

# Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

ISSN 0975-2935

[www.rupkatha.com](http://www.rupkatha.com)

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Volume VII, Number 2, 2015

Themed Issue on

“Desire and Deceit: India in the Europeans’ Gaze”

*In collaboration with*

Imagology Centre, University of Alba-Iulia, Romania

Guest Editors

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|-----|-------------|--|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1   | 21100201709 | Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies<br>in Humanities | 0.313        | 0.034       | 0.1         | 0.271        | 0.038       | 0.116       | 0.061        | 0.007       | 0.101       |

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# The Metempsychotic Birds: An Exploration of Samuel Beckett's Allusions to the Upanishads

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## Abstract

This paper discusses references made to Indian culture and philosophy in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, tracing them back to their sources via Arthur Schopenhauer. The allusions induce a rethinking of the conventional Cartesian interpretation of *Murphy*, and reconsider the usage of compulsive voice and situational irony within the novel from an Upanishadic point of view. The paper then analyses *Waiting for Godot*, and questions whether Beckett might have effaced his early allusions to Indian religious thought or could he have ironically personified the Upanishadic allegory of dualism as Vladimir and Estragon confined to a stage containing a single tree?

[**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett, Indian philosophy, Upanishads, dualism, allegory]

## Establishing Textual Parallels

In his German letter dated 7 July 1937, Samuel Beckett notes, "For in the forest of symbols that are no symbols, the birds of interpretation, that is no interpretation, are never silent" (Beckett 2009: 519). He writes this in a context where he appears to censure people, critics in particular, or the birds of interpretation, as being "hard of hearing" and incapable of remaining silent. This paper magnifies Beckett's choice of words and considers whether he might have allowed these birds of interpretation to travel through his first published novel *Murphy* and into his later play *Waiting for Godot*.

In another letter dated 17 July 1936, Samuel Beckett writes that he chose to keep *Murphy*'s "death subdued and go on as coolly and finish as briefly as possible [. . .] because it seemed to me to consist better with the treatment of *Murphy* throughout, with the mixture of compassion, patience, mockery and 'tat twam asi' that I seem to have directed on him

throughout" (Beckett 1983: 102). Whilst *Murphy* along with Beckett's other works have yielded various critical exegeses vis-à-vis themes ranging from humour, ethics and aesthetics, scholars have so far largely ignored the phrase *tat twam asi*, loosely translated as "that you are", originally from the Chandogya Upanishad. Based on empirical evidence from Beckett's letters and the *Whoroscope* notebook, past critics have observed that Beckett adopted the phrase from the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, without intending any direct reference to Indian thought. As John Pilling notes for example, by the time Beckett began writing *Murphy*, his grasp of Schopenhauer had become "second nature", so much so that he dispensed with specific references (Pilling 1992: 14). My objective, on the contrary, is to expand this Schopenhauerian influence in *Murphy* and have it flow into a limited tract of Indian philosophy, as discussed in the Upanishads.

First, however, it is necessary to establish empirically the relation between *Murphy* and

Indian philosophy. One must account for the fact that there is as yet a complete lack of archival material to suggest that Beckett studied the Upanishads, although the Bangladeshi playwright Sayeed Ahmed recalls in a newspaper interview that during his meetings with Beckett in Paris, Beckett would ask him probing questions about the Upanishadic philosophy. A major advantage is that *Murphy* and the Upanishads are essentially works of art, not cut and dried philosophical treatises, and consequently merit a comparative literary analysis, if nothing else. Beckett is not interested in delving into ontological disputes, just as the Upanishads “would not be considered philosophical in the modern, academic sense” (Britannica). Also, Schopenhauer, who stands as a common denominator that links Beckett to Indian Philosophy, is often compared to “a wisdom writer” rather than a philosopher (O’Hara 254).

At the start of *Murphy*, there are several references that are directly relevant to the Upanishads. In the first chapter, we learn that Murphy visits Neary several times and sits at his feet (Beckett 1957: 3). This, as annotated in *Demented Particulars* (2004), might refer to the term “Upanishad”, the Sanskrit etymology of which can be translated as “sitting down near” or “sitting close to” the guru or the teacher’s feet in order to gain spiritual knowledge (Ackerley 2004: 32). Thus, if an immediate parallel is to be drawn, one could regard Murphy as a character curious about the Upanishads, and could further claim that the author was at least aware of the existence of this central body of early Sanskrit text.

