

Identity Crisis in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*

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Abstract

The research paper tackles the concept of identity crisis in Samuel Beckett's famous one – act play , *Not I*. It consists of three sections. The first section presents a brief introduction to the concept of identity in psychoanalysis with reference to the opinions of the psychoanalysts: Jacques Lacan and Erik Erikson. The second section is devoted to approaching identity crisis in the play. It explains how the nameless character undergoes an identity crisis which is manifested in the character's language and her way of thinking. Finally, the research rounds off with some concluding remarks drawn from *Not I*.

1. Introduction

It is a universally conceded fact that man was, has been, and seems to go on being the cornerstone of much research, theoretical or practical. Psychoanalysis is a branch of knowledge that gets itself involved in studying the human nature. It tackles the development of man's personality from the early beginnings of childhood to the stage of being senile, attempting to diagnose its defects and suggest its treatments. This vital field witnessed the emergence of a number of famous pioneers whose contributions to man can not be overlooked or underestimated. Two prominent figures are the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901 - 1981) and the German psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1902-1994). They were much concerned with the human identity. Both indicated that man passes

Identity Crisis in Samuel Beckett's Not I
Hasan Mohammed Saleh

through a certain identity crisis, a crisis that presents itself in different manifestations.

Lacan's discussion of how man's identity is constructed must be briefly given here. His concept of identity is much dealt with in his famous book *Écrits*. According to Lacan, the individual goes through three stages as a life-cycle. These stages are the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, each of which is distinguished from the other by certain developments. To begin with, the Imaginary reveals itself when the child is compelled to have "*impressions and fantasies*" and is not able to use language to express his concerns.¹ Then the child comes into the Symbolic through the mirror stage. He thus becomes a part of the Real in that he can use language in order to participate in the social surroundings.²

What is noteworthy here is that Lacan gives much space to explain the mirror stage which is

*a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation - and, for the subject caught up in the lure of special identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I [Lacan] will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality - and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure.*³

"*Special identification*" is what concerns the individual as the above - mentioned extract shows. To put it in a different way, identity is the goal much sought by the human beings. The individual sees himself in a mirror which is reflected in an object or a person. Also, the individual may become the subject and the object at the same time. For Lacan, the mirror stage is all - important, because it is the yardstick against which to see the human identity. This identity is

built through the social structuration of the self. This is the way in which the individual is far from having a sense of alienation.

Generally speaking, language is subjectivity. It is the subjective facet of the human identity for "*The form in which language expresses itself in and of itself defines subjectivity*".⁴ It displays man's actions, background, and orientations. Therefore, language is situated at the heart of the Lacanian psychoanalysis. It has a great impact on shaping man's identity. Lacan establishes a relationship between language and desire. He says:

*The human individual sets out with a particular organism, with certain biological needs, which are satisfied by certain objects. What effect does the acquisition of language have on these needs? All speech is demand; it presupposes the Other to whom it is addressed, whose very signifiers it takes over in its formulation. By the same token, that which comes from the other is treated not so much as a particular satisfaction of a need, but rather as a response to an appeal, a gift, a token of love. There is no adequation between the need and the demand it conveys ; indeed, it is the gap between them that constitutes desire, at once particular like the first and absolute like the second. Desire (Fundamentally in the singular) is a perpetual effect of symbolic articulation. It is not an appetite: it is essentially exocentric and insatiable. That is why Lacan coordinates it not with the object that would seem to satisfy it, but with the object that causes it . . .*⁵

Closely examined, this quotation refers to the obvious fact that language expresses particular desire for particular things or persons. It is the vehicle for conveying ideas to express the self's concerns and to mix with society. As Lacan put it, "*It is in the other that the subject [the human being] first identifies himself and even*

experiences himself".⁶ In fact, part of the human identity is assigned to the medium of language. Further, one's acquaintances contribute to some degree in constructing identity through the process of social interaction. Such an interaction is unquestionably an effective instrument in the construction of the human identity. The self and the other are two forces working hand in hand in the sense that one can discover and find much of the looked after identity in the other.

On the other hand, Erikson, who suffered from severe identity crises in his life⁷, argues that at all the phases of man's life, man experiences an identity crisis which he defines as "*a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential*".⁸ Elsewhere, Erikson formulates another opinion of identity crisis. He states that such a crisis or confusion encompasses " . . . *an inability to establish intimacy, a sense of time urgency, a lack of concentration on required tasks, and a rejection of family or community standards*".⁹ Quite evidently, Erikson here puts forward his psychoanalytical theory of the human identity especially in time of a crisis. The human beings prove themselves incapable of having a reposeful life, and can not get along with the self and subsequently with the society. So certain identity crises always accompany and colour the individual's life. Social, Psychological, and personal disorders must be foreseen all the way. The human beings undergo particular changes, gain unprecedentedly new experiences, and finally defy these developments in their own ways.

