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When the Body Remembers: Memory and Body in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract:

The groundbreaking play of the twentieth century, *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett opens with an uncertain and absurd conversation between the two tramps. The unconventional play and its opening insinuate the relationship between a fragile body(ies) and a feeble mind(s). The loneliness and the strangeness of the setting set the tone for the play and the physical and emotional hollowness of the characters. Estragon represents the physical side of man(body), while Vladimir represents the rational side of man(mind) and both are waiting for something to happen to give them a sense of completion. Their inability to recall, remember, move, and laugh perfectly captures the helplessness and disillusionment of humans in the post-World War era. The constant nature of human suffering and pain in the modern world is represented in the form of the fragile memory and weak/disabled bodies of the characters. One of the major trauma theorists, Cathy Caruth, opined that the mark of a shocking experience is that it disrupts language and proper expression, which is quite visible in the characters of the play. The present reading of the play is intended to view the (dis)abled body(ies) and frailty of memory of the characters in the play as symptoms of traumatized body(ies) and minds. The paper is a modest attempt to show how the play offers unique insights into the fallible nature of memory and the sufferings of the body in the modern world, which may also help us in understanding the paranoia and development of suicidal thoughts in modern man.

Keywords: Memory, Body, Trauma, Existence, Suicide.

Waiting for Godot, a tragicomedy in two acts, is perhaps the most intriguing and influential play of the twentieth century. The play is undoubtedly multi-layered, thought-provoking, complex, repetitive, and absurd yet exhibits the sense and sensibility that the playwright has employed to portray the modern world's existential dilemma. The play is indeed a seminal work of the Absurd Theatre, which emerged in the mid-twentieth-century European

world following the horrific World War II. It greatly affected the way we perceive reality as its purpose was to challenge all the accepted conventions regarding life, literature, arts, and life – the never-ending conundrum of human existence and its purpose. Thus, the absurd plays sought to emphasize the meaninglessness, futility, confusion, and absurdity of human existence by employing various techniques such as circular plot with no proper beginning and ending, illogical or meaningless conversation, and repetitive actions to underscore the monotony of human existence and so on and so forth.

Absurdist playwrights, therefore, did away with the most of the logical structures of traditional theatre. There is little dramatic action as conventionally understood; however frantically the characters perform, their busyness serves to underscore the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), plot is eliminated, and a timeless, circular quality emerges as two lost creatures, usually played as tramps, spend their days waiting—but without any certainty of whom they are waiting for or of whether he, or it, will ever come. (Britannica)

As Adorno has said, “Beckett’s plays are absurd not because of the absence of meaning, for then they would be simply irrelevant, but because they put meaning on trial...” (Qtd. in Sabatini 48). The play is famous for its absurdity, where *nothing happens. Nobody comes. Nobody goes.* It actually mirrors the chaos, agony, and confusion of the post-World War II times. The play mainly focuses on two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for somebody named Godot, who never arrives. They are perhaps stuck in a state of limbo, waiting for something to happen but not knowing what it is or when it will come. From the opening to the ending of the play, the characters are in constant disrepair and looking for something uncertain. Their sufferings and discomfort while waiting become evident with repeated references to their physical discomfort and defective memory. The portrayal of the weak body, fragile memory, and trauma in the play is noteworthy for its focus on the physical and emotional sufferings of the characters. The portrayal of weak memory, especially can be seen as a reflection of the trauma that people experienced during and after the war, which would have affected their ability to act rationally and remember events and details clearly. Throughout the play, the characters are depicted as being trapped in a cycle of waiting and hoping for something to happen, but they are unable to act or change their circumstances.

ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot. (Beckett 6)

The title of the paper is inspired by a Partition novel titled *What the Body Remembers* (1999) by Shauna Singh Baldwin. The novel talks about the violence, trauma, and sufferings of the partition and its aftermath. Actually, the phrase “what the body remembers” is a commonly used expression in trauma studies and refers to the idea that traumatic experiences are stored not just in the mind(memory) but also in the body and could be exhibited through various bodily gestures or language or physical symptoms or sensations. In a similar vein, *the* concerned play portrays the characters’ physical and mental sufferings which have taken place so far. They have fragile memories that serve as a reflection of their condition of trauma, suffering, and disillusionment, consequently provoking them to contemplate suicide. The research paper with this title, – “When the body remembers”, underscores the importance of the body and memory through disillusioned characters and how their disturbing experiences have limited their abilities to recall, remember, laugh, and even move.

