



Forgetting and its authenticity/inauthenticity in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

The current paper aims at reading Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the light of forgetting motif as the culmination of the crisis of cognition. Forgetting can also be indicative of a desire for a new beginning and a new identity. The researcher wants to see whether forgetting in *Waiting for Godot* is purely authentic or purely inauthentic or to put it differently, whether forgetting is conducive to a new identity or it is portentous of a disintegrating personality? After reading Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and analyzing the play textually, the researcher finds that the play's world is based on the keyword, perhaps. Considering this, perhaps forgetting is deliberate and acts as a shelter for the characters. Trying to remember something or trying to think about something does not work in this play. It seems as if the characters cannot go through remembering and thinking but remembering or thinking themselves come to the characters which is quite transitive and intuitive. Therefore, in the play, some traces of Henry Bergson's idea of spontaneous remembering and Martin Heidegger's idea of thinking and even deconstruction of any kinds of binary oppositions are traceable. There is perpetual evasion from certainty that one feels as if the characters have entered a dreamlike environment. On the whole, throughout the play, there is simultaneous asserting and withdrawing from meaning that highlights the tendency towards deliberate forgetting. There is no specific track of before and after in the play which is suggestive of a limbo-like world. The researcher concludes that *Waiting for Godot*'s world has more tendency towards internal world, but even the internal world is not immune from the real world's crisis of cognition. It argues that, forgetting suspends judgment; and no one can judge dogmatically; neither the characters nor the readers of the play, and in this regard, forgetting is both authentic and inauthentic.

Keywords: authenticity, inauthenticity, cognition, forgetting, *Waiting for Godot*

Introduction

In the light of my recent project on the crisis of cognition, I have come up with some questions regarding the ambiguous potentiality of forgetting and its effect on identity formation firstly in *Waiting for Godot*'s world and then in our everyday world. Although, this paper tries to excavate double nature of forgetting and to delineate the dilemma of forgetting and waiting, it highlights simultaneous hovering between forgetting and its binary opposition, simultaneous remembering, which acts as a deconstructing element for forgetting.

Here the aim of the researcher is to prove that forgetting can simultaneously have an excruciating or facilitating effect on waiting. When forgetting is deliberate, it leads to illusion and the characters more easily tolerate the process of waiting. In fact, the crucial importance of deliberate forgetting is couched in the contradictory nature of illusion, because although illusion can occur in silence, it can help people to evade solitude and "the self-confrontations solitude brings" (Kenner 9). Furthermore, there is a mysterious bond between deliberate forgetting and the realm of silence; the positive silence of personal thought, the silence of temporal withdrawal into the self" (Ebrahimi 11). Concretely, in the play there are some silent moments in which one speculates perhaps silence is a big help in the discovery of the identity.

On the other hand when Beckett's characters naturally forget something, their waiting turns to be more excruciating for them. In fact, the negative facet of forgetting or *amnesia* is tantamount to negative fact of silence elaborated as "the negative silence of total, irreversible withdrawal, a silence that occurs when one

denies the human need to relate with the external world" (Ebrahimi 11). Strikingly, when forgetting is *amnesiac*, the characters are totally alienated from their world and are even hesitant in waiting, which is their only goal in life. But the interesting point is here that although "nothing is certain and among all the approaches that the tramps have already tried, what is left certain is waiting, which they keep on doing" (Hadaegh 202). Funny enough, forgetting sometimes culminates in nothingness which is a recurrent motif in the play, and it seems there remains only one way for the characters which is identifying themselves with nothingness, that is to say, the characters' identity is dependent on the discovery of the realm of nothingness, as Jacobi asserts, "the highest upon which I can reflect, what I can contemplate, is my empty and pure, naked and mere ego, with its autonomy and freedom" (qtd. in Critchly 4). Therefore, what is the essence of my paper is that I have shown that the presence of forgetting motif is not necessarily a sufficient reason for accusing Godot's world totally inauthentic and meaningless. On the other hand, the free play of forgetting and spontaneous remembering in the realm of waiting provides enough room for the hovering status of their world between authenticity and inauthenticity like our own daily world.

