Abstract:

The aim of the paper is to show that how the literary model of pain, functions as a meaning system in Samuel Beckett’s novel *Molloy*. The paper argues that Beckettian pain is the condition of acute uncertainty, an inability to know and feel one’s own self. The paper postulates how Beckett understood pain to be an essential component of the human condition, that why he considered pain as an underlying phenomena through which consciousness is wrought, and how he dissociates the experience of pain in his narrators as a parody or critique of mind-body dualism, particularly the tradition of dualism found in the Enlightenment and René Descartes. The paper shows that how Samuel Beckett uses various dissociative pain syndromes like pain asymbolia, traumatic neurosis, Phantom-limb pain as a trope in his novel. By using these dissociative pain syndromes as the mouthpiece of his own philosophy of pain, by portraying this bizarre condition of pain without painfulness, Beckett grants us an exemplar of how to laugh in the midst of pain, how to celebrate suffering in the face of uncontrollable agony.

Key-Words: Body, *Cogito*, Enlightenment, Dissociative Pain Syndrome, Pain, Pain Asymbolia, Phantom limb, Suffering.

The primary object of this paper is to show that how the literary model of pain, functions as a meaning system in Samuel Beckett’s novel *Molloy*, which forms the first part of the trilogy, the second and third being *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. In Beckett’s fiction, not even death can be taken for granted, as the be-all and end-all. In the realm of Beckett’s novels, as in the world of his plays, life and death are equally uncertain, and suffering appears to be the only condition to which we can attribute some level of certainty, and is the only consistent human predicament. Beckett broods upon pained and abjected bodies, their workings, their desires, their secretions, their dismemberments, and their uncertain relations with the voices that animate them. We find his characters in ditches, in forests, filthy, beaten, literally falling apart. But corporal pain is a less concern for Beckett’s protagonists, on the other hand he portrays the vagabond, the insane, the morose, the derelict and the dispossessed precisely because these figures do not imagine themselves in the metaphysical tradition we imaginatively experience ourselves. To parody the Cartesian concept of mind and body dualism, and to push this distinction to an extreme, the pained body is often felt impersonally by Beckett’s characters.

But what is pain? We define pain in terms of its teleology, that is its purpose. The biological purpose of pain is to provide an overall response system that helps people to avoid harmful events and that helps to repair or restore the body from damage already inflicted. As the meaning of the original Latin word, *poena* implies, pain is intended to “punish” the self for doing something that may worsen an existing injury. But Beckettian pain basically takes the form of various dissociative pain syndromes like traumatic neurosis, in which a painful event fails to register in consciousness or memory as it occurs but returns belatedly in
haunting repetitions; or pain asymbolia that is insensitivity towards feeling pain or even Phantom-limb pain, in which the respective person after losing a limb, experience severe and chronic pain in what we call their phantom limb. They feel real pain in the limb they have lost, real pain in an imaginary body part. At its core, Beckettian pain is the condition of acute uncertainty, an inability to know and feel one’s own self. My impression is that Beckett understood pain to be an essential component of the human condition, that he considered pain an underlying phenomena through which consciousness is wrought, and that he dissociates the experience of pain in his narrators as a parody or critique of mind-body dualism, particularly the tradition of dualism found in the Enlightenment and René Descartes. By using these dissociative pain syndromes as the mouthpiece of his own philosophy of pain, by portraying this bizarre condition of pain without painfulness, Beckett grants us an exemplar of how to laugh in the midst of pain, how to celebrate suffering in the face of uncontrollable agony. Ultimately for Beckett’s characters, pain means life, and the absence of pain means death. As a stylistic device, suffering presents itself as an interpretive key to the Beckettian quest: pain itself is the mark of identity. More importantly, Beckettian pain presents itself as a guide, albeit deeply ironic and satirical, to understand how suffering animates consciousness within our bodies, and how pain gives us our formative understandings of life and death.

