

RATIONALIZING THE IRRATIONAL: IONESCO'S ABSURDIST VISION IN *THE CHAIRS*

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Abstract

*The theatre of the absurd was practised and popularised during the 1950s, a time marked by disillusionment and existential crisis as a direct impact of the World War II. Using the non-conventional, apparently illogical, inconsistent and nightmarish activities as its form which is also non-realistic, the playwrights of this school drew their philosophical stance from existentialism and shaped their artistic production following the techniques of expressionism and surrealism. They basically expound an existential ideology with implicit reference to humanity's loss or lack of religious, philosophical and cultural roots by depicting the "lonely, confused, and often anguished individual in an utterly bewildering universe". In the present paper, I propose to analyse Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* as one of the most appropriate specimen of the theatre of absurd by considering the apparent absurdity employed by the playwright in the plot as well as in the structure. Attempts will also be made to show how the play is a perfect justice to present the psychodynamics of the individuals of the post-World War II period marked by isolation and crisis.*

Keywords: illogical; theatre of the absurd; psychodynamics; post-World War II; existential crisis.

"The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter — these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable."

—Albert Camus

Primarily centred in Paris the theatre of the absurd conventions was a momentous theatrical movement that broke out in Europe immediately after the conclusion of the World War II as a direct reaction and transformation from the naturalist and realist theatre and as a reverberation of existential school of philosophy. As a cultural phenomenon this atypical theatrical form was basically instituted as a protest against man's apocryphal existence during

the politically portentous phase of the 1950s and “confront their public with a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention.” (“The Theatre of the Absurd 3) Historically speaking, the root of the theatrical tradition of absurd drama lies in two twentieth century philosophical cum artistic movements of expressionism and surrealism which “propose to distort external reality, such as the use of dreamlike images and an alternative ordering of logic which defies logic, space, and time, are found in many plays considered to be expressionistic as well.” (Saddik 51-52) The term was first coined by Martin Esslin in his 1961 book *The Theatre of the Absurd* where the critic defines this category of theatre as something that “strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.” (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 03) Often labelled as “anti-plays”, these plays are characterized as theatre that strives to present the absurdity of individual’s existence in a purposeless world by strange or improbable means. In their plays the absurdist playwrights “questioned the nature of human existence by presenting a world without logic or morals, and without the using conventional dramatic language, plot and narrative.” (Roudane 499) In fact, these plays directly deal with the “basic issues and problems of our age, in a uniquely efficient and meaningful manner, so that they meet some of the deepest needs and unexpressed yearnings of their audience.” (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 03)

Major proponents of the mid twentieth century Theatre such as Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco are often labelled as producers of Absurdist literature which is essentially an offshoot of the Existential philosophy imbibed with modern man’s overwhelming sense of meaninglessness, anxiety, crisis and of course alienation. Even, Ionesco himself is of the opinion that “All history is nothing but a succession of Crisis- rupture reputation resistance...and of attempts to return to positions that have been abandoned.” (Bowden 230) Such crisis in Ionesco’s era is in large extent the resultant of World War II and the threat of Nuclear annihilation that generated feeling of hopelessness and futility and therefore, the question of human “Existence” pervades mostly in the then literature and also in Ionesco’s works like *The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, *Jack or the Submission* and *The Chairs* but significantly with variations and richness.

Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994) is a Romanian born French playwright, whose turbulent childhood and unsettling Youth instigates his concern for the absurdity of human existence and aspirations, the hollowness of so called conventions an inability of proper communication between Writer and audience. His own experience in various spheres of life, like his attending the Punch and Judy spectacle at Luxembourg Garden, his study in the University of Bucharest, responsibility as French teacher, have attributed much in his compositions and it is well perceptible from his own speech: “Everything has only confirmed what I have seen, what I have understood in my childhood”. He started his career by publishing writings in various literary magazines, including essays, poetry, and criticism, but public recognition of his talent is manifested with his anti-play, *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and

