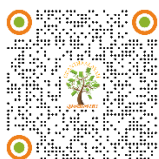


# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EUGENE IONESCO AND JEAN GENET IN ABSURD THEATRE

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## ABSTRACT

The post-war world in the aftermath of Second World War has witnessed tumultuous changes in the society. All that had been considered sacrosanct till then, no longer enjoyed their dominance since it became natural to subject everything to question. Almost all spheres of life were severely influenced by the heart-wrenching effects of the catastrophic war. The degenerated human being suddenly looked for responses in an isolated world which he thought would heal him at that juncture. Under such bleak circumstances, playwrights around the world felt the heat to try out new ways to communicate their messages to the society. The Theatre of the Absurd was the apt medium of the time to realign theatrical performances to the changing realities of the world. Pioneers in this genre of theatre such as Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet composed their plays to tap the dying conscience of human society. This paper considers Ionesco's *The Chairs* and Genet's *The Balcony* in absurd theatre and aims to bring out the different aspects of absurdity as applied by the playwrights in their respective plays. It also attempts to show that irrespective of differences between them, how both the dramatists were successful in conveying their well-intended messages to their audiences.

**Keywords:** Absurdity, Bleak Atmosphere, Eugene Ionesco, Isolated World, Jean Genet, Psychic Reality, Role-Playing

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The need and the natural evolution of the Theatre of the Absurd was not a sudden affair or an accidental discovery by a playwright. There were certain events happened around the world that triggered its arrival. People's loss of faith in God was one such experience that had a profound impact on it. Then there were two terrible world wars. The catastrophic effects that both the world wars exerted into the world left people question about the traditional system of values and religion. People were unable to come to terms with the aftermath of the Second World War and started searching for ways in which they can face or confront the new realities

of the world around them. Friedrich Nietzsche had foreseen this future way back in 1883, much before the First World War, when he published Zarathustra with the message that God is dead. Taking this event into account, [Esslin \(2001\)](#) in his seminal book *The Theatre of the Absurd* comments:

After two terrible wars, there are still many who are trying to come to terms with the implications of Zarathustra's message, 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 generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disjointed, purposeless – absurd. (p. 399)

In the world of new order, there was no such pivotal centre that would control the system of principles apt for the inhabitants. No binding force was there to hold all together in a thread of purpose. The very purpose of all living beings was lost; and in its place a purposeless life, and its consequence hopelessness attitude, descended all around. Thus, lack of purpose and hopelessness became the guiding principles of the Theatre of the Absurd. This type of new theatre turned out to be a medium for the quest of purpose, the incessant search dramatists over the years tried with, in a world of purposelessness and absurdity. Since the world has lost its meaning, absurd theatre attempts to restore some meaning back, maybe after a great deal of efforts. In such pessimistic circumstances, it's impractical to accept art forms and performances based on the orthodox methods and conventional concepts since such approaches have noticeably lost their vitality. And their end goal of rectifying the distorted human society needs nobler dimensions, both in terms of art forms and theatrical performances. To serve these purposes, a new kind of theatre was the need of the hour, and it was in this juncture that the Theatre of the Absurd was introduced to the world. The core of this theatre is absurdity. [Camus \(1955\)](#) in his seminal book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, defines absurdity very clearly where he says:

A world that can be explained with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of its illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and this life, the actor, and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (p. 06)

The post-war playwrights who opted to adhere to the afore-mentioned approaches, of communicating messages to their audiences across the globe, made a mark through their out-of-the-box the plays. They put the very existence of human being into question, but not in the way Camus had his approach to absurdity. Commenting on such absurdist dramatists, [Sharadgeh \(2018\)](#) says, "The absurd dramatists, however, did not resolve the problem of man's meaningless existence quite as positively as Camus. In fact, they typically offered no solution to the problem whatsoever, thus suggesting that the question is ultimately unanswerable" (p. 176). Two of the major dramatists in this unconventional theatre were Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet. Ionesco's *The Chairs* (1952) and Genet's *The Balcony* (1956) are testaments of their stagecraft in the post-war period. Not only did they usher in a system of avant-garde plays to the fore by the application of absurd features, but they also were successful in putting across their messages effectively to their