In this play which is the paragon model of quotidian concerns, the panacea is to some extent hidden in the serpentine realm of forgetting. Serpentine to the extent that even sometimes the characters forget how to forget something. Surprisingly, lack of etiology or the nexus of cause and effect is an accompaniment for

forgetting and it is very much necessary to scrutinize the relation between forgetting and boredom. For example, sometimes the characters are aware of their daily habits, but sometimes they fall into the trap of habit by the seduction of the amnesiac side of forgetting. On the contrary the deliberate side of forgetting seems to be helpful as much as it acts as a leeway from habit and quotidian life. On the whole, what is perplexing here is the ambiguous nature of forgetting and waiting that are temporarily accompanied by spontaneous awareness. Indeed, for better understanding of forgetting, the role of silence and language, respectively on memory and identity have to be discovered.

Materials and Methods

The present paper is a library research. The researcher will use an inclusive approach which simultaneously shows forgetting as a constructive and deconstructive factor on waiting. Interesting enough, in this realm lays the deconstruction of absurdist streaks of the play. Therefore, this paper is mainly concerned with the motif of forgetting both as deliberate and amnesiac forgetting and their effects on the authenticity and inauthenticity of Godot's world.

Indeed, the researcher stands against the one-sidedness of forgetting because in the most extremely possible way, when the characters forget their *raison d'être* and show craving for self-destruction and suicide, they evade killing themselves. As it is shown in Buddhism, the principal cause of suffering is due to deep-rooted desires within us; and the most important desire in Beckett's characters are desires for continuation and even paradoxically for self-destruction. As far as the desire for self-destruction is emanated from the characters' amnesia, the desire for continuation is emanated from deliberated forgetting. Furthermore, illusion is a positive consequence of deliberate forgetting and turns to be emancipatory. In this paper, besides introducing the double nature of forgetting, its effect on identity formation in their daily lives will be highlighted. And concerning this, the interrelation of silence and language comes to the fore. As a matter of fact, it highlights that although in the surface structure, forgetting seems to shatter the characters' identity; in the deep structure forgetting opens a space toward illusion. Subsequently, the character's quest for identity is not only static, but also dynamic in a way that their identity illuminates with sudden intuition which deepens their identity even if temporarily. Provocatively, the characters' constant forgetting can be taken into account as a simultaneous help and obstacle in recognizing their identity.

Reading *Waiting for Godot* (1957) in the light of forgetting motif is the acme of the crisis of cognition, according to Michael Worton (2008) ^[14], sometimes "amnesia heightens their anxiety. And Pozzo says, memory is 'defective'". Interesting to note is that forgetting can also be indicative of a desire for a new beginning and a new identity. In fleshing these claims out, the researcher wants to see whether forgetting in *Waiting for Godot* (1957) leads to an authentic or inauthentic life. In other words, whether forgetting is conducive to a new identity or it is portentous of a disintegrating personality. Here, the researcher deals with Beckett's characters' amnesiac characteristic and their deliberate forgetting concurrently.

Strikingly, when the characters confronts with amnesia, it seems they are plaything of memory and not the other way around. But concurrently, the characters have a chance to play with their

memory and to make memory their plaything with the power of deliberate forgetting which push them toward the realm of silence. And a big question arises here that from where silence emanates? As a sceptic answer it seems it comes 'from the realm of nothing' which can be attributed to the realm of mind which seems to be the repertory of silence. And silence is no longer the 'other' in the binary opposition of self and other, in the same vein that sound is no longer superior to silence. For example, Derrida in his *Of Grammatology* (1998) highlights the realm of thought which is prior to speech, as he mentions to "the metaphysical belief that language gives expression to ideas that prior to that expression leads a purely spiritual existence in the mind.

Indeed, in silence there can be found the deconstructing power of forgetting which leads to some sort of "kenosis or self-emptying: the winner is the one who managed to get rid of all" (Eagleton 147). Surprisingly, the silence and deliberate forgetting are not permanent and they will be perforated very soon by some temporary spontaneous awareness which is declared through the rhetoric of language. Since 'logocentrism' has lost its value in our world and also in Godot's world, language is no longer certain guarantor of certainty. And in this regard, identities are not one-dimensional. Therefore, either for identity formation or for the discovery of other's identity, memory, logic, are not necessarily sufficient tools, perhaps silence and forgetting are big helps.

