CHAPTER I

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE ESSENCE OF ABSURDITY

T.S. Eliot once said that a great poet in writing himself writes his age. This brief statement is aptly applicable to Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus and Eugene Ionesco the writers chosen for the study here. Their works present, as they do, a panorama of the futility and anarchy of the contemporary civilization. However, their works cannot be understood without a full and fair understanding of their age in which these dramatists were born and brought up, and then the main literary trends which influenced them and determined the tone of their works.

In this age there was a complete breakdown and a rapid social change noticed in every sphere of life. Industrialization and urbanization brought, in their wake, their own problems, like the problem of over-crowding, housing shortage, increase in vice and crime, fall in the standards of sexual morality… etc. Consequently, the atmosphere has increasingly grown more smoky and noisy, and the city slums raise their ugly heads on all sides. Ennui and boredom of the city life and its agonizing loneliness, desolation and disillusionment are all brought out by the plays of the authors selected for the study.

By the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, we find writers like Shaw, Wells and Galsworthy, criticizing the very basis of the existing social, economic and moral system. This period of time ushered in an era of moral bewilderment and uncertainty. There was much rejection of traditional beliefs in Victorian era as well. The rise of the scientific spirit and rationalism led to a questioning of accepted social beliefs, conventions and tradition. It gave rise to fears and frustrations, skepticism and agnosticism. Heroic ideals were topsy-turvy and beliefs in religio-philosophical anchors were shattered.
The temper of the age, therefore, becomes “anti-heroic.” The anti-hero’, is ‘neurotic’ and ‘crippled’ emotionally, if not physically. Because of moral unease and uncertainty, a collapse of faith in the patterns of social relationships, there is a search of new patterns. Moreover, moral and ethical values are no longer accepted as absolutes. Consequently, pessimism and despair of the age overshadows the dramatic picture of man. Pessimism views the universe as basically unfavorable to man and ruled by some power bent on evil and hostile to man. Such a pessimism holds out no hopes for man; it regards man as doomed and his struggle as hopeless, because he is relentlessly pursued by some hostile and malignant power.

In terms of political scenario, socialism and internationalism replaced the old Victorian notion of the supremacy of the whites. Nationalism is no longer accepted as enough, and imperialism has come in for a great deal of criticism. The relations between the nations of the world have been based on the basis of political subjection and imperial supremacy. Nationalism comes in conflict with internationalism.

The devastation and brutality of the World Wars I and II heightened these feelings; people who had believed their governments’ propaganda that they were fighting “the war to end all wars,” saw their leaders cynically pursuing profit at the expenses of millions of lives. Moreover, the imagery of soldiers waist-deep in mud and lice in the trenches, choking the death on their own blood after poisonous gas attacks, made it very easy for many to accept the death of God. Martin Esslin says:

_The number of people, for whom God is dead, has greatly increased since Nietzsche’s day, and mankind has learned the bitter lesson of the falseness and evil nature of some of the cheap and vulgar substitutes that have been set up to take His place._

Thus, the problem of every man, in the contemporary social system in modern industrial world, is that he stands on walkways of the world, desolated and deserted. He wishes to find out what happens to the world which separates him from the civilization, desolated and abandoned. The universe, man is forced to live in, has no interest in him.
The important dramatists of the early 20th century, therefore, address themselves to the ugly world in which monsters and hypocrites destroy the defeated, frustrated little people. They have brought a great deal about man in relation to his social environment, and they have criticized the whole structure of the modern society. It is not man as an individual alone, it is man in a social order, tortured, starved, disillusioned, thwarted and driven to disaster by the forces of a system which cares nothing for the general welfare of society. Man realizes that he counts for nothing as an individual. He would be thrown overboard. He would have known that the progress is for the benefit of those who exploit man and not for the good of society as a whole. Man has grown up in the faith that he “belonged”, that he was a necessary and a respected part of a social order, but he has lived to find out that there was nothing of the kind.

In case of the economic scene, most of the modern playwrights have focused on the callous, brutal nature of a commercialized, mechanized society, its fears, insecurity, spiritual decay and disintegration. They ironically critique the disease of their acquisitive society. The cause of this misery is a social system which is destructive in itself, which thwarts every effort to achieve happiness, which puts a value on misery and pains as a good itself, and worst of all encourages and rewards everything that is predatory and destructive, condemning beauty, well-being and happiness as a sin. The breakdown of the economic system has much to do with the breakdown of social and moral values. As a result, life has become mechanical and impersonal; this has further shaken man’s sense of security.

The world, in which man lives, is tragic, because it is without intelligent social organization. Ignorance, brutality, selfishness, greed and hatred are the dominant forces in this world. The modern dramatists present deformed and crippled human beings to show that the World, in which their figures live, is a particularly static world, deprived of dynamic motion, and through the figures and their exploitation, they could picture the mordant disintegration of Western civilization as it undermines all things beautiful and good in its pursuit of profits. They also reveal that most individuals helplessly dehumanized, and see no hope for man in other kind of state; they offer no hope for salvation to a suffering and wretched humanity. Esslin rightly points out that the theatre,
“Presents the audience with a picture of a disintegrating world that has lost its unifying principle, its meaning, and its purpose - an absurd universe”.2

The result of a mechanical and impersonal life makes man feel insecure. This feeling of insecurity causes unbearable spiritual anguish, fear and torture, and it becomes a terrible obsession which drives human beings to their doom and they are constantly on the rack, suffering – the torture of Hell.

The economic depression, unemployment, over-population, acute shortage have consequently increased the hardship of life, and caused stress, strain and nervous breakdown. The contemporary writers attack bitterly the capitalistic society in which money can gain everything, even happiness. This society becomes entirely barren and heartless. This reveals that man is crying out against a system which has not only exploited his body but his spirit, too.

Life during the period is found to be worsened due to the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity and purposes, the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach. Life has lost all meaning; a universe is deprived of all hopes of light. Man feels strange, and lacks hope of a promised land to come. The world has lost its objective standards of reality and its central explanation and meaning. Man is surrounded by areas of impenetrable darkness that he can never know his true nature and purpose, and that none will provide him with ready-made rules of conducts. Lawrance and Federman have a pertinent point to make in this regard:

*Man for Beckett is alone thrown into a meaningless world; a closed world; he is chained to the process of waiting. He is tied to the hope of delivery by something outside the self, tied to the hope of arrival of Godot, who will apparently change his being.3*

Man’s attempts to contact with each other and with the world, in which he lives, are doomed to failure. He lacks vitality, the strength and the force to preserve the accepted values against a hostile university. James Knowlson in “Happy Days” says, “There can be little or no communication between man and man.”4 The same author adds, “we are left then with an image of two creatures, seeking to communicate in a World where real communication is virtually impossible”.5 So man wanders in the darkness, and is condemned to
wander more and more, without any hint of solid footholds to redeem this wretched condition. Browne says:

A tradition that once meant civilization and have evolved a society that is grasping, repressive and destructive. Anything that was honorable is gone and the codes of the past have become anachronistic and ridiculous in the present.⁶

Man moves from one defeat to another striving vainly to find some answers to his problems, but each day the gap between himself and his needs grows wider. His problem, in a social order, is not a problem of physical starvation, but of psychological persecution which leads him to suicide as the best way of salvation. In Waiting for Godot, Estragon and Vladimir say:

We should have thought of it (suicide) when the world was young, in the nineties…. Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower among the first. We were respectable in these days. Now it’s too late. They would not even let us up.⁷

Thus, man even contemplates suicide as a way of escaping the hopelessness and despair. Man is cut off from religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, he is a lost soul bereaved of all the sustaining sources. It, therefore, seems necessary to comprehend the absurd situation man is inevitably placed in, in order to have a full and fair understanding of the dramatization of the absurd world and the absurd predicament of the man.

