

Absurdism in Theatre: An Introductory Statement

OBIRE, U. Dennis PhD
dennis.obire@dou.edu.ng,

OGBORU, Esegene Rita
Department of Creative Arts, Dennis Osadebay University,
Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

A man wakes up in the morning with excitement, takes his shower, prepares for work and hurriedly enter into his car. He starts the car and stays inside for over three hours without driving out. After some time, he steps out and sits on the burnet of the car pondering on his daily routine for the past twenty five years. Few minutes later, he says “what a life of endless struggle.” This analogy is a picture of an absurd situation. It presents a motionless and helpless state of man in a universe devoid of direction and meaning. Absurdism is the belief that human beings live in a chaotic and aimless cosmos. It focuses on the idea that humans would directly clash with this cosmos if they attempt to find order. Because the universe is not wired to be orderly, there should be no pursuit of order in a chaotic environment (Lasisi 37). It emphasizes the meaninglessness, hopelessness, and helplessness of man’s existence in a universe that is disorderly, disoriented, and full of despair. According to Adjeketa, it is a “state of derailment in deeds, behaviours, and living from the normal to the abnormal” (104). In spite of the chaos in the world, human beings must in one way or the other try to create meaning and this in itself is a contradiction that results in the ridiculous. Since absurdism implies that people may create their own meaning via their own decisions and actions, even when life may not have any intrinsic purpose, it is in close alignment with existentialist philosophy (“Absurdism–Intro to Humanities”).

Absurdism found expression around the 1940s where humanity was battling with the effects of World War II. Through an ironic portrayal of humanity's place in the universe, the absurdist addressed the issue of life in a post-Hiroshima world. Their plays, which featured clown-like, alienated, and aimless antiheroes, portrayed the futility and seeming pointlessness of the individual's existence in a world without fate (Mambrol). Absurdism as a concept has a link with modernist perception, a time when man saw no hope in existence. Modernism as it were, was a reaction to the quick changes brought about by urbanization, industrialization, and the emergence of mass media. It was a time when people felt that the traditional method of doing things was no longer applicable. In drama, modernism signified a significant break from conventional theatrical norms. According to Nwahunanya, one important feature of modern drama is “the propensity towards experimentation” (170). In modernist theatre, forms are experimented with. It analyzes social and political issues, opposes realism, emphasizes the individual, and uses innovative methods, and so on. A variety of movements, including epic theater, realism, expressionism, surrealism, symbolism, theater of the absurd, among others, influenced the ideological horizon of modern theatre. According to Ebewo, the theatre of the absurd, “which is an arm of the avant-garde, is one of the most modern movements” (153).

Albert Camus put forward absurdism in the 1940s, although it was impacted by a variety of philosophical and creative trends, such as Franz Kafka's writings and avant-garde art. The style and methodology of avant-garde art had an impact on absurdism. The play *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry is a significant starting point for the Theatre of the Absurd (Allen). Brockett and Ball, documents that to the absurdist, truth consisted of "chaos and lack of order, logic or certainty and their plays embodied this vision in a structure that abandoned cause-and-effect relationships for associational patterns reflecting illogic and chance" (204).

Some playwrights and artists who contributed to modernist ideas, challenged theatrical conventions and explored new thematic frontiers include; Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Samuel Beckett, Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Anton Chekhov, Tennessee Williams, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and so on. Apart from Western thinkers, some Nigerian playwrights have explored the absurdist concept via their plays. Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*, Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks*, among others are examples of plays that align or follow the absurdist ideology.

Theatre of the Absurd

From the classical era, to the modern era, writers, artists and so on, have tried to figure out how to contribute their quota artistically and express their ideologies towards life. In the words of Anigala, the dramatist creates "the work of art or directs a play or participate in a production with the intention of expressing himself and promoting a basis for improvement on the human condition" (23). Following the emergence of Greek drama, absurd elements initially appeared in Aristophanes' plays as wild humor and old-fashioned comedy. Therefore, morality plays from the middle Ages might also be considered a forerunner of the Theatre of the Absurd, which addressed existential and metaphorical issues that the average person faced. Dramatists such as John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Jakob Biederman, and Calderon depicted the world as a mythological archetype throughout the Elizabethan period (Sarkar).

Martin Esslin coined the word "absurdism" in his 1960 book "Theatre of the Absurd," which explained a new genre of plays that were popular in Europe at the time and were influenced by the existentialist ideas of French authors Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. It was a theatrical approach that fused revolutionary, avant-garde dramatic form with existentialist philosophy. The critic Martin Esslin referred to it as the theatre of the ridiculous, despite the fact that it was not a formal movement. Esslin noted that the playwrights in this group share two characteristics: they believe that a large portion of life's events are illogical or absurd and cannot be rationally explained; they also think that dramatic action should demonstrate this absurdity or ridiculousness (Wilson & Goldfarb 348). The theatre of the absurd's underlying idea presents people as always trying to understand the existential nature of humanity. It refers to a human condition that is out of tune and out of harmony with reason; it is a scenario that is deemed irrational and inconsistent with a logical and reasonable existence (Dibia 92).

