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## An Absurd Drama - Reflections of the Situation Existing in the Society

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper discusses the absurd drama characteristics and how it is distinguished to other forms of drama. In this paper absurd theme with existential touch is interpreted. It is also analysed the significance nature of this drama in respect of contemporary drama. The main objective of this paper is to argue the specific purpose of absurd drama performance. How drama helps individuals in orienting their thoughts and better prepared to face the world. this paper emphasis on the basic absurdity of the human condition, on the bankruptcy of all closed systems of the thought that claim to provide a total explanation of reality and reflections of the situation existing in the society.*

**Keywords:** *Absurd drama, existential, performance, human condition, explanation of reality, situation, society.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The absurd drama, as a genre, is distinguished from others due to its language and theme rather than by any other single quality. 'Absurd drama' has certain characteristics like the usage of typical language. A characteristic feature of a dialogue sequence in an absurd drama is in its

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incongruous relationship between what is said and what is implied. This form of drama was studied by many investigators, but studies based on Absurd theme with existential touch are rare.

Marjorie Boulton defined thus: “A true play is three dimensional; it is literature that walks and talks before our eyes”<sup>1</sup>. So drama is enacted on stage, where a story is narrated by means of dialogue and action with accompanying gestures, costumes and scenery as in real life. This is different from an improvised dramatic performance, in which a story is unfolded by means of dialogue. But an improvised version, the mime drama was famous in Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a crowd puller. This type of drama without costume or scenery, as in real life, seems to be the representative of realistic drama. As Mrs. Cohn puts it, his “drama is concentrated down to man acting”.

In Greek, ‘theatre’ means a place where one goes to see something, the triumphal entry of the emperors and their sport. None of these activities can be regarded as drama, but the dividing line between them and drama is very fluid. The circus where the clowns perform acrobatic feats together with little farcical scenes; the puppet theatre and shadow plays, where the actors are mere drawings; the abstract ballets, cartoon films, and mimes are also considered as drama. Hence, it is obvious that drama is something that one goes to see, when presented and organized as something to be seen. The drama is studied through each of its elements - action, direction and staging. The stage drama is stronger than opera and other forms of drama. The stage drama and media are bound to go together in the process of dramatic communication.

The drama is an imitation of the real world. The dramatic performance contains an element of reality. A wide range of entertainment is presented in the dramas. The art of theatre is concerned almost exclusively with live performance in which the action is precisely planned to create coherent and significant sense of drama.

The very nature of art form of drama is to provide enjoyment. This art form specifically contributes to the sum total of man’s tools of expression, conceptualization, thought and action. In fact, this art form conveys more than the meaning of the actual words that are spoken. Drama can operate on several levels through discursive literature, the novel, the short story and the epic poem. It is the most concrete form in which art can recreate human situations and human relationships. The drama is the mirror of nature and presents man’s situation in a touchy way that

has become attractive to an existentialist like Sartre.

The contrasted reality with a play is that, what happens in reality is irreversible, while in a play it is possible to start again from the beginning. Play is the stimulation of reality and it is a frivolous pastime. In fact it emphasizes the immense importance of play activity for the wellbeing and development of man and to gauge the gravity of human predicament under different situations. Drama also forms one of the most potent instruments to instruct the members of a society about the different social roles they have to play in their lives.

### **FARCE**

Farce is another form that describes the anxieties of people about possible lapses in behavior to which they may be exposed through temptations of various kinds like suicidal tendencies, preference for loneliness etc. The abstraction of a remote thought has become a common human reality and is presented through the thought processes, expressions and actions of characters. For example, even though there is no significance, the think-tank tries to workout plans of action for various future contingencies, as epidemics or nuclear wars, treating them in terms of likely future events. These events are translated into dramatic form, as concrete imponderable situations resulting from psychological reactions.

### **THE SERIOUS DRAMA**

The serious drama starting from the Greek tragedies to Samuel Beckett's works is concerned with the psychic condition of man. An attempt was made to theorize this condition in concrete terms. The dramatic form is the only means to show the concrete implications of abstract philosophical thought. Drama also requires plausibility, but it must be conveyed not by a narration but by actors' ability to make the audience believe in their speech, movement, thoughts and feelings. This depends on the preconceptions of the audience and the impressions that can be made on their minds.

The social problems of the last hundred years were not only aired but reflected in the works of playwrights like Ibsen, Bernard Shaw and Brecht. Many profound philosophical problems are also referred in the plays of Strindberg, Pirandello, Camus, Sartre and Beckett, but only arbitrarily.

