

Absurd Waiting Vs Sacred Expectations In Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting For Godot'a Muslim Perspective Against The Grain

Javed Ali

Assistant Professor,
College Education Department, Sindh
Email: javedarajper@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates through Muslim Perspective, the Metaphysical Anguish about human existence and the epistemological position Samuel Beckett holds in Waiting for Godot. Reading against the grain technique is used to meet the purpose. The study reinterprets the dominant themes of meaninglessness absurdity of life reached at through conventional reading. In contrast, this study challenges such notions of absurdity within the framework of Islamic thought and foregrounds sabr, tawakal and yaqeen in God. By challenging waiting as passive stagnation, this study reflects waiting as a spiritual condition to test a believer's faith. Thereby, this study demonstrates a metaphysical purpose by subverting the prevalent existential readings in absurdity.

Key Words: *Metaphysical Anguish, Waiting for Godot*

Introduction

Modern men, especially in the West, seem to struggle with questions of meaninglessness, alienation, and the absurdity of life. The two World Wars pushed humanity to the verge of its complete annihilation. The men's lives were marked by isolation, pain, and uncertainty. Waiting for Godot holds a central position among such works about life's triviality. The play depicts the life of two men: Vladimir and Estragon. They both wait endlessly for an unknown figure named Godot who never shows up.

The existing scholarship reads the play along the lines of absurdity and existential dilemma. Also, critics associate the play with the works of

Albert Camus, Nietzsche, and Jean Paul Sartre. The central theme in the play is waiting which is futile, meaningless and fruitless. However, the current reading of the play suggests a Muslim reading against the grain through an Islamic spiritual framework. The Islamic perspective does not accept the final outcome of despair but proposes that *sabr*, *tawakal* and *yaqeen* are the alternative responses in the face of difficulties and sufferings.

A Muslim reading against the grain technique questions the dominant interpretations of the play that lead to nihilism and meaninglessness and argues that the endless waiting in the play highlights human beings' innate desire for divine certainty.

Theoretical Framework seated in Islamic Spiritual Epistemology

The Holy Quran categorically asserts that life and death were created so as to test who is best in conduct and its teachings suggest adhering to the principles of *sabr*, *tawakal* and *yaqeen*. In contrast, wait signifies divine wisdom and a way of spiritual elevation. The Quranic verses on *sabr*(patience), *tawakal* (trust in God) and *yaqeen* (faith) are the foundation for spiritual uplift. The Holy Quran says:

1. *Sabr*: Encourage seeking help through patience and prayers. Allah is with those who are patient. (The Holy Quran: 2:151)
2. *Tawakal*: That the believers will be tested through fear, hunger and loss but urges patience and reflection. And it notes that those who stand steadfast, Allah's mercy is on them. (The Holy Quran: 2:155-157)
3. *Yaqeen*: That Allah is sufficient for those who rely on Him. (The Holy Quran: 65:3)

Metaphysical Anguish: An Overview

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett is an exceptional postmodern and post-World War II play. Esslin (1980) has called it "one of the successes of the post-war theatre. The play labelled as theatre of the absurd and existentialism prompts many questions about life, free will, predestination, determinism and death and expresses uncertainty about them. The characters are representative of all mankind and are destined to wait for Godot who is an unknown figure and does not turn up. In the words of Vladimir, 'We constitute the whole mankind.' Godot is seen as having control over their lives. Before we talk further about the angst and anguish, metaphysical and epistemic uncertainty of the characters, let's have a rudimentary look at the play.

The playwright has combined both tragic and comic characteristics in the play, and is divided into two acts, unlike the traditional play with

structure of five acts. Due to the unique blending of the characteristics, it is called tragicomedy. Its first publication appeared in French and the English translation rendered by Beckett himself appeared a few years later. The play violates the traditional concept of play in which action is the soul of tragedy. It has no story, no plot and no action. In fact, non-action and futile waiting is enacted twice.

