



Metaphors of “Memory, “Silence” and “Waiting”: Gradual Corrosion of Self in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* And *Endgame*

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Beckett was an Irish dramatist, the son of a Protestant minority in living in a Catholic society. He started his career as a teacher in Paris. S. Knowlson records that Beckett was very fond of reading Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. Soon Beckett found teaching uncongenial and turned to writing. Beckett produced *Waiting for Godot*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and became an international celebrity. The Nobel Prize was given to Eliot. Beckett achieved the same height when *Waiting for Godot* was staged. Beckett’s plays depict the disintegration, action and inaction. Beckett’s characters are deformed people, tramps and misfits. Beckett’s perception of life and death is portrayed through his characters doomed to wait and suffer. They are haunted by painful moments of past, they silently brood over death.

Declaring that “modernism and tragedy are incompatible”, Joseph Wood Krutch had rightly pointed out that modern malaise, nausea, angst, alienation, loss of identity, entropy, nihilism were forces that had dehumanized and deflated the heroes (79). Interestingly, in the “modern” novel too the corrosion of self is visible as hero totally vanished. The protagonists of Feeder Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust and James Joyce are lost souls lacking in heroic strength of character. Sean O’Faolin expressed deep concern about the fate of the hero in a society where “most of the traditional certainties have become

progressively less and less certain” (16). In the modern drams and novels there is a constant corrosion of self. He goes on to observe that the contemporary writers are “anti-humanist and anti-heroic, highly skeptical about man’s inherent dignity.”(81). The American playwrights projected him as a sorry product of social conditions. Thus, soulless robots, corrupt, people the expressionistic plays revealing the trend towards corrosion of self and dehumanization of the protagonists.

BECKETT AND THE EVOLUTION OF ANTI-HERO

After the end of World War II, philosophy and psychology introduced many changes as new ideas were propounded that revolutionized the Western thought. New language, new words were invented to express the inner turmoil of the characters who were suffering from the traumas of war and depression. Freudianism and existentialism were exciting new paradigms of Western thought. The Existentialists took the cue from Kierkegaard and the concept of the self-presented in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is abstract and beset with irreconcilable contradictions. The self, though free, is trapped in a solitude from which there is no escape. Therefore, the most conspicuous characteristic of selfhood is that



“man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the being which he is not.” (17). Ionesco expressed the growth of nihilism thus: “man is lost in the world; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless” (34). The existential philosophy of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus greatly impacted the contemporary playwrights. The result was the evolution of The Theatre of the Absurd. War, Depression and political uncertainty also promoted pessimistic and nihilistic ideas. Man found himself alone in the terrifying universe. Beckett, Albee and Pinter were influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the Second World War. The tendencies of the total corrosion of self in a value less society were imminent. Sypher Wylie puts in this context that, “Man cannot alienate himself from his own consciousness, a dilemma that brings on the present crisis in anti-literature and anti-art” (17). According to Knowlson, Beckett was inspired by his mother to use the elements of psychoanalysis. He attended Jung’s lecture at Tavistock clinic. His characters try to repress and erase from their memories the events of the past that troubled them. Jeanette. R. Malkin in *Memory Theatre and Post-Modern Drama* (1999) aptly observed that “Beckett’s theatre may be called as memory theatre”:

Memory theatre might be doubly defined as a theatre that imitates conflicted and sometimes repressed or erased memories of a shared past, and as a theatre that initiates processes of remembrance through practices of repetition, conflation, regression, through recurrent scenes, involuntary voice, echoing, overlap, and simultaneity. (8)

The tramps of Beckett waste their time in discussing superficial aspects of things. Freudians believe in an innate disposition in “human nature,” but Sartre and Camus believe in existence rather than essence. Beckett observes that man doesn’t want to go on but he must go on. One requires purpose in a purposeless universe. Beckett writes in *Waiting for Godot*, “Let’s go.” (*They do not move.*)” In Beckett’s theatre, the metaphors of “memory”, “silence” and wait are predominant as his plays give a challenge to investigate philosophical, psychological and psychoanalytical problems confronted by the protagonists.

