



Cover Page



## EXISTENTIAL ORIENTATION IN THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SAMUEL BECKETT’S WAITING FOR GODOT AND ROBERT O’HARA’S BARBECUE

<sup>1</sup>Bushra Miftah and <sup>2</sup>Ruma Ahmed

<sup>1&2</sup>Research Scholar

Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University  
Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

### Abstract

Other than the culmination of the effects of war, the genre of drama since post World War II has witnessed a new dawn of literary canon highlighting the different paradigms of societies all around the world. The advent of ‘avant-garde’ was a direct result of the underlying sufferings of chaos and anarchy prevailing post WWII. In such an incomprehensible world, the two playwrights—Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and Robert O’Hara (b. 1970)—explored the aspect of humanity’s will to survive in the face of despair. They specifically dealt with the emergent problem of the meaning of life and its inevitability, resisting the practices and forms of the bourgeois ‘conventional’ theatre. The paper will be an attempt to discuss and compare these two playwrights who delved deep into the dialogue between the language one uses and the world one seeks to describe with it, showing how this disconnect reflects the absurdity of life; taking in particular focus Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot*) and O’Hara’s *Barbecue*.

**Keywords:** Absurdity, Identity, Existence, Humanity.

### Introduction

Post-World War II, gave rise to a new literary canon called the literature of ‘Avant Garde’ which was a result of the chaos and anarchy caused due to the sufferings of war. Feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, meaninglessness, nothingness and absurdity hovered over the society and playwrights imparted these themes in their works. Literature, therefore, began to create new forms of utterance from which ‘ordinary meaning gains a purchase on the extra-ordinary’. The question of existence gained vital importance, as truth lost its essence. In a world of shattered beliefs and uncertainties, Beckett and O’Hara have broken the traditional boundaries opening the realm to something new and fresh. The term ‘Theatre of The Absurd’ was coined by the dramatist Martin Esslin in his book with the same title. Published in 1961, the book outlines the “... unconventional theatrical style and standards in the plays...” (Sadeghi 87). Martin Esslin had described the works of writers like Samuel Beckett and Arthur Adamov to belong with the ‘Theatre of The Absurd’. The common traits are multiple. Lack of identity crisis has refrained one from the feeling of being an “individual”. The incomprehensible nature of the characters portrays their detesting rationality.

Beckett has surpassed the linguistic, cultural and conventional boundaries to bring the world’s attention to existential crisis. Post World-War, the meaning of life has been lost. Purposelessness has invaded and forced the absurdist writers to produce works of absolute nonsense. These works are absurd in their characteristic and linguistic forms. There is a lack of cohesion in plot, characters, language and time. The characters speak gibberish and are even estranged to their blood relation.

The plays cannot be easily comprehended by the audience as it lacks moral and meaning. Language has played a vital role in every such play. The characters fail to put language to use yet it is language that conveys the meaning of the text. Knowing the possibilities and pitfalls of language, Beckett (1929) writes, about James Joyce’s novel, *Work in Progress*:

Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something, it is that something itself. (*Disjecta* 27)

This study discusses two post-modernist plays written at a gap of six decades discussing the same plight. A comparative study of the plays shows an established relationship between writers belonging to two different eras and describing the plight of a modern man. Language has always played a pivotal role in expressing meaning through the unsaid, the contrary and the violent. In both the works, “*Waiting for Godot* and *Barbecue*”, there is confusion, chaos and irrationality. The waiting for both the protagonists, Godot and Barbara seems irrelevant and the chaos about them is in their absence. Both Vladimir and Estragon get indulged in irrelevant conversations, waiting for Godot, who never actually arrives. On a contrary note, in O’Hara’s *Barbecue*, the entire characters of the play wait for Barbara’s arrival. She, however does arrive but not until the second act and there is juxtaposition of both the Black and White Barbara together on the stage. There is a constant search for meaning and the quest for life in such plays. Lack of effective communication between people in the society after World War 2 has caused disillusionment, alienation and



Cover Page



bewilderment. Human existence in such plays is presented in a distorted manner, and reality is served through the unconventional. This study aims to discuss effective communication as a representative of human existence. Playwrights have used anti- forms to dissolve the conventional boundaries.

