

**DISINTEGRATING IDENTITIES: A STUDY OF CHARACTER AUTOMATISM IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME**Muhammad Mubashar Nawaz\*<sup>1</sup>, Khurram Shehzad<sup>2</sup>, Bilawal Hussain Niazi<sup>3</sup>

Original Article

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**Abstract**

*This article discusses the fragmentation and the disintegration of the characters in the light of Zeno's paradox of plurality. The characters indulge in automatism to overcome the sense of alienation and familial lack of compassion since their childhood. While automatism protects them against external contingency, it reduces existence to sequential divestment, with each beginning denoting merely the certainty of perpetually descending to the end. They fail to become a part of the whole where they fear that they may lose their subjective identities and submerge into the whole. It shows how the situation and the disintegration of the characters in Endgame symbolize the impossibility of becoming the part of the whole. This paper explores how Beckett goes even further than Zeno by showing the divisibility even of the part and tells how an individual is alienated from society, people around him and ultimately from himself and he lives only in temporal units without the possibility of finding intrinsic meanings of life.*

**Keywords:** Alienation, automatism, disintegration, fragmentation, individual identity

**Introduction**

Beckett, like all modernist writers, has endeavoured to 'make everything new'. His texts are innovative not only in relation to all other forms of drama but also with respect to his previous works. *Waiting for Godot* creates a stir among critics, but it seems that the writer is dissatisfied with the humanistic productions of it. The presentation of *Endgame* brings forth a gloomier vision of human life and it is somewhat 'more inhuman than Godot'. In this play, the characters are in a mind-like cell and less mobile than Vladimir and Estragon or they are almost immobile. Beckett's characters show physical degeneration and decay. Hamm is confined to his chair and not able to stand; Clov is not able to sit and moves in circles to scrutinize the cubicle. Nagg and Nell, throughout the action of the play, if there is any action, remain in dustbins, legless and immobile. Every character has been shown in exhaustion and the play begins with the word 'finished'. All existential and mystical solaces also come to an end with the death of the body and the disintegration of nature, and there may even be an end to meaning, the demise of God, and the termination of time. Ending is contained in each part of the play and this concept of ending makes it more symbolic than any play of the Middle Ages.

Beckett lets '*Endgame*' travel towards its endless end with its own course that is why it appears that it is in a process. It is in an unrelenting process of putrefying. The close reading of the play stamps the fact that nothing is final and ultimate before it begins to be acted. The play

foregrounds itself through various devices. For instance, the name that is given to Hamm denotes 'actor' and he questions before he begins to perform his role, "Me—to play" (Endgame, 2006, p. 2). It indicates that the actor is in the process to become a character on the stage. Clov shuffles the setting of the stage such as uncurtaining the props before he actually ensues his role through dialogue. This action of Clov demonstrates that stage setting itself is in the continual process as things are taking their place. When he inspects the world outside, following the orders of Hamm, through a telescope, he reports a zero vision which indicates that nothing else exists and there are not many things outside. The use and mentioning of theatrical term go side by side in the process of the play. Copeland (2007) sums up this reflexive emphasis: "Here the focus upon the play as play is relentless" (cited in Levy. p. 48). The soliloquy of Clov in the very outset of the play foregrounds yet another process in an unconventional way.

CLOV: (*fixed gaze, tonelessly*):

Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.

(*Pause.*)

Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.

(*Pause.*)

I can't be punished any more (p. 2).

Hamm also endorses the significance of the very philosophy at the later stages of the process. "It's finished, we're finished. Nearly finished" (p. 50); "Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of . . . that old Greek, and all life-long you wait for that to mount up to a life" (p. 70). These remarks point out toward lived experience or temporality of living. Living merely includes the accumulation of temporal units that are far from the individual experiencing them, not the ongoing revelation of the intrinsic significance or value of the living subject in question. This assertion of Hamm directly refers to the problematic and complex relationship of the 'whole to parts'.