The Chairs (1952). In these plays, Ionesco's uniqueness becomes prevalent in his presentation of the 'human existence' within the periphery of Theatre and in his utmost endeavour to proliferate apparently inexplicable meanings of life. Subtitled as "A Tragic Farce" the play *The Chairs* is basically a dramatization of a world described by Camus as absurd. And in order to project man's irrationality, estrangement, and helplessness Ionesco uses here the irrational itself. The play is the portrayal of the psychodynamics of two elderly characters, probably the last survivors of the world, an Old man, aged 95 and an Old Woman, aged 94 and their sheltering in a house surrounded by water. The world presented here is a world devoid of any communication. Here we get these two characters frantically arranging chairs for some invisible guests who would attend their island-home to hear one orator, and the list include "everyone", involving almost everyone of the post-apocalyptic world. Metaphorically, the invisibility of the guests refers to the fact that the two characters are the last two people of the world. But before the commencement of the orator's speech, the two commit suicide. Subsequent incidents show us that the orator is also a "deaf-mute", unable share and hear anything. The play concludes with the fading sound of an audience which was claimed by Ionesco as the most significant part and described by him as "The last decisive moment of the play should be the expression of ... absence". The playwright commented as the Orator leaves:

At this moment the audience would have in front of them ... empty chairs on an empty stage decorated with streamers, littered with useless confetti, which would give an impression of sadness, emptiness and disenchantment such as one finds in a ballroom after a dance; and it would be after this that the chairs, the scenery, the void, would inexplicably come to life (that is the effect, an effect beyond reason, true in its improbability, that we are looking for and that we must obtain), upsetting logic and raising fresh doubts. (*Four Plays* 164)

Though alienation as a condition absurdity is a homogenous conviction usually subscribed by most of the existentialist thinkers as their central philosophical tenet, a significant heterogeneity exist in their stance for its treatment: Albert Camus viewed it in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* as

"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." (Camus 18)

whereas for Ionesco "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" and fore-shadowing of such theme is well perceptible from the isolated setting of the Island house and minimal stagecraft in the play *The Chairs*. Here, both of the two central characters, the Old Man and Old Woman are presented in a semi-circular stage with dimming light and outside their house, there is nothing but Water: "Ah! this house, this island, I can't

get used to it. Water all around us . . . water under the windows, stretching as far as the horizon" (*Four Plays* 113), and this is somehow echoing Coleridge's famous lines from "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" – "Water, water everywhere", which makes them, "Alone on a wide wide sea!" (Coleridge) and this sensation of loneliness, separated from the mainland, is evident from the Woman's words: "It(water) makes me dizzy" (*Four Plays* 113). Here, the concern is not only with the geographical isolation, rather Ionesco is perhaps attempting to emphasise the barrenness in Modern Man's existence which can also be discerned in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon, stands in pair outside the society.

To bring forth the complicated issue of human Existence in a seemingly traumatized world to a post-World War II audience, the great masters of Theatre of Absurd generally sought refuge to the genre of 'Tragi-Comedy'. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a 'tragi-comedy in two acts and Ionesco too deliberately uses such a mixture of genre in *The Chairs*, which is 'A Tragic Farce'. Importantly, Ionesco's gesturing towards such genealogy is not simply ironic, perhaps he is pointing to the inseparability of the Tragic and the Comic in a world where the moral order that guarantees both tragedy and comedy has dissolved leaving human being in a Void or Nothingness. Regarding the play under discussion, Ionesco himself says:

"The subject of the play is not the message, nor the failures of life, nor the moral disaster of the two old people, but the chairs themselves; that is to say, the absence of people, the absence of the emperor, the absence of God, the absence of matter, the unreality of the world, metaphysical emptiness. The theme of the play is nothingness" (Towarnicki 9).

In this play the Void is extended with the arrangement of the empty chairs for the invisible guests including the Belle, Photo-engraver, the Colonel, the Newspaper Men, the Emperor and even "the post-office employees, the innkeepers, and the artists, everybody who is a little intellectual, a little proprietary" (Ionesco 121) and the more guests arrive the more emptiness is suggested. Such void is not altogether negative rather it generates a sense of positive absence blurring the distinction between the Real and Unreal which is explicitly evident in the end where there is "the rows of empty chairs" (*Four Plays* 159) and also "the human noises of the invisible crowd; these are bursts of laughter, murmurs, shh's, ironical coughs..." (*Four Plays* 160) and thereby questions like, 'what is Real?', 'What is Unreal?' are come to the front. Answer perhaps can be drawn from the worldview of another 'comedist' of the time Harold Pinter for whom "A thing is not necessarily either true or false, it can be both true and false".

Here in *The Chairs* the issue of presence and absence is well manifested with Ionesco's unique handling of Language where the increasing number of chairs is also suggestive of absence of language, and for Ionesco himself, "this vacuity (should) slowly invade the stage, continually covering up with words like clothes, the absence of the real people, the gaping holes in reality" (*Four Plays* 188). In this play the Old couple continually

trying to fill the void with their own conversations which often seems illogical, as in the beginning of Old Man's story, "Then at last we arrived" where a progression of Time is intertwined with sense of both ending and beginning. Again the recurrent usage of pauses, dots, specially towards the end the use of Echo e.g.:

"OLD MAN: ... thanks to the usher . . .

