

In Search Of Meaninglessness: A Close Reading of Absurd Drama

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ABSTRACT: Martin Esslin coined the term “absurd” in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) for a group of dramatists who instead of searching for a meaning of life were ready to accept the meaninglessness of life. Though these dramatists’ originated from various countries there was a unity of their thought. The major absurd dramatists are Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov and Harold Pinter. In this paper I will mainly ponder on the works of the most popular of them: Beckett and Pinter. I will try to unveil some of the characteristics, perspectives and nature of the absurd drama. Some of the very striking features are - there is no such progressive plotline, so ambiguity of action and inaction; language is not sensible, but sort of babbling. The setting of this kind of drama is sterile and very claustrophobic. The characterization is also very obscure and dubious. And obviously there is meaningless life- absurd, and sterile.

INTRODUCTION: The absurd drama flourished in European countries in the mid 20th century mainly from 1940s to 1989. Albert Camus with his extremely unfamiliar and uncommon novel *The Outsider* (1942) started to write a whole new history for the world literature. The novel was really novel and shocking for the contemporary literary writers and readers as well. The very first line of the novel is unique and striking: “My mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I don’t know” (Camus, 3). How is a son who does not remember the exact date of his mother’s death! This total indifference to the world and its deeds was stupefying. What is the

meaning of life and afterlife? Why people should care for anything at all! Why this anguish, apprehension, tribulation and perplexity about life? Whatever happens man can only observe and accept. Camus' another masterpiece essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) clarifies the absurd theme. These are the five themes which dissertates the absurdity of the absurd drama mostly:

1. Action and Inaction: No notable plotline.
2. Language kind of babbling.
3. Questioning the self.
4. Absurd sterile settings.
5. Characterization of the plays.

ACTION AND INACTION, NO NOTABLE PLOTLINE: In almost all of the absurd plays nothing significant happens throughout the play. More specifically there is no definite or lengthy plotline. Pradip Lahiri in his essay on *The Birthday Party* of Harold Pinter states, "the plot is light and can be stated in a few words" (Lahiri, 54). There is no climax or anticlimax in the absurd plays- only a series of situations from daily chores in *Endgame*, the uncertain waiting for someone in *Waiting for Godot*, Krapp's listening to his own past voice in *Krapps's Last Tape*, in *Happy Days* Winnie only talks and Willie listens indifferently. So, there is nothing which can touch the melodramatic part of human mind or can give any didactic lesson, no moral innuendo can be found.

In Pinter's play a similar attitude is found but he combines plot, action and absurdity in a little different manner. Martin Esslin projects "the commonplace situation that is gradually invested with menace, dread, and mystery; the deliberate omission of an explanation or a motivation for the action." (Esslin, 235). So Pinter's situation is absurd also but a mystification is created at the same time. As in his one-act play *The Room*, the audiences are aware of the room only. What happens outside the room or is there anything real outside the room starts to haunt and overwhelm the audience and the readers. Pinter himself stated, "Obviously they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening. I am sure it is frightening to you and me as well" (Esslin, 235). This mystery is the question what happens afterlife, what human beings are supposed to do in the utmost negligence from world itself. They can only await for the uncertainty. In *The Birthday Party* Stanley is taken away from Meg's hospitality by two inauspicious people. Where Stanley is taken or from where

he has come Pinter does not give us any story. Thus they represent the secret, the obnoxious like death. So uncertainty looms over his works and this creates the absurdity of situation.

LANGUAGE KIND OF BABBLING: In each of the absurd drama the language is very limited. There are very childlike utterances without any verbosity. So not only the situation is absurd the words uttered by the characters in the play are also absurd. In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir and Estragon's conversation can make the audience more baffling:

“ESTRAGON: They rustle.

VLADMIR: They rustle.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: What do they say?

ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.

.....

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[*Long silence.*]

Even in this little passage it can be observed that no important information is presented or no messages is directed towards the audience. It is only the musings of the two tramps. Thus absurdity starts to be presented in a funny way. Michael Worton in his essay, “*Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text*” justly affirms, “Language is no longer presented as a vehicle for direct communication or as a screen through which one can see darkly the psychic movements of a character. Rather it is used in all its grammatical, syntactic and – especially – intertextual force to make the reader / spectator aware of how much we depend on language and of how much we need to be wary of the codifications that language imposes upon us.” (Pilling, 68).

This is about Beckett. In Pinter also we find the perfect non sequential, irrelevant uttering. Mac Cann's dialogue “Chicken? Egg? Which came first?” is stated in a very crucial moment. These kind of nonsensical words are spoken are used to terrify Stanley. Thus the funny

absurd situation arrives. The reason for this “meaningless buzzing” is provided by Beckett himself:

“... the words I heard, ... free of all meaning... the words I uttered myself, ... were often to me as the buzzing of an insect.”(Esslin, 84)

The use of such minimum projection is to highlight the fact that attaining certainty in this meaningless world is impossible. So no communication of definite language can bring us to any definite certainty.

