

Godot and the Gate: A Comparative Study of Dystopia in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*

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Abstract: Dystopian novels have taken different shapes and different significance across the world in different periods. These texts are set in an imagined space where the everyday present reality is turned into grim and cruel absurdness. *Waiting for Godot* (1955) by Samuel Beckett and *The Gate* (2015) by Basma Abdel Aziz reveals a similar kind of situation. *Waiting for Godot* depicts the meaninglessness of post-war Europe while Basma Abdel Aziz exposes the failures of the ideas of the Arab-Spring in the post-Mubarak Period. The proposed research will compare and analyze the two texts to understand the concept of dystopia by tracing the significance of images both the texts display. The paper will be divided into three parts, with the first looking into the imageries of the 'Gate' in the Abdel Aziz and *Godot* in Beckett and how they represent the peculiarity of an ideal state. The second part will compare and analyse the imageries of 'waiting' and the 'queue' to understand the futility of existence in a heavily surveilled state and the third through the imagery of the 'Disgraceful Events' and the World War II will seek to understand.

Keywords: Dystopia, Samuel Beckett, Basma Abdel Aziz, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Queue*

The Arab Spring came with a lot of hopes and prospect of changes in the Arab world starting from Morocco to Bahrain. Mass movements across Arab countries unpredictably reached a new height when Tunisian youths for the first time have demonstrated to oust the autocratic president Zine El Abedin. People demanded an end to regime and wanted the government to address issues like economic crisis, low quality of living, better health policies, jobs for youths, better educational facilities etc. Soon the wave spread to other Arab countries notably in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Palestine, Iraq and some other Arab countries. Interestingly, in most of the Arab countries, autocracy prevailed for a long time and although they have seen small-scale protests but it was not as large as it was seen in post to December 2010.

The Arab Spring proved to be good for certain countries like Tunisia, Jordan or Oman where the rulers agreed to step down or introduced reforms which did not led to bloodshed at the end. A few countries like Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq have faced the most unfortunate result where those countries have entered almost a decade long civil war and mass destruction. In Tunisia the president Zine El Abidin left his office and fled to Saudi Arabia; Hosni Mubarak in Egypt resigned, Yemeni president Abdullah Saleh resigned. Although it brought major changes in Sudan and Iraq later on but only to retract the decisions to resign by respective leaders Omar Bashir and Nuri Al-Maliki. Uniquely, Egypt is a country where the movements and subsequent events to it were most dramatic.

Aspirations of “long revolution” a popular slogan during October 2011 demonstrations in Egypt propagated by a Facebook page led to a mass protest in Tahrir Square. Significantly, after the resignation of Mubarak, the army ceased the power suspended the constitution and dissolved the parliament and lifting of 31-year-old emergency. Democratic elections were held to replace Mubarak as a president; but Mohamad Morsi was elected as the new president. Hosni Mubarak and his former interior minister Habib el-Adly were sentenced to life in prison on the basis of their failure to stop the killings during the first six days of 2011 revolution. His successor, Mohamed Morsi, was sworn in as Egypt's first democratically elected president before judges at the Supreme Constitutional Court. But fresh protests erupted again on 22 November 2012. On 3 July 2013, the military overthrew the replacement government and President Morsi was removed from power (Wiki). This was precisely the backdrop when Basma Abdel Aziz penned the novel *The Queue* or *Al Quun* in Arabic to be translated by Elizabeth Jaquette and published in 2016.

The novel starts with Yehya Saad el Ghab who is hit by a stray bullet while returning from his office. It was the incident of Disgraceful Events when the youth of the country had started protesting against the authority which is controlling the country, the Gate---a gate, just a gate. Interesting to note that Basma Abdel Aziz does not indicate to us which country is it or is it a country at all. But names, streets, characters all seems very familiar---it is Egypt or any other Arab country which has suffered long years of dictatorship under charismatic and popular leaders. When Yehya went to Zephyr Hospital, one of the government-run hospitals in the district, he was told to seek a permission from the Gate and a Certificate of True Citizenship to remove the bullet. Authorization to remove bullets shall not be given until a citizen proved to be loyal to the Gate, representing the country. He, along with Nagy his friend and Amani his lover started the process to secure a permission and a certificate from the Gate and they all stand in a queue leading up to the booth of the Gate.

