



## VISUALIZING DRAMATIC TEXTS: EUGENE IONECO'S *THE CHAIRS* AND BADAL SIRCAR'S *EVAM INDRAJIT*

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The paper proposes to explore how a dramatic text enters into a conversation with its readers in multiple ways. As far as the language is concerned, the words in a dramatic text are designed to become a performance in the mind of its readers. Even in the absence of an actual stage, a dramatic text produces the sense of one. The activity of reading a play becomes interesting if the 'signs' inherent are interpreted by the readers for what they signify. Umberto Eco's Theory of Semiotics helps in visualizing a documented text. The readers must recognize the relationship between the 'script' and the 'stage'. Thus, there are two sets of readings going on simultaneously in the minds of the readers. It is difficult to separate the page (text) from the stage (performance). The French dramatic movement of the 1940's and 50s emphasized the absurdity of the modern condition as defined by existential thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre. The existentialists followed Soren Kierkegaard's dictum that "existence precedes essence"- that is, man is born into the world without a purpose, and he must commit himself to a cause for his life to have meaning. In order to highlight these issues Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet and Indian absurdist like Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar wrote significant plays. The present paper would focus on the short plays of Eugene Ionesco, who was one of the major playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd and Badal Sircar, an Indian Bengali writer whose plays were translated into English by other Indian writers to emphasize how a dramatic text can be visualized by its readers.

**Keywords:** Visualize, Existential philosophy, Existentialism, Theatre of the Absurd, Absurdity.

### **Introduction**

The paper proposes to interpret how a dramatic text enters into a conversation with its readers in multiple ways. As far as the language is concerned, the words in a dramatic text are designed to become a performance in the mind of its readers. Even in the absence of an actual stage, a dramatic text produces the sense of one. The activity of reading a play becomes interesting if the 'signs' inherent are interpreted by the readers for what they signify. The readers should recognize the relationship between the 'script' and the 'stage'. Thus, two sets of readings simultaneously take place in the minds of the readers. It is difficult to separate the page (text) from the stage (performance).

Umberto Eco in his book *The Theory of Semiotics*, proposes an important theoretical framework of Signs and Signifiers. The 'icon', 'index' and 'symbol' are the three categories of signs which can become a mode of analysis for visualizing a dramatic text. Drama is basically iconic, every moment of dramatic action is a direct visual sign of a functional reality. Eco defines signification as the semiotic event whereby a sign stands for something. He defines communication as the transmission of information from

a source to a destination i.e. from the text to the reader. In a dramatic text, communication is made possible through a code which co-relates between the form and the content. These literary 'signs' communicate through a variety of syntactic and semantic relations, manifest in the dramatic text itself. They also take on meaning from the historical and socio-cultural contexts within which they are produced.

## Literature Review

Plays written by Samuel Becket, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet in Europe and by Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar in India belong to the category of Theatre of the Absurd. Critic Martin Esslin coined the term 'Theatre of the Absurd', for such plays based on a broad theme of absurdity, roughly similar to the way Albert Camus uses the term. The origins of the Theatre of the Absurd are rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, it was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the traumatic experiences of the horrors of the II World War, which exhibited the total impermanence of any moral values, shook the validity of all conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness. The trauma of living under the threat of nuclear annihilation in 1945 may have been an important factor in the rise of the new theatre.

Eugene Ionesco was one of the major playwrights of Theatre of the Absurd. The French Dramatic Movement of the 1940s and the 50s which emphasized on the absurdity of the modern condition of man as defined by existential thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre. The existentialists followed Soren Kierkegaard's dictum that "existence precedes essence"- that is, man is born into a world without a purpose, and he must commit himself to a cause for his life to have meaning.