2. Identity Crisis in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*.

The problem of existence has been a moot point in the Theatre of the Absurd. In this theatre, man is drawn as finding himself in a sort of endless strife with this problem, saving no effort to solve this dilemma. The modern man in this world suffers much

from an identity crisis. As an Absurdist, Samuel Beckett seems interested in the subject of identity crisis, for he frequently introduced it into his plays and novels. Beckett's characters are in no position to figure out what goes on around them. They thus create for themselves a world of illusion to live in. As a matter of fact, the being and non-being is of prime concern for his characters who are captured in an identity- seeking world. This world is marked out by chaos, disintegration, and self- loss. They seldom get rid of such nightmarish world, and they end in having a sense of failure. In a word, they always undergo an identity crisis.

Not I is a play characteristic of this Beckettian concept of identity crisis. It underlines a formidable difficulty of bordering on personal identity. This difficulty leads into profound meaninglessness of life. Like other Beckett's characters, the female in *Not I* is put in ". . . such desperate situations, playing so confidently with the idea of being. . . ".¹⁰ Existentialists believe that feelings of anxiety and despair about their existence represent the common denominator among people, feelings that are caused by their alienation from themselves or from the world.¹¹ Such feelings are deeply rooted in man's nature. They result from the persistent contemplation of existence.

In *Not I* there is no character in the ordinary meaning of the word. The play has just a mouth and an auditor. The role of the Mouth is confined to present the dramatic world, and the Auditor standing dimly lit on the stage. The Auditor is later revealed to be a female character. The Mouth is a metonymic representation of the human being. The title itself is indicative of an identity crisis. It stands for the psychological split within the character who does not realize the real cause behind existence. The world the Mouth visualizes is one of nihilism and anarchy. In fact, personal disintegration is at work in *Not I*.

Identity Crisis in Samuel Beckett's Not I
Hasan Mohammed Saleh

The Mouth inaugurates the play narrating and meditating a girl's life . Such a situation presents itself through indulging into the girl's different phases of life. It unfolds the events addressing the audience in this way:

*. . . out . . . into this world . . . this world . . . tiny little thing .
.. before its time . . . in a godfor what? . . . girl? . . .
yes . . . tiny little girl . . . into this . . . out into this . . . before
her time . . . godforsaken hole called . . . called . . . no
matter. . . parents unknown . . . unheard of . . . he having
vanished . . . thin air . . . no sooner buttoned up his breeches
. . . she similarly . . . eight months later . . . almost to the tick
. . . so no love . . . spared that . . . no love such as normally
vented on the . . . speechless infant . . . in the home . . . no . . .
no . . . nor indeed for that matter of any kind . . . no love of
any kind . . . at any subsequent stage . . . so typical affair . . .
nothing of any note till coming up to sixty when . . . what? . .
seventy? . . . good God! . . .*¹²

Here the Mouth speaks about the birth of the girl whose parents are unknown. The girl is also left unnamed. Of course, this gap of information about the character creates the impression that Beckett approaches a subject of cosmopolitan dimension, not limited to male or female or any community. The concept of identity crisis is a concept that penetrates all societies in general.

This sense of ambiguity that befalls the girl's identity is accompanied by the fact that she shows no symptom of understanding her entity. She is found to ". . . stare at her *uncomprehending* . . . " (p.5). She leads an entirely empty and meaningless life to the extent that she cannot construct a logical sentence to give shape to her identity. She is much anxious about herself. Existentially conceived of, this anxiety produces the idea of

the nothing.¹³ Such a personal trait expresses itself most clearly in the Mouth's description of the girl " . . . *nothing she could tell . . . nothing she could think . . . nothing she . . . what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she.!*" (p.9). The girl's identity crisis brings back to mind Simon de Beauvoir's close-knit statement about the nothingness of her existence. She observes:

*I look at myself in vain in a mirror, tell my own story, I can never grasp myself as an entire object, I experience the emptiness that is myself, I feel I am not.*¹⁴

Simon de Beauvoir and the anonymous female character are two sides of the same coin in that both of them believe that they see themselves in many things, but they find themselves nowhere. The mirror they hold up to their nature reflects a typically feminine subjection to the pressures of life.

