

## Existentialism Staged: A Comparative Study between Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and Kanafani's "The Hat and the Prophet"

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### Abstract

In a general sense, existentialism had left its mark on Arabic and Western literature. The different conceptions and applications of the philosophy on literature, particularly in the art of drama, remain luring for more investigation. This paper aims to explore the development of Arabic and Irish literature under the particular influence of existentialism, with a reference to two distinct plays: "Waiting for Godot" (1955) by Samuel Beckett, and "The Hat and the Prophet" (1967) by Ghassan Kanafani

**Keywords:** Beckett, Existentialism, Godot, Kanafani, Literature, Theatre

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## Introduction

Poetry is unarguably known as the Arabs' more dominating form of art. Comparatively, fiction in old times was limited to proverbs and orations. Drama, however, did not become part of the artistic forms of Arabic literature before the 1900s, as an export from France, hence its indebtedness to the European model. In his book, *Arabic Literature: An Overview*, Pierre Cachia studied the development of Arabic Drama and reported its early beginnings in Egypt and Lebanon during the years of French colonization to Egypt and the Levant, where the occupiers needed to bring in some form of entertainment from home. Egyptians witnessed this alien form of expression with awe and decided to come up with performances of their own. A Lebanese merchant called Mārūn an-Naqqāš (1817-55), was among those who were determined to "pour European gold into Arab molds". (Cachia, 2002, p. 144). Different Arab troupes started performing masterpieces of Corneille, Racine, and Shakespeare. However, these performances were mainly musical entertainments with dramatic plots. The first serious attempt to create classical theater was by another Lebanese who lived in Egypt, George Abyadh (1880-1959), who after studying acting in France for six years and gaining practical theatrical experience with French troupes, returned to Egypt and started his own theatre company. The company presented the Arab audience with *Oedipus Rex* and *Othello*, among others. Najīb ar-Rīhānī (1891-1949), in his own right was the first Arab dramatist to introduce comedy and humor to the Arab theatre. (Cachia, 2002). In the later years Tawfiq al-Hakīm (1898-1987) is considered by many as the founding father of Arab drama. His life in France and his exposure to French modernist culture, philosophy, intelligentsia, and avant-garde, transcended to the forming of the conscience of many Egyptian and Arab authors. His philosophical plays remain Arabic classics (Starkey, 2006) Arabic drama is an outcome of the strong resilience of its practitioners of the theatre in the face of considerable difficulties. Parallel to the continuous process of adaption and development are many political, social, and cultural obstacles. Freedom of expression and appreciation of the aesthetic are not common places in the Middle East, something which does not make it an easy mission to achieve a theatrical paradigm that matches its counterparts in the world. However, within that broad and variegated space, the struggle for a change continues. (Allen, 2000).

On the Irish front, literature had major setbacks. Under the British colonization, Irish writers before 1900 were highly co-opted with the English tradition. However, writers who wrote about the Irish tradition and question were overlooked and discouraged by the hegemony of the English literary heritage. Some Irish writers stayed in Ireland and took it upon themselves to defend their nations 'Irishness' against the English hegemony, shaping in this struggle a distinctive Irish literary tradition. Other writers, such as Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) and George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), chose to abandon this national cause, and apt for a wider Anglophone audience and a wider reach for readers, and chose diaspora over father land. A third part of Irish writers mostly remained in Ireland but struggled with a complicated notion of nationalism (Wright, 2010). Under such circumstances, Irish drama, started Abbey Theatre, founded by W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), Lady Gregory (1852-1932), and the tragic texts of John Millington Synge: "Playwriting and theater production have transformed themselves as rapidly as Ireland itself" (Flynn, 2002).

In the 1990s and after, Irish theatre has become a genre in its own right away from the previous era theatre productions of 1970s. A century or less from now, Irish drama may create forms that we cannot imagine, especially with the quick artistic response to recent social changes.

