



## Theatre and Anti-Theatre: The Escape of Self in the Contemporary British and American Drama

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The present research paper entitled “*Theatre and Anti-Theatre: escape of self in the Select Plays of Samuel Beckett, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard* will explore the evolution of loss of self as depicted in contemporary British, French and American. The conspicuous feature of the plays written in the post-World War drama is the escape of self because the protagonists are seen struggling throughout the play.. The playwrights are confronted with the baffling problem of depicting a self that seems to have lost its reality. Darwinism led to the formation of the idea of the machine-man the image of the mechanical self. Kepler’s laws and Freud’s explorations of the unconscious brought home the realization that man is but an infinitesimal fraction of the energy that flows through the universe. In the age of Freud and Einstein, God ceased, as it were to reveal Himself in man.’ Declaring that “modernism and tragedy are incompatible”, Joseph Wood Krutch had rightly pointed out that modern malaise, nausea, angst, alienation, loss of identity, entropy, nihilism were forces that had dehumanized and deflated the heroes (79). Indeed, modern playwright lacks potential to acknowledge “the awareness of the reality of death” (Fromm 245).

After World War 11, the new sense of uncertainty, anxiety, and pessimism, coupled

with theological revolution, imparted a new awareness to the continental playwrights. The corrosion of self became an inevitable reality because this was an age in which existence came to enjoy precedence over essence. Truth assumed a life- sustaining illusion. Mind, consciousness, soul are treated as illusive and meaningless things. For the existentialists like Jean -Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers, failure is the fate of man whose every project is doomed. In this situation action is futile and aspiration absurd. The existentialists thus gave eloquent expression to the current metaphysics of despair. A representative of the “lost intellectual,” the existentialist hero is introspective, subjective, and tormented by doubt. Being lost and fragmented, the neurotic protagonist who, like the neurotic characters of Kafka’s novels, lives in a cosmos without direction, meaning or purpose.

The American playwrights projected man as a sorry product of social conditions. Thus, soulless robots, corrupt, people the expressionistic plays revealing the trend towards loss of self and dehumanization of the protagonists. Maxwell Anderson, S.N Behrman, Clifford Odets, Robert Sherwood, Thornton Wilder and Eugene O’Neill turned to Europe for inspiration. Surrealism of Strindberg, psychic iceberg of Freud, philosophy of Bergson, enlightened them about the absurdity



of human condition and the gradual corrosion of self.

Absorbing the new ideas and techniques, the playwrights dramatized the un-heroic situation in an inhuman society. Thus, in Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), the protagonist is Mr. Zero, a waste product in a society, which coldly replaces him with a machine. In O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Yank can find no significance in his life, he struggles hard and at last he discovers that he can feel at home only in the deadly embrace of a real ape. O'Neill discovered that all conviction was transient and that no absolutes existed, except in emptiness and death. Likewise, Clifford Odets recorded the universal sense of frustration in *Awake and Sing* (1935) in which the protagonist struggles in vain to hold her family together. Robert Sherwood introduced gangsters as soulless protagonists in *The Petrified Forest* (1935) to highlight the spiritual bankruptcy of his contemporary society. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), abstractions—"docile creatures, incapable of heroism or villainy, passive shadows, theatrical stereotypes" (Bogard 357).

## EVOLUTION OF EXISTENTIALISM AND NIHILISM: JOURNEY OF ESCAPE OF SELF

Samuel Beckett, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard and Jack Gelber see in the democratic society a tendency to bulldoze the individual into a faceless non-entity. Having killed off God, the absurd playwright finds man

alone in the universe. The problem of modern individual today is how to escape the terror of pure contingency, the absurdity of existence. Born without reason and dying fortuitously, man appears superfluous on earth, a waste in the cosmic dustbin. In the words of Ihab Hassan, "In its concrete encounter with absurdity, with dread and the obscene corporeality of death, with mystical anarchy and organized nothingness, with abstract truth and experienced reality, the modern self discovers ways of affirmation that heroes of yore did not envision." (19). The contemporary British and American theatre voices this excruciating mood of nihilistic despair inspiring protest against life that has been drained of ultimate meaning. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, (1946), Kierkegaard had foreshadowed the anxiety neurosis of the post-World War era, its precipitate flight from inwardness, and its traumatic corrosion of self. With prescient insight he analyzed the ontological despair that seizes upon an individual who cannot endure life with ultimate meaning. It is this type of despair, "this sickness unto death" which accounts for the inevitable split in the modern individual.

