



The Failure of Human Relations in Samuel Beckett's

Radio play Embers

Dr. Mustafa Ahmad Mohammed

Abstract

Embers is a radio play of one act .It was published in Evergreen Review in Dec. 1959. It is set on the ocean's edge, with continuous sound of the sea as background. Beckett portrays Henry who speaks to his dead father. The central character is, Henry, a blind lonely old man. In this play the focus is on Henry who is torn between the boredom of living and the suffering of being. The paper is on the failure of human relations in Samuel Beckett's Radio play *Embers*.

ملخص البحث

مسرحية جذوة هي مسرحية اذاعية كتبها صاموئيل بكت ونشرت في مجلة افكرين في عام ١٩٥٩ وهي تروي فشل علاقات بطل المسرحية هنري الذي فقد بصره . ونستمع اثناء المسرحية الى صوت البحر الذي غرق فيه والد هنري. وهنري هو الشخصية الرئيسية في المسرحية الذي يبدو وكأنه يتمزق بين الملل من حياته ووجوده. يعالج البحث فشل العلاقات الانسانية في هذه المسرحية من منظور مسرح اللامعقول.

Suffering, a fundamental attribute of existence, constitutes the center of Beckett's plays and the plays demonstrate, in turn, different kinds of human responses to suffering, ranging from meek passivity to active rebellion and exile. In accordance with this perception of suffering, all Beckettians are uniformly worn out with age and ailment, paralyzed and immobilized, and awaiting slow, uncertain extinction as a possible relief from their languid weary existence. Beckett's men and women, physically repellent and on decline, and grotesquely entrapped, symbolizes the inextricable imprisonment of Man in the vast expanse of the universe, where he ceaselessly strives to live with the misery of being a mortal, to endure what cannot be cured. All these characters are in a physical sense, outsiders, cut off from the world of social activity. Beckett peels off all the layers that surround life to show that at the core, everyone is a suffering Man who accepts or revolts against his suffering.

Following Krapp's Last Tape (a radio play), Beckett wrote another radio play, Embers, where the central voice is once again that of an old, blind ,lonely man of Hamm – Dan – Krapp lineage who shares with them agedness and sightlessness. Beckett probes the negative emotions of suffering, boredom and



hopelessness through Henry, who is torn between the boredom of living and the suffering of being. Henry displays abject cowardice when racked by clear awareness of the options before him- to go through a death –in-life existence with others or move out of it and come to terms with the reality of loneliness, depersonalization and futility of existence. He makes his choice by rather meekly moving out of dull domesticity but, he shrinks from plunging into life that confronts him with his lonely self and mercilessly denies him any consolation and respite from Nothingness which stalks existence and nullifies everything including his contemplated plunge. Henry cracks up under these options. But because of his awareness of, and consequent withdrawal from pale domesticity, he proves his potential as a positive rebel notwithstanding his faint – heartedness to turn into an exile.

Henry uses his memory as his tape recorder to reconstruct his past. Through his central voice, we are witness of three Henrys-- Henry of the past, Henry at present and Henry in the future. In his reminiscence of his past, Henry reveals his three- fold relationships with his father, wife and daughter and his failure in every one of his roles at every stage of his life.

As the play opens he sits alone on the sea shore," an old man, blind and foolish", (1) feeling less secure and lonely man. In Krapp's Last Tape, Krapp had deliberately opted out of life, renouncing the girl he loved, while Henry had got entangled in life through his marriage with Ada that had proved misery. Ada was more concerned with appearance rather than reality. With her, love sex become mockeries, vulgar, obscene rituals to be gone through. She had protested against Henry's passionate advances at a very early period of their married life.

Ada had been conscious only of genteel conventionality that drained away all spontaneity from her life. She restricted Henry from a full participation in life with her repeated "Thou Shall Nots". Henry recalls constant injunctions to him like "Don't wet your boots", (p.260) "Don't stand there gaping", (Ibid) "Did you put on your jaegers", (Ibid) "You should not be sitting on the cold stones, they are bad for your growths" (p.257) or "Why do get up?..." Well, why don't you (Pause.) Don't stand there thinking about it. (Pause.) Don't stand there staring" (p.260).

Henry, in turn resented Ada's observance of superficial propriety; "You were always very sensitive to being seen in gallant conversation. The least feather of smoke on the horizon and you adjusted your dress and became immersed in the Manchester Guardian" (p.261). Ada refused to provide him with any kind of companionship and often turned down his simple requests to



go out with him for a walk or for a row on the plea that poor Addie " Would be very distressed if she came and found you had gone for a row without her" (Ibid).

