

THE UNSEEN RELATION: SHAKESPEARE AND ABSURDISM

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Abstract

The term “absurdity” is very well known in literature and frequently used by the writers of post 2nd World War. They use this term in the manner of its meaning or even more than that in their works. The effects of War and human sufferings from that caused absurdism to flourish and also spread Nihilism, meaninglessness, nothingness. The aim and motive of this paper is to prove that the idea of absurdism may be new which is observed by absurd writer on human bizarre situation, but the existence of absurdism was already been used in the writings of Elizabethan writers or before that. In these writers the king of drama, William Shakespeare was also one of the most prominent in whose writings the existence of absurdity can easily be traceable when he is well known for his tragedies and comedies. Although this existence was not noticed by or tagged by the writers or critics of that time as absurdism, there was its presence on the large scale. This paper is going to compare the level of absurdity among the playwrights of absurd and absurdism in the select works of Shakespeare. The idea here is that the writer who is still incomparable also created the levels of absurdity in his plays unintentionally without being aware of the notion of “Absurdism”.

Key Words : Absurdism, Nihilism, meaninglessness, Macbeth, Bizarre situation, Nothingness.

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Introduction

What is absurdism? And what are the reasons that create absurdity and finally lead to the situations that one cannot imagine? Basically the purpose of being familiar with the answers of these question is as much necessary as pondering about your secure future. Whatever we do and whatever is happening in the present around us is very much directly connected to our future actions, results and living. Or we can say, most of the reactions come out in the form of making someone mentally unstable and paralyzing the power of thinking. The situations that create meaninglessness and nothingness due to the lack of communicating ideas and loss of interest in the activities happening around in one's life, because of which man is only left with doing nothing important and purposeless activities, we can say, can be said as absurdism. The aimlessness and careless attitude towards life is the gift of the 2nd World War to the people involved and uninvolved in it. The aftermaths of this war effects human lives on a large scale by which people lost their faith in church/religion, government and any official and unofficial power which rules. The writers of this period focuses mainly on the ongoing mental and social illness of mankind and tries to create humor out of it. Most famous writers of this period are Albert Camus (1913-1960), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994), Jean Genet (1910-1986), Harold Pinter (1930-2008), Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), Tom Stoppard (1937-), Edward Albee (1928-) and many more like these writers talked about the concept of absurdity in their works and portrayed men's life in a very humorous manner.

Now the most important question that arises is about the existence of the concept of absurdism in our society. Is that was the time just after the 2nd world war when it came into existence or we also have some of its presence in the periods prior to it? So the answer is big Yes, we do have presence of absurdism, absurdity in the works of great writers in different periods of literature. Although, their main motive was not focused or give attention on this very aspect but somehow they created it inadvertently. The reason of the unwilling presence of this aspect in their works is the "nature" of men and the "situations" in which they involved. One of these writers is

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), who involuntarily brought out the shades of absurdity and the situations on which we sometimes feel pity and sometimes popped out humor.

The philosophical trends that dominated the period basically dealt with the question of the meaninglessness of man's existence and, this school of thought found expression in the new *Avant-Garde* genre of absurd theatre. But if we talk about its history than we can find its trace shortly after the rise of Greek drama in the wild humor and buffoonery of old comedy and the plays of *Aristophanes* in particular. These were further transformed during the late classical period by Apuleius, Lucian and Petronius, in Menippean satire, a tradition of carnivalistic literature depicting "a world upside down." Theatre of absurd also have its precursors in the form of morality plays, depicting everyman-type characters dealing with allegorical and sometimes existential problems.

Now it's enough of the past, let's talk about our main topic of concern which is to find out the traces of absurdism in Shakespeare's works. It would not be wrong to say that Shakespeare is a kind of writer whose greatness and expertness cannot be equaled by any other writers from this period or from any other period. But there are some shades of absurdities also available in his works that were not recognized or categorized by anyone in the term *Absurdism*. Almost all his plays deals with the harshness of life and posturized two classes, which according to the laws of literature are the symbols of provokers of tragedies or comedies. Like Shakespeare always in order to create tragic plays takes the characters from aristocratic, chivalrous, kingly classes and in order make his work comic he uses the characters from the lower, labor and poor classes. And then we come across with the images and scenes of absurdism. Shakespeare anticipated the actions and ideas practiced by modern absurd writers like Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, and Albee and so on.

