

# Modern Absurd Drama as a Catalyst for Social Awareness and Reform

Faisal Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

---

## Abstract

*Modern absurd drama, a genre engrained in existentialism, emerges as a theatrical tool to reflect the absurdities present within human society. With its origins after World War I, it gained prominence post-World War II by exemplifying the futility of war, conflict, and the horrific aftermath of destructive events. This study examines the influence of modern absurd drama in addressing societal absurdities through a qualitative approach. The research investigates the impact of absurd plays on audience perceptions of real-life absurdities and explores the potential for using theater as a means of promoting social reform. Through questionnaires, interviews, focus-group discussion and reaction of audience after watching absurd dramas, the study delves into the transformative power of absurd drama on social norms, political ideologies, and individual perceptions. The findings suggest that absurd dramas play a significant role in raising awareness and fostering discussions about social issues, challenging established norms, and inspiring critical thinking. The study contributes to the understanding of theatre as a platform for change and advocates for the integration of absurd drama with educational curricula for impactful societal transformation.*

---

Date of Submission: 08-09-2023

Date of Acceptance: 18-10-2023

---

## I. Introduction and Research Background

Modern absurd drama, an artistic manifestation of the philosophy of absurdity, emerged as a reaction to the destructive events of World War I and gained distinction after the World War II. It aims to reflect the nonconcrete concept of existentialism, revealing the pointless and absurd nature of human existence. Notable European playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, and Eugene Ionesco pioneered this genre, using it to question the purpose of human actions and the absurdity of societal constructs. Bangladeshi playwright Humayun Ahmed also utilized this technique of absurd drama to showcase the societal misdeeds for raising awareness under the veil of raising awareness for reflection, rethinking and reformation.

The essence of absurdism lies in its conflict between human pursuits for meaning and the inevitable realization of uncertainty and pointlessness (Camus; Hochberg). This philosophy questions established norms, ideologies, and belief systems, bringing to light the inherent absurdity within human actions and societal constructs. In the context of this absurdity, the study focuses on modern absurd drama as a medium to raise awareness about and challenge the societal absurdities that persist.

The term 'absurd' conveys a conflict between human psychological conflict to explore and investigate the meaning of life and activities whether they are right or wrong, whereas most often humans end up a result of uncertainty and pointlessness. The philosophy of absurdism is closely connected to "existentialism and nihilism, and the idea had its roots in the nineteenth century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard" (Absurdism).

## II. Problem Statement

The human society is plagued by conflicts stemming from diverse theological, cultural, and political ideologies. Despite advocating for peace, societies continue to engage in absurd and destructive activities, reminiscent of the absurdity depicted in modern absurd dramas. Recent events like the Russia-Ukraine war highlight the absurdity of warfare in the age of progress and development. This study aims to explore the potential of modern absurd drama as a tool to counteract the growing absurdities in society and motivate positive change.

---

<sup>1</sup>Faculty Member, Department of English, World University of Bangladesh (WUB), MPhil Fellow at BUP; e-mail: [fahmed.icr@gmail.com](mailto:fahmed.icr@gmail.com); [faisal2@english.wub.edu.bd](mailto:faisal2@english.wub.edu.bd)

### III. Research Questions

1. Are absurd plays completely devoid of meaning, or do they possess underlying significance?
2. To what extent do absurd dramas contribute to recognizing and addressing societal absurdities?
3. How do absurd dramas impact individuals, communities, nations, and international perspectives?
4. Is absurd drama an avenue for mere entertainment or a means of reform against human absurdities?
5. What are the implications of practicing open-space theater for absurd dramas involving diverse participants?

#### **Absurd Dramas: Either Meaningless or Carry Significance**

Absurd plays are often perceived as devoid of traditional meaning due to their unconventional structures and perplexing narratives. However, these plays possess a profound underlying significance. They utilize absurdity as a tool to challenge conventional thinking and explore existential concepts. For instance, in Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot," the seemingly meaningless conversations between characters highlight the human tendency to seek purpose in a seemingly indifferent universe. The absurdity serves as a metaphor for the absurdity of human existence itself.

#### **The Contribution of Absurd Dramas in Addressing Absurdities**

Absurd dramas play a pivotal role in recognizing and addressing societal absurdities by magnifying them in a distorted mirror. Through satire and exaggeration, these plays offer a fresh perspective on societal norms and behaviors. Consider Ionesco's "Rhinocéros," where the transformation of individuals into rhinoceroses serves as an allegory for the rise of fascism. The absurd and shocking nature of the transformation brings attention to the irrationality of conformity and the dangers of unchecked power.

