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The struggle of the self in the plays of Ionesco and Pinter

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Abstract

The Absurd plays emerged in the 1950's and 60's as a result of the chaotic socio political and religious conditions of the post war period. Man was disillusioned with the entire system, and exhibited lack of faith in everything and everyone. There was a struggle in him to understand and be understood. He was not able to relate to the chaotic socio political and religious environment. There was a lack of trust and faith, be it in the society, politics or religion. This struggle to come to terms with the new order of things was internal as well as external. This strife has been portrayed through the medium of the characters of the plays of Ionesco and Pinter. The strife is basically psychological, and internal, as it relates to his individuality and strife to not get annihilated by the system. This is because the chaotic conditions of the post war period prevented him from accepting the new norms as they were beyond his perception, and the destruction of the hitherto strong beliefs and system forced him to look inward and question his acceptance of everything. Hence, this struggle was portrayed through the medium of the angry young man of Pinter, and the pessimistic, disillusioned and isolated individuals of Ionesco's plays. The two prominent themes of the self and identity form the basis of most of the Absurdist playwrights, from Beckett to Pinter (Rahimipoor and Edoyan 2012). The struggle of the self and to know himself with the help of language has also been studied by Djamel and Moukhtaria (2018). Thus, language was also used as a tool to explore the self and its inherent struggle by the two absurd playwrights in their plays. This paper is an attempt to understand the strife of the absurd characters of Ionesco and Pinter from a few of their plays, and elaborate upon the significance of the same, drawing a parallel between the portrayal of the same by the two.

Keywords: Disillusionment, lack of faith, internal as well as external struggle, self and identity, language used for self-exploration

Introduction

Ionesco and Pinter, both have their own approach towards revealing the struggle of the self in their plays. Ionesco through the medium of the portrayal of his pessimistic, lonely, disillusioned and dissatisfied characters and their language, endeavours to portray the struggle of the individual, both within and also against the system. Yet, there lingers a desire in his characters to be understood, validated and accepted. The individual is willing to give up his struggle in order to be finally understood and accepted as a part of the system, as is evident in *The Chairs*. On the other hand, the Professor of *The Lesson* is willing to take the life of his pupil in order to be understood. Similarly, the metamorphosis of the main character Berenger in to a rhinoceros at the end of the play, shows the end of his strife and his annihilation into the system. Similarly, the annihilation of Stanley is complete when he is carried away by the henchmen of the system in *The Birthday Party*.

The Theatre of the Absurd was illogical, allegorical and reflected the inner conflicts of man. It compelled the individual to move out of his complacency, and confront the reality (Tiwari 2012)^[9]. This reality was also the reality of his struggle to know himself, as well as to strive for his individuality against a system which was out to annihilate him. The annihilation is complete, when the pupil is not able to understand. The final annihilation is in the form of death. Similarly, a voluntary annihilation can be seen in *The Chairs*, when the Old Couple take their life, after accepting the fact that after the Orator's delivery of the message of the Old Man to the elite strata of the system, he would finally be understood and accepted, hence here ends his strife, and he prefers to end a meaningless existence, which finally got a meaning at the end.

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The conflict can also be in the form of the territorial struggle as exhibited by Pinter in *The Homecoming*. Herein also is the portrayal of the struggle of the self to establish himself as the king of the herd, as is evident in Max. The struggle is there in all of Pinter's and Ionesco's characters. It is only the portrayal of the struggle that is different. Each character has a different struggle within himself/herself.

Cap-Bun (2011)^[2] in the study on the human condition oscillating between the fantastic and the absurd in *The Rhinoceros*, speaks about the Kafkan influence on the metamorphosis of Ionesco's characters into rhinoceroses. The study speaks about the various levels of understanding, meanings and perceptions involved in the play. This study explores the conflict of man being caught between the fantastic and the absurd as depicted by Ionesco in *The Rhinoceros*. The author talks about the defiance of the main character Berenger, to change into a rhinoceros and give into a new and changing set of values. Quinney (2007)^[10] in his study on the excess and identity in *The Rhinoceros*, speaks about the excessive circumstances that led to the extreme cowardice and submission to tyranny as portrayed by Ionesco in the play. The study particularly speaks about the mass infection of fascism in many countries. The author has also interpreted it as a moral call to judge the morality of the rise of this trend or phenomena. Craddock Jr. (1966)^[4] in his dissertation has spoken extensively about the concept of 'identity' in the plays of Eugene Ionesco. Man's struggle against social obligations and conformity, his sense of alienation and the struggle to know himself has all been looked into. The study is about man's struggle with himself, his true self which is hidden beneath layers and layers of social conformity, and preconceived notions. It also speaks about how man has forgotten his true self, and is into enactment in order to be accepted and understood.

