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## Language as a Metaphor of Meaninglessness and Absurdity in the Selected Absurd Plays

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“It is in its attitude to language that the Theatre of the Absurd is most revolutionary. It deliberately attempts to renew the language of drama and to expose the barrenness of conventional stage dialogue” (Esslin: 1960, 10).

Language has been an instrument of power and identity. Viewed from this perspective, it attains considerable importance for colonized people. Since natives in British colonies were barred from using their own respective languages, their many local dialects became extinct. So the writers of these former colonies often raise this issue of marginalization of their languages by the colonizers and their writings are a constant questioning of colonial unjust apparatus which oppressed them. Language for them, therefore, is invariably concerned with empowerment and identity and the same is employed by them along with English to restore pride in their cultural heritage.

Language also becomes an instrument of mockery and meaninglessness when it is targeted in an offensive manner. The language we come across in the Theatre of the Absurd is

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loaded with such meaningless conversations that the characters do not really want to communicate with each other meaningfully. It is aimed rather at exposing the absurd condition of their relations. Instead of indulging in any valid or meaningful conversation, characters in absurd drama undermine the dignity of one another in the process, aiming rather to hurt and abuse.

Language has been a pivotal mode of communication for centuries. Its denotative, literary and symbolic functions remain largely accountable for ascertaining meaning in communication. The same language, however, may acquire derogatory, vulgar and obscene status if directed unwisely towards others. On the other hand, the use of 'silences' and 'pauses' is another literary device to express inability of language. However, it must be mentioned that 'silences' and 'pauses' are a deliberative device of the writers, Harold Pinter in particular, to let the readers enter into the situations of the characters who are otherwise involved in nothing else but meaningless conversation. The present paper explores the use of language in a way that language no longer carries its conventional purpose of conveying something meaningful. Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957), Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and Edward Albee's *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) shall be discussed to come around to an understanding of the said theme.

According to its dictionary definition, the word 'Absurd' connotes 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical'. Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994) defines this term in an essay on Franz Kafka as something which is "devoid of purpose....Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." (1975, 5). Understood thus, the term 'Absurd' implies a world of illusions which hurt a lot when a man becomes disillusioned or severed from his roots, relations, reason and religion.

The term 'The Theatre of the Absurd' came to be applied by Martin Esslin (1918-2002) to a number of dramatists of 1950s and 1960s in whose works he found certain elements which presented life as hopeless and absurd. Samuel Beckett, (1906-1989) Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994), Arthur Adamov (1908-1970), and Jean Genet (1910-1986) formed a part of the group of the dramatists whose works came under the lens of his scrutiny. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) forms a necessary background for this new form of literary movement. He uses

this myth as a focal point to describe the absurdity of human condition. Condemned to roll a piece of rock to the top of the hill, Sisyphus would find it again at the foot of the mountain to his great dismay and grief. The weight of the stone would force it to gravitate towards the foot of the hill which implied that this absurd situation would never come to an end. Surprisingly his whole life passed accomplishing nothing as this penalty caused him ceaseless torture in an absurd but unavoidable punishment. The modern man too finds himself rootless in the face of unresolved mysteries of life in an inexplicable world and therefore behaves in a way that the absurd element dominates.

The World War II was largely responsible for the shattering of belief in religion. Albert Camus had been consciously raising the voice of a lost man in the face of uncertainties. He found the escape for this situation of man in suicide because life had turned out to be charmless, aimless and meaningless. The drama of the school of the Absurd deplores the loss of human values in an apparently meaningless world. Interestingly, language in which the characters communicate in these plays calls for a different set of assumptions: assumptions of vulgarity, non-communicability, shattering of illusions, and a sense of irresponsibility. Commenting on the nature of absurd plays, Martin Esslin observes: "The Theatre of the Absurd shows the world as an incomprehensible place. The spectators see the happenings on the stage entirely from the outside, without ever understanding the full meaning of these strange patterns of events, as newly arrived visitors might watch life in a country of which they have not yet mastered the language." (1960, 5). Pointlessness and futility of human behaviour, efforts and existence are at the centre stage of the absurd drama.