### Conceptual Framework

Many critics believe that Hamm in this connection alludes to Greek philosopher Zeno. The process which it indicates relates the philosophy of the play with Zeno's philosophy. According to Zeno, the process is reversed as he does not talk about the whole which consists of many parts, but parts exist only as separate parts. Zeno's paradox of plurality rejects all the notions of things being plural and all kinds of plurality. He says that if things are many, they must contain the element of the like and the unlike which is impossible. If things are many, they are both limited (must be a fixed number of many things) and unlimited (must have a third between the two that separates them) and so on. To add Zeno's words, "If there are many, they must be as many as they are and neither more nor less than that. But if they are as many as they are, they would be limited. If there are many, things that are are unlimited. For there are always others between the things that are, and again others between those, and so the things that are unlimited" (Aristotle, 1998, p.29).

Plurality cannot be both limited and unlimited so there are no pluralities. Every part of this plurality is both small to the extent that it has no size but also it is large as it is infinite, says Zeno. He also talks about 'infinite divisibility' if one keeps on cutting things into parts and the process of division is complete and things are divided into elements, it can lead to three possible ends: if elements are nothing, the appearance of the whole would be nothing and that is absurd, if elements are of zero size, the object composed of them must be of zero size which is again absurd, and if the elements are something they need further division, so, plurality is impossible. Zeno like his teacher Parmenides believes in monism. As for as Zeno's stance is concerned that

parts cannot postulate the whole and things cannot be composed in pluralities and the Pythagorean whole, it all can be seen in *Endgame* where parts remain parts and they can never form a whole but Beckett goes one step ahead, he even brings disintegration to those parts because human body is also an example of the whole, to form the whole, the harmony between parts is essential but in human body, according to Beckett, there is no harmony. All parts are separate entities.

In Zeno's views, the whole is impossible, so, Beckett, bringing disintegration even to that body directly or indirectly, proves that the plurality of objects is impossible. He brings a systematic alienation to human body and mentions its part. First, he separates the mind from the body, then the body from thought and goes on. It means that a part has its own individual identity in whatever the way it survives or exists. By entering the so-called 'whole' a part does not lose its subjective value. A part has an extraneous relationship with the whole. Thus, monism refutes the Pythagorean pluralism which believes that a part is meaningless unless it becomes the part of the whole. The Pythagorean pluralism negates the individuality and subjectivity of the part. Whereas Zeno questions the validity of pluralism by asking if a part is meaningless, how it can provide the meanings to the whole. He gives the example of the grains of bushel corn. If the *parts* (i.e., the grains) of a bushel of corn make no sound when falling, how can the *whole* (i.e., the entire bushel) make a sound when falling, since it is composed entirely of its parts? For Zeno, it is an absurdity to postulate parts into a whole, therefore, for him, it is problematic to constitute the whole with meaningless parts. He declares that the whole and a unit with a complete order is impossible. Since the whole is impossible so the divisibility of the world is out of question. The concept of plurality and multiplicity has been problematized by Zeno.

### Discussion

*Endgame* deals with the problem of indivisibility of life as a whole. According to Beckettian concept, the possibility of life as the whole in the presence of meaningless and diverse temporal parts such as Clove and Hamm is unattainable, this stance of Beckett endorses another idea that when such accumulation negates the whole it also negates the concept of becoming and it would be a futile effort to struggle to achieve it. Becoming is impossible because every part has meaning: "Mean something! You and I, mean something! Ah that's a good one!" (p. 33). If there is no progress in the case of becoming, the succession of time and moments too lose their significance. The linearity does not even exist and the transition from past to future seems implausible, and time here paradoxically perpetuates its own irrelevance: "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (p. 69).

In this situation, as Clov point out when responding to Hamm's question, "What time is it?" time is always "the same as usual" (p. 4). If time is considered restricted in its own constituency, what it is doing? It keeps on assembling the identical parts of the whole. This process or this action of time is decomposing the whole itself into parts. When the time selects identical parts from the whole, it dislodges the whole. Simultaneously, it becomes an alternative process from the whole to part. "I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and *between my legs a little trail of black dust*" (p. 81). This condition reminds us of Molloy's (1955) maxim: "To decompose is to live too" (p. 25).