The female character takes a special posture and movement of her own, a fact which is significant from the theatrical point of view. It can be seen in "*simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion*".¹⁵ When language is out of use, gestural expressions are used to get along with the outside world. Certain body movements can convey much meaning in case of the absence of language. Through out the play, there are four pauses and movements which take the above-mentioned way. They are indicated by the words (pause and movement) plus the number of pause and movement, each of them giving something new about the character. Taken as a whole, they clear the way for the incorrigibly problematic situation in which she is positioned.

In a way analogous to other characters in Beckett, the girl suffers from a hard-to-describe identity crisis. She appears to have a spiritual void which can not be easily filled, for she has

Identity Crisis in Samuel Beckett's Not I
Hasan Mohammed Saleh

*. . . found herself in the dark . . . and if not exactly . . .
insentient . . . for she could still hear the buzzing . . . so called
. . . in the ears . . . and a ray of light came and went (p.2)*

The repetition of some binary oppositions, like light and darkness, life and death, heat and cold, constitutes an integral part of the Beckettian existentialist cosmos.¹⁶ Hence, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is strongly established here. The image of darkness that characterizes the girl's life certainly affirms her futile existence. She is placed in a dark world which is fraught with a sense of absurdity.

Right from the beginning, the girl's thoughts oscillate between hope and despair, laughing and screaming, an oscillation that can be tangible in her recollection of the past. "*. . . since she was a baby . . . she must have cried as a baby . . .*" (p.7) . She flashbacks and ponders over her sins and the punishment meted out against these previous mistakes. As a consequence, she is "*as if in actual . . . agony . . . but . . . could not bring her heart . . . some flaw in her make up . . . scream . . . (screams) . . . then listen . . . (silence) . . . scream again*" (p.4). Things around her are "*. . . all silent as the grave . . .*"(p.4). She is portrayed as totally shocked, not knowing what to do. Desire for having a sense of personal integration seems to be the girl's primordial impulse. She has an irresistible desire to reach self-realization , but to no avail. She therefore lives in a kind of a labyrinth out of which there appears no possible outlet. This is what gives the girl the impression of being entangled in identity confusion.

More importantly, the female's personal identity crisis dovetails with her social crisis. She imagines having a catalyst for change, "*words were coming . . . a voice she did not recognize . . . at first*" (p.5) . Yet, the glimpse of hope she has is completely

crushed by the fact that this voice . . . " *could be none other . . . than her own . . .* " (p.5). She has grown into the disappointing realization that what could be called the social voice is no more than an echo of her own voice. The viewer, i.e the Mouth sees the girl as lacking the ability of getting her thoughts transmitted to others. She is far removed from communication. Curiously enough, she is

*Practically speechless . . . all her days . . . how she survived !
 . . .even shopping . . . out shopping . . . busy shopping centre .
 . . supermart [sic] . . . just hand in the list . . . with the bag . .
 . old black shopping bag . . . then stand there waiting . . . any
 length of time . . . middle of the throng . . . motionless. . .*
 (p.5)

Waiting , time, and silence are but a few salient features of Beckett's dramatic vision. To be sure, they depict the paralyzing astonishment that attacks his characters, and hence they feel themselves having no social contact. Their conception of identity undermines any attempt at communication. For Beckett the girl has no capability of communicating with her milieu. In the supermarket, she has difficulty of interaction. She only uses gestures to express herself, "*just hand in the list*". She remains "*motionless*" and stands out from the crowd of people. She has got the feeling of being socially isolated which is " . . . [*an*] *awful thought . . .*" (p.6). There can be no question that the girl is proven unable to have a social and spatial location for her identity.

Repetition is a very effective dramatic technique in the Theatre of the Absurd with a view to emphasizing the purposelessness of life. The Absurdist has a well-founded belief that repetition can better describe the sense of boredom and emptiness man possesses. It pinpoints the monotonous tone of life. Particular words, phrases, sentences and thematic motifs are

Identity Crisis in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*
Hasan Mohammed Saleh

recurrently employed in *Not I*. By way of example, the fourth movement of the girl which comes at the end of the play, bears a striking resemblance to the content of the first three movements. Beckett's final description of the girl goes like this:

*. . . tiny little thing . . . out before its time . . . godforsaken
hole . . . no love . . . spared that . . . speechless all her days .
. . . practically speechless . . . even to herself . . . never out
loud . . . but not completely . . . sometimes sudden urge . . .
once or twice a year . . . always winter some strange reason .
. . . the long evenings . . . hours of darkness (pp. 9-10)*

This mishmash of visual images clearly signifies the fragmentation of the personality given thus far. It is a reminder of the girl's incompetence to have a sense of self - fulfillment.