Many had begun to question even the existence of God, and the basis of their faith. The idea of the absence of God is conspicuous for the modern dramatists. They see that the human mind and heart, not as divinely inspired, but as products of their biological and social environment, and the death of a complacent acceptance of any ‘right’ system of religious belief become a natural result. This idea of a Godless universe created both despair and uncertainty, and could make trails and sufferings for man in his everyday life which seems pointless.

The dramatists’ plays are imbued with deep religious fervor. They are facing up to a deeper layer of absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties. Thus, religion was considered as a counterweight to the emptiness of the liberalism and the rigidity of conservation. In addition, religion offers the advantages as a
protection against tyranny which is created by the industrial society that creates people detached from tradition and alienated from religion. Consequently there is a danger of specialization in modern culture which tends to isolate religious thinkers from those in philosophy, art, politics and science.

The dramatic writing had its origin in the liturgy of the religion. It had its origin in the Mass, and it cannot afford to cut off itself from the ritual and liturgy of the church. No drama can be an alternative to religion, but its religious origin indicates the supreme importance of the moral or religious aim of the genre. T.S. Eliot says, “We escape from this strain by attempting to return to an identity of religion and culture which prevailed at a more particular stage”. Irving Babbit asserts that the Christian religion is an essential part of the history of our race. The problem of humanism is undoubtedly related to the problem of religion. This means we cannot accept any dogma or revelation unless we consider humanism and religion as alternative to each other. They wish us to live on the naturalistic level, and at the same time to enjoy the benefits that the past had hoped to achieve as a result of some humanistic or religious discipline. They are, thus as historical facts, by no means parallel, humanism had been sporadic, but Christianity continuous. It is quite clear that there is no possible development of the European races without Christianity. This means that is a tradition of humanism equivalent to the actual tradition of Christianity. To form the future, we can only form it on the material of the past, we must use our heredity instead of denying it.

Humanism is either an alternative to religion or is ancillary to it. To Eliot’s mind, it always flourishes most when religion has been strong; and if there are examples of humanism which are anti-religious or in opposition to the religious faith of the place and time, then such humanism is purely destructive. Thus, religion is only renewed and refreshed by awakening of feeling and fresh devotion. So the individual is no longer controlled by authority, but through religion a man’s self can be touched. T.S. Eliot points out that “humanism is insufficient without religion”. He admitted that, “in the past humanism has been allied with religion”. Accordingly, religion puts morals in their proper place, and humanism is a form, which is quite untenable
and meaningless without a religious foundation. He reveals that; Humanism makes for breadth, tolerance, equilibrium and sanity. It operated against fanatism.”

According to this point, as Eliot believes, the World cannot get on without breadth, tolerance and sanity. He believes that unless Europe recovered a form of a religious society, they would fall into the paganism that had overtaken Germany and Russia. He, also, believes that liberalism was a corrosive force, for it provides people with no position and value. A liberal society is a negative society. He points out that Russian communism is a religion, but this religion can only fight with another religion which is the church. This religion can galvanize the church to the chaos of communism.

Education seems to become more and more chaotic and meaningless as a result of the social, economic and religious factors, because we have no settled and satisfactory arrangement of society, and because we have both vague and diverse opinions about the kind of society we want. So the problem turns out to be a religious problem. T.S. Eliot says, “All education must be ultimately religious education.” He adds, “the hierarchy of education should be a religious hierarchy.” So a materialistic civilization, as Eliot believes, may bring chaos and torpor. Thus, Eliot did not separate literature and religion. He says in this regard:

I say that the consummation of the drama, the perfect and ideal drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the mass, drama springs from religious liturgy, and that it cannot afford to depart far from religious liturgy.

Thus, there should be some constant relation between drama and the religion of the time. Lawrence and Federman say, “Beckett is the maker of a myth with profound psychological, social and religious implication.”

The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism and various totalitarian fallacies - that means progress, nationalism and totalitarian fallacies take the place of religious faith during the Second World War. All values and beliefs were shattered by the war. Camus tried to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs. He says:
A world that can be explained by reasoning however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. He is irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.  

So Camus, Beckett, Ionesco and other dramatists deal with the question of God and religion in relation with the irrationality of the universe in their works. The awareness of man that he lives in a universe where there are no certainties, principles or absolutes stems from the decline of religious belief, on which these dramatists elaborate in their work. K. Muller says:

*The dominant theme in Beckett’s plays as in his novels, is the futility of human’s search for meaning and significance and the tragic fact that humankind cannot, in spite of this ultimately vain endeavor, renounce looking for sense.*

After two terrible wars, there are still many who are trying to come to terms in searching for a way in which they can, with dignity, confront a universe deprived of what was once its centre and its living purpose, a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disjointed, purposeless – absurd. As Esslin says:

*In expressing the tragic sense of loss at the disappearance of ultimate certainties the Theatre of the Absurd, by strange paradox, is also a symptom of what probably comes nearest to being a genuine religious quest in our age.*

The loss of the poetic image of ritual, which responds to a deep inner need in all human beings, that the decline of religion has left, as a deeply felt deficiency in our civilization. As Camus says in the *Myth of Sisyphus* : “The certainty of the existence of a God would give meaning to life has a far greater attraction than the knowledge that without Him one could do evil without being punished.” Camus, also, emphasizes, in *The Fall*, that man always needs some kind of authority such as religion or the state to tell him what’s right and what’s wrong, and to guide him through simple and clear regulations and values. The idea of the absence of an authority, be it divine or social, terrifies the ordinary man because, in this case, he would not know how to cope with life, which would seem chaotic and frightening, and how to find his way out of
this chaos and ambiguity. So the absence of God, on the other hand, would be disastrous. Consequently, man has to choose a master to shield himself from ambiguity and chaos. In *The Rebel* Camus points out:

*The absence of God leaves the rebel with absolute freedom, but in the name of human solidarity freedom translates into “a prison of absolute duties.” From the moment that man believes neither in God nor immortal life, he becomes ‘responsible for everything alive, for everything that, born of suffering, is condemned to suffer from life’.*

Man has lost faith in religion, which has been eroded by science and materialism. This feeling of insecurity causes unbearable spiritual anguish, fear and torture. Sometimes it becomes a terrible session, which drives man to his doom, which could come from his sense of being separated from nature and not yet attaining complete humanity; of not “belonging” in the universe. So he suffers from inner emptiness, isolation and a feeling of insecurity. Consequently, his suffering increases and he becomes down-trodden; his restive living leads a primitive animal-like existence.