The play revolves around the tramps, who happen to be the protagonists of the play, have committed themselves to wait for Godot or are destined to wait for Godot, an uncertain figure who does not appear throughout the course of action. The very anguish they embody is helplessness, uncertainty and a ceaseless wait for Godot, the unknown figure, who would direct their life and assign meaning in it. The two protagonists think of dropping the idea of waiting but are afraid of being punished. Godot does not appear. But there appear Pozzo, a tyrannical master and Lucky, a degraded slave. Their relationship is quite inhumane and when they enter the stage a second time they have degraded physically. Pozzo has grown blind and Lucky dumb. Both Estragon and Vladimir, the tramps and central figures in the play, keep waiting for Godot and while awaiting, both think of committing suicide but it seems that even suicide is out of their reach. They also think of leaving the place but are unable to leave. Act I of the play comes to an end with the following utterances between Estragon and Vladimir:

“Estragon: “Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: “Yes, we can go now.”

Both remain unmoving and static. Similarly, in Act II we come across similar utterances which show helplessness of the representative characters:

Vladimir: “Are we ready to go now.”

Estragon: Yes, let's go now.’ (Beckett)

But they remain still and stationary and continue to wait for Godot.

Belittling of Humanity

This post-World War II play is embedded with thoughts of disappointment and despair as the reason upheld by enlightened scientists, scholars and intellectuals had failed to ensure and guarantee prevalence of sound sanity in every sphere of life and particularly of the human mind capable of sound judgment. Contrary to this thinking and deeply rooted trust on the faculty of reason, the man of the twentieth century indulged himself in devastating wars which brought bloodshed, destroyed property and rendered human beings homeless, orphans and hopeless.

Samuel Beckett, who must have had childhood memories of the First

World War imprinted on his mind and the Second World War must have roused those buried memories of disaster and mistrust and distrust of humanity on each other. The war must have enraged, infuriated him and made him adopt an attitude of quietism and resignation that human beings are weak and fragile and they are controlled by the forces beyond their control. Such a nurturing and defragmented life of modernism is reflected in the play 'Waiting for Godot'. The play begins with the unfruitful and futile efforts of Estragon, who is panting and trying his best with both of his hands to remove his boots. In doing so, he gets exhausted, gives up and resumes efforts.

During the course of his struggle, he, out of despair says,
'Nothing to be done'. (Beckett, Waiting)

Islam argues that men get what they seek, but this effort requires trust in Allah.

Vladimir at the time of the utterance of Estragon appears with legs wide apart on the stage and seconds Estragon that he also had started believing the opinion expressed by Estragon. In response to where Estragon spent his night he says that he spent it in the ditch as usual and was beaten by people as usual.

Both Estragon and Vladimir used to be presentable and their existence was delectable but now they have declined in status so they have no access to the Eiffel Tower. The denial of access to the tower has snatched from them the capacity to commit suicide by jumping off from the tower. They are now frail and weakling creature having nothing in control. Time is out of their joint so are left to the mercy of waiting who is expected to pull them out of abyss they are in. During their wait they think of hanging themselves. In response to this suggestion Vladimir thinks that this way suicide will give them sexual pleasure.

"Vladimir: This mode of suicide will give us sexual pleasure by causing an erection.

Estragon: (Excited) Will it really cause erection?"

Pozzo and Lucky, two subsidiary characters, appear twice on the stage. The relationship between the two is of master-slave and this relationship between them portrays an agonising and aggravating human condition. Pozzo the privileged, maltreats Lucky brutally, beats him and abuses him. A rope is tied around his neck and frequent jerks to the rope cause him severe pain. He carries a heavy bag, a stool, a picnic basket and a coat for Lucky. By doing so, Beckett perhaps is trying to communicate the relationship between the creator and the created. Through this relationship, he asserting his existential point of view that the world is illogical and

irrational and master-salve relationship is incomprehensible. By doing so he is suggesting that man is outcast and alienated in this world; a world in which nobody takes responsibility and becomes a sensible man who can contribute to the welfare and well-being of fellow human beings. He does not show love and compassion for others and humanity in general in this chaotic modern world has lost trust in each other; subsequently, lack of trust is followed by pessimism and pain, angst and anguish.