It remains to say that Beckett maintains that the better prescribed panacea for the self's disturbances lies in understanding the self, there by getting along with society. Without this solution the self and the world would be an uncultivated wasteland in the Eliotic sense . The girl in *Not I* is located in a continuous confrontation of her being, for there are diverse references to an identity - seeking tendency scattered through out the play.

3. Conclusion

Identity crisis is a problem that puzzled Beckett's mind and hence it became quite principle preoccupation for him. Clearly, most if not all Beckett's plays treat the problem of man's existence.

Thus, *Not I* gives the feel of a universal dilemma shared by human beings. It is the dilemma of existence, no doubt. Beckett always broods over this subject since his entrance into the world of modern drama. This is so, because of the philosophical, political, and social milieu he found himself in. Seen in Lacanian terms, *Not I*

is a sample of human desire, a desire to live at far distance from the besetting daily troubles. In particular, Beckett is keen on man's much-discussed concern which is the formation of personal identity. He deeply absorbs the modern identity crisis that takes much of the human thinking.

Finally, in all the efforts exerted by the human being, he attempts to express his personal identity. However, he sometimes falls in the snares of a particular identity crisis for reasons known and others still unknown. The social environment doubtless promotes the individual to the status of prosperity or misfortune. Hence, man is a final product of this factor, although he tries to formulate a socially-independent identity. This attempt is socially vanished, thereby ending in an identity crisis.

Notes

1. Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory : The Basics*, (London: Routledge, 2003) , p. 160.
2. Bertens , pp. 160-3.
3. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Trans. Bruce Fink, (London and New York : W.W. Norton Company, 2006) , p. 78.
4. Lacan, p. 246.
5. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Trans. Alan Sheridan. Ed. Jacques – Alan Miller (New York. W.W. Norton and Company .INC. , 1978), pp. 278-9
6. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 148.
7. *Erikson's early identity crises can be ascribed to his mysterious origins. He was born in June 15, 1902 near Frankfurt, Germany, the son of Karla Abrahamsen and a father of unknown identity. During his first three years, he lived with his mother, who then married Dr. Theodor Homburger, Erik's*

*pediatrician. Erikson grew up in Karlsruhe, a town in Southern Germany, believing he was Homburger's son. In his autobiography, Erikson (1975) claimed that his parents "kept from me the fact that my mother had been married previously and that I was the son of Dane who had abandoned her before my birth." For more details on Erikson's life, see Jess Feist and Gregory J. Feist, **Theories of Personality** 4thed., (New York: WCB/McGraw – Hill, 1998, pp. 230-2.)*

8. Feist and Feist, p. 242.
9. Feist and Feist, p. 243.
10. Katharine J. Worth , **Revolutions in Modern English Drama**, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1973). P. 147.
11. Feist and Feist, p. 526.
12. All quotations from *Not I* are taken from Samuel Beckett, *Not I*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p .1. *Further references will be to the page number only due to the fact that the play is a one-act play.*
13. W.J Korab Karpowicz, "Before Truth Should Die" , **The Universalist Quarterly : Dialogue and Humanism**, vol. I. No. 1, (1991) , p. 152.
14. As quoted in Paul Roubiczek , **Existentialism : For and Against**, (Cambridge : Cambridge U P , 1964) , p . 125.
15. Beckett , p . 11.
16. Vivian Mercier , **Beckett** , (New York : O U P , 1977) , p .7.

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المخلص

يتناول البحث مفهوم أزمة الهوية في مسرحية صاموئيل بيكيت ذات الفصل الواحد الشهيرة "لستُ أنا". ويتألف هذا البحث من ثلاثة مباحث ، يقدم المبحث الأول تمهيدا موجزا لمفهوم الهوية في التحليل النفسي بالإشارة الى آراء عالما التحليل النفسي جاك لاكان واريك اريكسون ، اما المبحث الثاني فقد كُرس لدراسة هذا الموضوع في المسرحية قيد البحث، حيث يوضح كيف أن الشخصية مجهولة الاسم تعاني من أزمة هوية ، وتتجلى أزمة الهوية هذه في لغة الشخصية وطريقتها في التفكير وأخيراً ، ينتهي البحث ببعض الاستنتاجات التي تم التوصل اليها من خلال دراسة مسرحية "لستُ أنا".