

Existence in Limbo and the Post-War Psyche: Absurdism and Alienation across Cultures

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Abstract

*This paper explores the role of absurdism in post-war theatre through a comparative study of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, and Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*. Written in the aftermath of the Second World War, these plays reflect themes of confusion, alienation, and the search for meaning in a world that often appears purposeless. They move away from traditional storytelling and use fragmented plots, cryptic dialogue, and surreal settings to express the emotional emptiness of modern life. Despite their different cultural and geographical contexts, the plays present characters who feel lost, powerless, and unsure of their identities. While Beckett and Pinter portray the existential crisis in a European context, Sircar adapts absurdism to explore the struggles of Indian middle-class youth. This study shows how absurdist drama captures the deep emotional and psychological crisis of the time, highlighting the shared human experience of seeking meaning in an uncertain world.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The profound questions about human existence, the purpose of life, and the complications of consciousness have intrigued creative minds over several centuries. Different philosophies and schools of thought have appeared over time to provide rational answers to (some of) these. For example, existentialism is a compelling and intense outlook that explores the fundamental features of human existence [1]. The term "Existentialism" was coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s. The rudimentary concept of existentialism dates back to the seminal works of Danish philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard in the mid-19th century, whose domain of expertise was subjective experience, personal

choice, and mankind's struggle to find the meaning of life [2].

According to this philosophy, human beings are themselves held responsible for creating purpose and finding meaning in life. It is also considered to be an intellectual movement that gained traction in mid-20th-century France. This is viewed as a historic event that took place in the backdrop of the Second World War, when the existential movement emerged amidst the horrors of the Nazi death camps and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Similarly, the terms nihilism and absurdism are philosophical concepts that delve into aspects of human existence and the search for meaning and purpose in life [3].

Nihilism is an ideology that declares the absence of innate meaning, purpose, or value in life. This implies that societal norms, moral principles, and traditional beliefs are whimsical and baseless. Therefore, this leads to the conclusion that even existentialism is meaningless. Writers such as Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Chuck Palahniuk often explored nihilistic themes in their literary works [4].

For example, the hollowness and emptiness within a wealthy investment banker is portrayed in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. Dostoevsky explored the inner thoughts of the protagonist in *Notes from Underground*, who struggled hard to find the meaning of existence. Here, the characters seem hopeless and locked in an existential conundrum. Similarly, in *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre, the protagonist is confronted with emptiness and the sheer absurdity of life, resulting in a perplexed state of mind. In *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, we find Meursault grappling with the purposelessness of life and the lack of inherent meaning in human existence [5].

Another philosophical school of thought, absurdism, is based on the notion that the universe is illogical and incomprehensible [6]. It explores the absurdity of the human condition and the inability to find any logical explanation for existence. Furthermore, it argues that searching for meaning leads people into conflict with the world itself. The Theatre of the Absurd (coined by Martin Esslin) and the absurdist plays that followed were direct outcomes of the Second World War. Historically, this period was more devastating than the First World War. It was a post-war paranoia that gave rise to hopelessness, despair, alienation, and disorientation in people.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT & BACKDROP

Humanity faced various problems like inequality, racism, and loss of humanity, and a large number of natural resources were destroyed due to warfare and armed conflicts. This shattered man's peace of mind and belief in a happy life. Over time, it led people into a world of non-alignment, depression, trouble,

and torture. Nothing, apart from death, was certain for human beings.

Although absurdism initially originated in Europe, it later spread to other parts of the world [7]. After the war, human conditions had become barren externally due to massive loss of life, and people's internal state was equally tumultuous. Gradually, people started losing moral values, dignity, and emotional depth. Fear and terror during and after the war suppressed human emotions. Overall, this had a deep and lasting impact on individuals.

It was the call of the time when philosophers, theologians, social critics, and writers began to reflect these emotional and psychological struggles in their work to offer some solace to the suffering masses [8]. Through literature, people could relate to these emotions and restore a sense of inner calm. These creative works offered comfort and reduced the nightmarish effects of trauma, estrangement, and loss [9]. Absurdist literature portrayed humanity's perplexed state of mind and emotional despair.

