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Deciphering the Signs in *Waiting for Godot*: Meaning beyond the Text

Abstract:

This paper examines Waiting for Godot principally from employing the concept of the 'Other', specifically an Eastern Islamic perspective. Concentration on the reception and perception of Beckett in a decolonized Muslim country, namely Pakistan, enables us to explore the ways in which the teaching and reading of challenging texts might either avoid problematic situations or find appropriate methods of teaching through cultural facilitation, religious assimilation, political experience and linguistic codification. It concludes that any production of literary meaning is inextricably connected to the reader's worldview and understanding of cultural signs that work as a tool to extend or advance existent concepts.

Key Words:

Other, Reception, Islamic Perspective, Literary Meaning, Worldview, Signs

Introduction

Traditionally, there exists an abyss between fictional and real-life experiences in the portrait of Eastern or Muslim cultures due to the fact that the 'painters', more often than not, were the writers from the West. They observed and examined the happenings according to the norms, values, and standards of their own cultures. Therefore, they mixed fact with fiction, real with imagined, East with the West. This subjectivity facilitated the influential and vocal forces that always 'othered', 'satirized' the East. Exploring this situation, Edward Said postulates that the construct of the West and the East implicitly conveys Western Society is developed, rational, flexible, and superior whilst the 'others' are explicitly opposed to this (Said, 2). Likewise, as a subservient culture, the East is more submissive and more controlled, & it does not raise questions against any situation in which it finds itself. In other words, the West never bothered to take care of the history and worldview of its inferiors, the others.

It is thanks to the post-colonial practitioners who have come forward to examine this trend and have succeeded in making the world realize that almost all the cultures hold divergent social constructs, norms, and history (Ashcroft 2002, 4-5, Ashcroft 2003, 136-138). The critics of these schools have had their main focus on revealing

the distinctions between the East and the West and on acknowledging the differences as the quintessence of human nature. Thus, their plethora of criticism lacks the immediate responses from the East; acknowledging this fact, Sharp writes, "We still do not know what 'they think of themselves'" (Sharp, 28). Through providing the 'central' space to the responses from the overlooked, rejected or peripheral readers/stakeholders, reader-response theorists supply the want left by the contemporary or previous criticism.

This paper examines how the Muslim readers, particularly Pakistani, receive a text from the writers of the 'West' and what do they 'say' about it. Furthermore, it aims to explain the specific historical, linguistic, religious and socio-political factors which perform a multidimensional role in the lives of people, from the very basic daily life practices to the formation of a worldview. Aforesaid factors evolve a national culture that highlights vital aspects of social life (Scollon, 139-140), and it is also considered to be the magnetic force that welds a society (Taylor, 1). The paper strives to cultivate a blend of variables and applicable facts in order to reach a transferable and acceptable conclusion of the study. For this, *Waiting for Godot* serves as a matrix of

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examination. This play is a part of the syllabus at some universities in Pakistan. Pakistani readers' approaches to Samuel Beckett are significant in the sense that they belong to a culture that represents the mixture of a distinct thought system, the dominance of Islam as a religion, and post-colonial experience. In examining Beckett's implicit meanings, this group not only denotes the stamp of recognized Western criticism due to the formal education they received in English and aftereffects of colonialism. They also attempt to recognize the hidden implications of his texts through the involvement of their personal experience. In other words, Samuel Beckett's *oeuvre*, or any other western text, inspires readers of this culture to reflect on their own linguistic, religious, political, and cultural experiences and enables them to reconstruct/decipher the signs in new ways.

Literature Review

Practitioners in reader-response criticism shed new light on the experience and importance of the readers, which previous theorists, namely, formalists and new critics, for example, had consciously overlooked. Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that "literary work does not pop into the world as a finished and neatly paralleled bundle of meaning, but rather that meaning depends on the historical situation of the interpreter" (Selden, 39). Norman N. Holland further explores the association between readers' personality-based experiential and identical responses to the text. He writes, "As readers, each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear. Each will seek out the particular themes that concern him" (qtd. in Hecq, 39). Thus, a text can produce different meanings in different spaces and times it is because "Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies" (39). Reader response theory, in particular, argues that the relationship between text and reader is intrinsic. In fact, the readers give new life to the text through their valued judgements and interpretations (Iser 1978, 21). In literary reading, imagination holds a decisive role, which sparks the process of understanding and meaning, the vital point of reference. In the words of Beno Weiss,

Reading means stripping herself of every purpose, every foregone conclusion, to be ready to catch a voice that makes itself heard when you least expect it, a voice that comes from an unknown source, from somewhere beyond the book, beyond the author, beyond the conventions of writing: from the unsaid, from what the world has not yet said of itself and does not yet have the words to say. (Weiss, 178)

