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## Strife to Define the Self in an Identical Void: Borchert and Beckett

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### Abstract:

After the Second World War two plays – Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Wolfgang Borchert’s *Draussen Vor Der Tur* (*The Man Outside* in English translation and *Duarer Bahire* in Bengali translation) effectively distilled the nothingness of existence that was characteristic of the Post-War Europe. It is interesting that these two plays represent the two ‘powers’— the Axis power and the Allied power, involved in the just-over war. Despite obvious differences in terms of characters and tempo, both the plays successfully portray the pervasive helplessness of man.

**Keywords:** Second World War; Holocaust; Existentialism; Beckett; Borchert; Nihilistic; Absurd drama.

To those who have had the opportunity to read *Draussen Vor Der Tur* (‘The Man Outside’ in English & ‘Duarer Bahire’ in Bengali ) by Wolfgang Borchert, a soldier during the Second World War, and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, these two books will, probably, seem celebrating painfully the aftermath of the organized decimation of lives, differing in language, in their methods, in the stands of their respective writers and by a span of one year.

In the preface to the Bengali translation of *Draussen Vor Der Tur*, Dr. Hans Ferdinand Linsser, the Consul General, of the Republic of Germany, admits that he has been overwhelmed by the play and very objectively mentions that the play was first published in Germany in 1947 on 21<sup>st</sup> November, the day after Borchert died (3). This is important because *Waiting for Godot* was originally produced in French in 1948.

*Waiting for Godot* has an innate elusive multiplicity that upholds the crisis of alienation which has evidently issued from the War. Javed Malick in his introduction to *Waiting for Godot* observes that “after the war Beckett virtually shut himself up in his apartment and devoted himself entirely to writing. The next four years were his most productive period”(Malick 12). *Waiting for Godot* or ‘En Attendant Godot’ is a product of this phase of Beckett’s alienation. This alienation is visible in the characters of the play.

Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* want something and in an act of desperation they undermine their discomfort, their humiliation, boredom, and allow their miserable ‘waiting’ to perpetuate at a queer rendezvous where Godot is expected to come for

their satisfaction and relief. The waiting does not definitely begin with the commencement of the play — it seems from Vladimir's speech (about Lucky and Pozzo) : “we know them. I tell you. You forget everything. (Pause. To himself). Unless they are not the same...” (Beckett 48). The waiting does not end by the conclusion of the Second Act either. A few subtle, but significant changes in the Second Act differentiate it from the First Act in which waiting was implied in the characters' dialogue. Structurally, this recurrence from the First Act in the Second Act helps the playwright to support, as a visible, skeletal ploy, the soul of a theme of boredom and helpless humiliation which has been presented as universal lot in the Post-War era. This emotional degeneration of humanity is shown through a tacit and adroit representation by few microcosmic individuals of a greater macrocosmic humanity. “Vladimir is the neurotic intellectual type, Estragon the placid intuitive sort; Pozzo is the bullying extrovert, Lucky the timorous introvert. Vladimir instinctively sympathizes with Lucky, and for Pozzo Estragon experiences a degree of fellow feeling...” (Fletcher 77) Vladimir teaches patience and prevents Estragon from committing suicide at the end of both the acts, not by preaching sermons, but, keeping in tone with the prevalent mood of the play, referring to some discomfort or non-availability of equipments, and also by using Estragon's suicide obsession as a bait to roll their 'waiting' on to the next day :

Act -1

Estragon : Remind me to bring a bit of rope tomorrow.

Vladimir : Yes. Come on.

*He draws him after him. As before.* (Beckett 53)

Act -2

Estragon : You haven't got a bit of rope ?

Vladimir : No.

...

Estragon : Wait, there is my belt.

Vladimir : It's too short.

...

Vladimir : We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. ( Pause) Unless Godot comes.

Estragon : And if he comes ?

