

Hope in Hopelessness: Appreciating “Waiting” as an Essential Device in Selected Plays of Beckett and Ahmad

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2020-08023418

Volume: 8

Issue: 2

Month: October

Year: 2020

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 13.08.2020

Accepted: 29.09.2020

Published: 01.10.2020

Citation:

Mahbub, Rahman M., and Shahnaj Parvin. “Hope in Hopelessness: Appreciating ‘Waiting’ as an Essential Device in Selected Plays of Beckett and Ahmad.” *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2020, pp. 27–32.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v8i2.3418>



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Abstract

This paper aims to explore and appreciate “waiting” as an essential device in selected plays of Beckett and Ahmad. They defy traditions and conventions of plays by inventing their own innovative and individualistic manner of manipulating structural patterns to shape the Absurd dramas. This paper focuses on the incessant incidence of the “waiting” in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot and Ahmad’s The Thing, and analyzes how important this waiting matters to the characters. The essential device of ‘waiting for’ and the open possibility of a change is what keeps hope alive. Through the journey of the characters, the playwrights focus on how man can confront and survive against the hostility of surroundings through ‘waiting.’ This is narrative research that follows descriptive-cum analytical method, and the textual references are given as evidence to support the argument of this study. It is found that the reality of the situation in which the absurd character appears is a psychological reality expressed in images that are the outward projection of states of their mind. That is why the Theatre of the Absurd can be considered an image of the human being’s inner world. It presents a truer picture of reality itself, reality as grasped by an individual that helps the characters as well as the audience to comprehend the harsh reality that life is full of qualms through their absurd conditions.

Keywords: Absurdity, Waiting, Godot, Absurd Condition and Absurd-reality

The plays of Beckett and Ahmad show that in life, we are constantly waiting and keep going for something; and, while we wait, time is passing by, and life is getting closer to the end. Edith Kern, in her article “Drama Stripped for Inaction,” highlights how much we identify ourselves with Vladimir and Estragon and that we notice that we too are “bewildered and abandoned in a universe which makes no sense” (Kern 42). It seems Waiting for Godot tries to show a world in which hopes do not turn into reality, and human interaction and dialogue rarely make sense. Nonetheless, people are still eager to talk and engage with others as they are hopeful. No doubt, some indication, manifestation, situation, conversation indicate that ‘hope’ exists in hopelessness either directly or indirectly through the open possibilities in the plays of both Beckett and Ahmad.

The biggest concern of the characters in both of the plays is what they can do to pass the time. They worry more about what they can do while they are waiting than if Godot will arrive or the Thing will come at all. Lois Gordon believes that in waiting for Godot, they show the emptiness and nothingness of life:

Both figures demonstrate concretely – in taking the hat off and putting it back on and pulling the boot off, with additional gestures of turning each in different directions – that there is nothing to be done, nothing to be found, nothing to be revealed. The ritual of demonstrating or enacting nothing is the consummate activity of waiting/living (Gordon 156).

By waiting and in finding what to do while they are waiting, Vladimir and Estragon admit to the meaninglessness of their lives. All they want to do is find some kind of activity that will make the time pass faster, and Vladimir, Estragon, U. Peng, Ahmad, Munir, Headman- all are well aware of that:

U. Peng: I have found it. I have found it. It is here. [Points his finger]

Ahmad: He has discovered the treasure.

Munir: He has done it. [They all look at each other]

Headman: He has ruined it. [Pause]

Now we will have to find something else.

Munir: For what?

Headman: To pass the time (Ahmad 12).

Similarly, after Pozzo and Lucky leave, for example, we have the following dialogue in which we can see their awareness of the passing of time:

Vladimir: That passed the time.

Estragon: It would have passed in any case.

Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly (Beckett, 78).

And Vladimir also opines that time flies very fast when one has fun. One of their favorite things for the characters in both *Waiting for Godot* and *The Thing* to do to pass the time and entertaining themselves is talking - no matter how useless and meaningless the conversation might be. Martin Esslin says that “in a purposeless world that has lost its ultimate objectives, dialogue, like all action, becomes a mere game to pass the time” (Esslin 87); they do not talk to learn new things or to interact with other people, but to entertain each other. As Germaine Bree points out in the chapter entitled “Beckett’s ‘Grands Articles’” in Friedman’s *Samuel Beckett Now*, Vladimir and Estragon talk about their current situation of waiting very calmly, as if having to repeatedly wait for Godot does not bother them: “Beckett’s characters discuss their miserable and repugnant situation very calmly; they find it not only tolerable but, on the

whole, fairly good” (Friedman 80). Vladimir and Estragon have accepted their life the way it is, and they have grown so used to it that they fail to see how absurd their existence and their waiting are. In *The Thing*, the characters also discuss their miserable and catastrophic situation very steadily and boldly:

Headman: You kept us waiting, U. Peng.

