Christianity is comically laughed at so that its value is measured in terms of mockery and clownage. The volley of the following dialogues is a comic attack to the grand narrative of pilgrimage and the Bible.

VLADIMIR: Did you ever read the Bible?

ESTRAGON: The Bible . . . (He reflects.) I must have taken a look at it

VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?

ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were.

Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it
made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's

where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy.

When Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* by Pope is in her toilet, various types of cosmetic items are applied to enhance the beauty of the mock heroine and one of these beautifying items is the Bible. It means in that age of decadence the elite had not forgotten completely the role of the heavenly book in the elevation of a person's beauty. But in the above chunk of dialogues, the Bible hasn't any role to play in the spiritualization, socialization and the processes of self-actualization. When Vladimir asks 'Did you ever read the Bible?', Estragon has to squeeze his memory to search out the answer to this question. It means he has been least related with and interested in the said book. The suggestiveness of the textual chunk emphasizes the 'relevance' and 'usefulness' of the Bible to the present Era. Challenge to the grand narrative of the Bible does not stop here. Estragon's only fascination in the Holy Lands consists in the 'pretty' colour of the 'maps' of the land; he has no concern with the spiritual character of the place. Estragon further deploys a strategy to mock the traditional character of the birth place of Christ. He used to say that he would go to the Dead Sea to spend his honeymoon time. The perceptive eye of the reader quite successfully understands the artistic technique of Beckett to puncture the inflated sign of the image. Dead Sea is not a sea at all. It is a lake full of minerals where even the marine life is unable to survive. How can the newly married couple 'swim' here? The Dead Sea is juxtaposed with the Holy Land. The deadness of the Dead Sea makes an analogy with the character of the Holy Land. These lines do suggest the reader to go for the deep structures of the imagery which is devised consciously to debunk the traditional positiveness of the Holy Land. Friedman (1970) says that "the tree...represents the Cross" in *Waiting for Godot* (p.36). This tree produces but a few leaves in the last act; they fail to bring any 'shade'/solace/change in the life of the main characters of the play.

There have been so many other popular grand narratives to interest the reader. One of them is poetry that remained the part and parcel of every civilization on the earth. The role of poetry is undeniable in all the revolutions, battles and huge adventures. Artistic compositions of the poets have been a great fillip to aspire for the better communities, paradigms of life, the dynamic alternative to the human existence. Sometimes poets are more successful than the religions to persuade the people to overhaul their ways of life. Tagore's concept of egalitarian world and T. S Eliot's massive concern over 'the London bridge is falling down, falling down' exemplify the role of poetry in constructive life of the people. Great poetry like that of Seamus Heaney continues to push the Irish nation towards self-reformation and self-awakening. It is the greatness of the art of Heaney to offer a complete guidance to the downtrodden nation. Beckett incorporates poet and poetry in *Waiting for Godot* to practice his artistic mockery on it.

VLADIMIR: You should have been a poet.

ESTRAGON: I was. (*Gesture towards his rags.*) Isn't that obvious? Silence.

This above exchange of dialogues between the two central characters on the topic of the role of poetry and the status of a poet is all figurative that leads to the ridicule of the institution of poetic art. We know that great poetry produces some sort of rhythm in the mind and heart of the audience: some code/ideology is stressed upon to ask the audience adopt it as a syllabus of their lives. But here in this play the role of poetry and that of a poet is just to misguide and befool the audience. Estragon's depiction of his ideal place for

honeymoon is the Dead Sea that is just salty in character. Estragon's use of beautiful metaphors to characterize the present the barrenness of life as a version of paradisaical region is well exposed by the writer.

The discipline of poetry is once again ridiculed by Beckett at the start of Act 2.

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.
Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb-

A perceptive eye easily discerns the dynamics of this chunk of poetry. The tone and imagery of the poetic piece clearly tells us that it is a mockery of capitalism. The dogs are the capitalistic humans that like a dog have the sniffing sense for materiality. One dog is killed, then the other dogs come to celebrate his achievements. The upholders, advocates and the pursuers of capitalism are metaphorized in the imagery of dogs who try to steal the food from the kitchen. The same analogy is relevant to the second pair of characters: Pozzo and Lucky. These two characters are the ample embodiment of capitalism suggested through the imagery of dogs in the kitchen. Pozzo is the dog that eats up the flesh and throws away the bones to the dependent dog, Lucky. The dogs quarrel together, enjoy together and live together. This chunk of poetry not only ridicules the past poets who eulogized the greatness of man but it also ruptures the very ideology of capitalism.