The gradual deterioration of components in *Endgame* demonstrated the collapse. There are no longer any "rugs," "bicycle wheels," "sugarplums," "coffins," or "painkillers," among other items. As Hamm indicates, "there'll be no more walls anymore. Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't fill it, and there you'll be like a little

bit of grit in the middle of the steppe” (p. 36). Everything would eventually go through this disintegration process, with the exception of one remaining component (subjectivity) in the middle of "infinite emptiness." This temporal subjectivity is not external; rather, it denotes an inside void or deficiency, making a person conscious of their limitations. Hamm says: “There’s something dripping in my head. A heart, a heart in my head” (p.18).

Taking it a step further, Beckett's setting in *Endgame* really alludes to the subjectivity that is lost in an endless void. The environment does not reflect a specific location; rather, it is the expression of a mindset that is already accustomed to suffering. Some critics, like Vivian Mercier, Theodore Adorno, and S. E. Gontarski, disagree with this paradigm's inclusion of the setting because they think it paints a vision of the post-war or post-nuclear status of the nation in which Beckett lived and worked as an amateur ambulance driver. Nevertheless, Beckett favours using the stage surroundings to depict people's mental states rather than their physical ones. Kenner (1973) comments that “the stage, with its high peepholes seems to be the inside of an immense skull” (p.155).

In his paper, Nykrog (1998) references a nineteenth-century literary convention that interpreted "room" as an emblem for the intellect (p.124). since it has been demonstrated that the environment reflects the mind. It stands for the mindset that destroys the entire outside world. For it, everything is dead. The incapacity of such characters to transcend their inner thinking is what is meant rather than that the entire outer world has physically disappeared. They are unable to be plural even if they would like to. They never venture beyond their own personal worries. They ignore the outside world, or to put it another way, their focus on their own interiority keeps them alienated from it as Hamm says ferociously: “The whole place stinks of corpses...to hell with the universe” (p. 46).

This demonstrates how the characters' shortage and agitation are really represented by their perception of lack and turmoil in the outside world. It correlates objectively with interior consciousness. The absence in the external environment is a reflection of and an externalisation of the absence within. Every person sees the world from his or her own vantage point. When one is damaged, they regard the entire world as being unstable. His or her typical viewpoint prevents them from being able to observe the world outside of their field of perception. His internal dysfunction leads him to perceive the outside world as chaotic. During this process Zeno's philosophy of monism is approved by the characters of Beckett. The meaninglessness of a part is related with the meaninglessness of the whole. Clov's observation through the wrong window shows how the perspective determines meanings. “Ah what a fool I am! I'm on the wrong side! Sometimes I wonder if I'm in my right senses. Then it passes off and I'm as intelligent as ever” (p. 73).

*Endgame* is (to adapt the Unnamable's wording) set in “a head abandoned to its ancient solitary resources” (Beckett, 1958, p. 361). It imitates a particular mentality. It introduces psychological orientation of life. The characters are unable to go beyond from their persistent mentality. Indeed, according to Knowlson (1999), when Beckett directed a German production of *Endgame* in 1967, he described the play as “full of echoes; they all answer each other” (p. 551). The core of this mentality is the extraordinary obsession of characters with their internal distress that makes them totally aloof from external world. They are so much preoccupied with their own sufferings that they do not have any concern with the outer world. “It all happened without me” (p. 74). “Well, there we are, there I am, that's enough” (p. 83). Nothing could detract his attention from his own suffering; the object of his concerns is always he himself. “Can there be misery—

loftier than mine?" (p. 2). "Last night I saw inside my breast. There was a big sore" (p. 32). This also proves that apparently, they seem the part of the world that stands for the 'whole', but they remain individual, alienated parts of the whole.

