

Emergence of Absurdism: Theatre and Anti-Theatre in the Post-World War American Drama

Digvijay Pandya, T. S. Sangha

Abstract: *The Present Research Paper Entitled “Emergence Of Absurdism: Theatre And Anti-Theatre In The Post-World War Drama” Explores The Evolution Of The Theatre Of Absurd In The Post-World War European And American Drama. The Conspicuous Feature Of These Plays Is The Loss Of Self Of The Protagonists Who Are Depicted Struggling In The Plays Of Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, And Edward Albee. All The Major European And The American Playwrights Evolved Anti-Theatrical Techniques To Depict The Anxieties, Absurdities Of Human Existence In Pursuance With The Existential Philosophy Propounded By Albert Camus And Jean Paul Sartre. The Loss Of Self Is A Totally New Perspective In The Study Of The Theatre Of The Absurd. As Such, Ionesco, Beckett And Albee Are Confronted With The Baffling Problem Of Depicting A Self That Seems To Have Lost Its Identity. Darwinism Led To The Formation Of The Idea Of The Machine-Man, The Image Of The Mechanical Self. Kepler’s Laws And Freud’s Explorations Of The Unconscious Brought Home The Realization That Man Is But An Infinitesimal Fraction Of The Energy That Flows Through The Universe. In The Age Of Freud And Einstein, God Ceased, As It Were, To Reveal Himself In Man.’ Declaring That “Modernism And Tragedy Are Incompatible”, Joseph Wood Krutch Had Rightly Pointed Out That Modern Malaise, Nausea, Angst, Alienation, Loss Of Identity, Entropy, Nihilism Were Forces That Had Dehumanized And Deflated The Heroes (79). Indeed, Modern Playwrights Lack Potential To Acknowledge “The Awareness Of The Reality Of Death” (Fromm 245).*

Index Terms: *Conspicuous, Anti-Theatre, Absurdism, Alienation, Dehumanized, Nihilism, Existentialism, Entropy, Nausea, Angst.*

I. INTRODUCTION

After World War II, the new sense of uncertainty, anxiety, and pessimism, coupled with theological revolution, imparted a new awareness to the continental playwrights. The corrosion of self became an inevitable reality because this was an age in which existence came to enjoy precedence over essence. Truth assumed a life sustaining illusion. Mind, consciousness, and soul are treated as illusive and meaningless things. For existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Karl Jaspers, failure is the fate of man whose every project is doomed. Consequently, the evolution of the Theatre of the Absurd brought a revolution in the Post War theatre as the plays reacted against the realistic drama of George Bernard Shaw.

Mr. Martin Esslin, in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), observes that there is no worth mentioning purpose in the absurd. Man has lost all his roots and has come to the belief that all his struggles end in despair. The evolution of the absurdist drama from Samuel Beckett to Tom Stoppard made many experiments in the theatre and scrapped all the old conventions of drama. Seeking inspiration from Camus and Sartre, they dramatized new themes concerning the anxiety and absurdity of the modern age. The origin of the Theatre of the Absurd can be attributed to the avantgarde experiments of the 1920s and 1930s. The concept can be traced back to Soren Kierkegaard who describes it as a situation in human life. The elements of the absurd can also be found in the wild humour of the old comedy of Aristophanes. In some ways, even the morality plays of the Middle Ages can be considered to be the precursors of the Theatre of the Absurd. Franz Kafka and James Joyce deal with formless of plots. *Ubu Roi* is considered as the first play dealing with absurdity of life. The audience stood aghast in utter bewilderment, not knowing what it was all about. They had not heard the like of it ever on a stage. Majority of the onlookers were dumbfounded at what they heard and saw. Martin Esslin avers rightly, “These plays flout all the traditional and conventional notions of the plot, character, dialogue, theme, setting, and structure mainly” (*Introduction to the Absurd Drama* 1).

