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Theatre of the Absurd and *King Lear*: An Exploration of Artistic and Aesthetic Similitude

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For centuries Shakespeare's magnum-opus *King Lear* has been universally interpreted and critiqued from varied perspectives – as an implicitly Christian play (despite its pagan milieu); as a saga of man's inordinate suffering; as a heroic tale of Lear's ordeal and agony; as a drama about lust for power and filial ingratitude; and as a "parable of sin, sacrifice and redemption" (Ryan 1). The twentieth century, however, saw the emergence of new schools of critical thought which attempted to re-read the play from the view points of Marxism, Post-colonialism, Feminism etc. In 1964, a Polish-American scholar and critic Jan Kott startled the theatre critics by exploring the existential angle in this epic tragedy, and establishing an analogy between Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Absurd playwright Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*. In his groundbreaking essay 'Shakespeare, or Endgame,' Kott brought out the essential absurdity of human condition depicted in both the works. This paper is an attempt to look beyond Kott's study, and trace artistic and aesthetic similarities between the playwrights of this school such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Edward Albee and Harold Pinter, and the genius of Shakespeare in afore-mentioned play.

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A careful study of *King Lear* reveals that the picture of human predicament and ontological angst painted by Shakespeare is no different from the one highlighted by the Absurd dramatists. The causes of suffering – personal, social or political - may vary, but the human situation visualized by Shakespeare is as arbitrary, hollow and capricious as depicted by the Absurd playwrights. *King Lear* is primarily a tragic tale of human condition and parent-child divide narrated through twin plots - of Lear and his daughters, and of Gloucester and his sons, blended inextricably together so as to reinforce the universal validity of the play's theme. Apparently, through these twin tales he dramatizes the plight of those parents who become the victims of their own absurd decisions and suffer a tragic fate helplessly. However, at a deeper level, the acute realization of their hopeless situation manifests the existential belief of philosophers like Nietzsche, Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre - that man is entangled in the mesh of an absurd world divested of any moral order or meaning. In this inhospitable and grotesque situation, he has no option but to submit to his fate.

Gloucester's lament in *King Lear* against an unkind fate, "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods/ They kill us for their sport" (IV. i. 35-36) is precisely the existential concern that underlies most absurd plays. Lear, just like Gloucester, sets into motion absurdities that chart and shape his own tragic journey. In fact, his own rash actions, and subsequent suffering at the hands of his ruthless daughters, his initial unbridled anger followed by disarming humility, inordinate pride in power and subsequent abject penury, his spiritual and psychological meditations during bouts of madness, and his final submission to the providential designs - all signify a penetrating study of man's place in the cosmic picture. The grandeur of Lear's struggle in the face of circumstances he has no control over emerges as his redeeming feature like that of Sisyphus, who too finds redemption in his effort and suffering. Hailing Shakespeare's vision of man's predicament, Martin Esslin observes, "There is in Shakespeare a very strong sense of the futility and absurdity of the human condition" (Esslin 234). Unfulfilled desires and shattered hopes mark Lear's character as much as they do in absurd heroes such as Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Stanley Webber in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Jerry in Albee's *The Zoo Story*, Berenger in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and others who personify the archetypal human predicament.

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Absurd drama, by its very nature, subverts logic. It deflates the normal and celebrates the unexpected. Being anti-rationalist, it exhibits how rational thought, just like language, defies meaning, while nonsense offers more liberty for an exploration of the infinite and indescribable. Hence, in such plays, not only actions, but also motives behind them are incomprehensible. In *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo, the sadist master of dehumanized Lucky in the first act, is suddenly struck blind while Lucky becomes dumb in the second act. Similarly, in *Rhinoceros*, all the characters turn into rhinos one after the other, while in *The Birthday Party*, two strangers appear from nowhere to terrorize and dehumanize Stanley. Likewise, in *King Lear*, several scenes can be termed absurd such as Gloucester's blinding, his 'suicide' and Cordelia's death. In fact, even the madness of Shakespeare's characters - real and feigned - may also be included in the same category. All these absurdities or irrationalities in *King Lear* – thematic or structural - called "improbabilities" by A. C. Bradley, "grotesque" by G. Wilson Knight and "incongruities" by Jan Kott, point to a larger irrationality in the world which cannot be explained in logical terms. In its first scene, for instance, the very idea of love test appears absurd especially when, as revealed in the opening lines of the play, Lear has already settled the division of his kingdom and only needs to make it public.