More importantly, he is to be sold out but before putting him on sale, he is made to entertain the tramps. To carry the bidding of his master in order to please the tramps he dances. When they appear on the stage for the second time, they have declined significantly: Pozzo has lost sight and memory. He has lost physical strength. Lucky, on the other hand, has become dumb and has lost the most beautiful gift of speech that a man is endowed with, which makes him superior to the rest of the creatures on this planet. Decline of Pozzo and Lucky embodies not only the decline and degeneration of the two characters but of the entire humanity in terms of sight and speech.

Endless Waiting and Spiritual Void

Vladimir and Estragon keep waiting for Godot. They are caught between hope and despair. And this constitutes the dominant theme of play.

“Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.”

This utterance embodies metaphysical stagnation, where meaning collapses. And their inability to act and move reflects spiritual paralysis. The Islamic perspective, on the other hand, suggests that waiting is not futile and uncertainty does not stem from waiting but from the absence of *yaqeen*. In Islam, waiting with faith becomes meaningful and waiting without it becomes uncertain and leads to psychological torment.

Reading Against the Grain: Islamic Meaning

The philosophy of absurdity assumes human labour to be futile. It claims that there is an irreconcilable gap between the silence of nature and human longing. Albert Camus’ Myth of Sisyphus demonstrates this gap and advocates that human labour bears no fruit. However, Islamic philosophy contradicts this assumption. It argues that man is created with a purpose and each one of them is accountable before God. The Holy Quran says, ‘Do you think we created you in vain.’

Reading against the grain shows the readers that the characters’ hopelessness is due to their shunning the prophetic and spiritual path. It argues that *sabr* resists nihilism. The characters in the play continue waiting and the critics have termed it repetition and futility. Characters waiting lack transcendent grounding. Moreover, true *sabr* requires faith in the divine wisdom. Apparently, the characters wait but inwardly they are devoid of

spiritual vigour.

Due to the characters' lack of *tawakal*, they think of either leaving or committing suicide. Their uncertainty reveals that trust is amiss. Islamic *tawakal* brings a balance by relying on spiritual dimension. In Islam, human beings can only act; for their output, they must rely on God. The Holy Quran says that not a single leaf moves without His command. Consequently, the character suffer because their spiritual trust has collapsed.

Epistemological uncertainty is the deepest tragedy. The characters do not know whether Godot exists, he will come or he will not come. Islam, in contrast, emphasizes that *yaqeen* is necessary for living and stability. Certainty keeps hope alive in the face of suffering. The barren landscape in the play portrays the character's spiritual emptiness.

Conclusion

Waiting for Godot depicts metaphysical anguish at par in modern times. Conventional readings in existentialism argue that the meaning is impossible, despair is the future and efforts are futile. In contrast, a Muslim reading against the grain reveals three motivational forces of *sabr*, *tawakal* and *yaqeen*. They are the hope in the times of uncertainty. The study concludes that the anguish emerges not from waiting but from a lack of certainty and trust in the transcendental being. Islamic reading of the play demonstrates suffering becomes meaningful ones trust on the transcendent being is restored and a firm connection is established with God. The endless waiting of Vladimir and Estragon indicates souls search for certainty in the world torn by two World Wars.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

References:

1. Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1958)
2. Aronson, Ronald, "Albert Camus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/camus>.</
3. Beckett, S. B. *Waiting for Godot*, http://www.samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part1.html[4/24/2014 5:45:24 PM]

4. Gaarder, J. (1996). *Sophie's World*, Berkeley Books New York .
5. Sleasman B. C. (2011). *Albert Camus Philosophy of Communication: Making Sense in an Age of Absurdity*, Cambria Press Amherst, New York
6. Stevenson, J. (2002). *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Alpha A Pearson Education Company .
7. Yusuf Ali A. (Trans). (2003). *The Meaning of the Holy Quran*. Goodword Books
8. Zaretsky, R. (2013). *A Life is Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for meaning* the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.