Vladimir : We'll be saved.” (Beckett 93-4)

Dr. Renu Singh refers to John Fletcher and John Spurling regarding *Waiting for Godot* as a modern morality play in their work on Beckett — *Beckett: A Study of His Plays*.(Singh 2) On his way to his 'Salvation', Estragon, paired with Vladimir, is intellectually complemented as an individual, with himself providing the carnal aspects. He is thwarted, intimidated, humiliated by Pozzo, the demoralizer who has, from time to time, donned the attire of a ruthless defense personnel; an eccentric and oppressive dictator of intelligentsia; an enticer; and a heartless common man — revealing, in himself, a theatrically time-saving and compressed heterogeneity of viciousness. While Estragon, like Everyman in the morality play, has not parted with his good friend, Vladimir for once and has been, at

moments of futility and frustration, aided by the Boy who is functionally an equivalent to Hope of the Morality play (Knowlson 410-11).

The opacity of the theme, inclusive of its characters in *Waiting for Godot* makes it difficult to be certain about what the waiting is for and who the characters are or what they stand for. But there are reasons to assume that Estragon has had some connection with the battlefield. Firstly, his name, phonetically sharing much in common with the word “estranged”, is connotative of alienation from familial bondages. Secondly, he has to try hard to get rid of his boot. This implies that the boot has long been a part of him. However, there cannot be a greater intimacy with a boot than that a soldier has. Thirdly, in Act-1 a certain stage-direction portrays Estragon after the image of a vigilant soldier : “ He rises painfully, goes limping to extreme left, halts, gazes into distances off with his hands screening his eyes, turns, goes to extreme right, gazes into distances.” And after a while he comments: “charming spot” (Beckett 13).

Beckett’s Estragon shows some affinity with Borchert’s Beckmann and the difference between Estragon and Beckmann is difference between the static and the dynamic. Their similarity lies in their apparent dissatisfaction which in Beckmann, at the end of the play, erupts in an apathy for life that he has always longed for, and in Estragon sustains with a bovine submission to the reverberation of monotony. While Beckmann frantically scuttles through a throng of potentially supportive people to discover himself striving for life in an indifferent void, Estragon, avidly expects some vague cooperation , concretized in the name of Godot, that transfixes Estragon ( and Vladimir also) ignominiously at a certain receiving end. The virtual difference between Beckmann and Estragon is analogous to that between a roaming mendicant and a lame one. In the book *A History of German Literature: from the Beginnings to the Present Day* the author alludes to Borchert’s description of the Post-War German generation, designating certain attitudes towards them, which were characteristic of the milieu of which Beckett’s work was a product:

Borchert describes the young generation many times, calling them a ‘generation without valediction’, a ‘generation without an aim’, a ‘generation without commitment’ and a ‘generation without a self.’ Devoid of illusions and full of bitterness though these designations are, they arise from the hope that this generation might be able to bring about some kind of fundamental change (Beutin 474).

On returning from the campaign in Russia, the protagonist, Beckmann finds that his house (especially his wife) is occupied by another. He goes to commit suicide by drowning himself in the water of river Elbe. But he fails to commit suicide. Then begins his journey through the realm of bleakness where sympathy is scarce and a soldier’s sacrifice is hardly remembered, met with kindness, and commiseration. This sinister world is represented by Beckmann’s wife, the Colonel, the Manager of the cabaret, and Mrs. Crammer.

His wife, in Scene I, by taking to another man, makes the emotional void in Beckmann palpable. This suggests a physical deprivation of the protagonist. (Mukhopadhyay 20)

The Colonel is indifferent to the wretched condition of his fellow soldier. He now seems to have resigned with an air of inevitability to an acceptance of his own life as normalcy, as he knows that paying excessive heed to one's conscience often results in discomforts. The Colonel, presents a picture of luxury in the post-war scenario, reveals a nothingness in youth getting inspired by patriotic lectures of political leaders and joining the army to serve a 'glorious national cause'. In the third scene of the play we find that the Colonel and his wife are repelled by Beckmann's gas-mask and his army haircut. They find those things absurd. Beckmann vents his angst and hatred with a sarcastic gentility on a military hierarchy which, as it moves upwards, gradually shakes off accoutrements; makes responsibilities flexible and luxuriates in delicacies and sensual satiation (Mukhopadhyay 36-9).