It is absurd of Lear to think that love can be quantified and measured in words. Taken in absolutely by the hyperbolic claims of Goneril and Reagan, Lear expects something greater and more profound from his dearest daughter. But Cordelia's refusal to comply challenges his pride and earns her banishment from his life and kingdom. The irrationality of Lear's action matches that of his unbridled anger, and he lays down the foundation of his own ruin. A father's desire to know the depth of his children's love for him is quite natural, rather justified, but to judge its strength on the basis of a public proclamation by the child can certainly be called absurd and abstruse.

Absurdity, as a rule, manifests the comical while tragedy, in Aristotelian terms, the sublime. A craftsman of stature binds the two deftly so as to arouse in his audience both, a sense of relief and intense emotions. This blending of the dichotomous elements of comedy and tragedy like that of day and night, success and failure, laugh and tear, is an integral feature of the Absurd theatre employed to showcase the inherent tragi-comedy of man's life. The apparently comic antics of Vladimir and Estragon during their hopeless wait for Godot reflect the larger

tragic picture of man's futile efforts to wriggle out of the vacuity, monotony and meaninglessness of his life. Their comical gestures and cheap jokes are but a foil for a piercing sense of worthlessness that haunts them. Despite its overt comicality, the failure of their repeated attempts to commit suicide is a poignant comment on man's hapless situation.

Similarly, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare binds levity and seriousness in such a way as to enhance its tragic impact. Edgar's feigned madness, Gloucester's supposed suicide and the fool's witty and humorous comments - all these are craftily used by Shakespeare as a foil to project his tragic theme of filial ingratitude and the collapse of parent-child relationship. Wrapped in humour, the agony of the characters is projected more starkly. G. Wilson Knight in his noted essay '*King Lear* and the Comedy of the Grotesque' avers that "the core of *King Lear* is an indignity, an incongruity. In no tragedy of Shakespeare do incidents and dialogue so recklessly and miraculously walk the tightrope of our pity over the depths of bathos and absurdity" (Kermode 127). Shakespeare creates caustic humour through a deft usage of abrupt juxtapositions as seen in the following speech:

LEAR. But thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter -
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,
A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle
In my corrupted blood. But I'll not chide thee;
Let shame come when it will, I do not call it.
I do not bid the thunder-bearer shoot,
Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove.
Mend thou when thou canst; be better at thy leisure.
I can be patient; (King Lear, II. iv. 219-228)

The humour hidden in these lines is obviously dark, and serves to hide Lear's misery and sense of defeat. Later, in his encounter with Edgar, disguised as a mad man, Lear sees his own reflection in the latter's lunacy. Moved visibly by his plight, he asks the younger man innocently, "Didst thou give all to your daughters? And art/ thou come to this? (III. iv. 48-49). Brimming with pity for the poor Tom, Lear wonders,

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LEAR. What, has his daughters brought him to this pass?

Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give them all?

FOOL. Nay, he reserved a blanket; else we had been all shamed. (III. iv. 62-64)

Evidently, it is only the Fool who perceives the absurdities in his master's behaviour clearly and does not hesitate from exposing the bitter and disturbing truths that lie hidden beneath Lear's strange actions and words.

LEAR. Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL. All thy other titles thou has given away; that

thou wast born with. (I. iv. 149-150)

Later, Shakespeare once again highlights Lear's agony subtly by hiding it behind the veneer of an incongruous and comic behaviour when he enters the scene fantastically studded with wild flowers. Such apparent comicality brings tears to our eyes, for it is also simultaneously, exquisitely pathetic. Anne Paulucci in her essay "Shakespeare and the Genius of the Absurd" observes very aptly: "Realism holds a smooth mirror up to nature which distorts and exaggerates familiar things in order to shock us into a new evaluation of experience. The crazy mirror of the Absurd breaks up familiar pattern and forces us to accept a new dimension and a new type of communication" (*Comparative Drama* 232).

The Absurd playwrights were iconoclasts who shunned tradition to embrace novelty. They openly experimented not only with the structural designs of their plays but also with characterization. The emergence of the anti-hero as the protagonist - a de-glamorized, piteous and uninspiring person - is generally associated with this school of drama. Devoid of even the elementary virtues of an average man, he is a non-achiever, a manifestation of failure and misfortune. Just like Sisyphus, all his efforts are futile, and his existence absurd, directionless and meaningless. Deprived of any biographical or social moorings, he merely drifts on the tide of unfavourable time. Estragon and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, Stanley Webber in *The Birthday Party* and Mrs. and Mr. Smith in *The Chairs*, Peter in *The Zoo Story*—all face the unequal challenge of a meaningless existence and fail like Sisyphus. However, it would be a fallacy to attribute the creation of the anti-hero entirely to the Absurd playwrights, for Shakespeare had conceived and perfected in it in the portrayal of Lear. In this regard, the

beleaguered protagonists of the Absurd plays such as Vladimir, Estragon, Webber, Peter and others are actually emulations of Shakespeare's creative genius.