There was no meeting ground between the two. Ada could not sympathize with Henry's inertness and weariness with life. She felt nothing but disgust and despair over his refusal to immerse in life as she conceived of it. She wondered at Henry's obsession with the sea, while he remained forever on shore. His constant sit-outs near the beach and his incessant attempts to drown the sea roar by talking made her suspect if " there was something wrong with your brain"(p.260). But to Henry, the vagueness of the sea roar symbolized the vagueness or the formlessness of life. In reply to Ada's persistent nagging about his continual chatter, he answered sardonically: " I told you to tell her (Addie) I was praying.(Pause.) Boring prayers at got and his saints" (Ibid). They were at different wavelengths and she could never comprehend her husband's fear of and fascination for the sea. She once bitterly remarked:

I don't think you are hearing it. And if you are what's wrong with It, it's lovely peaceful gentle soothing sound, why do you hate it? (Pause.) And if you hate it why don't you keep away from it? Why are you always coming down here? (Ibid)

Ada's accusations stem from her inability to understand Henry's conflicting fascination and revision for life; he is afraid of both the options – of immersing in it as well as of leaving it.

Henry is a schizoid individual. His schizoid nature is " partly a direct expression of, and occasion for his ontological insecurity and partly an attempt to overcome it." (2) To Henry, life is not something lived out on the surface, a kind of veneer on nothing. All he wants is:

Thuds, I want thuds! Like this! (He fumbles in the shingle, catches up two big stones and he starts dashing them together) Stone! (Clash.) Stone! (Clash.) ('Stone' and clash amplified, cut Off.(Paus.)(He throws one stone away. Sound of its fall.) That's life! (He throws the other stone away. Sound of its fall.) Not this...(Pause.) ...sucking.(p. 260-261)

He plunged into wedlock expecting it to provide him the "thuds" , but when no" thuds" was forthcoming, he withdrew , without acquiescing in Ada's humdrum way of living and its emphasis on inanities like riding and lifeless music. Henry wearied of such existence that was further extended to Addie, his daughter, who was forced to learn and acquire talents that were keeping in



with pseudo gentility,. He had once ardently desired to have a child and amidst great resistance from Ada, he got her. "It took us a long time to have her.(Pause. Sigh.) We had her in the end" (Ibid). And then to what purpose except to school her into another edition of her mother? "It was not enough to drag her into the world, now she must play the piano," (p.259). Henry comments ruefully.

Ada's passion had been for geometry, plane and solid. She could not take Henry beyond the pale domesticity of life. Conversation with her amounted to nothing but small talk about trivia:

That was something, that's hell will be like, small chat to the Babbling of Lethe about the good old days when we wished we were dead(Pause.) Price of margarine fifty years ago.(Pause.) And now.(Pause.With solemn indignation.) Price of blue band Now. (p.256)

Henry desiring "thuds" withdrew into his shell, while Ada in ignorance of richer and fuller participation in life remained outside it, content with leading a falsely active, conventionally genteel life. Eugene Webb analyses Henry's plight and points out:

For Henry, his marriage was not a wholehearted leap into the waters of life, but only a sort of half-hearted wading in the shallows, and since Ada died, he has returned both figuratively and literally to the shore, where he has remained aloof and estranged from life ever since. 2

So was his relationship with his daughter. He found it equally difficult to communicate with Addie. Ada's constant preoccupation with Addie initiates her into general conventionality turned Henry away from themboth. He says: "What turned her (Ada) against me do you think, the child I suppose, horrid little creature wish to God we'd never had her. (p.256) Addie also tried to pull him out of his solitariness by attaching herself to him:

I use to walk with her in the fields, Jesus, that was awful, she wouldn't let go my hand, and I mad to talk. 'Rnn along now , Addie, and look at the lambs'. (Imitating Addie's voice.)' Nopapa.' (Violent.)' Go on with you when you're told and look at the lambs'. (Addie's loud wail). (Ibid)

But the irony of it is that he had also similarly failed to establish an equation with his father encountering only his father's stony silence.

Tired of talking to you.(Pause.) That was always the way, walk all over the mountains with you talking and talking and then suddenly mum and home in



misery and not a word to a soul for weeks, sulky little bastard ,better off dead,better of dead.(Ibid)

To his father he was a washout since he had refused to come for a dip. Henry hears once again his father's slamming of the door, shouting at him:" A washout, that's all you are, a washout." (Ibid)

