

## **A Study of Quietism in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Samuel Beckett is considered as one of the frontiers of existentialism and theatre of absurd in English literature. His literary works are the results of his personal beliefs, impressions and experiences. He had to live in exile, poverty, and loss for years. He also witnessed the hostility of World War II. So he was familiar with the grim and awful side of human life which is reflected in melancholy tone of his works. Critics may categorize his works to any group but the fact is that his religious notions and ideology has great impact on his writings. We can find Beckett's faith on Christian mysticism i.e. Quietism in almost every work. The study of his works through the light of Quietism would help us to understand Beckett better as a literary aesthetic.

**Keywords-** Quietism, Christian Mysticism, Aestheticism, Godot and Nothingness.

## **A Study of Quietism in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"**

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Samuel Beckett, a distinguished literary figure in modern English literature. He extended the possibilities of fiction and drama to get expression through absurdity of human existence, constant search for meaning and individual isolation. Critics categorised Beckett as writer of theatre of absurd and existentialism because his works possess predicament and absolute of

human existence. A writer's literary output is based on his beliefs and how he looks at the way of world. Behind Beckett's works, the roots lie in his belief on a particular type of Christian mysticism i.e. Quietism. He was educated in Ireland and settled in Paris where he produced fiction and drama. He started literary life at the time World War II. His works are divided into two main periods, before and after *Waiting for Godot* (1953). His pre *Godot* literary achievements include novel like *Murphy* (1938), *Watt* (1953) and *Trilogy of novels*, *Molloy* (1951), *Malone dies* (1951) and *the Unnamable* (1953) which made him a successful writer. His later works embody the complex mix of self-reflection and self-parody.

Quietism was a mystical movement that influenced Catholics and Protestant countries after reformation. Quietists had a distinguished approach to religious practices. They declared that religious life must be divine movement within the soul. By resigning from own will and desires one can attain God's grace. They believed everything that happens is prescribed for the good of the soul by God. They adopted passivity and silence as an approach to every aspect of life. There are many best known quietists such as Miguel de Molinos, Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Mothe Guyon and François de la Mothe Fenelon. They follow mainly two principles. Firstly, to keep themselves from materialistic world by putting worldly things aside. The second principle is to put God in high esteem and completely surrender to him. The quietists have different approaches towards God and worshipping God. They didn't follow the traditional way of offering, worshipping and praying to God. They all have an approach of holy indifference to prayer and they follow the path of passivity, silence, resignation of will.

After publication of Samuel Beckett's *Dream Notebook* (1999) and *German Diaries* (1989), it was confirmed that Beckett read William Inge's "Christian mysticism" and Arthur Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation". He wrote a letter to his friend Thomas MacGreevy in the year 1930 saying,

"I am reading Schopenhauer, everyone laughs at that. Beafret and Alfy etc. But I am not reading philosophy, nor caring whether he is right or wrong or a good or worthless metaphysician. An intellectual justification of unhappiness—the greatest that ever attempted—is worth the examination of one who is interested in Leopardi and Proust rather than in Carducci and Barres." (p118)

Both these writers rejected all kinds of religious dogmas and praised the quietists. Schopenhauer considered Quietist's spirituality as true Christianity. He states it is necessary that man reduce his own powers to nothingness. He gave examples of Indian Myth and Buddhist conception of Nirvana to attain almighty's grace by sacrificing will and desire. Beckett's literary works possess such a sense of rejection towards life. Quoting Andy Wimbush findings on this particular subject,

"A broader definition of quietism – without a capital Q – would include all other philosophies or religious teachings that encourage passivity and resignation of the will, and which aim at a state of indifference or mental quiet. Beckett reached this understanding of the term through the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who, in the third volume of *World as Will and Idea*, defines quietism as 'surrender of all volition, asceticism, i.e., intentional mortification of

one's own will' and uses it to talk about Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu ascetics as well as Christian ones such as Guyon and Molinos (1909, 3:433). Schopenhauer praised the disposition of all these quietists, while rejecting their individual religious dogmas. His own soteriology also focused on resignation of the will, and he stated that the concerns of 'quietism and asceticism' were 'identical with that of all metaphysics and ethics', and therefore something that philosophers should take more seriously (436)."

The idea of Beckett on Quietism both literary and aesthetic one. He incorporated the idea of quietism in lots of his works like *Murphy*, *Molloy*, *Endgame* and the famous work *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett was an unconventional writer he does not believe in words. Words are imperfect and unreliable tools for him. Beckett didn't have faith on language as his close friend Joyce. So Beckett's literary quietism emphasized on impotence, ignorance and silence which are appropriate for Beckett's unheroic aestheticism and his desire to work with ignorance. The characters of Beckett's novels and plays have no enthusiasm for life but have resigned attitude towards life. Beckett has interest in mysticism people try to connect his works to religion and mysticism. He was not a religious person he never believed in the power of Divine or the miracle or justice of god in the world. He never tried to find out universal truth or try to spiritualize his texts. He was more like a mute writer. He had the attitude of silence and the attitude of annihilation in his writings.

One of his works called *Molloy* we are introduced to a character who introduced himself as pretty quietist. Moran in *Molloy* (1951) was not Beckett's invention but rather borrowed from Jean de La Bruyère's satirical *Dialogues sur le quiétisme* (1699).

