

The Postmodern Drama

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Abstract: Postmodern drama has the absurd-grotesque characteristics. Absurdity is the content of our contemporary drama. Whatever postmodernists and critics have claimed on rejection of modernism can be seen in absurdist drama. Nowadays, life is absurd; without any meaning, goal, or hope to the future and drama, which has been lifelike or at least affected by real life, from Socrates time until now, represents this absurdity. The author of an absurdist drama is not intended to be a social reformist or the savior. He just draws out the image of real world.

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Postmodern drama is one that emerges in postmodern situation; the situation that is began in late modernism era and eventually managed to be dominated. Modernism comes to its end in late nineteenth century, and all efforts of the then philosophers, together with those of early twentieth century, were about on rejection of modernism and its beliefs and representations. The momentum element of modernism was the human credit and the problem-solving ability of his mind. Postmodernism considered such a belief as a useless illusion. That is why postmodern drama, instead of depicting a wise man struggling to overcome the difficulties using his wisdom (i.e. Hamlet); or one trying to go beyond life's limitations (Doctor Faustus); or one who is after improving his mundane life (Macbeth); draws out human beings who are unable to understand their distressed situation (characters of *The Homecoming*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Furry Gorilla*), or those who do nothing to change their current situation (*Waiting for Godot*, and *Homecoming*), or ones whose solutions, if any, are extremely harmful (*Furry Gorilla*).

Ancient Greeks considered humankind as descendants of gods, and Christianity knows the man, although guilty, as a son of God. Meanwhile Darwinism introduced him as a cognate with animals. This recent consideration was a great insult to the human who had been a descendant of gods. This new human being had nothing to do with truth; disable to understand the metaphysics; and ignorant of theology, psychology, and cosmology. This man was entangled with class-historical determinism and embroiled in his sexual complexes. He was subjected to prostitution and a death that was as wide as two epidemic world wars in the heart of modernity. Such human being perpetually unmade from virtue.

This new man was also differed from Dochart's intellectualist man who was in doubt regarding everything, used to contemplate, and the reason for his existence was his thinking and doubting. The new man itself was the subject of thought. A thought that was extremely bitter and gloomy. A thought conjugates doubt. Doubt in new man's merits was the subject of new thought (after sovereignty of rationality was faded). Meanwhile the theater too, went under vicissitude. Grotesque and absurdity became the dominant structure and plot under the effect of dominant nihilism. The postmodern drama perhaps is a bridge for the latest man to become a superman. For Nietzsche philosophy means ascending from the latest man to the highest one, who is the meaning of earth. Superman has to know that his responsibility on earth is just to destroy all nonsense values that people have chosen to judge Good-Devil, right – wrong, and ugliness-beauty.

Unlike the classical -philosophical man whose dramatic symbol was Oedipus Rex, with his philosophical magnanimity and seriousness majesty; and different from modern man whose symbol was Hamlet, educated in philosophy, concerning *to be or not to be*; the postmodern man is experiencing the collapse of all values. Even language is no longer reliable for him. In postmodern drama, regarding the communication, we see people are weaker than their earliest ancestors. They are talking but meaninglessness impedes the transition of the message. Characters in *Waiting for Godot* are the evident samples of such people.

For man in new drama language is a regular mean that has lost its least function (i.e. transition of concepts). The effect of ideas of Nietzsche as the most outstanding philosopher of postmodernism, on other intellectuals of this era can obviously be seen. For instance, Finkelstein refers to language plays. He says

that for modern man there is no basement of thinking. "Signifiers are floated freely, without being guaranteed by gods, so their meanings are understandable only in connection with each other and with other discourses. The world of meaning is broke up, as the floated ice cubes at the river, in such a way that it turns too difficult to talk about meaning in its traditional sense." [1]

Heidegger too, maintains such losing of human's/Dasein's originality as the scourge of routine, which here means imitative acceptance of values of the society. Nietzsche's solution for getting rid of this situation is to deny the current values and try to create innovative ones. Heidegger, following Nietzsche, claims that the solution for Dasein is to consider the values and to try to take possesses on them.

Postmodern drama emerges in such ground. It draws out the absence of values in new world. Postmodern drama itself is not meaningless rather its meaning/content is an emphasis on absence of values in new world. In the absence of philosophy, humanism, and democracy, that used to be the three classical (original) former feet of theater, postmodern drama emerges having the content of absurdity of affections, wisdom, religion, endeavor, and so on. Ionesco says, "I agree with an anti-theater or a non-theater". [2] he represents his reason of agreement with a non-theater or uprooting the classical basements of theater as: "my wish and ambition is to find the live origin of the theater." 3

Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, and their contemporary playwrights were after a new artistic-dramatic way of expression that best expressed the difficulties of the modern man: "what Ionesco wishes is an imaginative, pure, anti-thematic (or anti subjectivism), anti-ideological, anti-realism-socialism, anti- philosophy, anti-psychology, and anti-bourgeoisie theater." 4 it seems like he was after a theater appropriate to modern man's situation (i.e. a norm-breaking theater).