Ahmad: My dream is a reality.

U. Nen: Reverend one, shall we proceed with the rite?

U. Peng: A bud blooms in time; a leaf flutters in the breeze. Don’t be impatient, U. Nen. We have only one life. Let us hold it tight, not run wild and lose it.

Headman: Very true. We will be patient and maintain the dignity of our race (Ahmad 7).

In *Waiting for Godot*, the pair Vladimir and Estragon, decide to tell each other stories to pass the time. The first one is the story of two thieves, one of which was saved and the other was not. The meaning of the story, however, is not what matters the most; what they want to do is to be entertained so that they feel that the time is passing faster:

Vladimir: Do you remember the story?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: Shall I tell it you?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: It’ll pass the time (Beckett 42).

When Vladimir finds Estragon unresponsive and uninterested in the story, he says, “Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can’t you, once in a way?” (Beckett 42). Another story that they consider telling is one of the Englishmen in a brothel:

Estragon: You know the story of the Englishman in the brothel?

Vladimir: Yes.

Estragon: tell it to me.

Vladimir: Ah, stop it!

Estragon: An Englishman, having drunk a little more than usual, proceeds to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one, or a red-haired one. Go on (Beckett 46).

This is very humorous because usually when we ask someone if they know a story, we want to tell it. Instead, Estragon, upon finding out Vladimir knows the story himself, asks his friend to tell it to him. When Vladimir refuses, Estragon starts telling

the story and encourage Vladimir to continue. What Estragon wants is not to hear the story, but to keep the conversation going so that they do not notice the stagnation time and the as pain of existence. Similarly, in *The Thing*, the characters agree to listen to the stories of the possessed Girl for passing the time somehow:

U. Peng: Gentleman, you are here to know the future of this island. She will tell everything of things to come. But I have a condition.

Headman: Agreed. Anything. Let us be quick.

Ahmad: I would give anything to hear the future. The future of humanity.

Munir: Will you speak?

U. Peng: We are Tribals. You have dread, not faith, agreement, not a fraternity, frustration not humility. Therefore, first, she will tell of the past. All may testify the truth. You will be convinced of a divine gift. She is possessed by a ray of light. We all can see yet never hold.

Headman: It will be interesting to recall the previous generation.

Ahmad: I am not bothered about the past. The present is all. She must speak of the present and certainly of the future. Why resurrect the dead? They will have nightmares.

The girl bursts into loud sobs. Everyone feels miserable yet scared.

U. Peng: [Calmly.] You are mistaken. Sir. The chosen one will not touch the dead. She will speak of your past. You may contest if you like. A past of the living beings who could play with ten fingers, still react to sun and rain and juggle with incomprehensible words. First, she will tell of the Headman, the bastion of justice, knowledge, and dignity.

Headman: I will not hear about my past. I have buried it long ago. That is of no consequence to anyone. Let us know the glorious present, the hopeful future.

U. Peng: Past, present, future. A bare limitation of intellect. One cannot split them. When you hear the past, it is in the present; when you are in the present, the mind moves on to the future. And conscience swings like a pendulum between the past and future, leaving the present to its fate - a moment of inactivity, numbness (Ahmad 9-10).

Another thing the characters in *Waiting for Godot* consider doing while they are waiting is hanging themselves. Here, the researcher does not see the characters considering suicide because that would be the answer and the solution that would release them from their miserable condition, the thing that would make them free from having to wait. Reasonably, the researcher believes they consider it only to have something to talk about or just as a sport for passing the time. When estragon suggests that they hang themselves, that becomes the focus of their empty conversation, and it helps time pass faster:

Vladimir: What do we do now?

Estragon: Wait.

Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting?

Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?

Vladimir: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

Estragon: (highly excited) An erection! (Beckett, 47).

After pondering over who is heavier and should be hanged first because the bough might break, they give the idea of hanging themselves and decide not to do anything because it is safer:

Vladimir: Well? What do we do?

