Modern drama has roots in the war torn sensibility of disillusioned, battered, and spiritually sterile humanity. The cataclysm consequent to the two major wars dismantled reliable edifices of religion, morality and family. The basic queries regarding existence and truth remained unanswered and the disenchanted individual rejected traditional moral absolutes. Modern drama offered expression to these realities of the post war period. However, the existing dramatic structures failed to furnish requisite form to the burgeoning content now available as subject. Contemporary avant garde dramatist discerned the urgency to debunk old canons and experiment with new forms, styles and contents. Major modern playwrights rejected outmoded formulae and endeavored with fresh constructions to portray multilayered reality and heterogeneity of human personality.

Forms and attitudes, techniques and styles in drama do not occur automatically. They are products of an accretion of resources contributed by playwrights of different ages. Modern drama is far removed from being a mere facsimile of the ancient Greek and Roman drama, or the stagecraft of middle ages and the renaissance, or other periods in the history of the theatre. Modern drama is an outgrowth of a number of significant upheavals and development. It represents an effort to make some sense out of the chaotic doctrines, and undeveloped ventures in a century notably unstable and distressingly confusing.
in artistic as well as social aims. Therefore the story of the theatre is one of the rebellion and reaction, with new forms challenging the old, and the old forms in turn providing the basis for the new. To adapt the concept of art historian, E.H. Crombrich, “drama originates in our reaction to the world, not in the world itself” (Styan ix).

Around the globe there were reactions in stage production and concepts or ideas in theatre. The leaders in these efforts – romanticists like Victor Hugo, realists like Henrik Ibsen, and naturalists like Emile Zola- have created theatrical history with strongly urged ideals and truculent formulations.

Modern drama has its genesis in the closing decade of nineteenth century, a period characterized by discontent, restless criticism and an intense probing into disturbances and cleavages in the modern world. The pioneers of the modern theatre, Ibsen, Hauptman and Gorki, Chekhov and Shaw, were preoccupied with the ideological and social turmoil of their day. The heritage of an era of protest and revolt is the hallmark of contemporary drama. In the words of Allardyce Nicolle:

the conception of drama, expressing the theories and attitudes of the playwrights in opposition to those of the great majority of men of his time, marks the early modern dramatist as an embattled revolutionary, seeking to change men’s minds and hearts as well as their institutions and laws.
The modern theatre, therefore, seems an enterprise strongly marked by variety, eclecticism and a mélange of genres. Realism and Naturalism, Symbolism and Poetic drama, Expressionism and Existentialism, and many other styles are found juxtaposed in modern theatre. The threads of many different styles are interwoven within a single play. In practice it is difficult to find a play of pure Realism, or naked Symbolism. Ibsen is a realist and a symbolist, Strindberg embraces both Naturalism and Expressionism, O’Neill’s works fluctuates from Realism and Expressionism to the use of masks in his later plays. Tennessee Williams employs several techniques including Brecht’s alienation effect, in writing symbolist drama Pirandello becomes the progenitor of the Absurd, Weiss arranges Artaudian cruelty within Brechtian Epic frame and so on. Attempts to blend disparate techniques and forms have become more common than efforts to achieve formal or stylistic purity. Thus

The enlargement of the subject, the freedom of form, the radical shift of paradigm and the interplay of representational have culminated in a blending and reconciliation of dramatic techniques (Ahmed 30).

And all these major modern playwrights have boldly experimented with the traditional forms;

neither the doctrinaire, nor completely attached to a single absolute style of playwriting, they have frequently sought to
enlarge as well as to explore the boundaries of their art (Block and Shedd 3).

Behind these modifications of the new drama resided the thought of Friedrich, Hebbel, Nietzsche, Darwin and Marx: “beneath the surface of action, dialogue, characterization, beneath the crust of “style”, lay intellectual and visionary conviction.” Gassner observed that in the early nineteenth century theatre liberated itself from conventionality only to accept or accommodate a new form of bondage in submitting to the ultra-realistic requirements of verisimilitude and illusionism. Stage production consisting of acting, music, dance, scenic design, stage lighting, costume design and architecture along with the audience and actors present in the theatre come together in varying combinations in dramatic modernism. The rise of modern drama can be equated to the advent of realistic drama and stage production under the leadership of Ibsen, Zola, Shaw, Antoine, and Stanislavsky. The appearance of realistic technique and style is the first phase of modernism in drama. It consists of a succession as well as interweaving of strands that may be called Ibsenism, Wagnerism, Realism and Symbolism, objective Naturalism and subjective anti-Naturalism (subjective anti-Naturalism is evident in Expressionism and objective anti-Naturalism in Epic theatre as formulated by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht)

