

A Comparative Study of the Notion of Waiting for a Savior in Religion and in *Waiting for Godot*

Mohammad Reza Ghanbari

Department of Humanity and Life Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Jouybar Branch, Jouybar, Iran

Abstract: Samuel Beckett is a contemporary playwright who won the Nobel Prize in 1969 for his play *Waiting for Godot*. The play is about two symbolic characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who are representatives of human being. They waste their time near a road in a deserted place by a leafless tree, waiting for their savior, Godot. What goes on between them and two other characters demonstrates the chaotic condition of modern man. Besides discussing these elements, this study focused on the act of waiting. Waiting for a savior is not simply related to a particular religion or culture. It seems that the arrival of a righteous savior has been promised in nearly all heavenly religions. The condition of man being pictured in this play indicates the right time for the arrival of the savior, but he postpones it to the other day. Beckett wanted to focus on man's condition and also the act of waiting. Waiting functions as a kind of tranquilizer and keeps man hopeful about future. Man should think of a way out of this painful condition; and instead of waiting idly he should do something worthwhile to make a change and be hopeful about a better future.

Key words: Absurd literature • modernism • post modernism • positivism • savior

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett was born on Good Friday, 1906, in Cooldrinagh Country Dublin. He was the youngest child of the family. Beckett was born into a reasonably wealthy family. His father, William Beckett worked as a quantity surveyor in Dublin. He was successful enough for the Beckett to own a large property relatively near the city and Foxrock was a popular place for a Dublin businessman to set up house. His mother, May, had been a nurse before her marriage, was a housewife.

Beckett's early childhood was comfortable; in the essentials it was no different from the early life of any middle-class Dublin Protestant before and during the First World War. His father in the city, returning home in the evening; his mother ran the household and devoted herself to good works in the local community.

As he grew up, Beckett gradually acquired the skills and habit common to a child of his age and class; he learned to swim, to play tennis, golf, chess and cricket and to play the piano. From the age of five to the age of nine he attended a small, local school run by two sisters. Beckett's parents then sent him to a preparatory school Earlsfort House, in Dublin. After that, just like his older brother, he went to Potora Royal School in Enniskillen in

1920 and then to the more prestigious of Dublin's two universities, Trinity College.

On the surface, then Beckett's early life does not seem to provide the kind of raw material for the extreme, idiosyncratic writing with which his name is associated:

“You might say that I had a happy childhood... although I had little talent for happiness. My parents did everything that could make a child happy. But I was often lonely. We were brought up like Quakers. My father did not beat me, nor my mother run away from home [1].”

When he entered Trinity in 1923 he began to fulfill his academic potential; and it was at Trinity, also, that he first encountered work that was to prove a lasting influence on his own writing. As an undergraduate Beckett studied French, a language he had begun to learn at his first school; at that time, the University stipulated that a student must study two languages and Beckett accordingly chose Italian.

As he neared the end of his undergraduate career, Beckett was at least clear about the direction he did not want his life to take. He did not want to work in the family business; nor did he want to be a clerk or a schoolmaster, two other career paths that had been

suggested to him by his family. The only option open to him was therefore to pursue the academic course that his success at Trinity had made possible. As a leading student in modern languages, Beckett was an obvious candidate for the year-long exchange program that Trinity had organized with the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris; the successful candidate would spend a year as a tutor at the Ecole.

One day in 1930, Beckett heard that Nancy Cunard, Paris publisher and Richard Aldington, poet and critic, were offering a prize of ten pounds for the best poem submitted on the subject of "Time." The deadline was next morning. His poem was based on events in the life of the philosopher Rene Descartes. He rushed across Paris by night to make certain he got the manuscript into the Publisher's mail-box before the dead-line. "Whoroscope", as the poem was called, won the prize and launched Beckett on his career as a creative writer.

Beckett found himself unfit for academic life and his spiritual agonies of the period are reflected in his first volume of short stories, *More Prick than Kicks* (1934) and especially in his volume of verse, *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1936).

