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A SLICE OF DYSTOPIAN WORLD IN IONESCO'S "THE CHAIRS" AND ANNIE BAKER'S  
"THE FLICK"

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ABSTRACT

The term 'The Theatre of Absurd' (1960) was coined by Martin Esslin. He defines, "the theatre of absurd is a theatrical embodiment and manifestation of existentialism". It is part reality and part nightmare. The movement highlighted major writers such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, and others who worked with their characters to bring out the disillusioned social system. It came as a reaction against the realistic drama. The word 'absurd' means 'illogical' or 'inappropriate'. Obscure, blurry, irrational, irrelevant were some important jargons of the age. The theatre of absurd showcases the journey of the humankind where they are ringed with meaningless and monotonous activities. The characters are in a search to understand the meaning of life while leading a meaningless one. The dialogue the characters deliver is repetitive in nature. The actions are completely senseless, blasphemous, lack harmony and are devoid of purpose. "The Chairs" by Eugene Ionesco is significant in the themes like isolation, identity crisis, nonsensical conversation between the characters and endless search of ultimate meaning of life. However, "The Flick" by Annie Baker is a modern drama influenced by the layers. In both the plays we find abrupt and uneven relations. The characters are struggling towards their goal, suffering, unsatisfied and have failed family relations.

Keywords: theatre of absurd, meaningless, irrational, monotonous, existentialism

**The Chairs:** Absurd drama

Eugene Ionesco was born on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1909, Slatnia, Romania. He was a French-Roman playwright and was internationally recognized for his contribution to the absurd theatre. Eugene had an orthodox family background. He spent most of his life in France and later returned to Romania with his father in 1925 after his parents got divorced. He attended the Saint Sava National College and later pursued his degree in French literature at the University of Bucharest from 1928 to 1933 and worked as a French teacher.

Most of his important works were written in French. Eugene authored more than twenty plays, theoretical essays and memoirs. He was widely recognized for his contribution to innovative plays, "Rhinoceros", "The Bald Soprano" and "The Chairs". These plays changed the conventional theatre methods and attacked the serious sectors: blind conformity, totalitarianism, despair and death. As he wrote "human drama is as absurd as it is painful". Persevere and iconoclast. He depicted a world which was dehumanized with mechanical and puppet-like characters who miserably failed to establish their concrete thoughts and feelings through words and actions. Language became rarefied and the material objects gained a life of their own.

As he wrote, "I believe what separates us all from one another is simply society itself, or if you like, politics. This is what raises barriers between men, this is what creates misunderstanding". Throughout his plays his characters dwell in an unchanging milieu. He certainly blames the society stratification which is the very cause of distress. "No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for absolute. It is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa". "As the world is incomprehensible to me, I'm waiting for someone to explain it," says Ionesco about his production "The Chairs", which is considered a seminal example of the theatre of absurd highlighting the futility of human existence.

The Chairs is about the life of an old couple in their 90's who have chosen or fallen in front of their fate. The old couple is estranged in an isolated island. Their life with all the oddities have been depicted through the scenes. The first scene opens with the old man peeping outside the left window to watch the ships moving. Shocked, old woman lights a gas lamp and takes him by his sleeves to protect him.

The stagnant water around the house symbolizes the pause that life experiences under the absurd drama. Anything that is stagnant in life loses the vitality. The truth of life is change. Stagnant water or things eventually lead to destruction, not just everything around but degrades the soul.

There is lack of awareness, they have lost the notion of time. The old man fails to differentiate between day and night. He wants to see the boats making blots in sunlight. He is clueless, he states about a time when daylight would still be there at nine o'clock in the evening, at ten o'clock and at midnight. Is that really possible? Things have become an illusion for them. It's all a system of make believe. Nonsensical conversations are carried throughout where they try to build a less monotonous life and protect themselves from boredom. The old woman constantly tries to boost the broken spirit of her husband. She believes a brain like her husband's did not receive the proper opportunity to explore and grow. They have enjoyed their youth and are leading their life on the memories which they have created. The medium of entertainment in their life is through reliving the repetitious stories of their youth. The old man expresses his discontent and says, "For all of the seventy-five years that we've been married every single evening, absolutely every blessed evening, you have made me tell the same story, you've made me imitate the same people, the same months...always the same ...let's talk about something else...." They enjoy the stories, laugh at baseless and absurd jokes.

