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Communicating the Incommunicable: Gibberish as Expression in Ionesco's "Theatre of the Absurd"

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Abstract

Eugene Ionesco has often been accused of being "a peculiar anti-theatre man". A drama represents "action on the stage" but Ionesco is less careful about the action and is more concerned with the language which fails to communicate even if it is used extensively to explain the complexity and absurdity of life. Since the proclamation of absurdist writers that "the world is devoid of meaning, purpose" and any divine authority, writers have become critical with the ability of language to communicate the meaning. The writers of 20th century communicate with silence, especially the playwrights have shown bare stages, short and trivial dialogues and long periods of silence on the stage. In the words of Wittgenstein, we can say, "language goes on holiday" (19). Each writer has used their own distinctive style to represent absurdity through "anti-plot, anti-hero, anti-dialogues and anti-characters" but Ionesco has used language with all its vigor and treasure to represent meaninglessness of our world. This paper will discuss Ionesco's three major plays "The Bald Soprano", "The Chair", and "The Lesson" that how he has used language to convey the idea that no matter in what possible way a person tries to communicate, he always fails to connect to others, fails to convey meaning and fails to teach anything. The too much use of language by Ionesco also explores the gibberish quality of communication. The mumbling, babbling and the frequent sounds in the background also come to reinforce the uselessness of language usage in these plays. Language is ridiculed by language to give an insight into the abyss of our existence.

Introduction

The Romanian-born playwright, Eugene Ionesco, is one of the most prominent figures in modern literature. His stature has been elevated by many great critics especially, Martin Ensslin discusses his great endeavors to represent absurd theatre. He places Ionesco equals to Samuel Beckett. Like Beckett, he brings "Anti-Aristotelian" drama on the stage from which the audience receives a puzzling experience of the world which is highly irrational in the vertigo of meaninglessness and purposelessness. Man has always strived to reach a rational system where he can control everything, define every phenomenon and explain every experience but the world is highly irrational place which is created out of random chance if we believe in Big Bang theory and if we believe in higher and religious purpose behind the creation of our universe then still this higher religious purpose is too mystical that it becomes impossible to fathom it.

Absurdism is "highly personal experience" which emerges out of "man's confrontation with the universe" (Camus, 12). As the word "absurd" itself suggests that absurdism means "going out of harmony". The disharmony is not in the universe or in human being, it reflects the disharmony

between man and the universe together in their relation and confrontation when man strives to find "an inherent meaning or value" in his creation and the universe but he always fails and there is no approach that comes to recue us in explaining this absurd experience. In the words of Jean Paul Sartre, "the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence" (129).

Now, due to this highly personal experience of absurdism, writers have come up with various ways to explain this abstract experience which is largely felt by the modern world after World War II. Many writers have strived to explain this experience through literature and philosophy. The genre of drama has explored it befittingly and various writers have used their distinctive style to represent the absurdity of life through "anti-plot, anti-hero, anti-dialogues and anti-characters" but Ionesco has used language with all its vigor and treasure to represent meaninglessness of our world. Eugene Ionesco has lived his life through great World Wars and he has developed his intellectual level around the French philosophical endeavors, defining existentialism and absurdism. Like his contemporary as such Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and Arthur Adamov, he has also tried to represent anti-play by showing highly unorthodox plays in the history of drama. He has explored the theme of absurdity through a largely exaggerated form and shatters every conceivable notion and meaning of drama as well as life. In his plays, the time and place both are transcended into absurdity which can be clearly observed in his earliest drama The Bald Soprano when "the clock strikes seventeen" and the one of the characters comments "it is nine o clock". The characters are also anti-characters with abstract names mostly for example the Old Man, the Professor and the Maid etc. Moreover, the traditional roles of characters are also turned upside down by jolting the hierarchies as such the binary opposition of master/slave relationship is constantly turned upside down in his play The Lesson where the Professor and his Maid try dominate each other at different occasion. The laws of nature are also highly disturbed and teased by showing characters turning into rhinoceros or by showing a character with three noses. Martin Esslin says about such anti-dramas that the audience is so much bewildered that "it is often unclear whether the action is meant to represent a dream world of nightmares or real happenings" (3). The various nuances of language are also reflected in Ionesco's plays which mark his plays with peculiar identity from rest of the absurdist playwrights. The modern drama prefers silence and the modern playwrights are highly critical about language "as a mean of communication". It can be understood by Samuel Beckett's often quoted line "Every word is an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness of existence" (35). Since the world is derailed and "devoid of meaning", purpose, inherent values, love and rationality, there is no point in communicating and expressing anything. The only thing which can best describe our absurd situation is silence and inactivity where characters wait in long silences on stage and may say "Nobody comes, nobody goes. It's terrible" (Beckett, 7). This kind of treatment to absurdity is avoided by Eugene Ionesco. He uses language to its extreme level in order to show the failure of communication as well as the absurdity of life. He has elaborated this fact in "Paris Review Interview" very clearly that how he and his contemporaries have shown absurdity, "We achieved it above all by the dislocation of language. Do you remember the monologue in Waiting for Godot and the dialogue in The Bald Soprano? Beckett destroys language with silence. I do it with too much language, with characters talking at random, and by inventing words" (6).

