

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026

© 2026 by the author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



A Literariness.org Project

The Paradox of Hope in a World of Despair: *Waiting for Godot*

DR. PHANI KIRAN

Associate Professor
Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence
Navanihal, Karnataka

MS. SNEHA

PG Student
Department of English
Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence
Navanihal, Karnataka

Abstract: This paper titled “The Paradox of Hope in a World of Despair: Waiting for Godot” offers a comparative philosophical study of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* through the lens of Indian philosophical traditions, principally Advaita Vedānta, Buddhist thought, and the Bhagavad Gita. Where Western criticism has largely read the Theatre of the Absurd as a terminal condition of meaninglessness, this study suggests that what this play stages is avidyā: the foundational ignorance that mistakes constructed appearance for ultimate reality. The absurd, in this reading, is not a philosophical endpoint but a misperception of the classical Advaita image of rajju-sarpa bhrānti, mistaking a rope for a serpent, where the suffering is real, but its cause is not.

The inaction of Vladimir and Estragon is read through the Buddhist concept of sorrow (Dukkha) and the Gita’s doctrine of action without expecting results (nishkama karma), revealing their waiting not as cosmic tragedy but as attachment to a constructed object of expectation. The study in the conclusion states that the Theatre of the Absurd, read through Eastern metaphysics, is not a theatre of meaninglessness but a theatre of misrecognition. The void is real; what is wrong is the diagnosis. Where Western absurdism stops at the condition, the Indian philosophical tradition identifies its root in avidyā and points, through the ancient question Ko’ham — Who am I? toward the possibility of its dissolution.

Keywords: *Theatre of the Absurd, Avidya, Maya, Nishkama Karma, Eastern Philosophy, Existentialism*

आ

नाम नदी मनोरथिला, तृष्णातरंगावयता, रागग्राहिती मदान्धतमसा पूणान दुराशिपगा।

Transliteration: Āśā nāma nadī manorathajalā, tṛṣṇātarāṅgāyitā, rāgagrāhavaṭī madāndhatamasā pūrṇā durāśāpagā.

“Hope is a river whose waters are longing, whose waves are desire, whose crocodile is passion, whose darkness is delusion- a river of false hope that carries the unwary to ruin.”

Chanakya, the ancient philosopher-statesman, did not write about theatre. He wrote about the mechanics of human failure. Yet this verse reads like a stage direction for *Waiting for Godot*. Estragon and Vladimir do not stand there because the universe has abandoned them. They stand there because they have built their entire existence on the current of a river Chanakya named two thousand years ago: *asa* – hope as longing, hope as dependency, hope as the visible force that prevents a person from ever actually moving. They are not waiting for Godot. They are drowning in the river of waiting itself.

What are Vladimir and Estragon waiting for? Not Godot, not really. They are expecting that waiting will end. They are uncertain about everything in the world. They are struggling not as the world is cruel but because they are not aware of how to inhabit it without a guarantee. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is one of the twentieth century's most exhaustively discussed plays, and the critical tradition has largely read it through the lens it seems to invite: Western existentialism, absurdism, the silence of a post-war universe that has stopped answering. That reading is powerful. But it stops at the edge of a much older philosophical conversation.

Buddhist thought has a precise name for what Estragon and Vladimir experience. *Dukkha* — suffering, pervasive unsatisfactoriness is not caused by pain or loss in the ordinary sense. It is caused by attachment: the deep, unexamined belief that a fixed external object can deliver permanent relief. Godot is exactly this object. He is not a person or a god so much as a structure of expectation and the non-arrival of Godot is, as this paper will argue, structurally identical to the Buddha's description of desire's mechanism: the object recedes in proportion to the urgency with which it is pursued. The Heart Sutra's *Rūpaṃ śūnyatā, śūnyatāiva rūpaṃ* — form is emptiness, emptiness is form and it reframes the play's famous void not as terminal nothingness but as the condition of all conditioned things: they are empty of permanent, fixed meaning. That emptiness is not a catastrophe but a learning.