While teaching in Paris he made the acquaintance of James Joyce. Beckett's technical debt to Joyce as well as the ways his interests differed from those of the master was made clear in Beckett's own first novel, *Murphy*, (1938), also published this year.

When World War II broke out in September 1939, Beckett, then in Ireland visiting his mother, returned to the continent. In all the stress and confusion of war, he managed to work on his second novel, *Watt* (1942). After the War he worked feverishly for five years in what he has since regarded as his greatest burst of creativity. He wrote his trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt* and *L'Innomable*; his first great play, *En Attendant Godot*; and a volume of stories and sketches, *Nouvelles et Textes Pour Rien*, (1947-1949).

But on January 5, 1953 *En Attendant Godot* was first performed in Paris. It was an instant critical and popular success and ran for more than 300 nights. *Waiting for Godot* has since been translated into more than twenty languages and is already considered a turning-point in modern drama.

For a long while, Beckett wrote nothing significantly new and indeed, thought he had run dry. Then in 1956 he completed *Fin de Partie*. Translating it into English, as *Endgame*, set him off on a new series of short works in his native tongue: *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Happy Days*, *Play* and several radio and TV plays for the British Broadcasting

Corporation. This second great burst of writing resolved itself in a free-verse novel, written first in French as *Comment c'est* (1961) and later in an English recreation, *How it is* (1964).

During the 1960s, Beckett became an influential figure in all dramatic media. In 1969 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He wrote a number of plays during the last decade of his life. Samuel Beckett died on 22nd of December 1989 [2]

Summary of *Waiting for Godot*: Two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, wait in a desert-like setting beside a leafless tree for Godot, passing the time in verbal games reminiscent of music-hall comedians' cross-talk. Pozzo leads his slave, Lucky, with a rope around his neck. He asks Lucky to dance and think. He dances and thinks in an incoherent tirade. After they go, a boy arrives to promise that Godot will come tomorrow. In Act two the tree has leaves, but there is apparently no other change. The tramps continue waiting. Pozzo enters again, blind and dependent on Lucky, who is now dumb. After they go, another boy (claiming to be the previous messenger's brother) arrives with the same message. Still determining to leave, the tramps do not move and wait there for Godot.

DISCUSSION

Modern philosophy figures so prominently in Beckett's works that many critics find it convenient to treat him mainly in philosophical terms. Frederick Hoffman refers to his novels as "epistemological inquiries" and to the plays as "reflection upon the existence of God." Martin Esslin talks of his writings as "culmination of existentialist thought."

Some critics are fond of saying that while he was writing his original versions in English (until he finished *watt*), Beckett focused on positivism and that when he began composing his first version in French (the *Trilogy* and *Godot*), Beckett shifted his main concern to existentialism. This is too pat and can lead to oversimplification about both periods. For example, Beckett's *Proust*, published in English in 1931 long before any of the major works were written, is largely existentialist in its sympathies. And *Watt* itself, while it is a satire on positivism, is a satire with an existentialist message: watt tries to live by mind alone; the rest of his nature rebels, his mind does not survive the existential crisis. Furthermore, in 1961 Beckett published, in English,

Happy Days, concerned in part with existentialist concepts and also published, in French, *How it is*, which satirizes both existentialism and positivism.

“In any event, so far as Beckett's own philosophy is concerned, it is less valuable to think of positivism and existentialism as polar opposite and more constructive to think of what these two contemporary modes of thought have in common. Both see the search for truth as a never-ending project; both see philosophy's task not as the promulgation of final doctrine but rather as the development of methods, attitudes, techniques. Both, in short, are more concerned with means than with ends. And both insist on finding the answers by human means; both say in effect that the question of God is irrelevant. While positivism takes objectivity as its starting point and Existentialism takes subjectivity, they agree in practice that man must be the measure all things. In all the ways in which these two modes resemble each other, Beckett seems to agree with both of them [3].”

