



Illusion of reality, existential dread and broken communication as the major themes depicted in Eugene Ionesco's 'the chairs'

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Abstract— *The Theatre Of The Absurd was one of the most influential theatres to exist in the post war age. It staged some of the most legendary plays to have existed in human history. It was believed to have originated as a result of the social scenario that emerged post second world war. Having traits or tragicomedy, inspired by surrealism and dadaism as well, these plays hold a significant in the dramatic history of world theatre. Among the famous playwrights associated with the Theatre Of The Absurd was Eugene Ionesco. This paper thereby focuses on one of his masterpieces, 'The Chairs.' Highlighting the major themes of existential dread, broken communication and illusion of reality, this paper attempts to analyze the playwright's perspective towards the inclusion of these themes. It also provides a brief background of the evolution of the themes represented in the play in association with the absurdist theatre as a whole. Lastly, it presents the close parallels that exist between the reality and the absurdist play from the playwright's point of view. The paper thereby attempts to present a clear understanding of the origin as well as the inculcation of the three major themes in the play.*

Keywords— *Absurdity, Anxiety, Broken Communication, Existentialism, Trauma.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, dramas and theatrical performances have been a part of the human society. Earlier considered as a symbol of entertainment for the elite, these very plays paved the way for the oppressed to express their sufferings and thoughts eventually imbibing ideologies that led to the development of revolutionary changes. Theatrical plays are considered to be the perfect amalgamation of dialogues and performances leading to a visual theatrical presentation of the playwright's thoughts and ideas, creating an impact stronger than reading on the minds of the people who watch it. Different kinds of theatres gained significance with the changing times, in the form of comedy, tragedy, satire, musicals and many more. One such form of theatre that attained the spotlight during the post war (World War II) period was The Theatre of The Absurd. 'The Chairs' written by Eugene Ionesco was considered to be one of the most astonishing plays belonging to the Absurdist Theatre.

1.1. Theatre Of The Absurd

Written primarily by European playwrights in the late 1950s, The Theatre Of The Absurd gained prominence during the post war age. The name itself states the style of theatre these plays represent. Coined by Martin Esslin for the very first time in his essay, Absurdist theatre incorporated Albert Camus's theory of 'The Myth Of Sisyphus' describing Sisyphus being stuck in the endless cycle of a meaningless act such as pushing the boulder down the hill again and again till the end of time, and reflected on the absurdity of the same. This form of theatre focused on the absurdist nature of human society that lacked meaning and purpose. The sense of void felt by the people due to the traumas of the post war age and the uncertainty of life that prevailed were depicted by these absurdist plays. Prominent names associated with the Theatre Of The Absurd were Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and Eugene Ionesco.

1.2. Major Themes Of Absurdist Plays

Living up to the very term 'absurd', the plays lacked structure, form and violated every norm followed by the plays earlier. An important reason behind the same was to show the change in the human society that also lacked a sense of structure and was devoid of purpose and meaning post war. Existentialism, alienation, anxiety and trauma formed the vital themes along with the loss of meaning, isolation and devaluated language. Although the major themes recurred in most of the absurdist plays, playwrights had their own unique way of presenting them in their plays. In fact, certain playwrights also included intriguing themes that presented the underlying scenario of the society in a vivid way. Eugene Ionesco's 'The Chairs' presented themes in a similar manner.

1.3. Overview Of The Works Of Eugene Ionesco And His Association To The Absurdist Theatre

Known as one of the most prominent names associated with The Theatre Of The Absurd, Eugene Ionesco was a Romanian-French playwright who wrote mostly in French and was a pioneer figure associated with the French Avant-garde theatre. His famous works include 'The Bald Soprano', 'Rhinoceros', 'The Lesson' and many more. Ionesco's plays focused largely on the solitude and insignificance of the human existence. He is remembered as one of the most important dramatists of the twentieth century and is greatly appreciated for his contribution to the Absurdist Theatre. One of his most outstanding plays, written and staged in the twentieth century was 'The Chairs'. Like most absurdist playwrights, Ionesco also portrayed significant themes associated to the society back then, however he also resorted to peculiar methods for representing the same, as seen in 'The Chairs'. This paper intends on touching upon this very topic. "What are the major themes depicted in 'The Chairs'?" shall be the main focus of this paper. The paper shall also attempt to understand Ionesco's reason for incorporating the themes the way he did.

