



Perceptions about Waiting for Godot: Insights from Pakistani Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study has investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of 'Waiting for Godot' at a public-sector university, in Pakistan. The study has explored how students identify existentialist themes and how do they relate to identified themes in the play. Rosenblatt's (1938, 1994) reader response and Sartre's (1956) existential model have guided this study. The findings are based on data supplied by 15 participants through semi-structured interviews. The study has applied a qualitative mode of inquiry employing the Thematic Analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006). The key arguments based on findings reveal that participants' responses were affected by their social and educational background. It highlights that participants connected existentialist themes that were very close to their life experiences and observations. It reflects that the play raised a sense of questioning as the spirit of posing introspective questions was more evident among male respondents. The play served as a source of motivation for participants to struggle for life's meaning. It also highlights the role of teachers in developing participants' understanding of the play. The results are important for teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers as they bring some implications in the context of literary pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

The current study has explored the perceptions of undergraduate students at a public-sector University, Pakistan regarding *Waiting for Godot*, authored by Samuel Beckett. Students study this work as a part of their BS curriculum. The play had been taught by a single teacher. The data was collected from the students of BS III literature classroom where students come from varying socio-cultural backgrounds. In contrast to urban background, students from rural backgrounds have more stringent family systems where they strictly follow religious norms (Lloyd, Mete, & Sathar, 2005). Hence, they do not allow any kind of flexibility in the context of religion or their ethical and moral values. In addition, at public sector institutes students do not get exposed to such platforms where their critical thinking skills could be polished more (Andrabi, Das, & Khwaja, 2002). Students' educational background and capabilities are, therefore, different as they come from various private or public-sector schools and colleges and also from rural or urban social backgrounds. Such socio-cultural factors hinder in promoting learners' autonomy in Pakistani universities (Hameed & Hameed, 2016; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018). Moreover, in public sector universities, the teaching and learning process takes place in large classes.

Waiting for Godot is commonly interpreted in the context of existentialist thoughts. Correlating with the basic principles of existentialist philosophy, it gives an impression about incomprehensibility, absurdity and resilience of the universe in which a man waits for divine help which never comes. While coming in contact with the play, students of public sector

University, Pakistan, discover a contrast between their beliefs and the themes in the play. This point of conflict alludes to complications regarding critical reading and interpretation of the text. Since it is a common practice to relate oneself to works of literature (Flynn, 2007; Rosenblatt, 1994), the current study has investigated perceptions of undergraduate students regarding meaningfulness and the conditions of human world as highlighted in the play. To explore the perceptions of students, this study has followed frameworks of Sartre (1956) Existentialist theory and Rosenblatt's Reader response theory (1938/1994). The Research Questions are:

- How far do undergraduate students identify the existentialist themes of the play, *Waiting for Godot*?
- How far do undergraduate students relate to identified themes as delineated in *Waiting for Godot*?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sartre's Model of Existentialism

Philosophers have been dealing with the problem of 'being' and 'existence' for ages. The world of art has been highly impacted by existential thoughts. Sartre (1956), one of the central figures of existential school of thought, took the traditional assumption, 'Essence precedes existence' and challenged the long tradition in philosophy that had always prioritized abstract, universal and impersonal essence over actual human existence. By conferring precedence to essence, Sartre completely denies the idea that there is some inherent meaning prior to existence. It claims that we create ourselves by our actions. Sartre holds the view, "At first [man] is nothing. Only afterwards he will be something and he himself will have made what he will be. Man, first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards" (p. 526). It implies that man is what he makes of himself. It rejects the notion that we are born with any inherent meaning or predetermined fate but rather humans are artisans of their own existence. There is no a priori human essence, model or blueprint that determines man.

The problem of 'Being' is the centre of phenomenological exploration of Sartre. He discusses being-in-itself that refers to objects that are just there, having no awareness or value for themselves. It implies the being of things which are fixed like body, place of birth, historicity etc. but man is more than these fixed certainties. Man is not mere being-in-itself but also being-for-itself where man is a conscious subject, not in accordance with any definition, essence or generalization. He defines his own essence and gives meaning to his existence through the choices he makes. Man is always more than what he was, in a continuous restless urge to create his own meaning (Wild, 1955). These two aspects of being represent facticity and transcendence respectively. Sartre (1956) maintains that though the being of man is characterized by facticity, it nevertheless does not prevent us from being free and exercising our freedom. Sartre (1992) has encapsulated this idea as, "I am condemned to exist beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free." (p. 439). It reflects that man's essence is never completely fixed but he is yet to be. He gives meaning to his life by exercising and practicing his personal freedom, making choices and exercising freewill.