In addition to the general definition, the term “Upanishad” also originally meant “‘connection’ or ‘equivalence’ and was used in reference to the homology between aspects of the human individual and celestial entities or forces that increasingly became primary features of Indian cosmology” (Britannica). This second meaning markedly coincides with the fact that Murphy

pedantically follows the astrological chart or “ThemaCoeli With Delienations Compiled By Ramaswami Krishnaswami Narayanaswami Suk” (Beckett 1957: 32). What’s more, the first three parts of the compiler’s name are Indian, with the suffix *swami* signifying “holy man”. The prefix of the first two parts from left to right are the major avatars of Vishnu – Rama, from the Ramayana, and Krishna, from the Mahabharata – while the third, Narayana, is an alternative name for Vishnu, the preserver of the cosmos in Hinduism. The Vaishnavas or the monotheistic followers of Vishnu regard their God as the personification of the Brahman, the all-pervasive self beyond verbal grasp, or the *tat* from *tat twamasi*, a concept immediately relevant to Murphy’s design as a character.

To further this heuristic approach, Neary’s ability to stop his heart in “situations irksome beyond endurance” is relevant, added to the hand gestures that he practices corresponding to *murdras* (3). As annotated by Chris Ackerley, “the relation between heart rate and respiration permits the individual to exercise some control by means of sustained expiration” (Ackerley 2004: 32), which contextually refers to *pranayama*, the control of breath or vital power. In the Chandogya Upanishad (I.5), breath plays a central role, as elaborated by Max Müller, a nineteenth century German scholar of comparative language, religion, and mythology (Britannica), “The breath in the mouth, or the chief breath, says Om, i.e. gives permission to the five senses to act, just as the sun, by saying Om, gives permission to all living beings to move about” (Müller 1879: 12). Thus, having control over his breath, not only is Neary capable of stopping his heart, but he can also supposedly liberate his self from quotidian necessities such as drinking water and he can also annul “the pangs of hopeless sexual inclination” (3). What is more, Neary has acquired his knowledge of *pranayama* “somewhere north of the Nerbudda” (3), more commonly known as the river Narmada that

runs across the central states of India. However, as far as the plot is concerned, Neary has clearly failed in his venture of suppressing his desires, which are directed instead “To gain the affections of Miss Dwyer” (4).

Lastly, the narrator reveals that Neary's “first deserted wife was alive and well in Calcutta” (61), and Miss Counihan is said to have a clandestine correspondence with “a Hindu polyhistor of dubious caste. He had been writing for many years, still was and trusted he would be granted Prana to finish, a monograph”. His inspiration is that his feet “ave gut smaller than the end of the needle”, so that his chances of levitating seem distinctly possible (196). It would not be implausible to suppose that the Hindu, following Beckett's interpretation of the Vedic trend, is allegorizing rather than speaking literally. The feet, in this context, represent the *sthulasharira* or the gross body, which the Hindu needs to reject in order “to be up in the air”, or metaphorically to identify with the Brahman. Thus, the novel contains a series of allusions to Indian religio-philosophical culture throughout much of the text.

### The Dual World of *Murphy*

In *Murphy*, Beckett sketches two worlds: “the big world”, the macrocosm, or the phenomenal world of “*Quid pro quo*”, and the “little” world, the microcosm, or Murphy's mind as detailed in the sixth chapter of the novel (6-7). The conventional interpretation of this duality stems from the Cartesian system advocating, in Beckett's own words, the split between “a body and a mind” (109). However, considering that Beckett was immersed in Schopenhauer around this time, if *Murphy* is examined from a Schopenhauerian perspective, it is ascertainable that the phenomenal world or “the big world” depicted in *Murphy* also resembles the world as will, “a mindless, aimless, non-rational urge at the foundation of our instinctual drives, and at the

foundational being of everything” (Wicks 2010). As distinct from “the big world”, the little world corresponds to the world as representation, “the world of appearances, of our ideas, or of objects” (Wicks 2010). These two worlds are reworded by Schopenhauer as “*The Inner and Outer Nature of the World*”, which is exactly the phrase Beckett uses in the sixth chapter of *Murphy*, while describing his protagonist's mind.