The French philosopher, dramatist, and writer Albert Camus (1913–1960) described the human predicament as ludicrous in his essay collection 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (Barranger 122). Existential philosophy was a major influence on Absurdist Theatre, and it was most compatible with the philosophy of Albert Camus's 1942 essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus' in which Camus tries to provide a rational defense of why man should not end his life in the face of a pointless, ridiculous existence (Alsharadgeh 176). The reference to the story of "The Myth of Sisyphus" as documented

by Barranger (2002) and Alsharadgeh (2018) and other writers, presents Albert Camus's attempt to describe the helpless and hopeless state of man in a world full of despair as he struggles with the issues of life. Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to an eternity of futility, is asked to push a boulder or stone as the case may be up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, and this exercise is repeated without any head way invariably representing the futility of existence.

The Theater of the Absurd believes that people illogically try to force order and meaning onto their lives, yet the universe is fundamentally meaningless. The movement's impact continues to pervade the current theatrical environment, encouraging playwrights to experiment with form and content and question audiences' sense of reality. Playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean-Paul Sartre have challenged the very idea of what the performing arts can be in the Theater of the Absurd, where absurdity is a mirror that forces you to face your own desires and fears and see them in a different light (Reynolds 2024). Apart from the Western playwrights who tried to project the concept of absurdism in their works, there are a few other playwrights who have also contributed to the absurdist ideas.

Elements of Absurdism

The idea that human beings are in desperate search for intrinsic meaning in a universe that provides none is usually captured in absurdist plays. Absurdist playwrights often challenge conventional dramatic norms in order to express this central notion, by creating a distinctive "irrational" and "illogical" style. Theatre of the Absurd, as it were, is known or noticed for its conscious rejection of conventional dramatic structures and techniques. Barranger observed that the common elements that are visible in the absurdist plays of people like Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and others "are unrecognizable plots, mechanical characters, situations resembling dreams and nightmares, and incoherent dialogue" (122). These elements as captured in absurdist plays by early proponents of the movement has over the years affected Western contemporary playwrights and by extension Nigerian playwrights in churning out plays with absurdist contents. For the purpose of this discourse, the elements of absurdism would be examined using the following characteristics:

Illogicality of Plot:

One of the characteristics noticeable in absurdist plays is that their plots do not have a defined beginning, middle, and end as obtainable in traditional linear plot structure where dramatic action flow with a clear cut transition from the beginning to the end. Rather, they have a cyclical or repeating structure in which characters exchange dialogue or carry out the same acts without making any meaningful or real progress. According to Edwin Wilson, traditional plots in drama progress in a "logical way from a beginning through the development of the plot to a conclusion, an arrangement that suggests an ordered universe. In contrast, many absurdist plays not only proclaim absurdity but also embody it" (219). This lack of connectivity of actions in the narratives, symbolizes an irredeemable state of existence. Elo Ibagere's *Random Talks* for instance, is a play that explores the foibles associated with human beings in a meaningless, empty and chaotic society. The play discusses the absurdity of human existence, looking at various expressions about men and women's position in the society through characters like Oju, Mada, Osa and Bola. The plot is static and arbitrary; the actions hardly progress to a tangible climax. When characters like

Osa, Mada and Oju are on a subject of discussion, they quickly switch to other issues randomly thus making the story not to progress as obtainable in absurdist plays.

- Osa: What do you mean by exactly?
- Mada: I mean exactly.
- Oju: What is the meaning of that?
- Mada: Meaning of what?
- Oju: Your “exactly”
- Mada: Why do you concern yourself with meaning? Does anything have a meaning?
- Osa : What are you saying Mada? So everything is meaningless? Is that what you are saying?
- Mada: Exactly. That’s what I am saying.

(Ibagere 44-45)

The above conversations from the three friends in trying to understand the meaning of existence is part of the absurdist idea, and the futility and illogicality of their actions and reaction to these conversations is a testament to the meaninglessness of existence in trying to search for meaning in a chaotic world. In a logical setting, these men as young men ought to be engaged in one daily activity or the other for survival. Instead, they waste their time on illogical discussions. Since plots of absurdist plays do not have a sequential flow of actions, there is deviation of story. Oju, Mada, and Osa after series of random and absurd conversations decide to play the game of draught at a time of the day when they ought to be doing something meaningful and productive. When people play draught at a time when there are supposed to be busy with other meaningful venture, it shows a high rate of unseriousness with life. In the popular Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the plot does not conform to the traditional style, everything is motionless and nothing seems to happen.

Illogical Language:

The issue of illogical or nonsensical dialogue is another crucial element that can be identified in any absurdist play. Language which plays a vital role in human interaction is often used out of context in absurdist drama and this makes it unique. Languages used in absurdist plays are usually repetitious, illogical, and rife with clichés. In absurdist plays there is lack of communication and understanding. In other words, language loses clarity, potency and meaning. The loneliness of characters in absurdist plays is usually highlighted by the portrayal of language as an unreliable and insufficient means of communication. Lasisi states that:

Absurd dramatists realized that conventional language has failed to effectively express human experience. Thus, they ridicule the conventional speech and stereotyped speech pattern. They make their characters go beyond everyday conventional speech to be able to effectively express their experiences...objects are much more important than language in Absurd theatre. What happens transcends what is being said about it... (40).

