

GAUHATI UNIVERSITY
Centre for Distance and Online Education

ENG-3026

M.A. Third Semester

(Under CBCS)

ENGLISH

Paper: ENG 3026
WORLD DRAMA



CONTENTS:

Block- 1

- Unit 1: Classical Theatre
- Unit 2: Folk and Aboriginal Theatre
- Unit 3: Realism and Naturalism
- Unit 4: Epic Theatre

Block- 2

- Unit 1: Theatre of Cruelty
- Unit 2: Expressionism
- Unit 3: Theatre of the Absurd
- Unit 4: Feminist and Queer Theatre
- Unit 5: Post-colonial and Post-dramatic Theatre
- Unit 6: Introduction to Modern Drama

Block- 3

- Unit 1: Introduction to Sophocles's plays
- Unit 2: Sophocles: *Antigone*
- Unit 3: Moliere as a playwright
- Unit 4: Moliere: The Misanthrope
- Unit 5: Samuel Beckett as a playwright
- Unit 6: Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*

Block- IV

- Unit 1: Habib Tanvir as a Playwright
- Unit 2: Habib Tanvir: *Agra Bazar*
- Unit 3: Dario Fo: *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*
- Unit 4: Derek Walcott: Pantomime

SLM Development Team:

Head, Department of English, Gauhati University
Programme Coordinator, MA in English, GUCDOE
Dalim Ch. Das, Assistant Professor, GUCDOE
Dr. Apurba Kr. Deka, Assistant Professor, GUCDOE

Course Coordination:

Dr. Debahari Talukdar	Director, GUCDOE
Programme Coordinator	MA in English, GUCDOE
Dalim Ch. Das	Assistant Professor, GUCDOE
Dipankar Saikia	Editor SLM, GUCDOE

Contributors:

Mr. Dalim Ch Das Asstt. Prof., GUCDOE	Block-I (Unit- 3 & 4) Block-II (Unit- 2 & 6 partial) Block-III (Unit- 1 & 2) Block-IV (Unit- 1 & 2)
Ms. Smita Katakya Former Asstt. Prof., GUCDOE	Block-I (Unit- 1 & 2) Block-II (Unit- 1), Block-III (Unit- 3 & 4)
Ms. Darpana Gogoi Research Scholar, Gauhati University	Block-II (Unit- 5 & 6)
Mr. Anupam Kr Hazarika Research Scholar, Gauhati University	Block-II (Unit- 4)
Suzan Poudel Research Scholar, Gauhati University	Block-II (Unit- 5) Block-IV (Unit- 3 & 4)
Rajasmita Singha Asstt. Prof., GUCDOE	Block-II (Unit- 3)

Content Editing:

Dr. Dolikajyoti Sharma
Associate Professor, Dept. of English , GU
Dr. Farddina Hussain
Associate Professor, Dept. of English , GU

Format Editing:

Rajasmita Singha	Asstt. Prof., GUCDOE
-------------------------	----------------------

Cover Page Design & Type Setting:

Bhaskar Jyoti Goswami	GUCDOE
Nishanta Das	GUCDOE

ISBN: 978-81-983134-0-9

December, 2024

© Copyright by GUCDOE. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise.
Published on behalf of Gauhati University Centre for Distance and Online Education by the Director, and printed at Gauhati University Press, Guwahati-781014.

CONTENTS:

Block- 1	Page: 4-63
Unit 1: Classical Theatre	
Unit 2: Folk and Aboriginal Theatre	
Unit 3: Realism and Naturalism	
Unit 4: Epic Theatre	
Block- II	Page: 64-178
Unit 1: Theatre of Cruelty	
Unit 2: Expressionism	
Unit 3: Theatre of the Absurd	
Unit 4: Feminist and queer Theatre	
Unit 5: Post-colonial and Post-dramatic Theatre	
Unit 6: Introduction to Modern Drama	
Block- III	Page: 179-258
Unit 1: Introduction to Sophocles's plays	
Unit 2: Sophocles: <i>Antigone</i>	
Unit 3: Moliere as a playwright	
Unit 4: Moliere: <i>The Misanthrope</i>	
Unit 5: Samuel Beckett as a playwright	
Unit 6: Samuel Beckett: <i>Waiting for Godot</i>	
Block- IV	Page: 259-321
Unit 1: Habib Tanvir as a Playwright	
Unit 2: Habib Tanvir: <i>Agra Bazar</i>	
Unit 3: Dario Fo: <i>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</i>	
Unit 4: Derek Walcott: <i>Pantomime</i>	

Block- 1

Unit 1: Classical Theatre

Unit 2: Folk and Aboriginal Theatre

Unit 3: Realism and Naturalism

Unit 4: Epic Theatre

UNIT- 1

CLASSICAL THEATRE

Unit Structure:

- 1.1. Objectives
- 1.2. Introduction
- 1.3. History, Origin, and Evolution of Classical Theatre
- 1.4. Greek Tragedy
- 1.5. Greek Comedy
- 1.6. Some of the Popular Classical Plays
- 1.7. Summing Up
- 1.8. References and Suggested Reading

1.1. Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- *know* about classical theatre;
- *understand* the major characteristics of classical theatre;
- *analyze* the famous classical plays;
- *learn* about the influential classical playwrights.

1.2. Introduction

It is generally believed that the history of drama and theatre began in Ancient Greece and Rome. Classical theatre refers to plays and performances that were pioneered by the ancient Greek and Roman theatrical forms which had spread across the world later. The ancient Greek theatre originated during the 5th and 4th century BC while the ancient Roman theatre expanded from 3rd to 5th century BC. The theatre practices prevalent during 16th and 17th century Renaissance in England were also regarded as classics of the theatrical genre. Even the Neo-classical theatre which evolved during the 17th–

18th century in England is also categorized as part of the classical genre as they focused on re-telling of the classics. Since the time of its origin and gradual development across the ages, classical theatre has influenced art, literature, and philosophy. Classical theatre has considerable contribution in shaping Western drama and theatre and continues to influence and inspire contemporary theatre and art till the present day.

1.3. History, Origin, and Evolution of Classical Theatre

The ancient Greek theatre originated from the local community's ritualistic ceremonies that were held to honour and celebrate their worshipped deity, commonly Dionysus, the God of wine and fertility. The earliest recorded origin of drama dates back to Athens where ancient hymns, called dithyrambs, were sung to honour Dionysus. The hymn chanting later transformed into choral processions where performers would dress up wearing costumes and masks. Eventually, the chorus evolved into more dramatic acts with certain members taking special roles within the procession. Around 534 BC, Pisistratus, a tyrannical ruler of the city, announced a series of public festivals. One such festival was known as the City of Dionysia, a festival celebrated in honour of God Dionysus. The festival was celebrated with sacrificial rites, music, dance and competitions were held in dancing, singing, and poetry. The most remarkable of all the winners was Thespis. Thespis was often considered the first actor. He introduced the concept of solo performance, breaking away from the traditional concept of choral story-telling. Anthropological studies have derived from their research that the Mediterranean civilization has factual evidence of ruins that suggest the observation of religious ritualistic activities by the members of the primitive communities. The Persepolis in Persia, Karnak in Ancient Egypt, and Knossos in Crete have remains of architectural ruins of structures, designed for ceremonial purposes meant to have engaged a large audience. Initially, priests would practice the rituals to communicate with supernatural forces along with other participants to witness the act. Gradually, these ritualistic set ups evolved into theatre practices involving varied performances with a larger audience. Another form of early theatre was the performance of Thespis and his troupe. They performed on wagons in the marketplace, also known as agora, while audiences sat on

wooden stands to see the performances. The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens became the centre-point of theatre performances around 530 BC.

As a theatre evolved, playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides initiated and developed the classical genres of tragedy and comedy in theatre. The performances included masked actors, chorus, and orchestral music. The term 'tragedy' was derived from the Greek word, *tragoidia* (a goat-song), which might have possible reference to sacrificial rites to Dionysus. Early tragedy was written around 5th century BC. Aeschylus's *The Persians* (472 BC) and *Seven against Thebes* (467 BC) are often considered prime instances of early tragedies. Sophocles introduced the concept of dramatic structure and focused on character development. His *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC) is regarded as a landmark in Greek tragedies. Euripides explored and speculated on human psychology and realism in his works. His *Medea* (431 BC) still stands as one of the most widely read classics of Greek tragedy. Other famous tragedies of the period include Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* (458 BC), Sophocles's *Antigone* (441 BC), and Euripides's *The Bacchae* (405 BC). The term, comedy, is derived from the Greek word, *komoidia* (a revel-song), which referred to the festive, comic performances. Early comedy emerged during 5th century BC with Aristophanes' *The Acharnians* (425 BC) and *The Clouds* (423 BC). Aristophanes' comedy basically focused on myths and legends for the plot with exaggerated characters and situations. New comedy, initiated by Menander, fundamentally focused on realistic and domestic themes related to the common people. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BC) and Menander's *Dyskolos* (316 BC) are some of the famous early comedies.

The ancient Roman theatre emerged during the 3rd century and was immensely influenced by the Greek theatre practices. The Romans began by performing adapted versions of the Greek plays and incorporated them in their own ceremonies and festivals. The first recorded Roman theatre performance was the translated version of Greek playwright, Livius Andronicus' *The Trojan Women*, in 240 BC. The unique blend of elements from Greek theatre combined with indigenous influences assisted in spreading theatrical traditions throughout the Roman Empire. The evolution of Roman theatre owes to the works of playwrights like Plautus and Terence. The Roman theatre developed with the construction of permanent theatre

houses, such as the Theatre of Pompey in 61 BC, for more dedicated performances. It flourished under the imperial patronage of emperors like Augustus and Nero who showed keen interest in promoting theatrical production and performances.

Centuries later, the revival of the classical Greek and Roman theatrical models inspired Renaissance theatre in the 16th century, particularly in Italy and England. The humanist scholars rediscovered the ancient texts which led to a renewed interest for the classical forms. Renowned Italian playwrights like Giraldi Cinthio and Pietro Aretino were influenced by Seneca and Plautus. William Shakespeare and Ben Johnson combined classical elements with the contemporary themes of the Elizabethan Age. The establishment of permanent theatre houses like The Globe in London facilitated better theatre experience for both the performers and the audiences. Renaissance classical theatre emphasized on reason, individuality, and humanism which significantly influenced and laid the foundation for subsequent theatrical movements.

The Neo-Classical theatre emerged during the 17th century Europe, particularly in France and England, which sought to revive the classical ideals through a re-reading or re-telling of the classical narratives. Playwrights like Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine, and Moliere produced plays adhering to strict classical rules of composition like maintaining the unities of time, place and action, influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics* and the works of Seneca and Plautus. Some of the most notable Neo-Classical plays include Corneille's *Le Cid* (1637), Racine's *Phedre* (1677), and Moliere's *Tartuffe* (1664).

Check Your Progress:

- Q.1. How did the ancient Greek theatre originate?
- Q.2. What is the city of Dionysia?
- Q.3. Who introduce the concept of solo performer?
- Q.4. Name any two early tragedies.
- Q.5. Who introduced the concept of dramatic structure?
- Q.6. Name any two comedies by Aristophanes.

Q.7. Name the first recorded Roman theatre performance.

Q.8. How did classical theatre influence Renaissance theatre and performances?

Q.9. What was the major objective of Neo-classical theatre?

Q.10. Name any two Neo-classical plays and their playwrights.

Q.11. Who wrote the famous Neoclassical play *Le Cid*?

1.4. Greek Tragedy

Greek Tragedy was a dramatic genre that originated in Athens, in ancient Greece, in the 6th century BC. It originated as ancient ritualistic ceremonies carried out in honour of Dionysus, which later evolved into theatre practices. The tragic performances often relied on myths and legends, or royal court narratives for the plot. The tragedies typically began with a *Prologue* that introduces and explains the background of the plot. The prologue is followed by *Paraodos*, which marks the chorus' entrance, leading the storyline as it unfolds through different *Episodes*, the scenes with dialogues and action. The episodes are interspersed by *Stasimon*, or a choral interlude, that explains the developing situation of the play. The tragedy ends with an *Exodus*, which concludes the play.

Aeschylus, known as the father of tragedy, was the first to codify the basic rules of tragedy. He is popularly known for inventing the trilogy, a series of three parts in telling a long narrative. Trilogies were often performed in sequence, from dawn to dusk, over the course of a day. As the final part ends, a satyr play was performed to rekindle the spirit of the audience after witnessing a long series of tragedy. Aeschylus also increased the number of actors on stage that saw an enriching evolution of dialogue as well as other theatrical effects, allowing complex dramatization of narrative and actions to unfold on the stage. Sophocles, another pioneering dramatist of his time, increased the number of members in chorus up to fifteen. He also broke the cycle of trilogy as one complete narrative but rather made it possible in presenting different independent dramas. It was Sophocles who introduced the concept of scenery to the theatre. Sophocles also reformed the function of the chorus in that they explained less as compared to previous

performances and the focus shifted to the actors to develop the characters profoundly. The events on stage were not explained completely and left to the audience to speculate and reflect on them. Euripides was another renowned playwright of the time whose contribution to Greek tragedy is immense. He emphasized on feelings of the characters to elaborate the tragic event that is to unfold before the audience during the performance. He technically replaced the prologue with a monologue performed by an actor who introduces the play. Euripides established the *deus ex machina* as a stage element. Later, he minimized the use of chorus and expounded a monody sung by the characters themselves.

Aristotle was the first proponent of tragedy in drama. He wrote the first critical study of tragedy in *Poetics* and introduced the concept of mimesis and catharsis in his tragic plays. Mimesis, a literary term widely used in literary criticism and philosophy, carries a multitudinous range of meanings. In drama, mimesis usually referred to imitation or representation. Both Plato and Aristotle considered mimesis as representation of human nature and imitation of truth. According to Plato, theatre was incapable of conveying the truth but rather the actors tried to persuade the audience by using rhetoric or imitation of reality the truth. Catharsis referred to purification or cleansing, usually the purgation of intense emotions and thoughts by means of expressing what otherwise remains repressed. The focal objective of catharsis is to reach an emotional state of renewal and restoration. Aristotle also introduced the concept of the three unities, that is, the unity of time, the unity of place, and the unity of action in tragedy. The unity of time requires that the play's action should occur within 24 hours or in a day. The unity of place defined that the play's action should occur in a single location covering a single physical space. The unity of action observed that the play should have a single, coherent plot and few subplots which should be related to the main plot. Aristotle asserted that a tragic plot should be serious, complete, and with some magnitude. The protagonist is a tragic hero, usually a Prince or a legend with noble or royal status who endures conflict and sufferings. He is neither too good nor wicked, but has a tragic flaw that ultimately leads to his downfall. The tragic flaw or hamartia is the hero's flaw or error that comes from his ignorance or impulsiveness and not from vice or malicious character. The main objective of hamartia was to evoke pity and fear in the audience

which leads to catharsis. The Greek tragedies mostly explored mythological or historical themes. Some of the famous Greek tragedies include Aeschylus' *The Persians*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, Euripides' *Medea* and so on. Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude".