In the same scene, Beckmann falls into a swoon in which he has the vision of their General, playing xylophone, made of human bones, acquiring allegorical significance in striking paradoxically a harmony of disintegration. (Mukhopadhyay 41) This is the same General who should have shouldered the responsibility for the deaths of Beckmann's comrades. The colonel is at once full of derisive remarks for Beckmann to get rid of him. Beckmann's political and professional disillusionments are now complete (Mukhopadhyay 50-2).

In the fourth scene, Beckmann's desperation to live leaves him groping in the murk and takes him to the cabaret-manager. Beckmann dehumanizes himself in extolling his gas-mask and his awkward look (Mukhopadhyay 56). Though the Manager allows him to sing his song but later, finding that Beckmann sings of a gloomy life, discards him. According to the manager Beckmann's way of singing would not attract the audience, and he would have to add some spices — some sleazy materials to his singing. Besides, the cabaret-manager tells him about the taste of opera-goers to show Beckmann the distance between reality and art (Mukhopadhyay 56-7). Thus 'culture' does not provide Beckmann with either an opportunity to earn his living or a solace through identification in the cabaret-manager, of an avid listener of his song of desolation.

The fifth scene, however, is the most important in decisively pronouncing the annulment of Beckmann's existence by rendering him solitary in an informal and familial sphere through Mrs. Crammer. Mrs. Crammer's heartless narration of how Beckmann's parents ultimately escaped the agonies of life by exposing themselves to cooking gas, shows people becoming agonizingly apathetic towards others in an era of pervasive decadence. To Mrs. Crammer's husband the suicide was waste of cooking gas (Mukhopadhyay 71).

In Borchert's play, Beckmann's interaction with these three characters, along with his quest for an emotional refuge in the apartment of a young girl in Scene-3, can be considered the wakeful part of action in the play, the play being so frequently punctuated with reveries, ravings, and related actions. Together, these characters epitomize disgrace to life and death in a single design. Professionally, the Colonel is a dealer in death; the Cabaret-manager frustrates the strife of a groveling spirit to redeem itself and helms it to the refuge of self-annihilation. Mrs. Crammer, with her apparent anodyne words, relegates a pathetic death to a

trouble, heedless of the pain that death involves. An acquaintance with these three characters in Borchert's play, prior to an explication of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, will surely interest a reader in identifying a conglomeration of all three of them in Pozzo of *Waiting for Godot*. Gradually, as *Waiting for Godot* unravels, reflections of Borchert in the construct of characters through diversification or condensation of abstractions and the pattern of repetition become obvious. Pozzo acquires distinction by introducing into the prevalent monotony of the play, a strain of superlative defiance and also for the heterogeneity of his nature that reveals a colonel, a cabaret manager and a heartless individual abruptly with every mercurial twist of his mood.

On arrival in Act-1, Pozzo's suppressive attitude, his vituperation against Lucky and his monosyllabic commands reveal in Pozzo an ambivalent role of a charioteer and a defense personnel, conducting a parade :

“... Up Pig! (pause)... Up Hog !... Stop ! ( Lucky stops.) Turn !”

...

He drinks from the bottle, puts it down and begins to eat... Pozzo eats his chicken voraciously, throwing away the bones after having sucked them' (Beckett 23-4).

In this same gormandizer mode the Colonel appears in Borchert's play. Again both Pozzo and the Colonel have philosophized to evade their conscientiousness. In Borchert's play the Colonel nullifies Beckmann's antipathy for a hierarchical deprivation and takes pride in them being Germans (Mukhopadhyay 37).

Similarly, Pozzo, alienated emotionally from the spectacle of Estragon acquiring some pain through being hit by Lucky on his leg, almost sermonizes :

He's stopped crying.(to Estragon) You have replaced him as it were.(lyrically) The tears of the world is a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh (Beckett 33).

The arbitrariness of the Cabaret-manager is identical with Pozzo compelling Lucky to dance for his pleasure to produce an overall sense of agony that appeals to individual perceptions through varied sensitivities:

Pozzo : ... Dance, misery!

Lucky puts down basket, advances towards front, turns to Pozzo. Lucky dances...

...

Do you know what he calls it ?

Estragon : The scapegoat's agony.

Vladimir : The Hard Stool.

