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## Crossing the Borders: Beckett in the Eastern World

### Abstract:

*Beckettian scholars are of the view that Beckett is an autonomous artist and has never been a religious scholar, so his works should be read as an artistic expression without using any 'religious barometer. Beckett's obsessed quest about theology and his selected plethora of references about Christianity and God almost always capture the attention of critics by encouraging them to read Beckett through a religious angle. Such a stance of Beckett leads the scholars to categorise him as a secular writer who freely deals with religious themes. It is interesting to note that most of Beckett's religious scholarship revolves around Christianity and Western critical traditions. This means that Beckett's connection with other religions or religious traditions has been overlooked. This paper examines Beckett's attachment with religions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. In conclusion, the paper advocates that Beckett was aware of Eastern religious traditions..*

### Key Words:

Artistic, Religious Barometer, Holy Belief

### Introduction

The multiplication of Beckett critical industry finds its roots in the success of *Waiting for Godot*. Since then, Samuel Beckett has been the focus of attention and interest in the critical arena. Beckett scholars, time and again, claim that Beckett has secured a prominent niche in the literary world due to his keen interest in the complicated relationship between humanity and the universe. [Helene E. Baldwin\(1983\)](#), in this respect, avows that though Beckett has always remained unaffiliated with any publicly renowned group or theorists, his works stand on their own, and he sings nothing but 'the dies Irae of the human race.' Also, David Hesla as cited in [Cohn, R. \(1972\)](#). *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* by David H. Hesla. *Modern Drama* notes that 'for all its dialectical brilliance, its logical elegance, its symmetrical proportions, and its painful self-consciousness, Beckett's art is profoundly and essentially human.' He illustrates that the human characters of Beckett's world are phenomenally contrary to his art. Beckett's characters represent humanity as a vividly worthless, overtly gloomy, frantically meaningless, and asymmetrically disproportionate creation of this world. They are part of this universe but look completely alienated and consistently face the challenge of hovering over disintegration.

In simple terms, Beckett's projection of human experience is bitter and utterly dark. As a writer, none can go far beyond Beckett's brilliant art — virtuosic, identical with

unparalleled brilliance. Also, none can produce characters who may go terminally lower than any of Beckett's characters. Focusing on religious tendencies in Beckett, [Connor \(2014\)](#) suggests that we explore 'what is all this religion doing in Beckett?', instead of examining, 'what religion is there in Beckett?'. Accordingly, this point becomes the starting point of exploring Beckett to determine whether the apt exploitation of religious material is to convey his dissatisfaction with religious belief or his scepticism about the relevance of sacred language, which is not capable of coping with human miseries. A succession of scholars has systematically striven to explore the value of religious material, and by the end, the concluding remarks have divided scholars into

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opposing groups. Beckett's artistic mastery frustrates scholars and leads to elusiveness, which transcends the 'certainty of meanings,' and it is considered the crucial part of his oeuvre. In other words, his oeuvre, per se, fails to yield clear, rational and concluding implications but can evoke intriguing understandings. As a result, he can neither be excluded entirely from nor be included in religious boundaries.

