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# "TOO LONG HAD BEEN WAITED IN VAIN": A SARTREAN READING OF BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT* AND BUZZATI'S *THE TARTAR STEPPE*

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**Abstract**

Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism and Humanism" is one of the most accessible introductions to the theory of existentialism, which expresses the basic terms and assumptions of existentialism in a simple, understandable language. Three basic terms in Sartre's existentialism are anguish, abandonment and despair, which are derivatives of man's freedom of choice and his responsibility to choose what he is in the absence of any deity. Sartre's famous doctrine that "existence precedes essence" and that we are "condemned to be free" has attracted the attention of many writers. This essay will review and examine the Italian writer Dino Buzzati's novel *Il Deserto de Tartari*, translated into English as *The Tartar Steppe*, together with Samuel Beckett's masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*. Both works reflect Sartre's existentialist view of human existence in their unique way, but regardless of different authorial choices, there is a quite consistent parallelism in these works. One obvious similarity is the prevailing themes of waiting and agonizing passage of time, with deteriorated characters who passively keep waiting for someone to come and give meaning for their existence. Their life journey is shown to be painful but they are entrapped in the absurd world that nothing really happens. To make the unbearable pain less agonizing, they resort to self-deception to justify their futile waiting. By placing the characters in a bare setting, perplexed, anxious and uncertain about the validity of their actions, Beckett and Buzzati show the inner conflicts of the existentialist figures who, alone and isolated, have to find a justifiable rationale for their existence.

Keywords: existentialism, anguish, abandonment, despair, Godot, Tartars

When Dino Buzzati wrote *The Tartar Steppe* in 1940, Jean-Paul Sartre hadn't presented his acclaimed lecture "Existentialism and Humanism" yet. Seven years after this lecture and in 1953 Beckett's play went on stage. The salient point in comparing these works is that firstly there is a quite consistent parallelism in the works of Buzzati and Beckett, two prominent authors with such diverse backgrounds, and secondly, both works echo Sartre's aforementioned lecture in the best way possible.

Sartre's most distinguished existentialist quote "Existence precedes essence" is associated with human being's freedom to choose, "human subjectivity", and his entire "responsibility" for his own existence (Law, 26). According to Sartre, it is the man's own responsibility to choose what he is, and in choosing so, he defines not only himself but the whole humanity. The burden of this responsibility is more than what a mankind can endure, which leads him to anxiety and "anguish". Together with anguish, there are two more expressions defined by Sartre as being ramifications of man's responsibility and freedom: "abandonment" and "despair" (Law, 32-39). Abandonment, as he explains, means that man is alone in making decisions, that he is left forlorn with his insufferable responsibility to choose his own being. There is no one else to help, no deity, no predetermined ethical rules, and no consultant to help him with his choice, as choosing the type of advisor is the proof that he has already made his choice. The last expression, despair, is clarified by considering the world as a cluster of possibilities with man relying on those which legitimize his actions. This means that human beings generally ignore those probabilities that effect their action because man's identity is shaped by his actions. Sartre's assertion that "man is nothing but the sum of his actions" (41) emphasizes on the significance of man's action in sculpturing his identity, so to validate his actions, he simply has to ignore those probabilities that do not justify his choice and action. All these are reflected brilliantly in the works of the two authors.

The similarity between Beckett's Characters who keep waiting for Godot and Buzzati's Drogo and all other soldiers who freely decide to stay at fort Bastiani waiting for Tartars is highly noticeable. Clearly, the central theme in both works is 'waiting'. While these characters could have lived freely and happily by choosing a better life than merely waiting for someone to come and give meaning to their lives, they restricted themselves by their erroneous beliefs. They freely chose to stay stagnant and wait.