2.2 Waiting for Godot as an Existentialist Play

The notion of waiting and contesting one's decision to wait for a subtle hope that may change one's life appeals audiences throughout time. The selected play emerged in the post WWII, prone to evoke provocative questions concerning the meaning of human existence. The philosophical pathways and entangled structure of the play have drawn multifarious research attention. Kern, in her study, maintains that there are Kierkegaardian echoes in Beckett's very assertion (1987). Gilman (2008) points out that the play is closer to Camus' meaning in his description of the absurd as that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints. Many critics have labeled *Waiting for Godot* as an existentialist play in the more contemporary view of Sartre. Esslin (1987) notes the truly astonishing parallel between Sartre's existential philosophy and the creative intuition of Beckett, focusing on such facets as nothingness, freedom and the need of consistently creating ourselves in a succession of choices.

Critics have been divided over the topic. Since few maintain that the play has many religious undercurrents as Beckett concerns theological questions, dealing with the relation between God and mankind and waiting for salvation (Wang et al., 2013). He also commented that the play seems absurd but with a deep religious meaning. The text tries to explore the themes in four parts of God and man, breaking the agreement, repentance and imprecation and waiting for salvation. Beckett (1956) interpreted *Waiting for Godot* in the light of Christian theology, propagating the idea that the play is embedded with the deep religious meaning where the waiting appears as a manifestation of the characters' unflinching hope in God. Stempel (1976) views the play as completely Christian, simplistically allegorical. He sketches the character of Estragon as representing the Jew who waits for the Messiah, making Godot a figure for the Messiah either way.

Many researchers repudiate the theological stance of the play and align Beckett with the skeptical thought of hope and waiting as a futile illusion. They leap an association with existential philosophy, a fitting undertone preoccupied with the meaning of human existence. In the MLA's guide to teaching the play, Williams (2005) reflects that the play dramatizes elemental human experience to embody fundamental truths of the human condition as it construes meaninglessness of human existence through its unusual form. Different dimensions of the play: characters that are in absolute boredom of despondent life, the setting that only has the enigmatic road and a leafless tree, plot less narratives and the language that is devoid of content, all collectively and undoubtedly offer a shocking picture of the painful realities of human life (Nealon, 1992; Styan, 1981). Kennedy (1975) further elaborates, "*Wherever we look in Beckett's play, we see images of spiritual loss and of human suffering and waste*" (p. 157). It reveals the catastrophic, deplorable and apocalyptic human condition. It highlights the perplexing issues of hopelessness, meaninglessness, uncertainty, skepticism and anxiety that shackle and weaken one's firm faith.

2.3 Rosenblatt's Model of Reader Response Theory

Rosenblatt (1938, 1994) puts forward her Transactional Reader Response theory in which she gives importance to transaction between the text and the reader. Rosenblatt (1994) puts her idea as, "*The text brings into the readers' consciousness certain concepts, sensuous experiences and scenes. The special meanings and associations the words have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him.*" (31). It implies that transaction with textual elements and signs stimulate areas of consciousness where readers' responses are constituted by and constitute reading. Literary texts bring some concepts, ideas or experiences that readers can easily relate to their own life experiences and observations. They identify themselves in characters or in the storyline. This may influence reading transaction.

Rosenblatt (1994) argues that creation of meaning of any literary work is a two-way process. A transaction takes place between the reader and the text where each affects the other. Reader is not a blank tape registering a ready-made message, but actively involved in meaning-making process where different factors affect in shaping students' responses, their interest and relating their experiences to the literary works. Flynn (2007) also reflects that it is the reader who gives life and meaning to text. Otherwise words are just black marks on white pages. It is the reader who selects and synthesizes ideas into new experience and transforms ink spots into meaningful symbols (Rosenblatt, 1994). Thus, we cannot talk about the meaning of a text without consideration of the readers' contribution to it.

