

WAITING FOR GODOT – QUESTIONING CHRISTIAN IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at discussing the questioning attitude of Samuel Beckett towards Christianity, in his play *Waiting for Godot*. The work belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd movement of the 1950s which propagates the existentialist philosophy of Albert Camus and Jean Sartre. It is suggested through textual analysis that the play questions the basic claims, tenets, and ideology of Christianity. It raises questions about the position of man in the cosmos, the Christian concept of damnation and salvation, and the authenticity of the Christian history.

Keywords: Christianity, God, Man, Absurd.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Barclay Beckett was an Irish playwright, theatre director, novelist and poet of the 20th century. He lived in Paris for the most of his life and wrote in English and French. He is considered to be one of the last modernists. He was a great admirer of Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre and propagated their existentialist philosophy in his works. He belonged to the Theatre of the Absurd. His contribution to the field of literature was duly acknowledged in his lifetime. In 1969, he was awarded Nobel Prize in Literature. Samuel Beckett produced his seminal work *Waiting for Godot* in 1953.

Waiting for Godot is considered to be an epitome of the “Theatre of the Absurd”; a term coined by Martin Esslin for the plays of some playwrights who wrote in the 1950s and 1960s. The term is originally derived from an essay of Albert Camus. As the word ‘absurd’ gives us an idea that it is something foolish and opposed to reason, so a drama which has a cock and bull story would be called an absurd drama. *Waiting for Godot* has all the key elements of an absurd drama: it denies the traditional notion of time, has a loose plot and its characters indulge in idle babbling. The play has no proper beginning, middle and end. A sense of nothingness envelopes all the play.

Waiting for Godot satirizes the people who hope that God would come to help them. People wait for Him in the time of difficulty, as He promised mankind, but He does not come. Sometimes, He sends His messengers who, themselves, have been given no authority. They too cannot save mankind in crises. Moreover, He keeps giving people false hopes which are never fulfilled. Hence, the play paves the way for the central tenets of the existentialist philosophy that man is purposeless in its existence.

METHODOLOGY

This is a theoretical research in which I have taken help from Fairclough’s three dimensional structure. For the purpose of analysis, two chunks have been taken from *Waiting for Godot*. The chunks have been selected subjectively, considering the intent to find out religious underpinnings of the text. Both the chunks have been dealt with separately. The analysis has

been performed on three stages. At the first stage, the category of the selected text is given. Its interpretation is given at the second stage. The third stage deals with the religious context of the selected chunks. This is followed by the findings of the analysis.

Analysis

The dialogues for the purpose of analysis have been taken from Samule Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1949). It is a play which can more specifically be classified as a tragicomedy. It was originally written for theatrical purposes and belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd. However, we shall deal with the written transcript of it.

Chunk I

“Estrogon: What?”

Valadimir: Suppose we repented.

Estrogon: Repented what?

Valadimir: Oh... We wouldn't have to go into the details.

Estrogon: Our being born?”

Interpretation

Valadir suggests that they are repented. To this Estrogon replies that why should they be repented for they have committed no sin. Should being born be considered their sin?

Religious Context

It is better to look at the Christian context of these lines. In The Book of Genises, it is said, *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish and the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”* (Genesis 1:26). God created man and it became the most favored creature of God but when man ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, he had to face the wrath of God. Man wanted to cross the boundaries set by God and God did not like the idea. So in the Christian theology, every newborn human baby is considered sinful because of Original Sin committed by Adam and Eve. *“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”* (Romans 5:12).

Underlying Ideas

Christian notion of Original Sin is the target of satire in these lines. Viladimir is referring to the idea of regret and salvation. Estragon seems to be questioning the divine justice when he says, *“Repented what?/Our being born?”* ; The mankind did not choose to come to the world itself. He is of the view that they are given the punishment of a sin which they never committed.

