

TRADITIONAL DRAMA AND ABSURD DRAMA- A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Absurdism as a term was originally described as a violation of the rules of the logic. It expresses the failure of traditional values to fulfill man's spiritual and emotional needs. The main idea was to point out man's helplessness and pointless existence in a world without purpose. In practice The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated conventions. Time, place and identity are vague and fluid and even basic causality frequently breaks down. Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dreamlike or even nightmare-like moods. The absence of logical plot emphasizes the pointless existence of man. Theatre of the Absurd openly rebelled against conventional theatre. The absurd drama is well understood when compared with a conventional well-made-play which has a clearly defined plot with beginning, middle and end; tightly structured; sharply drawn characters; dialogue is not only witty but also dialectical. The absurdists have succeeded in achieving the independence from the traditional neo-Aristotelian strictures of imitation or representationalism by the introduction of 'Alienation Effect' which was invented by Bertolt Brecht. Bertolt Brecht rejected what he called the "Aristotelian" concept of a tragic play as an imitation of reality that has a unified plot and a universal theme, and establishes an identification of the audience with the hero which produces a catharsis of the spectator's emotions of pity and fear. Brecht proposes instead that this illusion of reality (as portrayed in Aristotelian Tragedies), should be deliberately shattered by the use of (a) episodic plot, (b) by protagonists who do not attract the audience's sympathy, (c) by emphasizing theatricality in staging and acting and (d) by other ways of barring the devices of drama so as to produce *estrangement effects*.

Keywords:- Absurdism, violation, Aristotelian Tragedies

Absurdism as a term was originally described as a violation of the rules of the logic. It expresses the failure of traditional values to fulfil man's spiritual and emotional needs. The Absurdist philosophy finds its roots in the existential despair that swept over Europe in the wake of World War I and World War II. The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes

and unshakable basic assumptions of the former ages have been swept away. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism and various totalitarian misleading notions. All this was shattered by war. In the Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus tried to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs, “A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is familiar world. But in the universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man is a stranger. He is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of the 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 constitute the feeling of Absurdity.”¹

MAIN FEATURES OF ABSURD DRAMA

The Theatre of the Absurd is the phrase used in reference to the drama that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence by employing disjointed, repetitious and meaningless dialogue, purposeless and confusing situations, and plots that lack realistic or logical development. The main idea was to point out man’s helplessness and pointless existence in a world without purpose. In practice The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated conventions. Time, place and identity are vague and fluid and even basic causality frequently breaks down. Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dreamlike or even nightmare-like moods. The absence of logical plot emphasizes the pointless existence of man. Absurdist playwrights use techniques of symbolism, mime and gesture, silences and verbal nonsense, myth and dream, fantasy, allegory, the circus, and commedia dell’ arte etc. In the meaningless post-second-world-war world, it was no longer possible to keep the traditional art forms so the Theatre of the Absurd openly rebelled against conventional theatre. It was surreal, illogical, conflict-less and plot-less.

Some more features of Absurd Drama as said Irving Wardle are as follows:-

1. A static situation that does not progress but only expands.
2. Substitution of an inner landscape for the outer world.
3. Lack of any clear distinction between fantasy and fact.
4. A free attitude towards time which can expand or contract according to subjective requirements.
5. A fluid environment which projects conditions in the form of visual metaphors.
6. An obsession with defeat.
7. An iron precision of language and construction as the writer’s only defence against chaos of living experience.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ABSURD DRAMA

As far as the subject matter is concerned rather than its style, “ we find no difficulty in making comparisons between the works of the current generation of absurdists and their historical ancestors: the Greek tragedians and farceurs as well as the great dramatists of English Renaissance (including Shakespeare).What more explicit statements of man coming to terms with the absurdity of his condition than that of Oedipus, Hamlet, Lear, Vendice, D’Amville, Phaedra, Oreon, Hippolytus, Orestes, and Prospero?...The style of the absurdist drama will change many times but the content will remain very much the same until man ceases to be man and become God...The absurdists of today write in such diverse styles...however some generalizations can be made.... The absurdists of today, as Euripides once did, co-mingle the

qualities of farce and tragedy, making us laugh at that which hurts us most, making us weep at that which is most foolish in our nature. They are all in the best sense of the word ironists....What one must emphasize is, these modern absurdists mean to be intellectual, ideological, objective, and cerebral...and want their audiences to accompany them on their cerebration.”² To achieve this purpose the absurd dramatists indulge in diverse stylistic techniques.