Shakespeare's most popular works like *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night* and others, although, are the greatest works in the history of English literature but in these plays one can also bring forth easily the signs of absurdities. These absurdities knitted in the story frame in such a manner that one can identify and compare them to the modern absurdist who uses the story especially to present and show the absurdism in human life through his actions and behavior and also from the involvement of the society. Shakespeare's play "King Lear" can be observed, in the manner of absurdity, similar to Beckett's "Waiting for Godot". The formation of the words, utterance of dialogues and misleading thoughts are presented in both the text. On the

one hand where, in *Waiting for Godot* the characters are forming unparalleled and meaningless talks and thoughts. They are thinking that there is someone called Godot they are waiting for. And at this hour of waiting they formulated number of meaningless dialogues, broken and incomplete sentences. On the other hand in *King Lear* the leading character shows the meaningless and immature capabilities of judgment, by making comparison between her three daughters, without using rational faculty, on the basis of level of buttering done by them to gain greater part of his wealth. He, although knowing the reality that Cordelia is more loving and caring than his other two daughters, disinherited her in rage or can say in egoism because Cordelia did not profess in an untruthful manner, as he wanted her to do. We can also find similarity on the level of dialogues in these two plays. In these dialogues the incapability of thinking or disability to formulate the sentences can be traced. In Shakespeare's *King Lear* when Lear asks Cordelia to say some words in his honor in order to gain the large portion of his wealth, she being a faithful and truthful person did not make any false or unnatural comments.

'KING LEAR: *To thee and thine hereditary ever
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom;
No less in space, validity, and pleasure,
Than that conferr'd on Goneril. Now, our joy,
Although the last, not least; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest'd; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.*

CORDELIA: *Nothing, my lord.*

KING LEAR: *Nothing!*

CORDELIA: *Nothing.*

KING LEAR: *Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.'*

Same kind of conversation we can find in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where we came across with similar kind of absurdity in thoughts and repetition of the words between Estragon and Vladimir after the attempts to peep inside the shoes without finding anything:

'Vladimir: Well?

Estragon: Nothing.

Vladimir: Show.

Estragon: There's nothing to show?'

These two characters of "Waiting for Godot" shows the sublime tragedy which Shakespeare shows in King Lear. At the time when Lear lost each and everything in his mutable world, nothing is left, and it is this very "nothing" which Vladimir and Estragon, like Edgar, must recognize with. At one place where the stress was made to bring out the positive attitude from Cordelia, on the other hand the same nothing showing the hopelessness and helplessness of Estragon in finding something beneficial and meaningful. In both the cases the power of expressions and emotions compiled in an extravagant manner. The authoritative voice's awkward demand and the dimmed and loathsome voice because of fetal luck are the faces of absurdity portraying the nature and condition of men in different period under different circumstances. Shakespeare and Becket is quite similar to one another in the manner of depicting emotions and human faults and flaws on paper and on stage as well.

The lust for power in King Lear and the lust for value and achievement in Waiting for Godot are two parallel factors that creates the common absurdness in both the writings. And so like that we can trace number of incidents that can prove the clear visibility of absurdism in the actions and scenes of King Lear. For explaining further I would like to provide one more example of the storm scene in which an arrogant and stubborn king behaves like an unfortunate, afflicted and poor old man, who in his dialogues showing the absurdity of change in actions and nature.

'KING LEAR: Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!

You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout

Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!

You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,

Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,

Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,

Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!

*Crack nature's moulds, an germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful man!'*

The case study is not limited to King Lear only because there are other plays also of Shakespeare's which shows the marks of absurdity in their structure. Let's talk about one another famous work penned by Shakespeare known as '**Hamlet**'.

