

Chapter One

The Dys-abled Players of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

I say to myself— sometimes, Clov you must learn to suffer *better* than that if you want them to weary of punishing you— one day.

— Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*

Beckett's corpus abounds in maimed bodies, disabled bodies, incarcerated bodies, grotesque bodies, painful bodies— bodies even though in crisis are never seen in their phenomenological materiality. Rather, those bodies become a cradle for different philosophical and metaphysical speculations. These are always already de-contextualised and de-animated, and are free from the socio-political condition and the spiritual and organic semblances. These become what Foucault has called, “military machine” (*machine á guerir*) “not as a self-healing whole, but as an object, a hindrance to be

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mastered and made-over design”¹. The singularity and specificity of the body is completely ignored for the sake of some already established categories and, “[t]hus” as Ato Quayson points out “discussions of maimed and disabled characters in Beckett are often conducted around two broad rubric: existential phenomenology and deconstructive antihumanism”². In Beckett there remains always a rupture between disability and pain.

Beckett himself suffered from various chronic ailments including arrhythmic heartbeat, cysts and abscesses and hence, it is no surprise that his *weltanschauung* is layered with different metaphors of illness. Deirdre Bair in *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* points out that “at one point Beckett insisted that all of life was a disease, with babyhood its beginning. Man, to him, was the prime example of the mortally ill, for man began as a helpless infant, unable to attend to himself, and most of the time ended in the same manner. In man’s beginning and end there was immobility, and each man was thus at the mercy of all others”³. Beckett’s dereliction for human and humanity makes him employ illness and disability as chimerical devices in his works. There is no distinction between human and the other in Beckett. In him we find a journey from the anthropological to the non-anthropological— in Beckett, the human is the *other* to the extent that it is discontinuous and deformed.⁴

¹ See Aho and Aho 146

² See Quayson 56

³ Beckett used to suffer from various ailments and in a way influenced his writing also, for more details see Deidre 170

⁴ See Sheehan 176

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Disease, decay, deterioration and dismemberment are the archetypes we find in profusion in Beckett's plays and novels but they are seldom associated with physical suffering. They are, rather, often conceived as allegorical— in many cases as symptoms of spiritual and creative debasement. This obliterates the very specificity of the body and the body-in-pain, succumbing to what Quayson calls the “hermeneutical conundrum”— “not so much so as to raise doubt about what it might mean, but so that the entire apparatus of representation is riddled with gaps and aporias”⁵. The *Endgame* is filled with gaps and aporias or what Theodor Adorno calls “organized meaninglessness” and “an expression of meaning's absence”. The disabled and the impaired bodies in the play thus, concomitantly, are never seen in their physiological and phenomenological realities; the studies on Beckettian dramaturgy are more centred around body as an idea or an ideal.

The play dramatizes the disability of two pairs of characters: Hamm and Clov on one hand and Nagg and Nell on the other. But all these four characters have been tied together in such a manner that it would be almost impossible for a character to live autonomously and might perish in no time if taken out of this arrangement. Hamm is completely blind, crippled and immobile and his entire existence is contingent upon Clov. He will die in no time if Clov leaves him. On the other hand, Clov is mobile and healthier. He is the only character who can move from one corner of the stage to another. He always threatens to leave Hamm but never does (“I'll leave you, I have things to do”) (15). He is aligned to Hamm because of some unknown reasons. In case of Nagg and Nell, we see a sort of radical captivation— they are both physically and psychologically

⁵ Ibid, 84-5

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confined in their ash cans, totally cut-off from the world as well as from each other. The absurdity of the situation is thus, very striking. In the play Clov's movement is in sharp contrast to the stillness of Hamm, Nagg and Nell. Quayson observes further that, "the dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility in a play constituted exclusively by characters that carry impairments serves to further accentuate the existential constraint of disability. Every move within this dialectic is constitutively dependent on its opposite, thus suggesting that impairment/disability/immobility and nondisability/mobility are part of a single continuum"⁶. Such radical interdependency becomes necessary especially when one is encountering a post-Holocaust-like situation:

Hamm: [...]

Why do you stay with me?