Beckett’s plays explore the nature of cognition, perception, consciousness, memory, temporality, being and non-being. There is a serious attempt to respond adequately to the three questions with which *The Unnamable* (1953) opens: ‘Where now? Who now? When now?’

BECKETT’S VISION OF HUMAN SUFFERINGS: FREUDIAN DEATH CONSCIOUSNESS

Samuel Beckett lived a traumatic and mysterious life. In his youth Beckett actually suffered from depression and was admitted in the hospital. His friend Dr. Geoffery Thomson has made many observations about dementia of Beckett. He had “remarkable knowledge of variety of dementias and other psychological ailments”. (TCD 81). His *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are plays about human suffering involved in human existence. Beckett found that two always affect human beings, “the boredom of living” and “the suffering of being”. It is a state of mind when man experiences “the free play of every faculty” (20). Beckett depicts human condition an inevitable part of human existence. Human condition is absurd and hopeless; Beckett



expresses the experiences of sufferings through the metaphors of “silence”, “waiting” and “memory” in his plays. His characters suffer from misfortunes as meaningless waiting, disillusionment of hope, and abnormal relationship. They are doomed to live in a meaningless and godless universe. They look helpless and feel trapped in a Godless universe where sufferings are inescapable reality. Beckett reveals that all the evils, sins, and disasters exist in life and man has to confront them. Beckett confronts the futility of existence and the tragedy of the human condition. His *Endgame* gives the message of predicament thus: ‘The end is in the beginning and yet you go on’ (126). Beckett conveys “a view of life which sees birth as intimately connected with suffering and death and which sees life as a painful road to be trod” (2 The world of Beckett is dominated by degeneration, the characters have no option but to continue the journey of life. Everything in Beckett’s world appears to be in decline and this gradual corrosion of spirit affects the characters. The failure of language is evident in the fragmentary quality of Clov and Hamm’s conversation which only approximately succeeds in giving expression:

CLOV: [*Sadly.*] No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we.

HAMM: We do what we can.

CLOV: We shouldn’t.

[*Pause*]

HAMM: You’re a bit of all right, aren’t you?

CLOV: A smitheren. (123)

Hamm and Clov are forced to desire an impossible “Once!” a never-achieved unity that will remain forever inaccessible and will inevitably keep causing pain. The characters are

thus trapped into a desire for an irremediable past. in Nell and Nagg it is more a desire for the happiness of their youth.(185) The sense of loss permeates all the dialogue evoking nostalgia for a previous sense of a holistic self “we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals! ” (97). As a result the sense of death is palpable: “I see my light dying” (98).

Love, Marriage, domestic happiness is missing in the world of Beckett. In Beckett’s plays, love can only coexist with dissatisfaction and suffering. His characters are doomed to loneliness and frustration and there is no remedy for it. Death is the central issue in *Endgame* Nell is the only female character in the play who dies in the course of the play. The death of female character symbolizes the end of reproduction. Even when there are two or more characters onstage, there are unable to understand each other. For instance, when Vladimir wakes Estragon up, because he feels lonely:

Estragon: [*restored to the horror of his situation.*] I was asleep! [*Despairingly.*] Why will you never let me sleep?

Vladimir: I felt lonely.

Estragon: I had a dream.

Vladimir: Don’t tell me!

Estragon: I dreamt that—

Vladimir: DON’T TELL ME! (17)

Characters of Beckett are anti- heroes. They submit to the absurdity of their existence, and fill their lives with meaningless void: “Krapp is listening to his tapes, Hamm is telling stories, Didi and Gogo are waiting, etc. Nevertheless, all of them go on”. Beckett’s characters do not know what to do, they are bored with their whole existence and they can only wait. In *Endgame*, the life of Clov and Hamm is grey, based on certain ritual actions such as looking through the



window with a magnifying glass, asking for pain-killers, telling stories, etc. They are on the end of the road, doomed to suffer the corrosion of self.