Stop to Consider:

Deus ex machina is a plot device that originated from Greek tragedy, often in the form of a divine, supernatural being or an unexpected event meant to resolve an otherwise irresolvable conflict of the play. It was introduced by Aeschylus in his play, *Eumenides*, the final play of the *Oresteia* trilogy. However, it became a popular stage mechanism with Euripides. Euripides extensively made use of the deus ex machina to resolve the conflicts of the plays. In Euripides *Medea*, the deus ex machina is a chariot sent by the Sun God, Helios, drawn by dragons. In his *Alcestis*, Heracles appears as a divine being to revive Alcestis from death and restore her to Admetus, thus resolving the plot of the play. Aristophanes in his play, *Theesmophoriazusae* uses the dramatic device to parody Euripides for his frequent use of it by portraying Euripides himself as a character introduced by the deus ex machine. The device was basically used to resolve complicated plots, illustrate the intervention of divine power or the supernatural, as well as add an element of dramatic surprise to the play. It was also used as a tool to produce emotional response in the audience, leaving them with a feeling of wonder as well as adding moral effects to the performance.

SAQ:

1. Discuss the narrative structure of Greek tragedy.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. Discuss Aristotle's concept of tragedy.

.....
.....
.....
.....

1.5 Greek Comedy

Greek comedy was a genre of theatre that emerged in 5th century BC in ancient Greece. It is also known as Attic comedy and can be classified into three types— Old Comedy, Middle Comedy, and New Comedy. Old Comedy was prevalent from 5th century to 4th century BC and mainly focused on politics, social issues, and mythology. It fundamentally represents the plays of Aristophanes, eleven of which probably still survive. He was the most important playwright of Old Comedy. His plays satirized the political situation of his time and portrayed caricatures of significant personalities like Socrates, etc. Middle Comedy period ranges from 4th to 3rd century BC which emphasized more on romantic and fantasy-based themes. During this period, the role of the chorus considerably diminished and did not wholly influence the plot of the play. Middle Comedy plots mostly asked for the audience's engagement to reflect on the action onstage to decipher the meaning of the play. New Comedy was in vogue from 3rd to 2nd century BC. New Comedy plays primarily contained fragmented works of Menander, and usually dealt with domestic and social issues. It was also referred to as situation comedy or comedy of manners. New Comedies used dramatic devices, prologues, messenger's speeches, etc to develop their performances. They usually explored daily concerns of everyday life rather than glorious mythologies and royal histories for the plot. Gods or supernatural beings and miracles were replaced by actual realities of society and human condition. The plays were mostly characterized by satire and social commentaries with exaggerated characters and situations. The actors often used masks and elaborate costumes and delivered physical humour and slapsticks to evoke fun and laughter among the audience. The comedies also portrayed some famous stock characters known for their definite personalities like the foolish old man, the clever slave, the young lover, the boastful soldier, the courtesan, etc. some

notable Greek comedies include Aristophanes' *The Clouds* and *Lysistrata*, Menander's *Dyskolos* and *The Groom*, etc.

Check Your Progress:

1. What are the different types of Greek comedy? Discuss.
2. Discuss any three characteristics of Greek comedy.

1.6 Some of the Popular Classical Plays

Let us discuss some of the most popular Classical plays in details:

- **Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex***

Oedipus Rex, also known as *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus the King*, is one of the earliest Greek tragedies written by Sophocles and was first performed in 429 BC. It belongs to the trilogy, *The Oedipus' Plays* by Sophocles which consists of *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. The narrative starts with Oedipus as the King of Thebes which was presently afflicted by plague because the murderer of the previous King, Laius was not condemned or punished. Oedipus sends his brother-in-law Creon to consult the Oracle of Delphi to get rid of the ravaging plague. Oedipus consults the blind prophet, Tiresias for clarity on the matter who indirectly points that the murderer he seeks is none other than Oedipus himself. Oedipus was the biological son of Laius and Jocasta who was abandoned at birth because of a prophecy that the child will murder his father and marry his mother. A shepherd found the baby on mountain-top and gave him to the childless king, Polybus, of Corinth. The ruler of Corinth and his wife, Merope raised him as their own son. Later, Oedipus was warned about his fate and fearing to cause any harm to Polybus and Merope, whom he considered his real parents, he leaves Corinth and reaches the city of Thebes. While on his way to the city of Thebes, he encounters an old man and both engages in a duel. Oedipus throws the old man from his chariot, killing him. On reaching Thebes, he encounters the Sphinx, a legendary creature with the head of a woman, body of a lioness, and wings of an eagle. The sphinx denies him entry into the city and

asks him to solve a riddle which Oedipus successfully does. The curse over Thebes end on Oedipus correctly solving the sphinx's riddle and he was made the king of the city. He marries the queen, who has lost her husband recently and began to rule the city in peace. It was later revealed that the old man killed by Oedipus previously on his way to Thebes was none other than King Laius, his biological father, and the widowed queen he married was Jocasta, his own birth mother. The Delphic prophecy was thus fulfilled. Jocasta was horrified by the turn of event and hangs herself out of guilt. Oedipus, guilt-stricken and embarrassed by his patricide and incest blinds himself. The play is divided into five episodes, beginning with the Prologue that introduces Oedipus and Jocasta as the ruler of Thebes. He was constantly warned to decline his search for the king Laius's murderer. His hamartia or the tragic flaw arises from hubris, especially his refusal to consider the warnings of Tiresias which led to his downfall at the end of the play. Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* has greatly influenced Western literature and drama inspiring significant works like Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Freud's concept of "Oedipus Complex".

- **Euripides' *Medea***

One of the best-known Greek tragedies, *Medea* is the retelling of the legend of the Colchian princess, Medea who married Jason and helped him to acquire the Golden Fleece with her magical powers. The play was composed by Euripides and was first performed in 431 BC at the City Dionysia festival in a trilogy series. Popularly considered a revenge tragedy, *Medea* narrates the story of Medea's revenge against her husband, Jason, for his betrayal and abandonment to marry Glauce, the daughter of Creon and the princess of Corinth. Jason's betrayal led Medea to seek revenge and to leave him without a wife or children. She plots strategically to murder the princess and the king of Corinth. She pretends to sympathize with Jason pleading him to keep their children and save them from the exile that King Creon has ordered for Medea and her children. To assure Jason that she holds no grudge against anyone, she sends her children with a gift for Glauce to seek her protection. Medea sends a poisoned coronet and a dress to Glauce that the princess readily accepts. However, on wearing the dress, the poison consumes her and she dies a horrible and painful death. King Creon, unable to bear his daughter's death, embraces her and absorbs the poison and dies immediately. Medea fearing revenge from her

enemies and to punish Jason for his infidelity kills her own children. The play concludes as Medea leaves the city of Greece in a dragon-pulled chariot given to her by the Sun-God, Helios, after fulfilling her revenge. The play opens with a prologue as Medea is introduced by her nurse, followed by a parodos where the chorus laments Medea's plight caused by Jason's betrayal. The play proceeds with four episodes and a stasimon, and concludes with an exodus as Medea confronts Jason in her final revenge.

- **Aristophanes' *The Clouds***

The Clouds by Aristophanes was one of the earliest Greek comedies, produced in 423 BC and performed at the City Dionysia festival in Athens. The play was not very well received by the audience and was later revised and circulated around 417 – 420 BC as manuscripts. The *Clouds* satirizes the intellectual and philosophical movements of ancient Athens, specifically 'modern' and moral education taught by radical thinkers like the Sophists. The narrative revolves around Strepsiades, a farmer who tries to convince his son, Pheidippides to get enrolled in The Thinkery and to learn the art of turning wrong arguments sound right in order to beat his debtors in court. The play is a critique of Socrates' philosophy and caricatures Socrates who runs an academy, the Phrontisterion, or the Thinking Shop that teaches how to argue correctly and turn a situation into one's favour. However, Pheidippides becomes fascinated with Socrates' teachings and learns to argue his way against his own father. The play concludes with the burning of the Thinking Shop. *The Clouds* has greatly influenced Western comedy and satire as well as philosophical debates.

SAQ:

Q.1. Discuss the significance of Dionysus in the growth of Greek classical theatre.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.2. Explore the philosophical implications of Aristophanes' satire?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.3. Present a feminist analysis of Euripides *Medea*.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.4. Discuss the cultural significance of Greek theatre.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.5. Discuss the significance of hamartia in tragedy.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

1.7 Summing Up

Classical theatre originated in ancient Greece and spans across Rome to 17th century Europe and laid the foundation for Western drama. It emerged in 5th century Athens as a theatrical genre and explored the human condition, morality, societal norms and conventions, and the complexities of life. Playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes produced plays and performances that shaped Western drama

and theatre and continues to exert its influence even in the present times. The Greek classical theatre model influenced Roman theatre producing significant works like Plautus' comedies. It influenced the Renaissance in Europe and expounded the emergence of Neoclassicism. Renowned playwrights like William Shakespeare and Moliere produced works with a unique blend of classical ideals and contemporary themes. The themes, structures, and the character archetypes continue to shape and inspire contemporary theatre narratives and performances even today.

1.8 References and Suggested Readings

Ashby, Clifford. "Classical Greek Theatre: New Views of an Old Subject". *Studies Theatre History & Culture*, University of Iowa Press, 1999. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q201q>

Bentley, Eric . "The Classic Theatre". *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Oct., 1958, pp. 54-57 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1124977>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1124977>

Damen, Mark . "Actor and Character in Greek Tragedy". *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3, Oct., 1989, pp. 316-340.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3208183>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3208183>

Hains, D. D. "The Presentation of Classical Plays". *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 5, Feb., 1914, pp. 189-198.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3287523>

Hughes, Alan. "Ai Dionysiazusai: Women in Greek Theatre". *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Vol. 51, 2008, pp. 1-27.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43646704>

Lichte, Erika Fischer. "Classical theatre". *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, edited by David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski, Cambridge University Press, 05 February 2013, Pp. 73 - 84
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139019651.007>

Pavlovskis, Zoja. "The Voice of the Actor in Greek Tragedy". *The Classical World*, Vol. 71, No. 2, Oct., 1977, pp. 113-123.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/4348797>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4348797>

Stricker, B. H. "The Origin of the Greek Theatre". *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 41, Dec., 1955, pp. 34-47.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3855235>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3855235>

Trapido, Joel. "The Language of the Theatre: I. The Greeks and Romans". *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Oct., 1949, pp. 18-26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3204106>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3204106>

Zeitlin, Froma I. "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama". *Representations*, No. 11, 1985, pp. 63-94 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928427>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928427>

xxx

UNIT- 2

FOLK AND ABORIGINAL THEATRE

Unit Structure:

2.1 Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Folk Theatre: An Overview

2.4 Aboriginal Theatre: An Overview

2.5 Common Key Features of both Folk and Aboriginal Theatre

2.6 Some Popular forms of Folk and Aboriginal Theatre

2.7 Summing Up

2.8 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- *learn* about folk and aboriginal theatre;
- *analyse* the characteristics of folk and aboriginal theatre;
- *understand* their challenges and opportunities;
- *know* the common key features of folk and aboriginal theatre.

2.2 Introduction

The folk and aboriginal theatre shares a common ground of origin, that is, both originated through oral story-telling, using words, songs, and dance to narrate their stories. The stories often revolved around mythological and legendary themes with the common aim to preserve traditional practices and cultural knowledge. Both the forms of theatre require community involvement as the plays were performed as well as produced within

the community groups involving the local members. The folk and aboriginal theatre involves ritualistic elements through ceremonies, dances, and sacred practices. Both the theatrical performances make extensive use of symbolisms in their acts as well as use masks and unique costumes to convey their desired meanings and messages to the audiences. The folk and aboriginal theatre practices emphasize on tradition and community norms and prioritizes the preservation of their cultural heritages. Both the theatre practices aim to transmit their cultural values and community knowledge to the future generation through their acts and performances. These forms of theatres often explored universal themes like love, loss, identity, community, belongingness, and the human condition and struggles. These theatrical performances adopt a multidisciplinary approach through the combination of music, dance, and visual arts as it attempts to blend traditional and contemporary practices.

2.3 Folk Theatre: An Overview

The folk theatre refers to a theatrical form that originated from traditional, rural, or indigenous culture and is often characterised by community-based performances. Folk theatre traces its roots to Ancient Greeks in the 5th century BC that celebrated rural festivals, rituals and ceremonies, following oral story-telling traditions, aided with music and dance. The Mummings' plays and mystery plays of Medieval Europe, from around 12th to 15th century also contributes to the origin of folk theatre. The pre-colonial African culture with a rich vibrant history of oral story-telling and community performances can also be seen to have inspired the origin of the folk theatre practices. Many Asian cultures from territories like ancient China, Japan, and India followed similar traditions of community celebrations through performances which led to evolution of traditional theatre forms like Noh, kabuki, and kathakali, which have major influence in the evolution of folk theatre. The folk theatre is generally community-based with the local people participating in performances and production of the acts. These performances involve story-telling, specifically about myths, legends, and folktales that were orally passed down through generations. The folk theatre was mostly performed during ceremonial celebrations which involves ritualistic dances and sacred practices in the performances. Symbolically significant masks,

elegant costumes, well-furnished props are used to convey the cultural significance and traditions of the community. The folk theatre also included songs, dances, music, and visual arts to enhance the performances. In addition to entertainment and celebration, the performances also emphasized on cultural preservation and transmission.

There are several types of folk theatre:

- **Rural Theatre**

The rural theatre usually reflected on the rural life and traditions of the aboriginal communities. The Mummings' plays of Europe and the Folk plays of India are significant examples of rural theatre.

- **Indigenous Theatre**

The indigenous theatre performances aim at preserving and promoting the indigenous cultures and traditions. The Native American Powwow performances are well-known instances of indigenous theatre.

- **Traditional Asian Theatre**

Ancient forms of theatre performances like the Japanese Noh and Kabuki, and the Indian Kathakali are commonly known examples of traditional Asian theatre.

- **African Folk Theatre**

These theatre performances often entail story-telling through music, dance, and drama. The Yoruba Alarinjo of Nigeria and Zulu Folk theatre of South Africa are significant examples of African Folk theatre.

- **European Folk Theatre**

The European folk theatre includes the popular Commedia dell'Arte, puppetry and European countryside folk plays. The Spanish puppetry and the Italian Commedia dell'Arte are most famous examples of European folk theatre.

- **Folk Opera**

These form of folk theatre performances combines music, drama, and folk traditions. The Chinese Folk opera and the Indian Folk opera are well-known forms of folk opera theatre.

- **Street Theatre**

The street theatre performances are not confined to the traditional theatre stage setting but are performed in open public spaces. The street performers of Europe and the Buskers from USA are well known performers of street theatre.

- **Shadow Puppetry**

These performances divert from the traditional conventions of theatre performances. They are performed through shadows to narrate the stories of the act. The Indonesian Wayang Kulit and the Indian Tholu Bommalata are significant examples of shadow puppetry.

- **Mask Theatre**

The Mask theatre performances uses masks to convey the stories and the characters' mental and psychological bearings rather than through facial expressions. The African mask theatre and the Asian mask dance are commonly known instances of mask theatre.

Check your Progress:

Q.1. Discuss any three types of folk theatre.

Q.2. Discuss folk opera.

Q.3. What is shadow puppetry?

2.4 Aboriginal Theatre: An Overview

Aboriginal theatre refers to a theatrical form created by indigenous people to reflect on and preserve culture and heritage. Its history of origin traces back to the ancient oral traditional storytelling custom during festivals and cultural ceremonies. The advent of aboriginal theatre can also be seen as a response to the colonial impacts like assimilation and cultural suppression. The aboriginal theatres are community-based performances meant for the indigenous locals who produces as well as performs in these acts. One of the most significant motives of these performances is cultural revitalization, that is to preserve and promote their indigenous culture and tradition. The aboriginal theatre narratives are not only meant for the entertainment of the audience or community celebrations but they also address major socio-political issues like those of social justice and cultural rights, through means

of artistic expressions. These oral story-telling performances narrated stories of ancient myths and legends, histories and cultural experiences. In addition to the act, the aboriginal theatre also includes music, dance, and visual arts in their performances.

