CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Narrating the success which followed the staging of the supposedly esoteric avant-garde play *Waiting for Godot* before the prisoners of San Quentin in November 1957, Martin Esslin remarks that the reception of the play as also the plays of Ionesco, Adamov, Pinter and others testify that they, which are so often "superciliously dismissed as nonsense or mystification have something to say and can be understood." Esslin accounts for the incomprehension and bewilderment that the absurd plays caused to their being a developing stage convention which has not yet been generally understood and hardly defined. Inevitably they appear impertinent and outrageous for a critic who tries to judge them by the standards and conventions of theirs.

Contrasting the absurd drama with its predecessors Esslin remarks:

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, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a good beginning nor a middle nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to 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. 1

Though a few names are associated with absurd dramas it must be admitted that they do not form a self-proclaimed movement. Each of the absurd writers is an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world. Each has his own personal approach to both subject matter and form; his own roots, sources, and background. If they also, very rarely and in spite of themselves, have a good deal in common it is because their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western World. This is not to say that their works are representative of homogeneous pattern. The theatre of absurd can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time:
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 a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, and actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.\(^2\)

The above clearly defines what the theatre of absurd is not. For centuries European drama patterned itself on certain conventions with a few innovations and modifications in its course. But the experiment of Beckett and others sought to revolutionize the conventional ideas about drama and theatre. The absurd theatre provides new medium, new approaches and new philosophy aimed at transforming the attitudes of people to life.

Esslin discusses the term absurd in its entirety in the following account:

Absurd originally means 'out of harmony' and belonged to the realm of music. Hence its dictionary definition: 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.' In 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 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 sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and the other writers. What is noteworthy however about them is that they express their sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational devices by abandoning the rational devices. Here in lies the difference between playwrights such as Sartre, Anouilh or Camus who tried to convey the absurd through conventional forms and the absurd playwrights. "The Theatre of Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet." It is this for an integration between the subject matter and the form in which it is expressed that separates the theatre of
The theatre of the absurd is preoccupied with the absurdity (nothingness) and uncertainty of the human condition:

The Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters. In Ionesco's The Chairs, for example, the poetic content of a powerfully poetic play does not lie in the banal words that are uttered but in the fact that they are spoken to an evergrowing number of empty chairs. The Theatre of the absurd is thus part of the 'anti-literary' movement, which has found its expression in abstract painting, with its rejection of 'literary' elements in pictures; or in the 'new novel' in France ... it should be centred in Paris ... The cosmopolitans like Apollinaire. Spaniards like Picasso or Juan Gris; Russians like Kandinsky and Chagall; Rumanians like Tzara and Brancusi; Americans like Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, and E.E. Cummings; an Irishman like James Joyce; and many others from the four corners of the world could come together in Paris and shape
the modern movement in arts and literature. The Theatre of the Absurd springs from the same tradition and is nourished from the same roots. An Irishman, Samuel Beckett; a Rumanian, Eugene Ionesco; a Russian of American Origin, Arthur Adamov, not only found in Paris the atmosphere that allowed them to experiment in freedom, they also found there the opportunities to get their work successfully produced.\(^5\)

It is said that so many of Backett's latter characters are tramps and wanderers, and that all are lonely. Beckett was addicted to silences, and both Beckett and Joyce suffused with sadness. Backetl is mostly for the world and Joyce is mostly for himself. "Work like Beckett's, which spring from the deepest strata of the mind and probe the darkest wells of anxiety would be destroyed by the slightest suggestion of glibness or facility; they must be the outcome of a painful struggle with the medium of their expression."\(^6\)

In *Waiting for Godot*, the feeling of uncertainty it produces, the ebb and flow of this uncertainty from the hope of discovering the identity of Godot to its repeated disappointment - are themselves the essence of the play. Any endeavour
to arrive at a clear and certain interpretation by establishing the identity of Godot through critical analysis would be as foolish as trying to discover the clear outlines hidden behind the Chiaroscur of a painting by Rembrandt by scraping away the paint.\textsuperscript{7}