Blaise Pascal, a noted French philosopher and mathematician, in his *‘Apology’* which comprises two divisions, pinpoints two different conditions of man: in the first part he would display the misery of man without God, and in the second part the happiness of man with God. He reveals that man’s misery is due, principally, to his uncertainty and insignificance. When man looks around him, all he sees is darkness and obscurity. He finds himself suspended. Man flounders in his efforts to lead a meaningful and happy life. His relations with his fellow men are warped by self-love; society is founded on mutual deceit. Man’s justice is fickle and relative, and no fixed standard of values may be found. Listen to Pascal’s description of the reasoning of such a person:

*I know not who sent me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what I myself am. I am terribly ignorant of everything. I know not what my body is, nor my senses, nor my soul.*

He adds:

*I see the terrifying immensity of the universe, which surrounds me, and find myself limited to one corner of this*
fast expanse without knowing why I am set down here…. On all sides I behold nothing but infinity, in which I am a mere atom, a mere passing shadow that returns no more. All I know is that I must soon die.²⁴

Pascal points out that man’s condition ought to impel him to seek whether there is God and a solution to his predicament. But people occupy their time and their thoughts with trivialities and distractions so as to avoid the despair, boredom and anxiety. Such is the misery of man.

Dr. William Lane Craig mentions in his subject. “The Absurdity of life without God” that modern man thought that when he had got rid of God, he had freed himself from all that repressed and stifled him. Instead, he discovered that in killing God, he had also killed himself. For if there is no God, then man’s life becomes absurd. If God does not exist, then both man and the universe are inevitably doomed to death. Like prisoners condemned to death, they await their unavoidable execution.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a noted French existentialist, portrayed life in his play ‘No Exit’ as Hell. Camus, too, saw life as absurd. At the end of his brief novel ‘The Stranger’ Camus’s hero discovers in a flash of insight that the universe has no meaning and there is no God to give it one.

The French biochemist, Jacques Monod, seemed to echo sentiments when he wrote in his work ‘Chance and Necessity’, man finally knows that he is alone in the indifferent immensity of the universe. Thus, if there is no God, then life itself becomes meaningless. Man and the universe are without ultimate significance.

In a world without God, there can be no objective right and wrong, but there can be only culturally and personally relative, subjective judgements. This means that it is impossible to condemn war, oppression or crime as evil. Nor can one praise brotherhood, equality, and love as good. So if God exists, then there is hope for him, but if God does not exist, then what we all are left with is despair.

Nietzsche (1844-1900), a German philosopher, predicted that someday people would realize the implications of their atheism, when men didn’t truly
comprehend the consequences of what they had done in killing God. This realization would usher in an age of nihilism – the destruction of all meaning and value in life. The end of Christianity, wrote Nietzsche, means the advent of nihilism. He adds:

*Our whole European culture is moving for some time now, with a torture tension that is growing from decade to decade, as toward a catastrophe: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.*

Modern man, says Francis Schaeffer, resides in a two-storey universe. In the lower storey is the finite world without God; here life is absurd. In the upper storey are meanings, value and purpose. Now modern man lives in the lower storey, because he believes that there is no God. But he cannot live happily in such an absurd world; therefore, he continually makes leaps of faith into the upper storey to affirm meaning, value and purpose, even though he has no right to, since he does not believe in God. Modern man is totally inconsistent when he makes this leap, because these values cannot exist without God, and man in his lower storey does not have God.

The dilemma of modern man is, thus, truly terrible. And so far as he denies the existence of God and the objectivity of value and purpose, this dilemma remains unrelieved for ‘post-modern’ man, as well. Indeed, it is precisely the awareness that modernism issues inevitably in absurdity and despair that constitutes anguish of post-modernism. The atheistic worldview is insufficient to maintain a happy and consistent life. Man cannot live consistently and happily as though life were ultimately without meaning, value, or purpose. Confronted with this dilemma, man flounders pathetically for some means of escape.

In a remarkable address to the American Academy for the Advancement of science in 1991, Dr. L.D. Rue confronted with the predicament of modern man, boldly advocated that we deceive ourselves by means of some ‘Noble Lie’ into thinking that we and the universe still have value.

As pointed out in the previous topics or sections, the breakdown of economic system has much to do with the breakdown of social and moral
values. Pessimism, frustration and a sense of alienation pervade everywhere. It is in such a stifling atmosphere that many new labels in the sphere of drama came into being. Moreover, the two world wars and their impact on European civilization sparked a new age in literature and art. Obviously situated in a period of historical strife, the Modernist’s anti-theatricality “attacks not the theatre itself, but the value of theatricality.”

Dramatic experiments have manifested themselves first in “Realism” and “Naturalism”. Realism is a literary movement that deals with the fidelity to the truth of human nature and life. It is applied in two diverse ways: to identify a movement in the writing of novels during the 19th century, and secondly to designate a recurrent mode, in various eras and literary forms of representing life and social world as it seems to the common reader. It depicts life as it is usually experienced without recourse to miraculous events, larger-than-life characters or supernatural intervention. Naturalism sometimes claims to give an even more accurate depiction of life than realism. It holds that a human being exists entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul nor any mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world.

Expressionism is another label, which is a German movement in literature and other arts; it was at its height between 1910 and 1925 that is, in the period just before, during, and after World War I. Its central feature is a revolt against the realistic and literary tradition of realism, both in subject matter and in style. Expressionism is a dramatic technique which enables a dramatist to depict “inner reality”, the soul or psyche of his personages. The emphasis shifts from the external to the inner reality. Strindberg had a considerable influence on modern dramatists and was considered the first dramatist to write “expressionistic” plays which struck the keynote of the “expressionistic” theory of the theatre in which there is a deeper and deeper probing of the self-conscious action that is increasingly internalized, and what goes on within the soul becomes more important than the external action.

In an expressionist play, the number of characters is cut down to the minimum. As Clifford Leech points out that the characters express themselves
briefly, often in monosyllables. The scenes are short and the number of
scenes is cut down to a minimum, each scene being a further stage in the
deeper and deeper probing of the central figure’s consciousness.

The other label of these trends is *Symbolism* which is used by many of
the major writers of the modern period, in the decades after the World War I,
who exploit symbols which are in part drawn from religious and esoteric
traditions and in part invented. Some of the works of the age are symbolic in
their settings, their agents, and their actions.

The *Dada* movement began in Zurich during the War, among French,
Germany and other European countries. Writers, painters and sculptors
mingled to establish a European artistic and literary movement (1916-23) that
flouted conventional values in works by nonsense and incongruity. Its aim was
the destruction of art, or at least the conventional art of the bourgeois era that
had produced the horrors of war.