audiences. Both of them are remarkably original in their endeavour to adopt a mode of theatrical performance as per the changing times and realities of the world. The aim of the paper is to analyse the above-mentioned plays of Genet and Ionesco according to the principles of the Theatre of the Absurd and find out the differences between them.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The data collection method adopted for this comparative study is qualitative in nature. For this purpose, the selected plays of the dramatists are considered as primary sources and research papers and articles on the plays by various authors are taken as secondary sources of information. It also takes the fundamental principles of absurdity, as expressed by Martin Esslin and Albert Camus, into account to analyse the absurd plays, *The Chairs* by Eugene Ionesco, and *The Balcony* by Jean Genet. It examines the texts of the selected plays to find out all aspects of absurdity as applied by the respective dramatists in their dramas. Once the absurd characteristics are confirmed, the considered playwrights are compared within the premises of the Theatre of Absurd and solely based on their selected plays to highlight the differences between them.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* is one of the pioneers in the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. It's so because the playwright opted to be original and conspicuously distinct from others works in this unconventional kind of theatre. The bare truth of human condition is thoroughly exposed in the play. Though many chairs are assembled on stage in a semi-circular manner, no guest is seen physically occupying them. The invited guests, who are treated with utmost courtesy by the old couple, are not visible to the audience at any point in time over the course of the entire play. Hence, psychic reality, not physical reality, is at the core of the work. "The question of being or not being stands forth as all actions lead to nothingness. The reality lies not in visual perceptions but in sensing the depth of realities on nothingness" (Madan, 2016, p. 21). This is the first glance of the play's departure from any of those in the conventional theatre. And in it exemplifies the dramatist's notion of psychic reality that corresponds to the reality of humankind in general.

The play is classified as an absurd play on multiple accounts. The hilarious and chaotic nonsense displayed in the dialogue of the old man and the old woman, the two major characters present on stage from start to end of the play, is distinctly obvious. What they speak is meaningless at multiple levels; they even go the extent of disregarding geographical realities of the world. Paris, the capital of France, is dismissed as a ruined city thousands of years ago.

OLD MAN: How did we get there? Where's the road to it? I believe the place was called Paris ...

OLD WOMAN: Paris? There never was such a place, my pet.

OLD MAN: There must have been once because it fell into ruins. ... It was the city of light and four hundred thousand years ago it faded right away ... there's nothing left of it now, except a song.

OLD WOMAN: A real song? That's funny. What is it?

OLD MAN: A lullaby, a parable: 'Paris will always be Paris.' (Ionesco, 2000, p. 131)

When people talk about Paris remained known only in a lullaby, and not in physical reality, the height of nonsense is amply obvious. It exposes lack of basic human sense; in other words, it is both nonsense and hopelessness. How can an existing physical reality be reduced to just a disappeared entity? The dramatist's craftsmanship is at the forefront when he chooses to go to this level to show how human intelligence can be so shallow in nature. The physical world in which we all live is a mere conundrum; it can never be fathomable by means of intelligence. In other words, it's absurd and this absurdity is materialized in the indecipherable world.

What is spoken on stage from time to time by the old couple can at best be labeled as banal, cliché-ridden, and monotonous. There are so many occasions when same dialogue is repeated endlessly and is finally resulted into nothing. One of the torturous spells of repetitive exchange is displayed just when the Orator is about to reach the old couple's residence.

OLD WOMAN: The Orator should be here now, Majesty ...

OLD MAN: Just coming, the Orator.

OLD WOMAN: Just coming.

OLD MAN: Just coming.

OLD WOMAN: Just coming.

OLD MAN: Just coming.

OLD WOMAN: Just coming.

OLD MAN: Just coming, just coming.

OLD WOMAN: Just coming, just coming.

OLD MAN: Coming.

OLD WOMAN: Coming.

OLD MAN: Coming.

OLD WOMAN: Coming, he's here.

OLD MAN: Coming, he's here.

OLD WOMAN: Coming, he's here.

BOTH: He's here ...

OLD MAN: Here he is! ...

(...)

OLD MAN: Here he is! (Ionesco, 2000, pp. 169-170)

The curiosity around the Orator's arrival is unexpectedly high. The OLD MAN and the OLD WOMAN are so engrossed in their anticipation that they don't hesitate to repeat the same line for eternity until they both converge in the same sentence. Ionesco's skills of exposing human hopelessness are at its best in the above interaction between the old couple. It is not only hilarious, or comic, but also torturous, or tragic, for the audience. The portrayal of human tragedy, displayed through hopelessness in a sequence of hilarious dialogue, is the ultimate truth that the dramatist wants to convey to his audience. The characters' behaviour and conduct on stage exemplify the incomprehensible and bizarre conditions of human beings in the world. To sum it up, Ionesco deliberately chooses to name the characters OLD MAN and OLD WOMAN. No specific names are used for the characters in the play to convey the logical message that the hopelessness of the old couple is representative of common human condition. It's same all around for

everyone in the world. No one can escape from this harsh reality. The old couple's invisible list of guests furthers this notion. Commenting on this, [Patel \(2021\)](#) says:

The Old Man and the OLD Woman feeling cramped by the invisible crowd could be seen as portrayal of their chaotic thoughts about the existing reality which they detest. The chairs and the invisible crowd also become a metaphor for the existential void that is embodied in the play. It would be fair to say that the existential dread is intricately woven into the very core of the play. (p. 289)