Another characteristic of Beckett's characters is the perpetuation of their habits. The characters never come out of their habits. Their actions do not progress. Their end is the same as their beginning or their beginning is as their end. The character continuously follows a particular attitude or habit. The same continuity is observed in another play *Proust* (1931): "We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known. 'Man is the creature that cannot come forth from himself, who knows others only in himself, and who, if he asserts the contrary, lies'" (p. 66). If one talks about a habit or an attitude which is inescapable or unalterable, it strengthens one's stance that the play is the mimesis of mentality. Habit always reflects mentality. This persisting idea can be seen in *Waiting for Godot* (2006) especially in the phrase of Vladimir: "The essential doesn't change" (p. 14).

The continuity of habit remains unalterable throughout the play and is emphasized at various stages: "But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits" (Beckett, 2006, p. 81). Habit, for Beckett, is an automatic adjustment of human organism in any condition of its existence. The relationship between Clov and Hamm is a symbolic relationship between habit and individual. Hamm is individual and Clov is habit. According to Beckett, the suffering of being begins when the bereft of habit takes place. Being bereft of habit turns an individual into the state of being. This state of being brings forth anxieties, distresses, therefore, an individual attempts to go back to his perpetuated habit. The same dilemma Hamm faces in the absence of Clov (habit). Hamm re-joins Clov.

When the transitional period begins to threaten Hamm, he at once goes back to the previous routine. He does not face the suffering of being rather he prefers to adjust himself automatically in that condition. He goes back to his attitude and habit. That's why he repeats the dialogue which he spoke in the beginning of the play near the end. "Me—to play" (p. 2), "Discard" (p. 82), "Take it easy" (ibid), "Raise hat" (ibid). Hamm is invulnerable to change as human beings are. He remains in the same state. He repeats the same actions and dialogues. He remains detached from the outer world. For him the time is always same. He is blind and oblivious to time. "Absent, *always*. It all happened without me" (p. 74).

In the play *Endgame*, the characters are confined to their habit which stamps the philosophy of Beckett that life is a habit. It is the habit that determines one's character. The similar vision has been given by Spitzer (1948) who believes in the automatism of habits. Habit works as a programmed configuration works in an operation. Habit adjusts itself automatically. The play itself is a solid proof of the course of the force of habit. The course of habit resembles the alarm-clock. On these bases, Spitzer forms the principle of automatism; that is, "once the first step is taken the process must run its course" (p.149). The same notion has been stressed in the phrase of Hamm that 'the end is in the beginning'.

The very notion is also addressed by Zeno while discussing the meaninglessness of the whole. For him if the part is meaningless, the whole will ultimately be meaningless. It is inherent in the part. The ironical situation arises in the play when Hamm demands Clov to speak something from his heart and there is a long silence. Speaking from one's heart is not habitual it is contrary to the principle of automatism. Clov could not speak. Life is a habit, and everything is presupposed. Therefore, love too is a habit, it is an impersonal automatism. There is no question

of emotions and subjectivity in it. There is no love. Love is just a habit. Even the love of God is mere outcome of automatism.

The same automatic sort of love is explicitly shown in the play through the mechanical manner of Nagg's prayer. It's parody of prayer. Here, the prayer of Nagg is a habit. *Endgame* offers two alternatives in the process of automatism. The first is winding it up and the other is running it down: "One day you'll say, I'm tired, I'll stop" (p. 37); "Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don't understand, it dies, or it's me, I don't understand, that either" (p. 81). To love without communication and relation is as impossible as to dream a well-ordered whole: "Get out of here and love one another! Lick your neighbour as yourself!" (p. 68).

Though parts are being accumulated, yet their journey is not towards the whole because they do not have any connection with one another. Their journey is not towards the whole, but it is towards the part, even the part is falling apart. Another key point in this regard is compensation. Automatism either eclipses compensation or it offers two possibilities as mentioned above and those also go towards disintegration. The first possibility is to remain indifferent to others by considering their sufferings or situations similar to one's own. This will again lead towards parts. The other possibility is just to ignore them as they ignore one's self. This possibility is automatized in the play through the bottling of Nagg and Nell: "Bottle him!" (p. 10).