II. SYNOPSIS OF 'THE CHAIRS'

Written and staged in 1952, 'The Chairs' (French: Les Chaises) was a 'tragic farce' play by Eugene Ionesco. It was considered to be one of the most magnificent absurdist play for its representation of the reality of human life in the most surreal way possible. The play revolves around two main characters known throughout the play as Old Man and Old Woman. For almost entire play, both the characters are seen frantically arranging for chairs for their invisible guests who would be coming to hear an orator reveal the Old Man's message. The play begins with the Old Man and woman indulging in nonsensical discussions about themselves with

a constant repetition of dialogues and intentional roleplay as such. They then begin with the arrangement of chairs as their invisible guests arrive and begin having disconnected conversations with them. The rest of the play showcases their grotesque thoughts through discussions. The denouement of presents the overwhelmed reaction of the Old Man and Old Woman upon being graced by the presence of an omniscient 'Emperor' followed by the arrival of the orator. The play ends with the two committing suicide with the belief that nothing could get any better by jumping out the very window the Old Man stood by at the beginning. The message is never truly disclosed and ultimately it is revealed that the orator was in fact deaf and mute but does try to say something, almost gibberish, bringing the play to an end. Although the plot overview simply touches on the absurdist elements of the play, the themes tend to reflect on the same in a profound manner.

III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MAJOR THEMES

A theme refers to an idea or concept that tend to recur in a work of art. Some of the recurring themes seen in Ionesco's 'The Chairs' are alienation, meaninglessness of life, mental decay, death and timelessness. However, the themes that are at the very heart of the play are the illusion of reality, broken communication and existential dread.

4.1. Illusion Of Reality

Throughout the play, it is seen that the Old Man and Old Woman constantly keep themselves occupied by rearranging chairs for invisible guests and even indulge in meaningless conversations with them. An attempt to fill the room with illusionary guests is understood as the couple's way of dealing with the loneliness and emptiness that lingers in their lives. They even hallucinate being cramped up by the guests to simply fill the vacant space in their lives that, in a way, haunts them. They seem to enjoy the comfort they attain from creating an illusion of reality that is poles apart from the actual one. The Old man and Old Woman also try to satisfy themselves by constantly believing that the orator shall arrive and deliver a magnificent speech with respect to the Old man's message, maybe hinting at their consistent attempt to hold on to something that does not exist in reality. The couple's delight upon witnessing the arrival of an 'Emperor' and the Old Woman stating that they shall die in full glory, while sobbing, simply portrays their need to live within the illusion of reality created by them and alluding to death upon nearing its destruction. It depicts their desperate need to keep their illusions intact to save them from facing the unfathomable truth. The fact that both of them commit suicide upon the arrival of the orator, who is the only character, in the flesh, to appear in the play,

could be seen as an example of the couple being unable to acknowledge the harsh realities of their life and thereby choosing death over facing the actual picture. Hence, it could be stated that the illusion of reality is one of the most essential themes of the play. It is rather seen as driving force of the play until the very end.

4.2. Broken Communication

Yet another aspect of the play that seems to exist consistently, is the inconsistency of language and communication. The conversations between the Old Woman and the Old Man, their interactions with the guests as well as the final words of the play spoken by the orator display broken language and disfigured speech elements. The Old Man and Old Woman addressing each other as husband and wife while indulging in pointless roleplay of mother and son also shows the uncertain dynamics between the two that ultimately fuels the broken communication between them. The discussions that the couple indulge in with the invisible guests wherein the audience only hears dialogues such as, “yes, yes, yes. Not at all.”, “Yes?,” “No!?” also showcase lack of understanding considering that the audience is only introduced to one side of the conversation. The couple also has a brief discussion about their son, wherein the Old Woman refers to him leaving them, even alluding to his death whereas the Old Man refuses to validate the same. This is yet again an example, not only of mental decay but all of the lack of communication that existed between the two. The Old Woman also has a discussion with the invisible guests wherein she states, “Do you know, my husband has never been understood. But at last his hour has come.” The line clearly reflects on the fragmented speech and communication of the Old Man as well as subtly hints at the Old Woman’s lack of comprehending. The ultimate display of splintered language is seen in the orator’s final speech, “Mmm, Mmm, Gueue, Gou, Gu. Mmm, Mmm, Mmm, Mmm.” as well as Ionesco’s final stage directions that clearly display the inadequate representation of thoughts, shattered language and communication making it a dominant theme in the play.