Pozzo : The Net. He thinks he is entangled in a net. (Beckett 40)

Lucky's turgid speech in Act-1 flouts grammar and punctuation; mocks scholarship with bombasts to convey an ambience of atheistic speculations and an enigmatic discrepancy between advancement of human learning and disintegration of rationality that has worked to the effect of disorientation of civilization and degeneration of humanity. That our scholarly

thinking depends on the willfulness of tyrants has been emblematically delineated through the mechanical promptitude of Lucky's thinking, expressed by wearing or taking off his hat, subject to Pozzo's whims. In Act-1 Lucky's considerably long thinking is suddenly terminated by Pozzo :

Pozzo : His hat !

Vladimir seizes Lucky's hat. Silence of Lucky. He falls. Silence (Beckett 45).

In *Draussen Vor Der Tur* the Cabaret-manager has got a similar attitude to Beckmann's song that emanates a sense of weariness and a comprehensive void of the Post-War existence. The Cabaret-manager discourages Beckmann for his melody that projects shards of reality.

Mrs. Crammer's cruelty rests mainly in her indifference to Beckmann, but primarily in her frivolous mystification of Beckmann's parents' whereabouts and in her denigrating the value of human lives. Instead of simply saying that Beckmann's parents have been buried, she keeps on mystifying it by referring to 'Church No. Five at Wolesdwarf' before revealing to him the horrible way they ended their lives 'wasting cooking gas'(Mukhopadhyay 71).

In Beckett's play Pozzo's words about Lucky emanate a similar cruelty that issues from utilitarian philosophy — "I mean instead of kicking him out on his arse, in the goodness of my heart, I am bringing him to the fair, where I hope to get a good price for him." (Beckett 32) Cruelty and indifference of the Colonel, the Cabaret-manager and Mrs. Crammer are contained in Pozzo's theory of tears that coaxes one into accepting settlement of equivalence of tears and laughs by divine providence: "... 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." (Beckett 33) In *Draussen Vor Der Tur* both the Colonel and the Cabaret-manager advise Beckmann to accept his existence without complaints.

Thus if Pozzo is an amalgam of the Colonel, the Cabaret-manager and Mrs. Crammer, Estragon together with Vladimir, can be identified with Beckmann. Compared to Estragon, Vladimir has a well-developed contemplative faculty. One can remember Estragon, salivating for the bones, degenerating himself to a dog. In Act-1 one particular action brings out an ape in Estragon :

Estragon : People are bloody ignorant apes.

He rises painfully, goes limping to extreme left, halts, gazes into distance off with hands screening his eyes, turns, goes to extreme right, gazes into distance.' (Beckett 13)

Lucky's forced and loud contemplation, full of sound and fury, is as much effective as to make him a pastime for Pozzo, professing no change in his inhuman existence. Vladimir's being sporadically taken by deeper thoughts of prudence or modified instinct is actually of no avail in bringing about normalcy to their life. The Pozzo-Lucky relationship, in a way, is a distorted and preposterous reflection of the indefinite relationship between Vladimir and Estragon on one hand, and Godot, the enticer and the unseen tyrant on the other. Vladimir's role of a good counselor has an obvious, additional dimension that makes the play a twentieth

century version of a medieval morality play, with other characters chipping in as well, upholding its generic features. Apart from dissuading Estragon from committing suicide, Vladimir also adds firmness to the intent of Estragon on his way to ‘Salvation’ (meeting with Godot) :

Estragon : Let’s go.

Vladimir : We can’t.

Estragon : Why not ?

Vladimir : We are waiting for Godot.

These lines occur umpteen times throughout the play like an incantation.

In *Draussen Vor Der Tur* the role equivalent to Vladimir’s is that of Well-Known (“Sabaar Porichito” in Bengali translation), a personified abstraction. Wellknown gives Beckmann a sustained company and instills optimism in Beckmann. Even when Beckmann, irritated, wants to get rid of him, Wellknown does not dissociate himself from Beckmann (Mukhopadhyay 18-9). In Scene IV when Beckmann thinks of taking refuge in drunkenness, Wellknown dissuades him (Mukhopadhyay 63). There is an obvious likeness between Vladimir and Wellknown.