The main character of *The Tartar Steppe*, Giovani Drogo's desired identity as a hero is believed by him to be dependent on the unfeasible attack of the Tartars. Since the first days of his being at the fort, different characters, especially those who had spent more than ten years there, have warned Drogo against wasting his life in the fort, as there will be no Tartars. These frequent warnings are underpinned by direct warnings of the novel's third person narrator who talks to Drogo with a rather scolding tone of voice: "… never again will the enemy come, never again will anyone come to assault your contemptible walls" (67). Yet, Drogo is "always full of hope", especially when he reviews his "heroic fantasies" in his mind from time to time: "one battle and perhaps he would be happy for the rest of his life" (40-41). Therefore, ignoring the recurrent and explicit warnings, he freely chooses to stay at fort Bastiani, hoping to shape his identity and thus the reason for his existence.

The futile action of waiting for a war for the sake of being a hero makes an anti-hero out of Drogo who fails to make a correct decision about whether to stay at the fort or leave for a glorious city life. He also fails to comprehend the hasty passage of time and the way he sacrifices his precious youth of which there is no return. But Buzzati's narrator plays the role of a great advisor, warning Drogo and teaching a life lesson for the readers: "there is no time to halt even for a second, not even for a glance behind" (88). The passage of time and its acceleration is tormenting for the narrator and the reader, but sadly Drogo doesn't grasp the seriousness of it until it is too late. Drogo as an anti-hero is defeated by his free choice and the responsibility of choosing a reasonable purpose for his existence and eventually accepts this failure right before his dejected demise.

Likewise, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon's identity is a riddle for them and they strongly believe it is in Godot's hands:

VLADIMIR: Let's wait and see what he says.

ESTRAGON: Who?

VLADIMIR: Godot.

ESTRAGON: Good idea.

VLADIMIR: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

Vladimir's emphasis on Godot as a necessary prerequisite on their existence is noticeable here. As the play progresses, we see their anxiety and stress intensifies while waiting in vain for Godot. Their life resembles blank sheets of paper waiting for their identity and purpose to be inscribed by Godot. While they struggle to fill the pages by futile actions, their laughter fades away slowly, becomes a superficial smile and then totally forbidden, as Vladimir states: "You'd make me laugh if it wasn't prohibited" (11). The life-long waiting and uncertainty is so tormenting for the characters that the repetitive, dull days and nights cause forgetfulness.

Similarly, dealing with anxiety and anguish due to the burden of this responsibility is not easy for Drogo. His journey starts with a "forced smile" (1) reflected on the mirror which questions his ambiguous identity. The mysterious sense of apprehension fills him, making him roam about his room "nervously" right before he leaves. He is even unable to say goodbye to his mother in a proper way (1). His conversation with people he meets on the way to the fort and within the fort is full of distressed silences. During the first days of his being at the fort, he is curious to see what the future has held for him. This is symbolically shown by the way Drogo insists on discovering what is beyond the wall, and on hearing there is "all stones- and nothing else" (13), he is filled with a sense of distress and dread, still not willing to believe the vastness of nothingness beyond the fort walls. "Mists", he says, there must be something behind the mists, definitely visible after it fades away (13). Soon he becomes aware of his absurd existence in the middle of nothingness, with his desired goals that become far-fetched and inconspicuous. Filled with disappointment, drowned in his isolation, he finds refuge in his room in the fort, "all panelled with wood", with a "wooden crucifix" (15) above the bed, symbolically resembling a wooden coffin for the reader and foreshadowing his doomed destiny. Drogo's hope for a glorious existence is blurred by uncertainty, his freedom of choice culminated in indecision, which results in escalated anxiety and anguish.