"In the second act of \textit{Waiting for Godot} when Pozzo and Lucky reappear, cruelly deformed by the action of time, Vladimir and Estragon again have their doubts whether they are the same people they met on the previous day. Nor does Pozzo remember them:\textsuperscript{8} "I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today."\textsuperscript{9} Waiting in the play is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself-defeating, purposeless, and therefore null and void. The more things change, the more they are the same. That is the terrible stability of the world "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, some where else another stops."\textsuperscript{10} One day is like another, and when we die we might never have existed, as Pozzo exclaims in his great final outburst.

Samuel Beckett though an Irishman, had his creative career started and sustained in France. It is amazing that
one who distinguished himself as a student in his own country should choose another country for his creative enterprise. It is equally amazing that he should choose French language and not his native English. It may be reasonable to account for the choice of the language and country if we take into consideration the inspiration that they gave to various literary movements. The symbolist movement and its impact on English literature hardly needs any mention. Paris had been the scene of Joyce's literary activity and it is no wonder that as one who admired Joyce's work and as one who knew Joyce so well, Beckett should choose on Paris.

Beckett's greatest play Waiting for Godot written and produced in French was a big success. Although it is anti-literary and anti-theatre it was received by the audience well. There is neither plot nor characterization in the conventional sense. There is neither exposition nor climax nor resolution. In fact nothing happens on stage. The characters Vladimir and Estragon meet but there is no conflict leading to further action. There is the eternal wait for Godot who never comes. As Martin Esslin remarks:

.... Beckett's plays often lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Instead of a linear development, they present their author's
intuition of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront their audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony, which gain meaning by their simultaneous interaction.11

As Beckett himself says in *Waiting for Godot* "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful". The characters Vladimir and Estragon who are shown to be waiting in Act One continue to wait for Godot who never comes. Nothing happens in the entire play except the two tramps encountering two pairs of characters Pozzo and Lucky and Master and Slave. The theme of the play appears to be therefore waiting, the act of Waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of a human condition. *Waiting for Godot* is waiting for an event, a thing, a person, and death. Whatever Beckett has said in his analysis of Proust about time is put across in this play.

When Beckett was asked about the theme of *Waiting for Godot* he quoted Augustine's words: "Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: One of the thieves was damned."12 The uncertainty of salvation and the chance of bestowal of grace explains Beckett's
understanding of life. The characters and situations have their parallels in religion but peculiar richness of play. The play like *Waiting for Godot* lies in its openness to philosophical, religious and psychological interpretations.

It is agreed that Beckett's plays suggest the difficulty of finding meaning in a world which is constantly changing and 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 thoughts. Beckett used the dramatic medium as a medium which is beyond language. His mime plays dispensed with words altogether. He used the stage to reduce the gap between the limitations of language and the illusion of being. The language in Beckett's plays serves to express the break down, the disintegration of language. Since there is no certainty there can be no definite meaning. Some have tabulated different modes of disintegration of language noticeable in *Waiting for Godot*. There are monologues, clichés, repetitions of synonyms inability to find the right words, telegraphic style suggesting sings of inability of communication and loss of grammatical structure. Most important sign of disintegration of language and meaning is the nature of dialogue in Beckett's plays. The dialogue often breaks down because no truly dialectical of thought is possible. Although Beckett's dialogues suggest the failure
of language as a vehicle of conceptual thought or as an instrument of the communication of readymade answers for the human problems is continued use of language is a paradoxical. He is trying to communicate the incommunicable.