In *Waiting for Godot* of Samuel Beckett (1906-1909), the absurd condition of human beings is better described through the endless waiting of two tramps Vladimir and Estragon for Godot who actually never turns up. Godot, they think, would somehow resolve their unstated problem in a mysterious way but their hope remains unrealised. The language employed by the dramatist shows his deliberate attempt to convey the meaningless situation of the two tramps:

Vladimir: We will hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladimir: We will be saved.

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*Vladimir takes off his hat (Lucky's), peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, knocks on the crown, puts it on again.*

Estragon: Well? Shall we go?

Vladimir: Pull on your trousers.

Estragon: What?

Vladimir: Put on your trousers.

Estragon: You want me to pull off my trousers?

Vladimir: Put ON your trousers.

Estragon: (*realising his trousers are down*). True.

*He pulls up his trousers.*

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

*They do not move.* (2010, 94)

We do not find any action here but only interplay of words. Language acquires importance as the action is removed to the periphery. The exchange of dialogues between two tramps leads nowhere as they do not try to understand each other deliberately. Their reiteration to 'move' does not yield any fruit as "they do not move" at all. Scared of their existence in a Godotless world, they deliberately find themselves in this situation which for them is like an oasis in a desert. Vladimir's taking off his hat and turning it upside down for searching something also seems to be a hopeless and desperate attempt. Their meaningless activities remain a source of hope for them; hope for the arrival of Godot. Katerina Vassilopoulou writes in this context: "This realization, nevertheless, cannot endure for long, but is rather another glimmer of the truth that they are refusing to face, namely that their life is sterile, purposeless and thus absurd". (14) This modernist absurd condition is an inevitable outcome of the decentring of a stable centre and meaningful relations which has also found vociferous expression in T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922):

'What is that noise?'

The wind under the door.

What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?

Nothing again nothing.

Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember  
Nothing? (1998, 59).

This sense of nothingness of everything results from a precarious modernist condition where mystery shrouds everything.

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) also brings to fore this absurd human condition in his works which have largely come to be termed as ‘Comedy/ies of Menace’. In his plays his characters get humorously menaced by some mysterious outsiders. Turning inmates of the house to be outsiders in their own house, these strangers remain instrumental in causing psychological disorder of the hero. Master in using ‘silences’ and ‘pauses’ as special linguistic devices in his plays, the playwright makes these dramatic devices as much suggestive of action as the dialogue. Describing an incident of Petey and Meg at breakfast in *The Birthday Party*, this use of ‘pauses’ is indicative of something:

Meg: Is that you Petey?

*Pause*

Petey, is that you?

*Pause*

Petey?

Petey: What?

Meg: Is that you?

Petey: Yes it's me.

Meg: What? Are you back?

Petey: Yes. (1991, 11)

This earthly breakfast conversation of this couple steers us away from the world of reality to something more higher. A kind of communication gap can be easily discerned in this innocuous questioning which has been punctured with a number of pauses. Unwilling to understand or reach out to one another, the conversation of the couple leads them nowhere but only to utter confusion. Pauses here indicate senseless indulging in a non-sensical conversation. Pinter uses

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language here strategically to portray the meaningless state of the modern man. Commenting on the role of language in the absurd plays, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* records that the “language in an Absurdist play is often dislocated, full of clichés, puns, repetitions, and non sequiturs.” The same repetition is discernible here as symbolic of their wretched existence.

*Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*(1962) by Edward Albee makes further development in the direction of an Absurd play by employing anti-theatrical speech or dialogues. Mirth and gloom, laughter and tears amalgamate to produce what is called ‘dark humour’. Deriving pleasure out of hurting each other, the dramatist underscores the sadistic elements in the play:

Martha: I know chromosomes are, sweeties

I love chromosomes.

George: Martha eats them... for breakfast.