Rosenblatt (1994) highlights the role of teachers in developing readers' understanding of texts and offering literary responses. Beard (2001) comments that the process of reading and responding is like a triangle where learners' role is on the inside and the teacher's role is on the outside, bringing awareness, prompts and promoting the reader to make contextual links. Without teachers' intervention, the response can be too narrow and restrictive. However, if students fail to have literary experience, it is the teachers' role to construct a schema to increase their interest and involvement in the text being enjoyed (Benton, 2006). Hence, it advocates a pedagogy that acknowledges the importance of individual responses. McGee (2003) also notes that guided reading and discussing literature, students will call on their analytical thinking. Clifford (1979) also reflects that appropriating reader response theory requires a shift of emphasis from 'analysis' to 'experience' which in turn requires a balanced,

harmonious pedagogy. Wherein, neither readers, nor texts are predominant. Thus, pedagogical approaches, instructors' interpretation and interests also influence the readers' personal responses to literary texts.

2.4 Relevant Empirical Studies Employing Reader Response Theory

Students' literary interactions and levels of engagement in transactional process often depend on students' textual understanding based on socio-cultural expectations. Louwse and Kuiken (2004) have studied personal engagement during which readers may become captured by a literary text. The findings highlight how the characters' experiences, setting, storyline and events in the text influenced readers' personal involvement. The study on readers' identification with characters by Louwse and Kuiken (2004) indicates that readers who link the literary world to their own personal experiences and observations, report change of self-perception after reading that particular text.

Schrijvers, Janssen, Fialho, and Rijlaarsdam (2017) examines the impact of literary education on students' self and social perceptions. It aims to explore relationships between students' learning experiences and teachers' classroom practices. Findings reveal that nearly all students reported to have learned something about themselves and others through literary works: mainly personal characterization of oneself and others, evaluation of people's behavior, life lessons and positive attitude towards literature. Skarstein (2013) study has explored readers' literary experiences in Norwegian secondary schools. The results of the study reflected that the participants took the selected fictional texts as didactic tools for stimulating their critical thinking skills. Through their literary exploration, the participants entered into new contexts and discovered other perspectives than their own.

The themes of texts allow readers to see themselves, access their own experiences as mirrored in the work where they closely engage with the text (Rogers & Christian, 2007). Taiwanese students' responses to five American short stories were researched by Liaw (2001). The findings revealed that students went beyond mere comprehension of the text and actively constructed meaning through transaction with the text because the themes were closer to their social realities. In the context of thematic closeness, Dutro (2010) presented third graders' experiences with a unit from their reading curriculum, 'Hard Times' in which children made strong connections between the theme of family's economic hardships and their own lives and social context where their own poverty paralleled with the story. Cox (2011) study examined fifth grade children's written responses to selected works of realistic literature from reader response themes of stance and personal meaningfulness. The study, based on its findings also argued that participants focused more on the themes and events close to their own life experiences and social observation.

Some studies centre on complex interpretations and interactions of older students responding to literature. Vasquez (2003) explores how young children engage in critical transactions with the text. She asserts that literary texts offer strong opportunities for students to deal with specific social and cultural themes because students draw from their personal experiences to give meaning to texts. Naylor (2013) researched teenage students' responses towards early modern poetry. It reflected the challenges for adolescent teenage readers. It explored the ways in which students made meaning out of the poetry of the early modern period, the role of teachers in supporting the students in the meaning-making process and how they approached poetry from a different time period. The findings reflected that readers were responsive to the themes of death and loss as schematized in the poetry. They were able to relate the themes to their own life experiences as reflected in the poems. Syed (2019) conducted research on undergraduate students' responses to four novels. Her findings revealed that the selected novels were seen to have an effect on readers' sense of citizenship. Her participants perceived the aspects of citizenship of identity, rights and duties as presented through the medium of selected novels. They related more significantly to the novels that were more relatable to their life experiences and socio-cultural context.

More recently, students' responses towards three young adult novels, included in UK school curriculum were researched by Syed, Naylor, Rimmeride, Varga, and Alara Guanio-Uluru (2021). The study used literature circles and Google documents where students responded to social and personal issues such as death, inequality, racism, war and contemporary politics as presented through the medium of the selected literary texts. This

study helped readers to have cross-national social interaction as the participants were from the UK and Norway. Thus, reader response approach pushes students to think beyond literary texts to deepen their thinking. The application of Iser's RRT on William Faulkner's 'Rose for Emily' showed the effects of the reading experienced by the readers who came to the subjective opinions after reading (Khrais, 2017). Participants made personal judgments by endowing cultural setting in the novel with their social reality.