Eugene Ionesco, who appears obscure and enigmatic in plays, and whose work and career was steeped in controversy, is a remarkable playwright who has expounded his ideas very lucidly and brilliantly. Like other playwrights of the absurd theatre he became a messiah for the enemies of realism in the theatre. As one critic puts it:

Here at last was a self-proclaimed advocate of anti-theatre: explicitly anti-realist and by implication anti-reality as well. Here was a writer ready to declare that words here meaningless and that all communication between human beings was impossible. Ionesco protested against the description that he was anti-realist that he maintained the impossibility of communication by language. He said:

The very fact of writing and presenting plays is surely incompatible with such a view. I simply hold that it is difficult to make oneself understood, not absolutely impossible.
Dismissing the left wing playwrights as well as Right Wing playwrights, Ionesco stated that society itself formed a barrier between human beings that man's authentic community is larger than society. To quote Ionesco,

No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute; it is the human condition that directs that social condition not vice-versa.15

It is this belief that all ideologies are flawed that they and their language needs constant reexamination.

Ionesco's play The Lesson is concerned with language, with the difficulties of communication. The Chairs also contains the theme of the incommunicability of a life-time's experience. It also dramatizes the futility and failure of human existence. The play also satirises the emptiness of polite conversation, the mechanical exchange of platitudes. Ionesco's theory of the theatre finds its expression in his play Victims of Duty. It is a playwright's play which opposes all that have been written from ancient Greek to the present day. For him the three-act-play accommodates a number of unnecessary things. He says that
the three act division is artificial. "The theatre needs very simple idea; a single obsession, a simple, very clear self-evident development."\(^\text{16}\)

Ionesco's polemical play performed in 1956 was Improvisation or Shepherds Chameleon. In this play there is a battle between the historical, sociological, epic theatre, the lyrical, poetical theatre of the world within, the theatre of dream, mood and being. In contrast to all other plays Rhinoceros is a play about the disease of the totalitarianism of right of the left and of conformation. It is the play which is easily understood and the brilliant touches. His Hunger and Thirst finally gave him the status of modern classic.

Ionesco's beliefs about drama, the function of drama may be understood in the following words of his:

I do not write plays to tell a story. The theatre cannot be epic... because it is dramatic. For me, a play does not consist in the description of the development of such a story—that would be writing a novel or a film. A play is a structure that consists of a series of states of consciousness or situations, which become intensified, grow more and more dense, then get entangled, either to be disentangled again or to end in unbearable inextricability.\(^\text{17}\)
His opposition to the conventional well-made play which is marked by logical construction is strengthened by a case for a play which has psychological tensions. He says:

Everything is permitted in the theatre: to bring characters to life, but also to materialize states of anxiety, inner presences. It is thus not only permitted, but advisable, to make the properties join in the action, to make objects live, to animate the decor, to make symbols concrete. Just as words are continued by gesture, action, mime, which, at the moment when words become in-adequate, take their place, the material elements of the stage can in turn further intensify these.18

The above suggests Ionesco's theory of intensification that the theatre ought to achieve. The language is one of the elements and it can be made to contradict the action and disintegrate characters. In the words of Martin Esslin: "the pattern of Ionesco's plays is one of intensification, acceleration, accumulation, proliferation to the point of paroxysm, when psychological tension reaches the unbearable the pattern of orgasm. It must be followed by a release that relieves the tension and substitutes a feeling of serenity."19
Jean Genet is another important playwright in the art of absurd drama. His plays reveal feelings of helplessness and solitude when man is confronted with despair and loneliness. This idea is very well illustrated in his image of the hall of mirrors which shows a hall of mirrors in which man is trapped by "an endless progressive of images that are merely his own distorted reflection - lies covering lies, fantasies battening upon fantasies nightmares nourished by nightmares within nightmares." His plays *Deathwater* deals with the relationship between the three prisoners about to be executed. The second play *The Maids* is about the three women who experience the separation of dream from reality. His next play *The Balcony* represents a world of fantasy. What distinguishes Genet's plays is that they lack plot, character, construction, coherence or social truth. His plays on the other hand have psychological truth but are not intellectual exercises. "Genet's theatre is propoundly a theatre of social protest. Yet, like that of Ionesco and of Adamov before his conversion to epic realism, it resolutely rejects political commitment, political arguments, didacticism, and propaganda. In dealing with the dream world of the outcast of society, it explores the human condition, the alienation of man, his solitude, his futile search for meaning and reality." In so far as Genet abandons the concepts of character and motivation, and concentrates on states of mind
and basic human situation, rather than on the development of a narrative plot from exposition to solution, and devalues language as a means of communication and understanding, and rejects didactic purpose and confronts the spectator with the harsh facts of a cruel world and his own isolation, Genet displays his association with the methods of other dramatists of absurd school. *The Balcony, The Blocks, The Maids* are good examples of his method.