This paper discusses that *Waiting for Godot* is best understood not as a portrait of irreducible meaninglessness but as a dramatization of *avidya* — the foundational ignorance that the Indian traditions identify as the root of all suffering. Estragon and Vladimir do not suffer because existence is absurd. They suffer because they are waiting for the wrong thing, in the wrong way, without any understanding that *nishkama karma*— purposeful action without attachment to outcome and it is the

only freedom available to them. The Bhagavad Gita's instruction to Arjuna, *karmany evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana*, speaks directly across the centuries to their paralysis: your right is to action alone, never to its results. To structure one's entire existence around an absence and to call that structure meaning is not tragic wisdom. It is, in the Indian philosophical framework, a curable misreading of reality.

Nothing happens to Vladimir and Estragon. That is the point and they are not in pain the way Hamlet is, or Lear, they don't have identifiable wounds and no specific cause. They are not grieving a loss or bracing for a known danger; they are simply caught and they are expecting that never fulfils. Buddhist thought gives this condition as *Dukkha*: suffering, that arises from the attachments and expectations from the mistaken belief that a fixed external object can deliver permanent relief. The non-arrival of Godot is structurally identical to Buddha's description as the mechanism of desire: the object recedes in proportion of the urgency with what it is pursued. The following verse from the Mahabharata makes explicit the factor of time that the characters themselves never manage:

The Mahabharata verse points what might be called the temporal irony at the centre of Beckett's play: time passes continuously and indifferently but the characters remain locked in an arrested present by arguing what day it is. Their uncertainty about the day, they don't even have the idea whether day is Saturday, Sunday, or Thursday. That is not comic forgetfulness but a symptom of the condition Esslin identifies in his seminal reading of the play: that the "routine of waiting for Godot stands for habit, which prevents us from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being." Habit, as Esslin implies is itself a kind of *Dukkha*, the pain control that dulls suffering without curing it. The exchange that follows makes this numbing circularity visible at the level of language itself:

VLADIMIR: He said Saturday. (*Pause.*) I think.

ESTRAGON: But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (*Pause.*) Or Monday? (*Pause.*) Or Friday?

VLADIMIR: (*looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape*) It's not possible!

ESTRAGON: Or Thursday?

Ginther Anders, in "*Being without Time: On Beckett's play Waiting for Godot*", offers a philosophical interpretation of the play. Instead of reading the play as a religious allegory, Anders focusses on the structural function of expectation. The characters in *waiting for Godot* reside in a state that may be described as "atemporality", where the normal progression of time is suspended and waiting displaces purposeful action. At this juncture, expectation itself becomes the primary means of existence. He

further opposes that the play reverses conventional dramatic logic; the characters do not wait because something definitely arrives; rather, they infer the existence of something precisely because they continue to wait. Consequently, Godot cannot be not so much a theological presence as a constructed object of expectation—one that endures an illusory sense of meaning within an otherwise unspecified and void-like reality.

The form used in a Play is a deliberate rejection of conventional dramatic structure. It is marked by structural minimalism, circularity and inseparable from its philosophic concerns, and existential uncertainty. The plot is virtually non-existent. At the structural level, the play is divided into—two nearly identical acts, which creates a sense of stagnation. This repetition underscores existential inertia and the futility of human effort. Nothing happens and no action takes place. The absence of action is central to the play. The often-quoted line about this play is by Vivian Mercier who claims that Becket “... has achieved a theoretical impossibility- a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What’s more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice.”

The deceptive emptiness showed by the play *Waiting for Godot* can resemble the Buddhist insight that meaning is not fixed but interactive and relational.

रूपं िून्यता िून्यति रूपम्। From the Heart Sutra:

Transliteration

Rūpam śūnyatā, śūnyatāiva rūpam.

The meaning of this verse is Form is emptiness, and emptiness itself is form.

