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Theatre of the Absurd and Samuel Beckett

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Abstract:

The label 'Theatre of the Absurd' is commonly applied to the plays of Eugene Ionesco, Jane Genet, Author Adamov and Samuel Beckett. The great critic, Martin Esslin had used the term 'Absurd' in his 1960 essay 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Esslin related the work of these playwrights to Albert Camus's philosophy which he had preached in his work 'The Myth of Sisyphus' and wherein he had considered human life inherently meaningless and futile. Then Esslin added the name of Pinter to this group of 'Absurdist'. Still later the names of Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Purrematt, Arrabal, Albee, Boris Vain and Jean Tardieu have been included in the list. There was not a sudden rise of this type of theatre. Many a small literary streamlets such as Dadaism, Surrealism, Expressionism and Existentialism mingled together to give rise to 'Absurdism' in literature. In the mid 19th century man's world-view had altogether changed and the old values were thrown to winds. Man had lost the firm grip of religion. But it was after the World War II that such philosophers as Camus and Sartre got disillusioned with the prevailing circumstances and expressed their views vehemently but philosophically. This gave a push to the creation of a number of such works in drama and prose fiction which share a common view that the human conditions is essentially absurd and this absurd condition can only be presented in absurd works. This movement emerged in France after the World War II as a revolt against the basic beliefs and values in traditional culture and literature.

Keywords: Absurd. Futile, Dadaism. Surrealism. Expressionism. Existentialism.

The term 'Abused Literature' applies to a number of dramatic works and prose fiction of the modern world which have a general view of human condition that it is essentially absurd and this condition can be fairly represented only in those works of literature which are themselves absurd. And then, what does the term 'Absurd imply?'. A common dictionary defines it as foolish, unreasonable and ridiculous. In philosophy the term absurd means out of harmony with reason or plainly opposed to reason. The word is itself a compound of Latin prefix 'ab' meaning 'from' and the latin adjective 'surdes' meaning 'irrational'. Thus, philosophically the term 'absurdity' is used to show us the irrelevance and irrationality of human existence in the world where all its strivings and struggles come to nought. This type of theatre has lately gained such a great momentum that it is now an accepted designation for the plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the 1950's, as well as the style of theatre which has evolved from their work. All these literary writers may differ from one another in minor details of structure, dialogue and other theatrical devices of their plays but all of them reach to the conclusion that man's existence is meaningless and purposeless. According to the Hutchinson Encyclopaedia, Millennium Edition, Helicon (1999), "Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence"¹. The development of absurd literature was not a sudden thing. As far back as 1896 we see its glimpses in Alfred Jarry's French play Ubu roi (Ubu the King). Both the mood and dramaturgy of absurdity are quite versible in this work though the world of literature did not pay enough attention to it. But it went on developing like a growing cancer. Even though the 'movement of absurdity' emerged in after the World War II as a revolt against traditional culture and literature, it had its roots in and was proceeded by many literary movements and individual writings. In the first half of the