The ideology of absurdism inspired writers to express their thoughts and philosophical concerns about human existence [10]. According to existentialist theory, human beings can create meaning in life through self-awareness. Free will and self-responsibility enable them to define their own purpose. However, absurdism rejects this by claiming that life has no inherent meaning, and this very lack of meaning may lead to self-destruction [11].

Joanna Gavins' *Reading the Absurd* (2013) inspired this research, as it presents cognitive stylistics as a tool to understand absurdist texts more clearly. Her approach shows how cognitive literary theory can deepen our understanding of absurdist literature [12]. This paper also includes a practical analysis of character dialogue in *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter to reveal how manipulative language can lead to devastating outcomes [13].

III. ABSURDIST THEATRE & CRISIS

A close investigation of absurdist plays and their inception is necessary before drawing

parallels or comparing them. The sheer dichotomy, fragmented character sketches, and obscurity of identity are all trademarks of an absurdist play [14], as they are ultimately conceptual in both treatment and representation [15]. The dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd express the metaphysical anguish of the human condition in ways that mirror meaninglessness and lack of purpose [16]. Absurdist writers such as Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Jean Genet intentionally rejected traditional cause-and-effect narrative structures [17].

Moreover, the chaotic environment after the Second World War disintegrated every sphere of life. Disillusionment, helplessness, shock, and loss of faith in humanity were natural responses to the devastation of war. These turbulent times and a fragmented, unstable society helped shape a theatre movement that directly mirrored this trauma. For example, Samuel Beckett's plays explore the metaphysical and psychological crises of human life through absurdist forms. His characters are often psychologically broken, and their inner struggles, identity crises, and existential dilemmas are clear throughout the plays [18, 19].

Similarly, Harold Pinter's characters express deep emotional suppression and psychological torment within a world filled with violence and absurdity [20]. His use of silence and pauses emphasizes miscommunication and the unsettling mystery between characters, often leading to distorted understanding [21]. In *Evam Indrajit*, Badal Sircar presents the frustration and moral confusion of the Indian middle-class intellectuals, trapped by religious, socio-cultural, and political dogma [22]. The play features a meta-theatrical setting where a writer facing creative block tries to depict the suffering of common people but instead wrestles with his own alter-egos [23]. As a notable work of Indian absurdist theatre, *Evam Indrajit* is known for its realistic treatment of existential themes and its portrayal of the monotonous routine of urban life [24].

Both *Waiting for Godot* and *Evam Indrajit* represent the hollowness, futility, and lack of purpose in human existence [25]. These plays

reflect the monotony, boredom, helplessness, and ignorance of ordinary people in the post-war period [26]. Beckett, for instance, portrays two tramps in a state of inertia, trapped in meaningless routine and lacking clear purpose. These characters embody existential voids and their actions - or lack thereof - force the audience to grapple with the emptiness of life. As parables, these plays allow for various interpretations, with "Godot" often symbolizing a mythic or metaphysical figure, giving viewers room for personal interpretation and insight.

The absurdist literary movement, which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, grew from the collective pain, confusion, and disillusionment caused by the Second World War [27]. It dealt with existential concerns such as the absurdity of human life, confrontation with nothingness, and the search for meaning. These plays often featured fragmented narratives, illogical structure, and repetition to depict the chaotic world.

Circular dialogue, silence, and incomprehensible language revealed the futility of communication and the limits of understanding. These plays were set in sparse, strange, and abstract spaces that symbolized alienation and solitude. Their characters were often exaggerated or caricatured to reflect the absurdity of the mindset of people during wartime. Ultimately, they conveyed the fundamental human struggle and the emotional turmoil of the time [28].

For example, Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* (1957) presents a stark view of human existence through characters such as Hamm, Nell, and Nagg, who are trapped in a meaningless and cyclical routine. Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) critiques bourgeois life through absurd situations and nonsensical dialogues that reflect the emptiness and irrationality of social norms. Similarly, his 1959 play *Rhinocéros* serves as an allegory for the rise of totalitarianism and the erosion of individuality, symbolizing the absurdity of blind conformity. Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) employs absurdist elements such as communication breakdown and emotional disillusionment to explore the

collapse of personal relationships and the existential crisis of its characters.