Eugene Ionesco's characters speak unthinkingly, repeat words, do babbling and mumbling extensively. This can be seen in his play The Chairs when the Old Woman starts echoing thoughtlessly the words of her husband.

"The Old Man: I refused to strike the enemy to the ground; I have always been too good.

OLD Woman [echo]: He was too good, good, good, good, good ...

OLD MAN: It is my pity that has defeated me.

OLD Woman [echo]: My pity ...pity ...pity ...
OLD MAN: But they never pitied me. I gave them a pin prick, and they repaid me with club blows, with knife blows, with cannon blows, they've crushed my bones ...
OLD Woman [echo]: ... My bones ...my bones ...my bones ...” (151).

This kind of repetition is also visible in his another plays The Lesson where the Professor teaches in a very absurd way the lesson of learning languages. He forces the Pupil, despite her resistance, to repeat the word knife again and again. Similarly, in Rhinoceros, Ionesco represents how the most articulate characters and the preachers of logic “succumb to Rhino erization”. Moreover, his plays provide extensive setting details which is not seen in other absurdist’s plays. There is usually bare stage, the characters are deprived of physical appearance and come up as such abstractions of human beings but Ionesco gives longer details of the characters and stage settings to show the ridiculousness of life and complexity of intertwining labyrinths in our lives. For example, in the play, The Chair, he gives extensive details of the circular walls and the doors. He even explains it with diagrams by numbering the doors separately but as the play progresses all the doors open into one place where the old couple is receiving guests. Similarly, there in long explanation of setting in his first play The Bald Soprano and ridicules senseless and absurd bourgeois life style. The play begins:

“A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles and a small gray English moustache. Beside him, in another English armchair, Mrs. Smith, an English- woman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of English silence. The English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes” (10)

In this way, Ionesco mocks the absurd life style of our absurd world by using language in its full expression and by using repetition to a greater extend.

Literature Review

Eugene Ionesco has been discussed and analyzed from various perspectives of absurd theatre. His work has many dimensions that he can still be analyzed in many new dimensions in any era. He has received critical judgments from various critics that his work is not easily understood. His works has often been denied and delayed their production. But he has also been elevated by various critics. Bernard F. Dukore calls him “the comprehensible poet of obscure” (174). Though his work has exaggerated abstract notions, yet he successfully communicates the truth of absurdity and obscurity.

Obscurity and abstraction are the trends of his age which are revealed in surrealistic works that reveal the quests of unconscious world through dreamlike and nightmarish qualities. Jacques Lemarchand strongly supports Eugene Ionesco and asserts that his theatre "is not a psychological theatre, it is not a symbolist theatre, it is not a social theatre, nor is it a poetic or a surrealistic one” (11). He is not propagator of realism but he uses realism to such an extreme level which turns every rationality upside down. Ionesco himself says that during his childhood he was fond of puppet theatre. He calls it “a theatre of caricature and of the grotesque, a theatre that exaggerates life and that becomes larger than life” (9). Ionesco achieves this kind of theatre through the absurd of theatre where he uses language extensively. Though Stephen M. Halloran states that Ionesco gives secondary importance to language and leads it to visual metaphor as it is revealed in his play, The Chair, the invisible audience does not communicate and reveals emptiness of our lives, yet the long dialogues of the old couple, their repetitions, echoing and the “guttural sounds” of Orator

also reveal that language is fore-grounded. This aspect of Eugene Ionesco can be explored to depict another dimension of Ionesco's "Theatre of Derision".

Methodology

The study follows a detailed textual analysis. There is text-oriented approach which is used to analyze the work. The study uses particular analytical approach to analyze the discourse of language in the work of literature. It is based on the text of Eugene Ionesco and critical analysis of his language is used to reach at the particular results. A close reading of the language is done to analyze the language, its features and its purpose. The texts of Eugene Ionesco are primary data source and other critical works on the work of Eugene Ionesco and on "Theatre of Absurd" are also used as secondary data to support the arguments.