Dada was essentially destructive and so radical in its nihilism that it
could hardly be expected to be creative in an art form that necessarily relies
on constructive co-operation. As Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, one of the
leading French exponents of Dada, recognizes in his autobiography:

*Dada consists of opposing, incompatible, explosive tendencies. To destroy a world so as to put another in its place in which nothing more exists, that was, in fact the watchword of Dada.*

The plays, the Dadaists produced and largely performed themselves, are
essentially nonsense poems in dialogue form, accompanied by equally
nonsensical business and decorated with bizarre mask and costumes.

Dada was reborn in a changed form in the *Surrealist movement*, where
Dada was purely negative, Surrealism believed in the great positive, healing
force of the subconscious mind. Andre Breton put it in his famous definition of
the word in the first surrealist manifesto of 1924. Surrealism was a pure
psychic automatism by which it is proposed to express, verbally, in writing, or
in any other way, the real functioning of thought.

Antonin Artaud was one of the finest of the surrealist poets and
became the most powerful seminal influence on the modern French theatre.
He was the ablest dramatist and one of the most extraordinary men of his age. His vision of a stage of magic beauty and mythical power remains to this day, one of the most active leavens in the theatre. He diagnoses the confusion of his time as springing from the “rupture things and words, between things and the ideas that are their representative” and rejecting the psychological and narrative theatre, with its preoccupation with personal problems. Antonin passionately called for a return to myth and magic, for a ruthless exposure of the deepest conflicts of the human mind, for a theatre of cruelty. He says, “Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that the theatre must be rebuilt.” He adds that by confronting the audience with the true image of their internal conflicts, a poetic magical theatre would bring liberation and release. According to this point, he says, “The theatre restores to us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names we hail as symbols.” Thus, Artaud, in theory, had formulated some of the basic tendencies of the Theatre of the Absurd by the early 1930s. But he lacked the opportunity both as a dramatist or as a director to put these ideas into practice.

Existentialism and Absurdity are considered the core of this chapter, so it seems logically necessary to have a significant look at Existentialism before passing on to the philosophy of Absurdity. Existentialism is one of the main philosophies that have invaded the human thought in the twentieth century. It is a philosophical doctrine based up despair. Its tenet is the insistence on the actual existence of the individual as the basic fact rather than a reliance on theories and abstractions.

It lies in an embryonic form in the works of thinkers like St. Augustine, Duns Scouts and Blaise Pascal. It is said, “This view of the human condition goes back a long way to St. Augustine, to Duns Scouts and to Pascal.” Existentialism comes to attach a great importance to the existence of an individual as opposed to his essence. This theory, in fact, was not complete before the emergence of Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian. It is he
who studies these thinkers St. Augustine, Duns Scouts and Pascal, minutely so as to formulate the theory of Existentialism. The same authors say:

It was given a brilliant restatement by the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard (1810-1855) in his many books, but especially in Concept of Dead and Fear and Trambling. The influence of Existentialism was much extended at the beginning of the 20th cent, especially in Germany, by Jasper and Heidegger (both of whom) obstinately refused to call themselves existentialists.  

Kierkegaard, Heidegaar, Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, Andre Malraux and Albert Camus have been profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Existentialism. All these philosophers have tenaciously stuck to the view that man is not an automaton wire-pulled by an invisible God; and also the society does not create man. He has a free will, and not as pre-destined being. These exponents of Existentialism come to realize that all these old values and norms have completely been destroyed by the Nazis and, as much, for the survival of the human race a set of new values must be created.

There are two groups of Existentialism: one group as Atheist Existentialism, and another Christian Existentialism. The first group has for its main concern-life on earth; the second one has for its main concern-the transcendence of religious values:

But by the side of atheist Existentialism there is a Christian Existentialism perhaps more faithful to Kierkegaard, illustrated in Germany by Jaspers, in France by Gabriel Marcel, he puts stress on the transcendence of their religious values.

Existentialism is widely recognized as a philosophical movement through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre after the Second World War. He lays stress on existence and not on essence, because essence is illusory and problematic. Sartre says in this regard:

Existentialism lays emphasis on existence opposed to essence which would be illusory, problematic or at least result and no point of departure from the philosophical speculation.

Thus, it is a philosophy based on human subjectivity since its center of interest in human existence. Sartre means, \textit{“By Existentialism we mean a}
doctrine which makes human life possible, and in addition, declares that every truth implies a human setting and human subjectivity.\textsuperscript{37}

Sartre also explains what subjectivity means according to existentialist: “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of Existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{38} Prominent names of Existentialism as Sartre, Heidegger and Kierkegaard agree with the saying, “existence proceeds essence”\textsuperscript{39} According to Sartre, there are two forms of being:

\begin{quote}
Being – in –itself… and being-for-itself... : being- in—itself is the self-contained, non-conscious being of an entity, its material being… being-for-itself--- is the mode of existence man achieves by separating himself from sheer being-in-itself.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

Heidegger names these states authentic and inauthentic being respectively:

\begin{quote}
Authentic being is rooted in the explicit sense of my situation….; and inauthentic being, moving automatically in the established ruts and routes of the organized world.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

And, like Sartre, Heidegger thinks that one can achieve authentic existence only by realizing one’s possibilities and constituting one’s own values and meaning in life. However, like being-for-itself, authentic existence is not easy to attain since it requires courage and strength necessary for rejecting society’s morals and values. Man, at the beginning, is a being-in-itself, or an inauthentic being which leads to the idea of Nothing. According to Sartre:

\begin{quote}
The individual identity that man creates for himself- his being-for-itself is constantly in a state of chance contingency with all that surrounds him, and both he and his circumambient world are wholly ungrounded, making for a condition of fundamental absurdity.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

Since man has appeared in the World by chance, without any essence and without any purpose, he, in Sartre’s word, is “superfluous”, so he is nothing at the beginning. Heidegger also agrees with Sartre on man’s nothingness before achieving authentic existence. According to Heidegger “We exist in a state of ‘Fallenness’ when we languish below the level of existence to which it is possible to rise.”\textsuperscript{43} Thus, Heidegger believes that man who achieves
authentic existence “recognizes... the nothing out of which he came and into which he goes.”

Existentialists regard language not as a means of communication, but as an obstacle to it. Sartre believes in the inadequacy of language as a tool for communication. According to him, language, far from expressing thoughts, solidifies and kills our thoughts. According to Heidegger, although the function of language is ideally to communicate truth, everyday language does just the opposite:

Language communicates truth, that is, uncovers and calls attention to what is there. But everyday language in constant use loses touch with the objects to which it ostensibly refers... Language then spreads untruth and establishes inauthentic existence. Instead of mediating my being-in-the-world by revealing intelligible objects of use and enjoyment, it obscures them by covering them with itself.

As stated earlier, for existentialists, man inhabits a world in which nothing is certain or reliable, but there is one certainty awaiting man at the end of the road: death. Man is irrevocably condemned to death, which is “the most obvious absurdity”, because man is sentenced to death for reasons unknown to him, and gives the human condition the tragic sense. Moreover, since life ends in death, death makes all man’s efforts senseless, and it “makes nonsense of any attempts to give ‘meaning’ to life.” However, this does not mean that man should give up life and sink to despair. On the contrary, man is determined to live his life as best as he can, and the only way of doing this is to live the present moment, knowing that life is short. Man should rebel against death, which dignifies him.