Eugene Ionesco's one act play, *The Chairs* depicts a ninety five year old man and his ninety four year old wife living on an isolated island, surrounded by water and cut-off by mankind. The play was written in 1952. It was the third of Ionesco's plays to be produced. *The Chairs* came out to be seen as a seminal example of the genre, highlighting the loneliness and futility of human existence. The Old Man and the Old Woman are stuck in a repetitive existence, retelling the same story and performing the same imitative actions day after day – even the water around the island is stagnant. The man can hardly even advance his story, rarely getting past "Then at last we arrived" (115) which is itself a conflation of an ending and a beginning that circles around itself. In fact, the old couple is not sure what would come next. When the man resumes the story, after having remembered they were in Paris, he says "at the end of the city of Paris, there was, there was, was what?"(120). He keeps repeating "the end of the end", but the end of the road is shrouded in mystery. Perhaps a previous comment which the man has made sheds some light. Giving an explanation for why the sky gets darker earlier now, he says "the further one goes, the deeper one sinks. It's because the earth keeps turning around, around, around, around..."(125) The revolutions of earth and of a repetitive existence press the couple into deathly routines, cyclical actions that inch them closer to death as they seek ways to create some excitement in their lives. The man, especially, is such a prisoner of this repetition that he is at times infantile, belying his ninety-five years, and calls his wife his mother, and father, at one point. His confusion over beginnings and endings – whether he is a child or an old man, finds some roots in his story, which is about being cast out of a garden. The reference is to the garden of Eden, and since he cannot remember mankind's initiation into the real world and expulsion from a godly one, it helps explain his confusion over lesser beginnings and endings.

The old man plans to share his life experiences with posterity and has invited a large audience to hear the orator who will speak on his behalf. The old couple is excited because that evening they expect everyone from the entire world. The memory overpowers both of them. The couple imagines the guests arriving who are referred to by the playwright as 'invisible' to the readers and the audience but visible to the old couple who speak to them. There is a set pattern in which each imagined guest arrives – sound of the boat, ringing of the bell, opening of the door, bringing of a chair by either of the two and asking them to be seated on the chair. The whole sequence is repeated several times in the play where facial

expressions, gestures and movements seem to be mechanical. The 'invisible guests' are exhibited as automatons for the benefit of the readers and the audience. They are only to be visualized as figures out of the range of the old couple's imagination and memory. The whole process of hurry and flurry about the room, greeting the guests and pulling in chairs to accommodate the invisible crowd is a happy time for the old couple. It can be seen as a kind of release from their isolated existence. A high point in the happiness of the couple is reached at the arrival of the invisible emperor. Finally the orator enters to deliver his speech to the assembled crowd. Played by a real actor, the orator's physical presence contradicts the expectations set up by the action earlier in the play.

The old couple then throw themselves out of the window into the wide sea because they claim at this point, when the whole world will hear the old man's astounding revelation, life couldn't get any better. As the orator begins to speak, the real audience and the readers discover that the orator is deaf and dumb as he makes unintelligible noises and gestures to the invisible crowd. At the end of the play, the sound of an audience fades in. Ionesco claimed this sound of the audience at the end was the most significant moment in the play. After the orator leaves, The writer says "At this moment the audience would have in front of them....empty chairs on an empty stage covered with streamers and confetti", (160) which would give an impression of sadness, emptiness and disenchantment such as one finds in a ballroom after a dance; and it would be after this that the chairs, the scenery, the void, would inexplicably come to life (that is the effect, an effect beyond reason, true in its improbability, that we are looking for and that we must obtain). Upsetting logic and raising fresh doubts.

Ionesco summarizes the theme of *The Chairs* (*The New York Times*, June 1, 1958): "I have tried to deal...with emptiness, with frustration, with this world, at once fleeting and crushing. The characters I have used are not fully conscious of their spiritual rootlessness, but they feel it instinctively and emotionally." The old couple realizes that their lives are nearing the end and the event they have planned symbolizes the recounting of their days and the people who had been in their lives. Isolated by age, as symbolized by the island where they live, the old man gazes longingly out of the window for the sight of any boat or sign of their former life to punctuate the monotony".

The theme of the inevitability of the passage of time is at the core of this play. *The Chairs* is not set in a particular time or place, although the action takes place in a semicircular room. Along the wall are two important elements – a window that overlooks the sea and eight doorways. The window frames the action of the play as when the play opens the old man is seen leaning far out of the window. At the end of the play both the old man and the old woman jump out of the same window.

Badal Sircar, an eminent Indian Bengali Playwright, contributed immensely to the development of Indian Drama. A Civil Engineer and a Town Planner by profession, he wrote many significant plays in Bengali which were later translated into English. Apart from writing plays, Badal Sircar was also a producer and formed a theatre group of his own called 'Shatabdi'. Initially he produced his plays on proscenium stages, but later resorted to 'angamancha' (circular and round theatre). Many of his early plays are based on a sense of utter meaninglessness in a world dominated by increasing violence and inhumanity. Badal Sircar's Bengali play *Eva Indrajit* (1965), translated into English by Girish Karnad another contemporary Indian Dramatist and staged first in 1970, is a milestone in the history of modern Indian Drama. It makes use of myth to examine some of the dilemmas of the Indian middle class. It is actually a theatrically effective and crystallized projection of all the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations at the hearts of the educated urban middle class. *Evam Indrajit* is about the frustrations which the young middle class face as a result of failure to adjust in a society and achieve their aspirations. A Young man's pursuit of knowledge, art and job has been projected through four characters – Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Nirmal. Nirmal's introducing himself as Indrajit, significantly associates the story with the world of *Ramayana*. Indrajit is actually the name of the rebel Meghnad, Ravana's son, who defeated Indra, the Indian Zeus.

