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Reflection of Modern chaos, exploitation, identity crisis and Subjective idealism: A Study of  
Samuel Beckett's *waiting for Godot*

Abstract

In every period Time has analyzed the works of writers and testified them who have emerged with novel thoughts or hinted at those dimensions which brought revolution in the fields of literary disciplines, so did the Samuel Becket who when studied from his debut writing seems an ordinary writer but the bitterness of time which made him to go through different sordid experiences and circumstances made him a remarkable play writer in the field of English literature, though being a novelist and poet he is famous for his outstanding play *Waiting for Godot*. The present paper tries to discuss the play through novel angles and attempts to peel off the new dimensions related to the play like Subjective Idealism, Agential units and its contradictions, balancing in the play (symmetry), Nazi atrocities as one of the factors behind Beckett's pessimistic outlook, reflection of modern Chaos and despair, threat to faith, individualism, absurdness and exploitation.

Key Words: Agential Units, Absurdness, Exploitation, Modern Chaos, Subjective Idealism, Space-Time continuum.

## Introduction

In the present paper the attempt has been made to depict the life of a twentieth century modern man through the lenses of Samuel Beckett and to highlight the major themes that he has used to express the condition of an individual in the World of reason and science. Though the paper mainly focuses on his famous play *Waiting for Godot* that has been remained the subject for most of the critics to review upon as the title of the play itself on the very onset invites the attention of every sensitive reader which lands him into the serious thinking to uncover the vagueness to reveal under which context the term Godot has been used. The play is absurdist in nature as Beckett was very much influenced by the Absurdist theatre. He has depicted the meaninglessness of life through the waiting in a play as one analyses the characters of Vladimir and Estragon brings some hope that something good will happen but it is also true that never happens in the play the characters keeps on waiting . They during that wait depicted their frustration and restlessness through gestures and unnecessary body movements.

When critically analyzing the play *Waiting for God* the image of modern industrialized emotionless society comes before the reader where rationality has cut off an individual from his traditional and mythical values and customs and most importantly took him away from the religion which was the main source of hope and satisfaction for him. It is religion that used to bind them socially together and maintain equipoise in every affairs of life. Yes, modern wave of rationality and materialism could not shaken the faith of every individual there were some sensitive souls who used the power of pen to reawaken the people about the ultimate reality and they brought reformations through their respective writings. Samuel Beckett has projected the picture of twentieth century modern man who has turned faithless and emotionless like robots.

## Review of Literature

The play *Waiting for Godot* has been a subject for different critical debates and controversies due to diverse themes and meanings so the huge corpse of literature has been written on that. The book by Harold Bloom entitled as “*Samuel Beckett: Modern Critical Views*” (1985) is a critical discourse on his works especially on *Waiting for Godot*. He has critically discussed the book on the sidelines of the modern interpretations. The different literary canons have presented their views differently on the multiple facets of this two act play. Another well known book entitled as “*Samuel Beckett: Twentieth Century views*” (1980) edited by Martin Esslin. The book speaks about the writings of Samuel Beckett in relation the theatre of Absurd and Existentialism. William .S. Haney in his essay, “Beckett out of His Mind: The theatre of Absurd” has pointed out that Beckett has crossed the “Linguistic and Cultural boundaries by dispensing with narrative sequence, character development and psychology in conventional sense” (Haney. 2001, p.40). He is further of the view that Beckett has went beyond “the psychic structures that select, organize, interpret, and limit our knowledge about the World around us” (Haney. 2001, p.42). Another writer by the name of Abhinaba Chatterjee has written about the existentialistic approach of the play in his research paper titled as, “*Camus’ Absurdity in Beckett’s Play: Waiting for Godot and Krapp’s Lost Tape*” (2013). There is number of critics who came with the significant literary credentials and commentaries upon the broader themes of the *Waiting for Godot* which projected the impacts of modern age in a clear form. Ruby Cannon editor of the well known book “*Beckett: Waiting for Godot*” (1987). The book opens up with the various interpretations from the different literary mouths regarding its subject, character and themes. The research paper of Noorbakhsh Hooti is entitled as “*Waiting for Godot: A Post-Modernist Study*” (2011), there are other research papers related to the diverse themes of the *Waiting for Godot* like Azam Azmi’s paper titled as “*Waiting for Godot: A Post-Modern Perspective*”.

Javid Akhter too has presented a paper on the same play entitled as “*Waiting for Godot; A Deconstructive Study*” (2015).

In addition to the above mentioned books and papers written on the Samuel Beckett’s plays especially on *Waiting for Godot* there are other significant sources of material available on the same subject. However, these critics and researchers have analysed the said play from different angles and perspectives and have discovered the new facets in connection to its themes and meanings.