Clov: Why do you keep me?

Hamm: There's no one else.

Clov: There's nowhere else.

[*Pause.*] (13)

Moreover, Hamm's physical incapacity on the stage has been placed in striking contrast to Clov's mental incapacity that disables him to go from the stage and away from Hamm. Being completely blind and immobile Hamm does not have any direct control over Clov but we still see him exerting some sort of *indirect* control over Clov and Clov's subsequent internalization of Hamm's authority. It is this internalization which helps in

⁶ See Quayson, Ato 68

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his confinement— when other's gaze is internalized it creates a stand-still, arresting one's essential "becoming"; it binds it to the "me-here-now". This objectification captivates one's self and initiates the process of extermination of one's subjectivity. And here Victoria Swanson draws a parallel between Sartre and Beckett and points out that , "[t]he organizing consciousness, the consciousness of the observer, displaces and objectifies the subject. Sartre and Beckett both present the gaze of the 'Other' as violent and subjectifying"⁷. But, as opposed to Sartre, there is no provision for freedom, will and authenticity in Beckettesque reality. Rather, she argues that "Beckett embraces the impossibility of meaning as liberation from confinement inherent with predicaments of subjectivity, power, and the limitations of language". She points out that "[f]or Beckett, the Sartrean vision of subjectivity is a trap that can only be escaped, if it can at all, by the kind of self-violence that leads to self-dissolution"⁸, something that can be seen in Clov's subjectivation and subjugation by Hamm:

Clov: I can't sit down.

Hamm: [*impatiently*] Well you will lie down then, what the hell! Or you'll come to a standstill, simply stop and stand still, the way you are now. One day you'll say, I am tired, I'll stop. What does the attitude matter?

[*Pause*]

Clov: So you all want me to leave you.

Hamm: Naturally.

Clov: Then I'll leave you.

Hamm: You can't leave us.

⁷ See Swanson.

⁸ *ibid*

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Clov: Then I won't leave you.

[Pause] (44-45)

So, vulnerability in the play not only comes from corporeal confinement but psychological confinement also. Both Hamm and Clov are confined to the stage in their own way— the former because of his physical impairment and, the latter because of his subjectivity and carcerality. It is only through his chaotic function, through his “repeated violations” that Clov will be able to disrupt this very power relation and “transform the abode into a pandemonium”⁹.

All the four characters in the play including Clov are incapacitated—they are at dis-ease with the world (though it will be very difficult for me to use the words ‘disease’ and ‘disability’ interchangeably). Their lack of ability (read, dis-ability) to interact with the other creates a rupture between their being and the world. Similarly, our bodies too live in relation to the other. Our bodies act as a bridge between the “self” and the “world”— the world is not ‘out there’ separated from our being but a situation which can easily be deemed as body-in-the-world and body-with-the-world. It is always already embedded, enmeshed, entangled with the world. So what the characters in the play lack is the inter-subjective acknowledgement; they remain not only physiologically but ontologically fractured, bruised, alienated and paranoid. Their incapacity to interact and communicate with the surrounding makes them deficit of the state of ‘holiness’— the wholeness, completeness, balance which we call ‘health’. They are all apprehensive and

⁹ Beckett, Samuel. “The Lost Ones”. *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*. New York: Grove Press. 209. Print

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paranoid about their surroundings, abiding by the Sartrean thesis “Hell is— other people”¹⁰. It is this cynicism that is dis-abling them to escape from their situation— they are all either incarcerated or self-incarcerated:

Hamm: Outside of here it's death.

[*Pause*] (16)

And again,

Hamm: Stop!

[*Clov stops chair close to back wall. Hamm lays his hand against wall.*]

Old wall!

Beyond is the...other hell.

[*Pause. Violently.*]

Closure! Closure! Up against! (33)

Thus, all the players in Beckett's play are restricted to their limited time and space— Hamm to his wheel-chair, Nagg and Nell to their ash cans and Clov to the stage. The shrinking of time and space is one of the highlights of *Endgame*. The ‘restrictive economy’ of Beckettian stage does not provide any scope for transcendence.