The following plays of Eugene Ionesco will be analyzed in detail:

1. The Chair
2. The Bald Soprano
3. The Lesson

Analysis

Eugene Ionesco's plays show special significance of language in his absurd theatre. Although it has already been mentioned that absurdist's bid farewell to the use of language because it is unable to say the purpose and meaning of this world. Language is avoided as much as it is possible. Samuel Beckett gives the best example in this vogue of silence and he even writes his plays in "pure mimes". Similarly, Harold Pinter is famous for introducing long silences in the beginning of the play or he keeps one character silent to highlight the lack of communication between two parties.

Ionesco's use of language is done in a purely absurd manner. He uses language to its fullest and criticizes language at the expense of language. The language which is used in his absurd plays represents its disengagement with the reality and world outside. The language is working not to underline what should be said but it is shown to tell what it can "show" us. For this particular purpose Ionesco uses "metaphysical farce". According to Rosette C. Lamont,

> "The metaphysical farce is an anti-play. It is a comic drama, a tragic farce, a pseudo drama. It is a twentieth century morality play which does not preach. The message of the play is an anti-message: speech, art, communication of any sort, are only the illusions man needs while there is breath. No one listens. No one understands. God is dead, or paralyzed and blind. Yet this piteous creature (human beings), crawling like a naked worm upon the face of the desert, is comical" (319-320).

Ionesco is not a preacher. His writing is far away from didactic approaches. He is not preaching anything like Kierkegaard about "leap of faith", or like Sartre about taking responsibility of your being, or like Camus to "embrace the benign indifference of this universe". He is only representing the absurdity of the world. His language is also showing absurdity and voids in our lives which neither can be communicated with all languages nor can fill the "void in our existence".

The play, The Chair, helps to re-evaluate the significance of language. It is a play about an old couple who invites a large invisible audience to deliver them the message but the message turns out to be just some vague sounds and babbling. Instead of using classical style of language and showing the grandeur of heroes and their wars, Ionesco highlights the banality of language by using clichés, repetitions, insignificant titles and distorted syllables. The name of the play is not based on any hero title such as Macbeth, Oedipus or Hamlet, it is based on the emptiness of our lives. A very ordinary word "Chair" come to indicate the absurdity of our lives that our lives are filled with trivialities like trivial title of the play. But this trivial title powerfully highlights the

blankness and detachment of our situations when the chairs clatter on the stage with the invisible audience on them. The play also indicates the mental immaturity of the characters when the "second childhood" of the characters is revealed through the dependence of characters on each other. The Old Man acts like a child as well as like a reasonable husband of the Old Woman and similarly, the Old Woman acts like a child and asks for stories as well as she acts like a "respectable wife of the Old Man". Their child like attitude is shown by using certain words that reveal their childishness and immaturity. The Old Man calls the Old Woman his mother repeatedly when she chides him for "spoiling his career" and he says,

"Old Man [weeping suddenly]: I've spoiled it? I've spilled it? Ah! Where are you, Mamma, Mamma, where are you Mamma?... hi, hi, hi, I'm an orphan, dworfan" (117).

There is another technique used by Ionesco to show the absurdity of communication by inventing new and distorted words. For example, in the above lines, he distorts the word "orphan" and says "dwarfan". Similarly, there are many other words which are distorted and carry no meaning such as the Old Woman twists word from poor to "ploor", marvelous to "arvelous", pass to "ass".

Ionesco also shows plurality of truths in his plays by using various versions of statements. For example, the Old Man asserts that he always "wished he had a son" but the Old Woman says that her son ran away because "his parents killed birds". Now, we get confused which statement is true and which is false. The long speech of the Old Man also fails to attain any sympathy of the emperor. Moreover, the most horrible absurdity comes at the end of the play when the personality of the Orator is revealed through the use of language. When he begins to deliver the message of the Old Man, we find out that he is "deaf and dumb". He only produces "guttural sounds" such as "He, mme, mm, mm. Ju, gou, hou, hou" (159) and writes some jumbled-up letters on the board which don't make any sense, for instance he writes, "NNAA NNM NWNWNW V" (159).