Theoretical Framework

The broader perspectives and subjective elements of this theoretical framework enable this study to give voice to the readers who are overlooked due to the 'peripheral' role in the world. However, it is limited to the readers from Pakistan, but it can represent the whole Muslim world due to the fact that almost all the major sects of Islam have their say in Pakistan. Islamic idea, no doubt, is the base on which this country came into being ([qtd. in Nanda, 217](#)), and it is the religious idea on which not only the solidarity of the nation depends but also it conceptualizes the fabric of nationhood. Quaid-e-Azam, the founder of Pakistan, believed in the idea that Islam would play a decisive role in the development of Pakistan. However, he explicitly spoke of religious tolerance and equal rights to every citizen of Pakistan. He announced, "you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan (qtd. in John, 93). Yet after his death, all the political figures exploited the religious idea in politics and never tried to achieve votes and national solidarity on the basis of national interests. Not only political leadership but Pakistan army also explicitly express the idea of national unity based on religion; one of the Pakistan Army Chiefs publicized, "Pakistan was created in the name of Islam and Islam can never be taken out of Pakistan. However, Islam should always remain as a unifying force." ([qtd. in Paul, 127](#)) Resultantly, assimilation of religion in each and every field of life caused to produce religious forces, making the environment of the country most rigid and suffocated. Obviously, the tendency towards religion was not to serve religion but to achieve hidden petty and short-sighted benefits. Dr. Farzana Shaikh concludes that Pakistan's long-lasting crisis of identity stems "from its struggle to reconcile secular ideas of democracy with its complex attachment to laws informed by Islam." (Shaikh, 2018) Though she talks about the efforts of

Islamising democracy only, in fact, this concept of Islamization has crept in all those fields through which people can be bamboozled. Conscious attempts have been made to put the people out of schools, and Pakistan's literacy rate is 58% for the year 2015/16 (qtd. in Pakistan Economic Survey, 172). However, the critics believe that percentage is flawed; factual literacy is far downward. Of those who are not in school, 25 percent of them are in religious *Madrasas* where modern education does not exist. These *Madrasas* secure funding from rigid Muslim Arab countries, and resultantly, this religious class of students undergoes a thorough process of rigid religious brainwashing. Thus, this trend leads to a delimiting of liberal thinking and a level of acceptance that characterizes the cultural fabric of the nation. National unity still depends on the religious idea, though sometimes sectarianism endangers it. Prosperous Islamic country for which the founder of Pakistan dreamt is still a dream to realize. The questions raised by Beckett against the religious constructs may seem trivial for the West, but in an overtly religious country, it is even difficult to discuss such kinds of matters openly.

Data Analysis

This paper concedes that “intercultural awareness forms an essential part of postmodern theatre” (Fischer-Lichte, 167) and keenly observes the productions of *Waiting for Godot* meant for Muslims. Politically modified productions enraged Beckett; he was not in favour of alterations (Taylor-Batty, 73-74). Focusing mainly on the political situation, Ilan Ronen staged *Waiting for Godot* at Municipal Theatre (Haifa, Israel) in 1984 (Hutchings, 117). Arab Muslims and Jews imagined that Godot would come to rescue them through their idea of rescuing was totally contradictory. In 1993, Susan Sontag produced *Waiting for Godot* at Youth Theatre in Sarajevo. She emotionally portrayed the brutalization of Muslims and propagated the idea of United Sarajevo in front of starved audiences, who shared the pain of Estragon's hunger under the candlelight. The performance aroused a sense in audiences that the world was aware of their misery; it created a hope that Godot was to come (Taylor-batty, 78). Also, Shaheen M. Mahmood has talked about the reception and performance of *Waiting for Godot* in a Muslim Country, Bangladesh. Nevertheless, his essay focuses on the translated version of this play known as *Godor Pratikshaya*. Most strikingly, religious aspects of the play were omitted in the translation. Though he writes that the ‘inevitable cultural gap’ (Mahmood, 66) caused this reduction, implicitly, he conveys that the religious part of the *Godor Pratikshaya* was consciously missing.

