



THEATRE OF THE ABSURD – INTRODUCTION AND FEATURES

Dhaval Kataria

Research Scholar – GLS University, Ahmedabad.

ABSTRACT

'The Theatre of the Absurd' as a catch-phrase is much used and much abused. However, there is no organized movement, no school of artists, who claim the label for themselves. A good many playwrights who have been classed under this label, when asked if they belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, will indignantly reply that they belong to no such movement – and quite rightly so. For each of the playwrights concerned seeks to express no more and no less than his own personal vision of the world. The Theatre of the Absurd expresses what happens when human existence loses its meaning and purpose. With that, communication breaks down, leading to illogical arguments and construction giving way to illogical and irrational speech and dialogues. The result is silence. The absurd plays insist on the audience/readers not to follow this and have logical conversations, otherwise all the conversations will break down and illogical silence will prevail.

KEYWORDS : Absurd, Esslin, Features, Introduction, Theatre

INTRODUCTION

Waiting for Godot was the first of its kind, a drama in absurd form, which was performed on 19th November 1957 in front of fourteen hundred convicts at the San Quentin penitentiary. *Waiting for Godot* is written by Samuel Beckett and this was not the first time that it was being staged. However, this time it was different as the audience was very different from the regular one – they were all prisoners. The type of play was also different from the regular one – it was Absurd. But, to the surprise of all, the prisoners did not find it difficult to understand the play. The teacher in the prison said, "They know what is meant by waiting... and they knew if finally Godot came, he would only be a disappointment."¹

In the article regarding the performance of the play in the prison, it was written, "It was an expression, symbolic in order to avoid all personal error, by an author who expected each member of his audience to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors. It asked nothing in point, it forced no dramatized moral on viewer, it held out no specific hope. ... We're still waiting for Godot and shall continue to wait."²

It was surprising that an absurd play would be taken so well by the audience of prisoners in such a large number. It made an immediate and a deep impact on an audience of convicts. Possibly it confronted them with a situation that was similar to theirs in some way. Probably they were unsophisticated enough to go to the theatre without any preconceived notions and expectations about the play or the plot. They were thus able to accept the lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense or plain common sense, for which the critics had condemned the play. (Esslin)

Many playwrights and people believe that absurdism is the way of life. Albert Camus's philosophy was that life was inherent and meaningless. In *The Penguin Dictionary of Theatre* (1966) John Russell Taylor writes that (the theatre of the absurd) diagnoses humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings. Awareness of this lack of purpose in everything that we do produces a state of metaphysical anguish which is the central theme in the theatre of the Absurd. The Philosophy of the Absurd presents that a person's pursuit for meaning and truth is useless. Absurdists believe that living in general is absurd as whatever the man does is pointless and everything will lead to the same end and that every action is pointless.

In his 1965 book *Absurd Drama*, Martin Esslin wrote that The Theatre of the Absurd aims to shock its audience out of self-satisfaction. The aim of the Theatre of the Absurd is to bring the audience face to face with the harsh facts of the world. The challenge behind this message is to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity. There are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence

because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The Theatre of the Absurd, thus, does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.

Features of the Absurd Drama

The Absurd plays do not focus on the usual logical acts, realistic occurrences or the traditional character development as seen in the plays of other genre. These plays focus on the characters, representing all human beings, ensnared in a meaningless world where anything can occur, however illogical it might be. The plays have unintelligible theme and derisory language. The ideals and purpose in life are devalued. The Theatre of the Absurd seem nonsensical but they do have a lot to say.

Aspects of The Theatre of the Absurd

Critic Martin Esslin coined the term in his 1962 essay "Theatre of the Absurd". The Absurd in these plays take the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning, or man as a puppet controlled by invisible outside forces. In the first edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin saw the work of various playwrights as giving artistic meaning to Albert Camus's philosophy that life is inherently without meaning. He introduced the Philosophy of the Absurd in which he argues that man's quest for meaning and truth is a futile endeavor.