Another significant writer who may be considered, is Harold Pinter. His plays *The Room, The Dumb Waiter, The Birth Day Party*, all deal with the individual's pathetic search for security, the secret dreads and anxieties. In his search for higher degree of realism in the theatre, Pinter rejects the well-made play for the reason that it provides too much information about the background and motivation of each character. Pinter's use of language reflects his clinically accurate fear for the absurdity of ordinary speech. So, in his plays conversations are marked by repetitiveness, incoherence and lack of logic or grammar.

The foregoing summary has focussed on the impact of *The Theatre of the Absurd* on writers in Europe but no mention has been made of absurd dramatists elsewhere. That is no reference has been made to absurd writers in the United States. The reasons for the absence of absurd dramas in the
United States are not difficult to understand. It was Europe which was more affected by the two world wars resulting in dissolutionment and disappointments. But in the United States the consequences of two World Wars have been less terrible. In the words of Martin Esslin:

The American Dream of the good life is still very strong. In the United States the belief in progress that characterized Europe in the 19th Century has been maintained into the middle of the twentieth. There have been signs, particularly since the shock administered by the Russian successes in the space race, that dissolution and frustration might become a factor in the American scene, but the rise of phenomena like the beat generation has been marginal compared to parallel developments in Europe.

Despite the optimism and belief in progress there were writers who felt that the foundations of American optimism were fragile. Edward Albee is the foremost among them. His plays The Zoo Story, The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf and Tiny Alice belong to the Theatre of the Absurd and were written, based on the European models. The Zoo Story is like the world presented by Harold Pinter in its dialogue and subject matter - the failure of communication. The next play in the Absurd tradition is The
American Dream. It is a play that takes up the style and subject matter of the Theatre of the Absurd and translates into a genuine American tradition. It "... attacks the ideals of progress, optimism, and faith in the national mission, and pours scorn on sentimental ideals of family life, togetherness, and physical fitness; the euphemistic language and unwillingness to face the ultimate facts of the human condition that in America, even more than in Europe, represent the essence of bourgeois assumptions and attitudes." Critics have seen linguistic resemblances between Albee and Ionesco. If Ionesco reflected the cliches of the French, Albee the American, the difference being the mechanical harshness of Ionesco's and the oily glibness and sentimentality of Albee's which is the American contribution to The Theatre of the Absurd.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf is Albee's full-length play which enabled Albee to reach a play's mark for the great. Written in the tradition of Strindberg and O'Neill it has clear affinity to the theatre of the absurd.

Albee's Tiny Alice is considered significant in that it shows a complex image of man's search for truth and certainty in a constantly changing world but the playwright does not offer solutions to the questions he raised. The play gains its strength by creating a mood, a sense of the mystery and impenetrable complexity of the universe. With Box and
Quatations of Mao-Tse-Tung Albec returns to the absurd theatre
by constructing an intricate pattern of crosscut monologues from
Mao and an empty box.
NOTES


5. Ibid., pp. 7-8.

6. Ibid., p. 20.

7. Ibid., pp. 24-25.

8. Ibid., p. 31.


12. Ibid., p. 32.

13. Ibid., p. 100.


17. 'Pages de Journal', loc. cit., p. 231.


20. Ibid., p. 167.

21. Ibid., p. 197.

22. Ibid., p. 266.

23. Ibid., pp. 267-268.