For existentialists, death is the finality which transforms man into nothing; they believe that there is absolute meaning in life and that man should create his own meaning and values. Since, God does not exist, man is absolutely alone assigning his own meaning to life and forming values which creates “forlornness” in Sartre’s word, “When we speak of forlornness, a term Heidegger was fond of, we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this.” To Sartre it is very distressing that
God does not exist “because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with him” so man is forlorn because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. In Heidegger’s words, man, in his state of “thrownness”, has to bear the whole responsibility of his existence since he has no excuse in a Godless universe. Therefore, for existentialists, “man--- is thrown into the universe and into desolate isolation.” So he is in exile.

In Existentialism it is up to man to give meaning and purpose to his life. For existentialists, “the world is utterly without absolute meaning, and man is left to invent his own personal meaning for his existence.” Moreover, in Existentialism, man is responsible not only for himself but also for others, which adds to the anguish man feels when he makes decisions and puts them into action through which he realizes himself. In Sartre’s words “Man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the world on his shoulders; he is responsible for World and for himself as a way of being.”

The existentialist school, henceforth, undergoes a change; from solitude and despair it comes to concentrate on humanism. Sartre and Camus from 1940 onward are confronted with the problem of history and war.

From 1940 onward Camus and Sartre are suddenly confronted with history and war. Sartre up to that time remained indifferent to politics and if Camus was clearly engaged in favor of the Algerians, he did it as a journalist rather than as a writer with the occupation and the resistance, their literature came to abandon little by little the themes of solitude for those of solidarity….. existentialism was in search of a new humanism.

But Camus and Sartre take different directions, Camus deciding on a form of humanism which is dead opposed to all possible forms of history and totalitarianism, while Sartre appears to support a sort of humanism seeking asylum against the highhandedness of time in history itself and in return dealing a counterblow, applying no less degree of high-handedness.

Camus, in truth, seeks a sort of humanism which resists history and all forms of totalitarianism. Sartre, on the contrary, designs a sort of humanism which would integrate itself into history and which would accept its violence.
After the death of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Existentialism suffers decay and decline, slowly wears out.

_The last books which Camus publishes before his death, show a lot of disorder and pessimism…with the death of Camus and Merleau-Ponty Existentialism comes to efface itself little by little._

Inspite of its slow disappearance, the importance of Existentialism cannot be underestimated, in other words, actually does not die out because it paves a way for as important and popular artists as Genet and Beckett.

Many existential philosophers have defined Absurdity in their own manner. Soren Kierkegaard, a Pre-World War II German philosopher, defined absurd as _“that quality of Christian faith which runs counter to all reasonable human expectations.”_ Jean-Paul Sartre a post-World War II French philosopher, felt that absurd was _“the sheer contingency” _or _‘thereness’ _or _‘gratuitousness’ _of the World._ Both of these definitions are hard to interpret and for the most part are not how Camus viewed the word absurd. Camus gives his interpretation of absurd in his book _‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ _which is the point at which man realizes that all the struggles that we put forth in repeated daily cycle are in all actuality completely meaningless.

Absurd originally means _“out of harmony” _in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition is, _“out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.”_ In this common usage, _‘absurd’ _may simply mean _‘ridiculous’ _, but this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows:

_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._

The philosophy of Existentialism does rotate within materialistic axes which don’t view illogical or metaphysical thing. _“Nothing for him (Sartre), is human consciousness…. ‘Being’ is made up of two sorts of things, real object and our mental picture of those objects when we imagine them.”_
Accordingly, Existentialism is no more than a haphazard stumble like any other philosophy releasing from materialistic context to philosophize a world based mainly standards that extend material and mind. A question might tickle someone’s lips, which is what is the reason behind these random stumbles? Simply it is the lack of faith which is generated mainly by the shortage of logical and reasoning evidences that justify the faith. The search for reason and logic in the matter of faith stems from the materialistic restrictions laid by the scientific and technological progress upon the human mind. And since the Scriptures seem not to provide such logical evidence, they are taken to be but an illusion and in a word “Unpractical”.

Another major factor in people’s loss, is the World Wars. These wars kill many innocents. Further they transform the World into a cemetery that takes different names in the works of poets or writers such as “The Wasteland”. The survivors out of these Wars have been disillusioned. They tend not to believe in any ideal that could not stop these genocides. Moreover, they have found that so many patriotic, politic, or even religious values are indeed the real motive and reason for these wars. Accordingly, despair, frustration and disillusionment have been a warm lap for those survivors. Then, it is not strange to see such philosophies grow out of such a land. Writers begin to depict their situation as individuals living in the debris of this world, and as persons having special views and judgements that may give a certain evaluation to the actual condition of the twentieth-century-man.

The Absurd has been one of the most pervasive movements in literature and in philosophy in the 20th century. Generally speaking, almost every movement in literature has emerged as a reaction to preceding literary movements, or as a consequence of the radical changes in society or traumas that the World has gone through. The Absurd is not an exception since the Two World Wars, traumatic experiences, for the whole world, played a tremendous role in the emergence of the Absurd as a school of thought in literature and in philosophy. Esslin rightly says in this point:
The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religion of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the War.\textsuperscript{62}

Thus, the Second World War played a central role in the emergence of the Absurd as rebellion against essential beliefs, ideals and values of traditional culture and traditional literature. Esslin says in this regard:

The certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away,....they have been tested and found wanting,... and discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions\textsuperscript{63}.

When everything that gave meaning and purpose to life and to existence turned out to be illusions, the old and familiar world became an alien one in which man felt lost and an ‘exile’. As Camus said in \textit{The Myth of Sisyphus} (1942):

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But 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 promised land to come. The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.\textsuperscript{64}

So, the world was no longer a unified whole, but “a disintegrating world that had lost its unifying principle, its meaning, its purpose---an absurd universe.”\textsuperscript{65} In such a world, it is quite natural for man to feel alienated since it is no longer possible for him to know “why it was created, what part man has been assigned in it, and what constitutes right actions and wrong actions”.\textsuperscript{66} Thus, the universe for the absurd writers and philosophers is irrational, defying logical explanation, and in such an irrational universe, man’s existence becomes meaningless and purposeless. Since the universe is irrational and resists rational systematization, any attempt at systematization is futile and doomed to failure.

To Camus, “the absurd is essentially a divorce between the mind and the world.”\textsuperscript{67} Beside this in a world devoid of any guiding principles\textsuperscript{68}, there
are no absolutes, and values are relative, so absurdists are against absolutism, which requires a unifying principle in the universe. Therefore, quite naturally they rejected all “those philosophies that start from the idea that human thought can reduce the totality to the universe to a complete, unified, coherent system”.