She sprinkles them on her rice. (1998, 2)

Apart from such dark humour, the writer underscores the role of illusions in human life. The hopes of a middle aged couple George and Martha rely on an illusion of an unborn baby whom they hope to come sometime. Though aware of reality, this couple deliberately harbours this illusion as they cannot imagine their lives without the same. The play shows the existential condition of the modern man who remains happy in a make-believe world as the real world is marred by anxieties, fears, tensions and a shifting of loyalties. Devoid of any respect and compassion in relations, these characters try to evade reality by taking flight into the world of games, games which however, aim to expose the weaknesses of characters.

George: (Puts his hand gently on her shoulder: she puts her head back and he sings to her

very softly) : Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf? (*reality*)

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf.

Martha: I...am ...George.

George: Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Martha: I...am George...I am (*George nods slowly*) (1998, 140)

The ending of this play on this note is very much like the ending of *Waiting for Godot*. As the hopes of Godot's arrival are shattered at the end so are the hopes of George and Martha of having an imaginary child. The need to break free of illusions and come to terms with reality is often beset with suffering, and pain as happens in the case of the above mentioned characters. Again linguistic device becomes the trope for dissecting the meaningless lives of these characters in a meaningless world. Language is employed by the dramatist as an unreliable medium unable to express the thoughts and emotions of the characters. Since the language of the characters fails to convey the intended message, their conversation is largely governed by silences, pauses, repetition and other non-verbal, non-sense gestures.

As already discussed, Albert Camus' existential philosophy as expounded in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) is invariably linked to the Theatre of the Absurd since this philosophy focuses on the same state of uncertainty and dilemma in inter and intra-personal relationships. Originated in Paris, Existentialism had a profound experience on the Theatre of the Absurd as it also had its roots in France. In existentialism, the starting point which an individual takes first is called 'the existential attitude' or a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world' which characterizes the existing state of an individual's life.

Denotative function of the language gets undermined as words largely become devoid of any meaning, creating confusion and misunderstanding among the characters. Such usage of language in this fashion amounts to communication gap which further worsens the relations between characters. Important things in the plays of Pinter are replaced by pauses, now known as the famous 'Pinter Pause'. In *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and McCann's questioning of Stanley shows how language can be used in a nonsensical manner to abuse a character:

GOLDBERG. What do you use for pajamas?

Stanley: Nothing.

Goldberg: You verminate the sheet of your birth.

McCann: What about the Albigensienist heresy?

Goldberg: Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

McCann: What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

Goldberg: Speak up Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road? (1991, 88).

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The language here not only becomes a mode of tearing a character to pieces but also to derive pleasure out of hurting him. Paradoxically the reason for Goldberg and McCann's incessant questioning, tormenting and later dragging of Stanley is never revealed which again underscores sadistic tendencies of these outsiders who threaten the security of the insiders of the house:

Goldberg: Why did you kill your wife?

Stanley: What wife?

Goldberg: How did you kill her?

McCann: How did you kill her?

McCann: You throttled her?

Goldberg: With arsenic. (1991, 83).

Surprisingly, no mention is found of his wife either before or afterwards in the play. Paradoxically, this strange accusation is levelled at Stanley of being a bachelor and widower, of having murdered his wife and having never married at all. Such dialogues not only baffle the reader but the characters themselves as this knowledge itself involves ambiguity, uncertainty and decentrality of everything. Such device is used by the dramatist to not only expose the absurdity of human existence but also the absurdity of their dialogues. The motive of Goldberg and McCann remains clear which is to dominate Stanley through this unrealistic cross-questioning which utterly confuses the latter. This knot of unanswered questions shows again the inability of language in leading to a stable and meaningful conclusion.

The despair of characters in absurdity of existence finds expression in the shift from the conventional well-made play to a plot less play. Having no story, characterization, meaningful dialogue, proper beginning and ending, mechanical puppets rather than characters, this drama probes the mystery and absurdity of human existence. Replete with trite and platitudinous conversations and pessimistic and gloomy aspects, the Theatre of the Absurd presents the dark side of human life. Devoid of any pleasure and hope, the characters in the above mentioned plays seek refuge in illusions, illusions which, however, drive them mad once the same are shattered.

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