

# An Ontological Approach to Existentialist Theatre and Theatre of the Absurd in the Works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett

Gülten Silindir Keretli

**Abstract**—The aim of this study is to analyse the works of playwrights within the framework of existential philosophy. It is to observe the ontological existence in the plays of *No Exit* and *Endgame*. Literary works will be discussed separately in each section of this study. The despair of post-war generation of Europe problematized the ‘human condition’ in every field of literature which is the very product of social upheaval. With this concern in his mind, Sartre’s creative works portrayed man as a lonely being, burdened with terrifying freedom to choose and create his own meaning in an apparently meaningless world. The traces of the existential thought are to be found throughout the history of philosophy and literature. On the other hand, the theatre of the absurd is a form of drama showing the absurdity of the human condition and it is heavily influenced by the existential philosophy. Beckett is the most influential playwright of the theatre of the absurd. The themes and thoughts in his plays share many tenets of the existential philosophy. The existential philosophy posits the meaninglessness of existence and it regards man as being thrown into the universe and into desolate isolation. To overcome loneliness and isolation, the human ego needs recognition from the other people. Sartre calls this need of recognition as the need for ‘the Look’ (*Le regard*) from the Other. In this paper, existentialist philosophy and existentialist angst will be elaborated and then the works of existentialist theatre and theatre of absurd will be discussed within the framework of existential philosophy.

**Keywords**—Consciousness, existentialism, the notion of absurd, the other.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ALMOST all the absurd dramatists handle the absurdity of human condition and the ontological argument. As it is known, Samuel Beckett is one of the pioneering absurd dramatists advocating the absurd way of thinking. He is mostly well-known for his plays highlighting absurd condition of the human beings; on the other hand, though Jean Paul Sartre is an existential philosopher, he represents his philosophical thoughts in his literary works. Sartre’s purpose is to understand human existence that develops an ontological account. Likewise, Beckett’s writings contain these philosophical ideas. His works permeate existential angst, hopelessness, human abandonment. Man is lost in a meaningless void in his plays. This absurd condition of man is going to be dealt in the plays *No Exit* and *Endgame* in this very study.

Gülten Silindir Keretli is with the Kilis 7 Aralık University, Turkey (e-mail: gultencankayatdt@gmail.com).

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Jean Paul Sartre’s ontology is explained in his *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre believes that man is living in anguish. He believes that man is condemned to be free. He reasons that when man becomes self-aware, he has to make choices that define the essence. Sartre’s existential point of view asserts that existence precedes essence and according to his theory, there are no fixed rules how a human being should be and there is no God to give man a purpose. Existential thinking starts with Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard advocating the individual and human subjectivity.

It found its first profound expression in Kierkegaard and gained its popularity through the philosophies of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel. Its literary expression is found in the literature of Dostoyevsky, Unamuno, Camus, Kafka, and Sartre. [1, p.9]

However, neither has there been any properly made definition of existentialism, nor any consensus has been reached among the existentialist philosophers. Sartre, in his book entitled *Existentialism and Human Emotions* divides the existentialists into two categories. First, those who are Christian, among whom could be included Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both of them are Catholic; and the atheistic existentialists, among whom can be classed Heidegger, and the French existentialists and Sartre himself. What they have in common is that they think that existence precedes essence, and that subjectivity must be the starting point [14, p.13].

As stated above, existentialism does not start with Sartre, but “Sartre is the clearest and most systematic. Consequently, detailed illustrations of existentialist themes are more often drawn from the works of Sartre” [12, p.VIII]. What makes Sartre distinguished among his contemporaries, who are dealing with the same issues, resides also in his originality because “he presents these problems on purely philosophical grounds and hence, lays down the basis of a systematic formulation of these problems and a rigorous hunt for their solution, abolition or dissolution” [1, p.5]. Thus, the cultural movement in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s is associated with his works which are central to the understanding of this system and he is to be regarded as the father of existentialism. Sartre makes an open challenge to the Western philosophy in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* by stating, “Life has no meaning *a priori*. Before you come alive, life is nothing” [14, p.49].

“In contrast to the Aristotelian assumption that essence

precedes existence and in the world man exists to achieve a purpose, the Sartrean existentialism argues that man has no predetermined purpose or meaning. Rather, humans define themselves because their individual lives come into being as a response to the challenges proposed by their existence in the world” [15, p.12].