Capitalism through its variety of forms has been making multiple attempts to present itself as the best system of life for the entire world. To pursue its poetics vehemently and on the larger scale, it exclusively focused on the individualization of human beings. The ruggedness of human individuality arrested the attention and vision of nearly all the mankind. It has been a great success in this regard. Let us discuss how Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* handles this subject. Descartes's world known philosophical thesis "I think therefore I am" (quid in Miceli, 2018, para, 1) also, in a sense, accounts for the assertiveness of an individual. There are so many philosophies of the world that believe in the capitalistic slogan of 'the struggle for the fittest'. Beckett designs a very successful challenge to this worldly pervasive paradigm through the refrain of *Waiting for Godot* 'Nothing to be done'. This is the only one substantial dialogue of the play; rest of the play text is the explanation of the said utterance. The heroic stature of all the fictional, historical and real heroes of the past is comicalized and ridiculed through this refrain. The protagonist of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* remains busy in his interior monologue through the discourse. He takes refuge in the delayed action, "there will be time, there will be time" (1969, p.11). Same is the ideology of the characters of Beckett's play under analysis. Their aim is 'waiting' for the character who will never come; "The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting" (Esslin, p.38). These dramatic characters seem

to be in some type of vacuum that is endless. To move, to work and to assert is all alien to them; "They have to remain where they are" (Brereton, p. 246).

John Langshaw Austin, a British Philosopher, stipulates the theory of speech acts in his famous book *How to Do Things with Words* (1955). He believes that utterance is always performative in character. It means language performs action; it is not a passive activity. The illocutionary force that works behind the utterance is the nucleus that must emerge in some real activity. There are so many other thinkers who also advance this theory in their discussions. The great sayings of the prophets, sages and thinkers changed the course of human history across the past expanse. Even today's world is consciously and unconsciously and practically propelled by the utterances/writings of these great inspirers. Beckett, keeping all this phenomenon in mind, very systematically and effectively poses a challenge to the traditional heroic role of language. Language in the play under discussion is to perform different functions. First, its multiple grammatical and graphological deviations account for the 'illogicality' of the traditional logicalities and moralities. Second, the wear and tear on the exiting social structures is also implied through these deviations. Third, the stale points, irregularities and discrepancies in the existing cultural hegemonies are also stressed via this technique. Fourth, it also symbolizes Eliot's 'London bridge' that has fallen fully and its debris and rubble is a playground for the meaningless tramps like Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky. The total nothingness creates a political comedy that makes faces at the traditional ideologies. Brereton rightly (1968) says that "*Godot* is more than half comic. The dialogue is funny and the overall tone of any production must reflect that" (p.258). He further says that "Marlowe and Shakespeare were writing tragedy. One cannot say the same of Beckett in *Godot*" (Brereton, p.258). There is no voice but only a lot of noise in the play. Reason is very simple: this noise is the loud ridicule of all the centuries old customary socially relevant signifying systems that have turned into a waste land at the hands of the new developments in knowledges and imaginations that appeared in the 20th century.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind the temporal and academic restraints, the Lyotardian theory of postmodern grand narratives given in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) was applied to the thematically popped areas of the play *Waiting for Godot*. It produced far reaching results and implications. Beckett being a shrewd literary artist attacks all the significant ideological social structures via ridicule and mockery. If Geoffrey Chaucer has a trump card in his kit, inflating and deflating the character's qualities, Beckett has attitudinal, tonal, discursal and thematic naivety to actualize the disillusionment of the illusion that the world had been steeped in since the times immemorial. The ism of friendship that was sung by all the great writers in the past produces alternative results. No one among the pairs of characters in *Waiting for Godot* proves a sheltering tree for the other. The religion of Christianity, bereft of spirituality, is just a story to laugh at for its low and funny character. The speech of Lucky ridicules the once grand narrative of language, a system that has been responsible for regularizing the sociopolitical spheres of life. Then struggle of man that has been always a thing to pride on is deflated in the play very strategically and successfully. The beat and refrain of *Waiting for Godot* 'Nothing to be done' is juxtaposed with Descartes' total paradigm known as "I think therefore I am" (quid in Miceli, 2018, para, 1). The long-established institutions of pilgrimage to the holy shrine, poetic art, capitalism and the philosophy of rugged individualism are all one by one and to

the fullest extent well exposed to let the reader/audience take it as a fatigue. *Waiting for Godot* renders the traditional grand narratives as something worthless and totally irrelevant to the new minds supported by the interventionist character of today's science and rational philosophy.

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