## Literature Review

Theologically oriented critics like [Athanasopoulou \(2000\)](#) are keen to import their own theological ideas to Beckett's texts in order to demonstrate his positive behaviour towards religion. David Hesla's *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of Art of Samuel Beckett* and Colin Duckworth's *Angels of Darkness: Dramatic Effect in Beckett and Ionesco* are keen to assess 'how' and 'in which way' Beckett's language transfers religious meanings. John Pilling's *Samuel Beckett* and Eugene Webb's *The Dark Dove: The Sacred and Secular in Modern Literature* reject all proclamations about Beckett's lack of interest in religion. More prominently, [Duckworth \(2000\)](#). Beckett and the Missing Sharer. *Samuel Beckett Today* declares, 'God is absent in Beckett's works and the world, but not absent from it.' This group postulates that religious meanings in the texts are deferred. For them, the use of theology as a material for his fiction demonstrates his deep concern with the relationship between man and God. Moreover, his pessimistic behaviour is, in fact, a courageous one where he explores the possibility of hope as he suggests, 'You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.' ([Beckett, 2009](#)) This group believes that Beckett encourages us to explore the possibilities while not losing hope, 'Try again. Fail again. Fail Better.' ([Beckett, 2014](#)) Fail and fail better — is a kind of revolt or the dignity of man's perseverance. Following this lead, Colin Duckworth does not lag behind and states, 'Beckett constantly denies any religious faith and derides God, and yet is so obsessed by God the idea of God that his writings are full of deiform figures and religious concerns.' ([Duckworth, 2000](#)). Depending on Beckett's use of theological symbols and allusions, this group, in fact, mostly strives to 'fit' Beckett into 'theist frame' by ignoring the symbolic 'theological symbols and allusions' that intimate, immediate anti-religious assertions.

The proliferating Beckett critical industry has mostly examined Beckett through Western critical, political, and philosophical traditions or perspectives. Likewise, as we have seen in the critical works of Helene E. Baldwin, Mary Bryden, Jean Onimus, Shira Wolosky, Gabriel Vahnian, and Marius Bunning, Beckett's use of the word *religion* and religious material have primarily been understood through the Christian lens. Beckett produced his works in the West, and this factor might have allowed Beckett scholars to feel comfortable in seeing Beckett's works in familiar contexts. Accordingly, a considerable bulk of Beckett scholarship finds its roots in Western intellectual traditions where Christianity holds its sway. It has also shown that most of Beckett's religious scholarship revolves around Christianity and Western critical traditions. Although Beckett had to face instances of censorship in his early phase, these days, a Western reader may hardly feel any issue in reading writers like Beckett. However, Beckett's reception and relation cannot be the same in different cultures. This chapter examines the exploration of Beckett concerning other religions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. However, the second section mainly strives to create a link between Beckett and the Eastern world.

## Data Analysis

### Beckett's Relation with Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism

Buddhism is an important religious tradition, and we see instances of Buddhist influence in early Beckett's works. Buddhism played a significant role in Beckett's early fiction and critical writings, with the heavy pessimism of the *Proust* monograph showing signs of debt to Schopenhauer's Buddhist-influenced theories of the 'will to live, and Murphy's studies with his 'swami' offering, perhaps, a satire on W. B. Yeats's explorations of Eastern philosophy ([Feldman, 2009](#)). However, the critics hardly noticed such an evident eastern influence on Beckett, or they might have overlooked it for other imperative reasons. Even famous Beckett's biographies show no trace of Buddhist influence on Beckett. However, they were aware of the inspiration that

Schopenhauer had had on Beckett ([Knowlson, 1997](#)). John Calder perceived Beckett's handling of a Buddhist philosophy about 'the denigration or merging of the individual self into the whole nature of the cosmos.' ([Calder, 2018](#)). He contends that Beckett was afraid of the concept of returning to life again, and this caused him to adopt spiritualist and Buddhist traditions. John Calder does not hesitate to say that 'Murphy, who is in search of nirvana, is Beckett's most Buddhist creation.' In fact, he strives to establish that by merging different elements of various religions, Beckett has invented his own philosophy of life. At the same time, his focus is on the point that 'Although Beckett constantly stated his lack of any religious belief, he never called himself an atheist.' However, his reading of Beckett through spiritual and Buddhist traditions initiated a way to explore a possible link between Beckettian oeuvre and the East as well as the eastern religions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. The recent efforts of Paul Foster, Lidan Lin, Andy Wimbush, Pavneet Kaur, and others have advanced such kinds of developments in the Beckett Scholarship. Undoubtedly, it is a much-needed change to read Beckett through an eastern prism by looking at him beyond the philosophical and rational constructs of the West.