There are several types of aboriginal theatre:

- **Traditional ceremonial performances**

These performances include oral story-telling in addition to songs, dance, and drama. They are usually performed to commemorate cultural ceremonies and rituals. These performances are aided by traditional music and instrumentation like didgeridoo. These ceremonial performances are mostly observed among the Australian Aboriginals, Native Americans and the Maori. The Corroboree and Welcome to Country ceremonies are significant ceremonial performances prevalent among the Australian Aboriginals. The Sun Dance ceremonies of the Native Americans and the Kapa Haka performances of the Maori are some of the most widely-known traditional ceremonial performances of the aboriginal theatre form.

- **Contemporary plays and musicals**

These are usually written by aboriginal play wrights that reflects on modern experiences of individuals in the society. They address serious social issues like identity and assimilation. These performances are integration of traditional and contemporary art style to create one concrete genre or art form. Jack Davis's *The Dreamers*, Tom Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, and Hone Kouka's *Nga Pikitia* are significant examples of contemporary plays and musical performances.

- **Dance Theatre**

The Dance theatre are often amalgamation of traditional and contemporary dance styles. These performances involve story-telling, accompanied by music, movement, gestures, and expressions. They explore the cultural identity and heritage of the aboriginal communities and reflects on their ways of life. Significant examples of these performances include Bangarra Dance Theatre of Australia, Kahawi Dance Theatre of Canada, and Atamira Dance Company of New Zealand.

- **Interdisciplinary performances**

These performances combine theatre, music, dance, visual arts, and technology. They attempt different experimental and innovative methods of story-telling performances. They do not strictly adhere to a particular community for production and performance but rather collaborate with various aboriginal and non-aboriginal artists for the performances. *The Aboriginal Opera*, produced by the Australian Aboriginal, is a fusion of traditional and Western opera. The *Native Voices* of the Native Americans combines theatre, music, and visual arts in their performances.

- **Community-based Theatre**

The performances for the community-based theatre are created with and for the aboriginal communities that frequently addressed local issues and concerns of the community life. These performances aim to empower community voices through artistic expression that otherwise were overlooked or goes unheard. These performances work as a medium to express the unknown or hidden concerns of the community life. The indigenous youth theatre programs by Australia's Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company and the community-based theatre initiatives by Canada's Native Earth Performing Arts are significant examples of community-based theatre.

- **Physical Theatre**

The physical theatre performances entail physicality or body movements to narrate stories. These theatre performances emphasize on combining traditional and contemporary movement styles and gestures to convey the message of their act. They often addressed and explored the cultural identity and heritage of the aboriginal community. *The 7 Stages of Grieving* is a famous Australian aboriginal theatre performance and a significant example of physical theatre and story-telling. *The Indigenous Physical Theatre Project* is a Native American aboriginal theatre performance known for their fusion of traditional and contemporary movement.

SAQ:

Q.1. What do you understand by Aboriginal theatre? Discuss the characteristics of Aboriginal theatre.

.....
.....
.....
Q.2. Discuss the genre of Dance Theatre as a performative art.
.....
.....
.....
.....

2.5 Common Key Features of both Folk and Aboriginal Theatre

Some of the common key features of both Folk and Aboriginal theatre are discussed below-

- **The traditional of story-telling**

Both folk and aboriginal theatre performances trace their roots back to the ancient traditional custom of story-telling. The performances use verbal dialogues, dance, and songs to narrate their stories. The narrative often revolved around mythological and legendary events that explored universal themes of human condition or celebrated the rich cultural heritage of the communities.

- **Ritualistic and symbolic**

Both the theatrical forms incorporate symbols, masks, and elaborate costumes to enhance the performance of the plays. These theatres are often performed to celebrate traditional ceremonies through dance, community rituals, and sacred practices.

- **Community-based**

Both folk and aboriginal theatre forms call for active participation of the community locals for the production and performance of the plays. They both aims to preserve and promote traditional practices of the communities and pass down their cultural knowledge and heritage through the generations, by means of artistic expression through their performances.

- **Immersive experience**

Both the theatrical forms involve active participation of the audiences. They not only cheers and applaud the performance but

gets actively engaged with the performers during the act. These performances aim at mirroring the cultural values and norms through the narratives which invokes an emotional connection between the performers and the audience as they strive to celebrate their community customs and traditions collectively.

- **Universal themes**

Both folk and aboriginal theatre practices seek to explore universal themes of love, loss, identity, struggle, and the human condition. The performances intend to examine certain crucial aspects of community life such as cultural identity, community norms, and the sense of belonging, through their acts.

Other similar aspects between both the folk and aboriginal theatre practices can be noted across different countries and communities where these performances are prevalent and forms significant part of their culture and traditions. The Japanese Noh theatre's use of masks and symbolism in their act is similar to Aboriginal theatre's use of traditional masks in their performances. The Indian Bhavai's tradition of story-telling reflects the oral story-telling traditional performances that form the crux of aboriginal theatre.

Check Your Progress:

Q.1. Discuss any five common characteristics of folk and aboriginal theatre.

2.6 Some Popular forms of Folk and Aboriginal Theatre

As already mentioned above, there are several forms of folk and aboriginal theatres across the world. Let us discuss some of the commonly known folk and aboriginal theatre practices:

- **Noh Theatre**

The Noh theatre originated during the 14th century in Japan. The theatrical form originated from a traditional Japanese dance-drama, popularly known as Sarugaku. This form of theatre spread widely as a major drama form during the Muromachi period, from 1336 to 1573. The Noh theatre practices were initially patronized by the royal imperial court and the samurai class. The Noh performances were known for their use of mask (Noh-mem) to

convey the characters' thoughts and emotions. The stage setting was simple and minimalistic while the costumes were elegantly adorned. The acts were accompanied by traditional instruments like flute, drum, and shamisen. The performances were carried out through chanting and singing (yokbu) by the actors along with slow and deliberate movements (kata). There are different types of Noh plays and performances like Geki-Noh, Oni-Noh, Katsureki-Noh, Shura-Noh, and Mugen-Noh. The Geki-Noh are dramatic plays that fundamentally focuses on human thoughts and emotions. The Omi-Noh are known as demon plays as they specifically feature supernatural beings and events. The Katsureki-Noh are historical plays depicting historical events. The Shura-Noh are warrior plays, similar to Katsureki-Noh, and are based on heroic deeds and battle tales. The Mugen-Noh are dream plays that explores themes related to faith and spirituality. The Noh theatre practices involves some key elements, typical to their core performances. These plays usually follow the Jo-Ha-Kyu structure of narration, that is, the narrative follows the conventional dramatic structure with a beginning, middle, and an end. Jo means the introduction that establishes the dramatic blueprint in the beginning of the play. Ha is the gradual development that indulges in creating and tackling conflicts and tension during the performance. Kyu is the final ending or the climax when the play resolves or reaches a conclusion. The presence of Hana (flower) is significant for the symbolic representation of beauty in the plays. The Monomane is a unique dramatic technique of imitation followed by the actors to convey the characters' thoughts and emotions. Zeami Motokiyo is one of the most important Noh playwrights and he is often considered as the father of Noh theatre. Other notable Noh playwrights include Kompara Zenchiku, who developed Noh theatre theory and aesthetics, and Kanze Kojiro Nobumitsu, a renowned playwright and actor known for his Noh theatre performances.

- **African Yoruba Alarinjo Theatre**

Alarinjo is a traditional African folk theatre that originated during the 19th century in South-western Nigeria. These forms of theatre practices involve oral story-telling, accompanied by music, dance, and drama in their performances. Historically, the origin of Alarinjo dates back to the 14th century, in the Yoruba Empire, significantly influenced by African, European, and Islamic traditions. The Alarinjo is basically a form of travelling theatre

where the performers travel as troupes to villages and towns, presenting their acts. The acts were usually accompanied by music and dance and the dialogues and speeches were delivered in the local Yoruba language and often used proverbs. The narratives were mostly based on folktales, myths, and historical events. There are several types of Alarinjo theatre practices— the Egungun Alazinjo are a kind of masquerade performances that strictly emphasizes on worshipping the ancestors; the Ogun Alarinjo explores the mythology of the Ogun, the Yoruba Iron God; and the Obatala Alarinjo explores the mythology of Obatala, the Yoruba God of creation. The Alarinjo performances are popularly known for a form of traditional Yoruba drumming practice called Bata. A double-headed drum, called Dundun, is used for the Bata during Alarinjo performances. Some notable Alarinjo practitioners include Duro Ladipo, Wole Soyinka, and Hubert Ogunde. The Alarinjo theatres were mostly performed during festivals and ceremonial events like the Osun Osogbo Festival and the Egungun Festival in Nigeria and the Yoruba Cultural Festival in USA.

- **Bangarra Dance Theatre**

The Bangarra Dance theatre is an indigenous dance company in Australia founded by Carole Johnson in 1989. The dance company emphasized on combining traditional aboriginal dance with contemporary and modern dance styles. The main objective of this theatre practices is to preserve and promote indigenous stories and culture through dance and empower indigenous artists and communities. Some of the major productions of Bangarra Dance Theatre includes *Ochres* (1995), *Rations* (1997), *Fish* (2009), *Blak* (2013), and *Dark Emu* (2018). This dance and drama form have won multiple awards and recognitions for its performances. It has won the Helpmann Award and the Australian Dance Awards multiple times. It has won the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and Indigenous Arts Awards as well. The Bngarra Dance theatre further aimed towards contributing to Australian cultural identity as well as inspire indigenous dance companies.

- **Maori Theatre**

The Maori theatre is also known as Whaikorero or Kapa Haka and is a form of aboriginal theatre that originated in New Zealand and dates back to the pre-colonial era. The narratives mainly used the Te Reo Maori language and stories were narrated

through songs and dance. The traditional Maori musical instruments like taonga puoro are important part of the performances. The Maori theatre fundamentally emphasized on whakapapa or genealogy and the Maori history and the integration of Maori values and principles. There are several types of Maori theatre like Kapa Haka, Whaikorero, Korimako, and Taki Rua. The main performers or the story-tellers are known as Kaihaka while the composer of songs and chants are called kaitito in the Maori tradition. The Maori theatre performances are mostly observed during festivals and events like the Matariki festival of Auckland, International Indigenous Theatre festival of Canada, and TeMatatini National Kapa Haka festival of New Zealand.

- **Bhavai**

Bhavai is a form of traditional folk theatre that originated in Gujarat, India, during the 14th century. It was initially performed by travelling troupes of actors, musicians, and dancers in the rural areas of Gujarat. Bhavai is a combination of music, dance, and drama, to narrate an event or a story. The narratives are often drawn from mythology, folklore, or the everyday lives of the common people. The Bhavai plays were performed in minimalist stages, often with curtains and props. The actors wear colourful and vibrant costumes, especially their traditional attire paired with beautiful accessories. The different types of Bhavai are Ram Bhavai, Krishna Bhavai, Bhagavat Bhavai, and Social Bhavai. Some of the well-known Bhavai artists or Bhavaiya include Ravishankar Raval, Chhagan Raval, and Dinanath Raval. The Bhavai is often performed during festivals like Bhavai Festival in Gujarat and the Gujarat Folk Theatre Festival in USA.

Check Your Progress:

Q.1. What is Geki-Noh?

Q.2. Discuss Jo-Ha-Kyu.

Q.3. Who is known as the father of Noh theatre?

Q.4. Discuss in brief the African Yoruba Alarinjo Theatre.

Q.5. What is Bata?

Q.6. Who founded the Bangarra Dance Theatre and when?

Q.7. Name any two major productions of Bangarra Dance Theatre.

Q.8. What is the other name of Maori theatre?

Q.9. What is the Maori story-teller known as?

Q.10. What are the different types of Bhavai theatre?

2.7 Summing Up

The folk and aboriginal theatre practices are theatrical performances that originated from the art of oral story-telling, which often aimed at passing down traditional values and cultural knowledge to the future generations. These forms of theatre provide a glimpse into the diverse community histories and experiences across the globe. Folk theatres like the Japanese Noh theatre, Indian Bhavai, and the African Alarinjo, usually performed story-telling narratives weaving tales accompanied by music and dance to narrate myths, legends, and folktales. Aboriginal theatres like Australia's Bangarra Dance theatre, and Canada's Native Earth Performing Arts, empowers indigenous voices and promotes their stories, struggles, and resilience. These theatrical forms foster cultural exchange and reflect on the rich traditional heritage of the conventionally marginalized communities. These theatre practices fundamentally focus on preserving and promoting the community's culture and traditions and their ways of life, ensuring the continuation of ancestral knowledge and artistic expression.

2.8 References and Suggested Readings

Attri, Shalini. "Folk Theater and History: Constructing Indian Identity through The Khyal of Amar Singh Rathore". *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 2020. DOI: 10.1142/S2717541320500047

Dalmia, Vasudha, "Folk Theatre and the Search for an Indigenous Idiom: Brecht in India". *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* Oxford, 18 Oct. 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195695052.003.000>

5

Gargi, Balwant. "Review: Folk Theatre: Pageantry and Performance".
Folk Theatre of India, Vol. 18, No. 4, 1991), pp. 198-200
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23002260>

Hansen, Kathryn. "Indian Folk Traditions and the Modern Theatre".
Asian Folklore Studies, Vol. 42, No. 1, 1983), pp. 77-89
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1178367>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1178367>

Mee, Erin B. "Contemporary Indian Theatre: Three Voices".
Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 19, No. 1 Jan., 1997), pp. 1-5
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3245738>

xxx

UNIT- 3
REALISM AND NATURALISM

Unit Structure:

3.1 Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Realism as a Movement in Literature

3.4 Realism in Theatre: Major Playwrights and Their Works

3.4.1 Characteristics of Realistic Theatre

3.4.2 Major Playwrights and Their Works

3.5 Naturalism as a Movement in Literature

3.6 Naturalism in Theatre: Major Playwrights and Works

3.6.1 Characteristics of Naturalistic Theatre

3.6.2 Major Playwrights and Their Works

3.7 Summing Up

3.8 Reference and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to

- *trace* the historical development of Realism and Naturalism;
- *identify* the basic features of realism and naturalism in literature;
- *understand* the implications of these movements for theatre;
- *learn* about the major playwrights and texts of both trends.

3.2 Introduction

Realism and Naturalism are two pivotal literary movements that emerged in the nineteenth century, profoundly influencing the development of drama and other genres. Both movements share a

common goal: representing life as accurately as possible. However, while Realism and Naturalism are closely related, they differ in their approach to depicting human experience and the forces that shape it.

Realism, as described by M. H. Abrams, can be understood in two key ways: first, as a specific literary movement that took hold in the nineteenth century, with key figures like Honoré de Balzac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America. Second, it is also used to designate a broader mode of representing human life and experience that has recurred in various literary eras (Abrams 269). The realist writers of the nineteenth century sought to depict the ordinary lives of people with as much fidelity to reality as possible, avoiding the embellishments and idealizations often found in earlier romantic and sentimental literature. In drama, this meant a shift away from grand, heroic figures and sensational plots, and toward everyday characters and situations that reflected the complexity of human behavior and social interaction.