QUESTIONING THE SELF: In *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp listens to his own voice in his recorder, recorded years back. But over the years his own voice becomes stranger and unknown to him. He cannot relate his present self with his previous self. The two selves of himself is like two different entity to him. Even, Krapp takes the help of a dictionary to understand one of his own used words! Here lies the universal problem of the self. What then is the identity if it changes from moment to moment!

Pinter's play also shows the difficulty of projecting a valid self which is constant. Len says in, *The Dwarfs*: “The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what... You are the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of? What scum does the tide leave? ... the scum is broken and sucked back. I don't see where it goes, I don't see when, what do I see, what have I seen? What have I seen, the sum or the essence?”(Esslin, 262).

Thus absurd dramatists differ from the social realist. The social realists epitomize action in a well plotted dramatic action. But are those actions really realistic? If the self changes instantly how human behavior is to be interpreted and exemplified? The time is basically absurd so no clear cut solution can typify the illusion and delusion of time.

So Esslin appropriately says, being “subject to this process of time flowing through us and changing us in doing so, we are at no single in our lives, identical with ourselves. Hence ‘we are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died - and perhaps many times on the way.” This inability to create any concrete self and the helplessness in front of time creates absurdity” (Esslin, 51).

ABSURD STERILE SETTINGS: In all of the absurd drama settings play a crucial and pivotal part. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir or Estragon are just characters but the protagonist is the very act of waiting. This waiting takes place on an awfully empty road. *Endgame* is enacted in a totally enclosed setting. It is only a small room. The characters are also somewhat not moving. Hamm is the paralysed old man. He is seen sitting in a chair throughout the play. And his servant or rather helper is Clov who can never sit down. So, in a way both of them are dependent on each other. Yet Clov wants to abandon his master and go down the room to the utmost unknown world. Whether ultimately Clov remains or leaves the room is the unanswered crux of the drama. This claustrophobic setting very much reflects the lack of moving capacity of human beings beyond time or greater force. In two dustbins Hamm's legless parents stay and they talk about their happier days. The outside is sterile stagnant and dead.

The play *The Room* is named on the setting. The room here represents our world with which men think themselves to be familiar. But there is kind of an uncertainty and apprehension outside the room. Esslin justly says that "the uncannily cruel accuracy of his reproduction of the inflections and rambling irrelevancy of everyday speech, the commonplace situation that is gradually invested with menace, dread, and mystery; the deliberate omission of an explanation or a motivation for the action". (Esslin, 235). So the commonplace setting not only represents life but the outside world represents what is death or the ultimate stoppage of our journey. Man is unable to solve the situation. He/she can do things with compatibility with time. The absurdity is man cannot control or know the future but still they are bound to live the life.

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE PLAYS: In the absurd drama there cannot be found any characters doing any socialistic incident. They are the very basic exemplification of human ambiguity, doubts, fears, confusion, uncertainty, obscurity, dubiousness and obviously indefiniteness. As in these plays there is no clarified concretization of certainty or the meaning of life. What is the purpose of this life? The characters are confused so much that in *Waiting for Godot* Estragon completely forgets about Pozzo and Lucky though he has met them the day before and speaks, "It's never the same pus from one second to the next." So if the moment is different how is it possible for a human being to completely represent the same characteristics throughout the play! So Esslin justly confirms, "Hamm and Clov, Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir and Estragon, Nagg and Nell are not characters but the embodiments of basic human attitudes,

rather like the personified virtues and vices in medieval mystery plays or Spanish *autos sacramentales*..... Beckett is concerned with probing down to a depth in which individuality and definite events no longer appear, and only basic patterns emerge” (Esslin, 76).

In Pinter the characters are somewhat an amalgamation of realistic and basic patterns. As in the play *The Lover* Richard and Sarah are middle-class suburban couple. The dramatist creates a sense of suspense with their conversation as when Richard is on his way to office asks his wife whether she is expecting her lover in the evening. And the wife casually nods yes. And when the husband returns from his office he says equally casually that he regularly visits a whore. Later it is revealed that the wife’s lover is no other than her husband and the whore is the wife herself. So along with being socially recognized husband and wife both of them maintain another essence, property and feature of their character. But there arises a tension towards the end of the play as their other nature wants to take over fully. Whether that happens at last remains open. Esslin points out that Pinter’s characters “have to solve their basic problem – whether they will be able to confront, and come to terms with reality at all. It is only after they have made this fundamental adjustment that they will be able to become part of society... Pinter repudiates the suggestion that in so presenting he is unrealistic” (Esslin, 262). Guru Charan Behera says in Pinter’s plays man “evolves various strategies, takes various stands, adopts various techniques to meet the claims of life” (Charan, 69). So basically his realistic characters are the victim of absurd situation from where only nothingness can sprout.

CONCLUSION: The absurd situation arose after the two world wars. People’s belief, faith, ideas, acceptance, certainty, confidence, presumption were immensely changed after the shocking and destructive consequences of the horrible thing. Their peaceful life ended and they begin to question their own faith without an answer. The real was the nightmare to them and they did not know what is not “real”. Here comes Beckett’s favourite quotation, “ Nothing is more real than nothing” (Esslin, 73). People were bewildered among this nothingness and meaninglessness. The result is a tragic farce – the absurdity.

References:

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