The earlier concept of parental love has also been dried up in this mechanical routine of life. The treachery of automatism that always snatches any kind of right from a part to render its responsibility in the life has been symbolized in almost every piece of Beckett's writings. It is symbolized with various inanimate articles such as clock, watch and time bell. The characters follow them. They follow the time bell or clock as they are puppets. Every ticking of clock or alarm set them for a particular action which is pre-scheduled. Thus, it marks their inability to come out of the clutches of that perpetuated time, "alarm-clock" on the wall (p. 70), "on lid of Nagg's bin" (p. 79).

Molloy (1955) elaborates this point in a more lucid way; he believes that the presence of pre-settled activities leaves no scope for an individual to render his personal duty and will in the scheme of life. Here again, Beckett points out the absurdity of life where the responsibility of a part is negated or overshadowed and then it is hoped that the multiplicity of these parts into whole would bring an order. Beckett in *Endgame* vividly dramatizes the problem of the flow of time since time remains the same, the characters also do not change.

The very automatism of time has also been felt by Copeland (1975) who says that the play goes in its course and ends at one place in order to begin yet at another place. Unlike *Proust*, Beckett in *Endgame* emphasised on consecutive and continued automatism. In both these plays he emphasised the role of habit in automatism. In *Proust*, he believes that there is a transitional period between two successive habits. According to him, this is a period where an individual is free from any mentality, habit and automatism. This is the period where an individual can sense the sufferings of being and then he goes to another set of habits and adjusts himself there.

But the time when he produces *Endgame*, Beckett considers that now the time has come where the transition is again meaningless. One finds in the play the succession of habits without any transitional period. This has made the life more absurd and the disintegration from the whole to parts takes another step. "To think that in a moment all will be said, all to do again" (Calmativ, 44). In a way, *Endgame* challenges the concept of pluralism by Pythagoras. The play aligns with

Zeno's refutation of the concept of pluralism. Beckett uses automatism with its extreme effects. This automatism not only splits the part from the whole but also a time comes when it splits the part from itself. It no longer remains under the dictation of mind. "What's the matter with my head, I must have left it in Ireland, in a saloon" (Beckett. 1967, p. 113).

The absent-mindedness means the loss of connection between mind and thought; hence, it results in the flight from the self. Early reviewers noted that *Endgame's* set evokes the interior of a human skull, making the action a mono drama. The characters: Hamm, who represents reason, Clov, who represents senses, and Nagg and Nell, who represent memories and dreams, could perhaps just be different facets of the same mind. As a result, Clov could not just go, as Hamm is aware, despite his repeated threats to do so. The solipsistic retreat (of maybe an artist) into the depths of the mind is echoed in the retreat from the physical world into the shelter, only to discover that "it proves no retreat since consciousness, perception, and memory are themselves unreliable and conflicted rather than unitary and serene" (Gontarski, 2008, p. 427). It means that the character has no connection between what he feels and what he thinks. The dialogue of Hamm that it all happens without me is an indication of absence of his mind from his thought.

Now the question arises from where this automatism begins. In the play, automatism can be traced out from childhood of characters. The activities turn into habits and later the habits complete the process of automatism. Hamm's fear of abandonment in childhood makes him a solitary child who, to escape from fears of utter isolation, invents the imaginary friends and begins to talking to them. This invention becomes his habit and consequently these habits get mechanical. Nagg says, "Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark? Your mother? No. Me. We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace" (p. 56). This habit of childhood ultimately reawakens itself in the later stages of life, whenever Hamm feels the fear of being abandoned. The same thing happens when Clov departs. "You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness" (p. 83).

The strategy of absent-mindedness takes its course in the similar pattern. First, the character goes back to his childhood automatically and begins speaking with his imaginary friends. This automatic inversion to childhood isolates him from the external world and that insularity accomplishes when the character takes flight from the awareness of itself. In this way, the connection between the characters' thought and mind ceases. This subjective isolation can be overcome by compassion, but the solution is problematic according to Beckettian ethics. He believes if the absence or the presence of compassion exists, it proceeds to two possibilities. Both the possibilities are torturing for human beings. The subject is compelled to escape his dilemma when there is no compassion, which appears inconceivable to Beckett, and the subject is compelled to stay in his predicament when there is compassion.

