



Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: A Theravada Buddhist Reading

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Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-2025-J-041

Subject: English

Received : 09.06.2025

Accepted : 13.06.2025

Published : 28.07.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijri.v9n4.25.JL041

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand and interpret Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot through employing the themes in Theravada Buddhism especially the cannon with regard to the 'three marks of existence'. In a sense, this paper also establishes that the occidental existential strains that are projected by Samuel Beckett are not new to the eastern spirituality and life world and have been existing even before the times of Christ. Therefore, the comparative reading of occidental and eastern thoughts are profitable and enriching like similar to James G. Frazer's Golden Bough. This comparative study is undertaken as a qualitative study by deeply analyzing the selected quotations with the Theravada Buddhist Philosophy mainly Three Marks of Existence in order to interpret the similarities that can be observed in the respective plot.

Keywords: anicca, anatta, dhukkha, theravadha buddhism, waiting for godot, beckett

Introduction

Literature exemplifies the beauty of thought process through a language bound by time and space as here and now expressing multiple layers of meaning more akin to religion which helps in the spiritual healing of life. Where these two meet a unique beauty may foster as in the expressions from time immemorial through oral and written texts. The World Wars I & II pushed humanity into the brinks of uncertainty and untold turmoil along with personal and communal miseries which became the reasons for many new awakenings in many walks of life grouped under the terms 'Modernism' and 'Postmodernism' trying to evolve alternative understandings towards things that were taking place around men and women but which were beyond their control further which pushed

many in not recognizing themselves as a reflection or as an image of God, which set-in the downfall that everything was permissible if it was satisfactory according to self-created individual standards. Waiting for Godot, a well-recognized literary piece that stands as an example of the post-war syndrome can be seen as the epoch exemplifying this era's way of looking at life within and around oneself. But at the same time it is shocking to note that Waiting for Godot even though is tabled as postmodern, exemplifies the characteristics of Buddhism to a large extent. Therefore, like the claim laid down by many, that postmodernism starts right with Friedrich Nietzsche which is long before even the birth of modernism, and in the same manner the strains of



postmodernism which is felt in *Waiting for Godot* is similar to the teachings of Lord Buddha according to the three marks of existence propounded by Theravada Buddhism.

Waiting for Godot; “a strange play where nothing happens” (Yogurt Bhikkhu Gavesako) is exhibited as the most famous work of Samuel Beckett and it is to be considered as the thin margin between modernism and postmodernism. Consisting two parallel plots with the limited characters (Pozzo, Lucky and two boys apart from the two major characters named Vladimir and Estragon) the plot revolves around Vladimir and Estragon who have been waiting for an unknown personality named Godot, with the expectations that this Godot will presumably save them—a projection of an incomplete salvific process. This respective play that is recognized as “The masterpiece of theatre of the absurd, is filled with the religious feelings of the writer” (Wang Jing). Therefore, since the day the play was published it has been occupying different comments with different perspectives and the main cause for this is, that the particular drama was written in (post)modern period when people were fed up with traditional beliefs existing at that moment. As many researches imply this has been highly influenced through Christianity and at the same time other main religious teachings are also clearly transpired within this play.

The ideas propagated by Buddhism (in considering the particular play chosen for a reading in this paper) emphasizes the root of having the impact of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who was influenced from the Eastern philosophies of Buddhism (and the Vedas) to Samuel Beckett and for his writings. Particularly, as many researches scrutinize the First Noble Truth in Buddhism can be seen with Beckett’s way of presenting the repeated meaningless patterns of existence in Samsara. In addition to that endless repetitive pattern of Samsara, suffering and emptiness, emptiness of ego, second, third and fourth Noble truths and even the title itself *The Waiting for Godot*, too represents the waiting of modern Buddhist society for Maithree Buddha and they are interpreted throughout the play under the lens of Theravada Buddhism. (At same time, this paper recognizes that waiting by itself is a universal archetype where the Britons are waiting for the return

of King Arthur, the Mongol race including Chinese are awaiting the return of Emperor Genghis Khan, Christians are awaiting the return of Jesus Christ, Hindus are awaiting the return of God Vishnu in the form of Kalkai, Buddhist awaiting the return of Maithree Buddha, and etc). Furthermore, the tree which Vladimir and Estragon are going to hang can be interpreted as the Bodhi tree or Bo tree where Gautama Buddha gained knowledge.