In the play language fails its fundamental purpose. Words no longer communicate, connect, or lead to action. As Bradby notes, Chambers argues that it was ‘this failure of language to express a certain experience of time that turned Beckett’s attention to the theatre, where he was able to create that experience with a fragment of actual time instead of trying to capture it in linguistic structure that, in fact, denied its existence’.

Through circularity, minimalism, and linguistic fragmentation, Beckett transforms the stage into a space where the futility, repetition, and ambiguity of human life are enacted rather than merely described. The use of dialogues and silence are crucial in the play. Dialogues often fail to communicate meaning. In Act 1 when Pozzo, Estragon and Vladimir were saying goodbye to each other, the words were repeated, but the attempt collapses into meaningless repetition, but the attempt fails. The conversation shows the breakdown of language. This lack of conversation between the

characters and meaningless aspect of the language. Beckett employs pauses, ellipses, and nonsensical exchanges to produce a tempo that oscillates between speech and silence. Though the pauses are empty, they are charged with existential anxiety.

POZZO: Adieu.

VLADIMIR: Adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

Silence. No one moves.

VLADIMIR: Adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

ESTRAGON: Adieu.

Silence.

POZZO: And thank you.

VLADIMIR: Thank you.

POZZO: Not at all.

ESTRAGON: Yes yes.

POZZO: No no.

VLADIMIR: Yes yes.

ESTRAGON: No no.

Silence.

In absurd drama, language collapses. The broken, repetitive, and often seemingly meaningless dialogues in *Waiting for Godot* highlight the complications of communication. Words are spoken but nothing is communicated. The farewell does not mark departure instead becomes an endless loop; it mirrors the play's larger structure. In Indian Vedantic philosophy this is contrast, silence is viewed as *Mauna*, not as a failure of expression but as a sign of higher understanding. What appears as language failure in absurdism can be reinterpreted, through the Eastern lens, it is an involuntary and unrecognized approach towards transcendence in language and not an enlightenment but its shadow.

Lila: (Cosmic Play Against Absurdist Void)

The Indian philosophical concept *Lila* and the theatre of the Absurd offer two intensely different understandings of the same existential condition. Nonetheless both recognize the variability of meaning and existential consequences. The Brahma Sutra states:

Lokavat tu līlā-kaivalyam —

Creation is merely the divine sport of the Absolute,

Just as ordinary play occurs in the world. (Brahma Sutra, 2.1.33)

Estragon: (looking at the tree) What is it? Vladimir: It's the tree.

Estragon: Yes, but what kind?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

(Estragon draws Vladimir towards the tree.) They look at it.

Estragon: Why don't we hang ourselves? Vladimir: With what?

Estragon: You haven't got a bit of rope? Vladimir: No.

Estragon: Then we can't (Pause.)

Vladimir: Let's go.

Estragon: Wait, there's my belt.

The tree Ashvattha, a symbol of life (the sacred fig of the Bhagavad Gita, whose roots are above and branches below). Throughout the play it stands at the center of the stage. For Vladimir and Estragon, it is merely an object of despair, when it is read through Vedantic lens it is the quiet and unnoticed presence of the very thing they are waiting for. The framework of *Lila* transforms the play from a drama of absence into a drama of misunderstanding.

Nishkama Karma: Action Without Expectation

In Beckett's play waiting is assumed as the form of existential helplessness. The characters are not self-dependent, but they are unable to proceed with resolution. Estragon and Vladimir repeatedly try to leave but never do, their inaction is not chosen but suffered.

ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: (*despairingly*) Ah! (*Pause.*)

VLADIMIR: He didn't say for sure he'd come.

ESTRAGON: And if he doesn't come?

VLADIMIR: We'll come back tomorrow.

ESTRAGON: And then the day after tomorrow.

ESTRAGON: And so on.

VLADIMIR: The point is—

ESTRAGON: Until he comes.