"Our Father, who art no more in heaven than on earth or in hell, who art everywhere, I neither want nor desire that thy name be hallowed, thou knowest best what suits us; if thou wilt, it shall be, unless I want or desire it. That thy kingdom come or not come, it is all the same to me. I do not ask thee that thy will be done on the earth as it is heaven: it will be so no matter what I do, I can only resign myself to it. Give us this day our daily bread, which is thy grace, or give it not to us: I neither wish to have it nor to be without it. Likewise, if thou forgivest my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me, that is all well and good. But if thou wouldst rather punish me by damnation, then so much the better, since it is thy pleasure. Finally, Father, I am too abandoned to thy will to ask thee to deliver me from temptation and from evil."

Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is commonly interpreted as the text of Existentialistic literature and Theater of the Absurd. It is an uneventful play. The actions and dialogues are repeated. It is ignorance, impotence, boredom and waiting clearly evident in the text. Beckett emphasized on the grime side of life; where man tries to find solace and hope in the state of helplessness. By reading the play within the context of quietism gives us new insights about Beckett's believe on a particular type of Christian mysticism i.e. Quietism.

The setting of the play is in a mode of nothingness. An isolated road, a ditch and a leafless tree bears symbolism of nothingness. The beginning and the end of the play in which "Nothing happens, nobody comes...nobody goes" goes on without perfect ending. Two characters Estragon and Vladimir kept waiting for Mr Godot and repeat the same action after

being informed that Mr Godot is not coming. But still they wait to be ‘Saved’. Like Quietists follow the spiritual path in silence.

The quietists never believed in traditional ways of praying God or practice of any kind of orthodox way to get salvation. They didn’t advocate for reading scriptures and lead a strict religious life. Beckett reflected this tent of quietists in the conversation of Estragon and Vladimir in Act 1 of Waiting for Godot .

**VLADIMIR:**

Merely smile. (*He smiles suddenly from ear to ear, keeps smiling, ceases as suddenly.*) It's not the same thing. Nothing to be done. (*Pause.*) Gogo.

**ESTRAGON:**

(*irritably*). What is it?

**VLADIMIR:**

Did you ever read the Bible?

**ESTRAGON:**

The Bible . . . (*He reflects.*) I must have taken a look at it.

**VLADIMIR:**

Do you remember the Gospels?

**ESTRAGON:**

I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy.(4)

Here in these dialogues ,it is very clear that Estragon and Vladimir are not religious at all.They took the Holy Bible very casually and they never discuss further about the greatness of Christ or Bible’s religious implications. Their impressions are vague and ambiguous.

The title of the play suggests “Waiting” which is sole purpose of a quietist’s life. A quietist resigned himself from every aspect of his life so that he could completely surrender himself to God. He only waits for god’s grace quietly.

**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.

**ESTRAGON:** Who?

**VLADIMIR:** Godot.

**ESTRAGON:** Good idea.

**VLADIMIR:** Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.(29)

In the above quoted passage, Estragon's dialogue "Don't let's do anything .It's safer" shows the quietist attitude of the character. He chooses to do nothing but to wait. He feels that it is safe to do nothing but to wait for Godot to arrive Estragon and Vladimir were so bored while waiting that they wanted to kill themselves by hanging on a tree. But they never stopped waiting. At the end of the play Vladimir asks , 'Well? Shall we go?' To which Estragon replies 'Yes ,let's go'. But they do not move. The waiting of these two was still going on.

Schopenhauer the supporter of Quietism advocates that history is nothing but a never ending series of quite similar events in which the basic nature of will expresses itself. Past events have no significance so by focusing on present situations one can change the course of life. Quietist led their importance on "now" as one can change his future by deciding actions at the present movement. Ulrich Pothast puts it as:

"That Beckett's literary work often may be called pessimistic and in this sense presents attitudes characters patterns of action or rather non action which show some kind of kinship with Schopenhauer 's pessimism has been observed early in the history of Beckett's studies."(4)

Lucky's monologue in Act-1 in which he acknowledged about the existence of personal god. One who exists outside of time and who loves us deeply and who suffers with those who are plunged into torment, it is established beyond all doubt that man, for reasons unknown, has left his labors abandoned, unfinished. The speech is as follows:

**Lucky:** "Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast heaven to hell so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing but not so fast and considering what is more that as a result of the labours left unfinished"(36)

Here Lucky echoes the theory of Schopenhauer about personal God. Lucky points out that Man have certain assumption about God and that's why Man cannot get to logical conclusion. Man is unknown about the reason why he is suffering. Schopenhauer explained that One cannot get relief ,if one is entangled in desire and longing for gains. He says:

"Certain men say that we ought to be without will, wisdom , love ,desire, knowledge and the like. Hereby is not to be understood there is to be no knowledge in man...But it ,meaneth that man's knowledge should be so clear and perfect that he should acknowledge of at truth that

in himself he neither hath nor can do any good thing, and that none of his knowledge, wisdom and art, his will, love and good works do come from himself, nor are of any man, nor of any creature, but that all these are of the *eternal God*, from whom they all proceed ... with the will, and love and desire, and the like ... the less we call these things our own, the baser and less pure and perfect do they become”(32)

Samuel Beckett is considered as one of the frontiers of existentialism and theatre of absurd in English literature. His literary works are the result of his personal beliefs, impressions and experiences. He had to live in exile, poverty, failure, and loss for years. He also witnessed the hostility of World War II. So he was familiar with the grim and awful side of human life which is reflected in melancholy tone of his works. His personal accounts prove that he was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer's religious notions. Schopenhauer's philosophy of life based on Quietism. The stoic attitude of Beckett is the result of his wide knowledge about Christian mysticism. Critics may categorize his works to any group but the fact is that his religious notions and ideology has great impact on his writings. We can find Beckett's faith on Christian mysticism i.e. Quietism in almost every work. The study of his works through the light of Quietism would help us to understand Beckett better as a literary aesthetic.

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