The reviewed literature reflects that there is a dearth of research on students' responses to literary texts, specifically in the context of Sindh, Pakistan. Thus, the present study is an endeavor to fill a void in this context.

3. Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach in which the data is interpreted in descriptive form to present the major findings of the research. My study relies on interviews as its data collection tool. Cohen (2007) reflects, "*Interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live and express how they regard the situation from their own point of view*" (p.267). It shows that interview is helpful in understanding the point of views regarding any situation (Bryman, 2012). Keeping the demand of data collection in mind, I conducted in-depth interviews that allowed the participants to exchange in-depth perceptions regarding the matter. Semi-structured interviews were designed in which I did not pose pre-planned questions to validate all the information collected. Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, and Kangasniemi (2016) model of developing an interview schedule was followed.

Sampling was done according to Cohen (2007) guidelines about considering size, access, and representativeness and sampling strategies. Data was collected from 15 participants who were undergraduate students at a public-sector university. The number was kept small as the target was rich data not generalizability (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). The whole class happens to be huge, thus participants were selected through purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012). In purposive sampling, we choose selective participants to get an in-depth understanding of a small population (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Yin, 2011). The students were selected on the basis of their active class participation and involvement in discussion groups, specifically in the course of Drama. Participants had varied educational exposure and social backgrounds (See Table 1). Eight out of fifteen participants had urban background, whereas seven were from rural Sindh. Eight participants had exposure to private institutes whereas seven had exposure to public sector institutes. Out of 15, eight participants were female and seven were male. The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This followed a systematic process. Data was coded, code patterns were observed, and themes were designed and reviewed. The themes developed from the analysis are reported in the section of findings.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Codes	Female Participants	Male participants	Total No. of Participants
Rural background	04	03	07
Urban background	04	04	08
Private sector schooling	03	05	08
Public sector schooling	05	02	07
Codes	Participants' pseudonyms		
Rural background	Ali, David, Evan, Fatima, Laila, Maryam, Nosheen.		
Urban background	Bilal, Charles, George, Hamza, Iqra, Javeria, Kainat, Ophelia.		
Private sector schooling	Bilal, Charles, George, Javeria, Maryam, Nosheen, Ophelia, Kainat.		
Public sector schooling	Ali, David, Evan, Fatima, Hamza, Iqra, Laila.		
Female Participants	Fatima, Iqra, Javeria, Kainat, Laila, Maryam, Nosheen, Ophelia.		
Male Participants	Ali, Bilal, Charles, David, Evan, George, Hamza.		

Ethical issues were considered significant for this study. Data was collected ethically as suggested in methodological literature (Bryman, 2012; Cohen, 2007). Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study. They were given informed consent forms explaining the project and assuring them of their voluntary and anonymous participation. Translation issues

were also considered. I realized the challenges of translation as it involves interpretation (Birbili, 2000; Temple & Young, 2004) and checked the work to ensure reliability of my translations.

4. Findings

4.1 Participants' Perceptions on Existentialist Themes as Reflected in the Play

Participants delve into multiple facets of the play on the theme of meaninglessness of human life. They viewed the play as capturing basic experience of being in the world. They reflected that the play has problematized human limitation, agonies, anxieties and helplessness. They identified the theme of meaninglessness through characters, plot setting and dialogues, further added by circular plot, setting of a barren road and a leafless tree, distractions of conversation and the act of characters' waiting, all collectively reflect the given theme. One female participant (Fatima) commented: *"The characters in the play had nothing significant to do with their life. Every day was a repetition of the previous day. They thrust lack of meaning and beat about the bush in order to kill time."* The sense of meaninglessness made the characters incapable of doing anything. Thus, they were filling up the hours with pointless activities. One male participant (Evan) referred to Estragon's action of checking his boots. He remarked that Estragon was struggling with his boot and Vladimir was also uncomfortable with his hat. He was searching inside but got nothing. These acts are symbolic as reflections of humans searching for meaning in life. The participant remarked that this essentially becomes a metaphor for human life's meaninglessness. The empty hat and boots show hollowness of human life. One participant commented:

'We see how characters were just sitting and waiting. I can really feel that the story is portraying human life as meaningless. Characters did not have courage to leave. They kept waiting and did not do anything. No one tried to make any movement. They remained still.' (George).