VLADIMIR: You're merciless.

The Indian concept of Cosmic *Lila* interprets the same experiential situations through a completely different metaphysical lens. From this perspective, the grasped individual engages in cosmic play without attachment, they are free from expectation and desire for outcomes. Life cannot be experienced as bondage, but it as to be performed actively without attaching in engagement with existence, steady with the principle of *nishkama Karma*. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna instructs Arjuna:

karmany evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana |

mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi ||

your right is to action alone, never to its results.

Do not be motivated by the fruits of action, nor incline toward inaction. (Bhagavad Gita, 2.47)

Vladimir and Estragon immobility is the contradictory of *nishkama karma*. They are completely driven by the fruit (Godot's arrival) and completely unable to perform action in its absence and they are surrendering action to expectation. The Gita's teaching reframes their condition not as an inescapable but as a failure of their understanding. One must choose action freely by not getting attached to what

that action result. Krishna further addresses the certainty of temporariness:

jātasya hi dhruvo mṛtyur dhruvaṁ janma mṛtasya ca | tasmād aparihārye 'rthe na tvaṁ śocitum arhasi
||

For the one who is born, death is certain:

and for one who has died, birth is also certain. Therefore, one should not grieve over the unavoidable (Bhagavad Gita, 2.27)

Krishna does not console Arjuna about death's inevitability whereas he frames action itself. The Gita's concern is not with what befalls a person but with how that person inhabits their situation, do they do with clarity and purposeful engagement, or with the kind of paralysed expectation that defines Vladimir and Estragon. The Gita names this failure precisely: it is not grief over what is unavoidable, but the refusal to act in the absence of a guaranteed outcome.

What separates the Theatre of the Absurd from the Indian philosophical tradition is not their diagnosis of human condition but the outcome of it. Both recognize that existence is uncertain, repetitive, and unaffected by the meaning we impose upon it. Where Beckett leaves this recognition as terminal, a door that opens onto nothing, but the concept of Lila reframes the same monotony as the texture of cosmic play, indifferent to individual desire but not therefore empty.

Shankaracharya's non-dual philosophy goes further: if the world is *mithya*- not real but mistakenly held as the ground of permanent satisfaction then the existential crisis identified in the absurd is not discovery but a reality that led through the consequence of misreading it.

What makes Vladimir and Estragon's state contradictory from this perception, they believe they are nothing, but they are trapped inside cosmic drama which they never understood. Their tragedy lies there, waiting itself is not the tragedy, but waiting without purpose is. To wait for Godot is to structure one's entire existence around an absence and to call that structure meaning.

As this paper argued through Indian philosophy it does not resolve the void that Beckett stages, but it reinterprets it. Waiting in Beckett's world is the whole existence becomes, in the Eastern framework, a symptom of *avidya*, not knowing about reality. Shankaracharya's Advaita does not promise the arrival of Godot, but it questions whether Godot was ever the right thing to wait for, so the Indian scriptural tradition offers Vladimir and Estragon is not an answer but a different kind of question that one must think genuinely whether their waiting itself was ever right response.

Works Cited

- Anders, Günther. *Being without Time: On Beckett's Play Waiting for Godot*. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, edited by Martin Esslin, Anchor Books, 1961.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Faber and Faber, 1956.
- Bradby, David. *Beckett: Waiting for Godot*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Brahma Sutra*. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama, 1965.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Anchor Books, 1961.
- Mercier, Vivian. "The Uneventful Event." *The Irish Times*, 6 Feb. 1956, p. 6.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, translator. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins, 1994.
- Shankaracharya, Adi. *Vivekachudamani*. Translated by Swami Madhavananda, Advaita Ashrama, 1921.
- The Bhagavad Gita*. Translated by Eknath Easwaran, Nilgiri Press, 2007.
- The Heart Sutra*. Translated by Edward Conze, Buddhist Society, 1958.
- The Mahabharata*. Translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004.