In this study, we specifically discuss and compare three important post-war absurdist plays: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, and Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*, focusing on their socio-political backdrop [29]. The harshness in these plays illustrates the psychological toll and worldview changes that followed the world wars [30]. These works reject conventional features of classical drama and instead portray the fractured human psyche trapped in an absurd world [31]. This paper seeks to link the paranoia seen in post-war absurdist theatre with the broader existential crisis faced by society during this era.

A common theme across all three plays is the presence of absurdism at their core. The characters often engage in meaningless conversations without clear direction. They lack defined purpose, and their actions appear illogical. Their dialogues involve circular reasoning, cryptic statements, and strange wordplay. Often, hopelessness is blended with black humor to portray their unstable state of mind. Emptiness, unpredictability, and the passage of time are felt deeply by the audience, who are left guessing throughout. These surreal worlds and ambiguous characters heighten the dramatic tension and draw viewers into the existential discomfort they represent.

IV. ANALYSIS OF ABSURDIST PLAYS

Waiting for Godot (1953)

This is a two-act play written by Nobel laureate Samuel Beckett, an Irish dramatist, short story writer, and renowned theatre director. Beckett was arguably the first playwright to focus entirely on the act of waiting as a central metaphor for existence. The play features a plot without traditional action, compelling the audience to share the experience of real time - of simply waiting. To wait is to confront the slow passage of time.

The protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, do nothing of substance; they merely exist on stage, passing time through repetitive and often meaningless conversation. Consider

the excerpt below, which highlights the cyclical structure of the play:

Vladimir: We could start all over again perhaps.

Estragon: That should be easy.

Vladimir: It's the start that's difficult.

Estragon: You can start from anything.

Vladimir: Yes, but you have to decide.

Waiting for Godot is widely regarded as a quintessential absurdist play. Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for the mysterious Godot, who never arrives. His identity remains ambiguous throughout, further reflecting the absurdity of human communication and interaction. The characters have no clear ambition or objective. They engage in trivial activities and inconsequential conversation, underlining the futility of existence. This repetition reinforces the absurd and ineffectual nature of their lives.

The play features absurd dialogue, marked by disjointed exchanges, non-sequiturs, and bizarre humor. Conversations often lead nowhere, leaving the audience puzzled and disengaged from traditional narrative logic. The purpose of Godot's arrival - and even his identity - remains unclear, heightening the play's ambiguity. This uncertainty mirrors the search for meaning in a world devoid of inherent purpose.

The structure of the play is cyclical: it begins and ends in nearly the same way, reinforcing the monotony of existence. Vladimir and Estragon prepare to continue waiting for Godot the next day, with no progress made. This evokes Albert Camus's philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), in which Sisyphus's endless and futile labor underscores the existential condition and the value of perseverance in an indifferent world.

Like Sisyphus pushing the boulder uphill, Vladimir and Estragon persist despite the futility of their task. Beckett's characters are trapped in a loop of absurdity, embodying the despair and purposelessness of modern life. The lack of resolution leaves the audience with a strong sense of existential unease, reflecting the absurdist worldview.

The Birthday Party (1957)

Next, we analyze Harold Pinter's three-act play *The Birthday Party* through the lens of absurdism. The play presents illogical situations where characters, their actions, and motivations are often unclear, unreasonable, or nonsensical - heightening the sense of absurdity. A central theme is alienation. In absurd literature, characters are often isolated from society, unable to form meaningful connections.

In *The Birthday Party*, there is a breakdown of communication. Characters frequently speak past each other, engage in irrational dialogue, and fail to comprehend or be comprehended. This breakdown creates confusion and uncertainty. The play also depicts characters trapped in meaningless routines and empty rituals. Their actions seem fruitless, underscoring the futility of their existence. Consider this excerpt:

You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odor. Let's finish and go. Let's get it over and go. Get the thing done. Let's finish the bloody thing. Let's get the thing done and go!