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It is obvious that philosophical problems do find a place in the theatre. Greek Theatre with its literary emphasis has provided the Western Theatre, with a sense of continuity in stories, themes and format styles. The plays are regularly revived with discernable references to specific modern concerns. It also provides an objective way for testing human behavior.

### **THE RESPONSE OF THE AUDIENCE**

The collective experience is an important element of the impact of drama on live theatre. The respective audience can produce a concentration of thought and emotion that leads them into spiritual insight and such an experience is akin to religious feeling. It is a collaborative art, and hence the theatre depends upon the response of the audience.

Usually in response to a stage performance, some sort of a collective reaction, a consensus will often develop in an audience. A specific response was seen against the mysterious character of Nora in Ibsen's "*A Doll's House*". In a stage performance of the character Nora in this drama, her action was objected by the audience. The audience compelled her to change her attitude towards her husband and to rethink and reformulate her attitude towards marriage.

### **THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE AUDIENCE**

A ritual is also employed in drama that enhanced the consciousness of the audience. The ritual has the elements of music, dance, poetry and action. A renewal of strength in the individual results in preparing him to face the world. The manifestation of drama through clarification, communication, enlightenment and illumination is a part of the ritual drama.

The development of culture in a society is a process of constant progression. In this process the drama has developed into a spoken version, a ballet, an opera or a musical comedy. Changes in a nation's mood will be noticeably visible through drama as potent reflections of political change. This helps individuals in orienting their thoughts and better prepared to face the world.

The play can be interpreted by the actor's personality provided by the author. Every play prescribes its own style, though it is influenced by the traditions of theatre and the physical

conditions of performance. Style of the play controls the gesture, movement, tone, speech and reflexes of the stage characters.

## **VERSE DRAMA**

Drama in its verse form has failed to portray life with pettiness. But the intensity of emotion is expressed by the rich language and rhythmic flow of poetry. A drama written in a verse form may not be able to produce the true way of life of the people but refers to the distant past and the country's civilization.

The language used in verse drama is often instinctively repetitive and ridiculous. Sometimes it is like a mock verse as in satires and parodies. But the language of drama is necessarily action, despite the immense diversity of drama as a cultural activity. But a traditionally well made play provides the frame work for the drama. It forms the reference for the relationship of characters and their previous history becomes the main theme of the play. The contemporary drama makes fewer commitments of this kind. The sophistication of dramatic aspects and the levels of uncertainty introduced in the drama. Here the audience no longer questions the fundamental issues as in a conventional drama.

## **THE DRAMATIC FORMS**

The dramatic forms are associated with both music and poetry apart from the spatial unity in rhythmic diversity and the unity of pace and tone in a wide variety of visual changes on the stage. The dramatic patterns such as rising to climax, subsiding and ascending are gradually intensified and gradually toned down on the other hand in traditional drama the action is near to reality, the location and the scene. And its representation is precisely identified and the stage is made to confirm the illusion of the characters in a play.

Mainly the form and structure of a drama depend on articulation and are joined as two distinct elements. If these two elements are not properly inserted the drama becomes stale and routine. Here, the clarity of structure has become the 'sign posting' of 'the course of action' which is important for the structuring of drama. The variations of these two elements result in lessening of monotony and dangerous source of boredom.

## **THE INFIELD STYLE OF PRESENTATION OF DRAMA**

The Infield style of presentation of drama reflects the attitude to life in the classical Greek Age. The different subjects related to philosophical issues and existential problems coexisted with high degree of historical consciousness in the contemporary drama. Greek drama emphasized the interaction between the chorus and protagonist in the plays.

In a general sense the language of drama ranges between two great extremes. One is intensely theatrical and ritualistic while the other is an almost exact reproduction of real life which is commonly associated with motion pictures and television dramas.

## **NATURALISM**

Ibsen practiced naturalism to capture the whole gamut of human experience as it is the basic impulse behind the Naturalistic movement in the contemporary drama. To deal with concrete issues rather than sentiments, naturalism has tended to transform into a style and the ideas and objects have become symbols. It is quite evident that naturalism has merged with symbolism. A new generation of writers has dealt with themes about the real contemporary society. The action and dialogue appeared to sound like every day behavior and speech of the people.

Strindberg and Frank Wedekind are also 'naturalist dramatists' and both believe that an individual could experience the world as his internal world. Wedekind has experienced the world as a grotesque place and he tended towards savage creatures and dramas.