In comparison with the abovementioned productions, this paper displays distinctive twofold ways of dealing with *Waiting for Godot*. Firstly, it does not cover the performance of *Waiting for Godot* but deals with the Standard English text of the play. Secondly, it centres its argument on readers' experience —reception and perception— with the text. It is noted that the responses of the audience and readers vary according to their experience of the event. Actual performance is responded to in a linear way, where you cannot reverse the happenings, and prompt response is needed to understand what is happening in front of you. Reading a text asks for horizontal interpretations, where the reader, in order to relate the patterns and events, can go backwards or forward. “Thus,” in the words of Wolfgang Iser, “reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character... A literary text must, therefore, be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself” (Iser 1974, 275). This process leads to the sense-making of the text by the reader; it rests within the text or goes beyond the text depends on the imagination of the reader. Various factors of society stimulate the working of imagination as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o proposes that the arts, the songs and the culture cumulatively nurtures and cultivates the imagination (Inani, 2018).

The title of *Waiting for Godot* never allows the critics to read the text in straightforward ways while overlooking its significance. The discussion strives to answer, ‘how do the people perceive foreign words in various linguistic cultures? Waiting is the first word in the title, and it holds many implications for Muslim readers. On the stage, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, and his arrival is deferred. But the pain continues to increase, and the irony is that the result of ‘waiting’ is unknown. ‘What do you expect?’ (Beckett, 11), questions Estragon, for whom ‘the limit of every pain is an even greater pain’ (Cioran 1995, 23).

Meditation and wordplay is the answer from Vladimir, “Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?”(11). But his game with the words determines his conscious plan. He controls the poisonous bite of hopelessness by breaking the flow of “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (qtd. in McKenzie, 105). It is easy for him to utter the original phrase, but cherishing the weakest, the weakest hope of Estragon is more important. Unconsciously, he also consoles himself that all is not gone still there is something in ‘waiting’.

On another level, ‘waiting’ suggests their search for the ultimate cure or Divine remedy for their incessant pain of life, but they are stuck on the midway. The place, which allows them to move nowhere. This stage puts them between belief and disbelief; they are neither sure of better consequences nor willing to discuss them. In the meantime, while waiting, what can they do except waiting? They have neither a tactic to put the burden of life away nor a solution to lessen the mental and physical pain. No choice they have, except easing their pain with worldly tranquilizers in the forms of words and dull acts; what else? Of course, yes, one choice they have, they can repeat; they are doing so. Their actions, which they perform on the stage, are represented in text, but what happens to the Pakistani readers while reading (offstage)? They feel that their repetitions of words and circular movements are similar to that of Islamic rituals, which execute the functions of relief and reassurance for the Muslims. Islam holds a large treasure of short prayers for almost each and every act. For example, if someone has lost his wallet during an accident, he is supposed to utter *Alahmdu Lilah* (God be praised,—he assures himself that he is saved by the mercy of God, this accident might have taken his life) or *In Lilah e Wa Ina Eleh Rajeoon* (We belong to God and to Him, we shall return— assurance is to one’s self that not only my wallet, I am also vulnerable.) However, the point of solace is not the same for the characters and the readers, the difference lies in action as the believer does it with belief, and they are continuing with it with a ‘doubt’ because they are unsure of outcomes.

Estragon: What exactly did we ask him for?

Vladimir: Oh . . . Nothing very definite.

Estragon: A kind of prayer....

Estragon: And what did he reply?

Vladimir: That he’d see.

Estragon: That he couldn’t promise anything.

Vladimir: That he’d have to think it over.[...] (Beckett, 18-19)

If Muslim readers are asked to brainstorm on the implication of the word waiting, they consider that ‘waiting’ is a rewarding symbol, and they find its roots in Islam. After reading the whole play, they opine that it is a hope that grows our life, we wait, and it will bear fruit. Though the process of waiting is painful, it becomes more painful if it continues. However, the end of waiting means the end of hope, sadness, and misery. Though deferred hope sickens the heart yet cherishing no hope breaks the heart completely, tearing the life into pieces. Islam deliberately lays greater stress on waiting and keeping hope with an optimistic heart. The background knowledge of the readers puts them to find the importance of waiting and waiting with patience is exclusively appreciated in Islam. Holy Quran declares, “I (God) answer the prayer of the suppliant when he crieth unto ME. So let them bear My call and let them trust in Me, in order that they may be led aright.” (Holy Quran, 2:186) The prophet of Islam (ﷺ) assures, “The supplication of every one of you will be granted if she/he does not get impatient and say: ‘I supplicated my God, but my Payer has not been granted.’” (qtd. in, Murad, 378). If someone thinks that his prayers are not granted, he may lose hope. That is why Islam asks if you think your prayer is not fulfilled, analyze yourself you must have got another benefit, and may the time has not to be matured; certainly, your prayer will be fruitful.