Gassner believes the first ruling principle of modern theatre was the idea of freedom. The idea was associated with the revolt against neoclassicist who believed that there are rules to which theatre should adhere to. The
importance of decorum, the idea that tragedy deals with the fate of princes and nobles, and the primacy of unities of time, place and action, were banished from the theatre. It was Victor Hugo’s diktat of complete emancipation of form, subject and style, in the dramatization of reality which marks a watershed in the history of theatre. His romantic play *Hernani* manifests the end of domination of the theatre by arbitrary rules, including the absolute separation of comedy and tragedy. He opened the floodgates to every kind of tabooed material, even the most sordid, and advocated the employment of any form and style. It was this freedom that sparked the Naturalism of Zola, the critical Realism of Ibsen and Expressionism of Strindberg.

Zola sought to put the clinical method of experimental biology to all life. According to him the work of art is a demonstration of a problem. Out of his parallelism between art and science there came a significant expansion of the subject matter of literature and the outgrowth of styles and techniques transmuting both fiction and drama. Zolas’s objectives were shared by the reformers of theatre in Germany. Duke George II of Saxe-Meiningen gave a new shape to German stage with a stress on scenic design including setting and costume. The walls of the closed room conveyed the illusion of reality and the authenticity of stage properties strengthen the air of truthfulness. Thus, the idea of stage as an environment rather than just a platform of acting affected fundamental changes in dramatic art. Stage setting now becomes essential to the meaning of the play.
The direct influence of Zola’s Naturalism was evident in the *Theatre libre* of Andre Antoine, which adhered to the drama of horrific and astonishing effects. Even the plays of Strindberg and Hauptmann establish that Naturalism transcends the limits of documentary Realism and could embrace symbolic and psychological techniques as well. What Antoine did in Paris, Otto Brahm did in Berlin and J.T. Grein in London. The same pioneering spirit activated Stanislavsky in founding Moscow Art Theatre with the motto:

we protested against the old manner of acting, against theatricalism, false pathos, declamation, artificiality in acting, bad stages and decor conventions, the emphasis on new productions that spoiled the ensemble work, the whole system of presentation’ and the insignificant repertoires of the time.

Chekhov made further developments on these precepts of Stanislavsky.

In the twentieth century the psychological studies became fused with Realism and Naturalism. Ibsen and Strindberg are important anticipations of this propensity. The later playwrights have combined psychological Realism with the anatomy of the motives and values of the whole society. This tendency is apparent particularly in modern American drama, and can be explicitly seen in Eugene O’Neill. The playwrights such as Ibsen and Strindberg, Chekhov and Shaw, Gorki and O’Casey, Miller, just to name a few transcend the dogmas of arbitrary rules and theories to create a drama of imaginative power and deep human significance.
England was not unaffected by the departures and variations in drama and dramaturgy during the two world wars. The efforts were dimmed during the hostilities of the two wars but immediately after the armistice they started again with fresh zeal. This was a period of exaltation when subjects and things never discussed before were being fervidly delineated. The ideas of Gordon Craig, the technical brilliance of Appia, movements such as Impressionism and Expressionism carrying a sense of social purpose; and claims that the stage should explore and experiment with fresh forms and ideologies, led to an incredible extension of the horizons of theatre. Consequently very rich and effective series of plays began to be written in the realistic mode which is reflected in the works of James Birdie, J. B. Priestly, T. S. Eliot, Christopher Frye, Noel Coward, and G. B. Shaw.