Thus, participants viewed characters as stagnant, unprogressive and passive. Giving characters bleak assessment of their situation and their frequent despair is appropriate to describe the theme of meaninglessness of human life. Participants also quoted textual lines for justifying their points. They reflected that meaninglessness is also reflected through dialogues. They quoted instance from the play as while waiting, the conversation between the characters weaved from Jesus to other insignificant issues like salvation, their physical aches and suicide. Many times, they contemplated leaving. They quoted the textual expressions like 'Nothing to be done', 'What to do?', 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes'. These expressions are reverberated in most of the dialogues. Such incoherent babblings try to impose the idea of human life as lacking meaning.

Participants also analyzed the theme of human freedom as reflected in the play. Eleven participants viewed characters as not exercising their freewill. Participants remarked that the characters were not completely free. Estragon and Vladimir were dependent on each other in power-relation. Similarly, Pozzo and Lucky were also confined to one another in power-relation. Thus, their over-dependence made them inactive. Estragon and Vladimir resumed the second day with the same act of waiting, reliving the similar day. Participants reflected that the characters were lacking individuality. The element of 'I' was missing in them. The other major issue with them was their indecisiveness. They did not attempt to make any changes. They all were devoid of decision-making power. Though the characters could have opted to leave but they carried on with the choice of waiting. Their acts of waiting were making urgent demands of action. There was a possibility of change. Participants further added textual references as when Estragon and Vladimir decided to commit suicide, they did not. They were not able to take action and delayed by saying 'First you'. Similarly, when the messenger boy came and informed that Godot was not coming that day, they decided to leave by saying 'Let's go' but they did not leave. One of the male participants commented: *'I think the characters were playing with their freedom. They were contemplating to do something but not taking any action. All the characters were lacking decision-making power. Through the characters' ending where nothing happens, it is shown that we cannot change but through exercise of our freewill.'* (Hamza). Thus, participants claimed that characters were not exercising their freewill as they did not do anything to change the course of their life.

Participants analyzed the theme of human responsibility as the characters were not accepting their responsibility. Participants quoted from the text, there was an instance when Estragon got his boot off, looked inside to see what was causing him the difficulty. There, Vladimir remarked that that was his own mistake that he was unable to remove the boot and was blaming the boot. Participants took this act as reflection of human tendency to blame external sources. The character was also blaming the boot for the pain of his feet. Participants further elaborated that characters were not accepting their responsibility. They did not initiate to change their situation rather they kept on waiting. If they could have realized their responsibility, they might have stopped waiting and have left. Their act of waiting and not accepting responsibility made them passive and stagnant. Thus, they were in an existential crisis.

4.2 Relating Existentialist Themes to Life Experiences and Social Observations

Participants exhibited personal involvement by having a sense of personal identification with characters. They related to characters' meaningless acts by sharing that they all do wait and hope that things will come to them by themselves. They also elaborated that they all fall in the trap of waiting. It is not only about Estragon and Vladimir: it is about the whole mankind who helplessly, in different phases of their lives wait for someone that would take the lead of their lives. The situation of the tramps is an allegory of human condition. Participants also contextualized the theme and responded experientially by recalling the tough phases of their lives. They discussed their own life experiences in relation to the theme. One female participant (Javeria) connected to the theme by expressing that characters' passiveness reminded her of her father's death. She shared that when her father died, she was like the characters: alienated, undecided, passive, waiting and not knowing what to do. She was living meaninglessly without any aim as she felt the absence of her father. But then, her family made her realize that she has to live her life, to struggle and not to give up. One female participant from rural background remarked,

'Since my childhood, I have this idea from my family that God has given us this life, He has sent us here with some purpose. But when I encountered existentialism philosophy, it has contradictions. It involves us in existential crisis. Such crisis leads to further psychological complexes, traumas and psychiatric disorders. That's why we see people commit suicide' (Fatima).