As it is indicated 'perhaps' is the keyword in this play, and when forgetting is deliberate it acts as a shelter for the characters. Actually, trying to remember something or trying to think about something does not work in this play to the extent that Estragon says, ". . . did that [thought] ever happen to us?" (123; act 2). It seems as if the characters cannot go through remembering and thinking but remembering or thinking itself comes to the characters which is quite transitive and intuitive. It may be true as Heidegger in his *Basic Writings* (1978) maintains that "man wants to think, but can't" (261). In fact, in *Waiting for Godot* (1957), border between things is not a clear-cut one, henceforth the border between forgetting and remembering is not also an exception.

As a matter of fact, spontaneous remembering shows some sorts of internal awareness for Beckett's characters and this awareness temporarily helps the characters to find their identities. Although Vladimir is meditative enough to assert "hope deferred makes the something sick", at the end he wants to know "who said that?" (Beckett, 40; act1). His wondering about his saying is reminiscent of this bitter truth in the lives of human beings when they apparently know many things but in practice they are oblivious and their act is way far from their sayings.

Michael Worton (2008) ^[14] believes that it is "one example of Vladimir's amnesiac discourse" (81) which is an evidence of his obliviousness toward the gift of living. Not only is it a sign for his amnesia but also it is indicative of his temporary awareness. On the whole, awareness is temporary in the play, and it is highlighted by the presence of forgetting. Beckett's world like the real world is based on dichotomy; and the play will only be meaningful by considering forgetting and spontaneous remembering together. In this regard, even characters' deliberate seeking for recognizing their identity does not work. There is perpetual evasion from certainty that one feels as if the characters have entered a dreamlike environment. The amnesia of the characters leads the researcher to think that perhaps the first act of the play was totally a dream. And it is not certain whose dream

it is; therefore, this distinction is to be a justification for the natural forgetting. But there is no guarantee for such a distinction in a play which is full of aporias and uncertainties.

Furthermore, throughout the play, there is simultaneous asserting and withdrawing from meaning that highlights the tendency toward deliberate forgetting; “we shall never know whether his discourse is amnesiac or whether the confusion . . . is deliberate” (Worton 85). There is no specific track of before and after in the play which is suggestive of a limbo-like world. The positive point is that the characters’ illusion has not been perforated and they had one last resort which is the pipe dream of Godot. Interesting to note is that, in today’s world dreams are no longer absurd, quite contrary, the quintessence of today’s life is to live with one’s dream. The researcher concludes that *Waiting for Godot*’s world has more tendency toward internal world, but even the internal world is not immune from the real world’s crisis of cognition, specifically the characters’ inability in recognizing their identities.

On the whole, forgetting suspends judgment; and no one can judge dogmatically about anything specifically about identity; neither the characters nor the readers of the play, and in this regard, forgetting is authentic, as Nietzsche asserts, “only through forgetfulness could human beings ever entertain the illusion that they possess truth . . .” (qtd. in Geuss and Speirs 143). In fact, Nietzsche believes in positive forgetfulness which provides opportunity for the triumph of rebirth and the discovery of identity. In other words, forgetting permits the characters to write their days anew and it provides an opportunity for them to escape from their daily habits and boredom. This potentiality of rewriting in forgetting shows that nothing happens till today; therefore, the characters feel that they have new opportunity for life. Metaphorically, life can be like a text which can be rewritten every day and in this sense “Beckett’s theatre is in Barthes’ terminology, remarkably ‘scriptable’: there is always an open play of possibilities in Beckett, a ‘galaxy of signifiers’ that constitutes a genuinely plural significance” (Zeifman 54). Astonishingly, Beckett’s play is the paradigm of Barthes’ *jouissance* and the desire for coherency is prevalent in the text.

But still, the other side of forgetting is inauthentic, because till the end of the play, everyone is concerned with the crisis of recognizing true identity. In other words, as there is no genuine or reliable source for the readers of the play to provide them with certain information, microcosmically, the memory of Beckett’s characters is not a reliable source for them. Therefore, the characters neither can be sure about their own identity nor about the other’s identity.