With the appearance of *Waiting for Godot* in Paris Theater, in 1953, the literary world was shocked by the appearance of a drama so different and so intriguing that it virtually created the term "Theater of Absurd," and the entire group of dramas which developed out of this type of theater is always associated with the name of Samuel Beckett.

Martin Esslin in his *The Theater of Absurd* maintains that these dramatists write from a "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of human condition." Nearly all so called absurd writers in a way tried to show the "lack of communication," and the second common aspect in their works is the "lack of individuality" in modern society.

Early critics referred to the "Theater of Absurd" as a theater in transition, meaning that it was to lead to something different. But little by little public could accept these unusual uses of technique to support thematic concerns, then we have plays which dramatically present powerful and vivid view on the absurdity of the human condition, which is the result of the destruction of individualism and the failure of communication, of man's being forced to conform to a world of mediocrity where no action is meaningful.

Since the second half of nineteenth century, due to the advances in science and technology, the "spiritual comforts" of religion became questionable and undermined the authority of Bible and Church. "If literature takes the place of religion, as Arnold

prophesied, then poets and critics, in their mutual dependency, are the priests who spread the new gospels" [4].

Beckett who witnessed both World Wars and experienced the second one and felt the misery of modern man with all his senses aired his own idea and philosophy in his works in a time when art was expected a mission more important and factual than "art for art's sake." But Beckett as a creative writer was not expected to preach and give advice simply because:

“ Beckett is no didactic writer concerned to put across a "message" in dramatic form. Even the many Christian echoes in the play must now be seen to add up not to any coherent religious statement, but rather to a meditation upon a world governed by no other divinity than a sort of malignant fate; a world in which human beings wait and hope for something to give value to their lives and console them for the absurdity of their death [5].”

Beckett's literary importance is neatly summed up in the official statement made by Swedish Academy when it awarded him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. "Beckett has exposed the misery of man in our time through new dramatic and literary forms. His ...muted minor tone holds liberation for the oppressed and comfort for the distressed" [6].

It seems that Beckett employed any pessimistic notion in the background of twentieth century philosophy in order to express his true feeling about, existence, God, freedom and human being in modern society. Like other existentialists, he comes to focus on the absurdity of human life and doubt the long-time believed religious matters.

As far as religion is concerned, during their missions all the prophets and apostles have emphasized the fact that a savior will arrive at the end of the time who will implement the government of justice over the globe. This news has been heard since human beings appeared on earth. Allah has indicated this promise in all the early scriptures and commanded humans throughout ages to expect the manifestation of the kingdom of Allah on earth.

Among Moslems, Shi'e believes that their twelfth Imam will reappear from occultation and establish heavenly government after it became dead as a result of corruption and oppression.

Bask one of Indian holy book says "At the end a righteous king will govern the earth, who is the leader of human and angels" [7].

David's psalm says that "beware, after a while there won't be any corruption and cruelty, waiters of Allah will inherit the earth and will live for ever and oppressors will be eradicated" [8].

New Testament chapter 24 verses 37 and 45 reads "thus you are to be prepared, for the son of man will come at time you do not expect".

Although, there are differences among religious groups about the name of the savior and the condition of his arrival, they all invite people to wait and this is believed to cause hope in the heart of people. "We need to keep hope for divine relief, await the reappearance of Al-Qaim at any moment and truly believe that he is the only solution for our tragedies in the world. According to tradition, this is the most virtuous struggle of the believers" [9].

But, why is the savior absent? Allah has decided that man in this world should achieve perfection on his own volition. It is possible for man to reach his destination without waiting for anybody. Of course for a universal government he has to wait, but not for his own self. Usually in normal circumstances man does not crave for him but when he is in difficulty, problem and real catastrophic conditions, willingly or unwillingly he submits.