The lived space, the familiar territory of the characters in the play shrinks as their impairments are turned into disabilities. Their bodies no more stretched “ex-statically” into lived space; rather, we see restricted bodily functions and contraction of space. Their

¹⁰ For strong points of view on the issue, see Sartre 61

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bodies lack what Maurice Merleau-Ponty would call “*praktognosia*” or kinesthetic wisdom. James Aho and Kevin Aho explain:

When I am healthy, my body stretches “ex-statically” into lived space, beyond the limits of my skin. The lived-body and the world “intersect and engage each other like gears” as I climb stairs, open doors, and sit at the desk. It is in those moments that I feel “I can”. When the lived-body is ill, on the other hand, this disposition shifts dramatically to “I can’t”. Now the world no longer gives itself as an expansive horizon of possibilities into which I can pass. Instead, the stairs look *insurmountable*, the door is *too heavy*, and sitting is *painful*. The boundaries of my world begin to collapse”¹¹.

Such bodily restrictions and “freezing and rigidity of the lived-body” accentuate disability and immobility as one is pinned down to a particular space and never move and act beyond the *vicinity*. The players refuse leaving their *vicinity* since all that they can be sure of is their *vicinity*, nothing further than the vicinity:

Hamm: Nature has forgotten us.

Clov: There is no more nature.

Hamm: No more nature? You exaggerate.

Clov: In the *vicinity*. (18)

The actions in the play are very much restricted as there is no intersubjectivity, no intercorporeality, no ‘bodying-forth’— we see a contraction of both lived-body and lived-space. The bodies in the play fail to transcend their skin, their *körper*; they remain always already limited to their corporeality; and any attempt to establish relationship with the world remains futile. Hamm, Nagg, Nell and, to a certain extent Clov stay caged in their

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion on the subject, see Aho and Aho 115-7

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machine-like bodies and become what La Mettrie has called *L'homme machine*, that is devoid of any of the essential 'becoming(s)'. None of the characters enjoy what they do. And as the space is 'narrowing' upon them, their life is being reduced to its bare minimum ("bare life"). We witness such claustrophobic ambience in the very stagecraft and such 'narrowing' down since the beginning of the play:

Bare interior.

Grey light.

Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture. Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins. Center, in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet, Hamm. Motionless by the door, his eyes fixed on Hamm, Clov. Very red face. Brief tableau. (7)

It is all that Beckettian stage has to offer: life reduced to its bare minimum. The "bare interior" and closed spaces of the stage are symptomatic of not only the nadir of life but also a shrinking of lived-space resulting from impairment and disability. "That is to say, there is a narrowing or 'funneling' of our existence down to essentials. Life close in on us; we stop doing things that once nourished and nourished us, leaving only work or other stressors that continue to deplete our emotional resources. The narrower the funnel becomes, the easier it is to be drawn into the hallowed-out state of having but one choice, either to live or die"¹². Disability and space are, thus, directly proportional to each other.

Not only do we see shrinkage of lived space in *Endgame* but also shrinkage of lived-time—the continuum of time which anticipates what-is-to-come (the future)

¹² See Williams, Teasdale, Segal and Kabat-Zinn 28-29. It has been quoted from Aho and Aho 120.

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relative to what-is- now (the present) and to what-once-was (the past). The temporal existence of the characters on stage is reduced to their immediacy as if they are stuck or glued to their present “now”. They have become prisoners of the present and confined to their single temporal dimension. Unsure about their past their future seem to be very dark and bleak. In illness, “the lived past”, as James and Kevin Aho point out, “with its remembered images of vitality and independence closes off. The remaining memories are stripped of their emotional valence and begin showing up in an alien and abstract way as the experiences of someone else” and on the other hand “once open vista of future hopes and dreams collapses”¹³. The illness and impairment in the play cause the rhythmic flow of time to stop and shrink, disabling them to think and act beyond the limits of the stage-time. So not only *here* but ‘outside of *now* its death’ as well.