Throughout the play, a sense of unease and anxiety pervades. The atmosphere is tense and disturbing. The characters, particularly Stanley, carry an unspoken fear. He is a classic example of existential alienation - unable to form genuine relationships, detached from the world, and emotionally isolated. His persecution by Goldberg and McCann occurs without clear cause, heightening the play's sense of paranoia and ambiguity.

Even mundane conversations, such as those between Petey and Meg about cornflakes or Stanley's birthday, are cryptic and seemingly meaningless. The sudden appearance of the mysterious men, Goldberg and McCann, with no clear purpose or identity, creates further tension. Despite revealing bits of background, neither Stanley's past nor his claim of being a pianist is ever confirmed. Goldberg, too, offers ambiguous hints about his motives, but never clarifies his role.

The audience is left in a Kafkaesque state of uncertainty, echoing Stanley's own psychological disintegration. Pinter achieves this by avoiding clear exposition, truncating dialogue, and infusing the script with deliberate ambiguity and nonsense. The characters also engage in mechanical, meaningless activities - reading the newspaper, serving tea, or referencing routines in the boarding house - which deepen the absurdist tone.

Overall, *The Birthday Party* uses illogical events, communication breakdowns, alienation, and existential dread to depict the absurdity of modern life. It pushes audiences to question not only the characters' motives but the very meaning of their existence. Pinter's unsettling world reflects a broader crisis of understanding and identity in the post-war era.

Evam Indrajit (1963)

Evam Indrajit is a seminal play in the landscape of Indian Third Theatre, written by Badal Sircar, one of the leading playwrights of his time. The play critiques existing socio-economic and political conditions, echoing public sentiments of disillusionment and despair. It captures the ideological crisis and psychological tension of Indian urban life in a society struggling with post-independence disillusionment and the long shadow of global war. The hopes of many had turned to despair, leading to confusion and a deep sense of existential loss.

The narrative centers on a playwright who is unable to write a play because life itself seems too fragmented and mechanical to fit into a coherent dramatic structure. Sircar presents a stark and realistic image of contemporary Indian society plagued by overpopulation, poverty, unemployment, and child labor. In doing so, *Evam Indrajit* breaks away from traditional dramatic conventions [22].

The characters - Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit - represent the monotonous, repetitive existence of middle-class Indian youth. Amal, Vimal, and Kamal live conventional lives shaped by societal expectations: college, marriage, and employment. Indrajit, however, resists this mechanical rhythm. Unlike the others, he questions the structure imposed on him and seeks something beyond societal norms. His

existential resistance separates him from the rest.

Through these characters, Sircar highlights how most people accept life passively, seeking comfort in material stability without questioning their purpose. As a result, they lose their individuality and identity. The writer figure in the play watches this monotonous cycle and reflects:

It's all a question of going round and round. The answer is a circle - a zero... One moment, one single moment. Deny that circle. Deny that going round and round... Let us save this life. Let us save this one moment in the present - that is life...

Indrajit feels alienated and misplaced in his world. He rejects the values surrounding him and struggles against conformity. He dreams of a world beyond the one he inhabits but finds no escape. His disillusionment deepens when he travels to London only to return more lost than before. Even suicide becomes a contemplated - but abandoned - option, highlighting his inner turmoil.

The play ends with Indrajit abandoning his personal rebellion. He resigns to his role, now identifying as "Nirmal" - a name that signals conformity. Yet, a sliver of hope remains. The Writer urges him to carry on, much like Sisyphus, aware of the futility of human action but continuing regardless.

Evam Indrajit is a landmark in Indian absurdist theatre. It critiques social structures, explores identity and alienation, and speaks to the shared human condition. Its circular narrative, unresolved ending, and philosophical depth offer a powerful example of absurdism adapted to the Indian context [23, 24].

V. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

Similarities

The three plays - *Waiting for Godot*, *The Birthday Party*, and *Evam Indrajit* - are central works within the Theatre of the Absurd and share a common philosophical foundation in absurdism. As coined by critic Martin Esslin in the 1960s, absurdist theatre portrays the uncertainty, absurdity, and confusion of human

life. In these plays, the characters grapple with identity, meaning, and purpose in an indifferent and often irrational world.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for a figure named Godot who never appears. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley is trapped in a dull and meaningless routine, facing inexplicable oppression. In *Evam Indrajit*, the protagonist attempts to resist conventional social norms and expectations but eventually submits to them. Each of these plays depicts the frustrations and ambiguities of existence.