Estragon: Don't, let's do anything. It's safer.

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says (Beckett 48).

The idea of committing suicide served its purpose because it made the two friends engage in conversation. In Act II, still before Pozzo and Lucky's reappearance, Estragon says they are unable to keep quiet and that the reason why they talk so much is, so they do not have to think or hear the dead voices of those who had thought before:

Estragon: In the meantime, let us try and converse calmly since we are incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

Estragon: It's so we won't think.

Vladimir: We have that excuse.

Estragon:

Vladimir: It's so we won't hear.

Estragon: We have our reasons.

Vladimir: All the dead voices.

Estragon: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Silence.

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

Silence.

Vladimir: Rather, they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

Silence.

Estragon: What do they say?

Vladimir: They talk about their lives.

Estragon: To have lived is not enough for them.

Vladimir: They have to talk about it.

Estragon: To be dead is not enough for them.

Vladimir: It is not sufficient.

Silence.

Estragon: They make a noise like feathers.

Vladimir: Like leaves.

Estragon: Like ashes.

Vladimir: Like leaves (Beckett 92-93).

The dead voices of those who had thought before, like Vladimir and Estragon, are unable to remain dead and quit. Beckett's characters still hear them, and that reminds them of how much pain thinking brings them. Vladimir and Estragon are aware of their stagnant situation. Still, because they cannot control it, they would rather not think about it and simply go on with their lives occupying their heads with the nearly nonsensical conversation. Again, in Act II, they show their awareness of making themselves busy by not noticing the passing the time and the sluggishness of their condition of waiting. Estragon tells Vladimir, "we don't manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us? [...] We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exit?" (Beckett 99) What startles the researcher about this line is that the pair does not want to be assured of their existence; they just have the impression they exist. They want to feel as if they were doing something meaningful with their lives; even they know that life is meaningless. Whatever they do to pass the time makes them feel as if they matter as if they are important, however brief that sentiment might be:

Convict: I stand on my toe. From me, the sapling will grow.

U. Peng: Who knows, my great-great grandfather

or mothers might have been cobblers, masons, peddlers. I do not bother about them. I am what I am. That is important (Ahmad, 17).

The reality of the situation in which the absurd character appears is a psychological reality expressed in images that are the outward projection of states of his mind. That is why the Theatre of the Absurd can be considered an image of the human being's inner world. It presents a truer picture of reality itself, reality as grasped by an individual that helps the characters as well as the audience to comprehend the harsh reality that life is full of qualms through their absurd conditions. Esslin believes that the plays of this type of theatre go against the traditional idea of what a play is supposed to be like, in general. The characters of these plays decided to last, struggle, and continue living on as long as possible and never to surrender, nullifying the unreasonable silence of the world. The truth is –they do not just struggle with alienation, absurdity; they struggle with the reality they live in. It is found that whatever the situation is, human beings are capable of going beyond the enclosed condition at the end. Such is human life, and it must continue through waiting. Both of the plays expose the strength of the human spirit.

That is why, in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Thing*, we notice that silence is unbearable to the characters, perhaps even worse than having to wait for Godot and the Thing, the end and death. So they have to be able to entertain themselves in order not to fall into silence again. In order not to think, the protagonists contradict each other, ask each other questions, recollect their past, tell stories, play games, and trying to guess the future, to point out a few of the things they do to pass the time. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir says that "thinking is not the worst. [...] What is terrible is to have thought" (Beckett 94), but later adds that it is not the worst, but that "we could have done without it" (Beckett 95). Vladimir and Estragon have thought before, and a part of them wishes they had not. Perhaps what they thought about was the disgrace and decay of modern man, which is too much for them to handle. When they faced the truth about their lives, they perhaps felt too impotent and unable to change things, they decided to stop thinking to prevent themselves from feeling that way again. Now, in both of the plays, they live

in a world where they are nothing but mere puppets, keep going on and doing what they can to entertain themselves while waiting for an uncertain change, salvation and death; and accept “Happiness of a few hours, before The Thing comes to mute our voices, to blur our vision” (Ahmad 5). In these plays, the world becomes more attractive, more valuable, and more beautiful for them on becoming conscious of the absurd. As in *The Myth*, Camus states that growing conscious of the absurd makes the world remote to man, and that is why a man should continue their struggle not to surrender.