At the turn of the century when Realism and Naturalism revitalized the theatre all through the continent, other different approaches to drama were also in vogue. Symbolism, in which drama is evocative and suggestive, brought to the stage rhythmic and introspective language of poetry. The embellishments of the stage were reduced to a few draperies or a curtain of blue gauze, to imply the vague and remote. Detheatricalisation together with the concern on language was the centre of dramatic expression. In order to show the soul of the drama and to sustain and enhance the emotions, Adolph Appia, Gordon Craig, and Meyerhold, and the other scene designers brought about the complex union of the art which Wagner had visualized by drawing upon the flexible properties of light and color. The symbolist theatre gave a new
emphasis to the creation of new atmosphere and mood in modern drama. It shaped the plays of Hauptmann, Strindberg, Claudel Garcia Lorca, Ghelderode and many other dramatists. Both Lorca’s surrealist fantasies and Ghelderode’s grotesque farce depend on symbolist evocations as does the repetition and pauses of the “static drama” of Samuel Beckett. Pirandello revitalized the art of elaborate pretence and make-believe. His successors animated, by the playful exuberance of Dadaism and Surrealism, reinvented elasticity in the dramatic form. Cocteau, Giraudoux, Wilder, Brecht- to name but a few repudiated the fourth-wall convention of the realistic tradition. Drama remained no more a copy of real life, theatre is something more than common reality, and demanded that the plays be performed in such a way that the audience does not forget for a single moment that they are watching a play.

All these experimental techniques led to the advent of Expressionism. Following this technique the playwrights probe into the mind of the character, reveal the dynamics of inner man, through the representation of hallucinations and other modes of subjective experience. In his ‘dream plays’, Strindberg virtually creates a new dramatic dimension. The depiction of external reality coupled with the illogical and frenzied behavior of the hidden self-results in the theatre of weird angularity and distortion. Fragmented episodes took over the linear narrative. The heroism of the single character give way to multiple and depersonalized abstractions. With the use of epigrammatic and ironic language the dialogues become nervous and explosive, resulting in piercing soliloquies and bizarre pantomime.
The anarchy and the catastrophe of the two world wars give rise to a distrust of readymade ideologies, and high sounding phrases in the theatre. Modern drama shows the revival of grotesque indicating the dissolution of moral and spiritual absolutes of our times. Weird fantasies and horrific nightmares far removed from reality. These call to vary question the existence of any norms. Wedekind and Pirandello had discovered that the grotesque can mould the experiences that are inaccessible to the light of common day. Viewed in the perspective of contemporary history, the grotesque has a rational of its own Surrealism and Existentialism leads to the Theatre of the Absurd.

The expression ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ is devised and given by a Hungarian born author and critic Martin Esslin to the plays of numerous writers, written in the 1950s and 1960s. The term is derived from an essay ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ by a French philosopher Albert Camus who defined existence as meaningless and absurd and one that end in “casual slaughter”(The Absurd). The plays written in this theatre form by Beckett, Adamov, Pinter, Albee, Genet, Ionesco and others share similar view that man lives in a universe which is empty of reason and logic. It is a purposeless existence in which he remains bewildered disturbed and obscurely threatened. An English lexicon describes the Theatre of the Absurd:

A form of drama that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence by employing disjointed repetitions, and meaningless dialogues, purposeless and confusing situations, and plots that lack realistic or logical development.(American Heritage).
Webster’s Dictionary explications the technique as:

A theatre in which naturalistic conventions of plot and characterization are ignored or distorted in order to convey the irrationality of existence and isolation of humanity.

The situations that compel to relinquish reason have brought the Theatre of the Absurd to the fore. The essential idea is the metaphysical anguish of the times. The sense of futility and emptiness was reflected in an era where the mechanical nature of human beings leads them to question the purpose of their living, where time was synonymous with a destructive force. Man feels isolated in a world which is devoid of reason and logic. The Absurd theatre is a strategy to come to terms with that universe. Jean Paul Sartre observes, “we are nothing and in action become conscious of that original nothingness”.

The tradition of the absurd is rooted in the avantgarde experiments in art and literature in 1920s. It is also an outcome of the shocking experiences of the revulsion of the Second World War, which manifests the devaluing of morals, loss of religious faith, disregard for the conventions and insignificance of human life. It can also be perceived as an effort to restore the significance of myths and traditions to the contemporary age by making man conscious of his true condition in this alienated world. The Absurd theatre achieves this by startling human beings out of their mechanical and complacent reality. In a post world war world which lacks religious faith, the authors of the Absurd plays
debunked the old forms and standards that cease to be conclusive and lost their validity.

