

M.A (English)

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Unit - VI

Topic : The Absurd Drama

The Absurd Drama refers to a literary movement popularized throughout European countries from the 1940s to approximately 1989. It connects itself with the theories of French-Algerian philosopher Albert Camus, in particular his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942. In this essay, Camus introduced his *Philosophy of the Absurd*, in which he argues that man's quest for meaning and truth is a futile endeavour; he compares man's struggle to understand the world and the meaning of life to Sisyphus, a famous figure in Greek mythology condemned to an existence of rolling a heavy stone up a mountain only to watch it roll to the bottom. In the words of Martin Esslin :-

"The Theatre of Absurd" is an intellectual shorthand for a complex pattern of similarities in approach, in mode of group of plays that have common set of philosophical premises."

Critics believe that Theatre of the Absurd arose as a movement from the doubts and fears surrounding World War II and what many people saw as the degeneration of traditional moral and political values. The movement flourished in France, Germany, and England; as well as in Scandinavian countries. Several of the founding works of the movement include Jean Genet's *The Maids* (1947), Eugene Ionesco's



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The Bald Soprano (1950), Arthur Adamov's Ping Pong (1955), and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1953). Beckett's death in 1989 is said to mark the close of the movement's popularity. Irving Wacziarg lists its silent feature as :-

- (i) A static situation that does not progress but only expands
- (ii) Substitution of an inner landscape for the outer world
- (iii) Lack of any clear division between fantasy and fact
- (iv) A free attitude towards time which can expand or contract according to subjective requirements.
- (v) A fluid environment which projects mental condition in the form of visual metaphors.
- (vi) An obsession with defeat, despair, fear and death.
- (vii) An iron-precision of language and construction as the writer's only defence against the chaos of living experience.

Above all, the hallmark of Absurd drama is its total rejection of all rationality in plot, characterisation and dialogue and the projecting of a vision of a world in which man is out of harmony with the Universe.

The Absurd Drama is best understood when compared with the conventional well made play. A well made play has a clearly defined plot with a beginning, a middle and an end. It is tightly structured. Such play presents sharply drawn characters who are convincingly motivated. The dialogue is not only witty but also dialectical. The play presents a problem or a theme that is unmistakably understood by the audience. Any play by Shaw or Ibsen has all



all these characteristics. The Absurd play, on the contrary, flouts all these age honoured conventions. It has absolutely no story, it starts at an arbitrary point and ends as arbitrarily as it begins. It has no linear progression, its movement is rather circular in that it ends where it starts. Its characters are hardly recognisable and they are not in the least motivated. Any part of the dialogue can be assigned to any character we like.

The dialogue far from being brilliant, is pointless, discursive, banal, often degenerating in to meaningless bubble. It does not hold up a mirror to nature. Rather it represents a dream or a nightmare.

A well-made play is based on three common assumptions.

- (i) There is a cause and effect relationship in life
- (ii) Character exists
- (iii) Language communicates

The absurd play rejects all these assumptions. Its basis assumption in life is irrational and that man is thrown in to the world for no purpose. Life itself is a contingency. Death defies all logic and it is the greatest reality of life. The Absurd playwright thinks that character personality is a myth. Man is a ridiculous creature in a meaningless universe. He can not act but he is always acted on. Lastly language is no more an intelligent tool for communication. Human experiences in their extreme states are incommunicable.

The absurd play therefore tries to communicate a vision not a story or a theme through an elusive static image or a complex pattern of images. One does not ask the



question. "What will happen next?" in an Absurd play but rather 'what is happening here?' or what human significance does it have for us?

The Absurd Drama is a manifestation of the change of mood that has come over our century. There is no doubt a pervading sense of disillusionment, a collapse of all previously held beliefs. There are social, political and philosophical reasons for this phenomenon. The waning of religious that had started with Nietzsche's declaration 'God is dead' (1883) the breakdown of liberal faith in the inevitable progress of man, the disillusionment with the hopes of radical social revolutions predicted by Marx; the relapse into barbarism, mass murder in the second world war etc. led to a sort of philosophical stagnation.