#### **The Impact of Absurd Dramas from Individual to Community**

Absurd dramas resonate with individuals by prompting introspection and questioning the status quo. In communities, they spark discussions on prevailing issues. Nationally, they can lead to social change; Vaclav Havel's "The Memorandum" satirized bureaucratic dehumanization and became a symbol of resistance during communism. Internationally, absurd dramas transcend cultural barriers. Beckett's works, for instance, reflect the universality of human struggle, fostering cross-cultural understanding.

#### **Entertainment or a Tool for Reformation**

While absurd drama offers entertainment through its unconventional humor, it fundamentally serves as a catalyst for reform. By presenting the nonsensical aspects of life, these plays challenge complacency. Albert Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" portrays the absurdity of the human pursuit of meaning. Such works encourage audiences to question societal norms and inspire reform by emphasizing the need for authentic living.

#### **Implications of Inclusive Open-Space Theatre**

Embracing open-space theater for absurd dramas with diverse participants enriches the experience. Diverse perspectives bring multifaceted interpretations. In Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," open-space techniques empower participants to explore absurd situations and societal injustices. This approach fosters empathy and collective action, mirroring the collaborative effort needed to address complex absurdities in society.

### IV. Literature Review

Absurdism, a philosophical concept that emerged in the mid-20th century, challenges the traditional notions of meaning and purpose in human existence. Albert Camus, a prominent figure in absurdism, asserted that the human condition is essentially characterized by the absence of inherent meaning (Camus and O'Brien 10). This existential philosophy laid the foundation for the development of the "Theatre of the Absurd," a dramatic genre that aligns with the ideas of existentialism and nihilism. This section delves into the key themes and theoretical underpinnings of absurd drama, shedding light on its role in addressing the absurdities of society.

#### **Absurd Drama as a Mirror to Society**

The Theatre of the Absurd, characterized by its departure from traditional dramatic conventions, presents a world where characters engage in nonsensical dialogues and activities. This genre seeks to highlight the incongruities, absurdities, and existential struggles inherent in human interactions. Samuel Beckett's seminal play "Waiting for Godot" epitomizes this genre, featuring two characters who engage in circular conversations while waiting for an elusive figure named Godot. The repetitive nature of their interactions mirrors the monotonous routines and uncertainties of human life (Beckett 23).

### Existentialism and Nihilism in Absurd Drama

The philosophy of absurdism is deeply intertwined with existentialism and nihilism. Existentialism, as expounded by thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, emphasizes the individual's responsibility to create meaning in a seemingly meaningless world (Hannay and Marino 87). Absurd drama explores this existential crisis by depicting characters trapped in absurd situations, struggling to find purpose. Nihilism, on the other hand, posits that life lacks inherent value, leading to a sense of futility (Klemke and Cahn 56). Absurd dramas often portray characters engaged in futile actions, highlighting the tension between human endeavors and their ultimate insignificance.

### Absurd Drama and Societal Critique

Theatre of the Absurd serves as a potent tool for critiquing societal norms, values, and institutions. Playwrights like Eugène Ionesco and Harold Pinter used absurdism to challenge the absurdity of authoritarian regimes, conformity, and power dynamics. Their works, such as Ionesco's "Rhinocéros" and Pinter's "The Birthday Party," expose the absurdity of blind conformity and the dehumanizing effects of oppressive regimes (Ostashevsky et al. 112). By presenting exaggerated and nonsensical scenarios, these playwrights provoke audiences to question the absurdities embedded within society.

### Reformation through Absurd Drama

While absurd dramas often depict characters grappling with meaninglessness, they also offer a potential for reformation. Pedro Querido, in his article "From Kharm's to Camus: Towards a Definition of the Absurd as Resistance," suggests that the acknowledgment of absurdity can be a form of resistance (Querido 768). Characters in absurd dramas, despite their predicaments, often continue to persist, reflecting a form of resilience and defiance against the absurdities they encounter. This resilience can serve as a metaphor for individuals and societies confronting societal absurdities and striving for positive change.

## V. Methodology

This qualitative research employs interviews, focus-group discussions, theatrical performances, and open-space theater initiatives to collect and analyze data. The integration of absurdist theatre with the English Literature and Language departments at universities fosters collaborative and outcome-based learning. The research includes reviews of research articles, translated absurd dramas, and the observation of student engagement in the process. Data analysis involves interpretation of modern absurd drama, feedback, reactions, and observations from open-space performances.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected through a mixed-methods approach involving qualitative methods. The research tools employed included focus group discussions, theatrical performances of absurdist dramas, open-space performances of absurd plays, interviews with English departmental heads at various universities, and reviews of the produced research articles and translated creative pieces of absurd dramas.

