

A STUDY OF EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES AND SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT

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This paper intends to give a comparative study on the themes of nihilism and existentialism as prevalent in the Book of Ecclesiastes and Samuel Becket's Waiting For Godot. Solomon or the author of Ecclesiastes was the first man to comprehend human life on earth as meaningless and futile. Like Estragon's and Vladimir's boring and dull existence with meaningless waiting, the Book of Ecclesiastes records man's life under the Sun as mundane with wealth, wisdom and toils having no worth because they are all chasing after wind. The play, Waiting For Godot, presents a nihilistic philosophy through their futile waiting. And the two tramps consistently indulge in nonsensical chattering that postulates lack of purpose and truth. The, ancient, Book of Ecclesiastes will be brought in to compare the modern and post-modern greatest fear; the fear of 'nothingness.'

Key Words: Existentialism, Ecclesiastes and Nihilism.

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Existential Nihilism refers to a world void of meaning or purpose and advocates human existence on earth, all action, suffering, and feeling, as senseless and empty. It consists of two words Existentialism and Nihilism. The term Existentialism was coined by French Philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, in the mid 1940s but Soren Kierkegaard is generally considered to be the first Existentialist thinker. The existentialists believe that man is thrown in an indifferent world where he is obliged to find meaning of his existence. There is no predefined pattern, of human being, which one must fit in. One has the freedom to act and choose according to his free will. He is solely responsible for his actions and the choice he makes subsequently determines his life. Through the choice and decision, one must create his own values and meaning of life. However in the failure to arrive at a definite meaning of life, one despairs and view the world as void of any meaning, truth and purpose. And human existence itself is reduced to absurdity.

Nihilism is derived from Latin word 'Nihil' meaning nothing. It was popularised by Turgenev in his novel *Father and Sons* (1862). Nihilism is a radical movement that rejects traditional values. The movement vouches to bring reforms by putting an end to the prevailing system. Turgenev coined the term in order to express the Russian intelligentsia of the time who have grown disillusioned by the system of the contemporary society and the lack of reforms. The movement is often associated with radical skeptics who abhor existence. With an indifferent attitude towards life, the nihilists will have no loyalties, purpose; believe in no values but has an extreme desire to destroy.

Waiting For Godot and the *Book of Ecclesiastes* recount the futility and meaninglessness of life. Man on earth has no purpose and truth. His life is dull with nothing remarkable. Beckett captures the pessimistic world of the two tramps through the refrain:

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot

Estragon: (despairingly) Ah! (*Waiting For Godot* 43)

Vladimir and Estragon have nothing significant to do with their lives other than wait for Godot, or any significant place to be other than by the side of a road in the middle of nowhere. The tramps' hopeless anticipation for the unknown man draws an analogy to the plight of mankind in general. Man has been waiting and searching constantly to make a sense out his life. In the process to comprehend the reason of his 'being', he is confronted with emptiness, barrenness and loneliness. This futile search for a meaning of life is succinctly summed up in the Book of Ecclesiastes as: "No-one can comprehend what goes on under the Sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it" (8:17). In the play, Beckett has also successfully evoked the concept of barrenness and emptiness of life through the deserted road where a lone tree stands with only "four or five leaves" and the constant absence of Godot respectively. The exact signification of Godot is unknown and many critics have given varied comments on as to who Godot really is? One of the assumptions, which Beckett denied, is Godot as God. By taking the assumption, it implies that God has forsaken mankind or in other words, in the infamous expression of Nietzsche, 'God is dead'.

The condition of the tramps presents a world where there is no salvation but a world of suffering and anguish doomed in hopeless waiting. Estragon even contemplates to repent for being born. This is, perhaps, because of the fact that life on earth, he knows, will not be smooth sailing and one has to endure hardships. Given a choice, Estragon would perhaps choose not to be born but that is something which he has no control over. This is akin to the concept of 'Thrown into the world' in Hedegerrian thought. Man cannot decide his race, class, gender, region and period but he was hopelessly thrown into the world by the time he realizes he exists. In other words, he has no decision in the making of his being. Similar point of view on life is presented in the Book of Ecclesiastes where the author despises life because of its bitterness:

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the Sun,... So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour under the Sun... What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with

which he labours under the Sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at even at night his mind does not rest (Ecclesiastes 1: 1-24).