Finally, it is conceivable that existing literature elucidates about the Four Noble Truths and other philosophical teachings but there is no any elaboration on the connection of Three Marks of Existence with the particular drama. Therefore, to explore the respective teachings of Buddhism in relation to the play and to cover the literature gap the researchers apply comparative analysis with the use of content analysis to analyze the script.

Literature Review

According to the article of Bhikkhu Gavesako by Lonesome Yougurt, Samuel Beckett’s absurd play *Waiting for Godot* has been written about the Buddhist aspect. Particularly his way of presenting the repeated meaningless patterns of existence in Samsara has been compared to the first Noble truth in Buddhism. Not only that, as he mentioned in his article (2012) “Buddhist aspects of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett noted more Buddhist perspectives. With that he has taken out Gain and Loss, Status and Disgrace, Censure and Praise, Pleasure and Pain which are known eight worldly conditions (atalo-dahama) in Buddhism. Further, he has shown out to certain aspects of popular Buddhism dealing with Karma and Merit and people are waiting for Maitreya as a savior.

In his research on Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*; *Suffering and Emptiness – An Interpretation in the light of Buddhism* by Elman Benjamin explains, the comparison of two fundamental concepts in Buddhism suffering and emptiness with Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* which reveals pain and nothingness in characters, stage, language and structure. In Chapter 2, he discusses the characters, suffering and forlornness both on physical and mental levels. In chapter 3, his focus is placed on time which brings nothingness. Further he writes that



the flow of time doesn't bring hope and salvation, but frustration and void. Beckett is fond of the sentence, "Nothing is more than nothing." In Buddhism, the real emptiness is considered not as empty but as existence while the concept of existence is not real existence but is empty and vacuum.

In his article on Waiting for Godot, Magdalen Ki (2017) explains that Godot is sinicized to become the Buddha, the symbol of hope that can save humans from 'dukkha' (suffering). The plight of Gogo and Didi is that nirvana is nowhere to be found.

Therefore, the need for a study that this paper projects is essential and need of the hour when the whole world is gearing towards World War III.

Methodology

A comparative analysis of the content of the printed script of Waiting for Godot is attempted with respect to the suggested research topic. Therefore, methodology of the particular research follows the method of qualitative analysis with the usage of content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Here the researchers seek the presence of the three marks of existence; Impermanence, suffering and non-self or anatta, dhukkha (pain/suffering), and anatta (soul/joy/bliss) of Buddhist philosophy that are evident as projections in the play. Impermanence, suffering, emptiness, meaningless, dissatisfaction of life are the beginning of Buddha's preaching. Similarly, it is the starting point of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot as well.

"Nothing to be done"

"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful"

(Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, Act I)

The first idea 'the Impermanence' can be taken out from the characters of Pozzo and Lucky. According to Buddhist teaching, as the sound of a drum which suddenly rises and disappears, everything is born and evanesced. There is nothing that is lasting as long as the blink of an eye. This fragile nature of things is named as impermanence. Therefore, impermanence is the only permanent thing in the world. Decay, maturation, drying, cracking, freezing, melting, crumbling, rotting, wrinkling of things as well as curvature, blindness, deafness, and death are some of

the main features that appear due to impermanence and it is the failure of everything.

The world is a place where the collection of impermanence is permitted. Things what are being or existing, connecting always with impermanence. Then that impermanence combines to sadness which becomes one of the main reason for suffering because people always think, they have the ability to gain what they need. Then the gained things belong to them till their last breath. But in reality sadness rises with all the subjective existences. This feature was preached by Buddha as anatta: "Sabbe Sankara Anicca" (Culasaccaka Sutta Majjhima Nikaya 35) and Beckett always shows this universal impermanence using the plot of Waiting for Godot.

POZZO: *But he is dumb.*

VLADIMIR: *Dumb! Since when?*

POZZO: *(suddenly furious) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is not enough for you? (Act 2)*

Among the three marks or features of existing things the first one is impermanence; nothing is permanent. Here two characters both Pozzo and Lucky are not disabled in Act number one since they have all the abilities that a man possesses. (Even though Lucky is unfortunate with exhibiting a symbolic life, he also has abilities.) In Act One, the rope which is used to bind Lucky has a considerable length symbolizing the completeness at that time in Pozzo with regard to his desires. For, he is very selfish, tyrannical and cruel slave master who considers himself as a superior being comparing to others with power that he has. Though in the second act, both characters become helpless. Pozzo also does not have much abilities to spread his power due to his blindness. His wonderful sight has converted into a complete blindness. As well as Lucky, the slave is dumb. Then the other noted thing is the rope which exhibited the relationship between them, which is with a short distance now reminding, where nothing is permanent! Everything changes even with a blink of eyes.