4.3. Existential Dread

Existentialism refers to the belief that human life is primarily devoid of purpose however it is up to an individual to provide meaning to his/her own life. The basic definition of Existentialism thereby states that ‘Existence precedes essence.’ Ironically, Existential dread forms the underlying Essence of the play. Ionesco himself stated that the main theme of ‘The Chairs’ is ‘nothingness.’ Throughout the play, the couple is seen constantly arranging and rearranging chairs for their invisible guests that will be arriving to hear the Old Man’s message. Not only did the actions lack meaning and purpose but the main

element of focus, the Old Man’s message that was to be conveyed by the Orator, also was a failure considering he was deaf and mute. It could therefore be stated that all the actions in the play had no meaning or point to them. This could, in a way, be considered a depiction of the meaninglessness felt during that age. The monotony and repetition seen in the conversations of the Old Woman also represent the cyclical nature of their lives reflecting on the existential dread felt by them. The empty chairs further become a representation of the couple’s attempt to escape the existential truth that their lives were devoid of meaning and purpose. The Old Man refusing to deliver his message himself and hiring an orator to do so who is, in fact deaf and mute indicates the Old Man’s fear of responsibility and thereby his inability to face the reality of his time. The Old Man and Old Woman feeling cramped by the invisible crowd could be seen as portrayal of their chaotic thoughts about the existing reality which they detest. The chairs and the invisible crowd also become a metaphor for the existential void that is embodied in the play. It would be fair to say that the existential dread is intricately woven into the very core of the play.

IV. UNDERSTANDING IONESCO’S PERSPECTIVE WITH RESPECT TO THE THEMES

Like most Absurdist playwrights, Eugene Ionesco also focused on a number of themes that portrayed the reality of the human society back in the day. However, Ionesco used his peculiar methods to do the same. Through this play and its characters, Ionesco presented the gruesome truth about his society. Through his characters, he explained the feelings that existed among the people of the society. A sense of uncertainty that prevailed among the people when they saw the very weapons created for progress and protection laid the foundation of a war so brutal. This very essence of uncertainty was captured by Ionesco in his play. The uncertainty of the Old Man and Old Woman seen through their broken communication is a depiction of the same. The way the Orator that the couple and the invisible guests were seen counting on, turned out to be deaf and mute, indicated the loss of hope and uncertainty about the future among the people of the post war age. Ionesco brilliantly portrays serious themes such as existential dread, illusion of the reality as well as broken communication through trivial elements such as an old couple rapidly arranging chairs and indulging in baseless conversations. Gravely serious themes such as suicide, death, trauma and anxiety are casually presented through the exchange of dialogues between the couple and their guests. What could be understood from this is that Ionesco deliberately used this method of presenting the themes in order to make the audience realize that the topics that earlier appeared as

intense and frightening were now apart of their reality. He tried to convey to the audience that their worst nightmares had indeed come true. The element of timelessness is also subtly portrayed in the play wherein no one is certain about the time the Orator shall arrive and the only time they mention it is within their frivolous conversations indicating the lack of importance given to the concept of time. Therefore, it is seen that Eugene Ionesco discreetly touches upon the noteworthy themes of the society by meddling with the traditional structure and form of the play in his own remarkable way.

V. CONCLUSION

‘The Chairs’ by Eugene Ionesco is therefore seen as one of the most marvellous plays during the post war age and is widely appreciated till date. Themes such as uncertainty, alienation, broken language, illusion of reality and existential dread that presented the reality of that age were depicted accurately through the play. The reason the play continues to inspire even today could be that the unsettling themes of that age linger in the human society till date. It may have taken a different form from the way it was depicted in the absurdist plays but its presence in the twenty first century cannot be denied.

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