One distinguished factor efficient in amplifying Sartrean anguish is the speedy passage of time which is tormenting for existential characters. They know their time is limited, and wasting it by waiting their whole life would be an unforgivable and irreparable mistake. Yet, they have freely chosen to wait, and therefore have to get convinced by availing themselves of self-deception that "they were young… they would still have time" (Buzzati 55). Buzzati's artistic use of third person narrator who speaks ironically, directly and indirectly, to emphasize the quick passage of time is noticeable in the novel. Referring to the abrupt change in the seasons, which is always "unexpected" for Drogo (64), and the rushing clouds that have "no time to stop, so urgent…their errand" (47), the narrator reproaches Drogo and warns him repetitively, but for Drogo, time seems to have come to a halt. Hence, the narrator makes it clear for the reader how Drogo deludes himself: "He believes that he still has an immensity of time at his disposal" (p.76). As we get closer to the denouement, the passage of time speeds up, inevitably enhancing anxiety and anguish: "… time was slipping past, beating life out silently and with ever increasing speed; there is no time to halt even for a second, not even for a glance behind. 'Stop, stop,' one feels like crying, but then one sees it is useless" (88). Finally, the haste of time becomes excruciating for Drogo who sees himself at the end of his life journey, yet with no grasp of the purpose for his existence: "Hope began to wane and impatience grew in Drogo as he heard the strokes of the clock crowd upon each other" (p. 88). Only at the end of his life does he realize his mistake, that the wrong path he chose willingly and freely could be retracted, that his identity and the purpose of life which remains unbeknownst for Drogo could have been defined by himself and himself alone in a better way.

In parallel, Beckett's play demonstrates the passage of time while for the existentialist characters it seems to have stopped. The tramps' frequent statements like "time has stopped" (29), and "will night never come" (28) reflect their extreme sense of weariness and malaise so much so that they even become uncertain whether it is morning or evening. For example, when the blind Pozzo asks about the time, they don't know if the sun is rising or setting (79). Since time has come to

a halt for these tramps, the playwright illustrates the passage of time by resorting to the only fixed prop on stage. That is the tree which is shown to have a few leaves at the beginning of the second act. To rid themselves from the pains of futile waiting, they have to keep themselves busy and entertained to pass the time. So they keep talking and talking about Godot (whom they really have no idea of who he is) and often some meaningless discourse to pass the time, which is now their mutual occupation. Since the play is an example of how the passage of time represents hopelessness, Beckett's insightful depiction of the tree with only a few leaves accomplishes the mission.

In fact, the entire journey of life is painful for these characters. This is symbolically shown by inordinate amount of affliction caused by boots in both works. Lieutenant Angustina, Drogo's persona and his role model, joins the futile expedition to explore the remote, mysterious stretch of frontier, passing the harsh, hostile path, accepting and embracing the pain caused by his boots and the evil setting of stony mountains. The narrator explains vividly how "his boots did begin to hurt damnably; the leather bit into his ankle, and to judge by the pain the skin must be already broken" (57). Angustina, who wastes his life at fort Bastiani just like Drogo, hoping to be a war hero dies at the top of the mountain after having had a painful journey, deluding himself and assuming that he in fact is a hero: "He …was beginning to look like prince Sebastian lying wounded in the heart of the forest" (62). This is while the others envy Angustia and the way he died. The dialogue between Major Ortiz and Drogo after Angustina's funeral reveals how the passage of hollow, repetitive and aimless days is tormenting for those within the fort that they wish they had Angustina's fate (62). Angustina's journey to the top of mountain is metaphorically human beings' life journey with its inevitable anxiety and anguish from which only death can liberate. The painful climb he endures, even climbing ranks from soldier to lieutenant, has no significance in the meaningless world where he dies, gets buried and forgotten easily. Thus, the burdensome passage chosen deliberately, and the refuse to change the painful shoes is metaphorically Humanity's freedom of choice accompanied by great anxiety and distress. Buzzati's climb scene is also an excellent conceit of time in an absurd world, emphasized by Angustina's last unfinished sentence: "Tomorrow we should…" (63), which is another "absurd hope" in the purposeless world of existentialism entailing anguish. Maybe it is for this very reason that Buzzati chose the name 'Angustina' for the character to symbolize 'Anguish' of a person who – like Sisyphus—accepts his choice and responsibilities in a world that has no inherent meaning.

Surprisingly, in *Waiting for Godot* Estragon's suffering and anguish is represented with similar boots discussed above. Trying to take the boots off while saying "it hurts" repetitively throughout the play, Estragon and in extend mankind's life journey is symbolically depicted as overwhelmingly exhausting. Estragon's boots are the emblem of man's agonizing free choice, and Vladimir reflects on that: "There's man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet" (4). The wrong size of Estragon's shoes which are painful and at the same time keep him busy all the time is a metaphor for man's freedom of choice which brings misery and frustration.