The postmodern drama has the absurd-grotesque specifications. It's better to consider that even those authors who are not classified in an absurd-grotesque classification have arisen some concerns of authors of this genre. For example, Eugene O' Nile in Iced Man refers to the issues like vain waiting, or a waiting that is not except because of idleness. He also refers to machineries, alienation of people, and the decline of lofty and valuable ideals in The Furry Gorilla.

Absurdity is the content of our contemporary drama. Whatever postmodernists and critics have claimed on rejection of modernism can be seen in absurdist drama. Nowadays, life is absurd; without any meaning, goal, or hope to the future, and drama, which has been lifelike or at least affected by real life, from Socrates time until now, represents this absurdity.

Martin Esslin, one who allocated the term *absurd* to a genre in literature, says on this as: "The word *absurd* means the impossibility of trust on the depth of the world's meaning, it is a kind of human's denying of his bigoted believe in nature, world, and the mission he has taken in to his responsibility. It is a state that has always been in the cyclic system of philosophy." [3]

"The bigoted believe of human in the nature and world, and the mission that he maintains for himself", is the same as what that in enlightenment era (beginning of modernity) happened by changing the name of *divine providence* to *development*. That was nothing except overcoming of western man on the nature, using the technology, in order to create a new world (rational-industrial utopia). The complete actualization of this new industrial utopia was coincidence with two epidemic world wars and stirred up the dream of the people.

The absurdist and machinery life is reflected in theater, and horror and anxiety of being solitude and bewildered can be understand from all types of theater. Dialogue is not in existence; neither in the form of what Haggel proposed (the resultant of confliction of two thoughts in the frame of the third one) nor in the form of Marks proposition (the confliction of two thoughts; winning of one and the failure of another). Dialogue is left behind. Nobody believes in any thought to make challenge with others base on that. Since there is no belief, nothing is rejected or accepted. That is why there is no motion in new drama. While in classical and modern drama the confliction of two thoughts formed the motion of the drama, characters in new drama are experiencing the collapse of all thoughts.

The character of new drama is a traveler who has come as far as 3000 years: from mythmaking to cosmology; to philosophy; to God believing; to modernism; to postmodernism. Characters of absurdist dramas are exhausted elderly (Beckett), or if they are youths, they are connected with or dependent on nowhere (Pinter). Although known, they have no relationship with others; they are stranger with traditions and tyranny of customs (Ionesco); still they don't do anything to change the situation.

The character of new drama looks like a traveler who was away from his hometown for many years, and now on his return, he finds out that all neighbors have gone (or have changed) so he is bewildered, distressful, alien and unsupported.

An absurdist character wants nothing because there is nothing leftover. This theater is: "a reflection of all disasters that are the significant features of post-wars era: disasters such as occupation, Nazism, and chaos."

The lack of meaning in life, the declining of the lofty goals or even the mundane ones, the collapse of basement of valued beliefs, lack of confliction

between an individual(subject) and other entities(objects), ends in missing and denying the subject. The devaluation of human's high values together with their refusal in accepting them as they are, and finding no substitution for them, has made the man of absurdist drama evacuated from all previous identity. In fact, we are facing another kind of human.

Unlike for Oedipus Rex, who once managed to be honored of being innocent and reaching happiness, after spending a distressful life and passing a difficult test of course, (Oedipus in Clinus), there is no hope for Branzhe, who is left alone among the rhinoceroses, to reach happiness; for Vladimir and Estragon to meet the Godot or to go after their business.; for Lucky and Pozzo to arrive to their destinations; and for Kerapp to make change in his ongoing absurdist life. This all is because achieving these goals and ideals doesn't matter for the hero of new drama.

The authority of family is destroyed (as in Endgame, and Homecoming). Authority of father and mother is declined to the value of a trashcan (Endgame). Female-mother, who used to have a sacral authority, is turned to stuff for group sex in the family (Homecoming). The leader turns to a beast, and the savior is become an unreliable liar (Waiting for Godot). Surprisingly, all these happen in a complete ignorant of people: as if, nothing is happening.

Of course, Ionesco and Beckett consider the word *absurd* as a label and reject it:

"Interviewer: Critics consider you and Eugene Ionesco among the writers of absurdist drama?

Beckett: These are just what they say, labels that make no sens." [4] Ionesco: "I don't like labels. They are too much naively. They make no sense."