There is a need to take a keen look at the various dimensions of the *Waiting for Godot* in order to assimilate the significant facets of the play. The main aspects of the said play are discussed as under:

#### Theatrical Experience

Theatre’s composite language employs a variety of means, or sign-systems, to signify and communicate meaning. It includes not only speech but also non-verbal elements such as setting, lighting, movement, gesture, etc. It is through a complex interaction of all these that meaning is produced in theatre. A more adequate reading in drama, therefore, is one that remains constantly alert to this interaction, to the play’s possibilities in performance. This approach is helped by the modern practice of including in the dramatic texts the parts known as stage directions which enable us to visualize a play’s performance. Beckett first came to know about the theatrical settings and stage directions before writings his dramas. Basically it was towards the end of the University life that Beckett began to show interest in theatrical shows. In Dublin there was a marked resurgence of theatrical activity and enthusiasm for Irish and European Drama. The Abbey Theatre presented the works of Sean O’Casey, Lady Gregory, Lennox Robinson and Denis Johnson, among others. The Gate Theatre specialized in the experimental plays of contemporary European writers like Pirandello. In addition to

these, the Queens Theatre concentrated on melodrama with the Theatre Royal and Olympia Theatre presented popular vaudeville shows. Beckett saw most of these plays and gained much interest about the formal aspects of a play than content. He admired the realistic comedies of writers like Sean O'Casey but was more attracted to the bold experimentalism of the modernist writers of Europe. In Paris he came across with Joyce and was influenced by him. He soon became a member of a small group of friends and admirers whom Joyce loved to have around him.

### Absurdness / Nothingness

Samuel Beckett has quite clearly depicted the World that is falling apart and becoming increasingly meaningless in the wake of the brutal advance of Capitalism, rampant individualism and the consequent loss of community, large scale devastations of the World wars, threat of a nuclear holocaust, and the destruction of the liberal traditions of hope and faith in man's innate goodness, rationality and progress. These all situations surface before the audience and the readers after assimilating the expressions and the gestures of its characters. The play (Waiting for Godot) is formulated in such a way that, on the one hand, there is a certain emptiness precisely at those places-such as plot, character, dramatic speech, setting etc.- where one would conventionally look for meaning, and, on the other, the cognitive emphasis moves from the immediate dramatic interest to some ultimate philosophical horizon beyond history and society. The indefinite place for an uncertain appointment with somebody called Godot who never comes. In the course of the play, he is perceived in various ways: savior, god, a vindictive tyrant, a rich employer, somebody who has the tramps "future in his hand.....at least (their) immediate future (Text, p. 59)."

In their attempts to solve this mystery, critics have searched Beckett's own life, history and etymology without being able to establish definitively who or what Godot might

mean. Beckett's own angry response to this has been that if he knew who Godot was he would have said so in the play. Actually Godot cannot be made to represent any one idea, ideal or person, precisely because he represents an absence. Like the boy outside in *Endgame*, he is the absent figure whose non-presence is the play's centre. He is also the name for that emptiness which one finds at the heart of the play after cutting through all its immediate noise and activity. He is also, by analogy, the void that Beckett perceives at the centre of human existence after he has systematically removed from his thinking the socio-historical context of life.

### Identity Crisis

Beckett has also highlighted the identity crisis in the modern period as a modern man has strayed out from his roots as is evident in the play through tramps who wait for Godot as well as the wayfaring couple whom they encounter have no fixed individual identities, barring a few biological, temperamental and situational traits. They are perceived, at this place at this moment of time, not as four distinct personalities but as two radically truncated and grossly generalized images of all mankind, which in Lucky's phrase, "is seen to waste and pine waste and pine (Text,73)." Incapable of any significant action or initiative, they imply an utterly pessimistic view of man as a helpless victim of his ontological fate.

### Agential Units

The play has been constructed primarily on sets of binaries. It has two acts which purport to dramatize two consecutive evenings in the life of its central characters. It employs two sets of characters and each set is a pair. Interestingly, even the messenger boy has a brother. The relationship between and within these pairs is not always one of identity and harmony but also one of contradictions tension. Each of these central couples in the play, for

example, is conceived so indivisibly that it functions as a single agential unit: while Pozzo and Lucky are physically tied to each other, Vladimir and Estragon are unable to part company despite their frequently expressed wish. Thus, the play has, not four characters but two agential units. The two units are sharply in contrast to each other, each epitomizing a mode of being which is counterposed to the other. The tramps are compelled to a futile and perpetual waiting, and are imprisoned, as it were, in space. Pozzo and Lucky, on the other hand, are committed to an equally futile and perpetual wandering, and are confined within a temporal prison. Mutual love and care between the tramps is also in contrast to the exploitative relationship that the wayfarers symbolize.

