

**Special Issue:**

COMMUNICATION & COVID -19 PANDEMIC

**ALIENATED SELF: THE COLLECTIVE SOCIAL IDENTITY MIDST THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19**

Shruti Vasishta

*(M.A. English candidate, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Noida.)***ABSTRACT**

An indelible plight on humanity's timeless souls, it hit the world so hard, no one ever fathomed the intensity of their intangible wounds. Living with Covid-19 as the new normal, which never exactly became "normal"; with each new sunrise, the world becomes present to the new depths of suffering and pangs of pain, losing countless, succumbing and yet fighting the stings of Covid.

The whole idea of how one related to their self before the pandemic, has lost its ground. The essence of being acquainted to one's self, knowing oneself, has muddled through the suffering. How do we reach our-selves in the abyss of such mass anguish and affliction? How do we make sense of who we are, what are we to become? How do we even identify with our-selves anymore?

These are universal questions that are weighing down on the chests of millions, driving them further and further away from themselves. Did Samuel Beckett already contemplate and narrate the plight of dissociation and everydayness of the alienated and hopeless existence through his profound play *Waiting for Godot* and how does it mirror our world today?

Keywords: COVID-19, *Waiting for Godot*, Identity.



INTRODUCTION

The ambiguity of the beginning of the end of Covid-19 is an indefinite path to tread. When suffering through an individual emotional or physical crisis, we seek help from others, we communicate, we talk, we let our emotions guide our way out. But in the mass frame where every individual is suffering one loss or another, how does one even know who they can and cannot reach to unburden themselves, while not burdening the other too? Living in the uncertainty of the times, it becomes easy to lose oneself and hard to reconnect with that self. Everything seems bleak and irreparable. The collective emotional response to the irredeemable effects of Covid-19 on each individual's psyche distances them from themselves, thus creating a feeling of alienation from and within oneself. It is a feat no one prepared the world for, and yet, here it is.

The idea of our Self and Identity is a multidimensional one. Our Self is how we know ourselves to be and our identity is how we portray ourselves to be perceived by the world. As we live through various experiences of our lives, our Self grows through experiences; the experiential self, and the narration of that experiential self, the narratives we build around us to project an image of ourselves serves for our identity. No matter, Self or Identity, they both are ever evolving, ever changing, with time, and experiences. The experiences which amount to be positive or negative, build, create and recreate our selves and identities. "Life is full of...identity changes as we shed one sense of self and inhabit another." (Bowles)

Our Self, is our relationship with ourselves. It's how we see ourselves to be, identifying with how we go through life every day and create an idea of who we are. Like a see-saw, the graph of change of this known self can be progressive, inducing happiness when we go through experiences that make us feel alive, happy, and content or when we learn from our failures or it can be detaching, hopeless, and isolating which can happen during the duration of our lives of several instances when one feels a sense of alienation and a loss of the known self as well, the self they understand themselves to be, the self they connect with. This may occur due to any act where "our identity is threatened and there is a distinct loss of self, comfort, and a challenge to the different ways we know ourselves in our world." (Bowles) During such phases our sense of self and how we see ourselves to be, alters, so quickly that we are unable to grasp sense of it and hence it results in creation of a sense of alienation and isolation. One such colossal instance of change is the Covid-19 pandemic that has shaken human beings to their very cores, creating a sense of drift, inhabiting such consternation that might take an insurmountable amount of time to catch up to.

