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SAMUEL BECKETT: WORDMASTER
'WAITING FOR GODOT'

TEXT WITH CRITICAL
COMMENTARY

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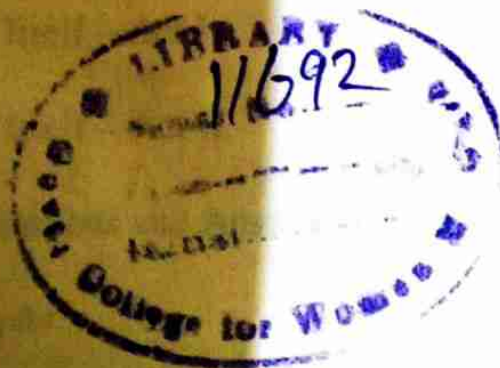
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*For my parents
who taught me how to live
and
for my sons, Mekaal and Faraz
to whom I have tried to pass on these teachings*



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PREFACE

For the past two decades at least, my heart has been in my Shakespearean studies. I have always as a student and as a teacher, enjoyed learning about Shakespeare. Why then, have I chosen to attempt this work on Beckett? Firstly, because when I began to read Beckett, I realized that he takes us one step nearer disaster, pushing us over the edge of the cliff; whereas Shakespeare stops at the edge. He leaves you peering over, conscious of the disaster, but also aware that you have just managed to avoid it. Secondly, there is such an outpouring of material available on Shakespeare, it is daunting to write anything more on him. In Pakistan there is very little critical material available on Beckett. I have written this for Pakistani students at the postgraduate level.

In my experience as a teacher, I have found that our students find Beckett very difficult to comprehend. This is because they have almost no exposure to modern theatre. Therefore, moving away from a traditional concept of drama becomes very difficult for them. I have stressed the play's flexibility and its ability to reflect issues as germane to us in Pakistan as anywhere else in the world.

I am aware—as indeed is every literature teacher—that 'guide books' exist on every text. I am also aware that student's rely heavily on these in their examinations. Partly because, first, they lack confidence in their own English and are never encouraged to express their own views. Second, local examiners are used to the style of these guides and the 'set' answers they provide. I can only add my voice to every teacher before me who has pleaded with students not to use these outdated books.

My aim in writing this book is for you to read it and gain some understanding of what Beckett has done in *Waiting for Godot* and then go on to discover Beckett for yourself. Literature is a great river, but like all great rivers it is constantly fed by

new streams of writing, new interpretations of old themes and new theories about classical texts. There is always something new waiting in literature. Never be afraid to respond to the text. Let it speak to you.

This is not the only way to look at the play. It is only a guide to show you one pathway. With a text as complex as *Godot*, there cannot be only one road to understanding.

I owe thanks to several people. Firstly, my students over the years, whose insights into and problems with Beckett, inspired this effort. Secondly, my husband for his encouragement and practical help in getting me critical material. Thirdly, my son Faraz who gave up valuable computer time to go through the text with me repeatedly for errors; who typed all this and who once refused to get me a particular book on Beckett. His view was that having read four or five critics should give anyone enough material to understand the basics. After that, you have to listen to your heart.

I have tried to do this.

Ira Hasan

Lahore

February 2000

1 WHO IS SAMUEL BECKETT?

*'For Beckett does not come from nowhere: he is very much a writer of his time, shaped by the forces of his time to speak to the new audience of his time.'*¹

People who have heard of Beckett have usually done so through *Waiting for Godot*. There is no doubt it is this play which made him famous. The play was written around 1949/50 and published three years later in October 1952 and its English version was published in 1954. Britain saw its first performance in 1955 and America in 1956. Since that time rumours about Beckett have been rife. He seemed to be an odd-ball. He did not give interviews, did not answer mail, did not like photographers. He was supposed to be Irish, yet he wrote in French. He also had some sort of connection with James Joyce. Everything he wrote seemed to confirm early opinion—that Beckett thought of the human race as refuse—and expressed it explicitly by placing actors in rubbish bins!

In the early 1960s, criticism on Beckett consisted largely of rumour and speculation and few critical studies of any depth were in the offing. Ruby Cohn, one of the first to see Beckett's genius, mentions that when she first tried to publish criticism on his work, her efforts were rejected with the publisher's comment 'We like your criticism but we don't feel your author merits publishing space.'² By the end of the 60s, however, things changed. Partly because critics themselves began to see what Beckett was doing and, partly, their eyes were opened forcibly when Beckett won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. The Swedish Academy said he was being honoured for his new forms of the novel and drama about 'the destitution of modern man'. Be that as it may, more than a hundred books and over 5000 articles on Beckett are in print today.