19th century we see Balzac (1799 to 1850) depicting French society with utmost realism giving great attention to the exigencies of everyday life. Then comes Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher who developed existential phenomenology and asked such philosophical questions as: what is it to be? What kind of “being” human beings are? The man was intelligent but with a sceptic mind and wanted to answer these and other such questions on the mere strength of his philosophical understanding without the help of any divine thought. Sure enough, his efforts could not help him to reach any final solution, though his thought could create ripples in the contemporary literary atmosphere. Still the waves of ‘absurdity’ were too low to be felt by common masses. But the ‘trend of absurdity’ continued and raised its lead in the form of such literary movements as Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Existentialism. M.H Abrams and G.G Harpham agree that, “The literature has its roots also in the movements of Expressionism and Surrealism, as well as in the fiction, written in the 1920’s of Franz Kafka². This great thinker expresses his views in his books like ‘The Trial’ and ‘Metamorphosis’ and presents so much unique, strange and unheard of about the world and its ways, consciously or unconsciously portraying its absurdity. Kafka is included with expressionist writers and according to M.H.Abrams and G.G Harpham, “Expressionist writers of prose narratives (most eminently Franz Kafka) abandoned standard modes of characterization and plot for symbolic figures involved in an obsessive world of nightmarish events”³. These small streams of individual thought gained momentum and gave rise to different literary movements. Expressionism was one of these early movements in literature and other arts which originated in Germany and was at its peak between 1910 and 1925- that is started before the World War I, continued during and after it. This movement had not a sudden start but had precursors such artists and writers who had in their own different ways departed from the real descriptions of life and the world, rather representing it in a distorted form and shape. Among the literary precursors of expressionism were such giants as the “French poets Charles Bandelaire and Arthur Rimband, the Russian Novelist Dostoevsky, the German philosopher Nietzsche and the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg”⁴. Even though expressionism was not a well defined movement, it can safely be assumed that its basic aim was a revolt against the artistic and literary tradition of realism in subject matter as well as in style. Such an artist or writer invariably, undertakes to express his/her tensely emotional vision of human existence and its social surroundings. These writers thought the industrial world with all its technological progress disintegrating into class and felt themselves involved in an obsessive world of nightmarish events. Their dramatists often represented anonymous human types instead of individual characters and replaced plot with episodic emotional states. The dialogue was broken into exclamatory sentences and phrases. They employed masks and the stage sets were sprawling. With all their individual differences, all of them represented a sterile and frightening world in their plays. As against expressionism, surrealism was launched as a concrete artistic movement in France by Andre Breton when he wrote his book “Manifesto on Surrealism” (1924). This movement was preceded by a brief movement called as ‘Dadaism’ which had itself emerged as a reaction to the destructiveness of the first World War. Its main objective had been to destroy the values of the modern bourgeois society along with its art and literature that it had fostered. Surrealism inherited many traits of Dadaism and its expressed aim was a revolt against all restraints on free creativity and free thought. It discarded logical reasoning, long established morality and all other social and aristocratic conventions and norms. Surrealism submitted itself to automatic writing – writing delivered by the promptings of the unconscious mind by exploiting the material of dreams of the states of mind between sleep and waking and of drug-induced hallucinations. This revolutionary movement often joined hands with one or another social or political movement. The effects of Surrealism extended far beyond the small group of its followers and its influence can be found on many modern writers of prose and verse who have broken with conventional modes of experiment with broken syntax, dreamlike and nightmarish sequences and the maxing of shocking and bizarre images. It is to this effect that we find enough of ‘black humour’ in the novels of Henry

Miller. This all comes to the development of the 'Theatre of Absurd' of the modern times while many critics fully agree that the mode of most 'Absurdist' plays is tragicomedy and trace its roots back to the age of Shakespeare. Even the great critic Esslin cites William Shakespeare as an influence on this aspect of the 'absurd drama'. In a unique way, Nell, a character in Samuel Beckett's 'End Game' wants to convey the significance of tragicomedy in 'absurd literature' to us saying, "nothing is funnier than unhappiness it is the most comical thing in the world"⁵. Esslin himself admits that the label 'Theatre of the absurd' covers a wide variety of playwrights with differing styles; they do have some common stylistic precursors. William Shakespeare is cited by Esslin to show his influence on Ionesco's *Macbett* and Tom Stoppard's *'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead'*. According to F. Durrenmatt, comedy alone is suitable for us and we can achieve the tragic out of comedy, indeed many of Shakespeare's tragedies are already really comedies out of which the tragic arises. It seems Mr. Esslin has taken the discussion too far. The great critic, Kenneth Tynan thinks that Esslin's survey of tracing the precursors of the absurd is noteworthy but at the same time says, "but when Mr. Esslin ropes in Shakespeare, Goethe and Ibsen as herbingers of the Absurd, one begins to feel that the whole history of dramatic literature has been nothing but a prelude to the glorious emergence of Beckett and Ionesco"⁶. Without going further into the past details of 'Absurdism' we better scale its heights which this form of literature has achieved during the modern times. It has widened its field and established its place as a distinct form of literature. However the existential philosophy of such men of letters as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus gave final shape and structure to the 'literature of the absurd' more especially to its content, even though there was apparently a great love-hate relationship between these philosophers and the absurdist playwrights. The movement of 'absurdism' had a sudden emergence after the horrors of World War II as a rebellion against beliefs and values in traditional culture and literature..... the assumptions that human beings are fairly rational creatures..... that they are part of an ordered social structure and they may be capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat"⁷. Simultaneously, men like Camus and Sartre, having got disillusioned with the war-weary World gave vent to their anguished philosophical utterings, thinking in the same terms in which the 'absurdist' did. These philosophers viewed a "human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe; to conceive the human world as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning; and to represent human life in its fruitless search for purpose and significance, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came towards the nothingness where it must end – as an existence which is both anguished and absurd"⁸. The term 'absurd' was coined by Martin Esslin in the first edition of his book *'The Theatre of the Absurd'* published in 1961. The term had been used by Albert Camus in his philosophical work *'The Myth of Sisyphus'*. The work gives us the account of the tragedy of Sisyphus (or Ulysses) who was condemned forever to roll uphill a marble block which always rolled down again and again on reaching the top of the hill. Camus felt that such a futility was the fate of all human beings. Camus was often labelled existentialist though he frequently refuted this label. Many of the absurdist were contemporaries of Sartre, but few absurdist were really committed to his way of existentialism as expressed by him in his *'Being and Nothingness'*. Sartre praised Genet's plays because, to a great extent, these plays expressed his own views. The war had touched his own nerves bitterly and he was forced to cry hopelessly still all these playwrights did not see eye to eye with him. Ionesco, however, hated Sartre bitterly⁹. He accused Sartre of supporting communism but ignoring its atrocities. Accepting that the human life is a 'futile passion' he, nevertheless, called his existentialism as a form of humanism. Moreover, he emphasized human freedom, choice and responsibility. Sartre focuses on the two dilemmas faced by free individuals..... the dilemma of choice faced by them and the dilemma of acting responsibly in an indifferent world. In his statement "man is condemned to be free", Sartre reminds us of the responsibility that accompanies human decisions. The world War II had pressed hard 'The Absurdist' as well as the 'Existential philosophers'. The both got disillusioned and came to realize the emptiness of the human world. In

