

UNVEILING NONSENSE IN THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD.
EXPLORING EUGENE IONESCO'S CRAFT TO INCORPORATE
INVISIBILITY AS A THEME IN "THE CHAIRS"

Shrestha Chakraborty

Researcher -

Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University,
West Bengal, INDIA

shresthachakrabortyc@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper is a modest attempt to unveil the deliberate deployment of nonsense in *The Theatre of the Absurd* by means of exploring Eugene Ionesco's craft of incorporating "invisible characters", as a theme in his Absurdist "tragic farce" play "The Chairs". The ontological question that might haunt avid readers is "What is the possible interpretation, as well as the relevance of a series of invisible guests in the play?". However, this is the beauty of the *Theatre of the Absurd* as it leaves so much open to interpretation and makes one wonder and ask questions without giving an answer but, at the same time, helps one find them. As Ionesco himself rightly puts it, "It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question". At first sight, the invisible guests may appear to be useless and nonsensical in the eyes of the audience. They are hardly shown to function throughout the whole play. Rather, they are an assembly of a cross-section of humanity arriving one by one at Old Man's house who has arranged a seemingly ceremonial gathering in order for his message or meaning of life to be delivered to humanity. The audience comes to the theatre and watches the play, but cannot conquer what they thought they could. Much to everyone's surprise, the Orator elected by the Old Man to speak on behalf of him could not utter even a single word as he was a deaf-mute. But it is a firmly held belief that everything possesses a meaning, be it a gigantic statue or a small pebble. Hence their potentiality of bearing an underlying significance. As Ionesco himself rightly states, "If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and uselessness of the useful, one cannot understand art".

Keywords: absurdism, invisible characters, nonsense

*We are more closely connected to
the invisible than to the visible.*
Novalis

There is not an iota of exaggeration in the following words of Albert Camus, when he stated: "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”. Primarily centred in Paris, the theatre of the absurd was a momentous movement that broke out in Europe immediately after the fin of World War II, as a direct reaction and transformation from the naturalist and realist theatre and as a reverberation of the existential school of philosophy. This atypical phenomenon was basically instituted as a protest against man’s apocryphal existence during the politically portentous phase of the 1950s and to “confront the public with a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on, that seems to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention.” Historically speaking, the root of the theatrical tradition of the absurd drama lies in two twentieth-century philosophical 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”. The term was first coined by Martin Esslin in his 1961 book “The Theatre of the Absurd”, where the critic defined 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”. Often labelled as “anti-plays”, they are characterized as theatre that strives to present the absurdity of individual’s existence in a purposeless world by strange or improbable means. The absurdist playwright questions “the nature of human existence by presenting a world without logic or morals, and without the using conventional dramatic language, plot and narrative”. 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” (Bennett 2009, 11).

Major proponents of the mid-twentieth century such as Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, and 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. 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". Such crisis in Ionesco's era was to a large extent the result of World War II and the threat of Nuclear annihilation that generated feelings of hopelessness and futility. Therefore, the question of human "*Existence*" pervaded in 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.

The ontological question that might haunt avid readers upon an initial lesson of the absurdist "tragic farce" play "The Chairs" is "What is the possible interpretation, as well as the relevance of a series of invisible guests in the play?". However, this is the beauty of the Theatre of the Absurd as it leaves so much open to interpretation and makes one wonder and ask questions without giving the answer although, at the same time helps one find them (Esslin 1980, 106). As Ionesco himself rightly puts it, "It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question". Maybe this is the meaning of life, searching for the answers and questioning the world around us, refusing to yield to the dogmatic thinking that our society sometimes tries to impose on us. The theatre of the absurd is a reflection of the author's personal world, it is deprived of objectively credible characters, and it is also radically apolitical, unlike the theatre of existentialism. The aesthetic concept of absurdity is based on the idea of alienation, the inability of man to establish real contact with himself and the world that leads to their deprivation, their inability to react in their own name. Although the play is absurd, it is at the same time absolutely, completely and totally brilliant, but not for everyone. To see past the *absurdity* behind Ionesco's assigning these invisible characters in the play, one should have a vision. In the words of Jonathan Swift, "vision is the art of seeing

what is invisible to others” (Ionesco 1997, 68). Ionesco feels it unacceptable for his plays to be analyzed and to tear down their integrity at the expense of rational truths. From mystics, we know that all miracles that exist in the darkness of the unconscious and are taken out in the daylight of reason will become a cartoon image. Ionesco’s plays are irrational in nature, and he is against any attempt at clarification or interpretation that tries to close it in a foreign and distorted world. “Once the world is unable to understand me, I’m waiting for someone to explain me” - words about the initial failure of “The Chairs”.

