

## Samuel Beckett's Trilogy In Postmodern Perspective

### 3

**Ousephachan K.V.\***

Self reflexivity is a dominant subject of postmodern fiction. William H.Gass dubbed this self-reflexive tendency as metafiction in 1970. Patricia Waugh describes metafiction as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality"(2). She further suggests that metafictional works are those which "explore a theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction"(2).

In metafiction the process of its own making is explored in a selfconscious manner. The metafictionist deals with the fundamental issues of communication by directing the attention of the readers to the ontological status of fiction and to the complex nature of the reading process. Reader's attention is also directed to the fact that art is artefact. Self consciousness and the process by which it got written are the subjects of metafiction.

"The defining characteristic of metafiction, however, is its direct and immediate concern with fiction making"(MC Caffery 22). It is an introverted novel. By the turn of the century the novel seems to have no other field left to develop and therefore it turned in upon itself. Robert Scholes refers to metafiction or self reflexive fiction as "fiction, which if it is about anything, it is about the possibilities and impossibilities of fiction"(237). Fogel is of the opinion that "metafiction entails exploration of the theory of fiction through fiction itself"(328)". Christenson goes a step further and regards metafiction as fiction whose primary concern

---

\*Asso. Professor of English, NirmalaGiri College, Kannur

as each work makes more clearly visible the process of its own creation.

*Molloy* is the first of Beckett's novels to be specially a writer's book, written down by hero obliged to record his experiences and transcribe his mental process. *Molloy*, Moran, Malone and the Unnamable are compelled to write this way. They tell us that they are so compelled and offer us what they write. In *Molloy*, Molloy himself writes down his own tale and tells us all the while that he is writing and that it is a tedious task fraught with difficulty. "It was, he told me, I'd begun all wrong that I should have begun differently. He must be right I began at the beginning like an old bullock, can you imagine that?"(9)

At the opening of the novel, Molloy is in a room and his occupation is writing an accurate description of writer's position. "I am in my mother's room. It is I who live there now"(9). He does not know how he got there and what his relation to the man who gives him money in turn for the pages he writes. He says,

I don't know how I got there.  
Perhaps in an ambulance,  
certainly a vehicle of  
somekind I was helped I'd have  
never got there alone. There is  
this man who comes every week.  
Perhaps I got here thanks to him.  
He says not. He gives me money  
and takes away the pages. So  
many pages, so much money (9).

Molloy presents himself as being directed by an authority from outside. Besides this, Molly refers to a voice within himself. The voice like the visitor harries Molloy. In the opening passage he describes parts of the creation process. The incentive to write comes from within the narrator himself, who gives expression to

the promptings of the voice by inventing other speakers or characters in the story. The narrator makes an effort to describe characters outside himself but imperceptibly he becomes the subject of description.

Molloy has to keep reminding himself that he is only telling a tale and has to be careful to remember what he represents in the story, so much so that he asks the reader to correct any lapses he may make. "I cannot stoop neither can I kneel, because of my infirmity and if ever I stoop-forgetting who I am, make no mistake, it will not be me, but another"(35).

His lapses in fact are frequent "I had forgotten who I was and spoken of myself as I would have of another"(40) and he adds 'excusably' because "from time to time I shall recall my present existence compared to which this is a nursery tale"(40). The existence that he refers to here is the one in his mother's bed. It is a man writing in his bed and what he describes is only a dairy. The narrative is interrupted with his own comments and keeps himself reminding that he must tell his tale as it took place at the time and not as it would happen to him now. Molly says, "I weary of these inventions and others beckon to me"(63). The obsessive element, the need to say and nothing to say in the Unnamable, is thus foreshadowed in Molloy and helps constitute the essential unity of *The Trilogy*.

The question as to, 'Why do I write?' is a central one. Molloy deals with this problem in the opening of the novel, in the description of the visitor and later when he mentions the inner voices. Molloy is directed by an agency from outside whose will does not conform to his wishes:

What I'd like rw is to speak of  
the things that are left, say my  
good byes, finish dying. They  
don't want that. Yes, there is

more than one, apparantly. But it's always the same one that comes. You will do that later, he says. Good(9).

He also refers to a voice from within that functions as an incentive to write. Hannah Copeland is of the opinion that the voice, like the strange visitor, harries Molloy. Indeed it seems to convey the creative imperative itself.