retaliation to Ionesco's criticism, Sartre criticized his ideas that he had put in his book 'Rhinoceros'. According to Rosette C. Lamont, "Sartre's criticism highlights a primary difference between the Theatre of the Absurd and Existentialism. The Theatre of the absurd shows the failure of man without recommending a solution"¹⁰. Ionesco felt that Sartre and Camus thought out the themes which they did not express in a far more vital contemporary fashion. He said in an interview with Claude Bonnefoy, "I have the feeling that these writers---- who are serious and important – were talking of absurdity and death, but they never really lived these themes that all this was not deeply inscribed in their language. With them it was still rhetoric, eloquence; with Arthur Adamov and Beckett it really is a very naked reality that is conveyed through the apparent dislocation of language"¹¹. Beckett's own relationship with Sartre was complicated and 'he generally found the writing style of Sartre and Heidegger to be too philosophical and he considered himself 'not a philosopher'"¹². However, it is safe to say that the war-weary world had shaken the nerves of all thinking men, whether 'Absurdist' or 'Sartre- minded philosophers' and everyone gave expression to his feelings as per his own bent of mind either using philosophical expressions or simply 'absurd' outbursts. The Existentialism and 'Absurdism' got so mixed up that it was difficult for great critics even to distinguish and disentangle one from the other. The 'Theatre of the Absurd' movement was originally a Paris-based movement and such Absurdist, as Genet, Tardieu and Boris Vian were born in France. Many of them were elsewhere but came to live in France and wrote in French. Beckett came from Ireland, Eugene Ionesco from Romania, Adamov from Russia and Fernando Arrabal from Spain. Many writers of other countries got influenced by this Paris-based movement. In England some of whom Esslin considered practitioners of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' include, Pinter, Stoppard, Simpson, Saunders and David Campton. In the United States of America we find such people as Albee, Sam Shepard and Jack Gelber included in this category. In Germany Peter Weiss, Wolfgang Hildesheimer and Gunter Grass come fall under this category. In India Mohit Chattopadhyay and Mahesh Elkunchwar have been labelled absurdist. Under the same category are placed Tawfiq-ul- Hakim from Egypt and Hanoch Levin from Israel. In the same way we find such people in Spain, Portugal and other countries. In any way Genet, Beckett, Albee, Arrabal Stoppard and Pinter are considered the topmost 'Absurdist' of the modern world. The absurdist think the world empty, hostile, incomprehensible, meaningless, ever-changing and in no way dependable. Esslin is of the view that "Absurdism is the devaluation of ideals, purity and purpose and the viewer of an absurdist drama has to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors"¹³. Esslin goes further to say that, "while the world is being shown as complex, harsh and absurd and as difficult to interpret as reality itself, the audience is yet spurred on to attempt their own interpretation, to wonder what it is all about. In that sense they are being invited to school their critical faculties, to train themselves in adjusting to reality"¹⁴. These playwrights discard all the conventional standards by which drama has been judged over the centuries. Their plays are not structurally well made with a beginning, a middle and a desirable ending. These plays start arbitrarily and end arbitrarily, thus reflecting the irrational nature of life. These 'absurdist' express the senselessness of life by abandoning rational devices. They do not see any possibility for the solution of problems they preset in their plays. Stage-setting is generally austere in case of these playwrights quite in time with what they want to present. Their protagonists are not kings, heroes and princes but common men and even tramps. The beginning of the 20th century had given great push to scientific development but bringing in its way the development of war-weapons also. All this had changed the world into a horrible place where religion had lost its grip. All this resulted in a profound sense of meaningless and rootlessness in life. This led to a loss of faith in a coherent and cohesive universe. This caused the breakdown of communication and the inability of language to express the illogical human situations. Thus we find the language of the absurd just a meaningless pattern what happens on the stage is not expressed by the language used by the actors and often their doings and utterings are contradictory. The language of the protagonists is inter-related with the stage-setting and their very nature. These absurdist also make use of such non-