The crisis is palpable in the play because “most of their [Beckett’s characters] interchanges depend on memory, which again depends on continuity and causality” (Gordon 130). Memory is incapable of helping the characters voluntarily, that is to say, when the characters want to remember something even their identities, memory falls short. For example, there are times that Estragon and Vladimir cannot remember the other character or each other’s real name or the name that we have known them with from the very beginning of the play. For example once Pozzo asked “Estragon’s name” and he said “Adam” (85; act 1). Or to the surprise of us, when one character is addressed with a new name, he does not wonder and answers. As when Pozzo is fallen on the earth Estragon says “we might try him with other names” then Estragon once calls Pozzo “Abel! Abel!” and once more

calls him with “Cain. Cain! Cain” and when Estragon sees Pozzo answers he says “He’s all humanity” (151; act 2). This forgetting is to the extent that even sometimes in the play Estragon and Vladimir seem to be interchangeable names for these two characters.

But this mal-functioning of the memory is not an end in this play, because it seems there are moments at which the characters have very informative soliloquies in the form of stream of consciousness. For example, Vladimir says:

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? . . . But in all that what truth will there be? (Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir looks at him). He’ll know nothing . . . He’ll tell me about the blows he received and I’ll give him a carrot. Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the whole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener. At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. I can’t go on! What have I said? (Beckett, 161; act 2)

This excerpt is the core of Vladimir’s soliloquies throughout the play, he pours out his internal awareness quite unconsciously and quite independent of his memory. And when at the end he says “what have I said”, it shows that such awareness has even surprised himself and it is also indicative of the other facet of himself with which he cannot identify easily. It is necessary to note that if there is to be an important awareness as a shadow of so-called eternal truth, there is not necessarily any dependence upon memory, fixed identity, logic or any kind of logical causality. In other words, these momentary awareness are very much reminiscent of Lacan’s key term, *point de capion*, which is well elaborated as “surturing point [...] or the moments in the psyche where the signifier and signified are gathered, thereby momentarily bringing to a halt the slippage of signification by which subjectivity is continued” (Wolfreys *et al.* 79). In fact, it seems that in these moments the characters suddenly get away from alienation and come to terms with themselves and temporarily their mind turns to be filled with something whether by means of memory or vision.

Conclusion

To settle the matter, for coming to a conclusion Bergson (1988) [2], declares that “we shall only to retrace our steps and to correct, particularly by bringing memory back again”. It is just the same as Beckett’s characters’ search for rendering their memory, but they cannot. And here, Bergson’s idea of perception is very much like Beckett’s characters’ vision which is intuitional, as he says:

I mean a perception which exists in theory rather than in fact and would be possessed by a being placed where I am living, as I live, but absorbed in the present and capable, by giving up every form of memory, of obtaining a vision of matter both immediate and instantaneous. (Beckett 34)

In fact, this saying challenges the determining role of memory and highlights the importance of vision. It seems Beckett is inculcating this idea that these kinds of awareness cannot be bound to the domain of memory. However, propounding the

notion of intuition cannot remove the importance of the role of memory, as Bergson in his book, *Matter and Memory* (1988) [2], claims:

It is indisputable that the basis of real, and so to speak instantaneous, intuition, on which our perception of the external world is developed, is a small matter compared with all that memory adds to it. Just because the recollection of earlier analogous intuitions is more useful than the intuition itself, being bound up in memory with the whole series of subsequent events and capable thereby of throwing a better light on our decision. . . (66)

As far as the play *Waiting for Godot* is concerned, time and again there is trace of spontaneous remembering or intuition in the play, but there is not proper recollection of intuition or any other recollection as memory, and consequently the characters cannot decide about their lives. And in fact, intuition or spontaneous remembering sheds lights on different dimensions of identities of the characters. On the whole, Bergson in his book, *Creative Evolution* (1911) [2], claims a high position for intuition as he says, "the intuitions of seers and saints and poets opened new roads and suggested unattained but not impossible heights from which men might have angelic vistas" (16).

Finally, the important point of this paper is to see the impotency in judging everyday life that emanates from the deconstructive aspects of every binary opposition, from language and silence to memory and intuition,... which are directly or indirectly related to forgetting and spontaneous remembering. As a result, there is no priority between these binaries, because it seems that neither of the binaries, here for instance; forgetting as the centre of focus, is certainly a negative (inhibitive) or positive (willing) factor in daily lives of Beckett's characters that either dooms or remunerates them with a retrogressive or progressive life. Therefore, the authenticity and inauthenticity of their lives are interwoven as they are seemingly drowned in their everydayness and feel vegetated, spontaneously they feel revitalized. At the end, it is necessary to note that without forgetting, spontaneous remembering will not be effective.

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