Having failed to achieve communication with his father, he is plagued with a guilty feeling that he was the cause of his father's suicide. Ada had accused him of fearing his father out with his stubbornness to opt out of life." You wore him out living and now you are wearing him out dead"(p.262). Henry's obsession with the sea is also partly because his father seemed to have drowned in it. His suicide had not been confirmed; it had been merely a conjecture. For all that one may hazard a guess; he might have run away from his family. Either way he had chosen Henry's options in the end. If his father had committed suicide, on account of Henry's refusal to respond to his sense of the healthy vitality of life, it begs the question as to what had happened to his involvement in life. Why did he have to court suicide without living his life of sanguine convictions? Did not his convictions give him the necessary sustenance and equilibrium to counteract Henry's failure? Or was it that his father, in the end discovered to his dismay that life is not for a mere swim, close on to the shore, but involves a deeper plunge into the sea, " as far out on the other side of the bay". Henry also feels this longing to take the plunge: " I am like you in that , I can't stay away from it, but I never go in". He had continued to remain on shore, failing to slam life like that, as his father had done. Henry had shown him the light though he never dared to leave the shadow. "...You always loved not long past noon and all the shore in shadow and the sea out as far as the island"(p.254). Ada's narration of the last few moments of Henry's father bears evidence to the fact that the latter had walked out in the end, accepting the challenge of life. Ada Said:

You were not there...None of them knew where you were. Your bed had not been slept in. They were all shooting at one another. Your sister said she would throw herself off the cliff. Your father got up and went out, slamming the door. I left soon afterwards and passed him on the road. He did not see me. He was sitting on a rock looking out to sea. I never forgot his posture. Perhaps just the stillness as if he had been turned to stone... Perhaps, as I said, just the great stillness of the whole body as if all the breath had left it.(pp.262-263)

More than a sense of guilt at having possibly driven his father to suicide, Henry feels a sense of shame for his inability to take a decisive step as his



father had done to come to grips with a miserable existence in a "white , world, bitter cold"(p.264). with the embers also turning cold. Henry watches the embers dying, but he cannot precipitate the end nor live through life without the "thuds". He feels disgust for his inability to accept life with its insipidity and boredom or to challenge it, to make a game of it and thereby experience the "thuds". His timidity to stay out and face his own "self", "whose contempt" as Beckett observes in Proust, "would cause one most pain" 3 makes him unfit to remain alone. He ruefully admits his impotency and laughs sneeringly at himself: " And I live on the brink of it .Why? Professional obligations?(Pause.)(Brief laugh.)Reasons of health?(Brief laugh.) Family ties? (Brief laugh.)A woman?(Laugh in which Ada joins.) Some old grave I cannot tear myself away from"(p.258). Henry's suffering increases as he becomes aware of his inadequacy to live and of his fear either being " dead and lifeless" or of having "real aliveness" with his recognition and acceptance of his separateness.

He could no longer remain alone. He needs someone to be by him. There was a time when he "usen't to need anyone", (p.254). but now he has the need for "someone to be with me, anyone, a stranger, to talk to , imagine he hears me...for someone ...who knew me, in the old days, anyone, to be with me , imagine he hears me, what I am now"(p.255).

So he summons his dead father, Ada and even Addie whom he had despised in those days. Earlier he had been the object of others' observation. He had been the focus of attention for his father, wife daughter and even his sister. All of them had unanimously declared him to be a washout. He had therefore withdrawn from them all and now when he becomes aware of himself and his sense of ontological insecurity, he needs others to experience him as a real , live person. Like other Beckettians , Henry's only defense against the intolerable, demanding reality of his own aliveness and the realness of things is to tell stories. Like Hamm, he also goes on with his story, the story about "an old fellow called Bolton"but he "never finshied it, never finished any of them, everything always went on forever" (pp.254-255). But in the case of Hamm, if the story does not get finished , it is because of Hamm's deliberate efforts not to finish it. In Henry's story nothing gets finished because his story about Bolton and Holloway comes to a dead stop with Bolton's repeated pleadings and Holloway's incessant refusal to oblige him. The story cannot proceed any further or to oblige him. Holloway shouts at him : " Stop that for the love of God , Bolton , do you want to finish me?"(p.264). Bolton looks at him fixedly, very reminiscent of his father's last stare at Henry with a peremptory tone of command: "Are you coming for a dip? 'No'. ' Come on ,



come on' ", followed by a "glare, stump to door, turn, glare". A washout, that's all you are a washout". Holloway quails before this stare of Bolton, "Not a word, just the look, the old blue eye, very glassy, lids worn thin, lashes gone, whole thing swimming, and the candle shaking over his head...'we've had this before, Bolton, don't you ask me to go through it again'"(Ibid). It is Holloway who has the last response in this unending story, for unable to face Bolton's stare, he covers his face in shame and despair: "fixes Holloway , eyes drowned , won't ask again, just the look, Holloway covers his face, not a sound, white world, bitter cold, ghastly scene, old men , great trouble, no good (Pause.). No good (Pause.) Christ!" (Ibid). Henry's reference to his father in his story of Bolton gains credibility in the light of his sudden departure from third person narrative to first person towards the closing stages of his tale. Describing Bolton's passionate appeal to Holloway to give him companionship in his attempt to live an authentic existence, Henry says, "Candle shaking and guttering all over the place, lower now, old arm tired, takes it in the other hand and holds it high again, that's"(Ibid). for it begins all over with Bolton's renewed appeal to Holloway.

