

Mapping the Absurdism in the Microcosm of Edward Albee's Play 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' and the Absurdity in the Macrocosm of the Contemporary American Cultural Ethos through the Discourse of Speech Act Theory

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ABSTRACT

The interdependence of language and literature is not merely by virtue of the fact that language embodies literature but more than being just a means of expression, language, at its different levels starting from lexis to inter-sentential level of discourse, captures the subtle intricacies of the human experience like power relations, ideologies, different voices, speech acts etc. through different markers of language like fumbles, repetitions, generalized vocabulary, prefabricated fillers, less logical connectors, incomplete sentences, simple sequence of phrases and functional interpretation of an utterance in a particular context despite its being a different structural type i.e.declarative,imperative , interrogative etc. The present paper attempts to capture the absurdity of American Way of life in Edward Albee's play Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf by interpreting each utterance as an 'act' performed by an individual character in the overall organisation of the play. The scope of Sinclair and Coulthard's pedagogic theory of class room discourse has been attuned by incorporating some inputs from Burton's theory on dramatic discourse, Grice's Cooperative Principle etc. to deal with the unpredictable interactions among characters of the play under study. The evolved analytical apparatus has been able to see through the various strategies put in practice by characters in the development of their discourse which eventually lays bare their value system, psychological upheavals, thought patterns and the overarching contemporary American absurdity of life.

Terms-discourse, speech acts, absurdity, pedagogic discourse

PAPER

The Theatre of Absurd as a genre of drama presents itself for discussion at two levels: first, there is an underlying vision of the universe, a vision memorably expressed by Kafka and the existentialists as well as by the dramatists of the absurd, which has lost its unifying principle, its meaning and its purpose and where man feels metaphysical angst at the absurdity of the human condition in this mysterious universe resorting along the way to self-delusion to bear the futility and failure of human existence; second, a number of forms of writing and strategies of presentation generated by this underlying vision.

A writer's vision is absurd when the arbitrary, the disconnected, the irrelevant, non-seam are seen to be the main principle or non-principle of the universe. A writer for whom experiences are dislocated and unrelated must clearly deny the logic of cause and effect in expressing these experiences, the logic on which naturalist's drama is based. This drama defies the logic of cause and effect, expectations are not met, and conventions are flouted. The dramatist is a hardcore absurdist who depicts this metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition- 'nothing happens' (Waiting for Godot) through a technique that also defies logic and reason.

Albee's work shows a brilliantly inventive use of technique but where the questions of the presentation of metaphysical anguish at the human condition in this mysterious universe are concerned, he is not equal to the likes of Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter. The human condition depicted by a Beckett or Ionesco is absurd in that it cannot be explained; it does not display rational exploration of any experience in life. Man is too helpless to seek any solution to the problem that cannot be concretized. What to talk of having any hope, he does not even have any wish left to look for a solution in this mysterious universe. This sort of human condition conveys the very essence of the theatre of the absurd.

But the absurdity of the human condition of Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is not that absurd as that of The Chair and Waiting for Godot. Here the reason of the problem is not concealed and the solution to the problem is also suggested which does not stand any chance in Ionesco, Beckett and Genet because their theatre is a theatre of 'Nothing really happens, nothing is resolved'. In the theatre of Edward Albee one finds a tension between realism and the theatre of the absurd. He has attempted to exploit the advantages both of the

theatre of the absurd and of realism. With a deliberate and avowed aim of social criticism, a savage attack on American way of life, a 'way of life' projected by the media or the politician which forces the people to conform to it if they are to be the Real Americans. But social criticism is also one of the features of the theatre of the Absurd, though it may not be that significant. To quote Martin Esslin-"Behind the satirical exposure of the absurdity of inauthentic ways of life, the theatre of the absurd faces up to a deeper layer of absurdity- the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious beliefs has deprived the men of certainties"(Pp 291-92).

So, the play 'Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' falls more in the first category of the theatre of Absurd i.e. being satirical in nature. Though the play under study might not show metaphysical anguish of that magnitude, it still falls under the category of The Theatre of Absurd, showing the absurdity of certain real social life situations with the added advantage of showing the absurdity of contemporary life. This paper will discuss both its common traits with other theatres of this genre and the contemporary American absurdity.