In the play, we do not find any of the characters transcending the limits of the time on stage. “Nothing seems to happen in the now of the dramatic action. All that is left for the characters is the recollection of the past”¹⁴, as Quayson points out. We see Hamm, and especially, Nagg and Nell taking recourse to the past as a respite from the pain of the present—dreariness and weariness of their present existence:

Hamm: I love the *old* questions.

[*With fervor*]

Ah the *old* questions, the *old* answers, there’s nothing like them!

[...] (46)

¹³ See Aho and Aho 120-121

¹⁴ See Quayson 68

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Although their effort to (re)create the past in order to suit their present proves futile, it provides them some kind of anesthesia — momentary relief from their painful sterile condition. Nagg and Nell remain isolated from each other in their separate ash bins. They do not share anything in the ‘here, now’ of the stage but that lack of ‘-with-the-other’ is compensated by a shared past. They were hardly able to see each other but they could hear properly and it was their narrative (of the past) that was keeping them alive:

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

[*Pause. They turn away from each other.*]

Nagg: Can you hear me?

Nell: Yes. And you?

Nagg: Yes.

[*Pause.*]

Our hearing hasn't failed. [...]

Nagg: Do you *remember*—

[...] (22)

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The narrative of what had happened on Lake Como in this particular scene juxtaposes the past with the present or to be more correct, the *ability* of the past with the *disability* of the present. So for Nagg and Nell, “the process of recalling the past is at same time a process of animating what is potentially sterile and inert, that is, dead and only enlivened in memory”¹⁵. Such interlocutions help to build up the conflict— mnemonic interludes of *action* in the play exist in stark contrast to the general *inaction* on the stage.

The experience of pain and disability remains unaccounted throughout the play. Although in pain none of the characters recognize it. Only in few instances we find Hamm asking for painkillers; but, pain and, especially physical pain, remains unrecognized and uncertain. We do not see any articulation of the body in pain, of the body which is suffering— a condition which can be called *painfulness without pain* where one is able to be in pain but is not able to feel pain. Such ambiguous and perplexed status of pain in the play is the consequence of the contradiction between *being in pain* and *feeling pain*. Pain is always already contingent upon intersubjective recognition— the validation of pain of the sufferer is somewhat validated by the recognition of the other. In *Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry suggests that one of the complex things about pain is that it produces epistemological certainty for the pain sufferer but the possibility of doubt for the nonsufferer. “To have pain,” Scarry points out, “is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*”¹⁶. There is no “analogical verification” or

¹⁵ See Quayson 71

¹⁶ For strong points of view on different aspects of the issue, see Scarry

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“analogical substantiation” of pain in Beckett’s plays. *Endgame* employs a whole new structure of interlocution by disrupting and reframing the very relationship between the sufferer and the witness. There is no recognition and there is no effort on the part of the characters to alleviate pain: they remain indifferent to each other’s pain. Hamm’s demand for painkillers is never meted out by Clov. Hamm, on the other hand, never takes Clov’s pain seriously. And they both stay oblivious to the hunger, pain and suffering of Nagg and Nell:

Hamm: [...]

Is it not time for my pain killers?

Clov: No

[*Pause.*]

I’ll leave you, I have things to do. (14)

And again,

Hamm: How are your eyes?

Clov: Bad

Hamm: How are your legs?

Clov: Bad

Hamm: But you can move.

Clov: Yes.

Hamm: [*violently*] Then move! (14)

Quayson points out, “[t]he absence of a structure of interlocution for addressing pain in Beckett is what allows his drama in particular to reside uneasily between tragedy and

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comedy. The dianoetic laughter that often attends plays such as *Endgame* is possible because the characters' suffering is not physical or even indeed emotional. They are not perceived to be in pain in any physical sense of the word"¹⁷. Rather than evoking pathos the situation of the characters tend to evoke bathos. The characters in the play are often thought to be ciphers and their act nothing more than clowning. Nell diagnoses the problem and critiques their situation, as he says:

Nell: One mustn't laugh at those things, Nagg. Why must you always laugh at them?

Nagg: Not so loud!