Meanwhile Esslin insists on his opinion:

"Kaamyabi Mask:" Ionesco never admits such label on his theater

Esslin: That is true, for the author himself is not a theoretician. He just offers a theory together with his own personal idea. He doesn't want to be among theoreticians, whoever they would be. Nevertheless, I have talked with him. I think he agrees with the interpretation of his plays. Moreover, it is just in the frame of interpretations that one can find descriptive formula, because you can't put a work into a certain category if you don't know the best word in typology. I'll give you an example: the elephant is a mammal, but it may don't know this. So it's not necessary for an object that is located to a certain category to be aware of its classification because the classification has taken part outside." [5]

Modern criticism enables every single reader to criticize a work in the way he wants. This is why Ionesco and Beckett can't reprehend a critic because of his criticism. Apparently, Esslin is right. Although his idea too, is not definite and perpetual: in its best, it's a

temporary one. It's better to take into the consideration that the authors of this genre including Kafka, Khmu, Sartre, Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco, Adamou, Able, and others, who, despite of their differences have some similarities, are not absurdist. This means that they don't praise or offer the absurdity. Their works also aren't absurdist. In other words, *absurd* is a movement against absurdity. The point here is that the hero, or as it better to say a non-hero of the modern drama doesn't suggest a solution in order to change the current situation, because he is not supposed to play the role of the Savior and condescend to a new authority. He himself is an abnormal and a norm-breaker.

The author of postmodern drama too, intends not to be a savior or a social reformer. He just depicts the real world hoping that the observation of this depiction by a visitor could be ended in elimination of the imperfections. As the observation of one's image in the mirror help him to wipe out the mess. Nevertheless, the reformer always suggests a way to correction. It seems like the author is not egotist in the way the reformer is. Ionesco says: "I can't be humble and claim that I want to educate my people. I don't train others; I just testify. I don't explain rather I try to say what I understand." [6]

He also on the term absurdity explains: "in 1950s, we created a theater that had no similarity to those that had have existence from ancient times until then, so we did not know what we would call it. However, a British critic said it is the absurdist theater. *Absurd* was a popular word in that time. [7]

The life is meaningless. The aim in and from living is to survive from the savage system which wastes no time omitting the unfavorable members. No matter whom this *unfavorable* member is, from Yenck of The Furry Gorilla, to Beranzhe of The Rhinoceros, to a Professor in Philosophy of The Homecoming. New world throws the man who failed to do his function just as system requires him, to the wastebasket; just as an used automobile that is send to an automobile graveyard.

Beranzhe is solitary, not because all even his mistress has left him alone, but for his failure to be a rhinoceros and become the same as others. Therefore, the new world imposes an inevitable determinism that the result of its acceptance is the animalization of the human beings and its rejection means being destroyed. All the same, it is stressful and meaningless.

In the plays of absurd, characters are the caricatures of the ideal man, being defined prior to 20th century. They have lost their identity and have nothing else except a title of Mr. or Miss., Or a number in an registration book. They are evacuated from self of family, self of religion, self of nationality, and self of

ideology, because these issues are considered as equal as nothing or absurd.

Therefore, what remains is an ego without nationality, religion, etc., who has to protect this remained *nothingness* despite of the world that he is stranger with, and the creatures that understand nothing of his passions and emotions.

It seems like what is important to the writer of the postmodern drama is the concept of "nothingness". If we give up this concern, we will be in the same skeptical hallucination of modernity era. While Prometheus, Oedipus, and Sisyphus stand against the gods of destiny; Antigone, Elektra, and Hamlet were blunt and brave in declaring their disapproval face to face with the King; Estragon, Vladimir, Lucky, Branzhe never even think of being opponent because they know no ideal to move toward. Until the very end of the drama, there is no essential change in worldviews and functions of these characters. They're static characters who have no specific ideology to do anything to protect it. They have no specific specifications or eye-catching qualities that can be considered as discrimination of them from others. Although Branzhe doesn't shave his face, is always drunkard, and is late in his work, he never ever considers these habits as personal ones, rather he sees the others right in their criticism and so there's no conflict between he and his people.

This motionlessness can also be investigated in other works. In "Waiting for Godot", the waiters are always expecting the Godot's arrival, standing by a *black and bare tree*, receiving a message from him about his soon arrival time to time, but he never comes. The life of the only character of "Krupp's Latest Tape" is limited to listen to the tapes he already recorded. The characters of Homecoming are just after their sexual desire's satisfaction. If sometimes a social position dedicated to a person in such works, in Homecoming for instance, this is so contradictory to his deeds in a way that is no room for his position.

In the works of absurd the time and location of the plays have no clear, realistic, and integrated relation with the plot. In such plays the time and location often stir our minds up in a vague way, because here world is depicted as strange and horrible place. It's true that Ionesco and Pinter introduces an English or a French society respectively, but actually they offers not any believable location in an particular time period. That's why this unclear time and place zone can be generalized to any time and anywhere.