Molloy's sufferings and his growing difficulties in working symbolically represent his failing contact with the world. As the novel deals with the making of literature, Molloy's painful journey can be taken as a metaphorical description of his difficulties as a narrator. His painful walking indicates his difficulty as a narrator. He has problems in getting on with his story as well as finding words to express his real meaning. All through the novel Molloy is concerned with the process of attaching words to things, that is, with the occupation of writing. The whole journey from Molloy's observation of A and C to his gaining a view of the promised land of his mother's abode is presented as a metaphorical description of the obstacles the narrator has to overcome, if he is to continue the story. The various incidents in Molloy's journey and his way of progressing in circles have direct bearing on the meaning of the story as a work of metafiction.

Beckett uses sexual activity symbolically to throw light on the narrator's creative ability. Molloy's lameness was seen to express his inability to get on with the story. In the same way his impotence and his mild adventures with the opposite sex signal his flagging powers as a creator of fiction.

In the second part of *Molloy*, Moran is the narrator. Like Molloy he is writing a story. But he is different from and better than Molloy as a narrator. David Helsa is of the opinion that the second part of Molloy is a "parabolic presentation of a

certain facet of the task of writing”(98). Another indication, that the story deals with the narrator’s situation, is the repetition of the first two sentences at the end of the novel: “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows” And Moran cancels his own fiction by adding, “It was not midnight. It was not raining”(162). When Moran in the same breath affirms and then negates his own statements, the narrator brings to the reader’s attention that his story is no more than a fictitious tale.

Like Molloy, Moran is sitting at his desk writing. His actual account begins with a description of how he got started on his investigation of Molloy and on the report he has to make of this. He is presently occupied with it, “I remember the day I received the order to see about Molloy: It was a Sunday in a summer I was sitting in my little garden, in a wicker chair”(85). Moran receives a visitor, Gaber, who presents Moran with the order from the chief. Moran has no free choice. He writes because this external power tells him to do so. Moran also experiences an internal voice exhorting him to continue. He provides flesh and blood to the exhortations of the voice by portraying the visitor and other characters.

Moran, in a hesitant way, claims to be the author of Molloy; “Perhaps I had invented him. I mean I found him ready made in my head”(103). He even boasts of having invested his creature “with the air of a fabulous being, which something told me, could not fail to help me later on”(102). “For who could have spoken to me of Molloy,” he reflects, “if not myself and to whom if not myself could I have spoken of him”(103). Moran thus insists on his authorial power to create characters, and see them in his mind’s eye at places where neither he nor they can actually be when he reflects; “For where Molloy could not be, nor Moran either for that matter, there Moran could bend over Molloy”(102). The mission and obsession of Moran as a creative

artist is to find Molloy. Anthonl Hartley in this connection observes that Beckett's characters create and are created.

These reflections of Moran reveal the fact that he is an artist wrestling with the task of creation in the manner of the hero setting out on a superhuman quest.

It is lying down, in the warmth, in the gloom that I best pierce the outer turmoils veil, discern my quarry, sense what course to follow, find peace in another's ludicrous distress Far from the world, its clamours, frenzies, bitterness and dingy light, I pass judgement on it and on those, like me, who are plunged in it beyond recall and on him who has need of me to be delivered, who cannot deliver myself (101).

Moran has to content with two opposing forces in himself; Youdi and Gaber representing conventional literary taste, and the voice exhorting him to follow a more original inwardly inspired course of narration. Moran's narrative changes as he himself changes. In the end he returns to his old self and then he is willing to use traditional style and technique.

Molloy's growing lameness expresses metaphorically his increasing difficulty in getting on with the story. When Moran is in the "Molloy country"(121) the same stiffness and inability to move on overtake him. As he directs his attention inwards, he becomes more and more concerned about himself. His tale develops into one long rambling monologue to the detriment of narrative aspects like plot, portrayal of character and setting.

In Molloy anal imagery is used about the art of fiction suggesting the narrator's loathing for their own product and for their roles. Their disgust hints at the despair with which they regard their own situations; their art circles around itself displaying the narrators situation and techniques.