The play, Hamlet, deals with the number of human psychological conditions in which a person behave in an absurd manner. Play's central character "Hamlet" himself suffers from that condition from the very beginning of the play when he comes to know about the reason of his father's death and the illegitimate relationship of his mother and his uncle. The uncle who killed his own brother in order to gain the power and the possession of his sister in law (Hamlet's mother). This utmost painful truth, revealed from the tongue of the ghost of his father, becomes the profound reason for the change in nature and absurd behavior of Hamlet. The moment he heard the news of this unnatural murder of his father by his uncle he immediately started talking to himself and concluded that the world is nothing but a mask of fiendishness. He starts refusing all the knowledge of the worlds and the great books he read during his education.

*'HAMLET: Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter.'*

(Hamlet: Act 1, Scene 5)

The theme of absurdity in the form of feigned madness performed by Hamlet can be traced from the beginning to the end in the play. The absurdity of change in behavior of Hamlet is of course reasonable but this also shows the man's uncontrollable urge for achieving something of which he himself not sure that he can get. Hamlet's obedient words and oath given to the ghost of his father worked as an agent of grief and pain for Hamlet.

The inability of Hamlet to reach to the conclusion and to decide his further actions are also one

of the features of absurdism. In the play Hamlet is questioning the meaning of the human condition when he asks “to be, or not to be”; it is a reflection of whether life has a meaning or not, and he finally realizes that life is meaningless-

‘Hamlet: To be, or not to be, - that is the question:-

Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them? - to die, - to sleep, -

No more; and by sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks...’

(Act 3. Scene1)

Shakespeare used the character of Hamlet to create the most horrible and painful tragedy but it came out the most absurd one. Martin Esslin in his work “Theatre of Absurd” mentioned that-

“....Sophocles and Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Kleist and Buchner, precisely because the authors are concerned with the human condition in all its brutal absurdity”-

(Martin Esslin, Theatre Of Absurd, p194).

Hamlet displays "the existential attitude" throughout the play, especially when it comes to his soliloquies.

In his first soliloquy of Act I, he scrutinizes the absurdity of the world, and cried out his pain on the death of his father. The haste in marriage by his uncle and mother was also one of the reason of Hamlet’s disquietness.

‘How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Fie on’t! Ah, fie ‘tis an unweeded garden,

*That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.* (Hamlet: Act 1 Scene 2)

While in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet minutely and sarcastically elaborated and talked about the essence of men and his actions. Basically this sarcastic comment is not of Hamlet but Shakespeare who presented his thoughts from the mouth of Hamlet. The mind which already lost its peace is used by Hamlet in order to manipulate the minds of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern so that he can know what is going on between them and King & Queen.

*'What a piece of work is a man! how
noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving
how express and admirable! in action how like an angel!
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the
paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence
of dust? Man delights not me—*(Hamlet: Act 2 Scene 2)

In the play, Hamlet's soliloquies are uttered to define man and his essence and to act with deliberation and responsibility as a man. Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the most famous and greatest Existentialist said that, "*Etrehomme, etreresponsible*" [to be man is to be responsible], and Hamlet truly becomes responsible after he observes Fortinbras in Act IV,

*'...a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd,
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an eggshell.* (Hamlet: Act4 Scene 4)

For, he is inspired to find his essence as man. Declaring, "This is I, Hamlet the Dane," Hamlet has found himself and is free. He accepts his existential responsibility and duels Laertes, but is

reconciled with him as King Claudius and his mother die. Hamlet gives his kingdom to Fortinbras, knowing this noble man will rule well. Hamlet the Dane creates his own essence and is liberated in death.

Hence, we can conclude from the plays and references used to explain that the existence of Absurdism is not new or only related to World Wars. The strain of existential philosophy and the absurd evident in the plays of Shakespeare. The characters in Lear finally come to the conclusion that life is meaningless and there is “nothing” to make out of life. Shakespeare used numerous kinds of absurd elements in his works and those elements never got attention from any critic or writer at that time. And that is the reason people were not aware of the concept of Absurdism. When world war 2nd ended, its aftermaths caused the loss of identification, aimlessness, among the people of that period. They were living only to spend their remaining days and that too by going pubs, drinking smoking and what not. Whenever we come across with this concept, we get to know about the effects of world war 2nd, but the reality is something different. We always had the traces of absurdism in the works of earlier ages. And writers used them unconsciously because they wanted to create something else from it. They wanted to emphasis on some other concept. But that situations and scenes also had the features of absurdity.

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