## 1. Existentialism

Existentialism can be easily misunderstood. Some philosophers were surprised to be described as existentialists. Generally speaking, a common feature of existentialist philosophers is that they show interest in human freedom. The idea that the whole world is created to be man's environment. Man's power for making his own courses is the supporting element to let him be the main object of attention. They concentrate on showing people that they are free, to illuminate them with the unrecognizable truth of their freedom. (Warnock, 1970). In the nineteenth century, existentialist philosophers, such as Nietzsche (1844-1900), had revolved against the traditional and metaphysical approaches towards man and his position in the universe. Nietzsche is the first existentialist who proclaimed the death of God and called for a re-evaluation of Christian values. He criticized the submissiveness and self-deception that overwhelmed people of his time. So existentialism is a rejection of man being controlled by a super power of God or religious concepts. Jean-Charles Seigneuret (1988), a critic, defines it as being: "... a confluence of themes and a set of shared influences rather than a body of doctrines. A fundamental feature of all existentialists is their revolt against any form of essentialism that identifies human reality with a priori philosophical, scientific, or religious concepts." (Weidhorn, Caldwell, Averill, & Sawicki, 1988).

We as human beings have our own values and choices in a meaningless world of existence. Existentialist philosophers have rejected the idea of a closed system of universe with a specific given meanings. In addition, because of the existentialists, the individuals carry the burden of creating a meaning of a world that they are thrown into without knowing why. What is existence? For Husserl (1859-1938), undoubtedly it is given less than essence. He had the belief that existence could be abandoned or observed with minority. However, a phenomenologist concentrates more on the essence of things. This is true that we can look abstractly, however, Husserl himself had finally believed that the abstraction of essence would give a peculiar view, and it would not be fully understood apart from factual existence. "Essence cannot be adequately understood except in relation to this existence." (Wild, 1955, p. 73). As being always argued, existence is prior to essence. Looking into the depths of the matter, man has no particular designed essence or nature. His essence is to exist, to act. He is always being more than what he was, in a continuous restless urge to fulfillment. (Wild, 1955)

This philosophical movement has its serious impacts on literature in the mid-twentieth century with the works of Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980). Sartre's existentialism has been considered as the production of post-1945 mood of despair, chaos and crisis in Europe. With the beginning of World War II and Sartre's participation in the Resistance, the perception of individual's freedom is highlighted. Although the subject of existentialism remained at large the individual being isolated in despair, Sartre's works dealt more with the political implications of the theory. (Weidhorn, Caldwell, Averill, & Sawicki, 1988)

## 2. Existentialism in the Arab World

Existentialism transcended to the Arab world and dominated the literature of the first half of the twentieth century, especially with the rise of the political conflicts of Palestine and the war of the Suez Canal. Western existentialists sought freedom and liberation of all boundaries, whether theological, political, or social, for one to take their own responsibilities and choices. However, Arab existentialists had capsulated existentialism to politics. In his article "Shall we Return to Existentialism?", Egyptian journalist and writer, Anis Mansour (1924-2011), suggested that existentialism is the most suitable ideology for the Arab world due to its values of freedom,

emphasis on actions, and one's responsibility of their deeds and choices. He explains: write the source, already mentioned above "Shall we Return to Existentialism?"

Existentialism is a philosophical and literary theory which is devoted to an interpretation of human existence; namely, that man exists, that he should be aware of his existence, and that he should realize himself as a human being. To be a human being, he must be free. To be free means to be responsible for every opinion and resolution that he adopts for himself and for other people. (p. 51-59)

This is evident of a dominating political understanding of existentialism. The will to be free of dictatorial governments which deprive its people of their basic rights and of making their own choices. In addition, it may be the will to liberate their lands from colonization and occupation that ruined their peaceful lives. Mansour is calling for man's realization of his freedom and appreciation of his existence as a human. Mansour went on to deny determinism and stated that people are what they make of themselves. In this article, he describes the spread of existentialism in the Arab world which reflects the gloomy experience of the struggle, depression, and abandonment of the Six-Day War. (Cohen-Mor, 2001). Moreover, Mansour proclaimed that existentialism helped Europe and Japan out of their tragedies of the two World Wars and harness their powers for the future. He ends his article with a call for philosophers, writers, and men of religion to help the nation experience existentialism.