Generalization of characters is done with a specific purpose. With specific names, people tend to associate various notions and even go to the extent of their roots to find any relationship with the character. But with generalized characters such as OLD MAN, OLD WOMAN, Emperor, and ORATOR, the bracketing of name-meaning alongside the character's name is well put to rest. Rather, it spurs the audience to think that the life condition and conduct of a character are truly representative of a community of people. In this context, the afore-mentioned characters are not merely individual characters; they are equivalent of their respective group or class of people. With this, Ionesco sends across the message that whatever happens with any of the characters on stage is the common life situation of the humankind in general. The absurdity which the old couple or any other character manifests on stage is thoroughly prevalent in everyone's life. The feeling of absurdity, a kind of disharmony among people, or between people and their world, or between rationality and irrationality, or absurdity, constitute the core of Ionesco's play, *The Chairs*. To sum it up, the portrayal of the Old Man highlights the issue of meaning existence of human beings in general. [Suthar \(2016\)](#) appropriately concludes about the Old Man when he says, "the character of the Old Man is a genuine representation of absurdity and the problem of existence. Man, itself is an alien in this universe and that is what Ionesco has proved through the character of the Old Man"

Jean Genet was one of the most controversial French playwrights to have ever written plays based on his own life's experience. He was born in 1905 to a prostitute mother and this in fact played a huge role in his career and life. He was separated from his mother after his birth and was adopted by a farmer. Most of his early life was spent in petty crimes and more than half of life was behind the bars. Hence, it was quite natural for him to be in close contact with the marginalized sections of the society such as thieves, prostitutes, pimps, and maids. All such people make up for most of the characters in his plays. One of his successful dramas was *The Balcony*, published in 1956 and performed for the first time in the next year. The play is a representative of people's dreams and desires which can't be realized in a real world. Common people's yearning for powerful positions in the reigning authority is comprehensively scrutinized in the play with a combination of illusion and role-playing. To achieve this end, Genet constantly tries to construct his own world for his characters. "Genet's alternative universe is not a fixed or absolute entity. It gets constantly created, within each instance of questioning those in power" ([Singh, 2013, p. 25](#)).

The absurdity that pervades *The Balcony* is of a disparate kind. The play revolves around Madam Irma's brothel, a house of prostitutes, where clients visit regularly. Though it is a brothel, still there is no event of sexual act performed ever all through the drama. The customers only go there to satiate their fantasy for power. "Desire for power is a natural instinct of man, which is repressed due to the rules and principles of civilization and religion" ([Omar, 2020, p. 70](#)). In other words,

The Grand Balcony, as it is known in the play, is a place to realize people's daydreams through role-playing. Visiting customers of the brothel take various powerful roles of the reigning authority such as The General, The Judge and The Bishop. All that happens inside the brothel is never related to reality. Hence, the play is a montage of absurdities, both in terms of back-ground setting and the characters. The characters are played out by common people. Instead of all such absurdities, the brothel is portrayed as a building of noble dimensions. It is not a place for performing any petty act because it is meant to be presented with the earnestness of a public cathedral. The background setting of the room in which the first act of the drama is to be performed confirms this objective.

On the ceiling, a chandelier, which will remain the same in each scene. The set seems to represent a sacristy, formed by three blood-red, cloth folding-screens. The one at the rear has a built-in door. Above, a huge Spanish crucifix, drawn in trompe l'oeil. On the right wall, a mirror, with a carved gilt frame, reflects an unmade bed which, if the room were arranged logically, would be in the first rows of the orchestra. A table with a large jug. A yellow armchair. On the chair, a pair of black trousers, a shirt, and a jacket. (Genet, 2016, p. 05)

A brothel with the above-mentioned grandiose setting at the very beginning of the play makes one think of the out of order it displays. It is in complete contrast with reality, i.e., out of harmony with reason. The sheer incongruity with which the play starts is nothing but absurd. To take the absurd feeling further for the audience, Genet (2016) introduces the first character, The Bishop, in an extravagant fashion.

THE BISHOP, in mitre and gilded cope, is sitting in the chair. He is larger than life. The role is played by an actor wearing tragedian's cothurni about twenty inches high. His shoulders, on which the cope lies, are inordinately broadened so that when the curtain rises, he looks huge and stiff, like a scarecrow. He wears garish make-up. At the side, a woman, rather young, highly made up and wearing a lace dressing-gown, is drying her hands with a towel. (p. 05)

The uniforms used for the characters have special meanings in the play. Not only do they reflect the characters' position in authority, but they also are used to bind people's respect with the characters. At the same time, they help manifest power. "Ordinary people put on uniforms of different kinds, as a symbol of power. Uniforms change, as power is taken from time to time" (Liu and Wang, 2018, p. 68). With all the grand setting along with fashionable costumes, Genet's intension looks very clear from the beginning. By showing a brothel like a cathedral and a visiting customer to the brothel like a bishop, the dramatist leaves no stone unturned to portray everything unreasonable and illogical. In other words, this is absurdity at its very best. The methods that the dramatist adopted to manifest absurdity on stage is certainly of noble kind and unique on its own. His vision of introducing absurdity in his theatre is completely in contrast with what is noticed in Ionesco's theatre. Though both are pioneers in the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd, yet their notion about absurdity is exclusively inimitable.