The Absurd is frequently regarded as a movement descended from Existentialism. It is a philosophical movement that influenced many diverse writers in the 19th and 20th centuries. In other words, absurd drama owes its origin to Existentialism, expressionism and surrealism as well as the novels of James Joyce and Franz Kafka. But it refuses to believe, like the existentialists, that man has a free will, and disowns the traditional approach that man is a rational being, who lives in, at least, a partially intelligible universe. It disowns heroism and dignity of man.

The term ‘Absurd’, we are to note, is not used the absurd drama in the sense of ridiculous, but in the sense of out of harmony, life has lost its sanctity, traditional values are in the melting pot, man is thoroughly disillusioned about things, once invested with glory and romance; he is deprived of illusion, light and colour. The playwrights and novelists of the ‘Absurd school,’ if there is a school at all, have presented man, suffering from metaphysical anguish.

The playwrights have eschewed conventional plot, story and character, and created a dramaturgy that reflected their anguished vision of universal reality through apparently meaningless, illogical, unrelated and unsequential dialogue and action. Thus, the absurdists believe that life has no inherent meaning or purpose, which makes it absurd. Martin Esslin says:

*If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters, and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of*
dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings.\textsuperscript{71}

The absurdists regard language not as a means of communication but as an obstacle to it. Fritz Mauthner points out in his work \textit{“Critique of Language”} the fallibility of language as a medium for the discovery and communication of metaphysical truths.\textsuperscript{72} To illustrate the point it can be stated that prominent Beckett is one of the absurdists who are preoccupied with the problem of communication between people. He refuses the adequacy of language as a tool for communication, and asserts that \textit{“there is no communication because there are no tools for communication”}.\textsuperscript{73} According to Beckett:

\begin{quote}
the attempt to communicate where no communication is possible is merely a simian vulgarity, or horribly comic, like the madness that holds a conversation with the furniture\textsuperscript{74}.
\end{quote}

Esslin rightly suggests that for Beckett, as for many other absurdists meanings and communication is not possible \textit{“in a world that has lost its meaning”} here, \textit{“language also becomes a meaningless buzzing”}.\textsuperscript{75} As Molloy says at one point, \textit{“The words I uttered myself, and which must nearly always have done with an effort of the intelligence, were often to me as the buzzing of an insect.”}\textsuperscript{76} Language falls short in conveying man’s thoughts and emotions because man lives:

\begin{quote}
in a world subject to incessant change, (so) his use of language probes the limitations of language both as a means of communication and as a vehicle for the expression of valid statements, an instrument of thought.\textsuperscript{77}
\end{quote}

As stated earliest, for the absurdists, man inhabits a world in which nothing is certain or reliable, but there is one certainty awaiting man at the end of the road: death. Man is irrevocably condemned to death, \textit{“which is the cruel mathematics that condemns our condition”}\textsuperscript{78}, as Camus says in \textbf{The Myth of Sisyphus} (1955:12). Death is \textit{“the most obvious absurdity”}\textsuperscript{79} because man is sentenced to death for reasons unknown to him. Since life ends in death, death makes all man’s efforts senseless, and it makes \textit{“nonsense of any attempt to give meaning to life.”}\textsuperscript{80} Language, and specially traditional language is rendered futile.

One of the major reasons contributing to the sense of absurdity is:
the decline of the religious beliefs which has deprived man of
certainties... when it is no longer possible to accept to a
complete closed system of values and revelations of divine
purpose\textsuperscript{81}

The absurdists believe that the attempt to attach meaning to life is futile, and it
is merely an illusion that man should avoid. The absurdity itself is a character-
istic of neither the human being nor the world solely, but of their interaction.
Camus wrote:

\begin{quote}
The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For
the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them
one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures
together. This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless
universe when my adventures take place.\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

Camus saw the absurd as one of three essential components that
constitute the “drama of existence”.\textsuperscript{83} Absurdity is born out of the confrontation
between the two other components: the “human nostalgia” for unity or clarity
and the “unreasonable silence of the world”.\textsuperscript{84} So the philosophy of Camus is
a philosophy of the absurd, and for him the absurd springs from the relation of
man to the world, of his legitimate aspirations to the vanity and futility of
human wishes. Thus, the Absurd, for Camus, is an absence of correspon-
dence between the mind’s need for unity and the chaos of the world the mind
experiences, and the obvious response is either suicide or, in the opposite
direction, a leap of faith. Absurdity of life and absurdity of linguistic modalities
are co-jointed in these playwrights.

Such writers and absurdists considered to belong to the absurd
tradition as Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov attempt to portray “the sense
of the metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition”\textsuperscript{85} in their
works. Their chief concern is to depict the absurdity of the human condition,
and man lost and trying to find his way desperately in a world devoid of
meaning, sense, and purpose. But what is the aim of these writers and
playwrights in displaying the absurdity of the human condition? Why are they
so determined to make man face his condition truly? According to the
absurdists, man, who is ignorant of his true condition, is the one who is
deprived of human dignity since “dignity… comes of awareness”. For them, modern society is mostly composed of such individuals who lead a mechanical existence by means of illusions and habit, so they lack the sensitivity and lucidity essential for recognizing the absurdity.

At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show; you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of one’s own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this nausea, as a writer of today calls, it is also the absurd.

As Esslin points out, “this is the feeling of the deadness and mechanical senselessness of half conscious lives”. As a writer who belongs to the absurd tradition, Beckett agrees with Camus in that many people are ignorant of their true condition or evade it through their life composed of a series of habits which gives the illusion of meaning and purpose in life.

When the first absurd plays were being written and staged in Western Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, people in the East European countries suddenly found themselves, thrown into a world where absurdity was an integral part of everyday living. It became part and parcel of everyday’s existence. The East European Absurd Theatre was undoubtedly inspired by Western absurd drama, yet it differed considerably in form, meaning and impact.

In the wake of two world wars, the principle of absurdity found fertile soil in the imagination of modern writers in the 1950s a group of playwrights created a new form of drama, which the critic Martin Esslin named “the theatre of the Absurd,” to describe plays that abandoned traditional construction and conventional dialogue. These plays were notable for their illogical structure and the irrational behaviour of their characters.

The Theatre of the Absurd, a term coined by the critic, Martin Esslin for the work of a number of playwrights, has been become as a new way of waking public, their private world. Its origins are rooted in the avant-garde
experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time it was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the Second-World-War, which showed the total impermanence of any values, and shook the validity of any conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life, and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness. The trauma of living from 1945 under threat of nuclear annihilation also seems to have been an important factor in the rise of the new theatre and new kind of linguistic modalities.

This new theatre seems to have been a reaction to the disappearance of the religious dimension from contemporary life. This theatre openly rebelled against conventional theatre. It was anti-theatre, because of its outward defiance of a theatrical norm in terms of its plot, character and language. It was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. This Theatre of Absurdity first met with incomprehension and rejection.

Thus, the “Theatre of the Absurd” has become a catchphrase, much used and much absurd. The playwrights of this term are not widely different in other aspects, and they trace the features in common. Consequently, this movement, which develops the theatre, proceeds by a series of movements, as mentioned before, each of which comes to power as the previous one abdicates or is overthrown.