Absurdist playwrights believe that language is only a conventional and pointless interchange of ideas since words are unable to capture the essence of human experience and this makes deviation of language an essential element of absurdism. It challenges human and logical language as a veritable tool for communicating effectively. In discussing absurdist language, Wilson and Goldfarb states that “sentences do not follow in sequence, and words do not mean what we expect them to mean” (99). In Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, there is repetition of dialogue expressing meaninglessness as captured in the conversation between Estragon and Vladimir leaving the reader/audience in a state of confusion as to the happenings in the play:

Estragon: Like leaves

Vladimir: Like sand

Estragon: Like leaves

Vladimir: Like ashes

Estragon: Like leaves

(110-111)

Ambiguous Characters:

In conventional dramas, characters play a vital role in portraying or communicating the intention of the playwright to the audience/reader but in absurdist drama, characters are mechanical. They often lack clear motivations, or psychological depth. The environment in which characters live is sometimes out of sync with them (Cash 2024).The identity of characters in absurdist plays are often ambiguous, making them evoke the idea of a lost and adrift persons or individuals in an unfathomable cosmos. Edwin Wilson asserts that:

A significant feature of absurdist plays is the handling of characters. Not only is there an element of the ridiculous in the characters’ actions, but they frequently exemplify an existential point of view. According to this view point, existence precedes essence; a person creates himself or herself in the process of living. Beginning with nothing, the person develops a self in taking action and making choices. In theatre, existentialism suggests that characters have no personal history and therefore no specific causes for their actions (221).

The characters in absurdist theatre are disoriented and adrift in an unfathomable environment, and they give up discursive reasoning and logical strategies because they are insufficient. Many characters seem like robots trapped in monotonous speech patterns. Because the world around them is unfathomable, the more complicated characters are experiencing a crisis (Adejumo). The characters in absurdist plays are frequently "anti-character," which means they are unlikeable, illogical, and even hideous. Many of them reject society, become enmeshed in the unpredictability and despair of life, and engage in strange habits like talking to themselves or interrupting others. Even their speech might be illogical, imprecise, or seem out of touch with reality. The "everyday" person is simpler to understand since the characteristics lack fixed qualities and are inconsistent (Archibald).

Minimalist Settings:

Setting which has to do with the location or the place where dramatic actions occur in a play is one of the most intriguing features of absurdist theatre. The settings in absurdist plays are frequently surreal and dreamlike, in contrast to other genres where the sets are based in reality. This decision is in line with the genre's themes of insecurity and the quest for meaning in life. It serves to illustrate, rather than merely explain, how perplexing life can be (*The Royal George Theatre*). The stage is usually bleak, the set is little or minimal, the issue of time and place is unclear, and images or objects are used as symbols to reflect or communicate the emptiness and absurdity of human existence. In *Random Talks*, for example, the action starts and ends in front of a house, the set is bare, there is a long bench and a draught resting on the wall symbolizing the meaninglessness of human existence. This can be seen in the stage description of the play by the playwright:

(The set is a bare stage. A door leading inside indicates that it is the front of a house. There is a long bench on the side of the door. A draught is resting against the wall. As the lights come on, we see Osa, Mada and Oju looking somewhat agitated. They are young men about the same age. Two other chairs are standing by the corner (45).

In *Waiting for Godot* the setting is bare with actions taking place in a desolate surrounding as two characters Vladimir and Estragon stand near a tree and wait endlessly for Godot.

Tragicomedy:

Elements of tragedy and comedy are frequently combined in absurdist plays. The humor, which can be absurd or clownish, highlights the existential suffering and underlying hopelessness of the human predicament in a world full of chaos. In *Random Talks*, Osa, Oju, Mada in their conversations, often highlight the tragic nature of existence using comic language to express their thoughts as seen in their conversation which run thus:

Osa : Look, I am no longer enjoying this joke. It is degenerating into insults. Oju, you know I am older than you. I am not a woman. Get that straight.

Mada: Nobody is joking here. Oju has made a statement of fact (*pauses a bit*). But wait a minute. Even if it is a joke, who cares whether you enjoy it or not. The objective is not for you to enjoy a joke about you. It is meant to cause you some discomfort. And that gives us joy and pleasure. So, Osa, it is immaterial whether you enjoy the joke or not. The important thing is that we should find pleasure in it not you (66).

Conclusion

The preoccupation of this paper has been to discuss Absurdism which has to do with the hopelessness of man in a chaotic universe, the origin of absurdism, some of the proponents of the absurdist movement and elements of absurdism with reference to some absurdist plays. The absurdist idea which is against realism and logic is what some playwright like Samuel Beckett, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Elo Ibagere and so on employ in discussing the socio-political chaos and lack of meaning in the society. The plays referenced conforms to the absurdist tenets in terms of illogicality of plot structure, deviation of language, ambiguous characters, minimal settings and the fusion of tragedy and comedy in expressing the meaninglessness of human existence.

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