If Godot is a concocted version of God himself, His presence in absence in *Waiting for Godot* has been explicitly contradicted by a dream-realistic presentation of God in *Draussen Vor Der Tur* where God appears as a talking character at the beginning of the play, in the Proposition. There in a conversation with the Grave-digger God admits to have grown old and ineffective (Mukhopadhyay 11-2).

The nature of Godot that emerges not through such an unambiguous confession, but from an ambivalent piece of dialogue between Vladimir and the Boy in Act II, is akin to that of Borchert’s God.

Vladimir : What does he do, Mr. Godot ?

(silence) Do you hear me ?

...

Boy : He does nothing , Sir.

...

Vladimir : Has he a beard, Mr. Godot ?

Boy : Yes, Sir.

Vladimir : Fair or ...( he hesitates) ...or black ?

Boy : I think it’s white, sir (Beckett 91-2).

So Beckett’s Godot , like Borchert’s God is old and does nothing.

Borchert’s Beckmann vehemently vents his acquired agnosticism in SceneV with a bludgeoning decisiveness whereas charges against God of inaction and blind judgment are subtly raised. Beckmann thinks that God reserves his attention for the affluent and greedy but cares not for the poor (Mukhopadhyay 80-1).

The end of Act-1 of *Waiting for Godot* is semantically identical.

Vladimir : You work for Mr. Godot ?



Boy : Yes, sir.  
Vladimir : What do you do ?  
Boy : I mind the goats ,sir.  
Vladimir : Is he good to you ?  
Boy : Yes,sir.  
Vladimir : He doesn't beat you ?  
Boy : No,sir. Not me.  
Vladimir : Whom does he beat ?  
Boy : He beats my brother, sir.  
...  
Vladimir : What does he do ?  
Boy : He minds the sheep, sir. (Beckett 51)

Traditionally, sheep has always been regarded as the animal emblem of innocence, a virtue extolled and practiced by Jesus himself, and goat, of voluptuousness for its identification with mythical satyr. This transmutation of God's choice that violates tradition is catastrophic and seems to have been intrinsically related to the Holocaust, emptiness and things falling apart. Borchert's Beckmann feels it in a concrete way.

Estragon is identical to Beckmann almost in all states of mind— in temporal disorientation of sensibility that takes them near committing suicide; in having fixed their expectations on the seemingly unattainable; in going with the motion of longing; in often being discomfited by caustic reality of demoralization which they have to dissolve in optimism borrowed from their good companions; and also in their respective obsessions of boots( Estragon) and gas-mask( Beckmann) that relate both of them to a derangement of sensibility — an obvious outcome of the War. Borchert's Beckmann , throughout the play, has ever been annexed to his awkward looking gas-mask, implying to have still been in a war — between himself and his surroundings. But Estragon getting rid of his boots denotes a reluctance to take on a challenge, and a submission to the inevitable. It is hard for Estragon as well to wean himself from a habit — in Act One Estragon labors to get rid of his boots. In Act Two we find the boots in an 'attention' position — "Estragon's boots front centre, heels together, toes splayed" (Beckett 57).

River Elbe in Boechert's play shares much in common with the tree in *Waiting for Godot* — in reviving the spirit of their protagonists in diverse ways. Elbe, overtly animated through a dream-realistic delineation, refuses to terminate a life ignobly. In the Dream Scene River Elbe with her long speech motivates Beckmann to long for life (Mukhopadhyay 15-7). The tree in *Waiting for Godot* contributes to the rejuvenation of the characters through incorporating a subtle change in its appearance. In Act One the tree has a desolate look. But in Act II the tree has "four or five leaves." This tree, like river Elbe in *Draussen Vor Der Tur*, initially, has been envisaged by the protagonist as a potential support in terminating his life.