The atmosphere of these plays is dreamlike, allegorical, and symbolical, full of poetic images. By the 1950s, a group of playwrights in France wrote plays which the modern audience felt hard either to approve easily or reject conveniently. They placed the audience in a situation analogical to its own. Thus, the drama of the ‘absurd’ was a type of experiment in theatre, which French masters experimented first and afterwards it took America in its stride. The American playwrights like Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit and Jack Richardson launched a ‘New Wave’ in drama. Albert Camus’s *The Myth Of Sisyphus* (1942)[1] is a very serious study of the helplessness of man and the futility of human labour, that threaten the very existence of man. Camus avers in this context, “I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know the meaning.... What can a meaning outside

Revised Manuscript Received on December 22, 20

Digvijay Pandya, Associate Professor, LPU ,Punjab,India
T. S. Sangha, Associate Professor, LPU ,Punjab,India



my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 5). Albert Camus frequently resisted to be labeled as an existentialist and even criticized existentialism for its initially recognizing life as absurd and meaningless. Camus calls it a 'philosophical suicide.' He believes that "The Absurd ... does not lead to God ... the absurd is sin without God" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 42). This absurdity, Camus admits, has nothing to do with anything like a doctrine or a dogma; it is an experience. As such, man is torn between the two infinities: a very short life with appetite for living, and a very long life full of suffering. Neither nothingness nor eternity avails him anything. Man feels torn between infinities, absolutes, odds and feels the presence of a hidden God, an invisible God. It is not the life but the decline of spontaneous life into a mechanical routine which this leads to an awareness of isolation for an individual himself and others. Absurdity appears in the moments when man realizes his situation, in the moments of awareness of his position in the world. Camus describes this despair rooted in a sense of fundamental absurdity. This absurdity is not parallel to anything non-rational or ridiculous in an ordinary sense. This absurdity strives to mock at the very existence of man. Camus has given a very accurate estimate of this very existence. Death and meaninglessness appear to be at the basis of the philosophy of absurd. Absurdism is an insistence on the existential theme of the French writers like Sartre and Camus.. And the 'absurd' in a theatre is a scientific attempt to define the futility and absurdity of the world. Edward Albee's *Zoo* (1959) is a fine example to deal with the problem of alienation.

The Theatre of the Absurd gained momentum in France after World War II as a rebellion against Western culture and literature. Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Edward Albee, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter launched a revolution against the realist theatre of Shaw and Galsworthy. The Theatre of the Absurd is also closely associated with the philosophy of nihilism and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who provided a detailed diagnosis of nihilism. Aloni defines, "Etymologically, nihilism is denial or negation, of the established and esteemed beliefs and values in morality and religion" (60). One of the primary differences between nihilism and both absurdism and existentialist lies in the notion of meaning. All hold there is none imposed on you from outside or that can be discovered from a search. It may seem really important to Sisyphus to push that rock up the hill, but everyone there outside can see how pointless it is.

The writers like Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Jean Genet gave immense boost to the spirit of the theatre of the Absurd. It has been much used and abused. In fact, there was no such organized movement. None of the school of artists of those times ever claimed the label for themselves. The plays of Ionesco and Albee puzzled and outraged most of the critics as well as the audience. These plays provoked the audience who came to the theatre expecting well-made plays that presented well-observed characters. These plays, on the other hand, presented hardly any recognizable human being with witty dialogues. The dialogues, here, seem to have generated into meaningless babble. As described by Esslin3, "Characters

are frequently stereotypical, archetypal, or flat character types as in Commedia dell'arte. The more complex characters are in crisis because the world around them is incomprehensible" (*The Theatre of Absurd* 402). The characters in Absurdist drama are lost in an incomprehensible universe. A well-made traditional play is expected to have a proper beginning, a satisfactory middle part, and a well neat ending that must bring all the loose threads tie up effectively. An absurd play, on the other hand, starts and ends arbitrarily. Esslin states that, "By all the traditional standards of critical appreciation of drama, these plays are not only abominably bad; they don't even deserve the name drama" (*Introduction to the Absurd Drama* 1).

Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* is one of the finest examples of an absurd play. Beckett does not intend telling a story nor does he give any solution to any problem of life as shown in the play. He simply allows the audience to watch, experience, and judge on their own and in the end reach at its own conclusions. "Absurd drama asks its viewers to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors" (*The Theatre of Absurd* 20). The absurd playwrights never explained any theories or objectives behind their works. They were concerned only to express their own subjective view of the world. They felt an irrepressible urge to do so and they tried as best as they could in this dissection. They provided no explanations to the audience and the audience was given the chance to draw its own conclusions and thus interpret the work according to its own choice. The absurd plays depict an unfamiliar kind of atmosphere. The situations depicted and portrayed are unrealistic and dream-like. They do not dramatize the experiences related to day to day life of the audience. They take the audience to the world away from their own and where the characters are seen residing in a world created by themselves. The labeling of the different plays under the title the Theatre of Absurd is not such an easy task. One cannot classify any play under only one label. Martin Esslin observes that "It is not a binding classification; it is certainly not all-embracing or exclusive" (*Introduction to the Absurd Drama* 2).

Arthur Adamov is a famous dramatist of the Theatre of Absurd, and who later, in some of his plays, deliberately abandons this mode of style and opts for a realistic and socially committed mode of writing. He rejected the unrealistic style of absurd in his later works. So it is not a compulsion that a play which is categorized under the label of the absurd play will reflect only absurd conditions and characteristics. The other theories may be equally applicable to them. So, the writer may or may not be a committed follower of the absurd movement. As Wesley Barnes states, "It embodies an aspect of the philosophy though the writer may not be a committed follower" [31-32].

Ionesco's *Amedee* is a play about a middle aged couple where the wife used to operate certain types of telephone switchboards to earn her livelihood. The dead



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body of a lover is made a character in the drama. It is not made clear whose corpse it is. And as the play progresses, the dead body bulge out to such an extent that at a point of time one of its gigantic feet bursts out of the bedroom into the living room which was quite horrifying to drive Amedee and his wife out of their abode. It is a well-known fact that dreams never develop logically; they develop by associations. Instead of communicating ideas, dreams communicate images. The absurd dramatists create a dream-like atmosphere which takes the audience to a completely new world full of poetic images. In his plays such as *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and *Happy Days* (1961), Samuel Beckett depicts grotesque characters struggling with the absurdity of life. Beckett explores, in his works, these circumstances and their destructive effects including the loss of self, the feeling of isolation and alienation, and the uncertainty of identity and existence. Beckett's dramas proved revolutionary in the world theatre and inspired other playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Edward Albee to experiment further in the drama. Pinter got Nobel Prize and Edward Albee eclipsed Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams in America.

Some critics have violently criticized the plays of Beckett for inadequacies. They regard his plays as mere gibberish and a prank on the audience in the name of a play. The audience, however, underwent a completely new kind of experience and with it the Theatre of the Absurd gained unprecedented popularity. One of the important aspects of the plays of Beckett, Pinter, and Edward Albee is that there is no communication in them. Absurd drama uses conventionalized speech, clichés, slogans, and technical jargon, which it distorts, parodies and breaks down. Absurd drama subverts logic and opens up a glimpse of the infinite. It is often considered that the plays of the absurd theatre contain extravagant fantasies which are nevertheless essentially realistic. These plays are not mere photographic pictures of superficial life. These plays generally present a stark but disillusioned picture of the harsh world.

To conclude, in the Post-World War a new wave started in the European and American drama because they realized that the society has become full of politics and man is confronted with the anxieties and absurdities of life. The wave of nihilism, decadence of faith and the loss of human values brought about new challenges for the playwrights. The emergence of the Theatre of Absurd was a total revolution in the domain of drama. These dramatists stopped arguing about the absurdity of human life and existence; they just presented it in being. They never try to overcome or resolve the absurdities of life. Interestingly, as an absurdist dramatist, the thrust of Beckett is to dramatize the deflation of the protagonists. Their escape from self is an inevitable existential reality and the present research has tried to explore their struggle to escape from self; their fruitless quest of identity; their metaphysical despair, alienation, and absurdity.