Molloy and Moran in Molloy recount faithfully, certain of their adventures, the latter because he must write a report, former for no apparent reason at all. Malone, the author hero in *Malone Dies* announces at the outset that he plans to tell himself stories in order to take his mind of his dying, to pass time until he dies. The narrator even gives the plan of the narrative. This he wants to divide into five parts; "Present state, three stories, inventory, there. An occasional interlude is to be feared"(168). On the whole, the narrator sticks to this outline. Through the plan already given, the narrator discloses part of the narrative process, which is an underlying aspect of metafiction.

The narrator is bedridden like Molloy, but his physical and mental deterioration is more advanced and his thoughts revolve around death much more than in the case of Molloy. The narrator does not deal with the question of why he writes. He is greatly exhausted and powerless even to question the state of things. He submits to his fate as a narrator with greater resignation.

The narrator does not know why he exists in his present situation, why he goes on writing. He merely asserts that he feels compelled to continue. He describes this feeling of compulsion by saying that he is born grave and that he does not like to play or invent, ie, to write. But every time he tried to give up playing. "The grown-ups persued me, the just caught me, beat me, hounded me back into the ground, the game, the jollity. . . And gravely I struggled to be grave no more, to live to invent"(179).

The commerce of the narrator with the outside world has been reduced to the pure maintenance of his bodily needs. The narrator has tried to direct his attention away from himself but he does not succeed. "But it was not long before I found myself alone in the dark"(166). It is towards the inner darkness that the narrator turns. He likewise describes his thoughts, as being turned towards his inner darkness. From this darkness his stories seem to come whether he wants it or not:

I know those little phrases that seem so innocuous and once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. Nothing is more real than nothing. They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down into its dark (177).

The narrator also talks of the single noise that he hears. Formerly he was able to distinguish the various sounds, but now "the noises of nature, of mankind and even of my own were all jumbled together in one and the same unbridled gibberish"(190). He must sort this out in order to create a story of meaning.

His bouts of story telling are constantly being interrupted by periods of sombre introspection, when he slips back into the dead world, airless, waterless, that he aims to avoid by virtue of his new scheme, "to live and to cause to live at least, to play at last and to die alive"(179). This is what gives the novel its straightforward pattern: a fragment of fiction is followed by a fragment of self examination and vice versa to the end and an important theme is the very ambiguity of what constitutes the fiction and what does not. The observation made by Noorbaksh Hooti that postmodern metafiction "relies heavily on fragmentation, paradox and questionable narrators"(40) is noteworthy here.

Malone is a self-conscious narrator. He pauses from writing to tell us how his body is feeling, that the light is fading and so on. He writes in an exercise book and keeps us informed of every detail of composition:

My little-finger glides before my pencil across the page and gives warning, falling over the edge that the end of the line is near. . . . I hear the noise of my little finger as it glides over the paper and then that so different, of the pencil following after (190).

Pleased with his tale of Lamberts Malone congratulates himself "how plausible all that is..."(183). Malone knows that he can write and tantalize us with fragments of gripping narrative as well as with psychological insights and impressions of nature. Only a born writer can permit himself to scorn writing in this way : "What half truths my God. . . What truth is there in all this babble?"(167) The list of such self deprecatory phrases, scattered through the book, could be extended indefinitely. The writer feels himself pilloried on words that betray the hopes he places in them. "Invent. It is not the word. Neither is line. No matter"(179). Writing therefore becomes mortal tedium and one writes frenziedly in a hurry to be done. Sometimes Malone cannot continue with the pretence of story telling any longer. He says, 'no I can't do it' and later he laments to himself, "how false all this is"(179).

Malone despises his work and frequently criticizes his creative effort. But the fact remains that he is compelled to write for no easily stated reason. The activity seems obscurely necessary to life, for when we cease speaking, we are extinguished as the Unnamable is painfully aware.

Malone is able to maintain his own identity, remaining separate from his creatures. But in *The Unnamable* the boundary

between the first person narrative and his fictions becomes much less clearly defined. He recognizes that he has more real existence than his own inventions. So he assumes mask after mask, moving from one of his creature's to another and even attempts to solve his dilemma of identity by speaking of himself in the third person. The condition of the narrator in his search for identity affects the very style of the novel bringing form and content close together. "The sentences run to pages in length, are composed of breathless, mutually interactive phrases and render difficult all isolation of language from event." (Cohn 121). Realizing that he cannot exist except in language, the hero spins out an existence for himself through the novel, while at the same time revealing the essence of fiction to be nothing more than words a man mumbles to himself. In this book with its successive collapses of pretence, its peelings away, monologue with monologue of falsification, Beckett probes the working of the creating mind and so doing draws near to the essence of creation itself.