Consequently, the fear of death has to do with the fear of the pain and anxiety of the process of being born. Beckett's plays take this agonizing circular pattern of the trauma of birth. The structure of his plays is cyclical, this structure is created through language repetitions, actions, and the use of the Present Continuous tense. In *Waiting for Godot*, for example, Act II is a repetition with variations of Act I. In *Play*, the sound of the voices starts before the rise of the curtain and continues after its fall, etc. All these create the continuity of the trauma of birth in life. Beckett recreates onstage a libidinal condition, similar to a mother's womb, which gives his characters false feeling of security and control over their lives. Living is dying slowly and painfully in every Beckett's play. "Death association is evoked through language, visual images, his the immobility, music, stage physical language and silences. The whole universe stinks of corpses" (114), says Hamm. Beckettian characters look helpless and feel trapped in a Godless universe where sufferings are inescapable reality. The plays of Beckett are packed with the scenes of evils, sins, and disasters suffering. . Beckett's men and women are physically disabled, aged and derelicts.

LANGUAGE OF PATHOS, DEATH, CORROSION AND DECAY

Knowlson in his book *Damned to Fame* observes that Beckett himself had said: "I want to bring poetry into drama, a poetry which has been through the void." (497) Beckett evolved his

own unconventional language to depict the gradual corrosion and degeneration of his characters through words. Beckett's had foreshadowed the inescapable chaos of existence; he invented a style of writing which would adequately convey the shapelessness of life. Hence, he had to give 'form' to formlessness through a language which, itself, appeared to have no form.. Speaking with Tom F. Driver, Beckett observed thus:

IMAGES AND VISUAL TECHNIQUES: LIVE THEATRE

Beckett's theatre is at once visual, picturesque and loaded with images, symbols and metaphors of death, decay and corrosion of self. Beckett had sound knowledge of human psychology, memory and trauma. His passion for the new images to depict the inner traumatic world of his characters brought the visual effect on the audience and when *Waiting For Godot* was staged, it was a grand success The dominant themes in the plays of Beckett are the inability to communicate, a general sense of alienation, loss of meaning and loss of memory. Consider for instance the following dialogue of *Waiting for Godot*:

Vladimir: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? (81.)

Images play a crucial role in Beckett's theatre. No wonder, Beckett freely experimented with stage images: their corporeality, spatiality and their power of effect on the audience. Beckett borrowed from Dante landscapes and images which have thematic and functional significance. Beckett creates mental images to universalize the themes of death and decay and of corrosion of self. Language plays a special role in memory retrieval. Many memories are encoded in the form of images and sometimes sound. Consequently, language performs the role of a translator of a conversion of non-linguistic elements, images, sounds, smells, sensations, play vital role in recording the non-linguistic memories. For Artaud, the physical stage language has a beauty of its own, and its aim is to achieve "intellectual effectiveness as spoken language (151). Indeed, Beckett has made a revolution in the theatre aesthetics of staging trauma. In the majority of his plays, the stage has a hallucinatory dream-like quality. Knowlson concludes by saying that Beckett's theatre is visual theatre as perception plays great role in decoding theatre images:

The images that Beckett creates onstage look more like sculptures or paintings unique in their nature and impossible to forget. It seems that he destroys the boundary between drama and painting. In some of his plays the audience sees three-dimensional statues onstage, since only the lips of the characters are moving in a Play.

Waiting for Godot is packed with circular motions, echoes, ghostly voices and grotesque actions. Beckett firmly believed that there is nothing in the world that is permanent since the world is subject to death and decay. Man is

preconditioned to change from his birth, since nothing stays the same for him. Since the moment of birth, time influences one's physical growth and psychological maturity. Human beings are changing states all the time. In *Endgame*, Hamm describes this change: "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (97). Clov's complaints that he is seeing his light die but Hamm ignores him and demands: "take a look at me" (98) and then "come back and tell me what you think of your light" (98). Clov is very irritating in behavior towards Hamm, he tells us the horrible existence of Hamm who lives in his kitchen "ten feet by ten feet by ten feet, and wait[s] for him to whistle me" (93).