Naturalism, often seen as an offshoot or intensification of Realism, shares the realist commitment to portraying life accurately, but it is distinguished by its underlying philosophical framework. As Abrams notes, Naturalism was developed by a group of writers who were heavily influenced by the scientific and philosophical ideas of the mid-nineteenth century, particularly the work of Charles Darwin. This "post-Darwinian" philosophy held that human beings are fully integrated into the natural order and are shaped by biological, social, and environmental forces beyond their control (Abrams 270). In this view, human beings are not autonomous agents with free will, but rather complex organisms whose actions and destinies are dictated by heredity, environment, and the primal forces of hunger, sexuality, and survival.

The contrast between these two modes becomes especially clear in how they handle characters and their relationship to society. In Realism, characters are depicted as individuals who have agency, choice, and the ability to affect their circumstances. Realist drama, for instance, often explores how individuals navigate social structures, personal conflicts, and moral dilemmas. There is often an implicit suggestion that societal reforms or personal growth are

possible. In this sense, Realism holds a certain optimism, even when it portrays life's difficulties.

Naturalism, by contrast, is more deterministic. Its characters are often portrayed as victims of forces they cannot control, whether these be biological urges, social structures, or economic constraints. The human condition in naturalistic drama is one of struggle, but without the hope of triumph. The focus is on the harsh, unchangeable realities of existence, leading to a more pessimistic view of life. The characters in Naturalism are often seen as products of their environment, with little or no ability to alter their fates. Consequently, Naturalism presents a more cynical view of society, one in which individual efforts are often futile.

Thus, while both Realism and Naturalism seek to represent life truthfully, they diverge in their philosophical outlooks and their portrayal of human agency. Realism emphasizes individual choice and the potential for societal improvement, while Naturalism underscores the ways in which humans are shaped, and often constrained, by forces beyond their control. In the context of drama, these movements marked a significant departure from the melodramatic and idealized traditions of earlier periods, setting the stage for more modern, complex representations of life on the stage.

Check Your Progress

1. How do Realism and Naturalism differ in their representation of human agency and societal conditions in drama?
2. Discuss how post-Darwinian philosophy influenced the development of Naturalism, particularly in its view of human beings as part of the natural order.

3.3 Realism as a Movement in Literature:

The roots of Realism can be traced back to the 1830s in France, although it gathered momentum by the 1850s and became a defining trend in European literature by the latter half of the nineteenth century. The French were pivotal in the development of this movement, with major contributors including Gustave Flaubert and

Honoré de Balzac. Realism arose as a response to the over-romanticized, idealized portrayals of life that dominated Romanticism. It sought to depict life as it was, without embellishment, focusing on the commonplace and often harsh realities of existence.

The term “Realism” was first used in the 1820s but gained prominence as a literary strategy in the 1830s. By this time, a reaction against Romantic ideals, which emphasized emotion, imagination, and the glorification of the past, had set in. This reaction was particularly strong in Germany, where a group of radical writers known as the Young Germans, including Heinrich Heine and Carl Gutzkow, voiced their opposition to Romanticism. They also rejected the classical notion of art for art’s sake, advocating for a literature that reflected political and social realities.

Realism was not confined to France and Germany. A tendency toward realism emerged in various parts of Europe and America, starting in the 1840s. In Russia, writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy became key figures of the movement. In England, George Eliot and Charles Dickens are considered among the foremost realists, while in America, William Dean Howells and Henry James exemplified the movement. Although Realism was not a monolithic or entirely uniform movement, its fundamental goal was to offer an accurate, objective portrayal of the external world and human experience.

Realism as a movement rejected the idealization found in Romanticism and Classicism, striving for a truthful, unembellished depiction of life. Realist works often feature ordinary people from different social strata, especially the working class and the lower-middle class, presenting their daily struggles in a straightforward and unidealized manner. Realism focused on the present and contemporary life, avoiding nostalgic longings for an idealized past.

Key characteristics of Realism include:

- **Descriptive Detail:** Realist works emphasize the use of evocative and precise descriptive details. Characters and settings are portrayed with accuracy,

often using common, everyday speech rather than elevated language.

- **Focus on Social Issues:** Realists explored social issues, particularly those resulting from the Industrial Revolution, such as the growing divide between rich and poor and the deplorable working conditions in factories. The 1848 revolutions, which sought to address economic inequality, further influenced the choice of subject matter for many realists.
- **Rejection of the Fantastical:** Realists rejected fantastical elements, focusing instead on what was probable and realistic. Their works excluded events that were impossible or highly improbable.
- **Ordinary Characters:** Realist literature gave importance to ordinary people—peasants, workers, and other members of the lower social classes—who were often ignored in previous literary traditions.
- **Colloquial Language:** Realists often used colloquial, everyday language to create a more authentic representation of speech and interaction among characters.
- **Political and Social Engagement:** In contrast to earlier movements, Realism engaged with the political and social climate of the time, addressing the widening class gap and the challenges of industrialization. This engagement was particularly evident in writers like Balzac and Dickens, whose works underscored the plight of the urban poor.

Realism was not limited to literature but also had a profound influence on visual arts, most notably through the work of French painter Gustave Courbet. Courbet was an ardent critic of Romanticism and Classical ideals, advocating for a more democratic approach to art. He believed that peasants and workers, rather than mythical or idealized subjects, were the most worthy and authentic subjects for painting. Courbet's opposition to idealization and his focus on the ordinary had a lasting impact on subsequent generations of artists.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. Write a note on the basic features of realistic theatre with reference to any play you have read. (200 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. Is Realism a historical literary movement or a style of writing? (150 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3.4 Realism in Theatre: Major Playwrights and Works

The advent of Realism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a pivotal shift in the development of modern theatre. Moving away from the exaggerated emotions and stylized portrayals characteristic of Romanticism and melodrama, Realism introduced a more authentic, nuanced depiction of life on stage. This movement redefined the theatre’s role, presenting stories and characters that reflected the complexities of human existence in its unembellished essence. Realism rejected the overly theatrical in favor of creating a world on stage that resonated with the audience due to its familiarity and relatability.

The emergence of Realism in theatre coincided with broader social, political, and scientific transformations in the nineteenth century.

The Industrial Revolution, coupled with new philosophical debates, inspired playwrights and artists to abandon the idealized or fantastical elements of previous dramatic forms. Instead, they turned to empirical observation and sought to portray life as it truly was. Realist drama was, therefore, deeply connected to the social issues of the time, reflecting the everyday struggles, desires, and moral conflicts of ordinary people.

3.4.1 Characteristics of Realistic Theatre:

Realist theatre is characterized by several defining features that distinguish it from earlier theatrical traditions. These characteristics aim to create a convincing and immersive reality on stage, with a focus on capturing the genuine complexities of human life.

1. Authentic Characters

In Realist plays, characters are portrayed as complex, multi-dimensional individuals, often flawed and driven by realistic desires. They are not idealized or symbolic figures, but rather, people the audience can relate to or recognize in the world around them. These characters grapple with credible emotions and motivations, reflecting the diversity and unpredictability of human nature.

2. Detailed Settings:

Realist theatre places significant emphasis on the accurate depiction of settings. The scenery, props, and spatial design are meticulously selected to represent the specific time, place, and society depicted in the play. This focus on detail helps ground the action in a tangible reality, enhancing the authenticity of the performance.

3. Depiction of Social Issues:

Realist plays often explore pressing social issues of the time, such as class disparities, gender roles, and moral dilemmas. These issues are not simply background elements but are central to the plot and character development. Realist dramatists used their works to critique the injustices and hypocrisies of society, encouraging audiences to reflect on their own lives and the world around them.

4. Realistic Dialogue:

One of the hallmarks of Realism is its use of naturalistic dialogue. Characters speak in a way that mirrors real-life conversation, avoiding the heightened, artificial language common in previous dramatic forms. This approach adds to the overall authenticity of the characters and situations, as the audience hears speech that closely resembles everyday interaction.

5. Shifts in Dramatic Techniques:

Realism introduced a shift in storytelling techniques, moving away from the rigid structure of the "well-made play" and its predictable, often formulaic plots. Instead, Realist plays focus on the gradual development of characters and situations, often eschewing neat resolutions in favor of more ambiguous or open-ended conclusions.

6. Everyday Life as a Central Theme:

Unlike earlier forms of drama that focused on kings, heroes, and mythological figures, Realist plays are concerned with the lives of ordinary people. By focusing on the mundane, Realism expands the scope of theatre, making it more accessible and relevant to a wider audience.

7. Societal Critique:

Realist theatre often serves as a platform for critiquing the social structures and institutions of the time. Many playwrights used their work to highlight issues such as poverty, inequality, and the oppression of marginalized groups. This social critique is woven into the fabric of the narrative, making it an integral part of the play's message.

3.4.2 Major Playwrights and Their Works:

Several key playwrights were instrumental in shaping the Realist movement in theatre, using their works to challenge societal norms and explore the complexities of human nature. Among the most notable figures are Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Anton Chekhov, whose plays continue to be celebrated for their character development and social relevance.

Henrik Ibsen:

Henrik Ibsen is widely regarded as the father of Modern Realist theatre. His plays broke away from the traditional structure of the well-made play and focused on the internal conflicts of his characters, often addressing controversial social issues such as marriage, morality, and individual freedom. Ibsen's work was revolutionary in its portrayal of women and its critique of societal expectations.

➤ **Pillars of Society (1877):**

First performed in 1877, *Pillars of Society* was one of Ibsen's early works that laid the foundation for his later Realist plays. The play critiques the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie and exposes the moral corruption beneath the facade of respectability in a small town.

➤ **A Doll's House (1879):**

Perhaps Ibsen's most famous play, *A Doll's House* is a ground-breaking play for its portrayal of a woman's struggle for independence in a male-dominated society. The play's protagonist, Nora, challenges the traditional roles of wife and mother, leading to a dramatic climax that was controversial for its time.

➤ **Ghosts (1881):**

Ghosts tackles issues of morality, guilt, and the consequences of societal repression. It explores the lingering effects of past sins on the present, particularly through its examination of venereal disease and inheritance, subjects considered taboo at the time.

➤ **Hedda Gabler (1890):**

Hedda Gabler centers on the complex and manipulative Hedda, a character whose desire for control and freedom leads to tragic consequences. The play's exploration of power, manipulation, and the limitations placed on women establishes Ibsen's reputation as a pioneering realist dramatist.

George Bernard Shaw:

George Bernard Shaw was an Irish playwright whose works are noted for their wit, intellectual depth, and sharp social commentary.

Shaw was heavily influenced by Ibsen and used his plays to critique the prevailing social and political issues of his time, particularly those related to class, capitalism, and gender inequality.

➤ **Arms and the Man (1894):**

A comedic play, *Arms and the Man* satirizes romanticized notions of war and heroism. Through its characters, Shaw critiques the futility of war and exposes the gap between idealism and reality.

➤ **Major Barbara (1905):**

In *Major Barbara*, Shaw tackles issues of wealth, poverty, and morality. The play centers on Barbara, a Salvation Army officer, and her wealthy father, a munitions manufacturer, as they debate the ethics of charity and capitalism.

➤ **Pygmalion (1913):**

Pygmalion is one of Shaw's best-known works and explores themes of social mobility, identity, and class. The play tells the story of a professor who transforms a poor flower girl into a refined lady through language lessons, raising questions about the nature of identity and the influence of society on the individual.

Anton Chekhov:

Anton Chekhov is a Russian playwright known for his subtle, character-driven dramas that capture the quiet desperation of everyday life. His plays often focus on the inner emotional lives of his characters and their unfulfilled desires, using understatement and irony to create poignant portrayals of human existence.

• **The Seagull (1895):**

The Seagull is one of Chekhov's most famous plays, exploring the complexities of love, art, and ambition. The play's characters are trapped by their own desires and illusions, leading to tragic consequences.

• **Three Sisters (1900):**

Three Sisters centers on the lives of the Prozorov sisters, who long to escape their provincial town and return to

Moscow. The play is a meditation on unfulfilled dreams and the passage of time, with Chekhov's signature focus on character and mood.

- **The Cherry Orchard (1902):**

The Cherry Orchard is a play about the decline of the Russian aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie. The play's characters face the loss of their family estate, which symbolizes the changing social and economic landscape of Russia

Self-Assessment Questions:

1. Is everyday life a key theme in realistic theatre? Give examples from any play you have read. (200 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. Write on the major playwright of the realistic genre. (150 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3.5 Naturalism as a Movement in Literature:

Naturalism emerged in the 1880s as a more radical form of Realism, drawing on scientific principles such as determinism and causality. It sought to explain human behavior and social conditions in terms of biological and environmental forces, rejecting supernatural or

metaphysical explanations. Naturalism was deeply influenced by the work of Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution emphasized the struggle for survival and the importance of heredity and environment in shaping human behavior.

Naturalism can be viewed as an extension of Realism, but with a stronger emphasis on scientific objectivity. The movement's proponents aimed to depict life with the precision of a scientific observer, focusing on the deterministic aspects of human existence. Characters in naturalist works are often portrayed as being at the mercy of their environment, social conditions, and biological inheritance, with little agency to change their fate.

Naturalism shares many of the same principles as Realism, but it differs in several key ways:

- 1. Scientific Approach:** Naturalists adopted a scientific approach to literature, drawing on the methods of observation and experimentation. They sought to represent life with a degree of detachment, emphasizing causality and determinism.
- 2. Focus on the Lower Classes:** Like Realism, Naturalism focused on the lower classes, but it was more concerned with the forces that shaped their lives, such as poverty, heredity, and environmental conditions. Naturalist works often depict characters as products of their circumstances, lacking free will.
- 3. Determinism:** One of the central tenets of Naturalism is the belief that human behavior is determined by factors beyond an individual's control, such as heredity, environment, and social conditions. This view is evident in the works of Émile Zola, who is often considered the founder of the Naturalist movement in literature.
- 4. Detailed Description:** Naturalist writers, like their realist counterparts, employed detailed description, but their focus was often on the grim and sordid aspects of life. They depicted the struggles of ordinary people with a scientific eye, emphasizing the harsh realities of existence.
- 5. Pessimism:** Naturalist works are often more pessimistic than realist ones, emphasizing the futility of human efforts in the face of overwhelming social and biological forces. This

pessimism is evident in the works of writers such as Zola, Guy de Maupassant, and George Gissing.

Émile Zola is perhaps the most famous exponent of Naturalism. His works, such as *Germinal* and *L'Assommoir*, focus on the lives of the working class, depicting their struggles with poverty, alcoholism, and social injustice. Zola's approach was deeply influenced by the scientific theories of his time, including Darwin's theory of evolution and Hippolyte Taine's deterministic views on literature.

Other notable figures in the Naturalist movement include the Goncourt brothers, whose novel *Germinie Lacerteux* is considered one of the first works to adopt a naturalistic perspective. Naturalism also had a significant impact on German literature, particularly in the works of writers like Theodor Fontane and Arno Holz. In England, George Moore and George Gissing were influenced by Naturalism, while in America, writers such as Stephen Crane and Frank Norris incorporated naturalistic themes into their works.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. Write a note on the differences between realism and naturalism as a movement in literature, in terms of their emphases and thrusts. (200 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3.6 Naturalism in Theatre: Major Playwrights and Works

Naturalism in theatre emerged in the late 19th century as a more radical extension of Realism, emphasizing an extreme fidelity to life in both content and style. Influenced by scientific determinism, social issues, and the theories of the French novelist Émile Zola,

Naturalistic drama sought to present life on stage with complete accuracy. While Realism depicted ordinary life with an eye for social and psychological truth, Naturalism took this one step further by representing life in a deterministic and almost clinical manner, focusing on the harsh realities of human existence.