This paper will aim to examine how the selves and identities of people have shifted drastically during the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic and have assumed new meanings and how people are coping with them. "COVID-19, and its social and economic fallout, has suddenly left many, if not most of us, simultaneously facing abrupt changes to our identities." (Bowles) The gradual and subtle changes in our selves since the enforcement of the lockdown due to the global upsurge of the virus and its fatal repercussions have left people in a state of ever changing, ever fluctuating, selves and identities; they identify with baking one day, and painting the next; a routine that began by finding ways to engage their minds in the limited space of their houses. But with the gradual shift and shockingly speedy increase in Covid positive cases, the collective energy and sense of identifying with oneself and others shifted to baser emotions of a lack of belonging and sense of alienation, distress, grief and anguish. The change in their identities did not just limit itself to a change in hobbies, rather was an unwelcome plight of negative experiences giving rise to mental instabilities. Every individual seems to have a different approach and pace to cope with the mass emotions of negativity and desolation over losing their loved ones to the mutant virus. In such a sense, people have difficulty coming to terms with the changed self where the emotions have shifted to being pessimistic and the prospects, even for short term have shifted to being limited and restrained. This is where the barrier of a loss of identification with the new self and identity is formed. Navigating through the discouraging and alienating emotions calls for help; communicating and seeking assistance to manage



“reducing negative self-judgement and self-recrimination while waiting for new possibilities to emerge.” (Bowles)

Identity is not a stagnant concept. It is ever-changing, and ever-evolving. During the times of the pandemic, this evolving identity and sense of self is changing at light speed. People are finding it hard to relate and identify with themselves. “Plague was the concern of all of us...thus, for example, a feeling normally as *individual* as the ache of separation from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all *shared alike* and — together with fear — the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead (Camus 61).” (Jetten et al) Individually experienced emotions are felt by all of the world because of the same constant of Covid-19 at play. The collective social identity has formed here with the rise in detachment with individual selves. This detachment with the individual self in every individual gives rise to a resonance among all the people who constitute the society, the world. The resonance of the mass thought, mass feeling and emotion of estrangement, alienation and break with the known individual self, how one sees themselves, is experienced by all people going through the impacts of the same Covid-19. All of the world is feeling it, together. This feeling is the binding force of all the humanity, today. The collective sense of togetherness and identifying with each other even in face of a disconnection with the own distinct selves, connects all of the world. This “can be understood as manifestations of an emergent sense of shared social identity.” (Jetten et al.)

The objective of this research paper is to better understand one’s self and how they identify within themselves and with others in the dynamic environment of Covid-19. By the conceptual tools of Alienated Individual Self and Social Collective Identity, the paper would address the hindrances and obstacles one faces in connecting with the self, identifying with oneself and others. Further, it would be examined how people are dealing with this sense of detachment and alienation. Taking *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett as a parallel and at the core of the existential crisis, the narration of being “trapped in a repetitious life where everywhere is nowhere and each day is every day,” (Prasad 119) which is the blatant reality of the pandemic world every day, the dysfunctional self and collective social identity would be explored through Beckett’s sieve.

What makes *Waiting for Godot*, profoundly abysmal and pertaining to any time period one places and experiences it in, is the brilliance of the universal notion of alienation and detachment, a fear of being alone that is explicitly presented in the play by Beckett. In the present-day state of affairs, “man is confronting the problem of his existence as a being. He is striving for his survival and to control the bridle of the pacing time. He is struggling to save his “individuality” and this very idea leads to the philosophy of existentialism.” (De 732) It is up to the individual as to how they take and make sense of the disassociated self in this earthly pandemic world. Vladimir and Estragon represent all of the humanity and its quest to make sense of its changing existence. Albert Camus, an existential philosopher, points out that the interruption of the repetitive predictable routine, causes people to contemplate and disassociate with their selves and identities and how they identify with their own selves and others.

In the periphery of life, in the backdrop of our house arrests during the Covid-19 pandemic where one day merges into the next, and that day into the next, the dawns turn to dusk and so on and so forth, turning days into weeks into months and a feeling of monotony and gloom manifest. The sense of distinction between differentiation of different days muddles and vanishes. There is no seeming end to the waiting period to reach back life just as nothing of the known self, prior to the pandemic makes sense and happens anymore. With the rise of disassociation with how we connect to ourselves, we find distance with our own selves, just as Vladimir and Estragon feel as and when they are constantly “waiting for Godot” throughout the play. The play is a “metaphor, about life itself” (Prasad xv). It portrays “an image of life passing – in the hope, despair, companionship and loneliness. (Hall 16)” (Prasad xiv) Its presentation with its plot and



characters are shown to be plotless, and senseless with absolute “actionless actions.” (Prasad xvi) And isn't that the predicament of mankind today?