No doubt, waiting contains a certain element of hope. This mood of expectancy has universal validity because whenever we wait, we are expectant even knowing that our waiting may not be rewarded. While waiting, it seems ‘hope’ is the weapon for struggling against the absurd condition. As there is no other option, the characters in *The Waiting for Godot* and *The Thing* remain where they are, invent stories, trying to construct a past that gives them hope for the future. They accept the absurdity and revolt against the absurdity, as Camus also believes “accepting the absurdity of everything around us is one step, a necessary experience: it should not become a dead end. It arouses a revolt that can become fruitful. An analysis of the idea of revolt could help us to discover ideas capable of restoring a relative meaning to existence” (quoted in Popova). Therefore, Estragon and Vladimir live in hope as we do all through our life, believing that Godot – the expected thing may bring a change or at least the ongoing situation will be changed, or a miraculous cosmic solution is waiting somewhere.

Martin Esslin, in *An Anatomy of Drama*, opines that in *Waiting for Godot*, we are met with an “unfulfilled expectancy when one is waiting for something which has been promised but fails to materialize” (Esslin 117). He adds, in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, that:

The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives, we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting – an event, a thing, a person, death. Moreover, it is in the act of waiting that we experience the

flow of time in its purest, most evident form (Esslin 50).

The plays of Beckett and Ahmad show that in life, we are constantly waiting and keep going for something; and, while we wait, time is passing by, and life is getting closer to the end. Edith Kern, in her article “Drama Stripped for Inaction,” highlights how much we identify ourselves with Vladimir and Estragon and that we notice that we too are “bewildered and abandoned in a universe which makes no sense” (Kern 42). *Waiting for Godot* tries to show a world where hopes do not turn into reality, and human interaction and dialogue rarely make sense. Nonetheless, people are still eager to talk and engage with others as they are hopeful.

‘Waiting’ and ‘Hope’ are interrelated, and the task of life lies in waiting in fulfilling the mission. The lure of the probability and the hope keeps us tied to the edge of the vast expanse. A glimpse of rescue is always visible in the hazy arena of waiting.

This is the basic human situation in the world. All his life, man is waiting for something, which cannot bring any definite contentment to him, any definite peace like the condition of Sisyphus. He is waiting for happiness, not realizing that the greatest suffering consists of it. His nature is rooted in yearning and trying, which is an unquenchable thirst. However, waiting represents impossible possibilities ‘to going on’ in our life. Hope is the most human of all emotional states because only through hope, the man can recognize the infinite possibilities in the world. To hope about something necessitates a mental involvement, an act of thought giving to the thing hoped; evidently, it may not be the case for believing.

Similarly, ‘hope’ is not ‘wish.’ While ‘wishes can be entirely irrational,’ hopes cannot be so since acts of wanting or hoping are proper to the situations where there is something the will can change (Bloch 46-47). Moreover, hope is “ultimately a practical, a militant emotion (Bloch 112). So ‘hope’ always refers to a possible change, a better world, and a positive disposition. Due to these qualities, Bloch defines it as “the most human of all mental feelings and only accessible to men” and as something referring “to the furthest and brightest horizon” (Bloch 75).

In the absurd plays, the themes of waiting and continuation indicate the emotion of hope through conditions of indeterminacy, the unknown nature of becoming, and the not-yet happened. Also, the thoughts of existentialist thinkers were often hopeful about the future of human beings. It is found that 'waiting' and 'hope' are interrelated. The task of life lies in waiting, in fulfilling the mission. Nothing can excite human capabilities more than a challenge of 'probability.' We are a bundle of probabilities. It is in the act that the flowering lies. There is pain, yet we are glued to our position. The lure of the probability and the hope keeps us tied to the edge of the vast expanse. As if that is the destined cycle. Human beings are doomed to go through this cycle. A glimpse of rescue is always visible in the hazy arena of waiting.

Literature always has a strong association with hope, and waiting and enduring is an essential part of hope. Artists are disseminator of hope against hope through the endeavor they are involved with. Even in the absurd plays, there is hope, meaning, and a general something amongst the hopelessness and nothingness - a sense of 'moving about in the night,' a sense of carrying on, and a sense of outdoing anguish itself. The researcher has found some indication, manifestation, situation, conversation indicate that 'hope' against 'hopelessness' exists either directly or indirectly through the open possibilities in the plays of both Beckett and Ahmad.

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