COMPARISON WITH WELL-MADE-PLAY

The absurd drama is well understood when compared with a conventional well-made-play which has a clearly defined plot with beginning, middle and end; tightly structured; sharply drawn characters; dialogue is not only witty but also dialectical. The well-made-play presents a theme that is unmistakably understood by the audience. The absurd play on the contrary flouts all these age-honored conventions. It has absolutely no story; it starts at an arbitrary point and ends as arbitrarily as it starts. Its characters are hardly recognizable and they are in the least motivated. The dialogue is pointless, discursive, banal, often degenerating into meaningless babble. It does not hold up a mirror to nature. Rather it represents a dream or nightmare. A well-made-play has four common assumptions – (a) there is a cause and effect relationship in life, (b) character exists, (c) language communicates, (d) presents definite line of development. The absurd play rejects all these assumptions. In it there is no argumentative language that moves on to conclusion. Situation remains static; there is no conflict, climax or denouement. They express an existential anguish at the lack of cohesion and meaning in the world. The Theatre of the Absurd is not concerned with the representation of events; narration of the fate or of the adventures of the characters but it is concerned with the presentation of the individual’s basic situation, so they deal with a short period in the lives of the characters. It is a theatre of situation, as against the conventional theatre of sequential events. The gestures, movements, and silences add to the dramatic dialogue. The Theatre of the Absurd projects its author’s personal world.

This entire tendency towards presentational drama is an important pattern which identifies the creative attitude of the absurdist. They are concerned with creating works that proclaim their independence from the traditional neo-Aristotelian concept of imitation or representationalism. The founding fathers of absurd drama (Beckett, Ionesco and Adamov) objected to the realistic drama of their youth on grounds that realism was an irritating, if not inferior, form of art that enslaved the artist in a photographic relationship to life. Ionesco, the most outspoken of the absurdist elders on technical matters, felt that realism reduced the actor to a puppet. When they wrote their new drama, “they had the revolutionary motivation that was not entirely philosophical: they were out to liberate the theatre and emancipate the actor from bonds of naïve imitation.”³

The absurdists have succeeded in achieving the independence from the traditional neo-Aristotelian strictures of imitation or representationalism by the introduction of ‘Alienation Effect’ which was invented by Bertolt Brecht. The term Alienation Effect is also called the distancing effect or the estrangement effect. It was originated from the German term *Verfremdungseffekt* (V-effect). This effect prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to a consciously critical observer. This effect is actually, exactly opposite to the Aristotelian concept of identification of the spectator to the hero that leads to catharsis. In his critical theory, and in his own dramatic writings (*epic theater*), Bertolt Brecht rejected what he called the “Aristotelian” concept of a tragic play as an imitation of reality that has a unified plot and a

universal theme, and establishes an identification of the audience with the hero which produces a catharsis of the spectator's emotions of pity and fear. Brecht proposes instead that this illusion of reality (as portrayed in Aristotelian Tragedies), should be deliberately shattered by the use of (a) episodic plot, (b) by protagonists who do not attract the audience's sympathy, (c) by emphasizing theatricality in staging and acting and (d) by other ways of baring the devices of drama so as to produce *estrangement effects*. This will jar the audiences out of their passive and complacent acceptance of modern capitalist society as a natural way of life, into an attitude not only of critical understanding of the capitalist short comings, but of active engagement with the forces of change. Thus the absurdist drama fulfils a social function. (Brecht developed his Marxist theory of literature from this concept). In Aristotelian drama, the function was merely that of catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear on individualistic basis. " Bertolt Brecht's *estrangement effects* were designed to inhibit the sympathy of the audience with the protagonist of his plays, in order to encourage a critical attitude to the social realities that the plays represent" ⁴.