#### Contrast and Tension within each Agential Unit

The contrast and tension within each agential unit complicates their companionship. Estragon's easy defeatism and despair (he seems to be waiting primarily for death) and his preoccupations with immediate physical needs (hunger, sleep) are contrasted to Vladimir's almost obstinate optimism and intellectual preoccupation with philosophical questions. This contrast makes them mutually complementary, but it also adds a contrapuntal dimension to their relationship. This becomes particularly evident in their exchanges which often take on the quality of a verbal ping-pong. The contrast within the other major couple is mainly situational. While Pozzo is a domineering, bullying master, Lucky is a treacherous but abjectly obedient slave. A similar situational contrast is offered between the boy who looks after the goats and is treated well and his brother who looks after the sheep and is often beaten.

The binary opposition that underlies the play and organizes all the other oppositions into a unified experience of absolute ambivalence is that between hope and despair. In

addition to that dramatist has shown the wide cracks in the modern relationships where circumstances and compulsions run the relationships rather than choices and selections.

### Theme of Exploitation

The theme of exploitation has remained predominant in the play *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett has highlighted that theme through the characters of Pozzo and Lucky, Pozzo is a domineering bullying master and Lucky a treacherous but abjectly obedient slave. Translucently, it is the depiction of dominance of the powerful upon the weak especially during the modern era.

### Space-Time Continuum

Unlike other stage settings the place where tramps wait for Godot is not fixed. Beckett's stage direction identifies it as a country road but barring a rather surrealistic tree, there is no physical feature to evoke that identification in performance. Rather, the play's spatio-temporal location comes across, in Kenner's interesting phrase, as "nowhere-nowhen". Such non-specific settings are a common feature of Beckett's drama.

### Subjective Idealism

The Subjective and Idealist response contemplates the World in abstract philosophical terms and finds it not only unchanging but also unchangeable. It usually ends up accepting meaninglessness, loneliness and disintegration as the permanent and universal condition of human existence itself.

Samuel Beckett chose Subjective idealism, in this he was influenced not only by his own psychopathological disposition towards morbid solipsism but also, and perhaps mainly, by certain philosophical and literary traditions of his time. The so called Absurdist (or

Existentialist) position, with which his name is often associated, is itself a specifically twentieth century European development of what is generally recognized as a pessimistic tradition in Western philosophy, going back from to Heidegger to Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, and characterized by extreme subjectivism and hostility to dialectical thought (of Hegel and Marx), rationalism and history. This tradition became particularly strong in the period between the two wars and enjoyed wide influence amongst contemporary writers and artists. its ideological influence is reflected in the feelings of angst, boredom, alienation, meaninglessness and fear that pervade a whole tradition of literary writing from Proust, Musil and Kafka to Camus, Sartre and, of course, Beckett.

## Conclusion

The author Samuel Beckett has tried to bring before his readers and audience the modern chaos, confusions and absurdity, even though Modernism has ended in a chaos. The modernists inhabit a World governed by chaos and fragmentation. Their works show not only a deep awareness of this fact, but also an effort to produce unity, to force coherence on a shapeless World. Artists working at this time perceive the past as a distant universe in which order and meaning were possible, they “are all conscious of the present as chaotic....and of the past as an altogether more solid ground” (S. Spender, *The Destructive Element*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1935, p.12). T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* contains many instances of references to the past, both literary and existential; for example, it alludes to Spencer’s *Prothalamion* and the river *Thames* in Spencer’s poem is contrasted with the river in the present day, dirty and filled with the debris of a Twentieth-Century city.

Amid rapid social change and significant development in science including social sciences, modernist found themselves alienated from what might be termed Victorian morality and convention. They duly set about searching for radical responses to the radical

changes occurring around them, affirming mankind's power to shape and influence his environment through experimentation, technology and scientific advancement, while identifying potential obstacles to progress in all aspects of existence in order to replace them with updated new alternatives.

Modernist writings are verbally ambiguous, paradoxical and sometimes even nonsensical. It aims at disorienting the reader by removing conventional literary devices, thus complicated the process of understanding the text. Modernism gave birth to nihilism, the rejection of all religious and moral principles as the only means for obtaining social progress; the modernists repudiated the moral codes of the society in which they were living in. The reason that they did so was not necessarily because they did not believe in God, although there was a great majority of them who were atheists, or that they experienced great doubt about the meaninglessness of life. The loss of belief and faith gradually eliminated the social feelings and relations of the people. They absorbed matter and began the race to attain worldly progress and to make more and more fortune. This left the modern man total alienated and the thread that used to bind them together due to moral codes and religious beliefs broke and eventually left them scattered with dry and filthy hearts.

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