The play opens with the Writer's (a character in the play) dilemma which is related to what he considers the limitedness of his experience. The Writer in the play may be understood as the spokesman of Badal Sircar himself. The play bears all the characteristics of the Western Theatre of the Absurd and existential philosophy. He could partly see this in Bengali life too. Whereas, in the background to the

European Theatre of the Absurd was the II World War and the loss of faith in the metaphysical concerns, in *Evam Indrajit* the life of the four characters appears to be more personal and subjective rather than objective.

Badal Sircar it seems portrays three phases of human life – student life, employment and married life, which are related to the first two stages of Hindu life i.e. bachelorhood (*brahmacharya*) and family life (*grihasthashram*) and the other two stages i.e. forest dwelling (*vanaprastha*) and ascetic life (*sanyasa*) are not so revealed and pronounced but figure in the philosophical imagination of the character.

The writer is trying to write a play, but does not know “people”, he has not much experienced the realities of life and can only write about those who belong to the middle class society like him. He continues writing without any sense of satisfaction. All this is projected in an effective dramatic manner for the benefit of the reader. Language plays an important role in communicating the confusion and frustrations of the Writer who repeatedly uses the numbers in a mechanical, cyclical, monotonous and un-sequential manner.

Auntie, who may be understood as a ‘mother’ or ‘elder sister’, is frantic because she cannot make any sense of her boy’s behavior. She repeatedly asks him to have food but he repeatedly responds each time, “I’ll have finished in a moment.” Getting irritated she says, “Do what you want. Night and day – scribble, scribble, scribble. No food, no drink, just scribble. Only God knows what will come out of this scribbling...” (3)

Manasi appears on the stage. When asked by her about his writing, he writer is unable to decide about whom and what he should write, which communicates his dilemma to the readers. The whole scene is full of action and performance communicated through gestures and movements of the character. The frustration and the consequent dissatisfaction of a middle class adolescent, Indrajit are revealed through his dialogue with Manasi. She is the one who tries to elevate his courage in life but he cannot much relate to her as she is his maternal first cousin. He is well aware of the societal taboo attached to their relationship. It is because of this that he finds his existence meaningless. He is unable to commit suicide because he believes that it would not be a solution. Badal Sircar projects Indrajit’s character as mythical rebel Meghnad who tries to break barriers but is unable to.

Later in the play, Sircar projects Indrajit’s character after a gap of seven years as a matured and philosophical one. His physical maturity has also led to his spiritual growth. He has understood the significance of life and living, which has instilled faith in God and fortune. Indrajit undoubtedly has the right to establish the need and importance of faith in life, having lost all faith in worldly things he himself has become one who sees life realistically and dreams about it romantically.

Towards the end of the play, Badal Sircar makes the Writer observe:

Walk! Be on the road! For us there is only the road. We shall walk. I know nothing to write about – still I shall have to write. You have nothing to say – still you will have to talk. Manasi has nothing to live for – she will have to live. For us there is only the road – so walk on. We are the cursed spirits of Sisyphus. We have to push the rock to the top – even if it just rolls down. (59)

In the above message the Writer is not projected as an individual but a universal man who has to go on in life against all odds.

We may conclude that absurd writings depict horrific or tragic images; characters caught in hopeless situations, forced to perform repetitive or meaningless actions, nonsensical plots which are cyclical or absurdly expansive; either a parody or dismissal of realism. These plays emphasize on man’s loneliness in a world without any faith, man’s inability to communicate and man’s dehumanization at the hands of machine. All though the plays are serious, they also comprise extravagantly comic scenes in depicting a reality which is absurd, illogical and senseless, a world of futility and meaningless clichés. Images and objects help in the interpretation of the texts which on the printed page serve as a temporary stage linking the playwright’s imagination and the reader’s interpretation. It is important for the reader to deduce meaning through the non-verbal codes in a play along with its verbal semiosis. It is through these codes that the concrete page of a dramatic text becomes an abstract emotional stage in the mind of the reader.

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