The play Barbecue, written by Robert O’Hara, portrays the transracial identity affecting the life of America’s underclass. The juxtaposition of the black and white characters creates a platform of distinguished racial identity. The characters belong to a single family yet there are inconsistencies in characters’ opinions. Social satire is an effective form of art in communication. In order to understand the self-serving non-sense, it is necessary to understand the way one talks and expresses oneself through dialogues in the play. Self-definition in a working African-American culture is based on reality television. The characters are both a family and not a family, they may or may not be white and the gathering in the park may or may not be a barbecue. The whole drug intervention is multi-layered. Everything is doubled, and truth is not more necessary than facts. A play, written in 2015, portrays life of meaninglessness, and even eight decades after World War II, humanity is still suffering. Racial, political, cultural, gender, caste, class etc. differences have been deeply rooted in the society and even decades later the world is still bleak. The purposelessness, confusions, chaos, existential crisis have all arisen out of man’s failure of being understood. The constant questions circling around ‘I’ (individual) has put man into an excruciating pain of existence. This cliché question of existence has been overwhelming, but there is still no answer. It is here that communication breaks down and materialism gains vital importance for an impoverished dreamer. Thus, war, but is a tragic unnecessary. Vladimir and Estragon are victims of this nothingness. They have everything to do in the world, yet both of them, a representation of humanity, depend on Godot’s arrival. Godot, the absent protagonist, represents the “Ideal American Dream” that never arrives.

The question we can put here is, do humans have the potential to overcome this existential frustration? Do the playwrights allow the readers to question, compare and contrast the situation in two different worlds? A further comparative study of the two plays by two writers of two different decades give a deeper insight as to how exactly the two works portray the same plight. In this context the paper tries to discuss and understand the psychological suffering of man, the concept of existential crisis described by writers, and the purposelessness of modern man and how language plays a vital role in this crisis and humans’ ability to overcome this crisis in a war-torn world.

Robert O’ Hara, an African-American, is known for writing plays on sexual and racial identities. Known to have received a number of awards, he has many notable works in his name. Barbecue, a recent work of O’Hara, offers inconsistencies in characters’ opinions. The characters remain the same in costume, mannerism, relationship and language except the fact that they keep shifting races. This constant switch from black to white and vice-versa depicts transracial pathology afflicting the African Americans. It’s a showdown on the entire humanity and their sufferings. Barbecue is a play which is multi-layered drug intervention of the protagonist, Barbara. There is an absurd, half-hearted family indulged in constant quarrel as if their life depended on it. James, one of the main characters of the play, keeps shouting that they are not a normal family. He says,

...I know it. You know it. . We ain’t no normal gatdamn family and we ain’t never been no normal gatdamn family but now all of a sudden ya’ll read a book or see a tv show and ya’ll wanna gather up and act like we a normal gatdamn family... (4)

The entire family is addicted to something or the other but everyone tries finding faults in others, without looking at their own. The family was so indulged in constant quarrels that if they stopped finding complaints, they would barely have anything to discuss. The blabbering, mixed with “slangs” seems like an everyday language. The standard English language fails to take its place. The constant repetition of the same words by the characters are uttered only to satiate their inside. It can also be said that speech has been racialized. O’Hara shows ‘how race is performed and informs its performance’.

White characters are criticized for the language used while the blacks are given a pass considering their speech to be merely said out of oppression. Little Anne forces everybody to participate in the conversation by howling and that is her way to keep her family together. She screams on Adlean, for bringing her “badass grandkids” as she refers to them to the Barbecue.

The absolute lack of coherence in the family and the dialogues state that there is anarchy and chaos, and World War II has demeaned everything. As if to exist itself is a burden. Every character in the play has an addiction to something, like Adlean to cigarettes and Maria to that of Alcohol. But rather than correcting themselves by acknowledging the tangible world around them, they find escape in their own addictions. Rather than correcting oneself, they make Barbara’s addiction as the centre of attention.



Cover Page



The second act opens with less laughter and the characters are in deep work and profound expressions. It is purely a contrary element. Both Black Barbara and White Barbara are present on the stage. The entire conversation between the two suggests that Black Barbara is playing the role of White Barbara in her memoirs. The constant shift of characters from black to white and vice-versa, shows the inconsistencies in characters. There are multiple instances in the play which subtly differentiates the whites with the blacks. The colloquial language suggests the same. The play highlights how language is racialized, ‘crack’ was a common addiction to both, however, it was called ‘meth’ by the white casts.

It is both a racial satire and identity crisis that persists in society. And to understand this self-serving non-sense, that comes out of the mouth, it is necessary to understand the dialogues of incoherence. Our behaviour towards humanity is motivated by the false talks and fake performances on the outer edge of humanity which are taken as models of real behaviour, making the fake more credible even as the actual family or humanity falls apart like the O’Mallery family in the park. The White Barbara constantly addresses the Black Barbara as “black”. It is as if the only way to be considered important one should have a high stature. The common man thus, still suffers. White Barbara confesses that the memoir she wrote was nothing more than a lie. It was written only to catch the audience’s attention. She makes a confession that everything about her, even that about her family was all made up only to become a star, to be recognized.