Evolution should be adopted by every species to develop. But what if the means of changes have acquired a stagnant medium? The repetitious activities of human life become the supreme task to carry forward. The question arises, are they really happy reliving the old memories or are they pretending to be under the various intricacies of absurdity? The old woman seems to enjoy the stories whereas the old man expresses his displeasure.

#### **The Flick:** Absurdism in modern drama

20<sup>th</sup> century saw the coming of modern age. The stiff beliefs of the Victorian age was discarded. People started having a logical and scientific approach and questioned the religious beliefs. There was development in the field of science and technology (electricity, radio, cinema and transportation).

There was rise in industrialization and capitalism. Old norms and rules were given away to new ones based on liberty and self-realization. Virginia Woolf, in 1910 stated, not only had Human character changed, but all "human relations-between masters and servants, husband and wives, parents and children" had also shifted. The world shifted from the belief of having a peaceful life. The destruction caused by the world introduced the new side of modernity. With the apprising came violence and death.

The modern drama pays an attention to the individual's state of mind. The complex tensions between conscious and unconscious mind; questioning the subject of existence; changes in everyday life; the deficient character; the emphasis on the casual and the elimination of unnatural heroics. The drama, to be new in modern period, deal with spiritual issues and revolve around the exposure of evil. It discovers the psychological and sexual conflict between man and woman.

The Award winning play "The Flick" is a two act play set in a movie theatre of the same name. The play highlights about the work relationship of three underpaid theatre employees who struggle to meet their needs through the developing theatres. The coming down of the theatre culture and the replacement with new technologies and its effect upon humans have been displayed here. Passive human nature of plays a significant role. As change is the only constant the characters struggle with it. We as audience realize the lacuna of connectivity. The characters move around their work. They try to establish their values, ethics and self-worth.

The length of the play is generated from the mundane conversations and the unbeaten silence. The characters spend most of their time wordlessly sweeping, mopping, and collecting waste left behind by the filmgoers. The three main characters of The Flick are, Sam a white man aged thirty-five who wears a Red Sox cap and stays with his parents; Rose a young female aged twenty, projectionist, sexually magnetic despite her baggy clothes; Avery is an African American who is highly enthusiastic about movies. Even the characters seem to establish a sympathetic relationship, there is a stereotypical discrimination based on race, class and gender. The Flick addresses issues of un-employment, economic instability, racial inequality, disappointed expectations, and the spectre of an uncertain future.

Man's tragic dilemma is in the irrationality of his conflicting desires, like his desire for the opposite sex. As we find between Sam and Rose in The Flick. Their irrational love, the desire of one for the other makes it impossible for them to have peace.

We find a conflict between accepting modernity and trying to preserve the old systems. In, "The Chairs" the old couple try to establish change as they believe that would help the mankind. "The Flick" holds its characters ringed and narrowly paved into the situation where the desire for change is eventually given up making the characters hollow.

The absurdity of modern life comes across strongly in The Flick. Like Ionesco's The Chairs where the characters mill around trying to make sense of their surroundings and their lives. The formal cue for another ellipsis between scenes is signalled by the staccato sound of the film passing through the projector as the house lights die and projector light emanates at the audience from the second storey projection booth accompanied by the sound of a movie reaching its conclusion. When a digital hum has replaced the mechanical progression of celluloid later in the play, we know the film is no more. The projector's demise is a metaphor for lost innocence.

## Conclusion

Finding meaning is the central theme in grief and trauma literature. Though it seems difficult to cope, but not impossible to lead life of awareness and responsibility. Martela and Steger (2016p. 531) differentiated between three types of meaning in life: coherence, purpose, and significance. Coherence refers to "a sense of comprehensibility and one's life making sense." Purpose means having "a sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life," and significance refers to "a sense of life's inherent value and having a life worth living". It has thus become very important for us to think about our psychological health. The human mind erodes under such circumstances. The emotional aspect can be the key to development in every field. As we move towards the modern drama relationships become opaque, things that can be left unresolved. True human emotions are way to life. That is the element which differentiates you from other species. It is not about being sympathetic or empathetic, but it is about how a man should lead his life meaningfully.

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