



Research Paper

Waiting For Godot: A Solution to Existential Crisis

¹Md. Aminul Haque

²Tasnia Talukder

¹(Asst. Professor, Department of English, Uttara University, Bangladesh)

²(Lecturer, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Bangladesh)

Corresponding Author: Md. Aminul Haque

Department of English, Uttara University, Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* shows existential crisis which raises questions in the individuals' mind regarding the meaning, purpose, and value of their life by creating loneliness, nothingness, meaninglessness, frustration, alienation, and in some cases incurable madness. Thus an individual becomes hopeless about his existence while he seeks for meaning in a world of meaninglessness. His existing, his acting, his brooding, and his feeling – everything carries no meaning except futility. He does so many things but everything signifies nothing. He goes to so many places but moves nowhere. He experiences so many experiences but ultimately undergoes nothing. Therefore, he thinks, he tends, he pretends, he acts, and he accomplishes but on his everything, only nothingness exists. His actions seem sheer madness. But this madness gives him pleasure and helps him to survive. Nothingness gives him everything, and meaninglessness creates meaning for his existence. This study shows some ways to live in this absurd world through the queer activities of the characters of the play. They provide fun as well as a serious message to overcome the troubles and difficulties of this modern life.

KEYWORDS: Existentialism, Absurdism, Skepticism, Nothingness, and Meaninglessness

Received 28 Nov, 2021; Revised 10 Dec, 2021; Accepted 12 Dec, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett is a play of hopelessness, nothingness, and meaninglessness where two tramps namely – Vladimir and Estragon do nothing meaningful. Their dialogues and gestures associate madness and ambiguity. But through this madness and meaninglessness, they show us the meaning of modern life. They pass their time by doing so many things which signify nothing. Their main concern is to pass the time. They wait for Godot who never appears but still they wait. They never give up waiting. They find hopefulness in the middle of hopelessness. They find themselves lost and their memory is very feeble. They commit queer and odd things which appear very shabby and poor. They find repentance and want to change their condition but they feel they are unable to do so. They entertain themselves with dull, blank and boring conversations but they do nothing. Their actions are not followed by their words. They do all these things just to ensure their futile existence. Their behavior shows the eternal human struggling which is a necessary job to get the ultimate salvation. They do nothing which signifies everything. Their shown trivialities give us the meaningful existence of the human being. They show us the general human condition. They portray the helpless, lonely, frustrated, and ambiguous existence of the human being on this earth. Their insanity acts like a panacea to the modern pangs and sufferings. They mean their nothingness is everything, and their incoherent babblings signify the ultimate meaning of the general human condition. In this way, they become every one of us who try to overcome the existential crisis through their meaningless activity.

II. STRUGGLING: A WAY OF SALVATION

We are born to suffer, and for our survival, we must struggle. This struggle is obvious and perennial. But the positive and consoling thing is – through this continuous striving we can get ultimate salvation. As this struggling is a prerequisite to our survival, so we cannot but help to struggle. Moreover, this struggling ensures our existence. If we go through the existentialist philosophy, we see that a person is best when struggling against their individual nature and fighting for life. This struggling emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and choice. Moreover, a human defines his own meaning of life and tries to make rational decisions in an irrational

world. It questions the human existence and gives no purpose or meaning at the core of existence. A human being will go through dread, isolation, boredom, freedom, absurdity, commitment and nothingness because of his existence. In the play we see –

ESTRAGON: (giving up again). Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR: All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (Beckett, 1989, p.01)

Estragon's dialogue suggests that in our entire life we have nothing to be done, though we are preoccupied with so many doings in our whole life. But all our efforts are meaningless. Our achievements, laurels, happiness etc. everything is mere struggling. This assertion of struggle becomes manifested through the following dialogue of Vladimir, where he says that he starts anew everything, and his struggle is also resumed. That turns all of his efforts into sheer meaninglessness in the form of struggle. The general human condition is nothing but struggle. But when struggling becomes a common phenomenon of modern human existence, then we need to take it in a positive way. Moreover, for the salvation of the human soul, struggling is the precondition. Religion also suggests that. We see in the Bible that –

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. **Romans 5:3-5** ESV

Albert Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* also says that “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (Camus, 1942, p.03)

Camus describes Sisyphus as a rebel who defied the gods and put Death in chains so that human being didn't need to die. But when Death was freed eventually and Sisyphus himself was close to Death, then he makes a way to escape from the underworld. When he was recaptured by the gods, then he was given an eternal punishment of pushing a rock up a mountain. Going up to the top, the rock would roll down again, leaving Sisyphus to start anew. Camus sees Sisyphus as an absurd hero who lives life to the fullest, hates death, and is condemned to a meaningless task. But the meaningless struggle of Sisyphus gives him a kind of happiness. His repeated tedious job of pushing the boulder to the zenith of the mountain fills his heart with contentment. He lives his life to the fullest by doing the meaningless task over again and again.