The Struggle Within

Pinter aims at revealing the reality as it is. Pinter's characters are shown striving to maintain a self image. This might also result in their struggle with reality and illusions (Tiwari 2012)^[9]. They have a certain projected image of themselves, even though it might not be the reality, yet they pretend to live up to this image. One can see evidence of it in Stanley, Meg and Goldberg of *The Birthday Party*. The struggle is also to know oneself, the true self, minus all the pretensions. Similarly, the struggle to understand and be understood is supreme in the plays of Ionesco, especially *The Lesson* and *The Chairs*. The desire to have one's individuality intact is also evident in the strife of the main character Berenger of *Rhinoceros*. Fear and the struggle to combat that fear is also portrayed via Pinter's characters, like Rose of *The Room*, who is scared to venture out for fear of the unknown. Here the room that she is in has been referred to as a womb. She is shown referring repeatedly about the warmth and comfort of a room, as opposed to that of any other sort of a dwelling like a flat (Djamel and Moukhtaria 2018)^[5]. Pinter wants his characters to question themselves, thus acknowledging their inherent struggles. Just like the room of Rose being termed as a womb, the tower or rather the home of the Old Couple is also termed as a womb (Bermel 1975)^[1], reflecting the warmth and security that they wish for, in order to escape from the harsh realities of life, i.e. the strife within and without. The struggle of the self also has existential connotations. Doubrovsky (1959)^[6], also speaks about the non-

acceptance of reality by man. He prefers to live with the illusion. The struggle to separate reality from illusion is also an inherent struggle of the individual as portrayed by Ionesco and Pinter through the characters of their plays, be it Meg and Stanley of *The Birthday Party*, or the Old Woman of *The Chairs*. The existential dilemma also gives rise to the struggle to know one's self. Existentialism has its origin in the word 'existence' with the root word 'exist.' The word 'exist' comes from Latin, which means 'ex' out, and the word 'sistare' means to stand. So, the meaning of existence is somehow related to standing out of oneself. One can only do that with the aid of self-knowledge and realization. This is possible only when the strife within oneself comes to an end, and when one is able to find all the answers to the questions asked to himself.

The Struggle against the System

In Pinter's opinion the system was faulty and dehumanized people. His anger via his characters was directed against the system (Cohn 1962)^[3]. This is evident through the portrayal of characters like Stanley of *The Birthday Party*, who admits that he is different, yet he is not a threat to the system. In spite of this revelation of his, he is completely annihilated and carried away to some unknown destination by the two henchmen of the system, Goldberg and McCann. He is shown striving till the end to keep his individuality intact, yet his depiction with a complete dissolution of his character, and his rebirth in a new persona, totally different from his original disheveled self, shows the final annihilation of the individual by the system. Similarly, the Old Man of *The Chairs*, is also portrayed struggling to make his mark as a distinct individual, yet his desire to be a part of the system reigns supreme. His wife, the Old Woman, is even shown referring to the elite members of the system, who are their guests, as their symbolic parents. Thus, signifying their loneliness and an ardent desire to be accepted, appreciated and validated.

Conclusion

Ionesco's characters are a metaphor of his sentiments on stage (Doubrovsky 1959)^[6]. Ionesco's plays are his testimony on the predicament of man (Doubrovsky 1959)^[6]. Pinter, on the other hand adopts the approach of the angry young man, who is disillusioned with himself as well as with the system. The quest to know oneself reigns supreme in the characters of both, be it the lost Stanley of *The Birthday Party*, or the dominant Max of *The Homecoming*. The conflict in Ruth of *The Homecoming* is palpable, and is symbolic of her inner turmoil. Ionesco's characters portray the universal anguish of man. Ionesco's characters do not have an individual personality. They are symbolic of the man himself (Doubrovsky 1959)^[6]. The struggle of the characters, be it the Old man or Stanley, or Ruth, each one depicts the same characteristic of the individual, the lost and disillusioned self, looking for some means of an understanding of their meaningless life. In this manner, there is similarity between the characters of Ionesco and Pinter, yet the struggle in Pinter's characters is sometimes more aggressive than that of Ionesco's. Fear and insecurity are more apparent in Pinter's characters, as they know that nothing is permanent. Man dreams of permanence, but everything is transitional. Hence, everything that we value will come to an end one day. Only death is a reality which is the ultimate fact of life (Oliver 1963)^[7]. This realisation is

what brings an end to all struggles within and without, and with it comes the acceptance of the reality, albeit absurd.

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