To their surprise, they learn that the queue is not ending but rather growing. In fact, two micro-buses have been deployed to manage the crowd from the districts to the queue. The queue resembles a man's existence in a country ruled by an extremely autocratic government. People have been standing in the queue for days and nights. People around the queue seem to have developed a habit of standing in the queue; their whole life and existence is translocated with the queue. Gradually, the queue become the central focus. The novel not only reveals severe inhumane state of excessive documentation burdening the life of common man in post-Spring Egypt, but also reveals the crude side of heavy documentation in a modern nation in general. Gradually the novelist takes the opportunity to introduce different characters with significant and symbolic role. The characters exhibit different characteristics which is very normal as a human being, but Abdel Aziz did not forget to indicate a relation of theirs with the Gate. She suggests that in a heavily surveilled nation where humane needs may bring people in distress closer to each other but nobody could not be trusted. Anybody could be a spy employed by the authority, be it willingly or forcefully. Um Mabrouk is such a character. Although she has nothing to do with the politics in the state, but she becomes an inevitable part of the gate's existence through the queue. Um Mabrouk is the very common women who is not very much educated and lives her live with much difficulty. As a single mother and apart from taking care

of her family she not only has to care for her family but also to stand in the Queue to get a permit for her daughter's operation. Eventually she could not obtain it and her elder daughter had died. Even after her death, Um Mabrouk had to obtain a death certificate to show it as a proof in order to provide medical facilities for her second daughter whose health is deteriorating.

As we move on, we see how several people are managing to adjust themselves with the queue. While standing in queue Um Mabrouk soon opened a makeshift shop in the queue and starts selling mint tea attracting a lot of customers. She does not go home, rather the circumstances in the queue have forced to create home in the queue. People actually started living in the queue, they do not have home; there is no mention of their home or whereabouts. The man in the galabeya is one of the interesting characters in the queue. He lingers around the queue all the time preaching people and calling people to the path of God. The man in galabeya was the first person to embrace the High Sheikh's Fatwa regarding boycott of a candy company because they were using candies to produce chocolates with Gods name inscribed in it and it is blasphemous. The Man in galabeya took a microphone and stood alongside the queue, read the statement aloud from the copy of the High Sheikh's Fatwa. Mahfouz and Shalaby two former security guards worked with the Gate are the representatives of the autocrat government where they do not understand anything apart from orders from the top. In fact, Shalaby thought of slapping Ines when she justified the death of Mahfouz because he shot during the Disgraceful Events and it killed protesters.

In this novel, we see a complete re-alignment of religious fundamentalism autocracy and going together hand in hand. Interestingly, the Gate does not go against religion and religion does not oppose the Gate. Supports and understanding coming from both the sides are mutual. Abdel Aziz laid substantial lights on religious fundamentalism in the novel. How by some people religion is manipulated and people made to believe in things delivered by the High Sheikh and the man in galabeya. They announce: "A believer who is weak in faith, and does not join his brothers, is guilty of a sin, which shall be weighed on the Judgement Day. This sin can be absolved by fasting, or by making seven consecutive phone calls, each one not separated by more than a month" (Chapter Four).

Having understood the background and proposition of Basma Abdel's novel, we propose to bring Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) for a comparative study to understand the concept of dystopia in the Arab world post to 2010. Although it is a comparative study between the two texts, this paper will mainly focus on the *Queue* primarily because it is a lesser known text and much have not been talked about dystopia from/in Arab world. In this paper we shall argue how Abdel Aziz attempts to rewrite reality through absurdity of characters, events, actions and settings in her novel in the Post-Spring Egypt or rather the Arab world compared with post-war Europe as depicted in Beckett. In this novel, apart from an Orwellian situation where we see the Big Brother as the Gate, the absurdity of existence is extremely important. We further argue that the experience of living in Post-Arab Spring Arab world is no less absurd than living in a meaninglessness world of Godot, the Europe after devastating World War II. The aim of the paper is to analyse and compare the two texts in order to get a better picture of