The Absurd Theatre is thus an anti-theatre which rises against the conventional theatre. It is surreal, illogical and without plot or necessary conflict. The dialogues seem unrelated and nonsensical and defy comprehension. The devaluation of language is the most striking feature of the technique of Absurd. Language is shown as an inadequate instrument of communication and is reduced to meaningless exchanges. Since the dramatists do not aim at solving mysteries of human condition, but to present them within the dramatic structure, they adopt ‘silence’ as an effective technique to present life as they perceive it. The unsaid meaning is delivered through ellipses, gaps, and half-finished sentences and leaves the motives of the characters concealed or partially revealed. Hence, disrupting logic and breaking language to fragments, Absurd drama creates a form which expresses content. Esslin expounds:

The Theatre of the Absurd 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. While Sartre and Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed (Esslin 24)
Thus, theatre of the Absurd has influenced the modern drama with liberation of form, fractured language and shattered reason. Even violence is no longer a part of contemporary stage only; it has become a familiar portion of everyday history which resulted in the advent of Antonin Artaud’s ‘theatre of cruelty’ which relies on gestures, images and perceptions.

During all these alterations, transformations, expansions, revivals and reformation of forms to accommodate the increasing content, language has undergone a sea-change. Theatre language in modern drama incorporates verbal communications, pauses, silences, punctuation marks, irrational and sometimes prolonged sounds (Oooo..., Grrrrr), jargons, private symbols, tropes and metaphors. Incomplete monosyllabic, fragmented sentences to convey that reality itself is broken, distorted likewise; startling language with the element of surprise, repetitions, stichomythia indicate lack of communication. Either the sentences are too short and cryptic or too long apparently meaningless, leading nowhere but actually logical.

With this glimpse in the techniques of modern drama round the globe, this thesis proposes to analyze the respective dramaturgies of Albee, Brecht and Pirandello along with the detailed analysis of their selected plays.

Edward Albee (1928) attacked the very foundation of American optimism and was acknowledged as a playwright of the Absurd stream. The influence of the Absurd theatre was discernible in all forms of art and literature throughout the continent. As remarked earlier, the tradition of the Absurd
originated from a feeling of deep disillusionment. Post-war disorientation and discontentment led to the growth of absurdist elements in America as well. Unlike France, Germany and Britain America did not see the corresponding loss of purpose and meaning in life. This frustration and disillusionment came very late on the American scene. After experimenting in the realistic mode, Albee produced a play that takes the form and content of the absurdistst and translates it into a ‘genuine American idiom’ (Esslin 23). The language used is a combination of clichés, characteristically American; excessive use of punctuation marks, prolonged apparently meaningless sounds (Graaaa!), and many other modern tricks are employed by the playwright to make his intention more precise. Also the use of language of Absurdist plays is evident in Albee: pun, nonsequiturs, nonsense pattern, jokes or incoherent babbles that seemed unrelated to the stage action. The characters are like subhuman types who seemed to live outside law and society. For all this he was indebted to Beckett and Ionesco, the pioneering dramatists of the theatre of the Absurd. Like the other absurdistst, in Albee too one finds the deliberate creation of the atmosphere of threat and menace. The body of his work is replete with uneasiness disorder, senselessness or meaninglessness in existence. Sometimes he appears to go out of his way to tell the audience that they are witnessing a play not life. But later in his career Albee deviated from the Absurd stream and could be seen as a dramatist of the American life or as a satirist. “One finds caricature, which is to say, one finds such qualities as a delight in exaggeration
and in improbability” (742), as observed by the critics S.Barnett, M.Berman, W.Burto and K.Draya.

Luigi Pirandello (1867-1935), an Italian playwright belongs to the peer group of continental dramatists such as Ibsen, Hugo, Jarry, Artaud, Gorky, and Hauptmann. They initiated, gave direction and transformed the theatre with their respective innovative styles and techniques. Pirandello did not adhere to any one exclusive theatre technique; his works incorporate Verism, Naturalism and Futurism. He was associated with an Italian theatre through the teatro del grotesco, the theatre that adopts the ancient native Italian tradition of Commedia dell’arte and provided him with all necessary components for his experimental strategies.