## **EXPRESSIONISM**

The major movements in the drama is expressionism which was coined at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to describe a style of painting. It reacted violently against the late 19<sup>th</sup> century 'naturalism' and 'impressionism'. These two movements were applied and represented to the theatre to protest against the then existing social order. Initially it was concerned with spirit, later with matter and typically sought to get the essence of the subject by grossly distorting outward appearance. Bertolt Brecht rejected Naturalism and Idealism of the expressionist but interestingly pursued the epic theatre.

Brecht in contradiction to the Marxist ideology postulates each epoch as having different social conditions. His epic theatre is unromantic that did not pretend that events of the play were happening and made it clear that the actors were merely demonstrating the social conditions. His theatre is anti-illusionist.

Brecht's characters were thought by many observers as an existing representative of a class in the society. The character is shown as effacement to the point of dehumanization of life in the contemporary society. Brecht has presented the circumstances that motivated the beginning of an event and emphasized the need for creative activity that helps the audience in defining actors' behavior and individual characters.

Brecht's most significant contribution to drama is the alienation effect. His actor has never been transformed on stage into a character; and was just portrayed. But by abandoning the total transformation, the actor can speak his part in a quotation.

## **PLAYWRIGHTS IN PARIS**

The post-war mood of disillusionment and skepticism was expressed by the play wrights in Paris. They shared a belief that human life was without meaning and purpose and that valid communication was no longer possible. They felt the human condition had sunk to a state of 'absurdity' the term coined by French existentialist Albert Camus. These Absurd dramatists are responsible for creating a world of uncertainty that tends towards the lyrical mode.

## **THEATRE OF CRUELTY:**

French dramatist Antonin Artaud who wrote very little in dramatic form himself, is of immense importance as a theoretician of the new anti-literary theatre and coined it "Theatre of cruelty" for his conception of "a theatre designed to shock its audience into a full awareness of the horror of human condition"<sup>5</sup> which had an impeccable influence on the contemporary theatre since the World War-II. "The Theatre of Cruelty" is based on the extreme development of gesture and sensory responses by the actors who can communicate with the audience at a profound psychological level than is possible through words.

The surrealist theatre is based on ritual and fantasy and launches an attack on the

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audiences' subconscious mind in an attempt to release deep rooted fears and anxieties and make them regard themselves and their natures without the shield of civilization. In order to shock the audience and evoke necessary response, the extremes of human nature often mad and perversion are graphically portrayed on the stage. It is an anti-literary revolt and minimizes literary significance by laying more emphasis on screams, inarticulate cries and symbolic gestures.

In a similar sense Artaud also thought that theatre is associated with physical domain of the actor. For every feeling and mental action there is a corresponding breadth that is appropriate to it. He presented the characters as live self - contradicting people with their passions, unrelated utterances and actions on the stage.

These dramatists are of the opinion that characters and action are unable to comprehend the world, in the traditional drama. The audience needed an elaborate critical vocabulary to experience the emotions at the performance. But here, the absence of language is powerful and the action of unforgettable characters is equally powerful. The words are trivial but the action has tremendous impact. These authors have employed the forms of tragicomedy to convey the vision of an exhausted civilization and a chaotic world, to the audience.

### **THE ABSURD PLAY**

The absurd play is used to conceive poetic images which gradually unfold and disclose the deep meaning. But in conventional realistic play the main emphasis is given to plot and character. In Brechtian epic play the demonstration of human behavior is stressed. In the absurd plays the effects of image and metaphor are significantly conveyed, apart from the presentation of contemporary critical vocabulary.

In absurd drama the tragedy provides no relief. The tragedy associates with the catharsis and the psychological behavior of man. The experience of tragedy, when shared with another man with deep compassion, has gained profound and lasting impression on human nature and predicament. The world produces an emotion akin to a religious feeling that has been touched by something beyond and outside our mundane every day experience which gains insight into the sublime cathartic effect of tragedy.



## **THE COMIC STAGE**

The comic view of man is an incongruous mixture of bodily instinct and rational intellect, which is ironic. Comedies give insights not into the ultimate experience of human life but to the lightest emotion associated with them. The comic insights had never affected the manner and the ways of the society in spite of the minor weaknesses in the behavior of contemporary man.

The works of Samuel Beckett, Ionesco and Pirandello belong to the same mixed genre. As Corrigan pointed out “their characters suffer from the intellectual dilemmas resulting in mental and emotional distress of the most anguished kind”<sup>6</sup>. The comic stage had to offer farce in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Serious subjects were not dealt by the dramatic clichés of Victorian melodrama. But the stereotyped themes were made the subjects, which was evident from their inner emptiness. The characters dwell amid ambiguities and equivocations. Beckett and Pirandello’s characters suffer from intellectual dilemmas resulting in mental and emotional distress of the most anguished kind. But their suffering is communicated in a satiric form.