the concept of dystopia by tracing the captivating images presented in the two texts. Dystopian fiction is a genre of speculative fiction that explores social and political structures. In both the selected works we see interplay between society and politics. *Waiting for Godot* can be called a dystopia because of the purposeless waiting for the unknown and *The Queue* can be seen as one because of the way the government treats its citizens and the absurd gate and its permits.

The situational similarities between the texts are less. But what connects the texts is the background and the aftermath which could be taken as a starting point of our research. The two literary works are completely different. They belong to different ages, genre, languages, cultures, time and of course different contexts. But what exactly connects the two texts? The Absurdity of the situation. As the play perfectly reveals the absurdity of existence the novel by Basma Abdel Aziz also unveils absolute absurdity of a twenty-first century dystopic nation-state where Yehya had to get a permit from the Gate to remove a bullet lodged in his body a few days back. Eventually, in the process of securing a permission paper from the Gate, Aziz introduces swarms of people waiting outside in queue for various reason---for hospital concession, to travel, start a new business etc. Interestingly, the queue is not moving up, rather it is getting longer and people seem to have started a new lifestyle where they developed a habit of accommodating with the queue as a part of their existence---existence in the post-Arab Spring Arab world; more precisely in Egypt which has seen a drastic change in authoritative power.

The way Vladimir and Estragon spend their days in a “country road. A tree” is no different from Yehya or women with the short hair waiting in the queue for the gate to open to opt a Certificate for True Citizenship. Here if we try to understand the landscape, we must remember how the European countryside was devastated during the war. In the same way, the modern city mentioned in the *Queue* is somehow dry and ruthless and unreal but this unreality cannot be rejected as a fiction. Pozzo and his slave Lucky and their absurd behaviour too is no less different than Um Mabrouk who later on builds a shop in the queue and it became the center for gossips and the woman with the short hair who first initiated the Boycott Violet Telecom later turned out to be an absolute religious after the fatwa by the High Sheikh and the man in the galabeya who was constantly preaching in the queue. The spaces, the characters and actions in the play are dystopian whereas in the same way the *Queue*, people standing the queue and related to it somehow and other are very much dystopian. Waiting in the queue and waiting for Godot becomes synonymous when hope against hope becomes a major turn in the text.

The Gate is the central force in the novel which controls and dominates each and every man and action in the novel. The control of the Gate goes far more beyond the Big Brother of Orwell’s in terms of absurdity and murkiness of the situation. In this novel the Gate is nameless, faceless. Although it is a single entity, it has so many branches and parts to help it. The Disgraceful Events are failed popular uprising organized by the frustrated educated youth but the Gate was soon able to manage the situation by opening fire at the protestants, secret killings, prosecutions, and denying medication to the wounded like as Yehya’s. It could be one of the reasons that Yehya was denied any treatment because the authorities have suspected that he was also a part of the protest, although Dr. Tarek at the Zephyr was eager to treat Yehya. But

soon he faced the wrath of the Gate when an investigating officer visited him in the hospital. In the report published by the Gate, it termed the protest movement as the “Disgraceful Events” and it “took a violent turn to damage public property.”