The association between Beckett and Schopenhauer rather than Beckett and Descartes is further established by the fact that Beckett jotted down a short passage in German in August 1936, shortly after completing *Murphy*, which Mark Nixon translates: “There are moments when the veil of hope is finally torn apart and the liberated eyes see their world, as it is, as it must be. Unfortunately it does not last long, the revelation quickly passes. The eyes can only bear such pitiless light for a short while, the membrane of hope grows again and one returns to the world of phenomena” (Nixon 2006). As Mark Nixon indicates in his notes, the concepts discussed in this short passage are not wholly dissimilar to the Schopenhauerian idea of the “‘veil of Maya’, which normally keeps human persons in the world of illusion, i.e., the world of phenomena” (Potheast2008: 14). Thus *Murphy* is also restrained to the world of *illusion*, despite his attempts to shift to the “little” world.

By equating the phrase *tat twamasi* with the concept of *Maya*, illusion or appearance of the phenomenal world, a correlation is manifested between Murphy's “Separation order” (34), which is based ironically on the suggestion of an astrologer with Indian names, and the Upanishadic concept of Brahman and Maya. On the one hand, there is the world constituted of characters that are *composmentis* according to “the complacent scientific conceptualism” of mainstream psychology (176-7). They conform to the mechanisms of *prakriti*, which can be loosely

juxtaposed to the Western concept of Nature: they belong to the world as will, as epitomised by Celia, around whom much of the novel revolves. On the other hand, there is the world of pure perception, as personified by Mr. Endon: he belongs to the world as representation. Murphy, in Beckett's words from *Proust*, solicits the pure subject (Mr. Endon), so that he "may pass from a state of blind will to a state of representation" (Beckett 1931: 89). This state of representation, moreover, is distinct from the worldly thinking minds that Neary and Wylie possess, which regard the existential angst caused by impending death as a preeminent impasse. In *Murphy's* often-cited sixth chapter, Beckett describes Murphy's mind as "a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without" (107) in contrast to Mr. Kelly's clockwork cerebrum or Celia's brain congruent with the body (18), both of which are "not what he (Murphy) understood by consciousness" (110). Furthermore, Beckett explains, "Wylie's way of looking was as different from Murphy's as a *voyeur's* from a *voyant's*" (90). In this case, again, a link between Beckett and the Upanishads can be drawn via the Schopenhauerian interpretation of the world as representation (*voyant*), or the Brahman, that which Murphy is trying to attain, in contrast to the world as will (*voyeur*), the world of *prakriti* governed by illusions, or the fictive world captured in the novel.

Moreover, the relationship between Murphy and the rest of the characters can be juxtaposed with the intimate bond connecting the Hindu polyhistor to his monograph and by extension Beckett to his novel. Just as Murphy is restrained to the *prakritic* world, Beckett is forced to cater to "demented particulars" (13), or designate actual details and incidents in order to comply with the praxis of the novel as a literary genre. Again, a similarity can be retraced in *The World as Will and Representation*, where Schopenhauer suggests that since the concept of *tat twamasi* is

beyond words, the Vedic writers were forced to allegorize (Schopenhauer 1966: 55-6). And since Beckett is similarly restricted in terms of his authority as an author, he is forced to allegorize the *tat twamasi* attitude of Murphy. By associating Murphy with a molting bird migrating from one cage to another at the start of the novel, Beckett is able to capture, as indicated in his subsequent *Three Novels*, "a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerck, Mercier and all the others", as they migrate from one story to another (Beckett 2009:132).

### Beckett's Upanishadic Characters

What is intriguing at this point is that Beckett's metaphorically metempsychotic birds are not only restricted to his own oeuvre, but they date back to the Upanishads. In order to describe the duality between what Beckett calls *voyeur* and *voyant*, the Svetasvatara and the Mundaka Upanishads use the allegory of two birds: "Two birds, inseparable friends, cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit; the other looks on without eating", as translated by Müller whom Beckett might have read (Müller 2, 38). To elucidate the passage, the following verse of the Upanishad compares the first bird eating the fruit to a grieving man, immersed and bewildered by his own impotence, or in Schopenhauerian terms self-driven by will and condemned to suffering. The second bird is the observer, or a self in will-less contemplation. However, the two birds are inextricably attached to the same tree, which represents *prakriti*.