In German, *Verfremdungseffekt* signifies both alienation and distancing in a theatrical context: thus "theatrical alienation" and "theatrical distancing". Brecht, the German playwright and theorist, wanted to "distance" or "alienate" his audience from the characters and action. By dint of that, he wanted to turn the audience into observers who would not become involved in or sympathise emotionally or empathise by identifying individually the character's dilemmas and the wrongdoings he faces with their own, and by producing these dilemmas exposed in his dramatic plots. By being thus "distanced" emotionally from the characters and the action on stage, the audience would be able to reach an intellectual level of understanding (or intellectual empathy). At the same time, while alienated emotionally from the action and characters, they would be empowered on an intellectual level both to analyse and perhaps even to change the world which was Brecht's social and political goal as a playwright and the driving force behind his dramaturgy. To quote Brecht, "For us man portrayed on the stage is significant as asocial function. It is not his relationship to himself, nor his relationship to God, but his relationship to society which is central. Whenever he appears, his class or social stratum appears with him: His moral, spiritual or sexual conflicts are conflicts of society." ⁵

TECHNIQUES

Brecht's term describes the aesthetics of his Epic Theatre. First and foremost, Epic Theatre is certainly non-Aristotelian in so far as it upsets the sequence of time which Aristotle presupposed as one of the constituents of tragedy. Next, "narrative" replaces "plot". Next Instead of being "a part of the whole" each scene is to be "an entity in itself" moving in "jerks" rather than in the "evolutionary necessity by which one follows from the other." Further, the tragedy, Aristotle notes, "should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, middle, and an end." Yet this is precisely what Brecht attached - he demanded that "certain incidents in the play should be treated as self-contained scenes and raised – by means of inscriptions, music and sound effects and the actor's way of playing – above the level of the everyday, the obvious, the expected." ⁶ It is here that he mentions the *Verfremdungseffekt* or Alienation Effect which propels the spectator from a merely passive or, as Brecht was fond of saying "culinary" attitude - into one of genuine participation. Instead of resting comfortably in his seat, the spectator is expected to take a stand, both literally and figuratively. Or as Brecht put it, in the Aristotelian theatre, "the audience is entangled in the action on stage," a process which is bound to "exhaust their power of action." The epic theatre, on the other hand arouses their power of action and "extorts decisions from them."

To achieve Alienation Effect certain theatrical effects were suggested by Brecht. At one time, he wanted to keep the house lights half on, so that members of the audience could see one another, and not get too carried away by the drama. He often encouraged smoking in the theatre, because ‘nobody can be fooled while smoking’. He believed that an audience of workers would appreciate watching other people work, operating lights, moving the props and casually preparing themselves for the entries on stage. This emphasis on stage-craft was intended to take away the false mystery from the theatre, its illusory glamour, thus allowing a truer concentration upon the dramatic arguments. Soon theaters were built in Britain which was suitable for such stagecraft. And the British directors learnt from Brecht the effectiveness of the ‘anti-illusion’ approach.

It was much harder to capture the other side of Brecht’s stagecraft, his use of astonishing visual effects and the sheer care with which he chose his props. It was not necessary to pretend that the audience, actually were watching a living room somewhere: a table and chair would do, if they were the ‘right’ table and chair. It was not necessary to disguise set changes on have convincing moon. Brecht argued: dangle it down on a piece of string. The Octagon Theatre, (built in 1967) Bolton had an open stage, whose shape depended upon adjustable patterns of seating.

Brecht also used some of the shock techniques of his Alienation Effect which contribute great success of his plays. He used boards and streamers across the stage to indicate the time and place of the action which is to follow (thus eliminating the “culinary” element of suspense), to contradict the action on the stage (thus forcing the spectator to think for himself), or to address the audience in the way a street orator addresses a crowd. The dramatic action is suddenly and illogically interrupted by shrill songs, very often only tenuously relevant to the plot itself.

The distancing effect is also achieved when the audience has no longer the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place. The use of direct audience-address is one way of disrupting stage illusion and generating the distancing effect. In performance, as the performer observes himself, his objective is, “to appear strange and even surprising to the audience.” He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. These are the most important steps in the liberation of the modern theater from the limitations of the realistic stagecraft. But “Brecht’s most exciting Alienation Effect, however, lies in the human sphere. He likes to present characters who are alienated from themselves and from one another. His figures often seem to move in a vacuum where the most unexpected must be expected. Man is shown as animal with a peculiar smell; his words belie his feelings, his deeds belie his words. The dialogue proceeds erratically, the figures bluff each other as well as the audience.”⁸ By disclosing and making obvious the manipulative contrivances and “fictive” qualities of the medium, the viewer is alienated from any passive acceptance and enjoyment of the play as mere “entertainment.” Instead, the viewer is forced into a critical, analytical frame of mind that serves to disabuse him of the notion that what he is watching is necessarily an inviolable, self-contained narrative. This effect of making the familiar strange serves a didactic function insofar as it teaches the viewer not to take the style and content for granted, since the medium itself is highly constructed and contingent upon many cultural and economic conditions. “Deeply convinced of man’s inhumanity, Brecht harangued his audiences through his Alienation Effect, urging them to *become human*.”⁹