Rejecting the existence of God and religion, Sartre believes that there is no absolute meaning in life and man is necessarily expected to create his own meaning and values. Since God does not exist, then, man has to take the responsibility of God. As Bohlmann points out, for existentialists:

“the world is utterly without absolute meaning, and man is left to invent his own personal meaning for his existence” [3, p.14].

According to Sartre, man comes to the world as nothing, and then it is his responsibility to form an essence for his existence. “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” [13, p.15]. Man realizes that he is free to choose what he will “make of himself” because there is no predetermined human nature. An individual is responsible for filling his existence with an essence. But it is a lifelong struggle, only ends with death. Otherwise, he does not go beyond being a being-in-itself. Existentialists have believed that, unlike animals and plants, man does not have a fixed nature, or essence. Each human being has the freedom which is man’s primary distinction to make choices which will define him. For Sartre:

Man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being [13, p.52].

And freedom of choice brings ‘commitment’ and ‘responsibility’, which both form ‘authenticity’. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre propounds:

The existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and that there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero stop being a hero. What counts is the total commitment... [13, p.43].

His [Sartre’s] all philosophical and literary works are a desperate struggle to protect that mysterious entity, called ‘freedom’ of man. The freedom, which Sartre sought, is not; however, merely the freedom that gives man the capacity of saying ‘no’, but it is freedom at creative level which negates all the limitations put upon freedom. The capacity of negation does not lead mankind to darkness but brings light into the world [1, p.5].

### III. EXISTENTIAL THEATRE

The play *No Exit* was written by Jean-Paul Sartre (21 June 1905-15 April 1980), the leading figure of French existential movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although he produced many successful works in different genres, theatre stage was the most proper platform for him to communicate his ideas. He uses theatre as a platform to deliver his notions by backing up them with his philosophy.

According to Sartre, the concept of ‘bad faith’ means a sort of ‘self-deception’. For him, if a person owns the signs of bad faith, it means that he lies to himself in a way. In the play,

Garcin and Estelle at first do not confess their sins. They tell the stories in way that exonerates them. The implication is that they are inclined to show themselves as bystanders. They behave as if the events are happening around them but they have no involvement. Later on, Estelle turns out to be an adulterous wife and a baby-killer mother, Garcin turns out to be a coward.

Sartre divides existence into three: being-in-itself, being-for-itself and being-for-other. Ontologically, the Other appears as an alien freedom, as the upsurge of another subjectivity with its own desire for a human world [8, p.32]. It is through the Other’s recognition that we apprehend ourselves. So the Other operates as a mediator for self-awareness. It [consciousness] is constituted as a relationship with an Other whose inescapable presence has the greatest meaning for the Self. This Other judges, confers an identity and often affirms or denies the freedom of the Self. In its look, or gaze, the Other reveals its advantage over the Self. It fashions about the Self a being which the Self cannot see [8, p.41].

Other self is an instrument for evolution of one’s self. The possibility of interaction with others is infinite. Seeing the difference of other from your self is every time a journey into your world. Self-consciousness comes about only by being acknowledged or recognized by the Other. At the moment another self recognizes us; we become more familiar with ourselves. Otherwise, we do not care about the other’s differences. Someone other than me becomes aware of me. We can consider ourselves as reflection in the eyes of the other. Someone else is a mirror in which we see ourselves. You use a totally different conscious self as a mirror. However, one’s self cannot be united with the other self. For each self, his existence is the essential one.

To be recognized by the other, in Sartre’s view, is to be an object for the Other. The Other recognizes me only in my externalized role as an object; an object for his value judgements [8,p.37].

On the other hand, a choice carries the responsibility of all human being. In making choices, human beings are also choosing what is good for all, not only for themselves.

*No Exit* is being-for-other play. The play operates as a sharp metaphor for the human condition. Inez is annoyed to see Garcin with herself in the same room. The interaction is inevitable. Each is disturbed by the other’s presence. Garcin attempts to communication saying. “We should make a point of being extremely courteous to each other. That will ease the situation for us both” [8, p.9]. Inez behaves reckless towards Garcin’s need for sociability “I’m not polite”. Then Inez complains:

Can’t you keep your mouth still? You keep twisting it about all the time. It is grotesque [...] You talk about politeness, and you don’t even try to control your face. Remember you are not alone; you’ve no right to inflict the sight of your fear on me. [8, p.9].