Evidently, synchronous for having appeared almost immediately after the Second World War and within a year from each other, these plays differ from each other in their

presentation of the strife for redemption of an individual. This apparent difference in the strife of Beckmann and Estragon, owes to a difference in their vision of hope — a vision that is ephemerally jolted and clouded with disbelief but never obstructed for Beckmann till we come to the conclusion of the play. But for Estragon the vision means a helpless resignation to an unknown, unseen person, called Godot from the very beginning. Through dialogues; song, sung to the Cabaret-manager; and soliloquies war-memories have been ruminated by Beckmann over and over as undigested remnants of an awesome self-consumption. But in *Waiting for Godot* this consciousness of self seems to have long been petrified and down under Estragon's apparent eccentricity, to be occasionally revived by good counseling. One can perceive that indeed the image of Beckmann, with all his wrath and vivacity having waned and expectations shattered, converges on the image of degeneration that Estragon and Vladimir uphold — marionettes that he himself and Vladimir are in Act -1 : “they remain motionless, arms dangling, heads sunk, sagging at the knees” (Beckett 19).

A repetitive structure has been distinctly followed in *Waiting for Godot* where both acts, apart from their suggestions of being related to events which the audience has not seen, are complete in themselves. Moreover, the Second Act, in respect to its constituent characters, and the order of their appearances, seems a replication of the first act, though the tree does not look exactly the same as the tree in the First Act or the Boys are not the same or even Pozzo shows some changes in his elements. But to suggest these changes was important for Beckett to imply the running of time and to contrast it with stagnancy in Vladimir's and Estragon's life. So, apparently a repetition of the First Act, the Second Act suggests a different time and effectively multiplies the stagnancy of those characters' life. While the First Act, with a vague suggestion of a reunion with Pozzo and also with a similar Boy, stretches their waiting to a remoter beginning, the Second Act hints at an elongation of their ennui. The structure of the play suggests a perpetuation of boredom. Caught in the circularity of time, Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, Lucky, the Boy — all of them appear as factors related to time and express variations in forms and in some cases, attitudes but never ever in their roles. For *Waiting for Godot* there cannot be a mono-circular representation of the action of the play, geometrically. For, taken as a whole, the action is never complete. Rather, the action can better be rendered as a sequence of identical circles of an indefinite number — not necessarily convergent, for, coherence or integrity is the feature which, thematically, the play is alien to. This multi-circular structure, once drawn on paper, will look similar to the sign of continuation, exactly what the play purports.

However, in *Draussen Vor Der Tur* repetition occurs, but not in the shape of a mechanically maneuvered refrain, but in a more realistic form of a dream — as an introspection of experiences and perceptions. The repetitive part in Borchert's play occurs towards the end of the play, in Scene Five as a nihilistic obsession confirming the termination of Beckmann's quest for life. The reappearance of the Colonel, the Cabaret-manager, Mrs. Crammer, the Girl and her husband in Beckmann's dream substantiates that the causticity of life has destroyed an idyllic refuge of imagination for Beckmann. *Draussen Vor Der Tur* successfully and palpably completes the delineation of a comprehensive void — filling both Beckmann's practical world of struggle and his dream-world with emptiness, he wants to

overcome. In *Draussen Vor Der Tur* as in *Waiting for Godot* the replication differs from the original action in depicting significant metamorphoses. In the former, the Grave-digger changes into a scavenger in the Fifth Scene signifying an adverse relationship between growth in the number of deaths and a somber respect which is the due of the deceased. Sublime burial has been substituted by sweeping away of the corpses (Mukhopadhyay 85-6). It is in Beckmann's dream, that his wife, coupled with another man, avers the emotional hollowness in Beckmann. If expressed through a geometrical pattern, Beckmann's experiences and its rumination in his dream do not show two circles. Rather, it is one circle of dream and contemplation merged into another of real-life experiences. Together, they complete the void for an individual. Yet in a fortuitous twist in the tale of Beckmann, the waif, where Beckmann comes for an emotional refuge to the young girl and turns out to be the usurper of her husband, the paradigm of paradox emerges. Beckmann, the usurper, now having been revealed as the usurper in Scene V, qualifies as one of the sort of the lame German soldier who is what exactly Beckmann himself is (Mukhopadhyay 106-7).

Supposition of a convergent circle, narrating quite a similar yarn, is obvious here. What Beckett has sought to achieve by formulating names which signify a wide range of humanity, (Taylor-Batty 25) Borchert does by suggesting that the circle of the lame German soldier that is intertwined at the rims with the one that belongs to Beckmann, may have converged on other circles as well – to transmit to the audience a sense of universal void.

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