When the plays of Ionesco, Beckett, Camus and others first appeared on the stage, though they were the first dramatic achievement of that time, they puzzled and outraged most critics, as well as audiences. These plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries. Genet’s “The Maid”, Ionesco’s “Bald Prima Donna”, Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” and others will be noticed as first performance, took place in Paris, which is the fountainhead of the theatre of the Absurd.

As a powerhouse of the modern movement, Paris is an international rather than a merely French centre: it acts as a magnet attracting artists of all nationalities who are in search of freedom to work and to live nonconformist lives….This is the secret of Paris as the capital of the World’s individualists.89
This literary (dramatic) movement, between 1950 and 1960, revolutionized both English and World drama, connected the dramatists (Edward Albee, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, Vaclave Havel... etc) whose work is an expression of their personal experience and which Albert Camus in his book of essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), characterized as “Absurdity”.

The present dissertation is composed with a firm belief that the absurd drama works in a new convention which mirrors a new attitude to the world in our time and logically can be made comprehensible despite its incomprehensibility. This thesis is an attempt to deal with the work of some of its major exponents, and to provide an analysis and elucidation of the meaning and intention of some of their important plays; and also to explain its significance as an expression of the present situation of Western man. The Absurd Drama is important and significant and considered by critics as the finest dramatic achievement of our time. The rise of this new, original, and valuable dramatic convention certainly does not, in the opinion of critics, wipe out all that has gone before, or invalidate the work of important dramatists, past, present, and to come, in other theatrical forms. However, it provides a new language, new ideas, new approaches, and a new vitalized philosophy to transform the modes of thought and feeling of the public at large in a not too distant future, too.

The Absurd drama, essentially is a man centered drama; the man utterly confused and eternally lost in the labyrinth of chaos and directionlessness. Their stage craft and linguistic modalities define the nature and texture of their art and vision. Man is a mixture of contrastive aspects: spirit and material; goodness and badness; right and evil; heredity and environment, and so on. Therefore, any attempt to understand man and reflect this understanding to the others should not neglect or take any side of the human character at the expense of the others.

The Absurd dramatists’ writings show a picture of broken reality in which people undergo the impacts of their surroundings according to which
their inner drives respond with or without objection. All the circumstances, in
this world, seem to work against them. There are no values, no morals, no
religions; it is a sort of a jungle where creatures are fighting for living. To
survive is to renounce all the human rights and creeds, and to be a sort of
beast that could kill and live.

Man, therefore, feels like an alien; isolated, deserted, distorted and
fragmented. This socio-political and cultural disruption finally has a direct
bearing on his linguistic integrity and integrity of the self simultaneously. He
has always been in search of an answer to the question, “who am I?”
Nevertheless, as Beckett emphasizes in *Trilogy* man is fated to failure in his
search for his self since self is not fixed but fluid and indefinable. As Esslin
argues, in Beckett’s work, the problem is one “of ever-changing identity of the
self… So the self at one moment in time is confronted with its earlier
incarnation only to find it utterly strange.” Esslin adds, “It has been suggested
that Beckett preoccupied with the problems of being and the identity of the
self.” It is impossible to capture the self which is in a continuous “process of
renovation and destruction that occurs with change in time”, and only death
can put an end to this otherwise never-ending process. And quite naturally,
therefore, their language of presentation is absolutely unconventional and
stunning at times. It breaks down all the grammatical linguistic and even
semantic structures associated with the linguistic orientations.

The absurdists do not believe in the divine order governing the working
of the universe; what governs the world are chance and coincidences. So
man lives in a mad world where nothing is improbable. So the irrationality of
the universe is due to the absence of absolutes, and when one accepts that
there are no absolute values, the existing social and religious values become
arbitrary. There is not a distinction between the right and the wrong, and even
there is no right and wrong. Then nobody has the right to judge any body and
declare others guilty or innocent on the basis of those arbitrary rules and
values. Hence, the recognition of the irrationality brings out freedom from the
existing social and religious systems and values which are considered
arbitrary; it is that “the world is essential nightmare from which reason, forgiveness, and hope are absent; a place less to live in than to endure.” A world that turns man into a thing rather than a being. He can no longer think that he has a nature proper to himself.

Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. Beckett, Camus, Adamov, Inoesco, Genet Pinter and others all share the view that man is inhabiting a universe with which he is out of key. He is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened.

In the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, there is no dramatic conflict. Dramatic conflicts, clashes of personalities and powers belong to a World where a rigid, accepted hierarchy of values forms a permanent establishment. Such conflicts, however, lose their meaning in a situation where the establishment and outward reality have become meaningless. However frantically characters perform, this only underlines the fact that nothing happens to change their existence.

Absurd dramas are lyrical statements, very much like music: they communicate an atmosphere, an experience of archetypal human situation. The Absurd Theatre is a theatre of situation, as against the more conventional of sequential events. It presents a pattern of poetic images.

*The Theatre of the Absurdity is a theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence, and therefore, it uses a language based on patterns of concrete images rather than argument and discursive speech.*

In doing this, it uses visual elements, movements, light. Unlike conventional theatre, where language rules supreme, in the Absurd Theatre language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery.

*The Theatre of the Absurd has regained the freedom of using language as merely one - sometimes dominants, sometimes submerged - component of its multidimensional poetic imagery.*

The Theatre of he Absurd is totally lyrical theatre, which uses abstract scenic effects, many of which have been taken over and modified from the popular theatre arts: *mime, ballet, acrobatics, conjuring, music hall clowning*
– much of its inspiration comes from silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in early sound film. Esslin in this point says:

_There has always been a close relationship between the performers of wordless skills jugglers, acrobats, tightrope walkers, aerialists, and animal trainers and the clown. This is a powerful and deep secondary tradition of the theatre, from which the legitimate stage has again and again drawn new strength and vitality._

He also says:

_The silent film comedy is without doubt one of the decisive influences on the Theatre of the Absurd. It has the dreamlike strangeness of a world seen from outside with the uncomprehending eyes of one cut off from reality. It has the quality of nightmare and displays a world in constant movement and wholly purposeless. And it repeatedly demonstrates the deep poetic power of wordless and purposeless action._

It emphasizes the importance of objects and visual experience: the role of language is relatively secondary. It owes a debt to European pre-war surrealism: its literary influences include the work of Franz Kafka—Austrian writer. The Theatre of the Absurd aims at creating a ritual like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams, which are featured in many theatrical pieces, but it had to wait for Strindberg—Swedish writer, to produce the masterly transcriptions of dreams and obsessions that have become a direct source of the Absurd Theatre.