Life on earth is cruel some. All the toils and labours are but vanity because man does not get anything worthwhile out of his life. His days are marked with agony and worries. In the second appearance of Lucky and Pozzo, one can notice the deterioration in the physical condition of Lucky; gone blind. The suffering of mankind does not get any better but it gets worse with years. While Lucky goes blind, Vladimir and Estragon getting wearied of their waiting loose out their hope for salvation, plan to commit suicide if Godot does not turn up the next day. The tramps having endured hopelessness and barrenness of life they resolve to nihilism to end their sufferings once and for all:

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

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladimir: we'll be saved (Beckett, *Waiting* 124).

The two tramps have reached at the point where Camus says "one truly serious philosophical problem, (i.e) suicide" (Camus 3). Many nihilists will assert to end their life rather than to continue a life of hopelessness and frustration. Even Solomon had known all along that it is better to die, or better still not to be born than to endure life on earth:

And I declared that the dead,

Who had already died,

Are happier than the living,

Who are still alive.

But better than both

Is he who has not seen the evil

That is done under the Sun (Ecclesiastes 4:2-3) .

Like *Waiting For Godot's* opening; "Nothing to be done", the book of Ecclesiastes also begins by similar expression of despair: "Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (1:2). The word meaningless features thirty eight times in the book and the repetitive use of the word bring out the gravity of man's meaningless search for meaning of life. The author, without exception, discards all things of life as completely futile. In Ecclesiastes, human life is compared to the act of chasing after the wind. Just as one can never

chase and catch the wind, life on earth is futile. Going through the lines of Ecclesiastes, one can undeniably argue that before Sartre, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche and the likes, the existential philosophy was already felt by Solomon who wrote Ecclesiastes around 935 B.C.

Unlike other books in the Bible, Ecclesiastes does not state any dictums of Dos and Don'ts. Like the existentialists, the book gives man the right to determine his own course of life. It does not restrict one from satisfying his eyes and heart's desires by indulging in wine and pleasures of the world. The Book of Ecclesiastes declares, everything under the Sun is permissible but with an add-on condition that everything will be brought to judgment at the end; whether good or bad. At certain point in the book, the author comprehending the common destiny for all- death-and the futility of life decides to make the most of the present moment. This epicurean thought of the book can be compared with the theme of Carpe Diem (seize the day), taken from Horace's odes, in the famous work of Omar Khayam's *Rubaiyat*. Living in a world without ultimate meaning and the constant looming fear of death, the poet decides to spend the given moment in merry making forgetting the anxiety of what is to come.

Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* captures the monotonous existence of a modern man. The structure of the play is cyclical in the sense that it comes back to the point where it began; with no beginning or end. What has been done in the first act will be done again in the second act and the same will follow in the third one if there is any. Nothing is new: the conversation, the waiting and the feeling of despair remains the same. Their existence is reduced to a mechanized routine of waiting. Modern man keeps on repeating the same routine everyday while the reason of his being is shrouded in the mundane activity. For Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, both Nature and human life shows monotonous character:

The sun rises and the sun sets, / And hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south / And turns to the north;

Round and round it goes, / Ever returning to its course.

To the place the streams come from, / There they return again.

What has been will be again, / what has been done will be done again;

There is nothing new under the sun. / Is there anything of which one can say,

“Look! This is something new”? / It was here already, long ago;

It was here before our time (Ecclesiastes 1: 5-11).

Though the tramps talk about God and salvation, they completely negate the existence of divine being who cares about their welfare. In fact they even ridicule God for his inaction to improve their life. In their doubt on the existence of divine being, there is no more hope but to end their life in dejection. What differs Ecclesiastes from *Waiting For Godot* is the conclusion Solomon gives at the end of the book. Solomon, the king, after experiencing everything in search of happiness and peace realizes that nothing that is done under the Sun makes sense or gives happiness. The only solution for man to understand and enjoy life is to revere the Almighty.

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