III. CHRIST: THE SAVIOR AND ULTIMATE SUFFERER

Christ suffers; Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, Lucky and we all suffer throughout our whole life. We are born to suffer. Our sufferings know no bounds. We cannot get rid of sufferings though sometimes we see some glimpses of happiness. We long for this happiness as Vladimir and Estragon long for the coming of Godot. But this happiness makes us more unhappy. We see hope at times. But this hip of hope comes to make us more hopeless. Thus nothing and no one (including Christ!) can save us from this eternal suffering.

VLADIMIR:One of the thieves was saved. (Pause.) It's a reasonable percentage. (Pause.) Gogo. (Beckett, 1989, p.41)

Our meaningless life indicates to nothingness and meaninglessness. “Our being born? (p.41)” is also a matter of repentance. We are born on this earth which is a way to our eternal damnation. Our Saviour (Christ) cannot save us. The percentage of our survival is very low. Thus we repent for our birth, we repent for our existence, we repent for our doings, and even we repent for our death. We do not find any meaning of anything in our life. Thus we do nothing by doing so many things.

Jean-Paul Sartre also says in his masterpiece *Being and Nothingness* that “It is certain that we cannot escape anguish, for we are anguish.” (Sartre, 1943, p. 43)

That means anguish is a bread and butter for a modern man who cannot escape from it. The only way to survive is to get used to it. If he starts enjoying suffering, then he will be better fitted with the modern anguish. Moreover, once he will start loving it, he will find loveable anguish in his meaningless life.

In the play, Estragon says “People are bloody ignorant apes.” (Beckett, 1989, p.43) which vindicates to human knowledge and satirizes the human endeavor of looking for meaning in the world of meaninglessness. One day our all learning and our all practice of knowing will go in vain as our existence does not signify any meaning. But still, we will have some meaning if we go through the literal meaning of the line where people are compared with apes. Apes' movement does not carry any meaning but sometimes give us pleasure. And this meaningless pleasure helps us to overcome existential angst.

It also indicates that our actions do not carry any meaning. Our doings and thinking are ignorant, and we are devoid of light and knowledge. Our existence is thus futile. As we look for meaning in a universe of meaninglessness, our knowledge becomes valueless. And thus we become ignorant as well.

Gunther Anders, a German Jewish philosopher, points out the notion that the characters in Beckett's plays represent humanity in general. He says that "the *fabulae personae* whom Beckett selects as representative of today's mankind *can* only be *clochards*, creatures excluded from the scheme of the world who have nothing to do any longer, because they do not have anything to do with it" (142).

Here, this statement also goes with the characters of *Waiting for Godot* too where we find the protagonists Vladimir and Estragon have nothing to do except passing their time doing unnecessary things. As they represent the whole humanity in general, humanity's existence indicates to absolute nothingness. It shows the vagueness, ambiguity, meaninglessness, reluctance, hollowness, and futility of the human being in this earth which create only nothingness.

IV. NOTHING IS EVERYTHING AND VICE VERSA

Vladimir and Estragon say several times "We're waiting for Godot." (Beckett, 1989, p.44) which indicates to their keen escaping tendency from the harsh reality of their life. When they do not find any explanation to their absurd activities then they remind themselves and console to their ambiguous attitudes by saying so. So, this waiting is a perennial waiting which never meets the *finis* and never means anything to anyone. But they cannot leave this absurd waiting that has become their prime concern of survival. If they want to survive, they have to keep waiting. Thus from this waiting, it can be deduced that they are waiting for Godot means they are waiting for nothing, they are waiting for meaninglessness, they are waiting for vagueness, they are waiting for uncertainty, and they are waiting for ambiguity. They are looking for certainty in a world of uncertainty.

Jean-Paul Sartre says about nothingness in his philosophical masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness* that "Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being - like a worm." (Sartre, 1943, p. 21) Which means nothingness is a part and parcel of a human being. It has become our identity nowadays. We are living with nothingness. We cannot separate ourselves from it. Thus nothingness has become a synonym of our 'self'. Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot which means they are waiting for nothingness. But nothingness is their another being. It will not come from anywhere as it lies within them. And consequently, it never springs from anywhere else. They are just unaware of their own self, and consequently, they blindly wait for it. In the text, Vladimir says, "Nothing is certain when you're about." (Beckett, 1989, p.44) which connects with Sartre's view of nothingness and consciousness.