_Theatre of the Absurd is the use of mythical, allegorical, and dreamlike modes, of thoughts....For there is a close connection between myth and dream; myths have been called the collective dream images of mankind. As Mircea Eliade points out, “at the level of individual experience it has never completely disappeared; it makes itself felt in the dreams, the fantasies, and the longings of modern man.”_

Strindberg, Dostoyevsky, Joyce and Kafka created archetypes by delving into their own subconscious; they discovered the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. Myth has never completely disappeared on the level of individual experience. The Absurd Theatre sought to express the individual’s longing for a single myth of general validity:
“Theatre of the Absurd mirrors real obsessions, dreams and valid images in the subconscious mind of its author.”

For the French avant-garde, myth and dream enjoy utmost importance. The surrealists based much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious as “Surrealism believed in the great positive, healing force of the subconscious mind”. The aim of the avant-garde was to do away with art as a mere imitation of appearances. Apollinaire demanded that art should be more real than reality and deal with essences rather than appearances. He wanted a theatre that would be “a modern, simple, rapid, with the shortcuts and enlargements that are needed to shock the spectators”. One of the more extreme manifestations of the avant-garde was the Dadaist movements, which took the desire to do away with obsolete artistic conventions to the extreme. Some Dadaist plays were written, but these were mostly nonsense poems in dialogue form, the aim of which was primarily to “Shock the bourgeois audience”. Esslin says in this regard:

The plays, the Dadaists produced and largely performed themselves are essentially nonsense poems, accompanied by equally nonsensical business and decorated with bizarre masks and costumes.

After the First World War, German expressionism attempted to project inner realities and to objectify thought and feeling. It is rightly suggested that:

The dramatic products of expressionist movement were on the whole too idealistic… They share the tendency to project inner realities and to objectify thought and feeling.

Some of Brecht’s plays are close to Absurd Drama, both in their clowning and music – hall humor and the preoccupation with the problem of identity of the self and its fluidity:

His plays are about the appropriation of human personality by a stronger personality—the stealing of one’s identity, as a form of rape. And this is one of the themes of the Theatre of the Absurd as well.

Ionesco’s Jack, or the Submission is a clear case in point. French surrealism acknowledged the subconscious mind as a great, positive healing
force. “surrealism believed in the great, positive, healing force of the subconscious mind”. However, its contribution to the sphere of drama was meager: indeed it can be said that the Absurd Theatre of the 1950s, and 1960s was a belated practical realization of the principles formulated by the Surrealists as early as the 1930s—in this connection of practical importance were the theoretical writings of Antonin Artaud.

Artaud fully rejected realism in the theatre, cherishing a vision of a stage of magical beauty and mythical power. He called for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes, thus creating a new mythology. In his view, theatre should pursue the aspects of the internal world.

_The theatre must pursue by all its means a reassertion not only of all the aspects of the objective and descriptive external world but of the internal world; that is, of man metaphorically._

According to this point, man should be considered metaphorically in a wordless language of shapes, light, movement and gesture. Theatre should aim at expressing what language is incapable of putting into words.

Artaud wanted to restore the language of gesture and movement, to make inanimate things play their part in the action, and to relegate dialogue (Which does not belong specially to the stage, it belongs to books ) to the background.

Artaud adds: “It is not a matter of suppressing speech in the theatre but of changing its role, and specially of reducing its position.” Artaud forms a bridge between the inter-war-avant-garde and the Post-Second-World-War Theatre of the Absurd. “Artaud, who was befriended by Adamov in the period of his mental illness, forms the bridge between the pioneers and today’s Theatre of the Absurd”. The language modalities, therefore, are highly masked by the atmosphere of war and also by the chaotic situation that prevails consequential to the uncertainties engendered by war.

The Theatre of the Absurd highlighted man’s fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that man has no answers to the
basic existential questions; why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. The absurdity stems from the ambiguity of man’s position in the universe, from his fear of the death and from his instinctive yearning for the absolute.

According to these absurdists, man was doomed to alienation, and isolation in such a universe, for there was not a common and firm ground on which he stood safely. This ground which had seemed firm and safe was broken into pieces, and one had to stand on his own ground, alienated from one’s fellow man. He belongs to no-man’s-land, where despair and pessimism loom large. Hence, lack of communication, lack of sympathy and love, and man’s sense of solitude are reflected in the works of absurdist writers like Camus, Beckett and Ionesco.

The twentieth-century-dramatists epitomize the sufferings of the modern age which have a universal application. Hermann Hesse rightly points out that the mode of our present day life has become the more cruel and horrible than ever before. Literature is the transcript of that horror. These dramatists had recourse to irony and laughter while displaying the conflict between the mask and the face, the illusion and reality. They believed that everything is transitory, and reality exists at a particular movement of time. In all their plays they were concerned over the questions of illusion and reality. They represented man, suffering from metaphysical anguish. He is thoroughly disillusioned about things. He deprived of illusions, light and colour. He is alone, alone all alone, alone in the wide sea of life. Man is a stranger, an outsider, an exile. He has no hope or light. He is divorced from life and purpose.

The language, this man used to establish contacts with his fellowman, is almost disintegrated. It was substantially lost its communicability. Words have lost their definite meanings. The dramatists of the Absurd school are concerned with the ultimate realities, which cannot be conveyed by orthodox language. They have to evolve a new pattern of language. “By putting the language of a scene in contrast to the action, by reducing it to a very
subordinate role.” Or language appears more and more as being in contradiction to reality. Steiner says, “that much of reality now begins outside language”.

The Absurd dramatists’ plays are concerned with expressing the difficulty of finding meaning in a world subject to change. Their use of language probes the limitations of language both as a means of communication and as a vehicle for the expression of valid statements, an instrument of thought. They tried to find means of expression beyond language. Language in the selected authors’ plays serves to express the break-down of language. Where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meanings. The following chapters, therefore, seriously take into critical account the chief achievements of the selected playwrights both in terms of their thematic content and their projection of the stupefying and stunning reality beyond the generic and linguistic norms and conventions.
Chapter I

NOTES

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5. Ibid., p.113.
10. Ibid., p.482.
11. Ibid., p.482.
12. Ibid., p.488.
13. Ibid., p.515.
15. Ibid., p.47.
24. Ibid., p.11.
30. Ibid., p.42.
31. Ibid., p.85.
32. Ibid., p.28.
34. Ibid., p.218.
37. Ibid., p.10.
38. Ibid., p.15.
43. Ibid., p.52.
45. Ibid., p.93.
49. Ibid., p-21.
52. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p.52
54. Ibid., p.27.
55. Ibid., p.27.
57. Ibid., p.41.
58. Ibid., p.44.
63. Ibid., p.23.
66. Ibid., p.313.
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70. Ibid., p.23.
72. Ibid., p.43.
74. Ibid., p.32.
77. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.84.
79. Ibid., p.71.
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84. Ibid., p.28.
86. Ibid., p.291.
89. Ibid., p.26.
90. Ibid., p.78.
91. Ibid., p.29.
92. Ibid., p.69.
95. Ibid., p.396.
96. Ibid., p.320.
97. Ibid., pp.325-26.
100. Ibid., p.368.
103. Ibid., p.360.
104. Ibid., p.367.
105. Ibid., p.368.
107. Ibid., p.37.
108. Ibid., p.73.
110. Ibid., p.396.