1. Contemporary illusive human condition:-

'Illusion' forms an important segment of the genre of the Theatre of Absurd. A Vladimir and Estragon of 'Waiting for Godot' have the illusion of having an appointment with Godot, similarly both George and Martha have the illusion of having a child of their own since long. So in the real absurdist vein, the play 'Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' also dramatizes the futility and failure of human existence, made bearable only by self-delusion.

Undoubtedly, this self-delusion might have some rational explanation behind it and that is the American Way of Life. The American Way of Life doesn't accept sterility as it believes in procreation and reproduction at the physical level. It has an American dream, a dream of wish fulfilment- having a very handsome, green-eyed, fair complexioned and physically strong son regardless of his emotional vacuity and elemental deprivations. It doesn't accept human limitations and social aberrations, irrespective of the fact that this attitude might cause psychological malaise resulting in a hellish life. This way of life adheres to the pragmatic standpoint towards life which propagates conformism and reluctance to accept any kind of change whatsoever. So,

people are forced to prefer and lead a life of futilities and failures instead of throwing the gauntlet to hard reality and shredding the complacent exterior into pieces.

So, both George and Martha, sterile in so many ways, cannot live with their sterility, they invent this fantasy child as their real one to withdraw from the realities of life and live a false and illusory life thereafter. This is a strongly guarded secret to their private marital life which they nurtured since they got married and kept safe from the outward world with great effort and self-restraint. The reader starts smelling something fishy at the very beginning.

Exchange	Opening Move	Act
Threaten	Martha (really angered); yeah? Well, I'll start in on the kid if I want to	m threat
Advise	George: Just leave the kid out of this.	adv.
Challenge	Martha (threatening): He's mine as much as he's yours. I'll talk about hum if I want to.	chall.
Advice	George: I'd advice against it, Martha.	adv.

(Example 1 page 19)

This sort of refuge into a fantasy world might keep one safe from the pressures of the external world but the internal pressures accruing from this very false complacency of having a baby results in bickering and quibbles in real life, which is a paradox in itself. This very thing happens with George and Martha and they have negotiated to remain together only with accusations, charges, curses, complaints, threats, warnings and challenges against each other. To seek relief from this cat and dog life, both George and Martha escape into the realm of illusions. George gets into the realm of imagination and starts reading a book, whereas Martha dares to indulge in an extra martial affair before her husband. Both attempts promise to give temporary relief, but don't give any and only bounce back with great force causing more pain and frustration.

Their life is infested with vacuity, emptiness, negativity, depression and frustration that are incorrigible in themselves. The study of monologues, soliloquies and the very analysis of the play through the proposed analytical apparatus have demonstrated this futility and failure in the fictional life of the plays and macrocosm of the real world. As said earlier, both George and Martha keep on fighting with each other about the baby when they are alone, but in public life they assume the facade of getting along with each other when they talk imaginatively about the physical appearance of the fantasy child. Here, both are supplementing and complementing each other's utterance which hardly happens otherwise. So, the analytical apparatus has gone into the psychological depths of the protagonists. The fact of indulging in the fantasy of having a child and deriving pleasure at its very description before others heightens the absurdity of the contemporary human condition of American life when things are laid bare at the end.

Exchange	Opening Move	Act	Responding Move	Act	Follow-up move	Act
Elicit	Nick (to George; quietly) you couldn't have....any?	m Pro	George: We couldn't	Conc.	Martha (a hint of communion in this): we couldn't	Conf.

(Example2 page 138)

The whole of life at this juncture becomes a farce, a joke because it has remained cantered on the false and fragile base of a fantasy- child. It doesn't seem to have any significance and meaning. But this situation is not that in not that acute which may suggest the ultimate metaphysical anguish at the human condition on a larger scale. Instead, this is a particular social situation which has been drained of its meaning and purpose because of an imposed, forced way of life- the American Way of Life. If both George and Martha hadn't stuck to this way of life, they might have explored other ways and possibilities to search for happiness and meaning in life. But this particular approach towards life has become an inextricable part of the American psyche and it is not possible to lead a real life without self-delusions and illusions.