### Data Collection Procedure

The process began with the establishment of a culture of reading absurd dramas among the general population, followed by constructive discussions and debates around the themes presented in the dramas. The research team produced Bengali podcasts on absurd dramas and integrated the theatre of the absurd with the Department of English Literature and Language at the World University of Bangladesh (WUB). This integration aimed to enhance learning outcomes and engage students in real-life oriented performance-based activities.

The research team organized theatrical performances of absurdist dramas to gather responses from diverse audiences. Open-space performances of absurd plays were also conducted, involving the participation of students from the Department of English at WUB. Interviews were conducted with department heads at both private and public universities to explore the potential integration of drama theatre into English departments. These interviews provided insights into the feasibility and impact of such integration.

### Data Analysis Technique

The collected data underwent a rigorous process of analysis to extract meaningful insights. The research team translated and interpreted modern absurd dramas, capturing their underlying themes and messages. Feedback and reactions to the proposal of integrating theatre into English departments were meticulously reviewed and explored. The enthusiastic engagement of undergraduate students from the Department of English at WUB was observed and analyzed.

The reactions from the performance of open-space absurdist theatre involving the students provided valuable data for evaluation. Themes and patterns were identified through thematic analysis, allowing for a deeper understanding of the impact of absurd dramas on societal awareness and reform.

## **VI. Research Gap and Expected Results**

This study identified a research gap in the existing literature by focusing not only on identifying the problems highlighted by absurd dramas but also on offering solutions to those absurdities in society. The analysis aimed to present the potential of absurd dramas in raising awareness and provoking conversations about societal issues.

## **VII. Benefits and Implications**

The anticipated benefits of this research include the acceptance of staged absurd plays and TV dramas as purposeful tools for addressing real-life absurdities, the integration of theatre of the absurd into the education system, and the popularization of open-space absurdist theatre for mass awareness. By presenting absurd drama as a means of both identification and reform, this research seeks to contribute to societal reflection and transformation.

## **VIII. Results and Discussion**

The study anticipates the production of translated absurd dramas, research articles, and creative pieces highlighting social and political absurdities. The integration of absurd drama with educational curricula is expected to stimulate outcome-based learning. The research is projected to yield novel theories and findings, promoting the role of absurd drama in recognizing societal absurdities and fostering reform.

## **IX. Conclusion**

Modern absurd drama serves as a potent tool to engage audiences in critical reflections on societal absurdities. The genre challenges established norms, inspiring conversations, and contributing to the quest for societal reform. By integrating absurd drama with educational curricula, the study advocates for a transformative approach to learning, fostering awareness, and motivating change against the backdrop of societal absurdities. In the realm of dramatic literature, absurd drama stands as a unique genre that challenges traditional narrative structures and confronts the complexities of human existence. Its representation of absurdities, both personal and societal, provides a platform for reflection and critique. While absurd dramas may appear to depict meaninglessness, they also offer the possibility of awakening audiences to the absurdities existing in the world around them. By presenting exaggerated scenarios and nonsensical interactions, absurd dramas encourage audiences to question societal norms, consider alternative perspectives, and ultimately, seek avenues for positive transformation.

## **References**

- [1]. Absurdism. (N.D.). Retrieved March 16, 2022, from New World Encyclopedia: <https://www.Newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/absurdism>
  - [2]. Camus, Albert, and Justin O'Brien. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
  - [3]. Hannay, Alastair, and Gordon Daniel Marino. *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
  - [4]. Hochberg, H. (1965). Albert Camus and The Ethic of Absurdity. *The University of Chicago Press Journals* 75 (2), 87-102.
  - [5]. Kierkegaard, Søren, and Alastair Hannay. *Fear and Trembling*. Penguin Classics. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985.
  - [6]. Klemke, E. D., and Steven M. Cahn. *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
  - [7]. Madan, D. D. (2016). The Absurdity of The Absurd: The Meta Narrative of Nothingness. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, 4 (3), 18-21.
  - [8]. Nagel, Thomas. *Mortal Questions*. London: Canto, 1991.
  - [9]. Ostashevsky, Eugene, Matvei Yankelevich, Thomas Epstein, Ilya Bernstein, and Genya Turovskaya. *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006.
  - [9]. Perkins, Robert L. *The Sickness unto Death*. International Kierkegaard Commentary, 19. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987.
  - [10]. Querido, D. P. (2017). From Kharms to Camus: Towards a Definition of The Absurd as Resistance. *The Modern Language Review*, 112 (4), 765-792.
  - [11]. Theatre of The Absurd. (N.D.). Retrieved March 17, 2022, from Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-of-the-absurd>
  - [12]. Zhu, J. (2013). Analysis on The Artistic Features and Themes of the Theater of the Absurd. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3 (8), 1462-1466.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press, 1954.