Naturalism spread from France, where Zola laid its theoretical foundations, to countries like Germany, England, Russia, and the United States. Although the movement was relatively short-lived, its influence persisted in various theatrical forms, including drawing-room comedies and other lighter forms of entertainment well into the 1920s and 1930s. The core objective of Naturalistic theatre was to create the illusion that the audience was not watching a performance but rather observing life itself, with every detail of setting, costume, and dialogue painstakingly designed to mirror reality.

3.6.1 Characteristics of Naturalistic Theatre:

Naturalistic theatre is defined by a set of characteristics that distinguish it from both Romanticism and Realism:

1. Historical Accuracy in Costumes, Props, and Sets:

One of the hallmarks of Naturalistic drama is its attention to detail in terms of set design, props, and costumes. Everything on stage is designed to be historically accurate and reflective of the time and place in which the drama is set. The aim is to make the setting so realistic that the audience feels as if they are looking at a real room or environment that they could encounter in their own lives.

2. Adherence to the ‘Three Unities’ of Aristotle:

Naturalistic plays often follow the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place. This means that the action of the play takes place within a single location, over the course of a single day, and follows a single plotline, enhancing the sense of realism by focusing on the minutiae of daily life.

3. Characters as Victims of Circumstance:

Characters in Naturalistic dramas are often portrayed as victims of their environment, social conditions, and heredity. This reflects the deterministic worldview that underpins Naturalism, where individuals are seen as being shaped and constrained by forces beyond their control.

4. Exploration of Taboo Subject Matter:

Naturalistic plays frequently delve into topics that were considered taboo for serious drama at the time, such as suicide, prostitution, poverty, and mental illness. By addressing these darker aspects of human life, Naturalism sought to portray the full spectrum of human experience without romanticizing or idealizing it.

5. Realistic Dialogue:

Naturalistic theatre placed a heavy emphasis on replicating everyday speech as accurately as possible. The dialogue in Naturalist plays is often colloquial, fragmented, and unpolished, mirroring the way people actually speak in real life.

3.6.2 Major Playwrights and Their Works

Several playwrights were instrumental in the development of Naturalism in theatre, producing works that exemplified the movement's core principles. These writers focused on the darker, more sordid aspects of life, often exploring themes of despair, poverty, and human suffering. Below are some of the key figures in the Naturalist movement and their major works.

- Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* is often considered a precursor to the Naturalist movement, despite being written in the early 19th century. The play, which was first performed in 1913, explores themes of poverty, madness, and social injustice through the story of Franz Woyzeck, a soldier who is driven to insanity by his harsh social conditions and personal circumstances. Although unfinished, *Woyzeck* is recognized for its raw depiction of human suffering and its deterministic

portrayal of Woyzeck as a victim of his environment, making it a forerunner to Naturalistic drama.

- Russian playwright Aleksey Pisemsky's *A Bitter Fate* is another early example of Naturalistic tendencies in theatre. First performed in 1859, the play is a stark depiction of peasant life in Russia and explores the impact of social and economic forces on the lives of ordinary people. Pisemsky's focus on the grim realities of rural life and his portrayal of characters as victims of their circumstances align closely with the principles of Naturalism.
- Leo Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* is a powerful exploration of moral degradation and human despair. First performed in 1902, the play deals with themes of adultery, murder, and guilt within a rural Russian community. The characters in *The Power of Darkness* are driven by their basest instincts, and their actions are shaped by the oppressive conditions of their environment. Tolstoy's portrayal of human weakness and the corrupting influence of poverty exemplifies the deterministic worldview of Naturalism.
- August Strindberg was one of the most prominent playwrights associated with Naturalism, though he later moved toward more symbolic and expressionistic forms of theatre. *The Father*, first performed in 1887, is a grim exploration of gender conflict and psychological manipulation. The play's central character, a military officer, is driven to madness by his wife's calculated efforts to undermine his authority and question his paternity. *The Father* reflects Strindberg's belief in the deterministic forces that shape human behavior, particularly the psychological and social pressures that drive individuals to their breaking point.
- Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, first performed in 1893 as *Die Weber*, is one of the most famous Naturalist plays in German theatre. The play depicts the plight of Silesian weavers who, driven to desperation by poverty and exploitation, rise up in revolt against their oppressive employers. Hauptmann's focus on the economic and social forces that shape the characters' lives, as well as his detailed depiction of working-class life, make *The Weavers* a quintessential Naturalist drama.

- Though Anton Chekhov is often associated with Realism, his plays also contain strong elements of Naturalism. *The Cherry Orchard*, first performed in 1904, deals with the decline of the Russian aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie. The characters in *The Cherry Orchard* are portrayed as helpless in the face of changing social and economic forces, and their inability to adapt to these changes leads to the loss of their family estate. Chekhov's focus on the inevitability of social change and the characters' passive acceptance of their fate aligns with the deterministic philosophy of Naturalism.
- Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, first performed in 1879, is often considered a landmark of both Realism and Naturalism in theatre. The play's central character, Nora, struggles to break free from the constraints of her domestic life and assert her independence in a male-dominated society. *A Doll's House* addresses themes of gender inequality, individual freedom, and societal expectations, with Nora's ultimate decision to leave her family serving as a powerful critique of the social forces that shape her life.

Check Your Progress:

1. How do you differentiate between realism and naturalism in terms of their implications in theatre?
2. Write a note on the major texts of naturalistic theatre and elaborate any text that you have read. (200 words)

3.7 Summing Up:

Realism and Naturalism were ground-breaking movements that transformed nineteenth-century literature and art. Both sought to represent life truthfully and rejected the idealization of previous artistic styles. However, while Realism focused on providing an objective, truthful representation of life, Naturalism took this further by incorporating scientific principles and emphasizing the deterministic nature of human existence. The legacy of these movements continues to be felt in modern literature, with their

emphasis on the representation of ordinary life and the exploration of social and environmental forces that shape human behaviour.

The Realist movement in theatre revolutionized the way stories were told on stage, focusing on the complexities of human life and the pressing social issues of the time. Playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Anton Chekhov created works that not only entertained but also challenged audiences to reflect on the world around them. Through authentic characters, detailed settings, and realistic dialogue, Realism transformed the theatre into a space for societal critique and self-reflection, laying the foundation for modern drama.

Naturalism in theatre, though relatively short-lived, left a profound impact on the development of Modern drama. By focusing on the deterministic forces that shape human behaviour, Naturalistic playwrights like Georg Büchner, Leo Tolstoy, August Strindberg, Gerhart Hauptmann, Anton Chekhov, and Henrik Ibsen created works that reflected the harsh realities of life in unflinching detail. Their plays continue to resonate today for their exploration of human suffering, social injustice, and the complex interplay between individual will and environmental forces. Through their meticulous attention to detail and commitment to portraying life in its rawest form, these playwrights set the stage for the evolution of modern drama and its ongoing exploration of the human condition.

3.8 References and Suggested Reading:

- Brockett, Oscar G. and Franklin J. Hildy. *History of the Theatre*. Pearson, 2013.
- Habib, M.A.R. "Introduction to Realism and Naturalism." *Rutgers University*, <https://habib.camden.rutgers.edu/introductions/realism/>
- Schumacher, Claude. *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre 1850-1918*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

xxx

UNIT- 4

EPIC THEATRE

Unit Structure

4.1 Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 The Aristotelian Framework

4.4 Brecht's Exposition of Epic Theatre

4.5 Brecht Versus Stanislavski

4.6 Alienation Effect: The Core Principle of Epic Theatre

4.7 Summing Up

4.8 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to—

- *understand* the Aristotelian principles against which Brecht expounded Epic Theatre;
- *enumerate* the features of epic theatre;
- *note* the differences in acting method between Stanislavski and Brechtian theatre;
- *write* about alienation effect and how it is used in theatre.

4.2 Introduction

The term *epic theatre* was coined by the German playwright and theatre theorist Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). Epic theatre represents a distinctive mode of theatre developed by playwrights and directors worldwide. Traditionally, the main currents of Western theatre have been shaped by Aristotelian aesthetics, which emphasize the emotional power of dramatic action and the audience's identification with the reality presented on stage. The development of realism in the late 19th century—exemplified by the historic role of Henrik Ibsen—further reinforced this emotional connection. It

relied on what Samuel Taylor Coleridge termed the “suspension of disbelief,” creating the illusion of reality.

Epic theatre, however, takes a fundamentally different approach. It seeks to disrupt emotional identification with the action or characters, instead promoting an objective understanding of the events on stage. The term "epic" here alludes to narrative poetry, which is known for its detached and objective style of storytelling.

Brecht's development of epic theatre raises several critical questions. Why does he prioritize the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) over the emotional identification characteristic of Aristotelian theatre? While traditional actor training emphasizes complete identification with the role, does the alienation effect risk producing "bad" acting? If emotional identification can convey a distinctive theatrical "truth" to the audience, what is the value of fostering a detached, critical perspective? How does Brecht view the social function of theatre? Finally, what are the key elements of Brechtian epic theatre?

In this unit, we will explore these questions in detail. Throughout our discussion, we will reference Brecht's own theatrical practice and his plays to illustrate the core principles of epic theatre. But before delving into Brecht, let us have a brief discussion on Aristotle whose dramatic principles Brecht defies.

Stop to Consider

One of Brecht's early productions that exemplified his 'epic' style is Christopher Marlowe's *Edward the Second*, premiered in Munich in 1924. The production received appreciation from local critics, particularly for the way Brecht gave the play a ballad-like structure. Herbert Ihering, Brecht's life-long supporter, observed that the audience experienced the play as though they were watching a sporting event or witnessing a street incident. The characters were set at a distance, and Brecht called for a report on the events (Brecht xiii).

4.3 The Aristotelian Framework

To understand the principles Brecht sought to challenge, it is essential to briefly examine Aristotle's concept of tragedy, which

prioritizes emotional engagement. In Aristotle's framework, plot holds greater importance than character, as action defines character and ultimately drives the narrative. The tragic hero must possess *hamartia*, often translated as a "tragic flaw" or "error of judgment." This flaw is not moral depravity but an unintentional mistake, often stemming from ignorance. Importantly, *hamartia* ensures that the tragic hero is imperfect, as pure perfection would undermine the audience's sense of justice and fail to evoke pity.

Key structural elements of tragedy include *peripety* (reversal of intention) and *discovery* (a shift from ignorance to knowledge), which amplify the dramatic impact. These elements create a cause-and-effect chain that culminates in *catharsis*—the purgation or relief of the emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle explains that pity arises from undeserved misfortune, while fear stems from the realization that similar misfortune could befall us.

Catharsis, according to Aristotle, does not mean the total elimination of emotions but rather a restoration of emotional balance. By transforming potential emotions into active ones and then restoring them to a trained potentiality, catharsis allows the audience to leave the theater with a sense of relief. While some modern critics, such as F.L. Lucas, have dismissed Aristotle's medical metaphor of catharsis, arguing that theater should aim for pleasure rather than therapeutic purgation, Aristotle's concept suggests a refinement of emotional responses, aligning aesthetic experience with ethical outcomes.

Aristotle's theory of catharsis also serves as a response to Plato's objections to poetry, particularly regarding its emotional influence on audiences. Aristotle focuses on the twin emotions of pity and fear, which he consistently discusses in conjunction. Pity, he explains, is aroused by undeserved misfortune, which satisfies our sense of justice if it is undeserved. Fear, in turn, arises when we recognize that such misfortune could happen to us. Thus, pity and fear are intimately connected, as what evokes pity for others may also evoke fear in ourselves.

In Aristotelian theatre, the emotional effect on the audience is central. However, this focus on emotionalism is precisely what Brecht opposed in his exposition of epic theatre. Brecht sought to

disrupt emotional identification, replacing it with critical engagement, thereby moving away from the Aristotelian framework that foregrounds emotional catharsis.

Stop to Consider

How is epic theatre different from Aristotelian theatre? This is an important point to ponder about. You may not have a ready answer now. As you go through this unit, you will definitely have clues to this question.

4.4 Brecht's Exposition of Epic Theatre

Brecht remains clear and emphatic in his articulation of the distinction between epic theatre and dramatic theatre. In "Notes on the Opera *Rose and Fall of the City of Mahagony*" he enumerates these distinctions as shown in tabular form in Stop to Consider box below.

The aim of epic theatre is to elicit a specific kind of response and provide a perspective on the dramatic action presented on stage. The audience must not be emotionally carried away by the action but should instead adopt an intelligent and rational attitude. This approach enables the audience to engage in social intervention by awakening their intellect and offering them a dispassionate, objective perception of the social reality depicted in the dramatic action. Achieving this in theatre is no small feat. Brecht's extensive study of non-Western performative cultures, such as Chinese and Japanese theatre, significantly influenced the development of his *epic theatre*. He also endorsed opera as a viable theatrical form. Why? Brecht's use of opera is significant because it aligns with his concept of enjoyment and highlights the role of music in the production. Opera fundamentally contrasts with the central aims of illusionistic theatre. "The irrationality of opera," Brecht writes, "consists in the fact that it uses rational elements and strives to be vivid and real, but at the same time, all those aspects are cancelled out by the music" (*Brecht on Theatre*). As he further notes, the reality achieved by the representation of a dying man is cancelled

out when the man sings at the same time. In Brecht's approach, music reports the action, narrates the events, and provides commentary.

Stop to Consider	
Dramatic form of Theatre	Epic form of Theatre
Action	Narration
Involves spectators in events on stage	Turns spectators into observers
Consumes their activity	Awakens their activity
Enables them to have feelings experience	Forces them to make decisions
The spectators are immersed in something	Word-picture
Suggestivity	They are put in opposition to it
Emotions are preserved	Argument
The spectator stands right in the middle	Emotions are turned into insights
Shares in the experience	The spectator stands on the opposite side
Human nature presumed to be common knowledge	Studies
Humankind unchangeable	Human nature is object of investigation
Tension at the outcome	Humankind changeable and able to change things
One scene for the next	Tension as you go
Growth	Each scene for itself
Structure of events linear	montage
Evolutionary inevitability	In curves
Human nature as fixed	Jumps
Thought determines being	Human nature as process
Feeling	Social being determines thought
	Rationality

If emotions need to be controlled to enable the audience to achieve greater intellectual agility in the theatre, a great deal must be accomplished by the actors themselves. Brecht illustrates this point by referencing the acting style suitable for epic theatre through the performances of Helen Weigel in *Oedipus* and *The Mother*.

Stop to Consider:

Helen Weigel is an eminent German actor and artistic director who was also Brecht's wife. You may look at some of her performances on Youtube.

In *Oedipus*, Helen Weigel played the role of Jocasta's maid. She reports Jocasta's death in a voice devoid of pain or emotion. Her makeup reflects the horror of the event, prompting the audience to respond intellectually to Jocasta's death rather than emotionally. In *The Mother*, she delivers her dialogue as though written in the third person, thereby breaking the illusion and preventing the audience from identifying with the character, helping them become critical observers of the action. In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, a woman runs her business amidst a war that ultimately claims the lives of all her children. The depravity of war is depicted as a necessary condition for her survival, yet Mother Courage's business principles require her to submit to this moral depravity. She reveals her moral compromise in one scene when she "instructs the young man in capitulation to the higher-ups" (*Brecht Collected Plays*, 361). Brecht describes how Helen Weigel negotiates this moment: even in the midst of the character's most disturbing moral position, Weigel retains a glow of nobility and wisdom on her face. Weigel, Brecht shows, wonderfully distances herself from the role she plays.