Exchange	Opening Move	Act	Responding Move	Act	Follow-up move	Act
Elicit	George: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf	m pro	Martha: I..am...George.. .I...am	Conf.	George(nods slowly)	Ack

(Example3 page 139)

It can be averred that the human condition depicted in the play 'Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf'? is an American human condition, so to say. That is to say, the absurdity of this play is the absurdity of the American Way of Life. But at the same time, though the absurdity seems to have some rational explanation, it doesn't seem to have any solution that is when the absurdity of a particular situation rises above the local ambience and gets its place in the absurdity of a particular situation rises above the local ambience and gets its place in the absurdity of 'The Theatre of Absurd'.

2. Sense of Isolation

One of the main themes that recur in the plays of Ionesco and Pinter is the sense of loneliness and isolation of individuals because of the evasion of communication with each other. In Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf? we see that all the four characters imprisoned in their cells of selfishness, impotency, fear and distrust, inadequacy, lovelessness and as a result, the warmth of human contact is lost. Communication is deliberately evaded by the characters in order to lay off the problem and this causes isolation. Communication is evaded in the following ways.

2.1 Skip-Talk

The characters are so lost or engrossed in their private mysterious world that they hardly bother about the other persons and what they are talking. They just relate to and progress upon what has been said by them in their prior utterances. This psychological malaise is the offshoot of something which was considered undesirable in the past and so was suppressed for a long time. Honey, a simpleton wife, evades child birth by eating pills and so avoids unwanted and loveless pregnancies. She doesn't want to talk about it even with her husband because their marriage had been

taken for granted and so was not based on faith and love. This results in an identity crises and non-recognizance of her sexuality.

Exchange	Opening Move	Act	Responding Move	Act	Follow-up move	Act
Vent	Honey: I was asleep and the bell started...they BOOMED! Poe-bells....they were, Poe bells... Bring-bing-bong-BOOM	vent. com.	George:BOOM	Acc.		
B. Initiate	Honey: I was asleep, and I was dreaming of ...something.....and I heard the sound coming, and I did not know what it was	vent. com				
Trifle	George (never quite to her): It was the sound of bodies	trif.				
B.Initiate	Honey: And I didn't want to wake up, But the sound kept coming...					
Direct	George...go back to	dir				

	sleep...					
B. initiate	Honey....and it frightened me!	vent.				
Threat	George (quietly....to Martha, as if she were in the room), I'm going to get ku ...Martha	threat				
B. initiate	Honey: And it was so...cold. The wind was...the wind was so cold! And I was lying somewhere, and the covers kept slipping away from me, and I didn't want them to...	vent. com.				

(Example 4 page 104-105)

2.2 Pseudo Phatic -Communion

Phatic -Communication is substance- lacking talk but is said to be important for social consideration. But when such talk is dominated by mere gestures and lacks feeling and human touch, the human contact between people remains a far cry. The present paper has captured and analysed this sort of talk by 'observing exchanges'. In Act I, just at arrival, Nick starts indulging in this type of artificial talk which George is able to see through and so tackle accordingly.

Exchange	Opening Move	Act	Responding Move	Act	Follow-up move	Act
Observe	Honey: isn't this lovely!	obs	Nick (perfunctorily)	end	Martha: Well,	m

					thanks	ack
Obs	Nic(indicating the abstract painting) who---who did the	inqu	Marth'a that? oh, that's by George; some Greek with a moustache Martha one night attacked in	s rep fli	Honey (to save situation), ha, ha ,ha, ha	ter
Observe	Nick: its good a...a..	obs.				
B-elicit	George: A quite intensity	n-pro	Nick: well, no			

Example 5 page 20)