When we ponder the resemblance of *Waiting for Godot* in our very own lives, we find numerous parallels that push our existence one day further at a time, every day, waiting. The sense of hollowness and alienation arising from existentialism is very prominent throughout the play and it has become the reality of the days that we inhabit. Just like Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for Godot, the entirety of the humanity is waiting for the Covid pandemic to be over, to return back to normalcy of their everyday lives. The central part of the play revolves around the act of waiting itself “which would necessarily problematize what or who is being waited for. What is involved in the act of waiting and who is this Godot and why should anyone wait for Godot?” (Prasad xix) The heroes of Beckettian plays cannot aim to inspire as “even their minimal expectations are frustrated” (Prasad xix), just as every individual is too, in the face of adversity and death all around, now, in the 21st century Covid ridden world.

“Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Estragon: You're sure it was here?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said by the trees.

Estragon: He should be here.

Vladimir: He didn't say for sure he'd come.

Estragon: And what if he doesn't come?” (Beckett 06)

The conversation between Vladimir and Estragon is rendered absolutely echoing our limited, now restrained world. The impatient wait for Godot, just like the world's impatient wait for the pandemic to be over and the dilemma, confusion and chaos to reach that space of normalcy and sanity seems out of reach and yet there is this sense of immediacy to meet Godot, to find sanity again. The journey to reach there is optimistic at times, and cynical and glum at others. It produces an alienation from the self, arising out of the human condition of the human predicament. There is a portrayal of human beings, detached from their known selves, without any seeming answers as far as they can comprehend, just as there is no water as far as the sight can reach in a vast expanse of a desert. A sense of anxiety is adequately produced in the hope to manage and navigate through this seemingly never-ending abyss of the pandemic, just as it manifests in the play upon the anticipation of and subsequently no sight of Godot.

Days that blur in each other stop meaning anything, they lose their significance which becomes crystal when Vladimir says: “Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow when I wake, or I think I do, what shall I say of today?” (Beckett 83) There is repetition, lack of worth of each new day and an inherent meaninglessness induced in life which no amount of waiting could obliterate, or so it seems standing on the grave of the burnt world.

Alienated Individual Self

The conception of Self is our understanding of ourselves through our experiences that keeps on changing, growing, and evolving. There has been a glaring rupture and distinction between one's idea of Self before the pandemic, and it keeps on changing through the pandemic, with the rise of each new day. The Self that one related to, for instance, to be outgoing, travelling often, meeting new people, engaging with others was fragmented to be constrained in the four walls of their domestic spheres. So, the idea of self, shifted and



dribbled and became limited. "The virus has changed the way we look at ourselves and others, as well as...our relationship to the world and our sense of what we value in it. Fundamentally, what we see here is that COVID-19 has changed our notions of 'self'." (Jetten et al.) With this shift in our identification with our own selves, the coping mechanisms of people seem to differ at great variations, some revel in the changes while others shrink with a sense of alienation and lack of belongingness with their own known self, experiencing a severe diminish in positive experiences. The reshaping of "our sense of self too quickly where we can't adjust" (Bowles) makes for a low and despondent mass emotion driven by sadness and melancholy. In this arena of dissatisfaction, "being still, and learning to be comfortable with a new self, especially a smaller self with fewer immediate prospects" (Bowles) is the immediate need and critical concern.