Sartre's view regarding the character of being and existence is explained in his *Being and Nothingness*, where he specifies two kinds of reality that lie beyond our conscious experience. One is the being of the object of consciousness and the other is the consciousness itself. The object of consciousness exists as "in-itself", in an independent and non-rational way. As consciousness is always consciousness of something, so it is seen in relation to something else, and it is not possible to hold within a conscious experience. Thus it exists as "for-itself". A very notable feature of consciousness is its negative power, by which one can experience "nothingness". This power also works within the self, where it creates an intrinsic lack of self-identity.

V. TRIVIALITY: A SOURCE OF MEANINGFUL EXISTENCE

Modern life is full of trivialities which determine the human existence in an irrational world. Sometimes we give more importance to the less significant things in our life, and we are spending our time and money on them. In this way, our days and nights are being passed with their insignificant presence. But through our given effort and importance, we have reckoned them as very significant to our life and living. They have become the way of our survival, and our existence has been insured by the presence of these trivial means. In the play we see –

POZZO:It's the nicotine, one absorbs it in spite of one's precautions. (*Sighs.*) You know how it is. (*Silence.*) But perhaps you don't smoke? Yes? No? It's of no importance. (*Silence.*)... (Beckett, 1989, p.58)

Smoking (like other meaningless jobs) gives us pleasure. It has no importance apparently, but it creates insignificant meaning towards our life. It gives forbidden pleasure to us which helps us to live a better and meaningful life, driving away the anxieties of modern life. It helps us to exist in a world of meaninglessness.

The characters in the play (namely - Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky) also meet some trivialities which energize them to exist. These insignificant things and incidents make them survive in an absurd and meaningless world. The hat, the carrot, the turnip, the boots, the rope, the vaporizer, Lucky's baggage, the bone, the ditch all these trifling objects make meaning to them. These things become their source of joy and survival. And also the incidents like 'hat-swapping scene', 'Lucky's dance', 'singing', 'abusing', and 'blaming each other' also show the triviality of human life. Apparently, they seem very insignificant but we cannot continue our life without these trivialities. So these meaningless things and incidents give us meaning to survive ourselves in a world of meaninglessness.

VI. MADNESS: A PANACEA TO MODERN ANGUISH

Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky – all the characters behave insanely in the play. They speak like mad, they move like mad, and they also gesture like mad. Their behavior lacks rational explanations. Their speeches consider as incoherent babblings. Their memory is defective. This dementia and madness help them to forget their pain and suffering. Their forgetfulness helps them to amuse themselves. So, madness plays a positive role to them as well as to modern life. Modern life is full of suffering where madness supplies a piece of peace to the restless souls.

POZZO:

(*groaning, clutching his head*). I can't bear it . . . any longer . . . the way he goes on . . . you've no idea . . . it's terrible . . . he must go . . . (*he waves his arms*) . . . I'm going mad . . . (*he collapses, his head in his hands*) . . . I can't bear it . . . any longer . . .

Silence. All look at Pozzo.

VLADIMIR:

He can't bear it.

ESTRAGON:

Any longer.

VLADIMIR:

He's going mad.

ESTRAGON:

It's terrible. (Beckett, 1989, p.64)

Life has become unbearable nowadays to us. We cannot bear it anymore. Then we become mad, and only then we can bear it a bit. Madness gives us a slice of solace to bear the unbearable burden of life. Otherwise, it's always awful. Life is sometimes 'The Scapegoat's Agony', 'The Hard Stool' and sometimes 'The Net' where we all are entangled. No escape is there. We want a messiah-like Godot who will come and rescue us. But the harsh reality is he never appears as there is no escape to our agonies. "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" Thus we wait and wait and wait. And this waiting makes us more suffering. So we suffer and suffer and suffer.

Pozzo compares Lucky with Atlas by saying that "Atlas, son of Jupiter!" (Beckett, 1989, p.110). In mythology, Atlas is called Atlas Telamon, "enduring Atlas" who is condemned by Zeus to hold up the sky on his shoulders. Like him, Lucky also carries a burden on his back. Lucky is not lucky enough. Like Lucky, our luck has been captivated. We are entangled. Lucky is entangled by Pozzo, and we are so by God. Lucky is the toy in the hands of Pozzo, and we are just toys in the hands of God. We are burdened by heavy time. We are enduring continuous pain and misery.