With the arrival of Estelle, “the vicious circle” is completed. Thus, the three characters that are apparently deliberately chosen are left in a carefully designed room which is getting hotter and hotter. They understand that they are

inextricably linked together. Although they want to get rid of each other, they cannot. They are linked. Estelle is nothing without a man's attention; Garcin desperately needs Inez to give him assurance that he is not a coward because unlike Estelle her opinion will be completely honest. Their goals are only to meet their needs. They need each other for the sake of satisfying their fleshly desires or personal validation. They cannot escape by ignoring the others because they can always feel the other's presence. Estelle is scared by Inez's look:

My reflection in the glass never did that; of course, I knew it so well. Like something I had tamed. ... I am going to smile, and my smile will sink down into your pupils, and heaven knows what it will become.

Upon that, Inez starts to torture: What's that nasty red spot at the bottom of your cheek? A pimple? [8, p.21] Inez:

I am your lark-mirror, my dear, and you can't escape me... There isn't any pimple, not a trace of one. So what about it? Suppose the mirror started telling lies? Or suppose I covered my eyes- as he is doing- and refused to look at you, all that loveliness of yours would be wasted on the desert air [8, p.21].

Estelle has no other choice than relying on Inez's look.

When Estelle does not respond to lesbian Inez's flirtations (the expectation of the other), the other becomes torturer. When one fails to respond to the expectation of the other, s/he is tortured. "If you'll have faith in me, I'm saved" They cannot be indifferent to each other. Whenever Garcin and Estelle are inclined to kiss each other, Inez makes them remember her presence "Don't forget I'm here, and watching. I shan't take my eyes off you". Garcin comes to the conclusion which underlines the philosophy of the play, "The other is hell" good intentions count for nothing. We are at the mercy of other people's opinions. This is the basic philosophy the play depends on. One chooses for all of humanity when one chooses for oneself. All of the choices made by each character make everyone involved in. Inez directs her anger at Garcin, not Estelle. Nothing can happen without influencing everything.

They are doomed to an eternal torture. As they interact, they come to embody Sartre's philosophy. Garcin, Inez and Estelle are the paradigms of "being-for-other". They do not care for others' necessities. It is very significant that there is no mirror to see their reflections in hell. So they have to rely on the other's impressions about them. -the gaze of the other- (Lacan)

At first, only Inez is bold enough to confess her real story. But Garcin and Estelle leave out all their sinful deeds in order to justify themselves. They blame the circumstances. Inez asks "What is the point of playacting?" Sartre's work depicts how other people can condemn; define one which prevents him/her from living as s/he wishes. The only asset of human being is freedom which cannot be taken by the other. Freedom is the basic notion of Sartrean existentialism. However, the responsibility of freedom causes "nausea".

Existentialism is preoccupied with the theme of death. When he becomes aware of his mortality, he might first try to ignore its reality by keeping himself busy with the activities of

daily routine. Nevertheless, this attitude fails as avoiding death means avoiding life at the same time [15, p.97]. Inez falls into disgrace. Nobody speaks of her on earth. Garcin loses his connection when his name is lost and Estelle has lost when Olga takes the boy and tells the reality about her. They turn into molds. They cannot intervene in their conversations. The characters in the play are a coward and wife abuser, adulterous wife and baby-killer mother, lesbian who destroys a family. They have no chance to change. And they are trapped in a vicious circle. Inez is for Estelle, but she does not want to do anything with her. Garcin is for Inez, but she, as a lesbian, is sexually interested in Estelle. Thus, none of them finds any satisfactory respond to their physically or emotionally wishes or desires. Man can use his freedom of thought, choice and action by which his essence is determined. When life span ends, the lifelong events are frozen into a mold which can never be broken. When one is dead, nothing can be done to change living people's attitudes.

Sartre's hell which is portrayed as a locked drawing room does not look like the traditional concept of hell at first. In the course of the play, it turns out to be a crueler way of punishment. Hell is the 'agony of mind'. There is no place for fun in hell unlike that of Shaw. It is a bleak, "stifling", and isolated place of horror.