Through the inevitable domination of the western culture, the Western sickness finds its way to other countries. The media (movies, T.V, satellite, radio, internet, etc.) is the strongest means of western unifier and the witch-architect of global village's process in making the western globalization and remains no

single culture and civilization or society secure. For this reason, the "by-the-country road black and bare tree" could be planted just in the yard of any house; the invasion of the rhinoceroses could happen in every city; each single child might keep his parents in a wastebasket; or every single daughter-in-law may turn to a means for family's group sex.

The relationship between people is among the other issues that authors of absurd have been engaged in. people can't make relationship with each other any more. Perhaps they were reluctant to do so at a time, a time upon which individuality was considered as a value, but nowadays they can't do so even if they want to. As Zarathustra of Nietzsche points out the disability of language as: these fellows don't understand me. I am not a mouth for these ears.

The meaninglessness of the life is shown not only in the way of living but also in the dialogues. Discourses are meaningless; language is failed on its essential function; and people are afraid of this disability. This issue is portrayed in the works of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter.

Characters in Pinter's works talk to each other nevertheless this talking is absolutely inhumane. It even seems that the relation which is made is also a mechanical defined one. People's relationships are the same as relations in marketing: the female is or has a property that all men are interested in, and all discourses are just made to get that property, not on anything in connection with humanitarian relationships.

Ionesco says: "when people don't think in the way you do; when they have opposite ideas with yours; it seems like you don't have the same language. It seems like they can't understand you, and even are unable to understand the language you use. When there is an epidemic ideological disease, it turns to a blind dogma. That way discourse is impossible and one feels his people no longer are of his type or his race. There's a phenomenon here called separation, upon which you think your people are rhinoceros and vice versa" [14]. "the biggest part of my struggle has been a deaf conversations, for walls have not ears and people considering each other the same as walls. It seems like nobody interested in talking to others, rather people all want to make obedient out of others or humiliate them." [15]

Branzhe's discourse with others is the conversation of the deaf. It's the conversation of a *dreamed dumb* for the *all-deaf* people. Lucky's rhetoric, together with his nonsense words, has more to do with the breaking of the normal frame of regular relationships and the instability of structure of the new language.

In The Homecoming, Teddy is living in a family where his wife feels no shame of being a prostitute, and his father, uncle, and brothers all wish they could

get her to bed. He has got nothing to say, and in case he has, nobody would hear him.

Amid the circumstances where a single symbol stands for innumerable concepts, and a single concept could be understood from thousands of symbols, this accidental and open-ended turning of conversation that Bart calls it *the endless game of the opposite mirrors*, is both the cause of establishment and destruction of the life and social basements. This dominated lack of connection impedes the creation of an organization called *family*.

In works of absurd, contradictory to classical ones, there is not any logical cause and effect relationship between the accidents. This is because first, there is no action in part of a person so that we can consider the reaction of others as the contradiction or a response to it, and second, no body possesses a particular idea to make challenge upon. Eventually the plot of absurdist drama is a cyclic narration far from the daily life that is not in line with any logic. Dialogue, which is an argument (or a discourse), and made in opposition to other's speeches, has no instance here. Nobody is something to say something that requires a response. Moreover, even if the situation goes another way, there will be nobody to respond to it. What is seen in these works is "the lack of an obvious and coherent story, or a classical plot".

The personality of the character of new/postmodern drama is a subordination of the community's conditions. A community that besieges people and it is able to determine their personalities for them. The person himself, depend on the circumstances, is completely inactive. "Is it more honorable for a man to bear the arrow of infelicitous fate or to pick his sword and stand against the storm of disaster and puts an end to it?" [18]. such protest of Hamlet about social circumstances never comes to a modern man's mind, let leave the act of him alone. In one hand, the treads of bureaucratic net are interlaced the hands, feet, and minds of people in a way that they do and think of just what the system requires them, and in the other hand, through different mechanism (or what Marks calls it *the ideology*), it introduces the current situation as the "promised heaven" to the point that no healthy mind approve opposing it. Therefore, it, in the cost of their absolute obedient, offers welfare to people until they forget about the pain of being tighten up. However, this "hell" is much better than a utopia of a citizen of third-world country, who is sentenced to live under the bared autocracy.

The character of the postmodern drama is subordination to these conditions. He is not able to

neither understand the circumstances nor want to, or is able to take any measures against it.

Drama is no longer a subordination to act or will of the main character (i.e. the hero). The will of gods has turned into the will of Matrix, the epidemic dominated net on life. A net that technocrats, technology, capital, factory, and scientific facts are its consisting parts.

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