Estragon says, "We all are born mad. Some remain so." (Beckett, 1989, p.110)

Michel Foucault in his *Madness and Civilization* compares madness with knowledge which is a positive instrument to be used as a solution to our sufferings. Knowledge is light which drives away all kinds of darkness.

"At the opposite pole to this nature of shadows, madness fascinates because it is knowledge. It is knowledge, first, because all these absurd figures are in reality elements of a difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning." (Foucault, 2003, p.18)

So, madness can be considered as a solution to our pain and suffering. If one meets madness, he can escape his anguish. Moreover, madness is fascinating, and it is synonymous to knowledge.

VII. VLADIMIR AND ESTRAGON: THE SKEPTICS

In Western Philosophy, skepticism is defined as the attitude of doubting knowledge claims set forth in different areas. Skeptics challenge the adequacy or reliability of such claims by questioning about the rules they are based upon or what they really build. They have doubt whether some such claims really exist or not, as alleged, indubitable or necessarily true. Moreover, they have challenged the intended rational grounds of accepted assumptions. In real life, everyone is skeptical about some knowledge claims where the philosophical skeptics have questioned the possibility of any knowledge beyond the practical experience. The original Greek term means someone who is unsatisfied and still looking for truth.

Generally, the people who doubt are considered as skeptics. Their other attributes are questioning and thinking. In this sense, Vladimir and Estragon are two skeptics who doubt almost everything. They question and keep thinking almost all the time. They doubt Pozzo to be Godot. They doubt Pozzo's blindness. We see the reflection of their being skeptic in the following dialogues.

VLADIMIR:

(*violently*). Don't tell me! (*Silence.*) I wonder is he really blind.

ESTRAGON:

Blind? Who?

VLADIMIR:

Pozzo.

ESTRAGON:

Blind?

VLADIMIR:

He told us he was blind.

ESTRAGON:

Well what about it?

VLADIMIR:

It seemed to me he saw us.

ESTRAGON:

You dreamt it. (*Pause.*) Let's go. We can't. Ah! (*Pause.*) Are you sure it wasn't him?

VLADIMIR:

Who?

ESTRAGON:

Godot.

VLADIMIR:

But who?

ESTRAGON:

Pozzo.

VLADIMIR:

Not at all! (*Less sure.*) Not at all! (*Still less sure.*) Not at all! (Beckett, 1989, p.120)

They also doubt their existence and their surroundings i.e. the tree, the leaves, the hat, the boots, the time, the speeches, the relationship, the Boy, the Godot etc. But it can be said that their skeptical attitude helps them to exist in the world of meaninglessness. It helps them to pass their time happily. It helps them to see life in a positive way. It drives away their frustration, loneliness, and hopelessness. For being a skeptic, they can forget their pain and suffering. They can start their life (day) anew.

VIII. PROBABLE SOLUTIONS TO EXISTENTIALIST ANGST

Beckett hints some solutions to the problems of modern life. To the hopelessness of Vladimir and Estragon, he suggests some hopeful events. Being hopeless, while they have been waiting for Godot, they once meet Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo and Lucky help them to pass the time. They hope for something positive to happen to their desolate state. But again they become hopeless after the disappearance of Pozzo and Lucky. Then the Boy comes with some good news. They again become sanguine. They energize themselves with some positive vibes. They wait more and more. But their waiting does not finish rather their frustration continues, and their suffering prolongs. They are destined to wait and they are destined to suffer. To assuage their suffering, they do so many meaningless things. And these things help them to survive. One of the hinted solutions by Beckett may be the following incident where the two tramps see *bleeding* as a good sign.

Vladimir:He's bleeding!

Pozzo: It's a good sign. (Beckett, 1989, p.62)

If someone cramps, but doesn't bleed, then s/he never gets rid of the pain. But if any part of the body bleeds, then the pain comes out. So, bleeding gives a kind of relief in this case. Thus, modern anguish is similar to this cramping. We asphyxiate but cannot cry. We suffer but cannot bleed. Our soars remain fresh, and sufferings continue. If in some cases we can bleed, then we can get the relief. Bleeding is relieving.

If we reckon bleeding as crying, then we can find more hints of it as a solution. Pozzo says that ".....The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops." (Beckett, 1989, p.63)

In Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* we see crying or shedding tears is one of the solutions to the modern pangs. When we find Tommy as someone who lost literally everything in his life, becomes able to sob at a funeral of a stranger, gets relief from his suffering at least for the time being.

Standing a little apart, Wilhelm began to cry. He cried at first softly and from sentiment, but soon from deeper feeling. He sobbed loudly and his face grew distorted and hot, and the tears stung his skin.

