

Absurdism as a Tendency in Theatre: Ranging from Aristophanes to Beckett and Pinter

Melike Saba Akim

ABSTRACT

*Absurdism in theatre has mostly been associated with a well-known classification made by Martin Esslin; and regarded with the phrase *The Theatre of the Absurd*. However, absurdist predicament as a tendency has been found in theatre since the time of Ancient Greeks. In this essay, while absurdism in theatre will be considered as a movement than as a tendency, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter –who are counted as two of five characteristic playwrights of the movement by Esslin- will be mentioned briefly as pioneering absurdist.*

Keywords: *Absurdism, The Theatre of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter*

Introduction

There has been a widespread trend to associate them with the absurdist drama, a term coined by Martin Esslin in 1961 as *The Theatre of the Absurd*. As stated by Peacock (1997), *The Theatre of the Absurd* was firmly influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the World War II, “which showed the total impermanence of any values, shook the validity of any

conventions and emphasized the meaningless and arbitrariness of human life” (p. 38). In these kinds of plays, “action no longer inherent in a plot, but the unfolding of a poetic image. Man finds himself faced with a frightening and illogical universe, in which the means of communication, language, is also suspect” (Hinchliffe, 1967, p. 31). The five characteristic playwrights of the movement, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter are regarded as creating dramas in a new style characterizing an absurd feature with ambiguous background by Esslin. Yet, in his preface of Pelican edition of *Theatre of the Absurd*(1968), Esslin admits:

[...] a term like The Theatre of Absurd is working hypothesis; a device to make certain fundamental traits which seem to be present in the works of a number of dramatists accessible to discussion by tracing the features they have in common, that and no more (p. 10).

In this essay, the absurdism in theatre considered as a movement than as a tendency, just like symbolism itself is regarded as a tendency.

Absurdism as a Tendency in Theatre

Absurdism is a wide range trend as a consequence of two major world wars in both philosophical and artistic scene of the last century. The term ‘absurd’ is derived from a well-known essay of Albert Camus named *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Here in this context, Sisyphus which is a figure of Greek mythology represents the absurdity of human: existence of man is considered as totally nonsense and meaningless. In Camus’ words;

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity (as quoted in Esslin, 2001, p. 23.)

As known, the new orientations of drama including absurdist works, as seen in all forms of art, were strongly influenced by traumatic experiences of two major world wars. Thus, absurdism in theatre is mostly regarded as the crops of post-wars period of Europe due to a well-known study of Martin Esslin named *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Similarly, its roots are frequently associated with the avant-garde movements of the 1920's and 1930's. However, absurdism in theatre should not be limited to post-wars period of plays. The essence of absurdism can be traced back to Ancient Greek Theatre. In the case of origins of absurdist drama, one of the first Ancient Greek dramatists coming into mind is Aristophanes with his comedies which are repleted with absurd elements. Furthermore, the phrase the theatre of the absurd has once been used together with his name whereof the title of the book is *Aristophanes and his Theatre of the Absurd*(1990) which is written by Paul Cartledge in 1990. Aristophanes is not the only Ancient Greek dramatist regarded as absurdist; certain plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles are associated with absurdism by some scholars including Jan Kott. According to Kott (1971),

In the entire history of drama there are only two works in which the hero cannot leave his plays and must remain motionless from the beginning to the end of the play. The first is *Prometheus Bound*. In the second, Beckett's *Happy Days*, the heroine Winnie is buried up to her waist in a mound of earth; later she sinks to her neck... Winnie goes on laughing. She laughs like Camus' Sisyphus when the rock at the top of the mountain slips from his hands and falls into the abyss. Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days* is happy to the very end (p. 80).

Remark of Kott is essential here in that it indicates the absurd sense both in an ancient play and in a contemporary play. Likewise, absurd features can also be seen in Elizabethan stage and works of Shakespeare, in the comedies of Moliere, in the late nineteenth century as a reaction to the realistic plays of Ibsen and Shaw (Shearson, 1973; McGuckin, 1996). Therefore, in this study, absurdism will be considered as a tendency instead of being a movement occurred in around 1950's and aftermath. Eventually, Martin Esslin (2001) also underlines that the dramatists whose work is mentioned in *The Theatre of The Absurd* "discussed do not form part

of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement” (p. 22). As pointed out by Arnold P. Hinchliffe (1969),

Such a label is useful not as ‘a blinding classification’ but help us gain insight into a work of art. Once defined and understood, such a term helps us to evaluate works of previous epochs and he gives as an example (which not everyone will find felicitous) the work of Jan Kott on Shakespeare which produced Peter Brook’s *King Lear* influenced by Beckett’s *Endgame* (p. 9).

After the study of Esslin, the term ‘absurd drama’ is turned into a catch-phrase which is “much used and much abused” (p.8). Considering that absurd features can be seen in various periods of the history of theatre in certain ways as reviewed above, the notion of absurdism in theatre can be interpreted as a sort of ‘predicament’ⁱ. Furthermore, absurdism of the twentieth century is directly related to existentialist thought as well; thus it is not only limited to the roster of Martin Esslin. Absurdist sense also appears in the plays of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, or work of Franz Kafka. Similarly, it is tied with Symbolism, Surrealism and the theories of Antonin Artaud.