They had to run away from their identity to be accepted by society. One fakes up everything about herself, the other doesn’t stand the courage to be herself. Both know that to exist they need to give the audience what they want. Humanity searches for entertainment. The lack of actual communication, identity crisis and falsity has broken down the entire system. The irony stands when Little Anne reads a brochure to understand the real condition of Barbara’s addiction. She reads the philosophy of Halcyon Dreams, where it is written that addiction is a result of four causes of dependency, the chemical imbalance, unresolved events from the past, beliefs you hold that are inconsistent with what is true. She however, had to leave the conversation mid-way and the actual reason and solution to the problem couldn’t be reached.

To be understood is what man wants and it can be only achieved through effective communication. This is perhaps the only way to prevent suicide and addictions.

Waiting for Godot (first performed on 5 January, 1953), by Samuel Beckett is one of the most researched works where the “waiting” for the absent protagonist, “Godot”, never ends. The two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait for the arrival of Godot indulge in meaningless conversations to pass their time. Neither of them has ever seen Godot, yet they pass their hours doing absolutely nothing. The waiting for this someone is in vain as he never arrives.

The identity of Godot itself is a rhetorical question. The ‘American dream’ which has yet not been completely assimilated in the American Society becomes this Godot, in whose absence the entire play takes place. The entire play throws light on existential crisis. It seems that both the characters had the choice to leave but they rather choose to stay as long as they could stand. They wait is futile, Estragon says, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Act I, p. 35). The nature around them is however changing with due course of time, the tree has for instance grown three to five leaves.

Both Vladimir and Estragon represent the modern man escaping into a world of nothingness. This modern man suffers from an existential crisis in this world. The two characters, just like Barbara, simply indulge in useless activities to use up their hours of the day. They are representing men in general who constantly are a part of this meaninglessness.

“Waiting” is symbolic of this existential crisis. The play flows in monotony. Acts are meaningless, time does not flow consecutively, memory seems deceptive, existence is an impression or perhaps a dream and affliction is crystal clear through the situation of two tramps (1).

The play establishes a strong relationship of ‘hollow philosophies of existence’ between the characters and the audience where language is both a medium and a barrier. Beckett’s idea is to bring human suffering into one common sphere where the characters and the audience share a common perception.

Beckett calls for his audience to wake up to the meaningless life one is living, and wants people to ponder over this crisis. He says every man is but Vladimir and Estragon, who spend their entire life either waiting for the arrival of someone or vis a vis allowing themselves to be controlled by another as in the case of the highlighted ‘white supremacist ideology’ in O’Hara’s Barbecue, where the



Cover Page



white Barbara constantly reminds the Black Barbara of her identity and White Barbara herself suffered from identity crisis as she lied everything in her biography. O'Hara, a contemporary author, tries to bring this fact to the limelight by gathering the attention of his audience to the fact that we all are running into a gyre of nothingness. We have forgotten our purpose in life. The 'human' inside all of us are dead. Throughout our life, humans only seem to establish their supremacy over the other. The American Society is under the influence of this White Supremacist Ideology and man once again finds no path to lead him out of this situation. A constant denial of truth, of being and of existing is linked to the failure of communication.

In *Waiting for Godot*, both the characters are in this inescapable situation which leads them nowhere and they think that to exist is itself a burden. When humans find no option, he thinks that suicide is the only option to let him out of the situation.

Vladimir: ... (Silence. Estragon looks attentively at the tree.) What do we do now?  
Estragon: Wait.  
Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting?  
Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?  
Vladimir: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.  
Estragon: (highly excited). An erection!  
Estragon: Let's hang ourselves immediately!  
Vladimir: From a bough? I wouldn't trust it.  
Estragon: We can always try... (10)

Suicide has been discussed multiple times in this play. Hanging is considered as an option to get out of the monotony both the characters are suffering. Life doesn't interest either of them. Thus, they think to get out of this purposelessness suicide is the only option. However, they never actually commit it and are overwhelmed only by the idea of it. This shows that neither of them can ever reach any conclusion. The characters in *Barbecue* are indulged in constant quarrels to reassure their existence. On the other hand, Vladimir and Estragon are indulged in useless and futile conversations with each other.

Estragon tries to fill the gap of silence to escape the monotony through words of non-sense.