The major aspects in such plays are:

- Broad comedy
- Horrific/Tragic images
- Characters caught in hopeless situations
- Characters forced to do repetitive, meaningless actions
- Dialogues full of cliché, wordplay and nonsense
- Cyclical/absurdly expansive plots
- Role playing
- Plays-within-plays
- Parody or dismissal of realism
- Concept of 'well made play'
- Flexible sense of the limits of the stage and illusion
- Plays shaped by political turmoil, scientific breakthrough and social upheaval going on in the world.

Absurdists believed that living in general was absurd as whatever the man does is pointless and everything will lead to the same end. Every action is pointless.

In his 1965 book, *Absurd Drama*, Esslin wrote that The Theatre of the Absurd aims to shock its audience out of self-satisfaction. It aims to bring us face to face with the harsh facts of the world. The challenge behind this message is to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity. To bear it with dignity, nobly and responsibly as there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The Theatre of the Absurd, thus, does not provoke tears of despair

but the laughter of liberation.

The mode of most absurdist plays is Tragicomedy. Tragic is possible even if tragedy is not. We can achieve the tragic out of comedy. We can bring it forth as a frightening moment, as an abyss that opens suddenly.

The plays do not focus on logical acts, realistic occurrences or traditional character development. They focus on human beings trapped in an incomprehensible world subject to any occurrence, no matter how illogical. The theme of incomprehensibility is coupled with the inadequacy of language to form meaningful human connections. There is inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity and purpose. The Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as nonsense but they have something to say and can be understood. Esslin says that an Absurd play is the one that is devoid of purpose, cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.

The characters in an Absurdist drama are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe and they abandon rational devices and discursive thought because these approaches are inadequate. Many characters appear as automatons stuck in routines speaking only in cliché. Characters are frequently stereotypical, archetypal, or flat character types. The more complex characters are in crisis because the world around them is incomprehensible. Characters may also face the chaos of a world that science and logic have abandoned.

Despite its reputation for nonsense language, much of the dialogue in Absurdist plays is naturalistic. The moments when characters resort to nonsense language or clichés – when words appear to have lost their denotative functions, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters – make The Theatre of the Absurd distinctive. Language frequently gains a certain phonetic, rhythmical, almost musical quality, opening up a wide range of often comedic playfulness. Absurdist language ranges from meaningless clichés to wordplays to nonsense. In many cases, dialogues are purposefully elliptical. The language becomes secondary to the poetry of the concrete and objectified images of the stage. Many plays devalue language for the sake of the striking tableau. Often the primary things characters should address are replaced by ellipsis or dashes. Much of the dialogues reflects this kind of evasiveness and inability to make a connection.

Traditional plot structures are rarely taken into consideration in The Theatre of the Absurd. The plots can consist of the absurd repetition of the absurd cliché and routine. Often there is a menacing outside force that remains a mystery. Absence, emptiness, nothingness and unresolved mysteries are central features in many Absurdist plots. The plot may also revolve around an unexplained metamorphosis, a supernatural change or a shift in the laws of physics. Plots are also frequently cyclical.

The Theatre of the Absurd is a form of drama in its own standing and should not be compared with any other forms of drama. If the plays written in this form are compared to and judged by the standards and measure of any other form, they would surely be regarded as impertinent and outrageous. Instead of having a cleverly constructed story, these plays have no story or plot. Instead of subtlety of characterization and motivation, these plays have no reasonable and recognizable characters, but mechanical puppets. Instead of having a fully explained theme that is efficiently brought forward and finally solved, these plays do not even have a specific beginning or an end. Instead of having witty and to the point conversations and dialogues, these plays have random and incoherent babblings and songs. It is believed that drama holds a mirror to the society and presents the nature of the age in which it is written. But the Theatre of the Absurd reflects dreams and nightmares.

Talking about the Theatre of the Absurd, Albert Camus observes:

"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."(Camus)

In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.'(Esslin)

The Theatre of the Absurd believes that there is senselessness in the human condition and there is inadequacy in a rational approach towards it. The Theatre of the Absurd openly abandons rational devices and discursive thoughts. The Theatre of the Absurd does not argue about the human condition and its absurdity but it just presents it in the being through concrete stage images. There is a certain devaluation of language towards a poetry that emerges from the concrete and objectified stage images.

¹Theatre Arts, New York, July 1958

²San Quentin News, 28 November 1957

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