## **THE LATEST TRENDS IN THEATRE**

The drama of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century attempted by G.B. Shaw and Brecht, illuminated human weakness and felt divine if the human tragedy is limited. Drama has wide appeal where all the arts representing life are discussed and it is a way of seeing it. It is quite obvious in the words of Samuel Johnson ‘there is no limit to the modes of composition open to the dramatists’.

Therefore a play tells its tale by the imitation of human behavior. The remoteness or nearness of that behavior to the real life of the audience can be affected by a awesomeness and laughter with detached superiority at clownish antics. The characters in alienation are important in widening or closing the aesthetic gap between the stage and the audience as the dramatist is able to control their feelings.

The arena of the stage belongs to the excitement of the circus. This was the basis for all early forms of theatre, when more narrative forms of action appeared in drama and the actors control the attention of the audience by facing them. Another theatrical form is Proscenium that existed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this form of theatre, the actors are withdrawn into the scenes and the stage is artificially illuminated. This was a new development of spectacle and illusion in Western Theatre.

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In a drama static characters are meaningfully symbolic on a stage as in painting. No character emerges without action and no play exists without situation. The situation is never detached from the character though it may be possible to do so after experiencing the play.

The latest trend in theatre is the role played by the avant-garde school in focusing the ordinary life. The modern dramatists are more conscious about the tension between illusion and reality and the fact and fiction in theatrical experience. The ritualistic drama is written in verse, which assumed that the actors expressed in an incantatory speech in the dramas. The rhythmic delivery of words enhances the mood of the theatre to the level of religious theatre like that of Eliot and the plays are written in prose which is rare and essentially associated with comedy.

The Theatre is affected by an illusion which is the perfect presentation of the image of a human being's position in the world. The comic writers believed in the conception that behind every social being lurks an animal being.

In the contemporary literature it was believed that drama acted as an instrument in bringing out social and political change. Both drama and theatre have wide connotation and extend to the cinema and electronic mass media, the two powerful instruments for the freedom of expression.

The drama is associated with knowledge, perception, thought and insight into the society. It never makes an overstatement but carries on its own mechanism and has its own verification within it.

A playwright imagines a situation and characters that come to the complexity and ambivalences of the real world. Ibsen has contributed greatly to social and political changes in the society. But Brecht has refused to make his message too explicit because he knew by instinct and consciously the problem he wanted to present the audience. He wanted to make them think themselves rather than drumming the message into their heads.

The contemporary themes dealt with topics and themes by clever reference or allegory to audience. The social impact was evident on the contemporary drama and at the same time theatre is also successful in bringing into open the burning events of the contemporary society.

It is a misconception that the art of theatre has to be discussed solely in terms of intellectual content of the script and various theatrical experiences for bringing in a purposeful harmony. The various aspects of humanity are evaluated in different contexts which have become focal points in theatrical representation of the plays. Renaissance drama has been emphasized on the individuality of each character.

Theatre was restricted to philosophy in setting, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Man was presented just not as a creature, but posterity was shown to have given him the unique importance in the universe.

### **FROM 17<sup>TH</sup> TO 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY THEATRICAL CHARACTERS**

From 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century the theatrical characters were from lower classes and appeared as servants and dependents in the comedy. Rustics were ridiculous and their simplicity was endearing or pathetic.

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century middle class people had become an aristocratic entertainment in the theatre. After world war, theatre has made efforts to create interest in a wider section of society. By that time the audience had lost the interest in going to theatre as Television was becoming a powerful medium of drama as well as entertainment. Eventually theatres become a powerful medium for only those people who were prepared to energetically collaborate in the creation of drama as an art form.

During the late middle age the popular enterprises were found at royal courts and the house holds of the nobility where they act, sing and play music at festivities. The medieval theatre stems directly from the rituals of the masses and theatre has become a visible reflection of the invisible world. Once the theatre moved outside the church, the production of the plays has been done in the vernacular.

### **BRITISH THEATRE**

British theatre has paid more attention to the anti-realistic movement as characterized as an experimental theatre in the rest of Europe. Theatre has started to rebuild the cultural fabric of civilization after the devastation of World War- II and captured the attention of the public and

became new in the society.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre came into existence from a vigorous reaction against Realism and theatre has seized upon anything that came to hand in an effort to express the contradictions of the new age which is inspired by machines and technology. The oriental theatre took up Cubism, Dadaism, the psycho analysis of Freud and the shock of the world war which resulted and spawned widespread disillusionment and alienation.