OLD WOMAN [echo:] . . . usher . . . rusher . . .

OLD MAN: ... His Majesty the Emperor . . .

OLD WOMAN [echo]: . . . jesty the Emperor . . ." (*Four Plays* 156)

may appear incongruous apparently but the basic signification lies to what is not said. Absent Language with the use of dots, e.g.: "OLD MAN : It's too far away, I can no longer . . . recall it . . . where was this?" (*Four Plays* 120)

or "it collapsed. . . It was the city of light, but it has been extinguished, extinguished, for four hundred thousand years . . . Nothing remains of it today, except a song" (*Four Plays* 116), signifies not only the fragmented nature of Memory but also indicative of the fragmented nature of the human History.

Proliferation of the issue of Crisis or Communication lack which is intrinsic in Existential philosophy also encompasses in *The Chairs* which is enhanced through Language usage. In the present play the means of geographical communication is "boat", but the usage of language both verbal and non-verbal, is the crux of the play. Here, the Old Woman exemplifies her firm belief in language: "It's in speaking that ideas come to us, words, and then we, in our own words, we find perhaps everything..." (*Four Plays* 121), simultaneously the insufficiency of language is hinted as the Old Man is unable to communicate his message himself before audience: "OLD MAN: Ah! I have so much difficulty expressing myself . . ." (*Four Plays* 120). However such uncomfortability before people was also the issue with Ionesco himself as noted by one of his interviewers, Emmanuel Jaequart, "this shyness ... seems to be inherent in Ionesco's personality" (Jacquart and Ionesco 45). Even when the hired professional Orator produces certain unintelligible sounds and words like "ANGELFOOD", "AADIEU ADIEU APA" (*Four Plays* 160) in attempting to convey the message, from the audiences' gesture it becomes evident that his language is not able to make explicit meaning. Therefore it can be noted that in *The Chairs*, proposition of Wittgenstein's "Language Games" is nicely prevalent, in making and unmaking meaning depending on its contextual usage, considerably modified with Ionesco's intense crafting. For instance, the Old Man's story "Then at last we arrived" appears incongruous for its language to the readers but the same story charms the Old Woman as she says, "it's your life, it fascinates me", (*Four Plays* 115).

One of the central tenets of Existential philosophy is Angst, a kind of amalgamation of anxiety and suffering and in this play the Old Man's Angst is perhaps his message" as he says, "I'm going to communicate the message to them . . . All my life, I've felt that I was suffocating ; and now, they will know all" (*Four Plays* 121). This Angst is perhaps paving the Old Man's 'authentic existence' (Heidegger) that is possible when human beings do not

throw themselves to 'Dasman' or society, rather pursue things for their sole interest, which the Old Man is doing, seeking to establish his own existence by doing betterment to Others. This is also a kind of attempt for his own Identity in a seemingly Absurd ambience, and such issues are also perceivable in Pinter's play *The Caretaker*, where both Aston and Davies are seeking their own identity by building a shed in garden and undertaking a journey to 'Sidcup', respectively.

Moreover *The Chairs* also initiates the question of Female existence with the portrayal of Old Woman, whose action renders Heideggerian notion of 'thrownness to Dasman' which is to submit self to public or society without self willingness, as she too expresses her lineage towards social status without caring much about Old Man's own interest: "You could have been head president, head king, or even head doctor, or head general if you had wanted to..." (*Four Plays* 114).

Most importantly she does not embrace death for her "authenticity" but for the social recognition:

"Yes, yes, let's die in full glory ... let's die in order to become a legend ...

At least, they'll name a street after us ... (*Four Plays* 158)

And thereby she gives precedence to "Essence" which would signify her qualities as a member of society. Contrarily the Old Man's emphasis can be traced in his sense "Existence", the actuality of a particular man. For this he replies to his wife's view that "What good would that have done us? We'd not have lived any better ... (*Four Plays* 114) and again for this sake he views that "Let's be modest ... we should be content with the little ... (*Four Plays* 117) and thereby, this Old Man consequently substantializes another existential dictum that 'Existence precedes Essence'.