Aristotle was the first theorist of drama but he never wrote any play. He left that work to his followers. Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist of English language but he never wrote any theory regarding drama. In spite of that he followed his own particular pattern of dramaturgy in

all his tragedies so much so that his followers could very easily wring out a particular theory of drama out of his tragedies and as a result Shakespearean tragedies were called Romantic tragedies. He did not follow the classical rules of unities of time, place and action laid down by Aristotle and mixed humour with tragedy. But along with these innovations of dramaturgy he based his tragedies on the basic Aristotelian concept of tragic hero with tragic flaw (Hamartia), tragic waste, and most important of all the function of tragedy which is Catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear (self-identification on the part of the spectator). In the twentieth century Bertolt Brecht wrote theory as well as wrote plays based on his theory of drama revolving around the concept of Alienation Effect which is, as mentioned earlier, is the contrast of identification of oneself with the character. But as far as his plays are concerned (for example *Mother Courage*) it has been said that “Brecht was no Brechtian”, as he could not practice successfully his own theory in his plays.

But the Alienation Effect of Brechtian theatre has been very successfully practiced by most of the absurdist dramatists of the modern age such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, Fernando Arrabal, Edward Albee, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov and others. The Alienation Effect is achieved by them through the minimal stage devices, startling deviation from conventionalism, and avoidance of exaggeration and melodrama. All these are elements that constitute Brecht’s theory of drama.

Samuel Beckett’s most famous works include *Waiting for Godot* in which two tramps wait for someone who never comes; *Krapp’s Last Tape* in which a man listens to recordings of himself at a younger age; *Happy Days*; *Play*; and *Endgame*. The evanescence of man in time and the mystery of human personality and identity are Beckett’s main themes. Individuals are pathetic in their existence and vainly try to find purpose with it. His plays are brilliant poetic images. Beckett appropriated elements from mime, the music hall, circus and commedia Del arte.

Harold Pinter’s plays deal with the essential inexpressibility, the incommunicable essence of the self and soul and confusion over the meaninglessness of life. One cannot express oneself and as such communication gets baffled or frustrated. Along with Beckett and other writers of Paris avant-garde, Pinter has created a revolution in dramatic form. Pinter’s dramatic dialogue avoids discursiveness and does not proceed regularly from premises to conclusion and logic. Severed from the divine roots man is lost and consequently his action becomes senseless, absurd, and useless. Dukore puts the matter thus. “The sensation of metaphysical anguish when confronted by the absurdity of the human condition is the chief theme of the theatre of the absurd, which avoids discursiveness in dramatizing it.”¹⁰

Here language can no longer carry significant meaning; gestures must take the place of words. Through mime and vaudeville, fable and farce, Ionesco has revealed the humour present in human freedom as well as anguish present in our awareness of cosmic absurdity.

Fernando Arrabal’s main preoccupation is with the absurdity of ethical and moral values. In *The Automobile Graveyard* there is a prostitute who follows her profession simply because religion demands that one be kind to one’s neighbour. Similarly in the *Two Executioners* the son who objects to the tortures that his mother inflicts on his father is faced with the dilemma of moral laws: obedience to one’s father, the human goodness that prompts one to save the suffering victim from his tortures, and the need to honour and obey one’s mother. Arrabal merely presents the situation in which several moral laws are contradiction and thus exposes the absurdity of the system of values that accommodates them all.

Edward Albee is one of the few American exponents of Theatre of the absurd. His works include *The Zoo Story* (1958), *The American Dream*; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*; and *The Zoo Story*. *The Zoo Story*, as his plays, projects the image of the emptiness and sterility of the society. This play is a clinically accurate study of schizophrenia, an image of man's loneliness and inability to make contact.”¹¹ It is an image of the difficulty of communication between human beings in our world. *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf* is a classic example of mainstream of Absurdism. Here, two individuals George and Martha live in hatred for each other, yet continue to put up an absurd charade.

End Notes

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