Paul Foster is a central point of reference as he associates Beckett with Zen Buddhism and offers plenty of parallels to prove the affinity. He has mainly focused on tracing the similarity of themes in Beckett and Buddhism to note the mutual influence. He explores this association in *Proust* by recognising that the dilemma of suffering humanity that always runs through in Beckett's novels as a predominant theme is related to a spiritual problem. He claims that desire is 'the basic motivation in all human beings in seeking satisfaction and that the situation of suffering and dissatisfaction 'is brought about by desire (Beckett's hypothetical imperative). ([Foster, 1989](#)). In other words, he portrays desire as an inherent and motivating factor as it encourages people to satisfy their cravings. If the desire is not fulfilled, then it brings anguish. In a way, he advocates that it is not the fault of man for being born with a desire, it is inherited, but he is to suffer due to the sin he has never committed. Thus, desire falls in the same category in which the concept of original sin sits. However, if someone overcomes desire, he will overcome his suffering too. That is what Buddhist philosophy teaches to followers. [Leopardi\(2013\)](#) writes in 'A se stesso', '*In noi di cari inganni, / Non che la speme, il desiderio è spento*.' Beckett quotes it in *Proust*, 'the wisdom of all sages, from Brahma to Leopardi, the wisdom that consists of not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire.' ([Beckett, 2013](#)).

In *How It Is*, we find a similar idea that qualifies the Buddhists' ideology, 'I too will renounce I will have no more desires.' The shunning of desire is the very idea of Buddhism, and Paul Foster, through this similarity of theme, establishes the link of Beckett with Buddhism. Foster attentively explores the similarity of ideas in Buddhism and Beckett. Nonetheless, he avoids tracing the roots of this eastern knowledge in Beckett. Thus, he fails to inform us about Beckett's stance on Buddhist traditions. If Beckett was aware of Buddhist traditions, how did Beckett come to know about them, and why did he use this in his oeuvre?

From Matthew Feldman's rigorous study of Beckett's early readings in religion and philosophy, we learn the full extent of the young Beckett's engagement with Schopenhauer's work. Schopenhauer was a great critic of western rationalist philosophy, and this caused him to move toward Eastern intellectual traditions. Feldman believes that Beckett owed an enormous intellectual debt to Schopenhauer from 1930 onward. He quotes a Beckett's letter to McGreevy in which he speaks of reading Schopenhauer, 'it is a pleasure to find a philosopher that can be read like a poet, with an entire indifference to the a priori form; of verification.' ([Feldman, 2009](#)). Feldman finds it exciting and thinks that Beckett was so fond of Schopenhauer that he even addressed him, *dear Arthur*. This exploration provides a clue about Beckett's source of inspiration. Lidan Lin and Pavneet Kaur believe that Buddhism and Hinduism profoundly influenced Arthur Schopenhauer. Pavneet Kaur argues that Arthur Schopenhauer 'owes much to the Eastern philosophies of Buddhism and Vedas.' ([Feldman, 2009](#)).

[Lin\(2010\)](#) strives to fill in the missing detail about Beckett's eastern source of knowledge by exploring the presence of eastern religious traditions, particularly Buddhism, Hinduism, and Chinese Taoism, in Beckett's works. She claims the eastern influence in Schopenhauer's works not only came from 'India and Japan' but also from 'China.' Yet, the 'Chinese influence on Beckett has until now remained unexplored.' She postulates

that Beckett's biographers and scholars alike find that Schopenhauer had an influence on Beckett but fails to elucidate what kind of impact it was. The critics, according to her, also do not identify the eastern influence on Schopenhauer's knowledge. Here, she postulates that Beckett's knowledge about the East comes from Schopenhauer, who was highly influenced by eastern culture. She contends that Schopenhauer, along with his love for Plato and Kant, was a devotee of Hindu mysticism and Chinese Taoism. According to her, Schopenhauer demonstrates this inspiration in *The World as Will and Idea*. She further claims that Beckett was fond of *The World as Will and Idea*, he had read again and again. She finds its visible and observable influence in Beckett's *Proust* and 'Henri Hayden, homme-peintre.' Her essay suggests that mysticism was the main element that impressed Beckett's thought. She notes that Beckett was attracted to:

Buddha's idea of being and non-being as mutually inclusive and exclusive, the Hindu notion of the identity of the inner and the outer reality, the mystic purity of Chinese music, and the Taoist notion of pure men. (Lin, 2010)

She opines that Beckett's knowledge about the East was self-study, but his genius allowed him to appropriate eastern wisdom in his oeuvre. She quotes reasonable similarities and facts, and her essay offers new information to understand the relationship between Beckett and traditional eastern knowledge. She states with conviction that Beckett was introduced to Buddhism and Hinduism by Schopenhauer's works. However, Laloy and Giles provided him with Chinese cultural sources that Beckett used to produce *Proust*, 'Alba, Dortmund', and *Dream*. (Lin, 2010) This statement reads as though Lin puts herself into Beckett's shoes and speaks on his behalf, and this creates doubts over her claims. The similarities and references, she quotes, are significant but are unable to qualify the idea that Beckett was adopting them for a conscious purpose. However, it may be argued that he exploited the indirect knowledge he had about the various eastern traditions. Thus, Lin's claims need a further investigation that may bring more unambiguous evidence to extend the horizons of Beckett scholarship.

Andy Wimbush goes a step forward and traces the influence of Ernst Haeckel along with Arthur Schopenhauer on Beckett and explores it in *How It Is*. He argues that 'the doctrine of reincarnation, common to Buddhism and Hinduism, provides Beckett with an Asian counterpart to the theodicies of Dante, Milton, and Bible' (Wimbush, 2013). He hypothesises that Beckett was aware of Ernst Haeckel's *Indische Reisebriefe (A Visit to Ceylon)*, in which he talks of his experiences about Buddhism and Hinduism. He contends that John Calder, Paul Davies, Paul Foster, and John Kundert-Gibbs failed in tracing allusions to Buddhist sources within Beckett. According to him, a reference to the eastern sage in the Buddhist tradition is apparent in 'squatting in the deep shade of a tomb or a bo his fists clenched on his knees. Ernst Haeckel calls this tree 'bo-gaha' or 'Buddha tree.' He also mentions that a Buddhist influence is detectable in *Act without Words*, but Beckett refused to accept or negate it by saying, 'I know nothing about Buddhism. If it's presented in the play, it is unbeknownst to me.' (Wimbush, 2013). That is a classic Beckettian answer; he neither negates nor affirms any assertions. However, it should be noted, whether he accepts it or not, that the scholars' attempts to trace the eastern knowledge in his work succeeds in establishing the fact that Beckett was aware of eastern philosophy and religions.

Here, it is pertinent to mention that the Chinese influence on Beckett can be clearly seen in the early poetry and fiction, especially in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, with its emphasis in particular on Chinese music. It demonstrates that Beckett responds to Chinese culture; mainly, he is interested in Chinese religious music Shinto, which originated in Japan. Although Beckett deals with Chinese music, his understanding of Chinese music is superficial and simplified.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that the above discussion highlights that the diligent works of prominent scholars like Paul Foster, Lidan Lin and Andy Wimbush have not only provided us with the pieces of evidence that Beckett was aware of the Eastern religious traditions but also paved a new way of reading Beckett through

a different paradigm—the Eastern religious lens. Notably, this examination suggests that Beckett’s familiarity with traditional eastern knowledge enriches his texts with new themes, and provides scholars with more paths to tread. However, it appears that the indirect oriental effect on Beckett was superficial and straightforward because Beckett being impressed and familiar with the Eastern traditions, music and the Eastern religions make the readings of his texts more holistic but not religious ones.

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