Ionesco himself once says to his interviewer that, "It is this mortal condition which is unsatisfying" (Jacquart and Ionesco 45) and his notion of "Death" is much akin to Heidegger's view, for whom Death is the most authentic and significant moment and with this one is able to free oneself from anxiety. In the beginning of *The Chairs* the Woman seems to be entangled with anxiety of death as she warns her husband: "You shouldn't lean out, you might fall into the water" (Ionesco 113) but by the end it's become evident that the Old Man has completely freed himself from anxiety of death and is eager to embrace it as: "My mission is accomplished. I will not have lived in vain, since my message will be revealed to the world ... (*Four Plays* 157). Such stepping over death anxiety is also visible in Edward Albee's "The Zoo Story" where Jerry has made a free choice of death but difference is that Jerry abandons his responsibility by Suicide, whereas, Ionesco's Old Man does it after accomplishing his task. In *The Chairs*, Death is not merely a door to escape but is contended with a sense of satisfaction and thus it may be termed as a kind of 'Happy Death' (Camus) as notions of happiness get changed with Time. If one is supposed to 'imagine Sisyphus happy' with his tireless labour, there should not be any obligation to imagine that the Old couple is happy with their death.

The existential question of human absurdity is prevalent throughout *The Chairs*, started with isolated setting in an island, then to a sudden shift of wife's position to 'Mamma': "I am your wife, I'm the one who is your mamma now" (*Four Plays* 117), and then the repetition of the same story everyday for 75 years. This listening of the same story actually becomes a part of Old Woman's "Habit" and the Old Man's "love to see the water" (Ionesco 113), too is a "Habit", about which Beckett views in his essay "Proust" that this habit is a kind of shield and in the present play Habit is perhaps protecting the couple from the reality of nothingness as "human kind Cannot bear very much reality" (Eliot 176). Again the issue of absurdity revolves round the 'message' which is not conveyed properly in the play but this is not sufficient to regard it as utter absurd, rather it pops up another existential issue which is 'Endlessness'. In Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, two tramps' waiting symbolises endlessness; perhaps in *The Chairs* too Ionesco instils such endlessness with waiting for meaning of the message among the readers or audiences.

Eugene Ionesco himself acknowledges that "The aim is to release dramatic tension without the help of any proper plot or any special subject" (Schechner 21) and this is also the purpose of *The Chairs* where he tries to break the conventional boundaries, seeking to establish a profound interaction with the audience, which implied with the presence of the "human noises of the invisible crowd" that "should last long enough for the audience-the real and visible audience-to leave with this ending firmly impressed on its mind" (*Four Plays* 160). In this play on one hand Ionesco tries to establish an awareness of human existence, and also tries to explore modern man's endeavour to come to terms with realistic world, with the portrayal of the Old Man who struggles hard to seek some Sense out of his apparently Nonsense existence, as discussed earlier. Moreover, in this play the 'chairs' are the representative of human beings, whose lives are also entangled with apparent meaninglessness, absurdities of existence like the Old Man, but obviously with respective variations and therefore the invisible guests responded to Old Man's invitation to listen to his message and this perhaps indicates universal nature of human beings to seek some meaning in their lives too.

Ionesco himself has preferred the term 'Theatre of Derision' to Theatre of Absurd and his target of derision is human existence, apparently in tuned with 'meaninglessness' and 'nothingness'. In Michael Y. Bennett's opinion the Theatre of Absurd is not about absurdity, but "about making life meaningful given our absurd situation" (Bennett 24)) and such impasse has been beautifully rendered by Ionesco in the play *The Chairs*, with the Old Man's attempt for his 'message' which is a 'Hope' for betterment that extends its signification only to historical context in the then society but equally relevant for human existence in all ages. In philosopher Karl Jaspers' view, absurd is only that phenomenon which one cannot justify and such is the case with Lord Buddha who meditates under a tree for 29 years, which is absurd from immediate perception but in larger scale profound. Likewise, the message in *The Chairs* may appear meaningful in some interminable scale. The Fire Chief points out in *The Bald Soprano*, "that's (meaning/moral) for you to find out" (*Four Plays* 90), is essentially

applicable in *The Chairs* where the seemingly unintelligible words or sounds of the Orator are left wide open to the readers for their search as, for Harold Pinter “the search is your (readers) task”. Perhaps the unintelligibility is the result of the playwright’s intelligibility of his world where “We can no longer avoid asking ourselves what we are doing here on earth and how, having no deep sense of our destiny we can endure the crushing weight of the material World.” (*Four Plays* 3)

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