After World War II, modern man came to accept the absurdity of his existence and even worse came to doubt the existence of God for His being indifferent to all his sufferings. In such a condition which has been emphasized by the lack of communication and individuality, man has two choices, either to bear the condition, live and be hopeful about the arrival of the savior and a better future, or to commit suicide and put an end to his miserable life.

Choosing any of the alternatives brings about questions and consequences that the characters of the play are dealing with. What should we do while waiting? And about committing suicide, believers will consider it as a capital sin; and nonbelievers, for not expecting a promising after-world and fear of loneliness prefer not to.

In this play, the setting, characters and dialogues show the condition that make us come to this conclusion that this is the right time for the savior to appear and call the end of the misery as it was promised in religious scriptures.

The tramps are waiting for him; but they are not sure if this is the right place or time. They are ready to take anyone for Godot for they do not know what does he look like? They pass the time as if the act of waiting paralyzed them; they wait idly doing nothing worthwhile. On and on they repeat this dialogue:

ESTRAGON : Let's go

VLADIMIR : We can't.

ESTRAGON : Why not?

VLADIMIR : We're waiting for Godot.

At least this is not the way suggested by religion for waiting for the savior.

Beckett in his interview said that, at the time of writing the play, by Godot he did not mean God, Christ, or anybody else. It is said that he thought of calling the play "En Attendant" without the name of Godot in order to deflect the attention of the readers and spectators away from this non-character onto the act of waiting. Man is expected to be hopeful and patient in times of crisis and convince himself that there are still better days to come as it was promised.

Postponing the meeting by Godot denotes that his arrival or reappearance will put an end to the hope for a better future (because man is a never-satisfied creature), so the best way is to let man wait and be hopeful.

In the second act there is only a small change in the setting, that is the new leaves on the tree. This change can be interpreted in two ways: the time of the second act is tomorrow to the first act, maybe Beckett wanted to break the usual scale of time, so it can be another month or even another season. The new leaves can surprisingly show that Beckett, the absurdist and pessimist, is somehow hopeful about the future of mankind.

CONCLUSIONS

The isolated desert-like setting, tramps (representatives of mankind) wasting their time monotonously, slavery, fear of loneliness all indicate man's condition in modern time. It seems that man cannot do anything for himself in this chaos; he has no other choice expect making a plea for help from the promised savior.

Waiting for Godot denotes the end of the world, so it's time for the second coming. The savior simply postpones his appointment and keeps man waiting for TOMORROW.

By reminding the condition of mankind in twentieth century after World War II and perpetual fear of atomic bomb attack by superpowers, the time that although we speak the same language, we communicate nothing, it's the hope for a better future that can make man bear the condition and wait, wait for the Second Coming or reappearance of the savior at anytime, anyplace.

Waiting for a savior is a major and common notion presented nearly in all heavenly religions. It works as a

tranquilizer for the pain and misery of human, especially of the weak majority, in their struggle in the battle of "will to power."

REFERENCES

1. Bair, Deidre, 1980. Samuel Beckett: A Biography. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, pp: 22.
2. Bair, Deidre, 1980. Samuel Beckett: A Biography. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
3. Miller, Walter James and Bonnie E. Nelson, 1971. Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot and Other Works. New York: Monarch Press, pp: 27.
4. Bertens, Hans, 2001. Literary Theory: The Basics. London: Routledge, pp: 25.
5. Fletcher, John, 2000. Samuel Beckett. London: Faber and Faber limited, pp: 70.
6. Miller, Walter James and Bonnie E. Nelson, 1971. Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot and Other Works. New York: Monarch Press, pp: 5.
7. Faghihnia, Mohammad, 2000. Holy Mahdi (A.S.) in Heavenly News. Tehran: Noor Al-Asfia Press, pp: 40.
8. Haghdoost, Sayyed Abas, 2001. Knowing Mahdi (A.S.). Tehran: Golestan Kosar Press, pp: 40-41.
9. Majd, Vahid, 2003. Moment by Moment Expecting the Advent of Al-Qa'im. Tehran: Naba Press.