Epic style, therefore, demands a distinct mode of acting. Brecht, in his various writings on theatre, repeatedly emphasizes the need for a new form of theatre suited to our "scientific age." He highlights the audience's necessity to comprehend social and political realities, as this epistemological awareness is a prerequisite for social transformation. Brecht's grounding in Marxism enables him to envision theatre not merely as a source of aesthetic pleasure devoid of social or moral objectives but as a praxis for enacting social change. From this broad political and activist epistemological perspective, the actor's role—like any theatrical device—must be understood. The actor's primary commitment is not to inhabiting a role within a play but to demonstrating an understanding of human reality. While experiencing a role involves emotional identification with the character, observing the character from a critical distance requires judgment. Consequently, acting in epic theatre entails demonstrating, narrating, and depicting rather than internalizing the character's inner life. The actor's role is thus better approached through the paradigm of understanding rather than through self-effacing emotional identification.

The concept of understanding requires further elaboration. While the aim is to comprehend a character, a human character is primarily

shaped by the larger material forces underpinning human reality. A character represents an individual human being positioned within a hierarchically stratified society, with their consciousness reflecting the consciousness of a specific class. The historically evolving contradictions of society are expressed through the contradictions in a character's thoughts and actions. The central objective of epic theatre is to activate the audience's intellectual and cognitive faculties, as well as their capacity for action. Performance, therefore, serves as a demonstration of this understanding, aimed at achieving this purpose.

To better appreciate this notion of theatre's function, one may refer to Brecht's essay *The Street Scene*, where he illustrates a street accident as a quintessential model for epic theatre. An eyewitness demonstrates to a crowd how a street accident occurred. The purpose of this demonstration is to explain the incident as the eyewitness observed it and to help the audience form an opinion. The objective of the demonstration is clear and directly influences the "performance" of the demonstrator. This act is not an imitation of the driver's or the victim's actions but rather a form of representation sufficient for the audience to form a judgment about who was right and who was wrong. A perfect imitation, designed to transport the audience to a higher aesthetic realm, would be utterly inappropriate. The demonstrator must avoid creating an illusion, as that would undermine the very purpose of the performance. Even though the eyewitness has personally experienced the event, they are obligated to communicate its most critical aspects through demonstration rather than emotional identification. Now, consider how an illusionistic theatre, steeped in realism and naturalism, might depict this accident on stage (though Brecht does not elaborate on this in his essay): an actor playing the driver would likely delve into the character's inner life, portraying circumstances that compel their actions, making the accident an inevitable outcome of this internal struggle. Similarly, an actor playing the victim might focus on the inner turmoil of the character, whose moments of carelessness while crossing the road would inevitably lead to the accident. This approach reduces the event to a kind of fatalism or determinism, presenting the accident as a tragic yet unavoidable occurrence.

Check Your Progress:

1. What is the primary purpose of Brecht's epic theatre, and how does it differ from illusionistic theatre?
2. How does Brecht's example of the street scene illustrate the role of the actor in epic theatre? (100 words)

4.5 Brecht Versus Stanislavski

Konstantin Stanislavski, the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre and arguably the most influential theatre director and theorist of the twentieth century, developed a groundbreaking theory of acting that revolutionized performance in theatre and film. Understanding epic theatre—particularly Brecht's concept and practice of acting as the demonstration of socially significant events, both through and inherent in the character—would be incomplete without examining the Stanislavskian method.

This method is one of experiencing a role. An actor must fully internalize the role before its outward representation. To achieve this, the actor must be thoroughly and completely immersed in the play. Acting, according to Stanislavski, is an involuntary, subconscious act that must be guided and controlled by conscious thought. It is important to note the subtle yet crucial distinction between the role of conscious thought in Stanislavski's and Brecht's approaches. Brecht emphasizes the actor's critical and conscious judgment of the character's situation, while Stanislavski's method does not allow any critical distance between the actor and the character. Instead, it encourages the actor to find continuity with the character's inner life. For Stanislavski, the actor's conscious process involves determining what is credible and truthful on stage, enabling the actor to experience emotions analogous to the character's. These emotions are drawn from the actor's own lived experiences and are naturally evoked rather than artificially expressed through external gestures. Experiencing a role, then, means deep emotional identification with the character, allowing the emotions to arise organically. Stanislavski's pedagogy is rooted in the principle that theatrical expression must originate from the actor's inner emotional experience. The more committed an actor is to this internal process, the greater the artistic merit of the performance and its emotional

impact on the audience. Throughout his work, Stanislavski emphasizes the internality of theatrical action, writing, "All action in the theatre must have an inner justification" (*An Actor's Handbook*, 8).

Epic theatre operates on a fundamentally different critical framework. Consider the example of the street accident: actions depicted on stage do not need to be justified or justifiable. Instead, they can be presented as strange, shocking, or as events requiring intellectual engagement, comprehension, or even criticism. While the Stanislavskian model of theatre is rooted in the division between inner life and outward manifestation—where the former shapes the latter—Brecht views a character primarily as a significant social phenomenon. The purpose of demonstration in Brechtian theatre is to articulate a social truth rather than delve into the depth of a character. In Stanislavskian theatre, the actor is tasked with navigating and negotiating the diverse possibilities of situations to authentically articulate the character's inner life. Brechtian theatre, however, does not aim to create a fully realized human personality. As Brecht writes in *Brecht on Theatre*, "Our demonstrator need not imitate every aspect of his character's behaviour, but only so much as gives a picture." The focus is on portraying the social significance of actions rather than achieving psychological realism.

Epic theatre's focus is not exclusively on meditating on human nature or behaviour; instead, it depicts socio-historically significant human actions in a manner that reveals the underlying social laws. It is inherently geared toward intervening in social processes. Human nature, in this framework, is considered changeable. While people's social behaviours are shown not as eternally fixed but as contingent on external socio-political factors, they are also portrayed as capable of behaving differently in varying socio-political contexts. Thus, spectators are not presented with an unchanging, fixed human reality but are encouraged to engage with reality critically. This approach is distinctly anti-Aristotelian. Aristotelian drama, which persisted into modern theatre through influential directors like Stanislavski, is the very tradition against which Brecht's epic theatre reacts. As Brecht writes in *Brecht on Theatre*, "The drama in our time still follows Aristotle's recipe for achieving what he calls catharsis" (157).

Check Your Progress

1. What is the key difference between Stanislavski's and Brecht's approach to an actor's relationship with their character?
2. What is the difference between experiencing a role and 'demonstrating a character'?

4.6 Alienation Effect: The Core Principle of Epic Theatre

Brecht first uses the term *alienation effect* (in German, *Verfremdungseffekt*) in an article titled "On Chinese Acting." However, the term *alienation* had already appeared in an earlier article, "Theatre for Pleasure and Theatre for Instruction." Brecht was likely influenced by the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *priemostranenie*—the "device for making strange"—which may have inspired his development of the idea. Brecht observed certain elements in Chinese theatre and acting that subtly contributed to the alienation effect. One such element is the use of symbols and gestures. A more significant feature of Chinese acting is the actor's persistent awareness of being watched by the audience, which leads to a deliberate breaking of the fourth wall.

It is pertinent to illustrate the concept of the 'fourth wall' here. In theatre, particularly in the illusionistic tradition of Europe, which Brecht critiqued so thoroughly, actors perform as if they are neither watched nor overheard by an audience, creating the impression of an invisible "fourth wall" separating them from the viewers. This convention maintains the illusion of reality within the performance. The fourth wall is momentarily broken only when an actor moves downstage and directly addresses the audience. In realistic and naturalistic theatre, an actor's awareness of the audience is often considered a symptom of bad acting, as it disrupts the seamless immersion in the narrative world. He deliberately breaks the fourth wall to undermine the illusion of reality and to establish a direct, critical relationship between the actor and the audience. By stepping out of the narrative world of the play, actors invite the audience to reflect on the socio-political themes presented on stage rather than passively consuming the story. This technique transforms the audience from mere spectators into active participants, encouraging intellectual engagement and critical thought.

The actor demonstrates the role like an acrobat. A crucial aspect of this process of demonstration is the actor's observation of themselves—a glance at their body and performance with a sense of strangeness. This approach denaturalizes the object and estranges what is self-evident and commonplace. It prepares the audience to remain emotionally detached from the character or action. However, it is important to avoid misunderstanding the actor's handling of emotions in epic theatre. Epic theatre, grounded in the principle of alienation, is not a cold or detached demonstration of dramatic action. It does not demand the complete exclusion of emotion in performance. As Brecht writes, although Chinese acting might appear cold and emotionless, “that does not mean that the Chinese theatre rejects the portrayal of feelings” (*Brecht on Theatre*, 185).

Brecht's own plays offer numerous instances where situations accumulate emotional intensity. Emotions are often conveyed on stage through gestures, presented in such a way that the audience understands them critically rather than becoming immersed. The portrayal of emotion in Brechtian theatre is deliberate and calculated, aiming not to evoke empathy but to encourage analysis of the emotional dynamics in a social or political context.

We have already discussed how Stanislavski developed a system in which the actor fully transforms into the character. Brecht's technique of alienation, in contrast, rejects this total transformation and instead advocates for a mode of *quoting* the character being played. While it might be easier for an actor to perform the external signs of emotions without feeling the inner moods, merely mechanical modulations of voice, facial expressions, or body movements do not automatically create the alienation effect. “But it does occur,” writes Brecht, “if the actor at a particular point unexpectedly shows a completely white face, which he has produced mechanically by holding his face in his hands with some white make-up on them” (*Brecht on Theatre*, 187).

This moment of unexpected detachment forces the audience to question not only the actor's performance but also the nature of the character's emotions and their broader significance within the narrative. The alienation effect is not about eliminating emotion but about presenting it in a way that interrupts the audience's tendency

to passively consume the story, compelling them to actively reflect on the underlying social and political realities.

SAQ:

1. What is the primary purpose of the alienation effect in Brechtian theatre, and how does it influence the audience's engagement with the performance? (100 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. How does Brecht's use of gestures and symbols, as well as the actor's observation of themselves, contribute to creating the alienation effect on stage?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

4.7 Summing Up

Bertolt Brecht's concept of "smokers' theatre" envisions a form of theatre where the audience watches the action unfold with a sense of detachment, akin to spectators at a sporting event. In this kind of theatre, Brecht sought to engage the audience intellectually, encouraging them to think critically rather than becoming emotionally absorbed in the performance. He believed that the audience should be treated as intelligent observers capable of forming their own interpretations. To this end, Brecht aimed to present incidents on stage in a straightforward, unembellished manner, allowing the audience the freedom to reflect and interpret

the events independently. As he remarked, "I give the incidents baldly so that the audience can think for itself" (*Brecht on Theatre*, 14). This approach aligns with his critique of theatrical "muzziness," where the clarity of a play's meaning could be obscured by an actor's performance or a production's interpretative choices.

Central to Brecht's epic theatre is the primacy of reason. By focusing on rational engagement, the emotional and private aspects of human experience are deliberately downplayed. Brecht advocated for a "cold, classical, and objective" style of presentation, contrasting sharply with the Aristotelian emphasis on emotional catharsis and character development. Instead of portraying characters as fixed and coherent selves, Brecht emphasized human beings as dynamic entities shaped by contradictions. As he famously observed, "Nobody can be identically the same in two unidentical moments" (*Brecht on Theatre*, 15). This perspective informed his dramatic techniques, which favored rupture and discontinuity over linear character arcs.

Brecht's epic theatre sought to break away from the conventions of contemporary German theatre, which he criticized for its mediocrity and failure to engage the audience. His approach to acting was equally radical. Brechtian acting required performers to maintain a critical distance from their characters, rejecting full emotional immersion. This detachment was essential for fostering intellectual engagement rather than emotional identification in the audience. When asked whether this acting method should be introduced gradually, Brecht argued against it. He believed that gradual adoption would create a sense of loss for conventional acting styles, which could alienate the audience. Instead, he insisted that the method be introduced as a radical innovation, capable of jolting the audience out of their passive acceptance of traditional theatrical norms.

Brecht's epic theatre is not merely an abstract concept but a comprehensive theatrical practice. It incorporates specific techniques in acting, dramaturgy, stage design, music, and even the use of film. By presenting the material in a clear and accessible manner, without superimposed interpretations, Brecht ensured that his theatre remained intelligible and engaging. His ultimate goal was to transform theatre into a space where critical thinking could thrive,

challenging both performers and audiences to actively question the world around them.

4.8 References and Suggested Readings

- Benjamin, Walter. “What is Epic Theatre?” *Illuminations*. The Bodley Head Ltd, 2015.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Giles, Steve and Marc Silberman, eds. Hill and Wang, 1964.
- Willett, John. *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*. Methuen Drama India, 2020.

xxx

Block- II

Unit 1: Theatre of Cruelty

Unit 2: Expressionism

Unit 3: Theatre of the Absurd

Unit 4: Feminist and queer Theatre

Unit 5: Post-colonial and Post-dramatic Theatre

Unit 6: Introduction to Modern Drama

UNIT- 1

THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Unit structure:

1.1. Objectives

1.2. Introduction

1.3. Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty

1.4. Key Elements of the Theatre of Cruelty

1.5. Some notable works by Antonin Artaud

1.6. The Theatre of Cruelty's Influence on Subsequent Theatrical Movements

1.7. Summing Up

1.8. References and Suggested Readings

1.1. Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- *analyze* the Theatre of Cruelty as a theatrical genre;
- *know* about its evolution, influence, and contribution to drama and theatre;
- *learn* about Antonin Artaud's contribution to literary drama;
- *understand* the key features of theatre of cruelty.

1.2. Introduction

The theatre of cruelty was a revolutionary theatrical movement pioneered by the French playwright and philosopher Antonin Artaud in the early decades of the 20th century. Artaud's notion of the theatre of cruelty was basically designed to disrupt the traditional Western form of drama and create a more engaging and immersive experience for the audiences. The theatre of cruelty mostly emphasized on the emotional fervor of the audience through the projection of corporeality like gesture and movement, evoking sensory experiences and compelling the

audience to confront their raw emotions. Artaud's idea of the theatre of cruelty emerged from his dissatisfaction with conventional theatre that prioritized intellect over emotion. He developed his ideas in a series of letters and essays that were collected in his manifesto, *The Theatre and Its Double*, in 1938.

1.3. Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty

Artaud's perception of theatre was not merely a staged performance before a passive audience. For him, theatre is like a ritual, a custom, that invokes in us a fierceness and acts like a spiritual therapy that awakens our dormant emotions and passion. For him, theatre is a sacred, transformative practice and not merely a source of entertainment. In his seminal text, *The Theatre of Cruelty*, Artaud recounts that—

The Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigour and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid. (66)

Artaud's dominant theory of the theatre of cruelty was to project the audience into the heart of the action, compelling them to engage with the performance instinctively. The main objective of the theatre of cruelty was not to cause pain or harm exclusively but rather to be violent enough to shatter the fallaciously presumed reality, to shock the spectators out of their complacency. Artaud sought to engage the audience with the performative representation of the dangers of life, rather than be passive spectators indifferent to what has been exhibited on the stage. He emphasized on sound effects rather than spoken words or dialogue like loud screams, melancholic sob, eerie noise, strange cries, unsettling the audience and inducing a sense of unease in them. According to him, words are not sufficient to express or evoke every human emotion.