The literary-philosophical rendering of Dissociative Pain Syndromes in Beckett, refers also to the tremendous imaginative potential of suffering. For the characters who suffer this pain syndrome, the presence of some body-parts, from which springs pain, actually remain non-existent for them. They generate a somatic/mimetic map of the physical body based on the pain generated in the mind. The body that they perceive is a mimetic rendering of the phenomenology of their suffering. Pain produces a somatic or mimetic body alongside the physical one, though the two are not the same. The mimetic body may not be real, the pain that produces it is always real. Although the physical body is never precisely that which hurts them, and although the physical body is separate from the mimetic body of perception, pain nonetheless makes reference to the physical body. Even if they feel nothing, there must be something in order to feel. Thus, the dissociative pain syndromes produce an otherness within the self. It fabricates within the mind a mimetic or phenomenal body that is different than the physical body. The displacement of the physical body with the mimetic body produces a hermeneutic distancing or ‘deferral’ that shapes the Beckettian protagonists. Degenerate, decaying, and ostensibly gone, Beckett’s narrators appear to lack, in varying degrees, the flesh and blood that would contain them. They are disjointed, the unity of their bodies and minds are unable to take a proper coherent shape, and their bodily experiences gradually vanish from consciousness. Beckett’s narrators trace a path of detachment between mental and physical existence. At times they are disembodied voices, mere words reckoning with their hapless remains. Molloy, Malone and the Unnamable progressively broaden the space between knowing and not knowing, feeling and not feeling, living and not living. Agony serves a vital function throughout; pain fixes them within the world, yet it obscures their relation to the world.

Let us elaborate our discussion in this topic with Molloy, first published in French in 1951, later translated jointly by Beckett and Patrick Bowles in 1955. The first text of the trilogy, Molloy consists of two parallel parts of equal length, the one structurally mirror-imaging the other. The first part is a monologue by a former vagrant named Molloy and the second one is another monologue by a private detective named Jacques Moran, who is given the task by his boss, the mysterious Youdi, of tracking down Molloy. Molloy begins with the narrator, lying in his mother’s bed in his mother’s room, wondering how he got there: “I am in my mother’s room. It’s I who live there now. I don’t know how I got there.”
Novels: *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*: 3) Molloy assumes his mother’s place, continuing her motions, though his arrival has vanished from memory. In fact, Molloy is elusive to himself. His mind does not fully comprehend the experience of his body; the part of himself that perceives is distant from the self that is perceived. Pain is at the root of his self-division. He wishes to be free from phenomena, free from pain, but his search unconsciously produces more pain with greater self-division:

The truth is I don’t know much. For example my mother’s death. Was she already dead when I came? Or did she only die later? I mean enough to bury. I don’t know. Perhaps they haven’t buried her yet. In any case I have her room. I sleep in her bed. I piss and shit in her pot. I have taken her place. I must resemble her more and more. All I need now is a son. Perhaps I have one somewhere. But I think not. *(Three Novels: *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*: 3)*

*Molloy* does not follow the deception that pain represents the body, but rather the trauma that pain is mental phenomena. In this way, Molloy’s pain resembles traumatic neurosis. Bodily pain is perceived with varying degrees of indifference, while uncertainty is a source of existential dread. Molloy’s self-alienation, accompanied with pain asymbolia and traumatic neurosis, forms the root of Beckettian suffering, and it lays the foundation for Molloy’s storytelling.