The merciless existence of the presence or the absence of compassion has been portrayed in *Endgame* through the story of Clov and his father. His father desires that Clov may survive. He is unaware of the consequences of survival that Clov has to face. In both these possibilities, compassion proves futile in generating any sort of meaning in the life of Clov and his father. Beckett again proves the fact that compassion that normally seems to serve as a link between two parts to contrive a whole is absurd. Compassion for him is a two-edged sword; the presence or the absence of it will lead to the same end. Clov elaborates this double-edged effect of compassion-case very beautifully in his dialogue: "If I don't kill that rat he'll die" (p. 68). As an inversion of the tautology "If I kill that rat he'll die." (ibid).

Hamm, towards the end of the play, discards the things which seem related to him or are supposed to be in his possession. His life has been abandoned as others always desert him and discard him. He considers that life can only be lived through discarding. What he experiences in life is neglect, desertion and deprivation and automatically, he adopts the very qualities because he thinks them his way to exist as a part. His death lies outside this domain that is why he sticks to his interiority and withdraws himself from the outer world. The part considers his existence being a part and loses his identity if he becomes the part of the so-called whole as he believes that things are not many because they cannot be finite and infinite simultaneously. He says, "Outside of here it's death" (p. 9).

In *Endgame*, the problem of love is not restricted only to parents, it also entails the problem of God. He also lets human beings cry. The parents of Hamm leave him in misery despite his crying and sobbing, God too refuses to exist to feel and liberate human beings of their misery. These miserable ones are not the parts of his 'wholeness'. They are abandoned as Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell are forsaken. When in this state of misery and agony, He is required and not found, it leads human beings to declare his non-existence. That is why, Hamm is bound to say: "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" (p. 55). The concept of desertion of human beings by God has been intensified in the prayer scene. When Nagg joins Hamm in his prayer just for the sake of 'sugar-plum', he is wholly disappointed to listen that "there are no more sugar-plums!" (p. 55). The prayers of human beings bear no fruit because their prayers are not listened to, and God is unresponsive, uncaring and selfish like Hamm's father even if he exists. If His existence does not bring any relief for them, he is non-existent. If His existence and love have no reality how familial love and compassion can have any. The dichotomy and reality of the whole world has been expressed through the relationship of a father and a son.

They may believe that for existence or being, the existence of God is not necessary instead His absence, indifference and lack of compassion is needed, where a part can have existence without any whole. If there had been any whole, the part would not have any identity, at least, all would have been harmonious. The part would not have been a victim of abandonment. But in *Endgame* the characters overcome that sense of rejection through the process of automatism and gaining autonomy without existence of God, love, compassion and parents.

### Conclusion

Throughout *Endgame*, Beckett uses dialogue, repetitive actions, and stark settings to emphasize the disintegration of identities. The characters' interactions are filled with despair, loneliness, and a sense of purposelessness. Their language is fragmented and repetitive, reflecting their fragmented identities.

Beckett's portrayal of the disintegration of identities in *Endgame* highlights the human struggle to find meaning and maintain a sense of self in a bleak and absurd world. The characters' identities crumble under the weight of their physical and emotional limitations, leaving them adrift in an existence devoid of purpose.

By employing automatism, Beckett challenges traditional notions of dramatic structure and character development, instead focusing on the bleakness and despair of human existence. The characters are trapped in a world governed by routine and repetition, unable to break free from the cycle of their existence. Automatism serves as a powerful tool to convey these themes and provoke contemplation about the nature of human identity and the meaning of life. They

seem trapped in a routine, going through the motions without any real agency or control. Their actions and words become mechanical, lacking spontaneity or genuine emotion.

The characters need abandonment so that the process of automatism and journey towards being a part may be accomplished. All efforts, at last, bring human being towards divestment and disintegration and since living lies in fragmentation.

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