In his article "Modern Arabic Literature and the West" (1971), the Palestinian author, poet, and critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920-1994) discussed the philosophy's great impact on Arab world, and affirming that "it took Arab intellectual life by storm". He started his article exploring Arabic literature's development throughout centuries, and the strong influence of Western literature on contemporary Arabic writings. Commenting on existentialism, Jabra stated: "One does not have to agree on everything Sartre said, but his ideas became pivotal to the new generation of writers who sought involvement in the political and social issues of their times." (1971, p. 87-88).

This suggests the limited conception of existentialism in the Arab world. Due to the political Arab conflicts and issues, Arab existentialist writers laid their focus on these issues and found a link to the philosophy that seemed self-serving. Jabra stressed that one does not have to accept all the ideas of existentialism. This is an expected reference to the Arabs' rejection of the theological connotations behind the philosophy. Such is an attempt at maintaining the general idea and restricting it to political contexts away from its philosophical essence, a common Arab approach to western philosophy.

### 3. **Beckett's Pointless and Eternal Damnation to Wait:**

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) is an existentialist and absurdist author whose works "explore the despair, pain, and comedy of the human condition." (O'Neil, 2004, p. 87). His works aim to penetrate human existence in depth, which for Beckett, is absurd and pointless. In his early career as a writer, he wrote mostly poetry. However, his early literary works were difficult to read and gave an impression of a young gifted writer who is showing off rather than an artistic original voice. Gradually, he realized that he was proceeding in the wrong direction by trying to represent and explain the world to his readers. In his journey to Paris in the 1920s, he started to explore and experiment on modernism along with his fellow Irishman, James Joyce (1882-1941). Nevertheless, he "distanced himself from the modernist attempt to account for the world in its

entirety.” (O’Neil, 2004, p. 96). His aim was to capture a state of isolation, loneliness and ignorance, as well as the human’s need to explain their reason for existence.

In his two-act play, “Waiting for Godot (1955)”, Beckett presents the absurdity and purposelessness of human existence. The two tramps Estragon and Valdimir spend their lives waiting by a tree for the mysterious Godot. They believe that Godot is their savior. They try to pass the time by arguing, telling stories to each other, taking their boots off and putting them back on. Frustrated by the wait, they decide to hang themselves but fail and remain trapped in their meaningless existence empty of anything but defining nothingness. Master Pozzo appears driving his silent slave and burden-carrier, Lucky. They meet the two tramps by the tree and spend some time with them and engage with them in a conversation. The master and slave’s second appearance comes with a few changes. For instance, the master Pozzo is now blind for an unknown reason. The play ends with the two tramps still waiting for Godot who never came, and obviously never will.

Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” explores the meaning of existence, and defines existentialist literature. The tramps, for example, are waiting for Godot, who seems to promise a purpose, a meaning, or even an explanation, for their existence. Until he arrives, they try to pass the time by repeatedly questioning the reason of their waiting for Godot:

Estragon. Let’s go.

Vladimir. We can’t.

Estragon. Why not?

Vladimir. We’re waiting for Godot. (p. 9)

The whole revolves around the wait, whilst “Nothing to be done” (6), “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.”(30), “We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (53). All these discussions, which are repeated throughout the play, reveals the tramps’ inability to make their own choices and take actions. Instead, they keep waiting for Godot to come and save them. Despite Beckett’s dismissal of the critics’ interpretations of Godot for God, he does attack the belief that God will come to save humanity. Godot is not the only signifier. The play is full of symbols and signifiers. For example, Estragon’s struggle with his uncomfortable boots hints at the human struggle to define their path. (Hutchings, 2005). The world is filled with cruelty and harshness, like Pozzo’s tyranny over Lucky. Terrifying things happen without justification or explanation, as Pozzo’s sudden blindness. Nevertheless, we still wait for explanations which will never come, as Estragon and Vladimir wait for “the eternally deferred arrival of Godot....We cannot say for certain why we exist or that we are meant to do anything more while we are alive than pass the time as we wait for death.” (O’Neil, 2004, p. 100).