The human necessity of unifying explanation of world has always been satisfied by religion which made the human life meaningful. But today no religion helps man to know the purpose of life. Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1833), made the revolutionary statement that "God is dead, buried Him long long ago!" (2) and propagated skepticism, doubt and despair. Two World Wars, the Great Depression of 1930, Jewish holocaust in the concentration camps led to the loss of human ultimate certainties. There was no unifying principle left to give direction to human beings.



If one realizes the absence of sense, and this is the expression of the spirit of epoch, in which the Theatre of the Absurd is rooted, the world becomes irrational and the conflict between the world and the human being who begins to be estranged from it arises here

The modern schizoid in this perspective is the projection of man who fails to discover meaning in life, “a skeletal individual, a personality split by considering the problems of sincerity and hypocrisy, conformity and dissent, commitment and indecision, loneliness and complicity resulting from his tragic corrosion of self.”(Giraud 229).

The Greek hero also suffered from isolation as his aristocratic self urged him to revolt against fate and God. However, his identity crisis did not make him a neurotic misfit; rather his quest for identity inevitably led to the age old questions of meaning, salvation, and survival in a spiritual sense. On the contrary the quest of the modern protagonist suffering from the corrosion of self is futile, his despair grows in a degree of intolerable anguish because he “cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing.” (Kierkegaard 110) The Existentialists took the cue from Kierkegaard and the concept of the self-presented in Sartre’s *Being And Nothingness* (1943) is abstract and beset with irreconcilable contradictions. The self, though free, is trapped in a solitude from which there is no escape. Therefore, the most conspicuous characteristic of selfhood is that “man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the being which he is not.” (17). Man is the being who confers meaning on the world, but this meaning is never certain. Human reality is a perpetual becoming so that “what is

not determines what is.” (Sartre 87) The self at all times confronts its own negation.

Inspired by Sartre, Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), tracing the history which brought about his helplessness in the universe. Highlighting the absurdity of the human situation, it attacks the very existence of man. Everywhere man feels torn between infinities, between absolutes, and between odds. Man is bound to suffer intense despair in life. This despair being rooted in a sense of fundamental absurdity, Camus defines “absurdity” as the “disproportion between man’s intention and the reality he will encounter.”( 28) Absurdity becomes a defiance of the universe, an extreme tension which will never permit the hero to rest, just as the tormented Sisyphus can never pause in his futile but never ending task. Thus, the “emphasis is shifted from attainment to performance and in the process of sustaining his performance, of defending his passion for the absurd, the absurd hero achieves fulfillment simply by defending a truth.”(Galloway 12)

The corrosion of self led to the emergence of the absurd hero after the World War 11, it was a significant stage in the evolution of anti-theatre too. In the avant-garde theater of France, Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet dehumanized the individual completely. His corrosion of self turned him into a dumb animal bellowing back and forth across a crowded space that seems to him a void. Adamov’s best play, *Tours Contre Tous* (1999) deals with the social persecution of a group of people within the society, “the characters are skeletal puppets, stripped bare of all dignity and



feeling-obsessed only by their desire to survive at any cost.” (Wellwarth, 28) Absurdity is a key word in Beckett's dramatic writings as well as of the whole Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin refers to Ionesco's concept of the absurdity: "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".<sup>(20)</sup> Absurdity does not reside in the world itself, or in a human being, but in a tension which is produced by their mutual indifference. Human existence is in its essence completely different from the existence of things outside the human subject. The world of things is impenetrable and because of its impenetrability it is also alien to man. A man stands opposite to the world of things, which permanently makes an attack on him. Absurdity appears in the moments when man realizes his situation, in the moments of awareness of his position in the world.