In brief, the phrase ‘absurd drama’ is basically referred to the plays written with the common understanding which will be outlined in the following section. Those plays appear in a time filled with ‘chaos’ⁱⁱ in the post 1950’s. However, elements of absurdity have been proceeded from the theatre of ancient Greek into the twentieth century. Thus, within this study, absurdism in theatre will be considered as a tendency rather than being a movement or a strict categorization.

Additionally, Ihab Hassan (2001) points out that a great number of works in Western literature including *Waiting for Godot* “reveal a growing sense of disruption, an increasing capacity for distortion”. As an antiform, *Waiting for Godot* portrays an ironic and perhaps a nihilistic picture of the world. Hence, dramatic form eventually comes to rest in absurdity (p. 40). Herein, absurdity of the last century’s drama might be viewed as one of the major reflections of antiform. Considering this, the Theatre of the Absurd can be interpreted as one of the contributing post-war developments into the way of modernism to postmodernism. As Sheila

O'Brien McGuckin (1996) puts it, the Theatre of the Absurd “rode in on the crest of the wave of modernism, but that it also contained certain features that become integral to the effort to define the postmodern” (p. 9). While this study will suggest that examining both Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter in the light of being transition figures into the way of postmodern aesthetics, absurdist drama itself may also be considered as a part of this transition in that reflecting a break to conventional drama.

The Theatre of the Absurd

In theatre, the term absurd is first used by Martin Esslin by which he classified a group of playwright sharing a common agenda. This common theme is primarily based on the same understanding as stated here before: mankind is convicted of absurdity and there is no meaning and purpose to live. The difference between the philosophical approach and its theatrical repercussion is, according to Esslin (2001), the dramatists of the absurd are striving, by virtue of instinct and intuition; however, in philosophical approach, this effort occurs in a conscious way (p. 25).

Esslin lists the absurdist playwrights as, primarily, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter. For him, in absurd plays, meaningless existence and its absurdity are expressed in a concrete dramatic picture. However, dramatic conflict as a conventional way is no longer existed in these plays. Such other conventional elements of theatre as plot or classical characterization are also rejected. All the things occurred on stage are illogical and inextricable. Moreover, all communication breaks down and eventually man vanishes in obscurity.

In absurd theatre, man is not shown in a historical, cultural or social context. The position of man is quite different which is based on the basic condition of human. He is isolated both from the ordinary events and the hassles of life. Conversely, his only action is intrinsically manifested in motionlessness. Man may find himself trapped in a routine or in a metafictional maze (Bradby, 1991, p. 59), and perhaps even in a story itself (Cahn, 1979, pp. 36-39). As pointed out by Arnold P. Hinchliffe,

[...] the central action of this kind of play, action no longer inherent in a plot (plots in Absurd dramas are usually quite static), but in the unfolding of a poetic image. Such images[...] lack clarity but strongly represent the loss of clear and well defined systems of beliefs. Man finds himself faced with a frightening and illogical universe, in which the means of communication, language is also suspected (and therefore the well-made play with its real conversation is also suspected) (Hinchliffe, 1967, p. 31).

Language as another considerable element of absurd plays reflects the lack of communication which is embodied through clichés and meaningless conversations. The language used is pointless and stereotyped. Absurdist playwrights prefer to use certain ways so as to demonstrate the lack of communication: ranging from the usage of long silences to Vaudeville-style word plays, wherein the disconnection is underlined. In the reality of absurd, all characters are unable to communicate.

Lastly, the Theatre of the Absurd is partly an anti-literary movement of the last century (Esslin, 2001, p. 26). Therefore, it is a part of dispersion of the form in entire art including literature, which makes it another switch form in the way of postmodern aesthetics.

Samuel Beckett as an Absurdist

Samuel Beckett is considered as one of the essential absurdist playwrights by Martin Esslin. He characterizes all of Beckett's plays as totally plotless when it is compared with the other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. According to this, plays of Beckett present an overall portrayal of his intuition of the human condition rather than a linear development by a polyphonic way. In *Waiting for Godot*, there is no story to be told. The story explores a static situation (Esslin, 2001, p. 45). The only activity of play is waiting for someone called Godot, who never turns up.

For Esslin, *Waiting for Godot* has an element of crudely physical humour in accordance with the traditions of the circus or music halls. It is represented with the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon. They have complementary personalities: Vladimir is the practical of the two, and Estragon is the imaginative ones. Similarly, Pozzo and Lucky are equally

complementary in their natures. However, “their relationship is on a more primitive level” based on a master and slave morality (pp. 47-48). Vladimir and Estragon or Pozzo and Lucky, both of couples are complementary despite inconformity. Thus, all the play is built in a peculiar harmony of dual contrasts and echoic repeats. In both Act I and Act II, the same pattern is repeated and the characters follow the same routine everyday: Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot under a tree for the whole day; yet, Mr Godot does not come in any way.