It is not just Yehya who was hit with a bullet, there were so many people who are lodged with many bullets in their body and waiting to be operated in the Zephyr Hospital. The murkiness and absurdity of the situation becomes tense as Aziz with her unique narrative technique showed that the wounded men are not getting treatments but they are not dying as well. Strangely they are alive with a bullet (or many bullets) in their bodies. Even Yehya could not be operated on the fourth day. They had to wait so much that the bleeding had stopped and wound covered from outside and the end of the novel see Yehya buying lots of painkillers and in fact those painkillers are the sole solace he can get under such a circumstance. Amani has tried to get an x-ray copy of Yehya’s document from the hospital but she is caught and taken into prison. Perhaps she is raped and tortured. She does not pick up Yehya’s calls anymore nor does she meet anybody. Eventually Yehya could find the x-ray reports from the lady in the reception but she refused to have any files on June 18th as it was the date of the Disgraceful Events. Next time Yehya and Amani visits the Gate only to see the Gate has displayed a huge picture of them in an attempt to segregate them from the processes of obtaining certificates and permissions. Although the Gate make so many promises but it never opened and people in the queue kept on waiting till the end of the novel. Yehya’s wound becomes deep and blood is coming out with this urine now. But still he was not able to manage to remove the bullet from his pelvis and with such an absurd note the novel ends.

In chapter four the absurdity of the situation takes a twist where the past acts of Yehya are kept on record by the officials at the Zephyr Hospital and certain acts by him termed as “rebellious.” Because as seen in *square* more than once and there was no reason to be there. Sabah a nurse working with the Hospital got threatened from a very influential man in high position not to ask questions who has been helping the bullet victims relentlessly. Through the free services given by Violent Telecom it started recording people’s conversation in the queue and sending it back to the Gate: The Gate wanted to analyse them to know which of citizens possess more threat to their authority. Ehab had reported that all of them are under surveillance which was confirmed by Ines, other women standing in the Queue, people realized this and started boycotting the telecom. Interestingly, newspapers have not reported the boycott of the Violet Telecom but they reported other sorts of boycott led by Fatwa and Rationalizations Committee which is headed by the High Sheikh. We see an absolute decree of Fundamentalism when we Shalaby believing in the report by the Fatwa team where the word God could be seen in a candy and which was publicly destroyed and people looked at it with awe and praised the god. And eventually they rejoined by the man in galabeya, Um Mabrouk, Shalaby and Mrs. Alfat another women standing in the queue. By the end of the chapter The Booth, when people are getting angry over the gate and in a process to start a fresh protest, the Gate is using all its powers physical and diplomatic to suppress the uprising and divert the attention of the public.

Dystopia in the Arab World

Godot never appears, Gate never opens. An attempt to find meaning of the search for Godot and standing in the queue will be the same--absurdity, meaninglessness. But this meaninglessness or absurdity has become a part of living in a war-torn Europe and Post-Spring Arab world, more precisely in Egypt. Normally, an easy parallel could be drawn between *1984* and the *Queue* where the surveillance of a totalitarian state penetrated even the very personal life of an individual. But in fact, the Queue goes beyond that. Interestingly, Abdel Aziz did not forget to suggest that the world has moved far beyond and technology has become the sole tool of a totalitarian regime to spy on its citizens moreover, involvement of a foreign hand in the Disgraceful Events or uprisings against the government is always treated in the same way. It takes less effort to suggest that the situations in the gate is not only self-controlled by also remote-controlled. Needless to say, the USA, France, England and some other European countries have always had a role to play in the Arab world, notably in Algeria, Libya and some other countries.

The Arab world witnessed numerous bloodsheds, colonization, neo-colonization, coups, assassinations, invasions, civil wars, popular movements, cultural movements and there is no end to it. Although Hamid Dabashi in his book *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (2012) claimed that the Arab Spring brought to a real end of colonialism in the Arab world but in our understanding, it actually has brought with its chilling neo-colonialism. The effect of the Arab Spring could still be seen in Syria and Iraq where the ISI militia still trying to hold their ground resulting in mass destruction, loss of millions of lives and mass displacements. As a result, the hope of living in a better (Arab) world is shrouded in uncertainty. The situations in the novel is not only similar to those of in *Waiting for Godot*, rather it is very much akin to all modern nation states in the era of Post-Truth and manufactured consent where centralized power, military coups, rise of right wing and neo-fascism throughout the world and characters like the man in the galabeya or Shalaby has become a very common reality.

Notes

As we are using Kindle book for Abdel Aziz's novel there is no page no. as such, therefore we have not indicated the page number here but the location of quotations could be brought up in case of any requirement.

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