Participants connected the theme of meaninglessness to their social observation. They reflected that they found in their surroundings, there are many kids, beggars and other families living meaninglessly. They are just passing their life, rather living it in its full swing. They seem to be simply moving and living creatures but lack the sense of meaning in their lives. One female participant (Nosheen) commented that the theme reminded her of her friend. She had a car accident where she lost her parents. In those circumstances, she was filled with the sense of life's meaninglessness. One male participant (Bilal) related the theme by illustrating his brother's life. He claimed that my elder brother is more like Estragon and Vladimir. He does not struggle for the things; he just waits for the things to happen. Participants also connected characters' decision of committing suicide as they elaborated that the play also interrogates how we can respond to the meaninglessness of life. They also raised a question that is suicide the appropriate answer or we should hope and wait or should we do struggle to escape this feeling. They connected this with their social observation that in their surroundings, they have seen many people committing suicide, the reason when they cannot find meaning of life. Estragon and Vladimir were also in existential crisis; thus, they decided to suicide out of alienation and anguish.

Further, in relating the theme to social observation, few participants remarked that *'the play is very much familiar to all of us' (Ali, Bilal, Iqra, Javeria, Hamza)*. It actually mimics the daily routine of human conditions. They illustrated that most human beings live in a constant state of yearning and fix themselves into some hope. Their lives involve a cycle: rituals of getting up, eating and going to bed. Such disillusioning repetition of daily life makes them think that life is meaningless. This notion further breeds feelings of dissatisfaction and pessimism.

Relating the theme of human freedom, few participants exhibited personal relation to indecisive acts of the characters. Some participants shared their personal life experiences where the theme was relatable to their various phases of life as their inability of decision-making in various life aspects. They connected that often, they are also like the characters, where they do not understand what is happening with their lives. Usually they do not struggle for life's meaning but invent a number of diversions to entertain them. They just create an impression that they exist. They also lack decision-making power like the characters. They connected to the theme by sharing that they also live in expectancy that hangs them upon tomorrow and loses today. Thus, the inability of the characters to make choices showcases as a catalyst for their own transformation: making choices, living life and giving meaning that one chooses to give. The participants (Ali, David, Hamza, Evan, Charles, Kainat, Laila and Ophelia) proclaimed that one must take their own journey to gain life's meaning rather than being indecisive and hoping for other sources. One male participant (Charles) shared that the play reminded him of his pre-university days. The other participant (Maryam) shared that after experiencing failure in the medical field, she did not stop her struggle. She made the choice to join English Literature. She had plans, aspirations and desires and she put her efforts for those. Thus, while going through the play, she connected to the theme as if she would not have made the choice at that time, her life would be filled with meaninglessness. Hence, that is the power of making choices and taking decisions. One female participant from urban background commented;

'My first reaction to the story was like it is quite boring where nothing happens. But after going through in-depth analysis, relating my feelings to it, I gained an insight into an important aspect of my life. I realized that I was like Estragon and Vladimir; I used to wait for things to happen. I used to hope for many things; sitting relaxed by thinking that everything would happen on its own time. Now I got the message that I have to do efforts rather than waiting for someone to do for me' (Ophelia)

Some participants connected the theme to social observation by giving illustrations of political, religious, familial and societal norms. They illustrated that Lucky's enslavement to Pozzo is actually reflecting our enslavement to familial and social chains. We are also tied by a rope held by government, religious and social institutions. We also recycle others' ideas instead of creating our own. Further, they connected characters' state of mind with theirs as characters were not realizing the purpose of their existence: participants also exhibited that they, sometimes involve themselves in disillusioning repetition of the daily routine and at the end, they blame that life has no meaning. But with the help of this play, they can draw on their experiences and gain sense of self-realization to accept their responsibility for the life they have.

After transacting with the play, few participants interrogated the role of self. They claimed that the play has involved them in an act of self-questioning (Charles, George, Bilal, Ophelia, Iqra). They commented that the play is all about questions regarding why do we exist, why we are here, what is the purpose for being here. They saw these questions as the very truth of human life which lies at the very core of everyone's life. One of the male participants remarked: *'For me, the play has served as a source of questioning myself about life's purpose. Here in this question, our role is also important that what purpose and what meaning we have given to ourselves in this world. It is concerning man's being, its conflicts and the anticipation of overcoming them' (Bilal).*

Participants also reflected that the play has filled them with a sense of curiosity about what the point of life is. They highlighted that the play explores the key issue of life's meaning: an outlook on life pursues the question of the meaning of one's life. One male participant commented, *'All that scenario and this theme consistently called me ask how I came to be this way, I found myself reexamining my constructed self. I came to realize that I am responsible for whatever I am today' (George).* Another male participant commented, *'I think we are sent into this world to make our life meaningful. If we just sit aimlessly and say life has no meaning, it is skeptical. To remove such thoughts, we need to occupy ourselves with something significant. We are required to struggle against all odds to remain attached to life' (Evan).*