The bare setting of the works is also comparable in a parallel sense. The empty desert in *The Tartar Steppe* and a barren country road near a leafless tree in *Waiting for Godot* both show the desolate landscape of existentialism. The deserted wasteland which is described as a "monotonous", "worthless" (Buzzati, 12) landscape with no beauty in it, and the harsh, rocky environment of the fortress suggests the brutality of the universe towards human destiny and existence. When Buzzati's narrator announces the arrival of spring and discourses about the beauty of nature, he does it so desperately, emphasizing on the fleeting revival of faint hope in the human heart due to the coming of spring by metaphorically comparing it to the creaking sounds made by the change in temperature. This kind of hope lacks the motivating power and is plainly superficial, "enough to make a cracking noise and then it is over until the next year" (66). Becketts, too, illustrates the hopeless hope of existentialism in the beginning of Act 2, where everything is the same as Act 1 except for the tree

that has now "four or five leaves" (47). The growth of these few leaves, although attracted Vladimir's attention, didn't have the slightest effect on the mood of the characters. As in *The Tartar Steppe* in which the landscape is depicted as being worthless, this single tree by which they are waiting for Godot, is shown to be useless for the two tramps. This is evident when they give up the idea of hanging themselves, considering the weakness of its branches, as well as when they try to hide behind the tree and find out they are not hidden. Finally, it is Vladimir who admits the worthlessness of the tree: "Decidedly this tree will not have been the slightest use to us" (65). The useless, bare and at times harsh setting reinforces the loneliness and abandonment of human beings in the existentialist world, being left on their own, helpless and nervous, struggling to give meaning for their own existence.

Sartre's concept of abandonment is manifested in these works by the repetitive emphasis on the characters' isolation and loneliness. Drogo's prevailing sense of loneliness throughout the novel gets intensified once he returns home for a temporary visit, filled with hesitation of whether or not he should leave the fort and define a different meaning for his existence. Suddenly, he sees himself drowned in the tidal wave of agony as he finds the home empty. Sitting alone in his room, Drogo finds himself a worthless being: "So all the world went on living without need of Giovanni Drogo" (68). Everyone had freely chosen their life's pathway; his friends, his old mother and brothers, and even his girlfriend Maria who, on seeing Drogo's "feeling of indifference", decides to move to Holland and start a new life. (71). Unlike Drogo, Maria uses the free choice for her own advantage, she doesn't wait passively and helplessly for another entity and nonentity to determine a purpose for her being. But Drogo's chance of free choice leads him back to the fort, where he believes his identity gets shaped by promotional ranks of the commissioned officer, which is what Buzzati's narrator sarcastically states their uselessness. Drogo is undoubtedly institutionalized; he believes he is nothing outside the fort and thus he remains there vainly to mould his identity. He strongly senses his isolation at the end of his life, when "sick and alone in the world" he fights his last enemy--death (103). Buzzati's novel ends with peculiar emphasis on Drogo's loneliness so much so that the reader is left with a strong sense of pity and sympathy for the character: "Then in the dark he smiles, although there is no one to see him" (104). And so, his life comes to an end in a setting which is covered by darkness and loneliness, epitomizing loss of hope and the ultimate failure in shaping a proper meaning for his existence. Very late he realizes he has lost all the opportunities he had on his way, or better to say, he has lived in what Sartre calls as "bad faith" (93). Self-deception eluded him, he evaded from his freedom and responsibility to choose what he is, and so, guilty of bad faith, he dies in complete abandonment.