Nell: [without lowering her voice] Nothing is funnier than unhappiness. I grant you that... (26)

The negation of any real referent of physical pain and discomfort firstly, from the stage, secondly, from the structure of impairment and disability, thirdly, from the minds of the characters and, fourthly, the relationship between them enable the play to fall victim to several metaphysical categories or speculations. In order to understand the Beckettesque world, the *anamn sis* of the sheer complexities surrounding pain and suffering is required. In his reading of the play, Ranjan Ghosh refers to these phenomena and unsurprisingly raises some fundamental questions:

Despite Hamm's self-reflexive moves to change the horizon of existence, the inherent immovability of suffering remains as the "unyielding sureness of reality", which does not fail to cross our will. Why is this suffering, and what is the suffering for? Why does suffering need to be so persistent as to affect the life of the self, the spirit, and the body? Does *Endgame* provide us with a means by

¹⁷ See Quayson 83

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which to judge the reality and vitality of suffering? How do we account for such a dismembered and disjointed world?¹⁸

The “overdetermination” of physical pain can be observed throughout the play. Even the three-legged castrated dog whom Clov uses in the play to hit Hamm can be seen as an allusion to Friedrich Nietzsche’s metaphor for pain. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes: “I have given a name to my pain and call it ‘dog’. It is just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog— and I can scold it and vent my bad mood on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives.”¹⁹ Perhaps, even Clov himself can be seen as a reification of Hamm’s unbearable pain. He never gives Hamm his painkillers. The entire existence of Hamm is conditional and depends on Clov heavily. The latter, on the other hand, always threatens Hamm but never leaves (“I’ll leave you, I have things to do”). They equally surmount Hamm— *like* pain, *like* Clov. The pain is more of a cipher in Beckettesque reality making it very difficult to read. The disabled and impaired bodies in *Endgame* and the “precise metacritical function” that they serve make them elusive and ambiguous in nature rendering the “entire apparatus of representation... riddled with gaps and aporia”²⁰.

Beckett’s plays diagnose the limits of lived body. In *Theatre and Body*, Colette Conroy points out, “the body” for Beckett “is a metaphor for the restrictive experiences

¹⁸ Ranjan Ghosh. ‘Reading and Experiencing a Play Transculturally’. *Comparative Drama Vol. 46 No.3* (2012). 260-281

¹⁹ See Nietzsche 249

²⁰ See Quayson, Atto 83

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of the human psyche and its failure to escape from its own painful restrictions”²¹. There is no ‘escape’ in Beckett’s theatre and in *Endgame*, the uncanny immobility on the stage never allows any extant for freedom and transcendence. Although in the play we find Hamm once hinting at such an escape to a distant land, “Let’s go from *here*, the two of us! South! You can make a raft and the currents will carry us, far away, to other... mammals!” (42) but very soon his *anagnorisis* of pain brings him down to his bodily existence: “Wait! [...] Is it not yet time for my pain-killer?” The limits of ‘here, now’ of the stage *limit* the agency of the characters— not allowing them to come out of their ‘restrictive economy’ of corporeal existence.

The lived body becomes a tool to study different dimensions of disability in theatre. Conroy claims “[t]here is a huge difference between talking about ‘the body’ and its experience of a theatre performance and talking about ‘bodies’ and their experiences. *The body* supposes that there is an ideal or assumed body and that all people gain access to the pleasures of performance in broadly the same way. When we think about *bodies* as entities that see, feel and move in radically different ways, as in disability theatre, the idealized *body* becomes the disparate *bodies*. We can’t suppose that the play offers one overriding ‘meaning’ or a single coherent performance.”²² The (re)presentation of disability and impairment in Beckett’s *Endgame* blast open the very continuum of hermeneutics, challenging the ‘ideal’ and calling for an array of possibilities. There is no end to this game. By continuously resisting and subverting the notions of the body, pain, disability and action Beckett is trying to change the very rules of the game. The body,

²¹ Colette 73

²² For further discussion, see Colette 55-6

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pain, illness and impairment in the play are not what we understand off-stage. On-stage the exceptional bodies of Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell incite violence, encourage representation and persistently force explanation. They managed to suffer *better* even when sufferance was looming large. The play rather becomes a game to end the kind of conventional politics prevalent both on and off the stage.

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