In the narration of Molloy, repetition, difference and contradiction are the primary modes that establish aporetic passages, producing meaning as destabilized and undetermined. The failure of language to find passage into determinate meaning serves as the figure of Molloy’s failure to locate his passage in life. Molloy failed to interpret the internal dynamics of his anguish. The impossibility for Molloy to grasp the conditions of his material existence is the inescapable condition for his suffering. Herein lies Beckett’s inversion of the phenomenology of pain: life is painful in its inability to be apprehended. Molloy experiences pain in the breakdown of language, though this pain carries him through the aporetic impasse; anguish is the only coherent object that joins the disparate, fragmented, parallel and contradictory narratives weaving throughout the novel:

And once again I am I will not say alone, no, that’s not like me, but, how shall I say, I don’t know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don’t know what that means but it’s the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what, the laws of the mind perhaps, of my mind, that for example water rises in proportion as it drowns you and that you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery. *(Three Novels: *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*: 9)*

Here trauma becomes a mode of narration. Life for Molloy and all of Beckett’s narrators figures as an enduring traumatic episode, itself an aporetic impasse in which the subject cannot confirm or deny existence. Molloy’s narrative resides in this indeterminate space of invention and forgetting. On the surface, his words describe painful events; at a deeper level, his words are themselves instances of pain in their radical indeterminacy.

Where Descartes would espouse that humans are essentially thinking creatures and that the mind is the seat of identity, Beckett confounds the hierarchy of mind over body. The problem, says Molloy, is “the head”, not the mind. Images of the skull pervade the trilogy, and each narrator describes an existence as if enclosed within a skull. The imagery relies on physical anatomy, though the purpose is to take the reader into the internal, mental landscape of consciousness. Mind and body are at once detached and conterminous. With his mind in ruins, anguish is the sentiment of Molloy's inner landscape. As pain breaks down Molloy's
mental structures, it exposes a deeper structure of self that precedes and exceeds the thinking “Cogito”. The most detailed account of Molloy's interaction with his mother occurs in the well-known skull-knocking sequence. Molloy's indifference to suffering (both his mother's and his own) is paired with his morbid and sadistic tendencies. Beckett describes a learning scenario based on the psychological model of operant conditioning, though his satire of behaviourist experimentation creates isolation and deprivation rather than learned association. Molloy recalls:

I got into communication with her by knocking on her skull. One knock meant yes, two no, three I don't know, four money, and five goodbye. I was hard put to ram this code into her mind and frantic understanding, but I did it, in the end. That she should confuse yes, no, I don't know and goodbye, was all the same to me, I confused them myself. But that she should associate the four knocks with anything but money was something to be avoided at all costs. During the period of training therefore, at the same time as I administered the four knocks on her skull, I stuck a bank-note under her nose or in her mouth. (*Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: 14*)

In Beckett's hands, learning is undercut, and the psychological experimentation becomes the source of perverse comedy. No one understands the knocking; the violent and obscene bodily intimacy between mother and son displaces the method of learning.

The unsaid events surrounding Molloy's birth, figure as traumatic episodes that Molloy unconsciously re-enacts by occupying his mother's room. The "room" carries the attributes of "womb", an enclosed space belonging to his mother. Molloy assumes his maternal identity, which clearly comes out at the time of police’s interrogation of Molloy:

Molloy, I cried, my name is Molloy. Is that your mother's name? said the sergeant. What? I said. Your name is Molloy, said the sergeant. Yes, I said, now I remember. And your mother? said the sergeant. I didn't follow. Is your mother’s name Molloy too? said the sergeant. I thought it over. Your mother, said the sergeant, is your mother’s—Let me think! I cried. At least I imagine that's how it was. Take your time, said the sergeant. Was mother's name Molloy? Very likely. Her name must be Molloy too, I said. (*Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: 19*)

Perception becomes hallucination, knowledge becomes fabrication, existence is imaginary, life is forgotten, “without tears, as it is wept” (*Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* 32). Words and phenomena are disjointed, alienated from one another, while reality is beyond perception and comprehension. But Molloy’s pain is real and definite, even as his language of internal recognition becomes dubious.