Vladimir: Say something!  
Estragon: I'm trying. (Long silence.)  
Vladimir: (In anguish.) Say anything at all!  
Estragon: What do we do now?  
Vladimir: Wait for Godot.  
Estragon: Ah! (Silence.)  
Vladimir: This is awful!  
Estragon: Sing something.  
Vladimir: No no! (He reflects.) We could start all over again perhaps. (53-54)

It is as if every human deliberately reminds himself of his existence by indulging in meaninglessness. Both Beckett and O'Hara believe that man himself denies his potential and his responsibility to take care of mankind. The white supremacist ideology or the existential crisis are nothing but man's useless indulgence in the irrelevant. Estragon and Vladimir never suffer real physical harm. However, their minds are the ones that are tormented because nothing is certain and there is nothing for them to do to prevent that.

According to Sartre, consciousness is viewed as not being an entity of its own, rather, an entity "of something" which he classifies as for-itself. He continues by clarifying that the concepts of consciousness (for-itself) are defined by nothingness, hence, for-itself is created from nothingness (Onof 1). Thus, we can say that both the characters are acting according to their conscience because if they do not constantly find ways to entertain themselves, their consciousness would lose meaning. In brief, we can say that every action we involve ourselves in, is merely to masquerade the nothingness and meaninglessness of our lives.

There is no meaningful conversation that is exchanged between the two. The dialogues are said to hide rather than to reveal the truth. The empty conversations that are exchanged between the characters becomes an illusion of reality. Samuel Beckett has written this play where the audience unknowingly becomes a part of this play. Both the characters have the potential to relieve themselves of the prevailing condition and construct their life by choosing to not to wait for Godot, yet neither of them takes this decision. Man, has





Cover Page



the potential to make decision according to the experience in the physical world around him and thus validate his existence, yet he refrains himself from doing so.

The playwrights, O'Hara and Samuel Beckett, have compelled their audience to look in the mirror through their characters. The protagonist in *Barbecue*, Barbara, and the characters of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, all are representative of man in general and their quest for 'human existence'.

## CONCLUSION

The intricate aspects of the plays have opened doors for potential future investigation. By embracing togetherness, we promote Universal Humanism. The illusion that abolishing our identity would help us survive in this world, would only result in falling into the whirlpool of nothingness and meaninglessness. However, to exist, it is necessary that every human embraces this identity. It is necessary for humans to communicate and to understand the plight of others. There is a huge gap between different sections of the society. The cast, colour, creed, gender and the differences between the rich and the poor has caused complete anarchy in the society. Humans can bridge this gap through communication and understanding.

Writers believe that through their works they can create a canon where the voice of these marginalized sections of society can reach the world. Man has since World War II been searching for the unknown, this unknown is Godot whose arrival has been prolonged. It is therefore necessary to embrace and appreciate what is present. It is essential for man to help man out of helplessness. Together we all can work for a better society by understanding the profound condition of human existence. Mankind lurks on the hope of a better society someday.

## References

- Als, Hilton, 'Talking Trash: Robert O'Hara's family satire,' *The New Yorker*, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/26/talking-trash-the-theatre-hilton-als>
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. edited by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, 10th ed., Norton, 2018, pp. 751-807.
- Boyd, Maggie Laurel, 'Ordinary Language for Extraordinary Loss,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Indiana University Press, Vol. 46, No. 1, Fall 2022, pp. 48-65.
- Eng, Albert. *Existentialism in "Waiting for Godot"* from Samuel Beckett, GRIN Verlag. Munich. 2014. <https://www.grin.com/document/416819>.
- Esslin, Martin. "The Theatre of the Absurd." *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1960, pp. 3-15. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1124873](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1124873).
- Jani, Darsha. (2013). Futility, Hopelessness and Meaninglessness: Central Forces Leading towards Absurdity in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* In *Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)*, Vol. 3, No.2, Autumn, pp.96-106.
- Keatinge, Benjamin, 'Beckett and Language Pathology,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Indiana University Press, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Summer, 2008), pp. 86-101.
- O'Hara, Robert, *Barbeque*, 2014,
- <http://stageraw.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/OHara-Robert-BARBECUE-Feb-2014.pdf>
- Onof, Christian. "Jean-Paul Sartre: Existentialism". *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Web. 6 December 2019. URL=<https://www.iep.utm.edu/sartre-ex/#SH2d/>
- Sadeghi, Leila. *Nihilism in Waiting for Godot*. MS thesis. Allameh Tabataba'ee University. 2005. Web. 3 December 2019.