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**MEANING IN MEANINGLESSNESS: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN ABSURD
PLAYS**

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Abstract:

*The Theatre of the Absurd has become a separate genre due to the contemporary phenomena of absurdism in literature. This movement first appeared in post-World War II France as a protest against conventional literary and cultural ideals that held that people were logical beings living in a cosmos that was orderly and understandable. The word "absurd" comes from Albert Camus's Existentialism, which described it as a state of philosophical agony and purposelessness caused by the difference between man and his circumstances. The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was first used in 1961 by critic Martin Esslin to characterize a group of dramatists, including Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, who eschewed realistic dialogue, logical form, and characterization in order to depict the absurdity of human nature. This is demonstrated by Beckett's writings, especially the timeless *Waiting for Godot*, which highlights the "tyrannies of time and language" and the senselessness of life. Although Beckett himself opposed "codified interpretations" of his plays, his writing is sometimes seen as a blend of existentialist and absurdist traditions. The Theatre of the Absurd is modern man's attempt to make sense of an incomprehensible environment rather than just reflecting hopelessness. Playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, and Albee underscore the separation between man and his existence by taking away traditional plot and story and subjecting human action to minute clinical study.*

Keywords: *Absurdism, Theatre of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett, Existentialism, Martin Esslin, etc.*

Absurdism in literature is a modern phenomenon. Absurd drama has come to be recognized as a new genre. The strange theatrical experiment leads to the Theatre of Absurd. The absurd dramatists or 'the School of Paris' shared a common 'Avant-garde' attitude towards the predicament of human beings in the universe, especially the Christian society of Europe. Beckett's plays present the senselessness of life and loss of ideals. The one undeniable influence on Beckett - beginning in 1931 with the publication of an essay - was Proust, whose work reveals those themes which pre-occupy Beckett: the tyrannies of time and language which hinder an awareness of self: 'How am 'I', a temporal being imprisoned in time and space, to escape from realities of the life. Beckett's heroes take refuge in mysticism. Beckett's world is meaningless because of the absence of Godot. His plays have various recurring themes - disillusionment and loss of certitude, metaphysical, existential anguish, helplessness, etc. Beckett's Absurdism throws light on diagnoses the tragic plight of humanity as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings. 'The Theatre of the Absurd' has to be recognised as an isolated group brought together by Esslin Martin. Absurdism is the product of recent theories particularly New Historicism, that has influenced the artist to realise his impulses in New Directive. Both the mood and dramaturgy of Absurdity were anticipated as early as 1896 in Alfred Jarry's French play *Ubu Roi* [Ubu, the King]. The literature has its roots also in the movements of Expressionism and Surrealism, as well as fiction, written in 1920s, of Franz Kafka [The Trial, Metamorphosis]. The current movement, however, emerged in France after the horrors of World War

II, as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values both of traditional culture and traditional literature. This earlier tradition had included the assumptions that human beings fairly rational creatures that live in an at least partially intelligible universe, that they are part of an ordered social structure, and they may be capable of heroism and dignity. Even in defeat. Absurdity lies in the separation between humanity and its cultural, moral, and ideological identity. Albert Camus sees Absurdity as a disparity between 'man' and everything that 'man' uses to identify 'self'. Eugene Ionesco's description of the Absurd concurs with that of Camus.....

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, Martin, 23).

The term Absurd is derived from the Existentialism of Albert Camus and often applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value. Many 20th century writers of prose fiction have stressed the absurd nature of human existence. Notable instances are the novels and stories of Franz Kafka, in which the characters face alarmingly incomprehensible predicaments. The critic Martin Esslin coined the phrase Theatre of the Absurd in 1961 to refer to a number of dramatists of the 1950s [led by Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco] whose works evoke the absurd by abandoning logical form, character and dialogue together with realistic illusion. The classic work of absurdist theatre is Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1952). This work revives some of the conventions of clowning and farce to represent the impossibility of purposeful action and the theatre of the absurd include Edward Albee, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and Vaclav Havel.