Ionesco’s craft of incorporating invisibility as a theme is subject to many good interpretations. Much like the trams in Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” and the old couple in Beckett’s “Happy Days”, Ionesco’s “The Chairs” centres two characters in their 90s known as Old Man and Old Woman who are seen frantically preparing chairs and getting into their make-belief play of greeting a horde of invisible guests. The invisible guests are a cross-section of humanity, implying *everyone* in the world - a Lady, a Colonel, a Belle, a Photo-engraver, an Emperor and a handful of newspapermen - all of whom are shown assembling together to hear an orator who is supposed to reveal the Old Man’s discovery - his meaning of life. The Old Man says, “I have a message, that’s God’s truth, I struggle, a mission, I have something to say, a message to communicate to humanity, to mankind...” All of them are invisible to the audience and are indicated by empty chairs placed on stage for them to occupy, and by the speech and gestures of the Old Man and the Old Woman.

As readers, we may draw some interpretations of the invisibility of the guests in the play. One important implication is that this is a post-apocalyptic world, as the location and timing of the play suggest that their house is surrounded by water on all sides. In a house on the island, they pass their time with private games and half-remembered stories. The Old Man, for example, also speaks of the destruction of Paris. The old couple has a nostalgia for a vague utopian past, “when all Paris was like a garden”. Perhaps an

apocalypse has destroyed the earth, leaving nothing behind. They say that there is no Paris anymore and talk about an old memory repeatedly. The invisibility of the guests implies that the Old Man and the Old Woman are the only ones left in the world. The empty chairs might symbolize their long-lost friends. As guests arrive, the two characters speak to them and reminisce cryptically about their lives. The discussion goes on as the couple indulges in the invisible guests, wherein the audience only hears dialogues such as “Yes, yes, yes. Not at all.”, “Yes?”, “No!?”. This also showcases the lack of understanding, considering that the audience is only introduced to one side of the conversation (Suthar 2016, 3).

A major interpretation of the invisibility of the guests is the difficulty involved in conducting effective communication with each other. The complete loss of the touch of the world is presented both literally and figuratively through the invisible guests. Visually, the play communicates the message that guests sitting in the chairs are invisible, thus seeding the natural conclusion that guests are mere figments of the imagination of the Old Man and the Old Woman. The old couple act like they are having the time of their life by expressing their emotions through gesticulating, moving and giving a speech. The Old Woman 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”. This 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 comprehension. They both have a human face but are empty of real human content. They are not personalities for whom we construct an image of their behaviour. They do not have their own will. The alienation has deprived them from within, and the effect of this inner void is the destruction of their relationship with the outside world. The reactions of the old man and the old woman are mechanical, deprived of the thrill of life. Behind them are not real people. There is no causal relationship between them. 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 (Patel 2021, 287).

Another explanation is that imaginary guests are real people but with an absent mind. Perhaps because they do not want the truth or they cannot handle the truth. They are there but at the same time not. However, despite being invisible, they seem more alive than the strange Orator who seems more like a robot than a human being. In this reading, the invisibility of the crowd represents an audience without a mind relying upon the critics (the Orator) who are themselves incapable of understanding an artist like Ionesco (the Old Man) who tries to break free of mainstream conventions.

There are other interpretations of the invisible characters in the play. The need to be remembered is easy to identify with. No one wants to be forgotten forever. When finding the meaning of life or whatever discovery the Old Man has made, will guarantee it. Perhaps the chairs occupied by invisible guests symbolize the importance of not forgetting people. Or perhaps the couple might have dementia. Or being prisoners, bored and wanting to entertain themselves, the Old Man and Old Woman have just played an illusory game of treating a series of invisible guests as if they are real and in doing so the couple might have tried to re-construct the past events corresponding with the reality to influence public perception and attitudes about the past as well as public responses to it (Naz 2018, 3).