verbal devices as gestures, mime, music-hall cross talk and elements of circus as there is no coherent story in such plays, there is no coherent plot too found in them. 'Waiting for Godot' did not bear any subtitle when it was in French, but when Beckett translated the play himself into English, he gave it the subtitle: "A Tragicomedy in Two Acts". Samuel Johnson defining tragicomedy as a 'drama compounded of merry and serious events' praises Shakespeare for his powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind, but in one composition. The Absurdists mix the elements of tragic and comic so effectively that these elements interpenetrate within the same character in such a way that the boundary between the two in a composition is blurred. In Styan's view such an inter-mingling of tragicomedy helps the 'Absurdists' to project their conception of the human life and at the same time the audience, "is treated to the absurdity of human life inoculated with laughter". Beckett does not lack behind in this art and we see him at his best in his play 'Waiting for Godot'. All has to agree with Styan when he says, "So you will see that in 'Waiting for Godot', Beckett has filtered the nightmare of human existence through the screen of laughter"¹⁵. To this end, Beckett uses such theatrical devices as mime, music-hall cross talk and varying pace and rhythm of dialogue simply to give cheerfulness to the world of weariness and despair, which the tramps in his play, 'Waiting for Godot' inhabit. 'Waiting for Godot' was a new trend against conventional dramaturgy and no one had seen run or heard anything like it before. It was a new dramatic experience for the audience too and its distinct aspects like austere stage-setting, its unique protagonists, linguistic devices and other non-verbal acts, its static nature and lack of coherent story and a well-knit plot made it an avant garde play. In 'Waiting for Godot' the stage is, even compared to some of his own plays, much barer: a country side road, a raised mound of earth and a bare tree, probably a weeping willow. This setting is in tune with the protagonist's tragic situation rather the whole tragic world which these protagonists of the play represent. These protagonists do not belong any class of kings, princes and heroes but they are common people and they seem quite fit for this setting. All this creates proper ambience for the theme which the play is assumed to convey. As for the protagonists themselves, Beckett almost gives us nothing about them. All the four characters are rootless having no genealogy at all. At the most, we can understand that Vladimir is Russian, Estragon is French, Lucky is English and Pozzo is Italian. Theme of Beckett's play is not an individual's problem, not a single nation's problem but the whole wide modern world is confronted by this problem. In 'Waiting for Godot' every action and every situation is looked up as a metaphor for human situation at its most 'absurd'. Like other absurdist, Beckett thought human existence absurd as, all of us are born without asking for our birth and die without seeking for death, both ways leaving us helpless physically as well as metaphysically. Beckett totally rejects the form and content of the conventional theatrical plays. His two main characters in this plays are Vladimir and Estragon, the former asserting that they have an appointment with a mysterious figure, Godot and they are waiting under a leafless tree to fulfill this appointment. They do not know what Godot looks like or what is the actual place or time of their meeting. They have a faint hope that he will in some way change their lives for better. In 'Waiting for Godot' Godot could be taken for anything or nothing Vladimir's and Estragon's journey through time scarcely gives us any hope. The situation of Sisyphus, described by Albert Camus in his 'The Myth of Sisyphus' forever rolling a stone up a hill, forever aware that it will never reach the top, is a perfect metaphor for Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot' too. It is not the case of Vladimir and Estragon only. Every human action symbolises futility of human effort on earth. This was Beckett's firm belief of the world and its ways and he shaped the form as well as content of 'Waiting for Godot' according to this conception. As in his other plays, Beckett leaves us with a vague sense of uncertainty about the theme of Godot. He is vague and mysterious about things and situations. He avoids exact definitions. In Godot practically nothing happens and so no development is to be found in this play. Vladimir and Estragon idle away their time waiting for Godot who never returns. A local landowner called Pozzo along with his half-carry slave Lucky, arrives there. Pozzo eats a meal there and even grants the chicken bones to them which his servant has rejected. Besides,