The feeling of isolation and abandonment is present in Beckett's play as well. Estragon's famous statement that "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (33) reinforces their increasing sense of boredom and isolation in this never-ending quest for meaning. The two tramps of *Waiting for Godot* try to flee from the anxiety of abandonment by clinging to each other. They are strongly bound to one another and even though they don't enjoy each other's company, yet the fear of isolation prevents them from departing:

> ESTRAGON: Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!
>
> VLADIMIR: Did I ever leave you?
>
> ESTRAGON: You let me go. (Act 2, 48)

Beckett's artistic depiction of Estragon's suffering when he and Vladimir get separated at the end of the day is noticeable, as the audience can see that these characters live a painful life even when together. The characters' ironical acknowledgement of merriment and happiness when they are together is juxtaposed with their constant sense of anguish and distress as a result of waiting:

> ESTRAGON: We are happy. (Silence.) What do we do now, now that we are happy?
>
> VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot. (Estragon groans. Silence.) (Act 2, 50)

What is it that keeps the characters together? When Estragon suggests getting parted, Vladimir

emphasizes on their inability to do so, saying he always comes "crawling back", and so the only way to get separated is death, as Estragon reinforces. Man struggles to find meaning for his existence "till he dies and is forgotten" (Act 2, 52). Beckett's tragicomedy goes to the heart of Sartre's existentialism, with its transparent message that life is fundamentally meaningless, and thus it is man's responsibility to define himself. The story of trying to find a purpose for one's life is so miserable for Beckett's audience, seeing that Estragon and Vladimir are thrown in the middle of nowhere, not even certain of their existence. One reason that keeps these characters together is that they remind each other that they exist: "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (Act 2, 60). The obvious effect of uncertainty is forgetfulness that both characters experience from time to time, and so they need each other to help remember the past events and thus, a confirmation for their existence. Vladimir is shown to be less forgetful compared to Estragon, but when he also cannot remember the past experiences, the sense of despair and disappointment surrounds them at the climax of uncertainty:

> VLADIMIR: But we were there together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called . . . (he snaps his fingers) . . . can't think of the name of the man, at a place called . . . (snaps his fingers) . . . can't think of the name of the place, do you not remember? (52)

That Beckett's characters are "tied" to each other is not limited to Vladimir and Estragon, but Pozzo who is shown to be a well-off capitalist with a servant tries to flee from the dread of isolation as well. Getting tied to his servant by means of a rope, yet fearfully screaming "Don't let him go…hold him tight" (35) and not being able to depart from the two tramps (38) are some confirmations of the above point. Beckett's aim is to show how human suffering is not limited to only a small group of people and therefore all humanity suffers while questing for meaning and purpose. Pozzo's ironical question when he asks the tramps whether he "look[s] like a man that can be made to suffer" (27) is contrasted with the scene in which Estragon calls himself "Adam" (29), meaning his destiny doesn't belong to him alone, but to "all humanity" (77). Not even they all suffer and are uncertain about their existence, but also the existence of Godot whom they are waiting for and the actuality of God gets blurred in their mind:

> ESTRAGON: Do you think God sees me?
>
> VLADIMIR: You must close your eyes.
>
> (Estragon closes his eyes, staggers worse.)
>
> ESTRAGON: (stopping, brandishing his fists, at the top of his voice.) God have pity on me!
> VLADIMIR: (vexed). And me?
>
> ESTRAGON: On me! On me! Pity! On me! (69)

In the absence of God, they desperately keep waiting for Godot to come and tell them who they are. Just like Drogo of *The Tartar Stepp* who could choose not to wait for the Tartar's attack, Vladimir and Estragon freely chose to wait for Godot, finding the burden of choosing a purpose for their being too much for them. While Drogo's story ends with his sorrowful death, Estragon and Vladimir's story is tragically suspended to resonate the characters' bewilderment and existentialist dilemma.

The last Sartrean concept which is clearly reflected in the works is "despair", which is defined as man's "acknowledgement and acceptance of [his] limitations" (Law, 9), and thus living and acting based on the possibilities he has on his way. According to Sartre, "we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills, or within the sum of the probabilities which render our action feasible" (32). Buzzati and Beckett's protagonists ignore the possibilities that do not justify their waiting and in return, find reasons to proof their waiting is at no time futile. Giovani Drogo and the other soldiers at fort Bastiani often hear that the Tartar's attack is a distant dream and an unattainable legend, but they keep looking for any opportunity to proclaim the war is possible and near, and so they find a justification for their pointless waiting: "a state of extreme suspense in everyone's mind, as if the great hour had come and nothing could now hold it back" (51). The mere belief in the approaching of the Tartars gives them the feeling of "youth and life" even if most of them had "spent [their] whole life waiting