“One day we were born, one day we shall die..”

POZZO:

He’s stopped crying. (To Estragon.) You have replaced him as it were. (Lyrically.) The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. (He laughs.) (Act 1)

Particularly, individuals do not prefer to believe this universal reality though we have to engage with the feature which is named impermanence day by day. Nevertheless, we all have experienced this theory. Anyone cannot maintain anything as it is. Not only is that nothing is under our control to stop these features though the world is consisting abundant worldly powers. That is the reason Vladimir asks the same question again and again to know what he heard when he came to know that both characters have become deaf and blind is true or not. This is the nature of every mankind brings the pain and in Buddhism “Dukkha”; the second mark of existence implies the same.

This, indeed, monks, is the Noble Truth of dukkha, namely the fact that birth itself is dukkha, disease. Is dukkha, death is dukkha; to be joined with what is unpleasant is dukkha, to be separated from what is pleasant is dukkha, failure in getting what one wants is dukkha, in short, the five groups of physical and mental qualities making up the individual due to grasping are themselves dukkha – Dammacakkappavattana Sutta, Vin I 10; cp. S V 421 (Wijesekera)

ESTRAGON: (wild gestures, incoherent words. Finally.) Why will you never let me sleep?

VLADIMIR: I felt lonely.

ESTRAGON: I was dreaming I was happy.

VLADIMIR: He told us he was blind.

ESTRAGON: You dreamt it. (Pause.) Let’s go. We can’t. Ah! (Pause.) (Act 2)

With the second mark of Buddhism among Three Mark of Existence it refers the imperfections, restlessness, sadness, and dissatisfaction. As well as uneasy, uncomfortable, unpleasant, causing pain or sadness. Here the particular quotation is explained that all things are indefinite; nothing can be maintained according to our will. Therefore, it generates sadness similar to the situation of the play.

Then the third one or the final feature of the doctrine is anatta or non-self.

“Aniccan dukkhan anattai – ya pagnnaya passati / Ata nibbanti dukkha – esa maggo visuddiya” (Sutta Pitaka)

Buddhist teachings imply the doctrine of no soul or anatta means the idea of self is an imaginary. If there is any permanent thing or a force that rules, and controls by its own will, it can be called a “soul.” But there is no such thing in the three world relics nor in the whole universe. Permanent things should be taken as a soul while non-self, come with impermanent. Since what decay is not permanent here, we are unable to discern such kind of permanence.

ESTRAGON: Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful! (Act 1)

POZZO:I’m out- (he relights his pipe) – in the case- (puff) – in that case (puff) – what happens in that case to your appointment with this... Godet... Godot... Godin... anyhow you see who I mean, who has your future in his hands.... (pause)... at least your immediate future? (Act 1)

Thoroughly discussed idea; rejection of the God, which came into exists with postmodern era is paralleled in this study. Non-self can conserve as a Buddhist Philosophical teaching and an idea out of the Beckett’s respective play due to nobody comes to survive both characters; Vladimir and Estragon as well as us, in the real-life context. It further reminds the reader that it is our duty to make our own path, decide our own destiny instead of expecting about the fate or others. Since no one is here to control or make our lives.

Conclusion and Contribution

Literature cannot be simply defined through one or two words. It is a combination of various things which also can be defined as the mirror to a society as it represents several spheres of the society as well. Human thoughts and attitudes that influence by various changes in the human society impact to create many works with the literature which also use as a media to reflect them outward. With the impressions of the defeated generation of (post) modern era, while many writers tend to look towards the Eastern Philosophy during the modern and postmodern eras, the Buddhist philosophy takes a notable place among



them. There are number of evidences to indicate the influence of Buddhist philosophy for most of the literary works during these periods. Buddhism can be defined as a religion as well as a philosophy with a deep core that is construable to any one and as a result, most of the philosophies that origin during the Modern & post-modern era have been built up with the shade of Buddhist philosophy. Several of these facts resulted to bring up the theatre named “The Theatre of Absurd” which specifically describes the absurdity of human existence in the meaningless universe. Based on the main characteristics of this initiative, the Buddhist philosophy can be defined in parallel.

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