Molloy becomes more physically decrepit as he journeys on, and his body approaches paralysis:

And now my progress, slow and painful at times, was more so than ever, because of my short stiff leg, the same which I thought had long been as stiff as a leg could be, but damn the bit of it, for it was growing stiffer than ever...(*Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: 76*)

The decomposition of Molloy's body marks his desire for an existence free from the potential of suffering. Pain is the vital factor fuelling Molloy's disavowal of his body. To be free from the potential for pain is to be effectively dead. But though he may disavow his story and renounce his body, Molloy cannot erase the ontological priority of pain. Molloy's leg (one is shorter than the other) starts to really bother him, but then the other leg gets stiff from his uneven walking. He encounters with a charcoal burner, whom Molloy says he might have loved, though not in the same way as he had loved Ruth. Molloy hits him with his crutches, though, in a moment of annoyance and probably kills him. At the end of the first part, Molloy
finds himself in a forest, applying the logic that if he crawled around in a circle he would actually go straight. When he finally gets out of the forest, he falls into a ditch.

Moran's narrative constitutes the second half of Molloy. Moran's narrative parallels and replicates Molloy's narrative in a myriad of ways, though with few exact doubles. Moran's quest is to find Molloy, and as Moran’s journey resembles Molloy's journey with each successive episode, Moran comes to resemble Molloy physically and psychologically. Moran, who called himself a very methodical and principled man in the beginning of the narrative, becomes more and more Molloy-like as the narrative progresses. He started using a crutch in the same way Molloy did, gradually he becomes physically frail and even murders a man in a forest in manner comparable to Molloy's, and then hides his body in the forest. Quite strangely, the person, whom Moran murders, “vaguely resembles” (Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: 151) himself: “I found him stretched on the ground, his head in a pulp… I bent over him… Already my knee was stiffening again” (Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: 151). Moran loosely resembles the stranger he kills, and so the stranger's death symbolizes a suicide of Moran's former self, allowing the Molloy characteristics within himself to emerge. The murder of his “self” counterpart is lost in traumatic forgetting, whereupon Moran enters the realm of traumatic repetition in killing off the remaining vestiges of his former self. But perhaps the stranger is also symbolic of Molloy, as the figure of Moran's past, whose erasure in memory demarcates a space of traumatic forgetting. The stranger's head is in a pulp, beaten beyond recognition, no longer identifiable. The stranger is now unnamable, like the pain of Molloy and Moran. The traumatic erasure of the murder highlights the self-distancing, phenomenal detachment, and confusion characteristic of Molloy. Both Molloy's search for non-being and Moran's search for Molloy are ultimately the destruction of self. The traumatic lapse of the murdered stranger mirrors the trauma of birth and rebirth immanent in the quests of Molloy and Moran. To quote Ulrika Maude from the book Beckett, Technology and the Body seems appropriate here: Although both parts of Molloy clearly tell the story of a quest, no final goal is reached. The quest, deprived of a reachable goal, becomes devoid of meaning, destructive even, ultimately producing only physical deterioration; to go somewhere in these quests is always to end up somewhere else than planned, and in the process, the categories of self and other, subject and object, pursuer and pursued are switched around until opposites merge into one. Intentionality and teleology are interrogated, frustrated and ultimately toyed with. (Maude: 87)

Descartes states in his Passions of the Soul (1649), “the soul is linked with every part of the body all at once and its nature is such that has no relationship with the extent, dimensions or other characteristics which make up the body” (Rey 75). For Descartes, the truth of the body resides in the contours of the mind. A line in Beckett’s poem “Whoroscope” parodies the cogito, “fallor ergo sum” (“I am deceived, therefore I am”). For Beckett, internal experience takes precedence over the physical world, yet both are deceptive. Beckett works against the formulations of the “cogito”, using pain satirically to break with the premises of the Enlightenment. The image of the “cogito” trapped inside the head pervades the fiction: in hospital rooms, in ditches, in caves, inside the jars, inside the skull, inside the womb, and inside the tomb. At every turn, in Samuel Beckett’s fiction, a consciousness seeks to escape corporeality into formlessness, timelessness and absence, seeking refuge in the space of the death chamber.

Works Cited:

Beckett, Samuel. Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable. New York: Grove