.....He could not stop. The source of all tears had suddenly sprung open within him, black, deep, and hot and they were pouring out and convulsed his body, bending his stubborn head, bowing his shoulders, twisting his face, crippling the very hands with which he held the handkerchief. His efforts to collect himself were useless. The great knot of ill and grief in his throat swelled upward and he gave in utterly and held his face and wept. He cried with all his heart. (Bellow, 1956, p.53)

Raining is also analogous to bleeding and crying which we see in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot also hints us a solution to the modern barren life where fertility and regeneration have been stopped.

In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust

Bringing rain

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves

Waited for rain, while the black clouds

Gathered far distant, over Himavant.

The jungle crouched, humped in silence.

Then spoke the thunder

DA (Eliot, 1922, *What the Thunder Said*)

So, it can be said that to the barren landers like Vladimir and Estragon, bleeding is really a good sign. And they are a bit close to the solution of their loneliness and frustration.

Suicide can be considered another solution. Out of frustration, they try to commit suicide.

Estragon says, "Why don't we hang ourselves?" (Beckett, 1989, p.123)

In an absurd condition of life, while an individual is in a dilemma between the search for meaning and the meaninglessness of the universe, he has three ways of resolving this dilemma suggested by Kierkegaard and Camus in their works, *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), respectively. Firstly, they suggested suicide as a solution where an individual ends his own life. The second suggested solution is a belief in religious, spiritual, or an abstract transcendental being or idea. But this religious faith in an absurd reality is considered as 'philosophical suicide' by Camus. The third solution is acceptance of the absurd which suggests one to accept the absurd and to continue to live in spite of it. Camus suggests that through this solution, an individual can achieve his freedom. However, this solution is considered as 'demonic madness' by Kierkegaard.

IX. CONCLUSION

The whole human life is a farce where madness adds essence to the individuals' existence. Our suffering, frustration, the feeling of isolation, meaningless and queer behavior, lonely and helpless attitude, etc. ensure our existence in this world where life carries no meaning and almost everything signifies nothing. We find life as a source of failure and fragile activity which gives us nothing but the ultimate negativism. We struggle in every sphere of our life and our struggling defines us and our existence. So to move on, we must struggle. Otherwise, our existence will be extinct. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett tries to show us the necessity of this perennial struggling through the activities of Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, and Pozzo who have become the prey in hands of their meaningless and unexplainable queer behaviors. Thus their struggling, their negative attitudes, their meaningless behavior, their incoherent babblings, their strange interactions, etc. - all these things help them to exist in this world of meaninglessness. So it can be said that our struggling gives us solace, our madness creates meaning, our failure gives us the freedom to overcome frustration, and our loneliness adorns our life which is full of boredom and bellicosity. We just need a purpose to hold on, a truth to stick to, and an idea to apply in our meaningless life.

What I really need to do is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.

(Kierkegaard 1978, p.34)

REFERENCES

- [1]. Beckett, S. (1989). *Waiting for Godot*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- [2]. Bellow, S. (2003). *Seize the day*. Penguin.
- [3]. Cahoone, L.E. (2003). *From Modernism to Postmodernism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- [4]. Camus, A. (1990). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. London: Penguin.
- [5]. Camus, A. (2013). *The outsider*. Penguin UK.
- [6]. Colgan, M. & Moloney, A. (Producers), & Lindsay-Hogg, M. (Director). (2001). *Waiting for Godot*. Blue Angels Films & Tyrone Productions.
- [7]. Eliot, T.S. (2013). *The Waste Land (Liveright Classics)*. WW Norton & Company.
- [8]. Esslin, Martin. (1966). *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- [9]. Foucault, M. (2003). *Madness and Civilization*. Routledge.
- [10]. Frankl, V.E. (1963). *Man's Search for Meaning: Revised and Updated*. WW Publisher.
- [11]. Graves, R. (1990). *The Greek Myths*. Penguin UK.

- [12]. Hooti, N., & Torkamaneh, P. (2011). Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: A Postmodernist Study. *English Language and Literature Studies*, 1(1). doi: 10.5539/ells.v1n1p.40. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267237846_Samuel_Beckett's_Waiting_for_Godot_A_Postmodernist_Study.
- [13]. Kafka, F. (2013). *The metamorphosis*. Modern Library Classics.
- [14]. Sartre, J. P. (2012). *Being and Nothingness*. Open Road Media.
- [15]. (n.d.). *100 Bible Verses about Struggle*. Retrieved from
- [16]. <https://www.openbible.info/topics/struggle>