Ionesco's first play The Bald Soprano also indicates the uselessness of language. It is a play about the ridiculousness of bourgeois society. The couple Smiths invites another couple Martins to their house. During the whole course of play, they talk to each other as if they are strangers, even husband and wife reacts strangely with each other. Their dialogues don't follow a proper sequence and reveals the triviality of every day speech. The title of the play has nothing to do with the meaning of the play. We don't know why it is called Bald Soprano while it does nothing with any bald soprano. The setting is realistic but the repetition of words ridicules the realistic setting of realistic plays. Moreover, the dialogues follow "non-sequiturs", for instance when the clock strikes seventeen, the lady Smith says "it is nine 'o' clock". In this way we see the dialogues follow no logic at all. It also reveals the monotony of their lives as nothing changes in their absurd life. When the clock strikes, it can be any hour of the day. It doesn't matter if they mention the correct time or not. The events in their life and gossips also reveal the banality of life. Nothing is worse than banality of life as Anton Chekhov says, "There is nothing more awful, insulting, and depressing than banality" (47). This worse banality is shown in this play when the characters talk about very insignificant event. For example,

"MRS. MARTIN (graciously): Oh well, today I witnessed something extraordinary. Something really incredible. . .. In the street, near a cafe, I saw a man, properly dressed, about fifty years old, or not even that .... Well, I'm sure you'll say that I'm making it up--he was down on one knee and he was bent over.

MR. MARTIN, MR. SMITH, MRS. SMITH: Oh!

MRS. MARTIN: Yes, bent over. . .. I went near him to see what he was doing. ...

MR. SMITH: And?

MRS. MARTIN: He was tying his shoe lace which had come undone.

MR. MARTIN, MR. SMITH, MRS. SMITH: Fantastic.

MR. SMITH: If someone else had told me this, I'd not believe it" (21-22).

In this way Ionesco foregrounds the banality of modern lives. The language turns out be just gibberish that means nothing and has no greater significance which can bring change in the course of the play. Ionesco plays with language and shows farcical situations of human beings.

Ionesco's another famous play, The Lesson, is also written in the same vogue which uses language and propagates nothingness of our lives. This play is about a professor who kills his student for not understanding his absurd lesson. The play indicates the procedure of language failure. The Professor tries to transfer information to the student but fails all the time. He tries to teach her subtraction but fails, he tries to teach her linguistics but fails, he tries to teach her philology but fails. In the midst of failure, we recognize how logical lesson of the Professor turns out to be which is nothing more than absurd. In the beginning we can recognize the reason used by the Professor in teaching the subtraction but later on the lesson on linguistics and philology is not understood. They are just words in the void which are painful for the student who keeps saying instead of understanding anything that her tooth hurts. The illogical lesson of the Professor turns out to be nothing more than physical pain. For instance, the Professor forces her to pronounce "knife" but the word hurts her whole body.

"PROFESSOR: Repeat, repeat: knife ... knife ...knife ...

PUPIL: I've got a pain ...my throat, neck ...oh, my shoulders ...my breast ...knife . . . PROFESSOR: Knife ... knife ...knife ...

PUPIL: My hips ...knife ...my thighs ...kni ...

PROFESSOR: Pronounce it carefully ...knife ... knife.

PuPIL: Knife ...my throat ....

PROFESSOR: Knife ...knife ....

PuPIL: Knife ...my shoulders ...my arms, my breast, my hips ...knife ...knife ...

In this manner, Ionesco depicts that how language can have violent effects on someone. He reveals that language can be horrific and monstrous that can bring not only misunderstanding but also physical violence and murders.

Conclusion

In order to summarize, there are two main aspects of communication which are dealt in the absurdist plays. One aspect is related to silence that silence communicates the emptiness and meaninglessness of our lives and second aspect is related to extensive use of language to ridicule and satirize the failure of language. The second aspect is the hall mark of Eugene Ionesco's plays. He himself says that he "dislocates" the function of "language" by "using too much language" and achieves the technique to show absurdity and nothingness of our lives.

His three early plays The Chair, The Bald Soprano and The Lesson move in the same tempo of metaphysical farce which doesn't preach or dictate anything rather they only show the ever-increasing void in our lives. The medium which Ionesco has chosen for this purpose is the medium of language that turns out to be the verbal farce. Ionesco calls it the "tragedy of language". This tragedy reveals human actions through non-sensical dialogues, non-sequiturs, babbling, repetition and distorted words. All these endeavors to use language in every possible way fails to connect human beings in any powerful relation in this irrational, meaningless and absurd world. Using language in all possible ways doesn't come to teach us anything rather it shows us life as it is experienced by modern world.

Ionesco successfully beats the modern complexities and with the help of humorous plays he says the unsayable. His mastery of language helps him to dislocate language from its set rules of syntax, semantics and rhetoric and reflect a new attitude towards perceiving life. No matter how frustrating

this meaningless world is, the attempt to show it through every possible manner is the first step to liberation which Ionesco has achieved successfully.

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