Raymond Williams in his book, ‘Drama from Ibsen to Elliot’ points out the puppet nature of the characters in Pirandello’s dramatic art (as Pulcinella and Arlocchino of the Commedia dell’arte).

It provides him with a means of manipulation which is essential to the realization of fantasies. It involves a dependence on certain highly skilled methods of acting, including the capacity for improvisation which was a central method of Commedia dell’arte (189).

The conflict between life and mask, broken personalities and disjuncted psyches become the hallmark of the plays of Pirandello. He was dissatisfied with the conventional theatricality because he felt that life which is constantly
changing is distorted and killed when presented on the stage. He believed that
time-changing human motives cannot be reduced to simple formula; therefore, he denied the
validity of all drama or wants it to be as fragmentary as life itself. His
proficient dramatic technique, Block and Shedd observe, comprises of his
command over art of compression, dexterity in the portrayal of characters and
sudden climax, and the fractured language enhances his art. Preoccupations
with illusion and reality, instinctiveness and love of artifice coalesce in his
plays to produce the effect of improvisation. The employment of
unconventional theatre techniques sustains the readers’ interest as deliberate
obscurity compels them to stay, notice and think (Ahmed 14). Block and Shedd
comments upon his art of dramatization in these words:

To speak of Pirandello as a writer of intellectual drama, of
problem plays or of plays of ideas is to emphasize only one
aspect of his art, for in Pirandello’s best work the plane of ideas
cannot be separated from the vividness and immediacy of his
dramatic representation (508).

His powerful artistry along with his concepts and attitudes kept his work alive
and transformed it into drama.

Bertolt Brecht (1896-1956) appeared on the scene with an entirely new
dramaturgic concept, alienating empathy from the stage, destroying the fourth-
wall convention to demonstrate his ideologies. He disregards emotional
identification and purgation on the ground that a play should perturb viewers,
prompt their critical faculties, unnerve and jolt them out of complacency. He argues in his article ‘On the Experimental Theatre’ that the function of the conventional theatre was morally and intellectually degrading because “the more the public was emotionally affected, the less capable it was of learning”.

The hypotheses of the ‘Epic Theatre’ is to arouse the spectator from his narcotic slumber, destroy the “habitual way of looking at a thing”, hinder the identification between the stage and the audience and still unite them in mutual enjoyment (Tarannum 104). Brecht has been a frequent opponent of Naturalistic theatre and believed that the theatre should give up its attempt at portrayal of truth on stage. What Brecht recommended is a kind of distancing; a certain degree of separate existence from what was happening on the stage so that the spectators would be able to enter into an unusual dramatic experience and would be able to grasp things rather than be mastered by them. This is attained by what Brecht called ‘verfremdungseffekt’, which is the foundation of Epic theater. The reaction of the audience forms the crux of the alienation technique. The theatre maneuver also introduces an element of aloofness, starts a method of revival of the banal mundane things which appeared strange and evoked a sense of wonder and curiosity among the spectators. The well-knitted episodic structure of his plays led the spectators to see, ponder and criticize. The complete effect is achieved by the juxtaposition of contrasting episodes. Placards are used to display the theme on curtains. Music, songs interludes are some other alienating devices employed by Brecht. He also made use of gestures and recommended the study of Chinese theatre because he believed in
their mastery over the treatment of gestures. What Brecht demanded is an active participation of the audience rather than an “illusion of sitting in front of a key-hole”.

The ‘modern dramatic techniques’ are thus the playwright’s ways, methods and devices to achieve their desired ends. Baker quotes Sir Arthur Pinero to explain innovative methods and their representation on stage:

The art—the great and fascinating and most difficult art—of the modern dramatist is nothing else than to achieve that compression of life which the stage undoubtedly demands, without falsification (15).

Steiner opined that probably no other literary form has been so burdened with the conflicts of objectives and meaning. Modern drama effectively combines Realism and Naturalism, Symbolism and Expressionism, Surrealism and Existentialism to ably express and depict a sensibility torn apart by disillusionment and disintegration. The accomplishments of the masters of modern drama are unforgettable not simply for the innovative techniques they employ, but for the quality of perception that transforms their art into an unprecedented vital and rich expression.

The portion of the material followed in the next five chapters seeks to assess the inventions and discoveries and changes and developments brought about in modern dramaturgy by the three dramatists in their selected works.