Since the paramount concern of the Absurd drama is to highlight the essential meaninglessness of man's existence, and its solicitude pertains to men of no particular nationality, religion, creed or region, the identities of their characters are blurred, vague and ambiguous. This absence of biographical, historical and social references lends the protagonists in Absurd Theatre a crisis of identity. No wonder, they are portrayed as tramps, vagabonds, beggars and fugitives – all surviving on the fringes of the society. Through them, the playwrights aim at exposing the horror, monotony and meaninglessness of the contemporary man reeling under the nihilistic impact of the World War II. However, in this endeavour too, they seem to have been inspired by Shakespeare. *King Lear* presents a haunting image of a world where familial values have been subverted, filial piety rejected, moral order corrupted and all relationships, defiled. Evidently “the absolute has ceased to exist. It has been replaced by the absurdity of human condition” (Kott 137). Kott further asserts that in such a world, where “established values have been overthrown, and there is no appeal, to God, Nature, or History, from the tortures inflicted by the cruel world, the clown becomes the central figure in the theatre” (Qtd. in Kermode 270). Hence, Lear, divested of all that distinguishes him as a King, or as a man - his titles, social status, dignity, and even senses – is no better than a clown.

A similar stripping of identity is visible in Edgar also. Beaten by the unkind fate, he deliberately embraces anonymity by feigning to be a mad beggar. In these guises, forced or self-willed, both Lear and Edgar remind us of Vladimir and Estragon, who, in their utter lack of individuality, represent every man. Jan Kott's comment in his noted essay “King Lear, or Endgame” that “Names are not needed any more. Everyone is just a shadow of himself, just a man” (Qtd. in Kermode 280) seems aptly applicable in the context of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* wherein Stanley Webber is terrorized into shedding his own identity. He too, is unmanned, diminished to a speck by the agents of a harsh and inhospitable world.

As a corollary to the loss of identity is the effacement of any geographical specificity of the locale in the play. Most absurd plays are marked by a sense of placelessness. Just like the vague details of “A country road. A tree. Evening.” which open Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, or “The living-room of a house in a seaside town” that start Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, the

opening lines of *King Lear* do not offer any specific geographical site of action. The location of the first scene is left to the reader's imagination as its details are vague, scanty and bewildering. In fact, Shakespeare does not offer any recognizable clues to the specific locations of Lear's palace in Britain. This lack of identification of place serves to enhance its universality, for nowhere may be interpreted as representing everywhere. According to Irving Ribner "Lear's world becomes the entire world and it becomes clear that Lear's fate may be any man's fate" (Qtd. in Halio, 4).

An essential concomitant of the absurdity of human situation is his absolute failure to communicate with his fellow beings which further exacerbates his sense of alienation. As language deteriorates into clichés, meaningless questions, senseless answers, illogical dialogues and ambiguous references, there exists an utter collapse of any meaningful communication. The absurd plays abound in long pauses, broken sentences, repetitions and monosyllabic responses – all reflecting, by default, the fragmented and fluctuating minds of characters, and also the inability of language to express the essence of human experience.

ESTRAGON. Adieu.

VLADIMIR. Adieu. And thank you.

ESTRAGON. Thank you.

VLADIMIR. Not at all.

ESTRAGON. Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR. No, no.

ESTRAGON. Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR. No, no. (Silence)

(*Waiting for Godot*, Act I)

Evidently, this meaningless exchange mirrors a crisis in communication as also the inability of man to connect. Such a breakdown of language akin to the one we see in Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco and others marks certain scenes in *King Lear* too. According to Richard Fly, Shakespeare's language "exposes moments of extreme suffering and horror. The breakdown of language is only a step in the chaos and disintegration that Shakespeare depicts in the play" (Fly 75). The following exchange of dialogue between Lear and Kent comes very close to the disoriented, disorderly and fragmented exchange that characterizes the absurd plays.

KENT. It is both, he and she, your son and daughter.

LEAR. No.

KENT. Yes.

LEAR. No, I say.

KENT. I say, yea.

LEAR. No, no, they would not.

KENT. Yes, they have.

LEAR. By Jupiter, I swear, no!

KENT. By Juno, I swear, ay! (II. iii. 12-22)

Similarly, in the opening scene, Goneril and Regan's pronouncements of their love for their father is nothing but an empty rhetoric shorn of all semantic worth. Terry Eagleton terms their proclamations of love as mere "linguistic inflation," bombastic in delivery, but hollow in reality. Goneril's speech is devoid of value "not because it transcends meaning but because it has none" (Qtd. in Ryan 84). In fact, Goneril uses language only to suggest its utter inadequacy.