2.3 Ignoring

It is admitted that language is a social and so manifests its stratifications and hierarchies. It is a weapon in the hand of those who are at high-up to suppress the people of lower strata by ignoring their presentations. In a way, this sort of ignoring and taking the addressees for granted is also a reflection of fear, distrust and lack of confidence in the addressers. George who realizes the bad intentions and practical pragmatism of Nick adopts a strategy of ignoring his enquiries and observations and so confuses him by counter-questions and long utterances. This sort of treatment snaps the possibility of any sort of human contact or personal tie between them. This sort of fear and distrust causes a sense of insecurity and a person prefers to live in the cell of his isolation

Exchange	Opening Move	Act	Responding Move	Act	Follow-up move	Act
Exchange	George (looking at the ceiling) what are they doing up there?	inq. com.				

	I assume that's where they are.					
Elicit	Nick (False heartiness): You know women	n.pro				
Challenge	George (gives Nick a long stare of feigned incredulity....then attention moves): Not one son-of-a-bitch got killed, of course, nobody bombed Washington No....that's not fair	chall com				
Elicit	George: you have any kids?		Nick uh..... No....not yet (pause)	m inf.		
Challenge	George: (a kind of challenge): That's for me to know and you to find out.	chall.				
Reinitiate	No kids, hunh?	m.pro.	Nick: Not yet	conf.		

(Example 6 page 30-31)

3. Devaluation of Language

Like Ionesco, Edward Albee sees the absurd localized most sharply in conventions of social behaviour. To both, the normal currency of social intercourse-

of hospitality or courtesy or desultory chat- has lost its meaning and this 'devaluation of language' is an index of the vacuity of the social life represented.

3.1 Deflation of Speech-habits

A number of times, almost all the characters in the play exchange inane civilities and enact the complete absence of human contact which is the reality beneath the appearance of communication. Albee criticizes the emptiness of polite conversation, the mechanical exchange of platitudes

Exchange	Opening Move	Act	Responding Move	Act	Follow-up move	Act
Inquire	Martha: make the kids drink, George. What do you want, kids? What do want to drink, hunh?	s. inq. emp.				
Inquire	Nick Honey what would you like?	sum. inq.	Honey: I don't know dear...., A little Brandy, ...may be, 'Never mix never worry' [she giggles]	s. rep. com.	George Brandy? just Brandy Simple, simple	com. emp. eva.
Inquire	George:[Moves to the portable bar] What about you...uh.				George: Mind? No I don't mind I don't think, I Mind	com. ter.

Eliciting	George: Martha? Rubbing alcohol for you?	n.pro.	Martha: Sure, never mix-never worry.	con. com.		
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(Example 7 page 21)

The three-part and two -part structure of the exchanges with openings having appropriate responses and then follow-ups of evaluation and termination suggest the cool and calm atmosphere between the four. But the concurrence and confirmation of views is not that of the opinions of each other but about civilities. So, it is the target of the dramatist because there is hardly any occasion when they have this sort of concurrence except during some civilities and mannerisms.

3.2 Deflation of situation:

Albee constructs a scene and a situation in order to deflate it, puncture it with stage direction and asides. The action and language contrast with each other. The grimness of the situation is played off against its real import. These types of scenes are the images of the dislocation of people's relationships and the imprisoning isolation which, in turn, surround the master image of sterility. When the reader actually gets to know about the reality, following the description of child bearing and nurturing become very tragic, quite in control due to the way (very light vein) it is being described. Then the clichés and repetitions of phrases become a burden and heighten the intensity of the situation and enlarge the social reference of the problem.

Exchange	Opening Move	Act	Responding Move	Act	Follow-up move	Act
Inform	Martha: our son was born in a September night a night not unlike tonight, though, tomorrow, and twenty...one...years ago.	Inf. Com.	George (beginning of quiet asides) you see? i told you.	conf.		