THE IMAGE OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Beckett uses the powerful images of light and darkness to excavate the inner turmoil of his characters. The image of light is used as a technical device in thieve multidimensional effect. Artaud (1974) highly recommended the image of light as a tool to explore the inner world of the characters: "In the theatre, as in the plague, there is a kind of strange sun, an unusually bright light by which the difficult, even the impossible suddenly appears to be our natural medium" (21). Many of Beckett's plays are staged in semi-darkness; this darkness may be discussed as an intensifier of personal memory. Estragon's boots are killing him, Vladimir suffers from poor bladder, Pozzo loses his eyesight. Hamm's reminiscences describe the view of death and decay as he is always haunted by the memories of losing his sight. Ham projects his infinite sense of loss on to Clov whose sight and motion he resents. Hamm predicts the future thus:



One day you'll be blind, like me.
You'll be sitting there, a speck I
the void, in the dark, forever, like
me....infinite emptiness will be all
round you, all the resurrected
dead of all the ages wouldn't fill
it, and there you'll be like a little
(20)

Beckett created the mysterious image of kitchen room in the play *Endgame* to describe the nature of hell. Andrew Brink in his article *Samuel Beckett's Endgame and the Schizoid Ego* observes that for Clov and Hamm the outside world is depicted as a hell:

...another hell, nothing stirring,
no sun, no light, no darkness just
gray. It is characterized by
nothingness and timelessness,
time is zero and everything is zero
(30-32).

Hamm's description of the mad painter suggests that the world is on the verge collapse. He refers to the destructive and pessimistic images suggestive of global disaster. Hamm's speech is threatening and menacing:

I once knew a madman who
thought the end of the world had
come. He was a painter and
engraver. I had a great fondness
for him. I used to go and see him,
in the asylum. I'd take him by the
hand and drag him to the window.
Look! There! All that rising corn!
And there! Look!. (44)

. The kitchen has symbolical significance in the thematic structure of the drama. Living is dying slowly and painfully in every Beckett's play. "Death association is evoked through language, visual images, his characters 'immobility, music, stage physical language and silences. "The whole universe stinks of corpses (114), says Hamm.

LOSS OF MEMORY AN EXPRESSION OF CORROSION OF SELF

Beckett's characters suffer from fading memories and forgetfulness caused by their bodily dysfunctions. According to Bergson, perception is vital for good construction of our memories. In old age man loses his perception because of physical ailments. With the loss of physical vitality, his memory loss shatters his identity. Old memories of Beckett's characters are always haunting them, they are wandering and in the abyss of mind. Beckett is a powerful ingenious image monger. Beckettian character recollects a concrete image and then it is given a cyclical turn, the image goes in circles disturbing the thought patterns of the character. New sensations are created in the mind of the character. They start inventing stories and behave in an abnormal manner like a neurotic.

In Endgame, the audience discover that Hamm's face is covered by a handkerchief with blood.. There are the two windows, one opening on the sea and the other towards the earth. Symbolically, the windows refer to the resonations with the "Book of Revelations". Like two witnesses Hamm and Clov are condemned to await the arrival of the two beasts: "one from the sea and another from the earth". Both Hamm and Clov are being devoured alive by their private memories. The audience note that both Hamm



and Clove are buried in earth alive as Clov says: The outside is devastated and still: “no waves, no wind, and corpse” (106). Beckett uses powerful images of death, hell and damnation to depict the traumatic loss of self of Hamm and Clov.

Hamm: [*Violently.*] When! What’s happened? Use your head, can’t you! What has happened?