The play’s depiction of the characters’ physical suffering along with a forgetful memory exemplifies their intense emotional pain and trauma. Cathy Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) asserts that trauma is an overwhelming and intense experience that leaves long-lasting impressions on the mental and emotional well-being of the person. The reaction to such events is often delayed or may continue to happen over a period of time. It can take the form of repetitive behavior, hallucinations, nightmares, or other undesirable phenomena which are beyond the person’s control (11). In the play, we find that the characters display their traumatic personalities in different ways. The two tramps struggle to remember where they stayed the night before, the uncertainty of Godot’s arrival, repeated motifs of eating, excretion habits of the tramps, Lucky’s meaningless speech, and finally the loss of his voice and his master Pozzo’s loss of sight characterize the misery of humans. Their condition is associated with their traumatic experiences and isolation in a world devoid of purpose and decisiveness.

“Early in the play, while they wait, Vladimir and Estragon decide to kill time by killing themselves” (Bloom 32). Their helplessness and confusion ultimately provoked them to contemplate suicide. “For Vladimir and Estragon suicide is a form of evasion, an escape from the predicament of being born. It would presumably allow them to avoid poverty, physical abuse, and humiliation in life. ... Their suicidal thought is suggestive of their surrender to the absurdity of the world. For them, life itself is a sickness unto death.” (Dangar 3). Here, the

idiomatic expression “bored to death” somewhat seems literally relevant and apt. The idiom describes an extreme feeling of boredom that can cause a person to feel worse than death, and in the case of Vladimir and Estragon, their aimless waiting for something (un)known and (un)certain, makes them feel utterly bored. They cease to feel any vital signs of life metaphorically means death. Their futile search for meaning in a world that is essentially meaningless ultimately compels them to contemplate suicide. Here, the play echoes Camus' idea of the absurdity of human existence whose fundamental pursuit is – *To decide whether life is worth living.*

In the play, the tramps, Vladimir and Estragon appear to be suffering from various forms of trauma, which reflects through their behavior and body language. In the very opening of the play, we find that Vladimir complains of a stiff neck and Estragon suffers as his boots are hurting. Also, Estragon says that he has dreamed of being beaten by an unknown man, which is clearly a display of his inner turmoil and unresolved trauma. Vladimir, who sounds more assertive, logical, and confident of the two, exhibits the rational side of man, whereas Estragon, who is more focused on his physical needs like hunger and fatigue, shows the physical side of man. Vladimir's denial to listen to Estragon's dream shows the incompatibility between the body and mind of a traumatized person. His unwillingness to listen to Estragon's dream also symbolizes the modern detached and unsympathetic society. Estragon appears more passive and withdrawn, exhibiting symptoms of depression and dissociation as he “... curled on the ground like a frozen *foetus [sic]* may be viewed as another symptom of his trauma—a response to an abusive condition” (Dangar 4). Having said that, these two characters have contrasting perspectives, highlighting the intrinsic tensions between body and mind and, the physical and intellectual aspects of human existence. Estragon often prioritizes his immediate physical needs, whereas Vladimir attempts to maintain a more intellectual and abstract outlook on their struggling situation. Moreover, their movements and gestures appear slow and labored, which may indicate that they are struggling to cope with the trauma they have endured. Batty and Batty in the Modern Theatre Guide, *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot* say that “Vladimir is clearly the thinker, the philosopher, and the intellectual of the two, while Estragon is more concerned with bodily comfort, including sleep and food... This difference between the two men is captured figuratively in Estragon's business with his boots and Vladimir's with his hat, both scratching around inside their respective sources of irritation” (23-24).

The play also highlights the effects of postwar trauma on the human psyche. Vladimir and Estragon appear to have fragmented and unreliable memory. They often forget what they

have just said, where they are, and even who they are. The characters' existential crises, forgetfulness, unreliable memory, and constant questioning of the purpose of their existence can be interpreted as a representation of the psychological impact of war on humans, which left them feeling lost and confused, with no clear sense of direction or purpose.

ESTRAGON: I'm unhappy.

VLADIMIR: Not really! Since when?

ESTRAGON: I'd forgotten.

VLADIMIR: Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays! (Beckett 41)

Moreover, the play's setting is also quite significant as it represents the sense of desolation, loss, and hopelessness that people experienced in the aftermath of the war. The play is set in a lonely and barren landscape, with no clear indication of time and place. The characters are stuck in a cycle of waiting, unable to move forward or make progress, which can be interpreted as a reflection of the stagnation that occurred in many societies/countries following the war. "The setting becomes a metaphor for the whole uncertainty within which Vladimir & Estragon flounder. Beckett once commented that the key word in his play was 'perhaps' and the setting contributes to the general ambiguities & uncertainties." (Bradby 34)