Inform	Martha: it was an easy birth...	inf.				
Challenge	George: oh, Martha; You laboured....How you laboured	m. chall.				
Assure	Martha: it was an easy birth... once it had been ... Accepted, relaxed into.	ass. Qua.	George: Ah...yes Better	ack. com.		
Reinforce	Martha: it was an easy birth, once it has been accepted, and I was young.	inf.	George: And I was younger. (laughs quietly to himself)	fli.		
B. Initiate	Martha: And I was young and he was a healthy child, a red, bawling child, with slippery firm limbs.	inf.	Georg: Martha things she saw him at delivery....	fli.		
B. Initiate	Martha: ...with slippery, firm limbs, and a full head of black, fine and fine hair which oh, later, became blond as the sun,		George: he was healthy child	Ack.		

	our son.					
Express	Martha: And I had wanted a child...Oh, I have wanted a child.	exp. emp.		ack.		
B. Elicit	George: (prodding her): S song? A daughter?	Inq.	Martha: A child!	rep.		
Express	Martha (Quieter) A child. And I had my child.	exp. emp.	George: Our child	ack.	Martha: (with great sadness our child)	ack.
B. Initiate	Martha: And we raised him...(laugh, briefly, bitterly) Yes, we did; We raised hum	inf. emph.	George: With teddy bears and an antique bassinet from Austria... and no nurse	ack.		

Example 8 page 127)

In a way, the American Way of Life systematically eliminates, in the name of parental care and social and moral concern, every trace of natural human feeling and every potentiality for warm human contact from those who have to live by it and especially from the young.

4. Pseudo-Crisis

In the absurd play, a pseudo- crisis occurs when a knot of tensions brought to a head without resolving anything, without contributing to any development or progression. It demonstrates that nothing as meaningful as progression or

development can occur, emphasizing that complexity and tensions are permanent and irresolvable element of a world of confusion.

Martha's fling outside her marriage proves to be an abortive attempt to get away from the horrible reality and to establish contact with others. It indicates the drying up of those feelings that should provide a connection. After her venture into this extra-material affair, the reader was expecting some sort of resolution. But nothing really happens, nothing is resolved. Martha's soliloquy at the outset of Act III and her speech at page 111(Act III) show Albee's preoccupation with the idea of man's failure to make contact with others-oh my, there is sometimes some very nice potential, but, oh my! my, my, my, (Brightly) But that is how it is in a civilised society. (To herself again) All the gorgeous lunk-heads, Poor babbies". P.112 (Act III).

5. Circle Structure (No proper resolution)

One of the salient features of the Theatre of the Absurd is that it has a circular structure. The play ends with the same problem with which it started. Though the tempo and tension with which the play began is no longer there at the end of the play, but one finds hardly any change in the orientation of Martha, a little bit humbled through she is. Dissatisfied she was at the beginning and dissatisfied she is at the end, despite having gone through pseudo-crises. The exposition of the problem is not at the outset of the play but it is quite clear that the drama in the lives of the protagonists had started much before the curtain parts on the stage. The drama which most presumably would have started with 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' (as Martha has been living life by resorting to illusions and self delusions since long) and also ends with 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' and the answer by Martha isI am I am.....George"(140). In a way the play has not been wrapped up as circularity of structure through the theoretical apparatus used to analyse and interpret the play.

6. Ritualistic elements of the structure of the Play

The play has some correspondence with Genet's theatre of the absurd who is one of the major absurdist's in the genre. It has Genet-like ritualistic elements in its structure as a sequence of the three rites: Act I is about 'Fun and Games', the Act II about Walpurgisnacht and the Act III is dedicated to Exorcism.

7. Humour and Pathos

Humour and Pathos are the possible weapons in the hand of an absurd theatrist to deal with the existential anguish and despair. An absurd play expects the spectators to use their imagination to string together inchoate and absurd experiences into sensible concepts. Black humour and humour of gallows so commonly used in absurd play indicate this tendency. George and Martha drown in crude laughter the incongruities and absurdities of their marital life. 'Fun and Games' is a queer combination of tragedy and farce, pathos and brutal humour. As a consequence of this on the most serious moments or pathetic situations, the spectator rends the frost of anxiety with his free and indifferent laughter. It is the comic element interspersed in between their marital bickering that gives them strength to bear the tragedy of their existence in the play. With the arrival of Nick and Honey for a nightcap, it becomes clear that Martha is determined to seduce the young professor and George could not care less. But underneath the easy banter, which is cross-fired between both couples, lurks an undercurrent of tragedy and despair.