Henry's story seems to be autobiographical with himself impersonating both the characters. If he is Holloway, then his father represents Bolton. The story then seems to be a re-enactment of Henry's father asking him to " come for a dip" and Henry's refusal to consent to his wishes. Henry is seen racked by his sense of guilt for not obliging his father and hence the first voice that he summons in the play is that of his father. The call of the sea had been irresistible to his father and Henry remarks with admiration:" You would never live on this side of the bay; you wanted the sun on the water for that evening bath you took once too often"(p.245).But in the same breath he admits of his own passion for the sea which could never reach consummation because of his own timidity. At best, he could only "just near it"(Ibid). Hence Henry's story recounts the constant demands made by Bolton- though unspecified and Holloway's despair of not being able to accede to Bolton's directives. One could notice the authority and control that Bolton had over Holloway. He had called him to his place on a cold, dark night, with snow all round, " a ghastly scene, a white world, bitterly cold"(p .264)and despite his reluctance responds to his call. Bolton's " Please! Please!",(Ibid) without getting any further irritates Holloway, though. He is helpless either to move out it, that was always it, night and the embers cold, and the glim shaking in Your cold first, saying, Please, Please"(Ibid). Henry inadvertently changes into first person story – a plausible evidence to his reenacting in his mind his own tension with his father, before the latter left him and his family forever. His father does not seem to have



committed suicide as had been wrongly conjectured , but he had moved out of the pseudo- genteel life of Ada and others barring Henry. But in another way, he had moved off Henry's life, after discovering that Henry did not possess the drive and power to move out as he had done- to replace the boredom of living by courageous approach towards suffering and loneliness. He had understood the negative aspects of life, its monotony and insipidity, its deadness and boredom. The only way to challenge it is to withdraw from the routine monotony of mundane existence and plunge into life unmindful of the suffering it involves. It would also mean facing one's own self and coming to terms with it.

Henry remains alone, all others are either dead or have disappeared but he summons them in his head. They have no other existence. He dreads and longs for real aliveness. But then he fears to become alive, least he should experience a total vacuum, a total nothingness. He also dreads the state of non-being, stripped of his sense of autonomy, reality, life and identity. Tillich quoted by Laing in his study of The Divided Self states: "Neurosis is the way of avoiding non- being by avoiding being". 4 Henry turns into a nervous wreck and he abdicates his place in the outer world and lives in the world of his inner consciousness , in a " state of depersonalization, derealisation and inner deadness".5 He becomes a schizophrenic who feels the need to be seen alive, but then fears the "others" who poses a threat to his reality and identity. He is compulsorily driven to seek the company of other people," but never allows himself to be ' himself' in the presence of others".6

His last words forecast his bleak future . He looks at the emptiness of life before him:

This evening ...(Pause.) Nothing this evening.(Pause.)
Tomorrow...tomorrow...plumber at nine, then nothing (Pause.)
Puzzled.)Plumber at nine?(Pause.)Ah, yes, the waste. (Pause.)
Word.(Pause.)Saturday...nothing. Sunday.... Sunday...
All the day all the night nothing.(Pause.) Not a sound. (p.264)

His words are followed by the dull roar of the sea that drowns the immediate silence. The sea roar will initiate him into another series of words about Bolton and Holloway loud enough to drown it. The story will never get finished – the story expressing the isolation of a blind, foolish old man who can neither tolerate nor escape a life burning down to embers. His inability to overcome his sense of depersonalization upon his retirement from life, cause



him to seek a lonely refuge by the sea side. The world outside fails to understand him and fails to give him sympathy and offers only sterile affection and frustration. Henry continues to live on the fringes of life. The flame in him is now reduced into embers and he does not have the will to either put it off or fan it into a bright and intense conflagration.

Notes

1 Samuel Beckett, The Complete Dramatic Works(London: Faber and Faber,1986) p.253. All subsequent references to this text will be indicated by page numbers within parentheses.

2 Eugene Webb,The Plays of Samuel Beckett,(London: Peter Owen Ltd.,1972),p.81.

3 Samuel Beckett, Proust and 3 Dialogues with Georges Duthuit, (London: Calder, 1965), p.64.

4 R.D. Laing, The Divided Self,(Harmondsworth:Penguin Books, 1965), p.44.

5 The Divided Self,p.109.

6 The Divided Self ,p.114.