Esslin states that the vision of Beckett cannot be identified with any school of philosophy. *Waiting for Godot* has a peculiar richness which “opens vistas on so many perspectives”. The play is “open to philosophical, religious and psychological interpretations”, yet above all, it is melted in a pot of mysterious existence, time and evanescence, the paradox of change and stability, and lastly, necessity and absurdity (p. 61).

Not only *Waiting for Godot*, but also many other plays of Beckett –including *End Game*, *Act without Words I and II*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, *All That Fall*, *Happy Days*, his radio plays and movie scripts– are evaluated as examples of the Theatre of the Absurd by Martin Esslin. In all of Beckett plays, it is considered that absurdity is attained in every part of the play through the characters, as well as through the plotless move and the usage of non-communicative language whereby the unusual conditions or even usual states are occurred in unusual sequence. As stated by Arnold P. Hinchliffe (1969), “in much of Beckett’s work the tone means more than meaning, and it is this warmth which denies the metaphysician the last word, and qualifies Absurdity” (p. 72). Hence, Samuel Beckett is often regarded together with absurd theatre itself.

Harold Pinter as an Absurdist

Harold Pinter is considered as the younger generation absurdist playwrights as well in *The Theatre of The Absurd* (2001). His mysterious plays which blend realism and absurdism are counted as a major figure for not only contemporary drama, but also absurd theatre. Plays of Pinter textured with symbols as well as with reality reflect the isolation and violence of modern society through illustrating absurdity of the facts. Such topics of his plays as ambiguity and subjectiveness of reality, the failure of relational communication, and power struggle in human relationships create a sort of absurd and minatory atmosphere. His language is intensely subtextual and threatening; and stories arise from the action instead of ideas. Ranging from his

usage of language and creating characters in real situations to uncertainty surrounding the stage; all pieces of the play serve to constitute menacing ambiance.

For Pinter, life in its absurdity is basically funny. The basic absurdity of the situations that inspire him and the desire for realism do not contradict each other (2001, p. 242). According to him,

Everything is funny; the greatest earnestness is funny; even tragedy is funny. And I think what I try to do in my plays is to get to this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak (Pinter, 1960).

As pointed out by Esslin, Pinter finds that everything is funny until the horror of the human situation to float. For him, ludicrous part of life is its arbitrariness. In our time, man is surrounded by the unknown; everything is uncertain and relative. Accordingly, “the fact that it is verging on the unknown leads us to the next step, which seems to occur in my plays. There is a kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity go together” (Pinter, 1960).

Language of Pinter is also reflects the lack of communication. However, his usage of language operates slightly different as compared with the other absurdist playwrights. He uses it as “an exact reproduction of natural speech with all the hesitations and repetitions” (Hinchliffe, 1969, p. 83). As John Bowen (1962) puts it:

Mr Pinter’s buses really run; his observation may be appalled, but it is exact. His characters do not use language to show that language doesn’t work; they use it as a cover for fear and loneliness (p. 162).

In *The Theatre of The Absurd*, a great deal numbers of his plays are evaluated in the light of absurdism in drama. Within this study, Esslin elaborately surveys some of prominent plays of Pinter which can be listed as *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*, *A Slight Ache*, *The Caretaker*, *The Lover*, *The Homecoming*, and *Old Times* among many others including his television and radio plays.

Notes

¹ The term 'absurdist predicament' is used by Shearson in 1973 due to appearing absurdism in different periods of dramatic literature (Shearson, 1973).

¹The expression of chaos is conceptualized as a new science metaphor for modern drama by William W. Demastes within the book named *Theatre of Chaos: Beyond Absurdism, into Orderly Disorder*(1998). Demastes borrows the word of chaos from quantum physics so as to reinterpret western thought of modern times and drama of the last century.

Works Cited

Bradby, D. (1991). *Modern French Drama 1940-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bowen, J. (February, 1961). "Accepting the Illusion". *Twentieth Century*, p. 162.

Cahn, V. L. (1979). *Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard*. Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Cartledge, P. (1990). *Aristophanes and his Theatre of the Absurd*. Bristol: Billings & Sons Ltd.

Hassan, I. (2001). *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*. New Zealand: Cybereditions Corporation.

Hinchliffe, A.P. (1967). *Harold Pinter*. New York: Twayne Publishers.

Hinchliffe, A. P. (1969). *The Absurd*. London: Methuen.

Kott, J. (1971). "The Absurd and Greek Tragedy". *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 1, Number 1.

McGuckin, S. O. (1996). *The Theatre of the Absurd in Europe and America: Sartre, Beckett, Pinter, Albee and Drama Criticism*. (Ph.D. Thesis). Durham: University of New Hampshire.

Pinter, H. (1960, August 7). BBC General Overseas Service Broadcast. (H. Tennyson, Interviewer)

Shearson, B. A. (1973). *The Absurdist Predicament in Greek, Shakespearian and Beckettian Drama: An Application of Camus' Concept of the Absurd*. (MA Thesis). Canada : Carleton University.

Bio-note- Melike Saba Akım, PhD scholar in The Department of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy, Istanbul University.
e-mail- melikesaba@yahoo.com