8. Mystery and Menace

In the macrocosm of absurd theatre nothing is certain. The illusive human condition is fraught with mysterious and menacing situations. What has been kept as mysterious turns out to be menacing to the characters in the microcosm of the play and spectators of the macrocosm. In the Microcosm of the Georg and Martha, It is illusion of a child that springs forth mystery to the reader and menace to the couple. For Albee illusion and absurdity goes together. The fantasy-son of George and Martha has been a mystery right from the beginning when George says-don't talk a bit about the kid (10), about the child to give him an identity in the Act-II make the environment very suffocating and intense for the reader. Their collaboration in the building up of child -fantasy and sustaining it by going along with each other, though temporarily, but then fighting over it becomes quite incomprehensible and mysterious to the reader and Nick and Honey as well so much so that they want to get to the core of the issue. This incomprehension gives way to some doubt and later on to the revelation which is quite frightening and shocking to the people both in the

microcosm and macrocosm. This unsettling reality of infertility has been a menace to both George and Martha that they have been trying to close their door to. The very fact of being unable to escape the reality which is very menacing and horrible magnifies the problem and enhances its bitter effect. This mystery, menace and its bitter effect has been conveyed very convincingly by the analytical apparatus.

9. Lyrical Theatre (No Dramatic Conflict)

Edward Albee's 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' exemplifies more or less one more feature of the theatre of absurd, its being lyrical in nature. Absurd dramas are lyrical sentiments, very much like music. They communicate an atmosphere, and conventional theatre of sequential events. It does not show any conventional dramatic conflict. It presents a pattern of poetic images. In doing this, it uses visual elements, movement and light alike conventional theatre where language rules supreme. In this play language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery. It is the total impression coming out of all the elements which constitutes the play. The play aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision. Every segment of the play is a loose end in itself but is strung together in a way so as to convey the emptiness and vacuity, barrenness and negativity, despair and disillusionment of the contemporary American life. This experience or situation is expressed as vividly through the analytical apparatus as that to the human problem of in ability of connecting with one another.

10. 1) Language of Non-Sense/Sense

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama is its distrust of language as a means of communication. Likewise in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' Language has become only a vehicle of conventionalized, stereotyped and meaningless exchanges. Words fail to express the essence of experience. By ridiculing conventionalized and stereotyped speech patterns the playwright tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically.

2) Language of concealment

Language in the theatre of absurd is known for its role as a means of concealment rather than revelation of reality. Objects are much more important than language in absurd theatre. What happens transcends what is being said about it. This phenomenon is laid bare in the talking patterns of George and Martha. It is the hidden, implied meaning of words that assumes primary importance over and above what actually is being said. The analytical apparatus used to analyse the play explicate this feature quite convincingly.

As the play strives to communicate an undiluted totality of perception, so it had to go beyond language. Was there ever a play in which the character corrected each other's speech persistently and for so little functional purpose? There is George and Martha arguing about abstruse and abstract (63), the bunch of geese corrected as gaggle and finally as gaggle (113) and Honey's correction of George when he says that the doorbell 'rang' not chimed which maddeningly prolongs the tension before the watershed. The character, therefore, attempts to assert this small measure of control over speech because they fail in the greater ways.

All said and explained it should be admitted that Albee has been able to use the techniques of the theatre of the absurd, while stopping short a little bit of an acceptance of the metaphysic of the absurd upon which the techniques are based. But still, the play has been able to show the absurd character of certain social situations without believing that the whole life is absurd. The play is more about the absurdity of contemporary American life than absurdity of the universe. All the four characters of the play do not implicate us the way Davies, Vladimir and Estragon do. When the readers laugh at them, they are laughing at their own illusions, and recognizing their own acts of hubris, self-deception and failure. The protagonists, George and Martha, enact for us a certain attitude to America in 1960 and they don't go beyond it to tell us anything about the human condition in the Universe.

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