Pozzo makes Lucky dance and think aloud for their entertainment. Soon a boy comes with the news that 'Godgot won't come this evening but surely tomorrow'. The two men think of suicide by hanging themselves from the tree but they fail to do so. They now want to leave the place but they do not move at all. The next act is almost identical with the first act, except that the bare tree has put forth a few leaves. Here again we meet Pozzo and Lucky but in their changed roles. Pozzo has gone blind and Lucky dumb. Thus, the non action of futile waiting by the two chief characters is enacted twice. These characters are rather thrown back into non action and their waiting shows their boredom and hopelessness. In broader sense all this indicates triviality of all human activities and brings to our minds that very existence of man forms the base of his/her sufferings. Human suffering is inseparable from human condition and it always remains unmitigated. In Act II the blind Pozzo falls down and can not get up. So he cries for help when Vladimir suddenly realizes the human significance of the situation and says, "to all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help ringing in our ears! But at this place, at that movement of time, all mankind is us whether we like it or not"¹⁶. In the very first act, we see Lucky dancing and thinking aloud. Lucky gives us a long incoherent speech which is at the same time impressive and meaningful. In one sentence Lucky's trade seems to be: in spite of the existence of a loving God, man, for all his advances and progress is seen to be dwindling and pinning.

Towards the end of the second Act Pozzo calls upon Lucky to move on and Vladimir asks Lucky to sing or to recite before leaving. Pozzo says that Lucky is dumb and can not do so. Vladimir was surprised to learn it and asks Pozzo when Lucky became dumb. This reference to time pinches Pozzo and he says, "when one day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, he went dumb, one day, I went blind, one day we will go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?. They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it is night once more"¹⁷. We better not ask what this play or that play of Beckett is intended to mean. When asked what Godgot represented, Beckett answered quite simply, "if I knew, I would have said so in the play". It will be safe to say that we should not look for a story in his plays nor expect any specific message from this playwright. 'Waiting for Godgot' begins and ends with two men waiting for nightfall or for Godgot to come. About the action of the play we can only say that time moves imperceptibly. One of his characters gives us the true nature of the action of the play when he bitterly says, "Nothing happen, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful". Vladimir and Estragon seek ways to pass the time and avoid boredom. They tell stories, sing songs, play verbal games and do physical exercises. We feel the very essence of their boredom when Estragon says to Vladimir, "we always find something, to give us the impression we exist". The very first words of 'Waiting for Godgot' not only fit the setting of the play but also present the theme of it.

Estragon: Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: I'm beginning to come round to that opinion.

In the above quoted lines Estragon is only referring to his boots but it is clear enough for us to see that here Beckett is vaguely pointing to the motive of the play. A little later Vladimir repeats the phrase twice, first referring to his hat, then to the uselessness of mirth. Both these characters are essentially talking about their lives in face of hopelessness 'The suffering of being' is the main concern of this play. It is a great obsession for them to pass the time. When Pozzo and Lucky go off the following conversation takes place between the two:

Vladimir: That passed the time

Estragon: It would have passed in any care

Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly

It is not certain in what sense or what way 'Godgot' stands for God but the two tramps are sure that if Godgot comes, he may bring a change in their lives and the last few lines of the play suggest salvation.

Vladmir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow unless Godgot comes

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladmir: We'll be saved

But we need not lose hope while reading such an absurdist play as Beckett's 'Waiting for Godgot'. The Experts Committee of Indira Gandhi National Open University is of the opinion that "one must ask whether the writer of the absurdist play does believe in the total meaninglessness of life and human existence. If the author were totally convinced of the meaninglessness of life, why should he go on living?. Also, would not it be pointless to go on writing about the act of living?. The mere fact of writing is an expression of meaning by imposing some kind of an order or value on experience". In this way an absurdist writer attempts to impose an order on disorder.

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