Although Sartre became an influential basis for absurdism, his writings are not categorized as absurd because, unlike him, "they [absurd way of thinkers] saw no way out because rational and meaningful choices seemed impossible in such a universe" [5, p.204]. Sartre and his philosophy was a great source of inspiration for such absurdist playwrights like Samuel Beckett.

#### IV. THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Martin Esslin has described the *Theatre of the Absurd* in the words of Ionesco: Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless. "Absurd" originally means "out of harmony," in a musical context [6, p. 23]. As Sartre states "My fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of *being seen* by the Other" [9, p.86]. In other words, it is essential for the ego to be recognized by the Other to feel itself exist. As Kern puts it clearly, Beckett's works have been increasingly expressive of the fact that the individual is isolated, that his communication with Others is precariously dependent on the Look [10, p.171]. Especially, in Beckett's play *Endgame* the Sartrean 'Look' becomes physical and psychological dependence on the Other to reassure existence just like in the play of *No Exit*. In *Endgame*, Beckett reveals his characters to be in desperate need of each other both physically and psychologically to assert their existence.

Hamm is the main character showing physical and psychological dependence on the Other to ensure his existence. His dependence on the other is very clear in his relationship with Clov. Their relationship suggests a master-servant relationship, Hamm being the master, and Clov being

the servant. Hamm is physically in need of Clov since Hamm is blind and confined to a wheelchair. Clov is Hamm's feet and eyes. As Galens points out "Hamm, the king, for the purpose of the drama, is the center of all activity. Hamm is all too aware of his limited mortal power and abilities, and he struggles to survive the chess game by trying to dominate the other characters on stage" [7, p.74]. Hamm tries to assert his dominance over Clov whenever he can since asserting his dominance is also a way of asserting his existence. Thus, Clov is the obedient knight in service of his king. This power game is Hamm's strategy of putting the Other in the object position, and making himself the subject. Hamm, who is on the object position because of his physical deformity, becomes a subject by controlling Clov. Thus he asserts his existence by exerting power on Clov.

Hamm is dependent on Clov not only for movement, but also for sight. The characters are confined to a shelter-like room and their only communication with the outer world is through the two windows that only Clov can reach using the ladder. Again Hamm controls Clov's moves. The physical deformity on Hamm's part serves in two ways: on the one hand he really needs Clov for his physical needs; on the other he gets satisfaction by using his power on Clov, which gives him the feeling of existence as a subject. So, Beckett underlines this physical dependence since it signals a much more important need on the part of Hamm that is the psychological need to assert his existence. Hamm needs other proofs of existence since controlling a servant is not enough. That's why he is in desperate attempts to communicate with the other characters. This is a game, in which the characters must play their roles in order to assert their existence, and one of the rules of the game is to communicate, even if this communication is nonsensical. Thus the characters never let the silences or pauses take control of the game. If they cannot fill in the silences and pause they know that they will lose their subject position and cease to exist. Thus the game begins. The characters take their turns; they immediately fill in the silences and pause one after another. Hamm is the main player of this game. He directs the game as he pleases. At one point, Clov says imploringly, "Let's stop playing!", and Hamm's answer is certain: "Never!" [2, p.130]. Hamm is aware that this game is their only chance to feel that they exist. Without this communication, there is nothing that holds them together. So he is very careful about the game. They must keep the dialogue going or they will face the angst of existence. Hamm constantly reminds Clov that "Outside of here there is death!" [2, p.126]. Although he ruthlessly exerts his power on him, he is aware of their interdependency. As Luckhurst aptly puts forth: "Each of the pair needs the other to galvanize the witty exchanges and drily comic rituals which keep them going" [11, p.241]. They can only assert their existence through dialogue, which is the main part of this endless game. Even though their dialogue is out of habit, and mostly meaningless, it still has the function of reassuring their existence. This is a game against isolation, loneliness and meaninglessness of existence, and losing Clov means losing the game for Hamm. Hamm gets the Look from Clov and both physically and

psychologically sustain his existence with Clov's help. As Boulter suggests:

Hamm needs an audience. If, as the common Beckettian trope would have it, one exists only insofar as one is seen, Hamm seems to require his past to be witnessed in order for it to have been; [...] Hamm in some senses has become his narrative: telling it confirms his existence [4, p.46].