On considering this Upanishadic image, one cannot help wondering whether Beckett might have had the scenario in mind while writing *Waiting for Godot*, first staged in 1953. The play, like the verse from the Upanishad, involves two characters, who appear to be circling around a single tree. The first, Estragon, represents the self, driven by will and immersed in *prakriti*. In contrast to the Hindu of dubious caste in *Murphy*, Estragon is stuck to gross materiality, symbolized by the

fact that his feet have grown so large that his boots no longer fit him. The second character, Vladimir, personifies the person engaged in contemplation. Despite knowing that there is nothing to be done, he keeps thinking out of his hat, as it were, and raising philosophical questions that his partner Estragon fails to reciprocate. The single tree on stage could then symbolize *prakriti*, which the two characters cannot escape throughout their two acts, just as the birds remain perched on the same tree in the Upanishads, and similar to the way Murphy cannot stop thinking of Celia until his death.

However, the two characters from the drama are equally chained to their common pursuit for Godot, the "effaced" Brahman, that which cannot be encountered or described. Consequently, the question that supersedes the question of whether the two characters would ever meet Godot or whether Murphy might have identified with the Brahman shortly before his death is whether it is possible for Beckett or any artist to capture in words or on stage the phenomenon of such a meeting? Or is Beckett perpetually condemned to recreate the image of the two birds in the Upanishads, at best by effacing it?

According to Vedantic philosophy, "it is *netineti* (not this, not that) [...] that characterizes [...] language in relation to the real" (Coward 1990: 86). Similarly, Beckett's points of departure are Geulincx's "Ubinihil vales, ibinihilvelis", and Democritus' "Nothing is more real than nothing" (Murphy 1994: 224). However, while Beckett keeps his audience entertained with an endless regression in *Waiting for Godot*, he is forced to overcome the inevitable verbal impasse of having to describe Murphy's possible unity with the Brahman by sacrificing his protagonist to fire. Here again, there is a conspicuous homogeneity between this sacrifice and the depiction of aspirants of the Brahman state in the Chandogya Upanishad (4.15.5): "Now, whether or not the funeral rites are performed for such men as these, they

merge into a flame" (Zaehner 1966: 109). Consequently, it remains to be decided whether Murphy attains the state of Brahman, just as it remains to be seen whether Vladimir and Estragon will ever encounter Godot. What could be asserted (at least within the bounds of this paper) is that *Murphy* and *Waiting for Godot* depict undertakings to attain the Brahman, both of which result in unavoidable failure.

Beckett might have written his "drama" or "play" of *Waiting for Godot* to coincide with the Indian concept of *lila*, loosely translated as "a self-chosen play at bondage" (Aurobindo 2003: 305), or as per Beckett's direction of *Warten auf Godot* by the Schiller-Theatre Company, "It is a game, everything is a game" (Asmus 1975: 23-4). (In fact, there is a UK based group called Lila Dance who have performed "The Incredible Presence of a Remarkable Absence", a re-imagining of the world created in *Waiting for Godot*, based on the Indian perspective of *lila*.) As for *Murphy*, the thirteen chapters of the novel can be regarded as the thirteen Upanishads, which begin with a salutation to the sun, as in *Murphy*, and end with "Shantihshantihshantih" echoing Beckett's recurrent "All out. All out. All out" (Beckett 1957: 281-2). In this final case, Beckett might have drawn the association to the Upanishads via T. S. Eliot's ending of *The Waste Land*, which as Eliot notes, is also "a formal ending to an Upanishad. 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is a feeble translation of the content of this word."

To conclude, Beckett might have thus effaced the early traces of a haphazard and thus comically ironic Indian religio-philosophical sub-text from *Murphy* so perfectly that by the time he got to *Waiting for Godot* there was only the drama left to twitter for itself. The metempsychotic 'birds of interpretation', having migrated through his early novels, are corporeally transformed into Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*.

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