#### 4. Unfulfilled Prophecies of Peace and Kanfani’s Fear of Existential Death:

Known for his novels, short stories, plays, and literary criticism, Ghassan Kanafani(1936-1972) celebrates for being a resistance writer dedicated to the Palestinian national cause after the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel (O’Neil, 2004). He started his literary career by writing short stories through the eyes of the children of refugee camps. After publishing several works that brought him great recognition, he developed his literary techniques and ideas that literature and politics cannot be separated. He believed that the best writers are those who "promote freedom and express resistance to oppression." (O’Neil, 2004, p. 686). Kanafani’s passionate obligation to the Palestinian issue and human freedom is portrayed in all of his works. His literature was not only restricted to politics but also affected by major literary and philosophical movements in the

twentieth century, such as Modernism and Existentialism. (O'Neil, 2004). As previously discussed that Arab existentialist perception and application deviated from its western origin. A revisit to Kanafani's "The Hat and Prophet (1967)" can illustrate such difference. The three-act play portrays the situation of a man who has been accused of killing a mysterious 'thing'. Two judges try to investigate his crime. He, however, refused their accusation and claims innocent. He starts narrating his story and how he had met the mysterious 'Thing' and took care of it, fed it on only water, as its nature needed. Gradually, it became the main object of his meaningless life and gave it a sense and purpose. Mysteriously, the entity found its death of thirst as the man went briefly to respond to some messages and refusing some people who came to negotiate a deal with him to take the odd Thing. His attempt at defending himself and the judges decided to declare him innocent. Surprisingly, he renounced their decision and his innocence thinking he can't live with the burden of his loss of 'Thing'.

In Kanafani's play, the accused man attempts to make sense of his life. In the first act, for example, he reveals to the court that he lost the passion to live, that he is actually defending himself against feelings "of non-ending alienation, eeriness, loneliness, and struggle". He exclaims: "you have done nothing, and you have nothing to do." (Kanafani, 2013, p. 18-19), hinting at the feelings of anguish and despair caused by social and political failure. In the same act, a lady fails to convince the man to sell his mysterious 'thing', answering her that "it is my whole world". Oddly, he does not know what it is, yet he likes the idea of keeping it as it revives his life and gives it a meaning. In a conversation between the mysterious thing and the accused man, the latter professed to his thing: "you unintentionally gave me prophecy" and without it "the world will turn back to dust and rust" (47). The chaotic situation of Palestine, arouses the attachment to any simple sign that could revive hopes for life and peace. In the last act when the two judges announced freedom for the accused man, he refuses it: "Innocent? What a burden!" (89), indicating his refusal to rejoin the ugly world. With the mysterious thing, he has an illusion that gives his life a meaning, however, its death will turn him back to his chaotic world which is full of disappointment and despair.

Existentialism, with its strong affinity to socialism and nationalism, was perceived as conducive to regeneration on several different levels: the moral and individual as well as the political and national. The new writers' main motifs were freedom, anxiety, protest, struggle, social progress, individual salvation, rebellion, and heroism. (Cohen-Mor, 2001, p. 198).

That can easily apply to Kanafani's idea of existentialism. Arab existentialists started losing their faith in chances for the region's political conflicts to be resolved, and for stability to be achieved. Nevertheless they continued their fight for freedom, liberation, and change, torn by anguish for their nationalist cause. Therefore, if the land and the nation gave meaning to their lives, losing them will mean losing that meaning.

#### Conclusion

The two views of existentialism greatly differ. In the Arab world, playwrights used existentialism to serve their political views and to approach their absurd social reality. On the western stage, however, there is a broader and more universal side to the philosophy, with undeniable links with religion. It is an attempt to free man of all boundaries that control him. A recall for an intellectual liberation and theological as well. While Arab writers used it in a capsulated manner as a promise to free Arabs of the dominating social and political conventions. They call for an action to change their desperate environment caused by political issues. As

examined, Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and Kanafani's "The Hat and the Prophet" point out explicitly the different implications of the philosophy between the two worlds.

**About the Author:**

**Hadeel** got her bachelor degree of English Language and Literature in 2014. Her interests include literature, in particular, modern and contemporary literature. She enjoys reading literary texts and analyzing them. In addition, she is curious about languages and linguistic studies. Looking forward to harnessing her time and effort to translate research and write literary and linguistic articles.

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