Artaud observed that the Western theatre specifically focused on the psychological struggles of certain individuals or the social problems of some specific groups rather than addressing the innate universal human conditions. His vision for the Theatre of

Cruelty emerged from his dissatisfaction with conventional theatre. He expressed his admiration for the Eastern forms of theatre and distraught for the Western forms in his text, *The Theatre and Its Double*. He sought to awaken the subconscious mind of the audience by inflicting a form of cruelty that strikes the human senses like piercing cries, glaring stares, gibbering screams, etc. Artaud was convinced that a unique theatrical experience can aid in purging destructive feelings and experience emotions that are socially compelled to repress. He believed that language or words are inadequate in expressing all the human emotions or the trauma that is caused due to repressed emotions. Artaud speculated new design for theatre, for setting of the stage, use of props, sitting alignments of audience, etc. He envisioned an open space for theatre performances, with the audience at the middle while the actors performed around them, thus breaking the fourth wall and directly engaging the audience with the act. Bright lights and overwhelming sounds were mostly used for stage effects to startle the audience's sensibilities and engross them in the theatrical experience. Artaud propounded and professed the complete theatrical genre of the theatre of cruelty but produced only one literary work, a play called *Les Cenci*, that resonated with his claimed theories of the drama form. The play ran for only seventeen performances and was not very well acknowledged.

SAQ:

Q.1. How does Antonin Artaud define the Theatre of Cruelty? Elaborate.

.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.2. What was the main objective behind Artaud's idea of the Theatre of Cruelty?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

1.4. Key Elements of the Theatre of Cruelty

Let us discuss the major elements of the Theatre of Cruelty as a theatrical form:

- **Cruelty**

As discussed earlier, Artaud's perception of cruelty does not imply to physical violence or harmful activities. Its main objective is to startle the audience by executing cruelty-driven acts that completely deviates from the conventional forms of theatre meant solely for the purpose of entertainment. The Theatre of Cruelty is driven by psychological shocks that challenges the usually common perceptions of people and force them to think a different picture, departing from the conventional way of looking and understanding things. Its main aim is to address the social issues that are not commonly spoken about but are rather kept hidden or camouflaged by certain set norms that are deemed essential for the normal functioning of the society. The theatre of cruelty aims at unraveling and addressing the unsettling truth about the society and the human condition that are often overlooked or deliberately ignored.

- **Physicality**

Artaud emphasized on the use of physical movement, gestures, and facial expressions to convey emotions. He believed words or dialogues are insufficient to discern everything a human being experiences or endures. Hence, it is necessary to introduce other medium that can evoke the dormant emotions and help an individual to purge the repressed sensations. He sought to trigger and stimulate the subconscious mind of the audience by imposing a form of cruelty that assaults the human senses like shrilling cries, glowering stares, clamorous screams, etc. Artaud identified that Theatre of Cruelty can assist in yielding sensory experiences among the spectators by incorporating some specific sound or light effects that startle or shock the senses of the viewer, thus engaging them directing with the act. He focused on creating visceral experiences in the audience rather than gratifying their premeditated expectations.

- **Language and Dialogue**

Artaud was critical of the traditional notion of language and dialogue. He believed that language is inadequate in expressing the subconscious mind of the audience as well as incompetent to convey the right emotion and truth. Artaud questions the use of logical, rational language in theatre. He emphasized more on rhythm, sound, and light setting rather than words and dialogues. He preferred disjoint and non-linear conversation with fragmented statements and interrupted speeches, building intensity through repetition and rhythm. He favored the use of illogical, surreal form of dialogues that defy logic and rationality, introducing dreams, fantasies, and irrational elements. The major role of language in the Theatre of Cruelty is to shock and disrupt audience's expectations and complacency and invoke emotional resonance to convey the instinctive subconscious mind. Artaud emphasized the importance of physical gestures as well as silence and startling noise to create tension in the audience.

- **Set and Lighting Design**

Artaud challenged the traditional theatre setting and lighting conventions. He wanted to furnish an engaging, immersive ambience for the audience that delivers multisensory experience through specific sound, smell, and vision. He favored an abstract setting, a simple, unadorned open space which breaks the fourth wall between the actors and the audience, fabricating a surreal, non-realistic environment. He focused on the use of dynamic lighting to evoke and convey different emotions. He also devised use of shadows and silhouettes to build mystery and tension among the viewers. Artaud's *The Cenci* (1935) made use of abstract setting and dynamic lighting while his *The Spurt of Blood* (1925) was designed in a minimalist setting with special emphasis on shadow work to induce the desired effect upon its audience.

- **Role of Audience**

The Theatre of Cruelty aimed at active participation of the audience with direct engagement with the act on stage. Artaud challenged the traditional role of audience as passive observer and emphasized on transforming them into collaborators with close physical proximity with the performers. He foregrounds the involvement of the audience in enhancing the performance of the

act. He sought to blur the boundaries between the actor and the audience by deconstructing the conventional stage setting. The ultimate goal is to produce shock and awe in the audience as they experience intense emotional purgation leading to a spiritual awakening and transformation.

Check Your Progress:

Q.1. What is the nature of cruelty that the Theatre of Cruelty emphasizes on? Discuss.

Q.2. Why do you think physicality is significant factor of the Theatre of Cruelty? How does it enhance the theatrical form?

Q.3. Why does Artaud questions the traditional role of the audience in a theatre?

1.5. Some notable works by Antonin Artaud

The Theatre of Cruelty evolved through Antonin Artaud's literary and theatrical works; its impact felt across literary genres and art movements through the centuries. Some of his works are discussed below:

- ***The Cenci* (1935)**

The Cenci (1935) is a five-act play by Antonin Artaud, adapted from Percy Bysshe Shelley's classic, *The Cenci* (1819). The play revolves around the Cenci family and narrates the story of the late 16th century nobleman, Francesco Cenci and his daughter, Beatrice Cenci. This is the only literary work that conforms to Artaud's concept of the Theatre of Cruelty as it dramatizes the abuse inflicted upon Beatrice by her ruthless, sadistic father, Count Cenci. Each act in the play represents a distinct emotional and psychological state of the characters. Count Cenci's abuse of his own daughter can be seen as a critique of patriarchy and abusive societal norms while Beatrice's rebellion is symbolic of women empowerment and resistance against oppression. The narrative follows a non-linear and fragmented structure in a surreal, symbolic setting. Artaud directed the original play in 1935 as well as played the role of Cenci in the play. The play challenges the traditional normative theatre through Artaud's innovative plot-structure, stage

setting, and unusual character development. The play explores themes of cruelty, power, societal dissension, and rebellion through the dynamics of Cenci family's inherent tension and conflicts.

- ***Les Coupes (1931)***

Les Coupes (The Cup) is one of the earliest literary works by Antonin Artaud that explores the relationship between two characters, addressed as The Man and The Woman in the play. The play is known for Artaud's innovative use of physicality and gesture combined with a vivid use of imageries, sound, and rhythm to express repressed emotions and the characters' subconscious mind. The play is a short narrative, divided into five scenes, each representing a distinct emotional and psychological state of the characters. The setting indicates a surreal, illusory atmosphere, with major emphasis on space and movement. The presence of another character, The Shadow, represents the mysterious working of the subconscious. The Man in the play is the central character, struggling with his own desires and frustrations. The Woman is an enigmatic figure, representing desire and unattainability. The props used during the act also serve as significant imageries in the play. The cutleries like The Cups symbolize desire and emotional emptiness, while the Knife represents cruelty and violence. The shattering of the cups due to the violent exchange between the Man and the Woman symbolizes the destruction of desires in the play. In the final scene, both the Man and the Woman depart, leaving the Shadow on stage, reflecting on the characters' emotional void and desolation. Artaud involves dramatic techniques like fragmented dialogues and disjoint conversations to reflect on the characters' disintegration along with repetition of phrases and actions to highlight the cyclic nature of desire and frustration. Silence plays a significant role in shaping the narrative or the act. Prolonged silences emphasize on the characters' emotional distress and desperation in the play.

- ***The Spurt of Blood (1925)***

The Spurt of Blood is a short play by Antonin Artaud, composed in a single scene, showcasing a profound dramatic moment in a surrealist setting. The play centers around two characters, The Young Man and The Woman, both embodying individual struggles arising from uncontrolled desires and how it

culminates into violence and destruction. Another symbolic character, The Statue, represents the fluid, chaotic nature of human desire in stark contrast to its rigid, unyielding structure. Artaud uses the stream-of-consciousness dramatic technique and a vague, unstructured language to mirror the characters' internal thoughts and intentions. A vivid use of metaphors and imageries like the flowers symbolizes the ephemeral nature of human life while the knife embodies violence and destruction in the play. Artaud involves a strategic use of silence and pause amidst conversations to exert tension and reflect on the uncertainty, especially in human relationships. The significant themes explored in the play include violence, sexuality, desire, destruction, and disintegration of identity.

In addition to theatrical compositions, Antonin Artaud also wrote several essays, radio play, and film scenarios. His *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938) is one of his most significant non-fictional works which outlines his major ideas and perceptions regarding the Theatre of Cruelty as well as his critique of traditional theatre, denouncing the role of audience as passive observer while advocating a more immersive and engaging experience for them. *The Umbilicus of Limbo* (1925) is a collection of essays by Artaud that recounts his thoughts and ideas on theatre, art, and the human condition. He also scripted a radio play, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*, in 1947 where he employs sound, voice, and distorted language to create a sense of disorientation and chaos. The radio play explores themes of madness, identity, and social control and dominance, which are also commonly relevant in many of his other works. He further wrote a film scenario, *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), exploring a clergyman's relationship with a woman with a vivid use of imageries and symbolism. He was greatly influenced by Expressionist and Surrealist ideals which can be prominently witnessed in his works. He dwelled on the Surrealist idea of the subconscious while Expressionism inspires him to reflect on physicality and intense emotions. His use of rituals and mythology in his works is influenced by the Greek theatre traditions.

Check Your Progress:

Q.1. What was the inspiration for Artaud's play, *Les Cenci*?

Q.2. What does the Shadow represent in Artaud's *Les Coupes*?

Q.3. What is the symbolic significance of silence in the play, *Les Coupees*?

Q.4. What are the major dramatic techniques Artaud used in the play, *The Spurt of Blood*?

Q.5. Name a radio-play by Antonin Artaud.

Q.6. When was Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* published?

1.6. The Theatre of Cruelty's Influence on Subsequent Theatrical Movements

The theatre of cruelty influenced many theatrical movements as it explored the human condition and existential concerns of the twentieth century modern society. Artaud's rejection of traditional narrative structures inspired many subsequent movements to challenge the conventional norms that predominated the theatrical world for a long time. Artaud's emphasis on gestures, movements, sound, and light over words and dialogue impacted and antedated physical theatre and performance art. His exploration of the subconscious mind over intellect and reason resonated with absurdist and surrealist movements. Artaud's critique of societal norms and reality inspired existentialist and postmodern movement. The theatre of cruelty immensely influenced the theatre of the absurd. Many of the absurdist playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet reflect on Artaud's emphasis on absurd, illogical, and the irrational over rationality and reason as significant elements of theatrical creations. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is a prime example of theatre of the absurd that is structured by illogical narrative, inconsequential dialogues, repetition of conversations, and acts, gestures and movements showing boredom and unproductivity, which resonates with Artaud's views and ideas regarding theatre and plays. Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1959) is a social satire and absurdist play and a critique of societal norms and conformity. Artaud's philosophical concerns influenced playwrights like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger to explore the concepts of individual liberty, responsibility, and the human condition, providing new dimension to existentialist theatre. Many forms of experimental theatre like the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, etc. drew inspiration from

Artaud's unique and innovative approaches to theatrical performances. Many postmodern playwrights like Caryl Churchill, Heiner Müller, Robert Wilson among others used Artaud's ideas of fragmented and distorted narrative styles for their plays. Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) follows a non-linear, disjoint narrative and emphasizes mostly on visual and physical elements rather than mere words and dialogues to enhance and engage the audience's role in the performance.

Artaud's rejection of the traditional theatre conventions and devising newer methods of story-telling, stage designs, and character development mainly influenced the Experimental Theatre. His focus on evoking emotions and creating sensory experience influenced contemporary performance art and theatre. His emphasis on physicality and gesture, body movements and facial expressions continues to inspire and influence contemporary physical theatre, dance, and performance art. His collaboration with artists from various disciplines like visual arts and music have inspired contemporary interdisciplinary collaborations. The Open Theatre, founded by Joseph Chaikin, explores Artaudian principles of collaborative process encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration among artists. Artaud have influenced many playwrights and directors across ages with his theatre ideas. Samuel Beckett was influenced to undertake the Theatre of the Absurd by Artaud's emphasis on absurdity and existentialism. Eugene Ionesco was inspired by Artaud's innovative experimental ideas to explore absurdity and surrealism in his own plays. Even Tadeusz Kantor was inspired by Artaud's ideas to develop the concept of Impossible Theatre. The Living Theatre, founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, was influenced by Artaud's emphasis on immersive theatre. Ariane Mnouchkine's Theatre du Soleil incorporates Artaud's idea of active engagement of the audience by stimulating sensory experience to trigger their subconscious mind. Inspired by Artaud's take on expressing trauma by shocking the senses, artists like Louise Bourgeois and Frida Kahlo express emotional intensity through their visual arts. His idea of active audience participation, negating their passive role continues to inspire contemporary theatre artists to re-evaluate audience's role even in the present times.

1.7. Summing Up

Antonin Artaud's exemplary innovative ideas have influenced contemporary theatre and performances through the centuries and continue until the present times. His emphasis on experimentation and deconstructing conventional boundaries remains a mainstay of contemporary experimental theatre. Artaud's focus on direct and active engagement of audience with the performance has influenced contemporary immersive theatre practices. Artaud's concept of cruelty was to confront the audience with raw emotions and unsettling truth, revealing the darker side of the society and its norms. The Theatre of Cruelty was innovated as a form of trauma-sensitive practice to acknowledge and address trauma through artistic expressions. Artaud's cruelty forces audiences to confront uncomfortable truths, mirroring impacts of repressed trauma. Artaud's influence continues to inspire experimental and avant-garde theatre even today.