One doesn't know how Vladimir, and Estragon were and how they related to themselves before their initiation of "waiting" for Godot. Were they content? Were they not? What were the circumstances that lead them to wait for this intangible existence and hope of meeting Godot? And why? So, one doesn't know what steered them into the direction of this alienation with their selves and place hope on Godot but Beckett does present the more important area that needs to be addressed: "The basic problem that afflicts mankind (that) is, 'how to get through life?' Beckett's answer is simple and not encouraging: by force of habit, by going on in spite of boredom and pain, by talking, by not listening to the silence, absurdly and without hope." (Kumar 459) The question that arises is that how does one choose a way to spend their time in a manner that is not driven by anxiety induced by this disease driven hellish world. In this matter "Lucky is luckier than Vladimir and Estragon because he has found a better way of filling his time than go through the unbearable anxiety and tedium of waiting." (Prasad xxiv) The idea is to pass time in a manner that affects us minimally in a negative manner.

The sense of alienation that drives one's life just as in the play is that "the couple tramp (Vladimir and Estragon) is fed up with the routine life which is too difficult to be handled. This sameness and dullness snatches meaning out of existence" (Kumar 460) as is seen through our eyes, every new monotonous yet the very same repetitive day. This problem of everydayness is prominently visible throughout *Waiting for Godot*. Everyone on the stage and everyone off the stage wants to leave this boredom and dreariness of the alienated experience of life; Vladimir, Pozzo, Estragon, all want to leave everything but they cannot, for they have no other option.

"Pozzo: I must go.

Estragon: Then adieu.

Pozzo: Adieu.

Vladimir: Adieu.

Pozzo: Adieu.

Silence. No one moves.

Vladimir: Adieu.

Pozzo: Adieu.

Estragon: Adieu." (Beckett 40)

The constant helplessness of Vladimir and Estragon to escape their lives, meeting Godot, finally finding happiness, feel very familiar. "The baffled helplessness of the couple 'Vladimir and Estragon' appeals to us as our own helplessness on earth." (Kumar 461)



The aspect of time as presented by Beckett, both as momentary and internal time, places emphasis on the human mental condition and how individuals deal with the loss of their individual selves and find solace in the social collective identity formed in the process. The sense of alienation and meaninglessness is so integral that it is reflected even in the merging blur of existence that was earlier differentiated by way of different days. "I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today", says Pozzo to Vladimir. (Beckett 81) It is the unwavering search for happiness, normalcy, that is presented in the play reflecting in the Covid-19 reality of today. It is Vladimir and Estragon's fear of being left alone, alienated from their own selves, not knowing the world or even their own self, that makes them hold onto hope, in their unified identity, that makes them live through each new day at a time.

Collective Social Identity

The idea of our Identity, or how we relate to others and are perceived by them is a social construct. It is engaging with others for the formation of the idea of one's existence. The personal identity of an individual dictates how they carry themselves in the society, how they relate to and understand others. With the rise in Covid-19 and the hazardous effects of it, the sense of relation to others individualistically has lost its meaning because of the physical confinement all are subjected to. "No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and emotions shared by all. (Camus 161)" (Jetten et al.) The most prominent connection humans seem to strengthen with each other is that of estrangement with the self within each one of them. The reverberation of a loss of self in every individual makes for the Collective Social Identity wherein all identify with the same feeling of loss and alienation. It is the collective identity where how we are perceived by others is the same as how they perceive us, i.e.; our identity is resonated through the other as they are going through the same loss and suffering. With this sense of affinity, there arises a social identity that makes people resonate with a "we" feeling than an "I" feeling, a collective suffering, a collective burden, a collective identity. This collective identity plays a significant role in easing the weight of the pandemic and the suffering attached with it. It "makes shared group memberships (e.g., those based on nationality) both more meaningful and more inescapable." (Jetten et al.) The ray of hope to bear the immensity of the alienation and suffering lies in "people seeing themselves — and acting — not as isolated individuals but as members of a collective who are 'all in this together'." (Jetten et al.) This sense of shared identity becomes the foundation of the social connection that keeps people from drowning in the abyss of torments of loss of self and loved ones even stronger than the potential threat of the other person being the carrier of the virus of Covid-19.

Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, even though doesn't look it on the surface, is filled with suffering, pain, torment, and fear. A feeling mirrored by the society of the world through the pandemic. By way of Vladimir and Estragon, who are unable to move at their own accord, starved for food, in a state of mental disorder, in physical pain and "bored to death", Beckett shows the dehumanization of human experiences. Be it by way of presentation of the character of Pozzo and Lucky or Vladimir and Estragon, how they individually connect to themselves gets buried and a sense of collective "inseparably interdependent" (Prasad xxi) identity arises. Humanity shows a parallel "inseparably interdependent" front in the need of a sense of belonging too. People and their worldly ties that gives them a sense of being together, even if, in misery and suffering gives birth to the Social Collective Identity like the affinity and association, the bond Vladimir and Estragon share where they cannot even choose death or suicide over each other for it will leave the other all alone. "The optimistic view of the play shows a range of human emotion and the need to share experiences alongside the suffering of finite existence; governed by the past, acting in the present and uncertain of the future." (De 732) It may be understood that the entirety of the play that mirrors the present condition of mankind is a vivid and authentic rendition of the uncertainty of ever finding what they are waiting for, what the world is waiting for.



Hopelessness drives the play as well as the world and people identify with each other in the sameness of that suffering.

“Estragon: I can't go on like this.

Vladimir: That's what you think.

Estragon: If we parted? That might be better for us.”

However, there is a tinge of relief in sharing the same burden of existence and loss of individual selves as is with Vladimir and Estragon who, even though imagine the scenarios of leaving each other be, choosing individualistic paths, are unable to make that decision. They can keep each other company, making their existence bearable, giving each other support and warmth. They need each other to be a spectator, to provide each other with a sense of existence. “We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?” (Beckett 61) It is a world in which “even a sense of civilization is only a fading memory, one needs another if only as proof of one's own existence.” (Prasad xxv)

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, there is a deep sense of helplessness and alienation from the known self to each individual which Beckett brings out splendidly through *Waiting for Godot*, parallelly waiting for the pandemic to be over, but “one's only freedom is in the mind, which is also the only arena one can control; therefore, one should concentrate on the mental sphere and ignore the outside world, where freedom and control are impossible.” (Cornwell 42) So, paint, draw, sing, cook, or just lay down to read, whatever gives you a glimpse of peace and rest. Find yourself ways to catch up to the person you're becoming, one day at a time. Get to know yourself again, help people as much as you can and don't overburden yourself with guilt if you can't. Find harmony in the fact that all of the world shares your burden and you're not alone in your suffering, you share a collective identity that unites you with all of the world and ultimately, “this too shall pass.” (Lincoln)

REFERENCES

- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Edited by G.J.V. Prasad, Pearson Education, 2012.
- Associate Professor Terry Bowles, University of Melbourne. “Our Changing Identities under COVID-19.” *Pursuit*, Pursuit, University of Melbourne, 20 July 2020, pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/our-changing-identities-under-covid-19.
- Cornwell, Ethel F. “Samuel Beckett: The Flight from Self.” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 88, no. 1, 1973, pp. 41–51. *Crossref*, doi:10.2307/461324.
- De, Shomik. “Existentialism and Samuel Bekett's Waiting for Godot.” *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, vol. 5, no. 7, July 2018, pp. 731–34, www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1807999.pdf.
- Jetten, Jolanda, et al. “A Social Identity Analysis of COVID-19: Introduction to ‘Together Apart.’” *Social Science Space*, Jolanda Jetten, Stephen Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, And Tegan Cruwys, 6 Apr. 2020, www.socialsciencespace.com/2020/06/a-social-identity-analysis-of-covid-19-introduction-to-together-apart.
- Kumar, Dinesh. “Existentialism in Samuel Beckett's ‘Waiting For Godot.’” *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, pp. 458–61, www.ijelr.in/3.1.16B/458-461%20DINESH%20%20KUMAR.pdf.