4.3 Role of Teaching Strategy

Participants' responses were affected by teaching strategy applied by the teacher. Few of the participants responded positively as they were helped to seek a vital personal experience in transaction with the play. They shared that the methods used to teach shaped their way of understanding, evaluation and responding to the text. They worked in groups where they were directed by the teacher to relate or to evaluate the given textual lines. Hence, in this way the teacher devised strategies which allowed students to draw personal relevance, access each other's experiences and participate more productively in the meaning-making process. This facilitated them to discover deep meaning from the play. They further elaborated that the teacher used to put them in different situations and posed various questions about the characters existential crisis. This activated their intellectual integrity and ability to express their independent judgment. They took teaching methods as appropriate where they were exposed to open up many avenues of exploration.

Four participants exhibited their dissatisfaction by sharing that pedagogical implications were not appropriate as their interest and willingness to engage with the text was not stimulated. Few participants denied having a personal engagement with the play. As one female participant (Laila) remarked, *'The class during the play was solely based on lecture method. I sensed myself completely out of touch and indifferent.'* Participants recommended implementing various pedagogical approaches to help students interact with the texts. Participants' responses also indicate that their textual understanding and literary experiences towards *Waiting for Godot* were influenced by the way teacher interpret the play. Majority of the participants reflected that when it comes to responses, their teacher was concerned more about learning academic responses rather than their own reflections. Teaching approach did not allow participants the freedom to express the meanings they had created as they had read the play. One participant commented, *'Teachers wanted us to see the same layers of meaning in the text that they had seen'* (Participant George). In this context, participants suggested that teacher should focus on how to express an interpretation rather than formulating one. They suggested that teacher should inspire a love of learning among students for better literary exploration and to develop their literary tastes.

5. Discussion

Participants' responses suggest that participants' literary experiences with the play were affected by their educational and social environments. Rosenblatt (1994) also favors that readers construct their own meaning through bringing their individual experiences, social conventions, literary repertoires and contextual values while transacting with the text. After analyzing participants' demographic information and their responses, it is argued that participants from urban background and private institutes were more critical and open in their discussion and reflected their deep textual understanding as compared to those who had rural background and had exposure to public sector institutes. Participants from urban background (Bilal, Charles, George, Hamza, Iqra, Javeria and Ophelia) took the play served as a source of motivation, were more open in their discussion. In contrast to this, participants from rural background were indecisive in their responses and interpreted the play in the context of their religious beliefs took existentialist philosophy as anti-religious. They exhibited that this philosophy is actually posing hard questions about one's existence that enhances skepticism and stimulates obsession with the idea of nothingness. Thus, participants' familial background, educational exposure and social environment were important in informing their interpretations. Rosenblatt (1994) also supports this argument that a reader brings personality traits, his contextual ideas, preoccupations and many other elements that determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text.

Participants' responses also reflect that the play stimulated spirit of inquiry and had the most strikingly profound impact on them. This spirit of posing introspective questions was more evident among male participants. Out of seven, five male participants were more prone to the questioning spirit. Whereas, out of eight, only 3 female participants reflected their spirit of questioning related to one's existence. Thus, gender also served as one of the factors that affected participants' responses. Some male participants reflected that after taking the course, some students who began reading the play with a little knowledge of human existence and life's meaning became skeptical and more critical in discussion. Their understanding was displayed in their perceptive responses. Schrijvers et al. (2017) also favors the impact of

literary education on students' self and social perceptions where readers learn something about themselves and others through literary works: mainly personal characterization of oneself and others.

Styan (1981) and Nealon (1992) commented that the play highlights perplexing issues of hopelessness and anxiety. But participants in the study maintained that the play served as a source of motivation for them. It gives motivation to the participants to be active and progressive in giving meaning to one's life. Participants' getting a sense of motivation from the play actually goes against the views of some scholars as cited in literature review. Graver (2004) projected pessimist interpretation that the play has not outlined any plan of escape from doom. Whereas participants maintained that the play taught them that they can rise up from anything and can completely recreate themselves.