In the words of Ionesco “man is lost in the world; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless” (34). The Theatre of the Absurd has much in common with the existential philosophy of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. The origins of the Theatre of the Absurd are rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s. Samuel Beckett, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard and Jack Gelber used anti-theatrical techniques and devices to depict the loss of self of the protagonists. Hence, the absurd drama is unconventional, the playwrights seriously attempted to articulate the anxieties and traumas of the people afflicted with war and depression. The absurd plays assumed a highly unusual, innovative form, directly aiming to startle the viewer, shaking him out of this comfortable, conventional life of everyday

concerns. Samuel Beckett, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard and Jack Gelber realized that in the meaningless and godless world,

*Waiting for Godot* is an epoch-making play because it is built on the theme of the loss of self. Beckett has achieved a theoretical impossibility- a play, in which nothing happens, that yet keeps the audience glued to their seats. The protagonists are uncertain about who they are and how they got there. The world depicted in the play is short of certainties. The ‘self’ itself is a mystery. There is an excellent and clear account of schizophrenia in a little text book. The corrosion of ‘self’ is depicted very efficiently. The characters are depicted to be thought-blocked and are bound to fail to express themselves through conversation. Lucky’s long and incoherent speech exemplifies the flight of ideas. The characters neglect their personal hygiene and grooming, and there are periods of silence and inertia reflecting their loss of sense of reality.

The protagonist Albee merely waits to be “physically or psychologically emasculated, invites his doom with a self-immolation passivity that masochistically converts pain into pleasure.” (Henry Hewes 60). Just have a look at the following dialogue:

VLADIMIR: One daren’t even laugh any more.

ESTRAGON: Dreadful privation.

VLADIMIR: Merely smiles. [He smiles suddenly from ear to ear, keeps smiling, ceases as



suddenly.] It's not the same thing.  
Nothing to be done. (25).

. In *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* Beckett has created a world in which Godot never comes. They protagonists can only wait, they are buried up to the neck in sand or face down in the mud, a world which is devastated, post- atomic, and so empty that even a solitary human being seems like a monstrous intrusion

Thus, the protagonists suffer the gradual corrosion of self, they are expelled from the stream of successive life events which create the illusion of flux of time, and stop in one single moment which opens up the static, unceasing, absurd world of absurdity. The audience feels a sense of pity and belongingness with the two homeless wanderers, who when fed up with their endless waiting, contemplate committing suicide:

VLADIMIR: What do we do now?

ESTRAGON: Wait.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but while waiting.

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves? (9)

All the heroines of Tennessee Williams are neurotic and borderline individuals as they suffer from corrosion of self. He depicted the psychological neurosis of his protagonists in his plays *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1959), and *The Night of Iguana* (1962). His protagonists struggle desperately to end alienation through physical contact, and this leads them to promiscuity, sexual aberration and homosexuality. Freud classified homosexuality as an "illness" rooted in experiences of

childhood. Kaplan treats homosexuality " as a perverse situation to anxieties about identification" (2). The theatre of Tennessee Williams is erotic, sensational and lurid as the dramatist depicts the corrosion of self of his protagonists who indulge into perversion to end alienation, often become the victims of moral and psychological pressures. John Gassner called him as the dramatist of frustration because he had "captured with such skill the truncated lives of his characters caught in a world of their own illusions unable to break out." (1). Since all his heroines suffer from the corrosion of self, they withdraw into their own fantasies and seek artificial ecstasy in illusions to conceal their guilt. Crushed under the heavy burden of metaphysical guilt, they suffer total deflation of self and experience anxiety, depression and despair. Sensitive and vulnerable, weak and fragile, Amanda, Laura, Maggie and Blanche easily become prey to internal and external forces.. Sensitive and vulnerable, weak and fragile, Amanda, Laura, Maggie and Blanche easily become prey to internal and external forces. According to Carl Jung, neurosis is essentially a matter of schism between individual's conscious and unconscious desires- " a dissociation of personality due to the existence of complexes." (188).

Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie* is silly, garrulous, spinsterish widow; she imagines that she still belongs to the world of aristocrats. She is the head of a disintegrating family in which all the members lack the capacity to play meaningful roles in life. Wrapped up in delusions of her girlhood conquests, Amanda is often unaware of the realities of the world around her. She knows that all is lost and there is meaning



left in her life, she struggles to escape from her self weaving false delusions and fantasies. Her predicament is her false delusion, a sense of nostalgia for the past that is dead, a longing for an age of chivalry and elegance. Her admission that “She wasn’t prepared for what the future brought me” (13) is a clue to her false delusions: “One Sunday afternoon in Blue mountain- your mother received- seventeen!- gentlemen callers! Why, sometimes there weren’t chairs enough to accommodate them all.” (15). Amanda desperately tries to hold two worlds together even when she realizes that both are crumbling beneath her feet. She desperately tries to bring order in the family:

...Tom- Tom- Life’s not easy. It calls for Spartan endurance: there’s so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you: I h’ave never told you but I – loved your father...” (38).

Her sexual repression, nostalgic sensibility, and feelings of alienation lead to a neurotic instability which deflates her. Sexual anxiety is an irrevocable force which disintegrates the personality of William’s women. It is sexual morbidity and repression that lead them to frustration and despair and become the cause of the corrosion of her-self. She had married a telephone man who deserted her after siring two children, Tom and Laura. David Sievers aptly remarks thus: “Williams uses the Freudian language to depict the corrosion of self of his women who cannot hold two worlds together, they become the victims of sexual repression which ultimately make them borderline.” (377).

Tennessee Williams’s *The Streetcar Named Desire* (1959) depicts Blanche DuBois who is “is destitute, an alcoholic, an aging nymphomaniac, the best example of a borderline.” (Desmond S.J. Reid 432). There are interesting phases in her life which gradually lead to the corrosion of her -self. Frustrated by life, the personality of this belle gets disintegrated because of her efforts to hold on to her youth. Her attempt to hold the crumbling world of her family plantation is similar to Amanda’s efforts to keep her family together. Also like Amanda, she refuses to accept the reality of her life and attempts to live in her neurotic illusions and fantasies. In the very first scene of the play, she is on the verge of disintegration; she lost the family plantation and her youth. Her crisis begins when she comes to know that her husband Allan was a homosexual. “In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty- which wasn’t empty, but had two people in it...(25). Her disgust drove him to suicide. The memory of this guilt recurs vivid flashes and that is why she wants to avoid the “blinking light” of naked bulbs. Blanche does not want to face her rejection of her husband and the part she played in his suicide. Turning to sex as an escape from the nightmarish reality, Blanche becomes an English teacher with rather unusual extra-curricular activities: “After the death of Allan- intimacies with strangers was all I was able to fill my empty heart with... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me one to another.(205).

The second stage of her loss of self begins when she enters the world of her sister’s world. As she tells Stella, "I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, I can't be alone!" (Williams 23).



Mitch, too, worries that "I'll be alone when she [his mother] goes" (Williams 47). Mitch, like Blanche, has also experienced a "pretty sad" romance with a dying girl (Williams 53). Stella and Stanley are leading a happy life but she disturbs their peaceful existence. That is what makes *Streetcar*, in the words W. Gibbs, "a brilliant implacable play about the disintegration of a woman, or if you like, of a society." ( 54). In frightened flight from the horrid nightmare of her existence, Blanche seeks a haven with her sister assuming the role of a gracious, refined lady of the Old South. The glamorized neurotic behaves like injured "grand –duchess."

Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is certainly indebted to the Absurdist Movement of Becket. Susan Rusinko believes that "through their Beckettian word games, Stoppard's main characters act out Pirandellian contradictory truths of reality and appearance, sanity and insanity, relativity and absoluteness" ( 36). For Ronald Bryden wrote that Stoppard's play is "unabashedly indebted to *Waiting for Godot*," and New York Times literary critic, Irving Wardle, argued that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is "a highly literary play with frank debts to Beckett" (Wardle, 8). The main focus is on the loss of self as Stoppard expresses the indecisive nature of the characters. The protagonists waste precious time in playing physical and verbal games; strange situations are further emphasized with slapstick humor; and dialogue is often a vaudevillian pattern of one-liners between the two main characters. The chief characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are manipulated by outer powers, logic and facts fail to inform and only feed their confusion. Ultimately, they are left to wait in the

shadow of death until they both disappear from the stage:

ROS: How intriguing! I feel like a spectator—an appalling business. The only

thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting

will come on in a minute...

GUIL: See anyone?

ROS: No. You?