The religious concept of fate and destiny is also targeted here. The writer is of the view that human beings are like puppets in the hands of destiny. Our every act, whether good or bad, is already destined. If everything is in the hands of destiny and God, what responsibility do human beings share for their sins? Gloucester in Shakespeare's King Lear also expresses a

similar idea when he says, “*As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods;/They kill us for their sport*”. (King Lear 4.1.41-42)

Chunk II

“ESTRAGON: *Our what?*

VLADIMIR:

Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other . . . (he searches for the contrary of saved) . . . damned.

ESTRAGON:

Saved from what?

VLADIMIR:

Hell.

ESTRAGON:

I'm going.

He does not move.

VLADIMIR:

And yet . . . (pause) . . . how is it –this is not boring you I hope– how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there –or thereabouts– and only one speaks of a thief being saved. (Pause.) Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?

ESTRAGON:

(with exaggerated enthusiasm). I find this really most extraordinarily interesting.

VLADIMIR:

One out of four. Of the other three, two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him.

ESTRAGON:

Who?

VLADIMIR:

What?

ESTRAGON:

What's all this about? Abused who?

VLADIMIR:

The Saviour.

ESTRAGON:

Why?

VLADIMIR:

Because he wouldn't save them.

ESTRAGON:

From hell?

VLADIMIR:

Imbecile! From death.

ESTRAGON:

I thought you said hell.

VLADIMIR:

From death, from death.

ESTRAGON:

Well what of it?

VLADIMIR:

Then the two of them must have been damned.

ESTRAGON:

And why not?

VLADIMIR:

But one of the four says that one of the two was saved.

ESTRAGON:

Well? They don't agree and that's all there is to it.

VLADIMIR:

But all four were there. And only one speaks of a thief being saved. Why believe him rather than the others?

ESTRAGON:

Who believes him?

VLADIMIR:

Everybody. It's the only version they know.

ESTRAGON:

People are bloody ignorant apes."

Interpretation

Viladimir questions a story about two thieves mentioned in the Bible. He argues that four Evangelists were there at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ but only one of them speaks of a thief being saved, two do not even mention anything about them while the fourth one is of the view that both the thieves were damned. Apparently he puts forth a very logical argument that among the four eyewitnesses only one talks of a thief being saved and we believe him. People should rather believe the other three. To this Estragon replies that "People are bloody ignorant apes."

Religious Context

Here the two men are apparently alluding to a Christian parable regarding salvation. In Christian traditions, Fours Evangelists, Luke, Matthew, John and Mark, were present at the site where Jesus Christ was brought for crucifixion, at the time of the happening. According to Luke's account, two thieves were also crucified along with Jesus. One of the thieves mocked Jesus but the other one truly repented for his sins and asked for forgiveness. The one who asked for forgiveness was saved, the other one damned. *"One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!'" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."* (Luke 39-43).

Underlying Ideas

Viladimir points his arrows towards the validity and authenticity of the Christian history. He questions an important story about sin, punishment and salvation from the Bible. He argues that there were four people, who are also called the four Evangelist, present at the time of crucifixion of Jesus Christ; only one of them writes of a thief being saved, two do not even mention any such story, and the fourth one writes that both the thieves were damned. After having established the claim that these accounts are unreliable, the reader's mind is subtly put into an even more astonishing question, that is, "Was Christ really crucified?" or taking it a

step ahead, “Did Christ even exist?” It is suggested, since all the accounts of the Christian history are unreliable, so there cannot be any authentic answer to these questions. Therefore paving the way for the central argument of existentialism that religion is a myth.

CONCLUSIONS

A thread of rebellion against the set Christian principles runs throughout *Waiting for Godot*. The major characters, Viladimir and Estragon, question the position of man in the cosmos; the powerlessness of man and the role of fate in the schemata of the universe. Moreover, they question the authenticity of the Christian religious history. Overall, it propagates the view that religion is a myth which has nothing to do with the actual facts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My profound and unreserved gratitude goes to my able supervisor Dr. Shahid Abbass who put me through this course, motivated me and guided me on every step.

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