Clov: What for Christ’s sake does it matter? (128)

METAPHOR OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY

For Beckett’s characters every day looks the same. Boredom and habit continuously destroy his character’s fragile aging memories. Descartes wrote: “I think therefore I am... I remember therefore I am.” According to Bergson, it is our autobiographic memory that defines man’s character. Alfred Adler in his book *Neurotic Connection* contends that old age, blindness, different organ amputation, dysfunctions of nervous system lead to the decrease of certain sensorial perception, Adler’s theory is applicable on the characters of Beckett *since* the majority of them are sick aging people. For Beckett, these periods are normally painful, “mysterious and fertile since they replace the boredom of living by the suffering of being” (19). Only when an individual is taken out of his daily routine, he is capable of seeing himself as he is. Beckett connects these moments of change with suffering and strong emotions.

Memory is one of the main characteristics of human beings, since it makes us the way we are. Memory influences the present and future of human beings. Experiences shape the present personality and influence the future decisions of human beings. Men construct their identities

upon the canvas of their memory. Happy memories make them optimistic and open to new experiences; sad and traumatic memories bring negative attitude towards the future. Human beings become. Often, human beings become introverted and bitter because of their sad experiences. Images play a crucial role in Beckett’s theatre. Memories play vital role in the structure of Beckett’s plays. His language is lyrical, symbolical and poetical. Memories of Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, Pozzo, Ham and Clov are recorded in the form of images, sensations and sounds. The words are broken, dialogues are brief but deep in meaning since the focus of Beckett is to excavate the inner traumatic world of his protagonists who find themselves trapped. All Beckett’s characters are placed in a difficult situation and try to go on as best as they can. So death does not claim Beckett’s characters, and the playwright denies them the right to commit suicide: “Didi and Gogo try to hang themselves, but in vain, the bough won’t support their weight (18-9). So his characters exist on stage or in his novels, haunted by the ghosts of their fading memories.

METAPHOR OF ROOM AS SPACE

The room as setting is always the traumatized images ‘container in Beckett’s theatre, which makes it interesting for the analysis in relation to different types of trauma. The room can be related to a character on a very private level. Besides, as the room is a closed space, having walls as frontiers, it can reflect such features as imprisonment, or shelter. For all its convincing realism, the room also has all enveloping, claustrophobic psychic climate, especially when characters ‘movements are restricted by the room boundaries. Place as a



problem is a recurrent feature in Beckett's drama. His characters are never comfortable in their environment. The concept of a comfortable home is absent. Willie in *Happy Days* is willing to leave his "home or to escape his miserable life". Clov tries to leave Hamm's house at the end of *Endgame*, though audience will never know what he intends to do. Unfortunately, his characters are unable to leave, and have to be there: "onstage victims of their environment. As Nell observes: "There is nothing funnier than unhappiness" (101).

MEMORY AND TRAUMA

For Bergson, image is immobile and only perception and attention transforms it into reality. Beckett in *Proust* also discusses memory as "obviously conditioned by perception" (30). He states that:

We can only remember what has been registered by our extreme inattention and stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to which Habit does not possess the key (31).

Indeed, Beckett's world is actually inhabited by handicap aging characters: blind, lame, deaf people. Beckett was merely staging man's impotence. *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* present Ham and Pozzo are blind characters. They need another character to provide them with the outer world information stored in their memories. Since his characters get enveloped in darkness, they lose the sense of orientation and time. Beckett's characters become trapped in the sensations of their past: a sense of perception. Beckett took keen interest in Psychology, psychoanalysis and mental illnesses. He used his

knowledge when he conceived characters such as Lucky, Pozzo, Ham and Nell and many others who are sick and decadent suffering from the psychological traumas. In *Psychology Notes*, Beckett demonstrated his deep interest in the unconscious, mental diseases and troubled psyche.