The importance of waiting is not only in prayer; there are many other relevant elements in Islam, which involve waiting. Every day they [adults] wait for the time of the next obligatory prayer [five prayers in a day, fixed timings, no swapping at all]. All the year, Muslims wait for the moon of the fasting month. During the whole month of fasting, from dawn to dusk, they do not eat, drink and, if married, avoid intercourse. This wait is rewarding that they can eat the best when the moon rises. After the conclusion of this month, they celebrate

the festival of Eid when they meet and greet all Muslims. They are also waiting for the 2nd coming of Christ, just like Christians, but the difference is that Muslims' ideology predicts that Christ will follow the tradition of the Prophet of Islam. But before the arrival of Christ, they are certain of the appearance of two other Muslim saviours (*Mehdi and Khidir*) who will come to rescue them. Finally, they wait for the day of judgment, with the belief of redemption and heaven for all as well. There is much to add, but it is enough to say that waiting for Muslims is a symbol of hope and bliss. Mirroring through this hope, they consider waiting in *Waiting for Godot* as a symbol that will bring hope and bliss in the end.

This leads to discussing the most problematic word Godot which always remains the centre of criticism. Most of the critics believe that Godot is God; however, Deirdre Bair warns the critics and advises them to follow the lead provided by Beckett himself. Beckett confessed many times if he believes that Godot is God, he must have said so, "If Godot were God, I would have called him that" (Bair, 383). Still, it is difficult to believe in Beckett when he himself contradicts his stance again and again. This matter voices the notion that he also wants others to add more interpretations to the word. Keeping in mind the ambiguity of Beckett, Vivian Mercier allowed himself to comment, "Obviously those who wait on stage must wait for something that they and the audience consider extremely important. We are explicitly told that when Godot arrives, so Vladimir and Estragon believe, they will be 'saved.' They [Readers/Audience] do not have to identify Godot with God; they do, however, need to see the analogy if the play is not to seem hopelessly trivial" (qtd. in Phillips, 124). In short, Beckett scholarship overflows in the discussion on God with reference to Godot; Pakistani readers find another symbolic importance of the word.

Interestingly, English has been adopted as a medium of instruction in Pakistan, but in order to make the understanding more effective, students and teachers incline to communicate and explain things in other languages, either official or regional ones. This tendency allows one to translate the message into the language in which one is more convenient. God's equivalent word in Pakistan is *Allah* (infrequently *Khuda*). Thus when they read the title, *Godot*, being non-native speakers, they do not call it God. This does not mean that their language/s abilities make them so; rather, it is a grammatical issue that forces them to do so. Previously, while learning English nouns, they have faced difficulty in understanding 'god' and 'God'. In later stages, frequent practice and translation of both provide them with the convenience to remember the concepts of 'God' and 'god'. Thus, Pakistani readers do not directly attempt to equalize the word 'Godot' with God, solely, it is due to their linguistic competence, which is unable to provide a translated version of this word in their languages. Their competence suggests that it is another aspect of the word 'God', and it may have some attributes of the word. Moreover, Lucky's speech strengthens their idea that Godot is not God if it were God; Lucky must have talked about Godot, not about God. In the second act, when the boy comes with the message from Godot, Vladimir asks, "Has he beard, Mr. Godot?" and the boy answers with the assertion. Contrary to Christianity, Islam does not present any picture of God and strictly goes against creating or forming a picture of God. It is considered to be a sin, just like idolatry. The boy's affirmative answer eases the Muslim readers that he may not consider Godot as God. Here, one may not forget the background of the Pakistani readers, who are utterly unaware of Christin thoughts; they live in a culture where reading an English book in Mosque may endanger them, that is why they avow that Godot is not God at any rate.

This conception that Godot is not God also permits the readers of the decolonized country to analyze it politically. I. A. Richards announces that the personal situation of the reader inevitably (and within limits rightly) affects his reading" (qtd. in Freud 2003, 34). After decolonization, Pakistanis' road to an economic turnaround, indeed, is lengthy, rough and full of depression. The Muslims of the subcontinent considered Quaid-e-Azam as their saviour. They dedicated their lives and services to find the stability which they had not under British rule. Pakistan came into being in 1947; after a year, Quaid-e-Azam died. He succeeded in building a nation, but the nation's prosperity was still to achieve. The paramount role of leadership in securing economic ease is admitted at all hands, but his death stretched the nation's adversity to a higher level.

Unfortunately, after 70 years of liberation, Pakistan could not succeed in securing the status of an emerging country, and still, its Per capita is still 1629 USD. Instead of developing a mechanism through taking hard decisions, leaders preferred to invest in short-term policies, completely ignored education, infrastructure, power, agriculture, and the manufacturing sector. Whenever they felt their rule is in danger, they exploited religious constructs and convinced the people that they would serve them in the best manner. The people, who have already the concept of *Mehdi*, *Khidir*, and Christ's arrival, believe in them and get deceived. Most of the Pakistani readers suggest, while reading, they feel that they, like the characters, are waiting for Godot, the messiah who will bring an economic turnaround to their country.