GUIL: No (41).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two people who have been written into a scheme of things and there's nothing they can do about it except follow through and meet the fate that has been ordained for them " [...] I'd have to say that I'm using Shakespeare as a symbol of God, which I'm not prepared to say. I have written about two people on whom Shakespeare imposed inevitability, but I haven't got a philosophy figured out for you. (Fleming 5-6).

Edward Albee Followed Ionesco, Beckett and Genet to depict the absurdity of human existence, despair involved in the process of living, and the constant threat to the failure of humanness in man by the failure of sex, love and communication. For Albee, however, these are not the attendant problems of a metaphysical or religious world as they are to Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco, but the result of a sick culture. He took these themes in all his plays; he ridiculed the success myth, the image of American manhood and the institution of marriage.

Robert Burstein aptly observed that Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1960) is the real waste land of the modern world, the play is dubbed as "sexual-religious claptrap" articulating the loss of self of Jerry. (22). Interestingly, Jerry has all the attributes of a homosexual pervert: he is lonely, seductive, aggressive and rebellious. The play describes the life which man has created for him as a "solitary free passage" characterized by indifference towards others. The image of the zoo is a valid image for man who has come to accept loneliness as the norm of existence. Jerry pushes Peter onto a bench, as he say:" You're a vegetable: Go lie down on the ground." (2). Jerry's conversation with Peter expresses his homo-erotic fantasy to seduce Peter. Jerry is the lost animal of the Zoo World-sensitive and belligerent. He is full of hatred. "Self-pity and self-imposed isolation". In the words of C.W.E.Bigsby, "Albee's thesis is that there is a need to make contact, to emerge from these self-imposed cages of convention and false values so that one individual consciousness may impinge on others."(72). Jerry's need to make contact is an inner compulsion, a psychological urge, an inevitable necessity of the neurotic, a craving of the lost intellectual. But "when he succeeds in approaching an animal or a person, it is always through a barrier of mistrust and in a tension of disgust, fear and despair, and in his struggle to build contact, his self further gets eroded" (Harold Clurman 13). His predicament is not metaphysical, religious or transcendental as in the case of the protagonists of Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco: rather he is victim of a sick culture. Thus, Jerry underlines the absurdity of human existence consequent upon the failure of love, sex and communication. Indeed he is "a harrowing portrait of a young man alienated from

the human race", as Brooks Atkinson observed. (72).

Jerry has all the traits of a borderline personality, he is frustrated, depressed. Being alienated, his interchange with Peter exhibits an intense neurotic hunger for a relationship. He is an outsider, " an obnoxious stranger" (Henry Hewes 32), who accosts Peter when the latter is reading a book on a bench on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Summer in a secluded corner of the Central Park. He seems at first to be "just another of those talkative cranks with which the city abounds."(Donald Malcolm 68). Like a sick patient, urged by his emotional restlessness, Jerry ambles up to Peter and announces: I've been to the Zoo... I sad, I've been to the Zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO. (12).

His declaration confounds and baffles Peter who goes on asking again and again the mystery about the zoo, but Jerry holds him in suspense not deliberately but out of his neurotic entropy of self. He even forgets: "The Zoo? Oh, Yes: the Zoo. I was there before I came here." (23). The myth about the Zoo is exploded only when he narrates his harrowing experiences of the "The Lady and the Dog." For his neurotic volcano is exhausted in the long narrative: "I went to the Zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too." (49). Jerry's insistence tone, his broken language, repetitions, pauses, incoherence in conversation-all these are the traits of a borderline protagonist ready to commit suicide. His efforts to strike up a conversation are awkward and ridiculous in the extreme: he fidgets around Peter's bench and asks direct questions in incoherent language: "You're married...How many children you





got?... Any pets?"( 16-17). The entire encounter of Jerry with Peter symbolizes the ironical parody of the quest of the traditional hero. The quest of a Shakespearean hero is for social and moral order but Jerry seeks the contact with Peter to release his psychic tensions, the neurotic urge of a psychic wreck.

To conclude, all the major British and American playwrights depict the entropy of self, the absurdity of human situation, the meaningless of life, doubt, death and despair of the protagonists and they have evolved unconventional anti-theatrical devices to depict the modern malaise.