for this event" (51). Looking at the far distance day and night for any sign of movement, like flickering lights in the darkness or little black dots moving in the middle of the desert give them an extreme sense of hope. Thus, from time to time there is a sense of misconception fused by self-deception which suggests that what they had long been waiting for is finally approaching. This is in the form of black spots in *The Tartar Steppe* and Pozzo and a boy being mistaken for Godot in Beckett's play. These occasions give the waiters the impression that "they hadn't waited in vain; the years had not been wasted" (Buzzati, 51), the old fort in which everything is "completely out of date except the hearts of the soldiers" (52) who will continue to believe in the splendid day they have been waiting for until the end of their life. "Too long had been waited in vain" (52) but the temporary "enchantments" of believing in the approach of glory gets "shattered" very soon (54). A man's identity is formulated by his actions and all the vindications are necessary to assure him of the credibility of his free choice and actions.

Similarly, the main characters of *Waiting for Godot* keep looking at the far distance of the barren desert to look for any sign of approaching Godot. On seeing Pozzo and later the messenger boy, they assume they are whom they are waiting for:

> ESTRAGON: (*undertone*). Is that him?
>
> VLADIMIR: Who?
>
> ESTRAGON: (*trying to remember the name*). Er . . .
>
> VLADIMIR: Godot?
>
> ESTRAGON: Yes.
>
> POZZO: I present myself: Pozzo.
>
> VLADIMIR: (*to Estragon*). Not at all!
>
> ESTRAGON: He said Godot.
>
> VLADIMIR: Not at all!
>
> ESTRAGON: (*timidly, to Pozzo*). You're not Mr. Godot, Sir?
>
> POZZO: (*terrifying voice*). I am Pozzo! (Act 1, 16-17)

Later, Estragon's uncertainty about the arrival of Godot become even more agonizing for him: "Are you sure it wasn't him?" he asks. "No" Vladimir insists (84). To justify their current situation, they are forced to a posture of self-deception. In response to the irritating confusion and doubt about whether they should continue what they are currently doing- waiting for Godot- or not, Vladimir's quote is noteworthy: "What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come" (72). And so he justifies his and Estragon's endless waiting for Godot by reminding his friend the only thing in their lives that they are certain about—waiting. Not only the tramps are self-deceived, but they also manipulate each other into self-deception. They constantly remind each other they are waiting for Godot and approve each other's actions to escape from the burden of meaninglessness of life. John Shotter has a very insightful statement for the characters' self-deception and despair. He says, "it is a certain form of talked-about-activity, activity talked about as waiting, which necessitates their reference to a Godot, not the existence of a Godot which necessitates their waiting" (82). This clearly shows that the mere idea of Godot, even if it only exists in their imagination, can justify their action of waiting. Similar to Drogo who was a clear embodiment of Sartre's "bad faith", Vladimir and Estragon, too, epitomize bad faith by ignoring the better possibilities in their lives and clinging only on the tedious and monotonous act of waiting.

In conclusion, Sartre's three existentialist concepts of anguish, abandonment and despair are clearly exhibited in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Tartar Steppe* to demonstrate existentialist man's vexatious existence, his dilemmas and isolation within the boundary of freedom of choice. Both writers attempt to show how the characters struggle to find a proper purpose for their existence, and give a notable message that man is what he makes of himself, he is the sum of his actions and totally free to decide what he is. By placing the characters in a

bare setting, perplexed, anxious and uncertain about the validity of their actions, Beckett and Buzzati show the inner conflict of the existentialist figures who, alone and isolated, have to find a justifiable rationale for their existence. Both writers illustrate brilliantly the extreme sense of anguish in the characters that the readers and the audience cannot help but sympathise with them. They reflect, in different ways, the malaise of those who are unable to produce any meaningful purpose and therefore wait for a change that comes from the outside. If only they knew their waiting in vain for Godot and for Tartars is ineffectual in forming their identity, wouldn't they try other possibilities and live a better life?

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