In the play, readers feel that Vladimir and Estragon are caught in the whirl of time and space, though their creator, Beckett, has secured the niche of a writer who surpasses time and space. Here, both of them are conscious of their circumstances and their search; they know they are looking for Godot but are unsure in the sense of where and how to find it. No doubt, every reader explains this according to his own experience as Mathew L. Skinner phonates that "Readers...reconstruct settings, even if only indistinct ones, based upon their encounters with a particular narrative in their given cultural contexts." It reminds me of a story of a Muslim scholar who was in search of 'the greatest teacher.' After thirty years, he learned that he was not in the right time and right place (Shah, 76). It looks that Vladimir and Estragon's pursuit is genuine: they are looking for the unknown; they exist *in* a particular time of which they are unaware, but not *on* time; in the same way, they are in a *place* unknown to them, but not *on* an exact place of rendezvous. For the readers, that is the main fault of their search, they will find what they want, but before that, they need to wait.

Conclusion

This paper highlights three key aspects. Firstly, it suggests that any production of literary meaning is inextricably connected to the reader's worldview and understanding of cultural signs. The unconscious cultural understanding works as a tool to extend or advance existent concepts. Though the received meaning differs from that of standard one yet this *aberrant decoding* enriches the scope of text and supplements the existing scholarship, and, in a way, generates new texts. Secondly, the discussion on *Waiting for Godot* in theological terms is considered a metaphor for the deferred emergence of the Supreme (Connor, 2014, 133) and as a metaphor for delayed 'happiness'. This paper argues that the Godot figure can also be analyzed at another metaphorical or allegorical level as a metaphor for the endless wait for an economic and socio-political turnaround in the third world or post-colonial countries like Pakistan. Moreover, religious assimilation stresses on wait for the saviour to come, and people start looking to wait for a Godot like a saviour for the economic and socio-political turnaround where the endless wait is not over. Godot is still awaited in Pakistan, where the economy is under serious threat while socio-religious constructs are already blurred. Thirdly, religious and secular debate in Pakistan is urgently needed. Lack of debate and consistent charges of blasphemy scare the teachers to avoid talk about original sin, the neutral role of God or other complex religious matters. In fact, the unconscious competence of religious prejudice is performing a negative role. As a rule, competence consists of four levels. Unconscious incompetence, where one does not know one's ignorance. Conscious incompetence, where one realizes one's incompetence. Conscious competence, where one learns the skill. Unconscious competence, where one masters the skill in a way that it becomes one's habit. Donald Rumsfeld attracted the world by putting this idea into the following words, "there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns— the ones we don't know we don't know." (Rumsfeld and Myers). Steven Connor supplements the missing corner of this 'epistemological quadrangle' and writes", there not also unknown knowns, things we do not know that we know? Belief is perhaps in this corner"(Connor, 139). Approving Steven Connor's hypothesis that belief is 'unknown knowns', I suggest that this is not the last stage. In overtly religious culture, 'We want –we must know,' but a culture based on the religious, political scenario puts a

complete full-stop on such proceedings. Aesthetically this play releases the readers to express the suppressed ideas and leave the boring routine of life. But as soon as they realize that this thinking may lead to contradicting religious constructs, they drawback themselves from reflecting, 'They realize-they must not know.' This situation is best described in the concluding conversation between Vladimir and Estragon:

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

[*They do not move.*] (Beckett, 87)

After that non-movement, even no word is to follow. This is a typically Pakistani conundrum. A vast majority of Pakistani nationals subscribes to the notion that Islam had been the leitmotif of the Pakistan movement. Different nationalities and castes whose interests often lay diametrically opposite to one another, throwing their differences overboard, rallied behind the idea of Pakistan because it meant a renaissance of Islamic culture and civilization. The question was whether they would be able to put their differences truly aside and join hands to recreate an Islamic civilization under the umbrella of the modern welfare state. The answer was a resounding "yes" because the alternative was to be saddled with a Hindutva ideology that afforded neither place nor meaning to them. Despite this pledge and all the fanfare surrounding it, there has not been even a semblance of movement since the creation of Pakistan. The same is true of colonial rule. The urgency to throw out the colonial yoke did not mark the envisioned change as the transfer of power from the British to the local elite does not mean decolonization for most Pakistanis. Therefore, there is something typical Pakistani in *Waiting for Godot* where things do not move, even when they make a show.

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