Clov also shows physical and psychological dependence on the Other to reassure his existence. He is physically in need of Hamm since Hamm is the only one who knows the combination of the ladder. When Hamm asks Clov why he does not kill him, Clov tells him that it is because he does not know the combination of the cupboard where the food supply is stored. In order to live, Clov needs the food that Hamm provides for him. But in this power game Clov is not totally powerless. This dependence is not one-sided as Clov states. If Clov dies, Hamm dies too. This physical interdependence of the characters makes them inseparable for their existence. Clov's physical need for Hamm also underlines his psychological need for the Other. Clov is crippled too, but unlike Hamm he is not incapacitated. He can leave the shelter whenever he wants, but the shelter is the only place he has known his entire life.

For these characters suffering is inseparable part of their lifestyle and it is something proving them that they exist. Hamm is indispensable for Clov since he provides the suffering that Clov needs. "Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?" asks Clov, unable to identify the reason behind his motive for serving Hamm without questioning. Hamm's answer is meaningful: "You're not able to." He cannot refuse because serving Hamm and enduring his caprices reminds him that he exists. He is an object in this master-servant relationship, but at least this relationship gives him an identity. There is someone who knows that Clov exists. So, happiness is not important in this relationship. Pain gives the same feeling of existence as well. "Did you ever have an instant of happiness?" Hamm asks "Not to my knowledge," answers Clov. It is not the matter of happiness keeping them together; it is the feeling of existence.

The reason why Clov does not end the game is because of the existential anxiety. In this game, Hamm gives him the Look that relieves Clov. Hamm gives orders to Clov, rebukes him, and exerts his power upon him, but these are the things that alleviate Clov's existential angst. In this way, Clov moves all the time, serves the selfish King as a knight does in a chess game, and keeps himself away from this angst. Although he threatens Hamm to leave several times, it is just the part of the game; he knows he cannot leave. So the game will go on endlessly for the two characters, and only death seems to end their meaningless existence. Until that day, they will play the game and get the assurance of their existence co-dependently.

Far from being an endgame, the play suggests an endless game which the characters are condemned to play. Thus when the play ends, it actually returns to its beginning. The only exit from the game seems to be death that Nell achieves as her death has been reported by Clov. Death is the ultimate

painkiller for the characters [8, p.68]. Until that moment the characters need each other to assert their existence and add some meaning to it. The lack of connections with the outer world forces each character to depend upon another for his or her very survival. They try to be recognized by the other because only a recognizable self has an identity with a meaningful existence. The look of the other is necessary to make them exist. For this reason, the characters in *Endgame* try to relate to themselves and to one another by telling stories, engaging in meaningless dialogues, telling stories and recalling their fragmented memories.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Ahmad, Mushtaq. *Existential Aesthetics: A Study of Jean-Paul Sartre's Theory of Art and Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1991. Print.
- [2] Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett*. London: Faber & Faber, 2006. Print.
- [3] Bohlman, Otto. *Conrad's Existentialism*. Macmillan, California University, 1991. Print.
- [4] Boulter, Jonathan. *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: MPG Books Ltd, 2008. Print.
- [5] Brockett, Oscar G, Robert J. Ball, John Fleming, Andrew Carlson. *The Essential Theatre*. Cengage Learning, 2016. Print.
- [6] Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Print.
- [7] Galens, David and Lynn Spampinato, eds. *Drama for Students*. 26 Vols. Detroit: Gale Research, 1998. 18: 63-75. Print.
- [8] Hayim, Gila J. *Existentialism and Sociology: The Contribution of Jean-Paul Sartre*. London: Transaction Publishers, 2009. Print.
- [9] Howells, Christina, Ed. *Cambridge Companion to Sartre*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- [10] Kern, Edith. *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre and Beckett*. London: Yale UP, 1970. Print.
- [11] Luckhurst, Mary. *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama, 1880-2005*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Print.
- [12] Olson, Robert G. *An Introduction to Existentialism*. Courier Corporation, 2012. Print.
- [13] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Humanism*. Haskell House, Virginia University, 1977. Print.
- [14] Sartre, Jean Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. Philosophical Library/Open Road, 2012.
- [15] Tan, Siang-Yang, Wong, Timothy K. "Existential Therapy" *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*. 31-3. Fall, 2012.