Through invisible characters like the lady, the colonel, etc. Ionesco has challenged our capacity of “willing suspension of disbelief”. As readers, we would find all characters including the old couple imaginary. As spectators, we were set the task of participating with the playwright in building characters out of our own imagination. It may also have been a paltry trick played on us: a recreation of the playwright’s desire for a roomful of people to hear his message with the result being an inevitable disappointment. The play can also be interpreted in contemporary times. In the digital age, it is not difficult for us to imagine a room filled with invisible

guests virtually present, nor to conceive a sensual relationship without the physical presence of a partner (Pounders, 92). The exaggerated characters in “The Chairs” play a vital role in contributing to the absurdity and futility of human existence. Their over-the-top behaviours and absurd dialogues create moments of humour and satire, highlighting the meaningless and futile nature of communication. By presenting characters that are larger than life, Ionesco emphasizes the absurdity of human interactions and the inability to convey meaningful messages.

Though finding meaning is a vain attempt in the case of any absurd drama owing to the paradox, the last is formulated as two answers are possible— the absurd silence and an empty talk. In an absurd drama, the very logical structures of speech are negated - meaningless, whereas in Chekhov they still exist, even though the first beginnings of a total decline are noticed. *Nonsense* and *absurd* are used throughout the text to signify that the normal laws of language and logic have been suspended. In this play, Ionesco anticipates the modern and post-modern fascination for the volatility of language and its inability to express specific meanings. He is able to articulate these anxieties through the guise of comic absurdity and *nonsensical* narratives. However, linguistic nonsense and absurdist comedy are more than simple tropes used to amuse an audience. Comic absurdity and nonsense language function to destabilize fundamental concepts of logic, linguistic structure, and stable identity that are the very foundation of a sense of the self and its relation to society (Ionesco 2014, 2).

This storyline makes “The Chairs” a play about the failed life of two elders or, in a broader understanding, a play about failure at all, the absurd, the futility of existence. The play is titled “The Chairs” and what Ionesco wants to express is related not to the event that is played and seen with the spectator's eyes, but to the view of the many empty chairs that are its true heroes. This emptiness, the sense of nothingness, suggests what Ionesco seeks to achieve with metaphors. About “The Chairs”, Ionesco said that he just had the idea of an empty room that would be filled with unoccupied chairs.

The chairs that come at full speed and faster, constitute the central picture, an ontological emptiness, a kind of whirlpool of the empty. This first intrusive idea infuses the story of two old men who are on the brink of nothingness, and who have had trouble all their lives. But their story is only designed to maintain the initial, basic picture that gives meaning to the play.

To conclude, it is the beauty of Ionesco's absurdist play "The Chairs" that casts a bunch of invisible characters - one side angry and offended, the other cheering and applauding, while the third may ask themselves "What just happened?" with a huge question mark above their heads. "The Chairs" is one of those works in which the reader discovers something new with each repeated reading, as it is full of symbolism and a great testament of the 20th century to the new generations.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, Michael Y. *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*. University Of Massachusetts Amherst, 2009.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980. p. 106.
- Ionesco, Eugène, and Martin Crimp. *The Chairs*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997. (Ed.). *Ionesco's Theater of the Absurd, and the Chaos of Language*. Linguanerd, 2014.
- Naz, Saba. "The Chairs – Absurd Drama a Brief Analysis of the Theatre of Absurd with the Reference of the Chairs by Ionesco Topic". Prepared by: Saba Naz CMS # 401904 Topic Suggested by: Salman Rafique", *Academia.edu*, (2018): 1-5.
- Patel, Pearl Kaizad. "Illusion of Reality, Existential Dread and Broken Communication as the Major Themes Depicted in Eugene Ionesco's 'the Chairs.'" *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 2, (2021): 287–290.
- Pounders, Steven. *Eugene Ionesco and the Theatre of the Absurd*. Baylor University: Department of Theatre Arts.
- Suthar, Sunil, "The Old Man of the Chairs as a Symbol of Absurdity." *International Journal of Social Impact*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, (2016): 1-3.