GONERIL. Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter.

Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty;

Beyond what can be valued rich or rare,

No less than life with grace, health, beauty, honour;

As much as child e'er loved or father found:

A love that ,makes breath poor, and speech unable.

Beyond all manner of 'so much' I love you. (I. i. 54-60)

Contrarily, Cordelia's insistence on saying "Nothing" to match her sisters' professions of love for Lear, clearly reinforces the unreliability of words in expressing human emotions or intentions. She prefers to "Love, and be silent" for she recognizes the vacuity of words and the power of silence. Since the meaning of both, life and words is elusive, undependable and obstructive, says Harold Pinter, "the speech we hear is an indictment of what we don't hear" (Qtd. in Rusinko 51). Creation of power out of words and ideas is what the art of writing is all about, but the absurd writers have perfected the skill of divesting language of all semantic value.

Since the Theatre of the Absurd flourished under the shadow of the bloody World War, instances of violence and cruelty, whether direct, disguised or symbolized, are ubiquitous in it. In fact, they constitute an enveloping milieu, a sort of cosmic terror that prevents the characters from understanding and communicating with each other. In *Waiting for Godot*, abject brutality dominates the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky as we see the former hurling abuses and lashes at the poor servant. Violence, physical or mental, marks Pinter's *The Birthday Party* as much as it does Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and other absurd plays. Such an atmosphere of despair and violence that includes bouts of rage, assaults, crimes and suicides dominate not only absurd plays but also *King Lear* which, too, is replete with violence manifested in varied forms – verbal, emotional as well as physical. Gloucester is openly spurned, gruesomely mutilated. Similarly, enraged by the unkind, callous and insensitive treatment meted out to him, Lear heaps virulent curses upon his ungrateful daughters. We also witness horribly bloody scenes like those of Gloucester's blinding, violent deaths of Goneril and Regan, and the senseless execution of Cordelia on the stage. Perhaps Shakespeare, like William Golding, realized that beastliness is innate in man, and is a ubiquitously found human trait that can manifest itself in different ways. In *King Lear* it raises its head in the form of an inordinate lust for power as personified in Lear's elder daughters. Lear's terrible speeches spewing venom against them not only expose their brutality towards him but also highlight the agony, horror and fury that has wrecked his heart.

Theatre critics regard Absurd theatre as a product of twentieth century theatre which began with the staging of Alfred Fry's *Ubu Roi* in 1896, and scaled the zenith of its creativity and popularity in the 1950s. However, in reality, its seeds lay in the archaic and para-theatrical forms of miming and clowning that originated as 'mimus' in Greece and Rome, Commedia dell' arte in Italy and other forms of pre-verbal theatres like the pantomime. Absurd playwrights borrowed generously from these traditional forms to showcase the theme of ceaseless struggle of man in an inhospitable world. But they are certainly not the first or the only ones to interpret reality in terms that thwart comprehension. Centuries ago, Shakespeare practised the use of conventional theatrical forms to represent the irrational and the absurd. His masterly figures of clowns or fools such as Falstaff, Caliban, Fool and others, later inspired cine-characters like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Jan Kott, in his book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, elaborates Shakespeare's achievement in this field, and draws a parallel between the suicide scene in *King Lear* wherein blind Gloucester wishes to throw himself into the sea from over the

cliff of Dover, and a mime. He observes, “The blind Gloucester who has climbed a non-existent height and fallen over on flat boards, is a clown. A philosophical buffoonery of the sort found in modern theatre has been performed” (Qtd. in Kermode, 281).

Thus, it can be seen that the common features between *King Lear* and the Absurd plays extend beyond the thematic concern with the meaningless existence of mankind in an uncompromising world. The atmosphere of alienation, hopelessness, failure of identity and purposelessness in the face of formless opposition which pervades the plays of Pirandello, Ionesco, Beckett, Albee and Pinter – all seem inspired from *King Lear*, perhaps Shakespeare’s finest existentialist tragedy. They share with his dramatic art such characteristics as bind them in a common thread of creative uniqueness. The very fact that this tragedy written by the Bard in the 16th century foreshadows most of the features that figure prominently in the Theatre of the Absurd, reflects how much the playwrights of this school owe to Shakespeare in the art of dramaturgy. It is perhaps his pre-emption of the thematic concerns and techniques of the twentieth century dramatists which inspired Jan Kott to call Shakespeare, our contemporary. Eugene Ionesco’s glowing tribute to the master craftsman which appeared in the *New York Times* on 15 June, 1988: “Shakespeare is the King of the Theatre of the Absurd” certainly testifies the same.

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