The second set of unusual characters, Lucky and Pozzo, the master-slave duo, are also affected by their past traumatic experiences, quite evident in their physical manifestations and behaviors. Pozzo, a wealthy landowner, appears as a dominating and torturous master in Act I who become blind and physically deteriorating in the following act of the play. On the other hand, Lucky, Pozzo's passive and helpless servant, has a rope around his neck and performs menial tasks symbolizing a victim of his master's oppression and torture in the modern world. His weird dance is another manifestation of a traumatized body. As Sigmund Freud has said, "that the past once experienced is indestructible" (Ricoeur 445). Therefore, the traumatic past of Lucky has had a serious and lingering impact on his mental faculties. This character is famous for his lengthy, distorted syntax and nonsensical speeches, which make the other characters and the audience perplexed and confused. His passivity and submission to his master Pozzo, his distorted language, and incoherent thoughts ascertained his fragile memory, which made him struggle to process and articulate his traumatic experiences. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma affects the emotional and mental side of the sufferer to the extent that it inhibits proper articulation which often results in fragmented and disjointed narratives, quite similar to

what we witness in the case of Lucky. In *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Ricoeur says, "Language contributes to this by its slips; body gestures, by mistakes, awkwardness, and other failed actions..." (447). Thus, the way we use language is a significant indicator of our emotional and mental state in a particular situation. For example, we might accidentally reveal our true feelings and intentions about something, even if we had tried to suppress them earlier. Body language, choices of words, and gestures can also reveal a great deal of information about what we are feeling or thinking about a particular situation. For example, we might fidget or avoid eye contact as a sign of nervousness or discomfort. Lucky's speech failure, his master Pozzo's ill-treatment of him and his constant need to control him, and later his struggles as a blind man strongly indicate the traumatic state of both. Both characters show that trauma can have lasting effects on a person's physical and emotional well-being that could be manifested in various ways, different for each individual.

The transient yet recurring appearance of the young unnamed boy in the play serves as an influential symbol, adding another layer of meaning to the text which requires interpretation. He delivers Godot's message to the tramps who are waiting for Godot's arrival. He also tells the other characters on the stage that he works for Godot and is not subjected to any physical torture by him. He seems confused about the message and the identity of the person whose message he is conveying. The boy's vague responses to the tramps' questions indicate that he is a messenger of someone who is mysterious or may be not real; emphasizing the theme of confusion, fragile memory, and forgetfulness. Besides that, the boy's message is always the same but never fully understood or acted upon, further emphasizing the sense of inaction and repetition that envelops the entire play's environment. Moreover, the boy's frequent and unexpected appearances in the play, create a sense of unease which suggests that the characters are unable to escape their past and their memories – which also tend to appear out of nowhere.

The play ends on a note of ambiguity as the boy's visit does not provide any hope or relief to them. The play opens and ends with them waiting for the arrival of the mysterious Godot and their inability to act. While the traditional interpretations of the play suggest that the boy's arrival serves as a symbol of hope amidst the state of confusion and uncertainty, the paper argues that in the context of the traumatized tramps in a bleak world, the boy's unexpected and repeated arrival can be interpreted as a reminder of human mortality, transience, and impermanence of human existence. So, after the boy's departure, Estragon asks Vladimir, "Remind me to bring a bit of rope tomorrow." (Beckett 44). It suggests their readiness to embrace death as they are as hopeless as before. They are tired of waiting and display their

trauma by contemplating suicide. Thus, in that context, the boy's arrival with the message of Godot that "he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow" creates a sense of anticipation that something certainly will happen one day (Beckett 42). It sounds like a *memento mori*, which means "remember you must die" maybe not today but surely *tomorrow*. Also, many interpretations have compelled us to associate the invisible yet overarching presence of Godot as God or the divine intervention in a world of lost hope, although Beckett himself has never confirmed if he had ever conceived Godot as God. Having said that, it is evident that Godot's invisible authority, the tramps' ambiguous waiting for him and their fear of what they would do if he comes, and their hope as if his arrival would end all their sufferings – suggest the interpretation of Godot as the *final hour* for whom humans especially traumatized and hopeless people wait for the most so their sufferings could end at once with death. They are *waiting for the end* – the ultimate end that every human has to face. "To me, in Samuel Beckett's history making play *Waiting for Godot*, Godot symbolizes- [*the*] final destination, men's ultimate abode, where they will find their unanswered questions. When human beings are unable to apprehend anything, they call it [*a*] mystery. Godot is this Maya or mystery or death or the final destination." (Das 23).

To sum up, the research and analysis of the play done in the paper, it can be said that play's emphasis on physical and mental uneasiness, the characters' sufferings, and endless waiting all serve to convey the silent agony and weariness of humans in a meaningless, godless, and hopeless modern world. The characters are shown to be drained, disillusioned, and disoriented. Their physical and emotionally disturbed state indicates a deep-seated trauma of the post-war era. It also underlines the other important themes of fragile memory and forgetfulness, failure of communication, the fallibility of language, suicide, despair, existential crises, physical deterioration, and the search for meaning – to perfectly mirror the desolate landscape of the post-war world of the twentieth century. Beckett's remarkable expertise and employment of such extraordinary themes have made the play a timeless classic. This exceptionally absurd yet phenomenal text will continue to fascinate and resonate with readers and audiences even today.

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