The trauma of aging is relevant in Beckett's work. There are practically no young characters in his theatre, the exception may be the boy in *waiting for Godot*, who is a secondary character. Old age is merciless with our body and mind, which are in degeneration and decay. Beckett has a deep interest in experimenting with elderly people, who suffer from illnesses and disability. He himself experienced the process of aging early, since his diseases were numerous. Knowlson states that Beckett himself suffered from the traumas of "palpitations, spasms, suffocations, sebaceous cysts on the anus, eczema, herpes on the face, etc." (668). Beckett vividly presents tramps and disabled people on the stage depicting the helplessness of man and the traumas of inescapable human sufferings.

Vladimir has a weak bladder and Clov is lame. Pozzo and Hamm are blind, besides Hamm is paralytic, bound to a wheel chair. Beckett's elderly characters are victims of physical and psychological diseases. Estragon has problems putting his boots on, and Hamm is in constant dependence on Clov for performing all the daily chores. They are on the extremity of despair; their old aging bodies do not want to go on, but still they go on. Hamm continuously inquires Clov about his eyes and legs in *Endgame*, the only answer that Clov gives is "bad" (110).

Nagg: Can you see me?

Nell: Hardly. And you?

Nagg: What?



Nell: Can you see me?

Nagg: Hardly.

Nell: So much the better, so much the better.

Nagg: Don't say that. [*Pause.*] Our sight has failed.

Nell: Yes. (99)

Estragon is a confused personality, he is uncertain about the colour of his own boots, he is uncertain about the place of his meeting. All these symptoms of memory failure virtually deflate his personality and the result his corrosion of self.. Beckett's characters have no hope for the future. They are always haunted by their past. Life is also presented as meaningless in Beckett's plays. In *Waiting for Godot*, Didi and Gogo want to repent of having been born In *Endgame*, Hamm declares that "the end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (127)

BECKETT AND STUDY OF DEMENTIA: FINAL CORROSION OF SELF OF THE PROTAGONISTS

Memory plays an important role in the plays of Beckett. His characters present both: remembering and forgetting. His interest in the studies of memory is appreciated by all critics. He wrote *Proust*, (1931) which is the result of his deep reflection on the mechanisms of memory. In this essay, Beckett discussed memory and demonstrated his interest in voluntary and involuntary memories and in the mechanisms of remembering life material in his works. Beckett had profound distrust of memory functioning. He had firm conviction that 'yesterday' has dangerous power to 'deform'. He had a comprehensive knowledge of human psychology which he applied in creating damaged, misfits and mangled characters. Beckett's *Proust*

Monograph (1930) describes his perception about amnesia, dementia, and the repressed memories of the neurotic. In his plays, the characters suffer from memory loss. Beckett's characters are not donned with perfect memories, old age and brain dysfunctions, such as dementia, amnesia. . His characters with poor and failing memories only adds humanity to Beckett's characters. But Vladimir confesses the loss of memory thus: "at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is in us". (73). It is obvious that a spectator may identify his own self with the process of aging, normally feared by the majority.

Dementia begins with anxiety and depression, repression and denial of any type brings changes in the behavior of the protagonists. Common symptoms are irritation, aggressiveness, and changes in moods, hysterical dreams, lack of decision, and lack of communication. In Beckett's world the characters are deformed and misfits. Hamm is blind and in a wheelchair. He gets headaches. Nagg and Nell have no legs.. Nagg is hard of hearing, Nell is unable to cry. Clov has stiff legs and he is unable to sit down. There is no growth in the universe of Beckett. as Hamm says: "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals! " (107) Growth is measured in terms of decay. .

.To conclude, the plays, *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* have depicted the traumatic experiences of the characters who are borderlines suffering from dementia. Hamm, Lucky, Vladimir, Estragon and Pozzo are anchored in their memories, and both have behavioural re-enactments, which are symptoms of trauma. Dementia begins with the presence of ghostly voices from the past haunting the present. For instance, in *Waiting for Godot*, each character



possesses more than one voice; these voices can belong to their past selves or can be fragments of their consciousness. Malkin observes that in Beckett's theatre voices are as sonic images, they are present everywhere, they constitute "Beckett's boundless void" (16)

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