In *The Unnamable*, the narrator is not able to give an accurate description of his whereabouts. About one third in the novel, the narrator comes up with an account of the jar, where he is, then, stationed. The incentives behind his writing is a "master" who sets him writing, before he is free to say what he wants. The master functions as a censor to the narrator's words, rather as their ultimate source of inspiration:

The words . . . have to be ratified by the proper authority, the messenger goes towards the master, and while the master examines the report, and while the messenger comes back with the verdict the words continue, the wrong words, until the order arrives, to sop every thing (42).

The obligation to utter words is a punishment inflicted upon the Unnamable by a 'master'. Yes I have a pensum to discharge before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more and I've forgotten what it is. . . I was given a pensum at birth, perhaps as a punishment for having been born perhaps(248).

There can be no possibility of an end to speech for such a cessation would entail the end of existence itself. Everything therefore, fictions and fables included, is grist to the mill.

All this business of labour to accomplish before I can end of words to say; a truth to recover; in order to say it before I can end. Of an imposed task; once known, long neglected, finally forgotten, to perform before I can be done with speaking, done with listening, I invented it all, in the hope it would console me.. (288) .

"I have to speak"(288),he says, having nothing to say, no words, but

the words, the words of others and he is never certain, even that it is with his own voice that he speaks. On another occasion he says:

the words are everywhere, inside me, outside me,.. . I am in words others words.. . I am all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words with no ground for their setting, r sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, that I am they, all of them(335).)

He even finds himself stuck in a groove of words. "I seek like a caged beast, born of caged beasts born in a cage and

dead in a cage”(356). He finds that creation is a sheer monotonous torture: “it goes on by itself; it drags on by itself, from word to word, a labouring whirl, you are in it somewhere”(370).

One of the first remarks of the Unnamable is ‘I’ say ‘I’ and through out the novel he struggles heroically to speak of himself: “me utter me, in the same foul breath as my creatures? Say of me, that I see this, feel that, fear, hope, know, and do not know? Yes I will say it and of me alone”(375). The chief threat to his selfhood comes from those creatures who seek to obliterate his distinctness either by absorbing themselves into him or by usurping his person altogether and setting up on their account.

In *The Trilogy* the Beckettian hero concentrates his attention upon his immediate activity, that is, a preoccupation with the creative act. The hero recognizes himself as the author of the stories and comments on his creative efforts and criticizes weakness in his work. He acknowledges that his own existence is fictional and has no life outside of fiction in which he plays a central role. The creator’s life became coincident with the created work. The hero is painfully aware of his function as a creator, for he can speak of nothing else. Thus the simultaneous and interdependent development of the novel and the author hero toward self consciousness leaves its traces throughout *The Trilogy*.

### References

- 1 Beckett, Samuel. *The Beckett Trilogy Molloy, Malone Dies. The Unnamable*. London: Pan Books, 1979.
- 2 Cohn, Ruby. “Watt in the Light of the Castle,” *Comparative Literature* 13, 154-56, 1961.

- 3 Esslin, Martin. ed. *Samuel Beckett: A collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs. NJ., Prentice Hall, 1965.
- 4 Federman, Raymond., *Journey to Chaos, Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1970.
- 5 Fletcher, John. *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1964.
- 6 Fogel, Stanley. "And All the Little Typtons: Notes on Language Theory in the Contemporary Experimental Novel." *Modern fiction studies*, xx, 3 Autumn 1974.
- 7 Helsa, David H. *The shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1971.
- 8 Hooti, Noorbaksh. *English Language and Literature Studies*. Vol. I.No. 1; June 2011.
- 9 Kenner, Hugh. *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic comedians*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962.
- 10 Mc Caffery, Larry. 'The Art of Metafiction': William Gass's *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*. *Critique XVIII*, 1, 1976.
- 11 Scholes, Robert. "The Fictional Criticism of the Future." *Triquarterly xxxiv*, 3, Fall 1975.
- 12 Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The theory and Practice of Selfconscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984.