The characters were seen and interpreted as lonely helpless images in industrial society and devoured by the tyrannized mechanical devices or enmeshed in the tentacles of the machine. Brecht's earliest work was influenced by German Expressionism. His works were preoccupied with Marxism where man and society could be intellectually analyzed and discussed. Apart from entertainment, Brecht believed that theatre should be strongly didactic, capable of provoking social change and appeal to the spectator's reason and not to the spectators' feeling.

## **THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY THEATRE**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century which was a reaction against naturalism and impressionism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was a protest against the existing social order. The essence of the subject by grossly distorting outward appearance or external reality is thoroughly shown in the contemporary theatre.

Absurd theme is an inner current and an implacable thought. To understand Beckett's plays better, the existential writings are also referred to this study. The term 'Absurd' which was once shunned, had become a metaphor for tendencies in literature and theatre. It kindled new dimensions of thought and philosophy and involved more of 'showing' than 'telling'. The theatre of the absurd, was then called 'the new theatrical virus' which spread its wings even over the women's theatre. Its anti-conventional mode had a significant influence on the theatre, where the traditions of dialogue, action, emotions and acting styles were flouted. Theatre has come a long way from the times of Second World War, which through the loss of hope and faith, culminated in the philosophy of the absurd.

The theatre of the Absurd was much in common with some of the fundamental ideas of

existential philosophy of Heidegger, Sartre and Camus in its emphasis on the basic absurdity of the human condition, on the bankruptcy of all closed systems of thought that claim to provide a total explanation of reality. The immediate consequence of the existential concepts such as temporality isolation, anxiety, choice, dread and death is that all these existential experiences find their culmination in the theatre of the absurd. Absurd theatre, term applied to a group of dramatists in the 1950s who did not regard themselves as a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes towards the predicament of man in the universe, essentially those summarized by Albert Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This diagnosis humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings.

The existential situation is associated with materialization and incarnation in the existence of man, which fills the gap between man and the world. It seeks that the basic truth of human existence is to be realized by man.

The Absurd drama expresses the hopelessness of life of man and the need to refuse without renouncing it. It further investigates the happiness and the intellect of the man. The value and the purpose of man in existence becomes an important aspect.

The metaphysical distancing of world and object, thought and reality, essence and existence are figured in the Absurd drama. The action and a sense of freedom and passion have become spring board for the feeling of absurdity of man in existence.

The dramatic structure and the subject matter are influenced by the Absurd vision in this Drama. It abandoned the rules of drama which caused the effect on the arrangements of the incidents rather than developing the action linearly. It is shown that its circularity situations are often resolved and generalized. The characters in this drama are void and cut off from the rest of the world. Time in flexible and dramatic forms had disappeared from Theatrical scenario in the contemporary drama.

Absurd drama is timeless, universal and philosophical in the contemporary drama and is the substitution of inner landscape for the outer world. This form of drama locks fantasy and fact in the plays. A free attitude towards time, that can expand or contract according to subjective requirements of a fluid environment, projects the individual mental condition.

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The drama has enumerated situations which are associated with the life of man, death and isolation. It communicates intimately to the intuition of human situation of his own sense of being and individual vision of the world.

The drama deals with black humor and the subject of despair. In spite of despair, man wishes to survive in the incomprehensible world. The world is very hard to understand. The inability of understanding the world makes man tend towards philosophical thinking and nothingness in life.

To express absurdity in philosophical story and also expressed conclusively the artistic language of the theatre. The author would like to bring out the life situations of the stage characters of the plays. The human predicament is referred to as realistic in the absurd drama. The metaphysics of boredom is represented through the plays.

The Theatre of the Absurd is a reaction of the disappearance of religion from the contemporary life. The drama has given an attempt to restore the significance of myth and ritual in the age. Man will become aware of the ultimate reality and his condition in the life through this form of drama. By imitating against the loss of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish, the man slowly slips down into the absurdity. Absurd drama provides condition where the man meets with incomprehension and rejection of the world. The other aspect of the drama is the distrust of language as a means of communication. It was constituted on the onslaught of the language showing it as unreliable and insufficient to communicate with the people.

### **REACTION OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF RELIGION**

Martin Esslin has recognized that there is no explanation for all the mysteries of the world. The previous systems have been oversimplified and therefore there was no appearance of despair causing the simplified system itself to provide an answer.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Absurd movement has realized that man should live without any final truth. He has changed according to the situation and readjusted himself to live with less exulted aims to be a humble, receptive and less exposed to violent disappointment in crisis of conscious. Therefore

the better adjusted people live in closer accord with reality.

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