Irrationality is an important ingredient of absurdity. Each successive event should be connected to its preceding by means of a cause or motive in a play to make a coherent meaning overall. But, when such coherence is missing or something happens without a reason, it will render the feeling of absurdity in the audience. This

feature can be noticed in scene eight when chief leader of the revolutionaries, Chantal, is shot dead on the balcony without any motive or reason.

All the characters step forward and take their positions with great timidity. They are silent. They simply show themselves. All are of huge proportions, gigantic – except the Hero, that is, THE CHIEF OF POLICE – and are wearing their ceremonial garments, which are torn and dusty. Then, near them, but not on the balcony, appears the beggar. In a gentle voice, he cries out:

THE BEGGAR: Long live the Queen! (He goes off timidly, as he came.) (Finally, a strong wind stirs the curtains: CHANTAL appears. THE QUEEN bows to her. A shot. CHANTAL falls. THE GENERAL and THE QUEEN carry her away dead.) (Genet, 2016, p. 63)

The sequence of events leading to the scene is totally out of order. Upon being informed that the revolutionaries have blown up the royal palace, Madame Irma and her visiting clients get ready to take the roles of the reigning authority. However, the chief leader of the rebels, Chantal, also appears along with Irma and others as Queen and her various functionaries. It is certainly illogical. How can the leader of the revolutionaries, Chantal, be unknown of the fact that her followers have blown up the real Queen's palace? How can Chantal, a former prostitute in the brothel of Irma, agree to accept Irma as her Queen? There are so many logical questions arise which are quite natural for the audience. Irrespective of all these valid questions and not following the sequence of events happened just before, Chantal is shot dead. It is certain that Genet's motive is to make the events absurd to induce equivalent feelings in his audience. After all, *The Balcony* is a model play in the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. And true to its nature, the playwright makes every effort consciously to resort to absurdity to drive home his point that whatever happens can never be explained solely by means of comprehensible reasons. There is more to it that goes beyond the boundaries of sheer rationale. And the audience is knowledgeable enough to fathom the unseen in the visible proscenium arch.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Genet's *The Balcony* lacks the vital ingredients of a conventional drama such as plot, character, and coherence. This is not true for Ionesco in his *The Chairs* where characters, the Old Man and the Old Woman in their physical being and the inviting guests through their psychic reality, engage to bring out the coherence of meaning till the time the Orator arrives on stage. In case of *The Balcony*, everything turns out to be an illusion and it is confirmed by Irma, the owner of the brothel, at the end of scene nine when she exclaims that she must start everything again and distribute the roles to her customers very soon. In contrast, *The Chairs* ends to the audience's dismay that the much-hyped Orator turns out to be a deaf and mute person and for what specific reasons the Old Man has chosen the Orator to convey his life lessons. In Genet's case, absurdity is underlined though a series of illusions whereas in Ionesco's case the same theme is communicated with the absence of meaningful communication. If Genet's theatre is termed as the theatre of social protest where common man's cravings for the functionaries of authority are realized through role-playing, then Ionesco's theatre should be called the theatre of psychic reality where more invisibility and physical being are intermingled to convey the hopelessness of human world. On one hand, Ionesco resorts to physical as well as psychic reality to highlight absurdity, and on the other hand, Genet relies only on physical reality with

the help of role-playing to achieve the same absurd feeling. However, both the dramatists subscribe to the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd to put across their thoughts to their respective audiences.

The theatre of Genet and Ionesco differ in the above-mentioned facets of approach and construction from each other. Nonetheless, they both bear the fundamental essentials that they have in common as far as absurd theatre is concerned. The underlying common denominator for both the pioneers of the Theatre of Absurd is the rejection of motivation as the sole objective to act out a problem through a theatrical performance. Spreading awareness about states of mind of people and human conditions in the modern world is their common goal. Since endurance is the ultimate determinant of one's endurance, curiosity around Genet and Ionesco's plays in today's time and continuing scholarship on their works have manifested their craftsmanship in the sphere of theatrical performance. With these achievements, Genet and Ionesco continue to be the role models in the Theatre of the Absurd and appeal to present-time audiences all over the world.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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None.

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