Few male participants expressed change in their perceptions after reading the play as they commented that they have started thinking critically about their choices and power of their decisions that how they can change their life. Participants reflected that the play served as means of self-discovery for them as they found themselves re-examining their constructed self and came to realize that they are responsible for whatever they are today. Grattan (1965) supports the argument as he reflected that Beckett leaves the readers to think deeply on the fundamental questions concerning their existence and purpose of being here in this world.

This spirit of asking introspective questions indicates that the play raised curiosity among participants in which gender was an influential factor. It can be interpreted that it is because of difference of social exposure that males and females are having in Pakistan. Biased social setup, cultural patterns and conservative traditional norms define women's place in houses and men as the breadwinner. Such constraints and impediments have immensely devastating effects on women's lives. It affects women's personality, identity, psychology and even their performance. It kills their critical thinking skills and makes them passive. Such a social setup does not allow any flexibility to women in developing their thoughts. Whereas, males are regarded more valuable to the family, they have their social circles and meet many people around. Their wide exposure to society and meeting many people make them more expressive in sharing their views. Hence, they become more critical and introspective in their nature.

Teaching strategy was also one of the response- affecting factor that helped students to seek a vital personal experience. Beard (2001); Rosenblatt (1994) and Young (1987) also highlight the role of teachers in developing readers' understanding of texts and offering literary responses. It can be interpreted that responses of participants reflect the role of teacher as a great factor in navigating their literary experiences with the play which relate to Martinez and Teale (1993) studies that teachers play a pivotal role in orchestrating students' literary responses. The interactive environment created by the teacher fostered students' ability to articulate their reading and literary experiences.

Participants' responses also reflect that the way teacher approached the play influenced participants' understanding. Participants recommended that since the play touches very sensitive issues, a teacher needs to be neutral and impartial while teaching the play. This relates to Young (1987) views that by removing any partial position from the teacher, the readers can respond freely in their own autonomous ways. This can be interpreted that in our social context and educational culture, teachers occupy a dominant position in classrooms. In most of traditional teaching, teachers do not allow students to speak up their thoughts and ideas. What teachers deliver and how teachers interpret literary texts, students formulate the same interpretations. Hence, it affects students' own creative interpretations related to literature. Participants' responses towards teaching strategies and teachers' ways of interpreting the play suggest that readers' responses and the role of teacher in guiding that response can be a dynamic rewarding experience if pitched appropriately. Clifford (1979) also supports this argument that pedagogical approaches and instructors' interpretation influence readers' responses to literary texts.

The results indicate that reading literary texts can be optimized through aesthetic stance. Such evocation generates diversity of responses among learners. If students become personally involved with literary texts, they would be more likely to attain cognitive and

affective goals. It provides a signboard for articulation of readers' personal responses to the world.

6. Conclusion

The study reveals that participants' responses towards existentialist themes were affected by their social exposure and educational background. It also highlights that participants connected to existentialist themes that were very close to their own life experiences and observations which was expected in light of Rosenblatt (1994). It also reflects that the play raised sense of questioning more among male participants. The study also highlights the role of teachers in developing students' responses towards literary texts.

Recognizing the limitations of the study, it explores importance in further developing this area of research to incorporate students' responses to literary texts. The participants consisted of an age group that ranged 19-22. Future research can also be done on postgraduate students to check if age also serves as a response affecting factor. This study has focused on a single play. Research scope on the same area can be further extended to highlight perceptions of students to other literary works. This study has no gender specific sampling. The results showed that male participants were having more questioning spirit than female respondents. Future research may yield more conclusive findings and can be done to have comparative analysis among responses of male and female respondents to have consideration of gender as a response affecting factor in literary interpretations.

The findings have brought some implications in the context of literary pedagogy. It is suggested that teachers should encourage students to interact with the text and draw individual responses. Teaching strategies should be devised in a way that moves readers towards critical appreciation of the text. It should allow students to access each other's experiences and participate more productively in meaning-making process. It also recommends that teaching should focus on how to express an interpretation rather than formulating one. Participants' responses also signal for curriculum designers. The results indicate that learners' active engagement with literary texts depend on thematic relevance of the work. Hence, it is recommended that curriculum designers should focus on the works that are thematically relatable to readers' experiences and observation. Thus, to strengthen learners' connection with literary texts, works should be selected having consideration over the themes and contextual proximity.

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