Cryptic dialogue, indirect communication, and psychological isolation are also shared traits. Vladimir and Estragon are stranded in a barren landscape. Stanley is emotionally cut off from the outside world. Indrajit is mentally and ideologically detached from both society and himself. All characters struggle to understand their place in the world, reflecting broader post-war or postcolonial alienation.

Repetition and routine are key motifs. In *Waiting for Godot*, the daily wait for Godot reinforces the monotony and futility of life. Stanley's repetitive lifestyle in *The Birthday Party* emphasizes his emotional stagnation. In *Evam Indrajit*, the circular nature of daily life mirrors modern social entrapment. All three plays reject traditional plot progression and instead create cyclical narratives that highlight the absurdity of human experience.

A crisis of identity is another shared theme. In *Waiting for Godot*, characters' identities are vague and interchangeable. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley's past and profession are never clarified. In *Evam Indrajit*, the protagonist questions his own individuality until he ultimately surrenders it. These plays - while stylistically different - present a unified existential concern: alienation, purposelessness, and a search for meaning in a disoriented world.

Dissimilarities

Despite their philosophical commonalities, the three plays arise from different cultural and literary traditions. Their geographic and socio-political contexts differ significantly. *Waiting for Godot* is grounded in post-war European

existentialism, reflecting the trauma and aimlessness experienced after the Second World War. The minimalist setting and abstract language underscore the universality of existential waiting and despair.

The Birthday Party is deeply rooted in the socio-political atmosphere of post-war Britain. It focuses on the intrusion of unknown forces into individual lives and the fragility of identity. Pinter's dialogue - marked by silence, menace, and dark humor - creates a sinister and unsettling tone. The play reflects paranoia and control in a seemingly free society.

Evam Indrajit, on the other hand, speaks from an Indian postcolonial context. The protagonist confronts societal expectations shaped by traditional and modern values. The play incorporates Indian socio-political issues like poverty, unemployment, and spiritual disillusionment. Sircar's use of meta-theatre and symbolism reflects the intellectual and emotional struggles of India's urban middle class. The theatrical form itself - Third Theatre - breaks away from both Western realism and commercial Indian theatre.

Stylistically, Beckett's play is minimal and abstract, Pinter's is realistic but charged with ambiguity, and Sircar's is experimental and locally rooted. Each uses absurdist devices differently to convey unique cultural anxieties.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Theatre of the Absurd and the broader absurdist literary movement had a significant impact on post-war drama. In response to the collapse of societal norms and the trauma following the Second World War, avant-garde playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Badal Sircar rejected traditional dramatic forms. Their plays reflected the inner conflicts, moral dilemmas, and self-doubt experienced by the masses in a fractured and uncertain world.

Absurdist theatre emphasizes existential themes and frequently employs non-linear narratives to express the chaos and fragmentation of human experience. In the plays discussed - *Waiting for Godot*, *The Birthday Party*, and *Evam Indrajit* - the line

between paranoia and existential crisis is blurred. These works present characters who confront absurdity, alienation, and the inability to find meaning, echoing the broader condition of modern existence.

The movement marks a break from conventional storytelling, challenging established ideas of plot, character, and dialogue. Absurdist playwrights such as Beckett, Pinter, Sircar, and others expanded the scope of drama by presenting the meaningless, cyclical, and contradictory aspects of life. Their works engage deeply with existential philosophy, highlighting the absurdity of the human condition and the emotional isolation that follows.

With its themes of bleakness, nihilism, and identity loss, absurdism also functions as a form of social critique. Its experimental structures and philosophical inquiries continue to influence playwrights, directors, and scholars. Even today, absurdist theatre opens new avenues for performance and interpretation.

In essence, absurdism remains an essential literary and theatrical movement. Born from post-war anxiety and philosophical crisis, it articulates the deep uncertainty of human existence - an "existence in limbo" that still resonates in contemporary culture.

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