Samuel Beckett's stage plays are gray both in colour and in subject matter. The Absurdist label becomes problematic when applied to Beckett because his dramatic works tend to overflow the boundaries which scholars attempt to assign. When we discuss Beckett's plays, the critic inevitably becomes entangled in contradiction. Beckett himself denies "that there is a philosophical system behind the plays." He has his explicit refusal "to reduce them to codified interpretations" (McMillan, 43).

This suggests that to search for such systems or interpretations in Beckett's work is a fruitless endeavor. His objections threaten only those interpretations which "reduce" his work. The challenge for the critic is to evaluate and analyze Beckett in such a way that his works are not reduced but enhanced. The problem with designating Beckett's work as Absurdist is that this interpretation reduces his work. When a critic describes a work as Absurd, that critic does not simply mean that the work is "outrageous" or "nonsensical" or merely silly. Coined by American critic Martin Esslin, the term "Theater of the Absurd" is defined as a.....

kind of drama that presents a view of the absurdity of the human condition by the abandoning of usual or rational devices and by the use of nonrealistic form....Conceived in perplexity and spiritual anguish, the theater of the absurd portrays not a series of connected incidents telling a story but a pattern of images presenting people as bewildered beings in an incomprehensible universe (Holman, 2).

Martin Esslin contrasts this technique of the Absurdist with that of Existentialist theatre in which the meaninglessness of existence is presented "in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning." [p. 24]. Esslin has set up a false dichotomy between these two dramatic traditions. Samuel Beckett's work goes beyond either the Absurd or Existential by actually encompassing both the isms. The duality of his plays allows not only for a depiction of the 'senselessness of life', but also for the emergence of a reasoned, logical understanding of the "irrationality of the human condition." (Esslin, 24). The senselessness of life is the characteristic of Absurdist drama. The irrationality of the human condition is the characteristic of Existentialist drama.' In the introduction to *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin provides a comprehensive explanation of Absurdist Theatre. He quotes Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*

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 (Esslin, 23).

The kind of denotation of Absurdity describes the absurd plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and many absurdistists. Martin Esslin's application of this idea reveals the term's inadequacy in reference to Samuel Beckett. Esslin categorizes Beckett with the likes of Adamov, Ionesco and Genet. All of these are writers belonging to that group of dramatists Esslin calls the Theatre of the Absurd. The Theatre of the Absurd, in Esslin's opinion, strives....."to express its sense of the irrationality of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought (Esslin, 24).

The Theatre of Absurd does not reflect despair and irrational forces but express modern man's endeavour to come to terms with the world in which he lives. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines the term, "Absurd means inharmonious out of harmony with reason". or propriety, plainly opposed to reason and hence ridiculous, silly." In *The Penguin Dictionary of Theatres* [1966], John Russell Taylor writes

The Theatre of Absurd is the term applied to a group of dramatist 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 [Absurd, literary, means out of harmony]. Awareness of this lack of purpose in all we do produces a state of metaphysical anguish which is the central of the writers in the Theatre of Absurd (Taylor, 234).

Absurd drama has to be known as a new genre. Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Robert Pingat, N. M. Simpson, Edward Albee, Fernando Arambell and Gunter Grass have passionately endeavoured to put a man under the microscope and subject to him minute clinical examination. Samuel Beckett writes the plays by intuition. In his plays, absurdity serves the existentialistic interpretation, a kind of hypothesis that test the human activity. In Beckettian plays, absurdity through the conflict and collision with reality and illusion, social, psychological and metaphysical dimensions, with human actions and awareness. His dramatic world is full of absurdities, mysterious, suspense and ambiguities. Yet despite the obscurity of his work and obscurity of his personal life, despite the fact that he has written the plays without actors, acts without words, and novels without plot. Beckett is the applauded and productive playwright. Beckett's concentrated, learned and allusive work, and his insistence on separating his writing his life seems ideal. So the biographical details are hard to find and often contradictory. The theatre of Absurd challenges the long-held tradition of drama. It has no story, no plot. no form, no characterization. it does not convey any philosophy or coherent idea in logical sense.

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