1.8. References and Suggested Readings

Artaud, Antonin. "The Theatre of Cruelty". *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, edited by Eric Bentley, Penguin, 1968, Pp-66

Artaud, Antonin and James O. Morgan. "The Theatre and Cruelty". *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3, May 1958, pp. 75-77
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1124955>.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1124955>

Allet, Natacha and Christy Wampole. "Myth and Legend in Antonin Artaud's Theater". *Yale French Studies*, No. 111, 2007, pp. 143-156. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20479376>

Cohen, Hilary. "Artaud's 'The Cenci'". *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1982, pp. 132-135 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145436>.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1145436>

Dasgupta, Gautam. "Remembering Artaud". *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2, May, 1997, pp. 1-5.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3245858>

Finter, Helga and Matthew Griffin. "Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: The Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty". *TDR (1988-)*, Vol. 41, No. 4, Winter, 1997, pp. 15-

40<https://doi.org/10.2307/1146659>.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146659>

Goodall, Jane. "Artaud's Revision of Shelley's "The Cenci": The Text and its Double". *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1987, pp. 115-126. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41153273>

Greene, Naomi . "Antonin Artaud: Metaphysical Revolutionary". *Yale French Studies*, No. 39, 1967, pp. 188-197
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2929492>.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2929492>

Ho , Christopher . "Antonin Artaud: From Center to Periphery, Periphery to Center". *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2, May, 1997, pp. 6-22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3245859>

Jannarone, Kimberly . "Audience, Mass, Crowd: Theatres of Cruelty in Interwar Europe". *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 2, May 2009, pp. 191-211. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40587389>

Knapp , Bettina. "Artaud: A New Type of Magic". *Yale French Studies*, No. 31, 1964, pp. 87-98 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929726>.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2929726>

Lyons, John D. "Artaud: Intoxication and its Double". *Yale French Studies*, No. 50, 1974, pp. 120-129
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2929470>.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2929470>

Marowitz , Charles . "Notes on the Theatre of Cruelty". *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1966, pp. 152-172
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1125194>.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1125194>

Sharpling, Gerard. "Women's Stage: Female Characters in Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty". *Dalhousie French Studies*, Vol. 66, 2004, pp. 39-52.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40838342>

xxx

UNIT- 2

EXPRESSIONISM IN THEATRE

Unit Structure

2.1 Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 The Expressionist Movement

2.4 Expressionism in Theatre

2.4.1 Key Characteristics of Expressionism in Theatre

2.4.2 Evolution and legacy

2.4.3 From Expressionism to Epic Theatre

2.5 Expressionist Theatre: Major Playwrights and Works

2.6 Summing Up

2.7 Reference and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit on Expressionism in Theatre, learners will be able to:

- *define* the concept of Expressionism and trace its origins in the early 20th-century German theatre;
- *identify* and describe the key characteristics of Expressionist theatre;
- *compare* the techniques used in Expressionist drama with those of Realist theatre, focusing on how Expressionism challenges conventional narrative forms and audience expectations;
- *analyse* how the themes that expressionist plays take up including the portrayal of societal contradictions and psychological states;
- *learn* about important expressionist playwrights and their works.

2.2. Introduction:

Modern drama encompasses a variety of movements that challenged traditional narratives and theatrical conventions. Expressionism, one such movement, emerged in the early 20th century and influenced not just theatre but also painting, music, poetry, and film. Characterized by a highly subjective style, Expressionism sought to externalize internal emotions and thoughts, often distorting reality to convey deeper truths. This rejection of conventional narrative structures marked a significant shift from movements like Naturalism and Realism.

One of the main distinctions between Expressionism and Naturalism lies in their treatment of reality. While Naturalism aimed to represent life as it is, without embellishment, Expressionism was more concerned with depicting the internal emotional and psychological states of characters, often through distorted or exaggerated means. This allowed Expressionist theatre to become a medium for exploring inner conflicts, existential crises, and the alienation brought about by modern life.

The socio-political context of the early 20th century, particularly the aftermath of World War I, played a significant role in shaping Expressionism. The devastation of the war led to widespread disillusionment with traditional values and societal norms. As a result, Expressionism emerged as a response to the chaos and alienation experienced by individuals in an increasingly mechanized and industrialized world.

In the context of modern literature, there were notable shifts away from the conventional characteristics of every genre. In drama, this resulted in a variety of styles and forms that Modern drama came to be known by, each named after its defining features. These include kitchen-sink realism, neo-realism, absurd drama, the comedy of menace, dark comedy, and the drama of cruelty, among others. This unit will focus on one particular form of Modern drama: Expressionistic theatre.

Expressionism, as a movement, started in the early 20th century and spread across various artistic genres, including painting, drama, poetry, prose, film, and music. It is characterized by a distorted style and form, which is highly subjective and abandons conventional

narrative and meter. Born out of a growing sense of disillusionment in society, the Expressionists sought a complete break from tradition.

One common theme that runs through Expressionism is anti-Realism. Initially, Expressionism began as a form of windy neo-Romanticism and eventually developed into a hard-headed, dialectical kind of realism. The movement was marked by several defining characteristics: a rejection of realism in favour of dreamlike states; non-linear, often disjointed structures; and the use of imagery and symbolism instead of naturalistic depictions. Artists in this movement bore witness to the alienation of the individual, which they saw as a defining trait of modern life. Expressionism conveys the angst that comes with knowing our spiritual needs cannot be fulfilled by modern societal constructs. It actively resists the dehumanization of individuals within the modern urban landscape.

Similarly, other key characteristics in Expressionist theatre, poetry, and film include a resistance to defining characters too rigidly. Expressionist artists believed that focusing on superficial details would detract from the essence of the work. As a result, characters are often symbolic representations of society, reduced to their social functions rather than being fully individualized. Consequently, characters in Expressionist works often lose their individuality and become hollow speakers of societal ideas.

Another noteworthy feature of Expressionism is its fragmented structure. Expressionist works reject conventional structures, opting instead for loosely connected, autonomous scenes. These fragmented scenes reflect the fragmented, often post-meaning nature of life, suggesting that events are no longer driven by narrative but are instead shaped by character development and inner turmoil.

Check Your Progress

1. Define expressionism and elaborate its basic characteristics.

2.3 The Expressionism Movement:

The term “Expressionism” was first applied to painting. It was initially thought to have been coined by the French painter Julien-

Auguste Herve in 1901, but John Willett later discovered that the term had been in use at least half a century earlier. While Impressionists aimed to depict more of external reality, Expressionists sought to convey their personal experiences, focusing on the inner ideas or visions of what they saw. Expressionists rejected realistic styles, dismissing them as mere imitation. They were uninterested in objective reality and refused to be confined to surface detail.

Although the term "Expressionist" can be applied to artworks from various eras, it is most closely associated with modern artists working in Germany in the early 20th century. Influenced by the dramatic, emotive works of Post-Impressionist painters like Vincent Van Gogh and Edvard Munch, Expressionist artists sought to transcend literal depictions of nature. They also connected with a long tradition of expressive Germanic religious art, dating back to the European Middle Ages. Among the notable German Expressionist groups were *The Bridge* (Die Brücke) and *The Blue Rider* (Der Blaue Reiter). These artists—including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, Marianne Werefkin, and Franz Marc—stood in opposition to the academic realism taught in European art schools at the time. They aimed to reinfuse art with emotion and spirituality, breaking down the rigid boundaries between art, music, performance, and other forms of creative expression (Styan 1-2).

Expressionism quickly flourished and spread across Europe, with artists such as Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele in Austria and Sonia and Robert Delaunay in France adopting the movement. However, with the rise of the German Nazi party in 1933, modern artists faced persecution for the so-called 'degeneracy' of their work. Many were forced to emigrate to other parts of Europe or the United States. The Nazi party held an infamous exhibition in 1937 titled *Degenerate Art* (Entartete Kunst), after removing 20,000 modern art pieces from state-owned museums. Approximately 650 works were displayed with derogatory labels aimed at discrediting the artists. After the Second World War, works by German Expressionist artists, such as those from *The Blue Rider* group, regained popularity through exhibitions like the *1938 Exhibition of Twentieth Century German Art* at the Burlington Galleries in London. During the post-war years, an increasingly abstract form of

Expressionism emerged in the United States, known as Abstract Expressionism. Later, in the 1980s, Neo-Expressionist artists would revive Expressionist techniques internationally in response to the Minimalism of the 1970s.

To fully understand the rise of Expressionism, it is essential to consider the historical context from which it emerged. The movement was born during a time of great societal and political upheaval. The Industrial Revolution had transformed the world, creating an increasingly mechanized and industrialized society. This industrial reality often became central to Expressionist works, as exemplified by Georg Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy (1917–1919), which is set in a gas plant. The outbreak of the First World War horrified and simultaneously inspired many Expressionist artists. While some, like members of *Der Blaue Reiter*, lost their lives in the war, other writers took up the pen to capture the horrors of mass death and destruction. The war shattered the prevailing belief that life would continuously improve with technological advancements. Expressionist texts, in particular, presented a modern, disillusioned society whose values and beliefs had been destroyed in the chaos of war

Check Your Progress

1. How did the goals and techniques of Expressionist painters differ from those of the Impressionists?
2. Discuss how the socio-political context of the early 20th century, especially the Industrial Revolution and World War I, influenced the development of Expressionism.

2.4 Expressionism in Theatre:

Expressionism, as a movement, made its most significant impact in the realm of theatre in the early 20th century, primarily through its defiant subjectivity and rejection of naturalistic representation. Originating in Germany, Expressionist theatre sought to portray the inner emotional world of characters rather than simply depict their external, realistic surroundings. This radical shift from realism allowed playwrights and directors to explore personal, psychological, and societal themes through vivid, often distorted

and dreamlike imagery, which connected strongly with the prevailing intellectual currents of the time.

2.4.1 Key Characteristics of Expressionism in Theatre

Expressionist plays are marked by several distinctive features that differentiate them from the realistic, plot-driven drama that preceded them:

- 1. Atmosphere and Lighting:** Expressionist theatre often creates a surreal, dreamlike atmosphere. This effect is achieved through the use of shadowy, unnatural lighting and deliberately distorted set designs. The lighting is not meant to illuminate reality but to evoke the subjective emotional state of the characters, frequently plunging the stage into eerie shadow or using harsh contrasts to heighten the psychological intensity. Silence and long pauses are also employed to create an unnerving rhythm in the dialogue, contributing to the surreal, nightmarish mood.
- 2. Set and Decor:** Expressionist sets eschew naturalism, presenting stark, simplified images that directly reflect the play's themes rather than a realistic environment. These sets often feature bizarre, exaggerated shapes, along with dramatic and sensational use of color. The visual design becomes an extension of the characters' inner turmoil, underscoring the emotional, rather than physical, reality of the play.
- 3. Fragmented Structure:** The traditional well-made play's linear progression and clear conflict resolution give way to a more episodic structure in Expressionism. These plays are often broken into a series of disconnected episodes or tableaux, each making its own dramatic point. This fragmentation reflects the chaotic and subjective nature of the human mind and is designed to present a sequence of emotional or philosophical statements rather than a cohesive plot. The emphasis is placed on conveying the intensity of the author's personal vision, often the dreamer or protagonist of the play.

4. **Stereotypical Characters:** Characters in Expressionist theatre are often reduced to nameless, symbolic representations of broader societal roles. Rather than fully developed individuals, characters are often labeled by generic titles such as "The Worker," "The Father," or "The Engineer." This depersonalization allows the play to explore social and political themes on a universal level, making its commentary on the human condition applicable to wider audiences. Masks are frequently used to emphasize this lack of individuality and to evoke the concept of fate or destiny, as highlighted by Yvan Goll's statement that the mask is "unchangeable, inescapable... It is Fate."
5. **Poetic and Disjointed Dialogue:** Expressionist dialogue is often more rhapsodic or fragmented than conversational. It may swing between long, lyrical monologues and short, staccato bursts, disregarding natural speech patterns. This reflects the characters' inner psychological states rather than serving to advance the plot or develop interpersonal dynamics. The language is designed to evoke emotions and ideas directly, rather than through action or plot mechanics, in stark contrast to the naturalistic dialogue found in Stanislavsky's realism.
6. **Anti-Realistic Acting Style:** Actors in Expressionist plays typically abandon the detailed, realistic acting techniques popularized by Stanislavsky. Instead, their movements are often exaggerated or mechanical, evoking the image of puppets rather than autonomous human beings. This deliberately unnatural style emphasizes the emotional or symbolic nature of the characters and heightens the surreal, often grotesque atmosphere of the production. While this heightened acting style can lend itself to comedy, as seen in certain works like Gogol's *The Inspector General*, it is equally effective in more serious, tragic contexts.

2.4.2 Evolution and Legacy:

Although German Expressionism, as a formal movement, was short-lived—unable to withstand the rise of authoritarianism and the brutalities of war—it laid the groundwork for later developments in

theatre. The early fervor of Expressionism, with its dramatic protest against industrialization, mechanization, and societal repression, influenced major 20th-century playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Sean O'Casey, and Arthur Miller. These writers absorbed the movement's aesthetics, modifying its techniques to suit the demands of more mature, socially conscious drama.

In America, Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) exemplifies the continued influence of Expressionism in its portrayal of a psychological journey through a series of symbolic episodes. Likewise, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923) explores the dehumanizing effects of industrial society, using non-realistic settings and characterization to critique the modern world's mechanistic values.

2.4.3 From Expressionism to Epic Theatre:

One of the most significant heirs of Expressionist drama was Bertolt Brecht, who developed *epic theatre* as a reaction to the emotional excesses of the earlier movement. While Expressionism sought to immerse the audience in the subjective world of the protagonist, Brecht's epic theatre aimed to foster critical detachment, engaging the audience's intellect rather than their emotions. Brecht borrowed the episodic structure of Expressionism but repurposed it to make didactic, political statements that encouraged reflection rather than immersion.

Through these various adaptations and evolutions, Expressionism has remained a potent force in modern theatre, leaving an indelible mark on both dramatic form and theatrical aesthetics. From the fragmented realities of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* to the poetic, often fractured dialogue of Tennessee Williams's plays, Expressionism's influence is felt in some of the most iconic works of the 20th century. Its legacy continues in contemporary theatre, film, and even television, where distorted perceptions and intense emotional states are frequently explored in visually striking ways.

Check Your Questions

1. Discuss the key characteristics of Expressionist theatre and how they differ from the conventions of Realist drama.

2. How did Expressionism influence later theatrical movements, particularly Brecht's Epic Theatre?

2.5 Expressionist Theatre: Major Playwrights and Works

In theatre, Expressionism became a powerful tool for depicting psychological conflict, alienation, and social criticism. The playwrights associated with this movement used stark, non-naturalistic settings and exaggerated actions to explore the human condition and its relationship with an oppressive, mechanized world. Below, we explore some of the major playwrights and their key works that shaped Expressionist theatre.

1. Georg Kaiser:

Georg Kaiser is one of the most prolific and influential figures in Expressionist drama. His work delves deeply into the inner struggles of the individual as they confront societal forces. Two of his most famous works, *The Burghers of Calais* (1917) and *From Morn to Midnight* (1917), exemplify his focus on existential questions.

In *The Burghers of Calais*, Kaiser adapts the historical tale of citizens offering their lives to save their city, focusing on themes of sacrifice and collective responsibility. However, through the Expressionist lens, the characters' inner turmoil takes precedence over historical accuracy, reflecting Kaiser's concern with the emotional consequences of self-sacrifice. *From Morn to Midnight*, on the other hand, follows a bank clerk who rebels against his monotonous existence, only to find that liberation from societal expectations leads him to an existential crisis. The play's dreamlike structure and use of distorted imagery convey the protagonist's alienation from the world.

2. Ernst Toller

Ernst Toller was not only a playwright but also a political activist, and his works reflect the revolutionary spirit of the time. His play *Transformation* (1919) explores the psychological and political awakening of its protagonist in the aftermath of World War I. Toller's plays often highlight the struggles between individuals and the masses, between personal freedom and societal constraints. His

Man and the Masses (1923) grapples with these tensions through allegory and symbolic action. Set against the backdrop of revolution, Toller's characters struggle to find meaning in a world filled with chaos and conflict.

Toller's use of fragmented dialogue, surreal imagery, and stark contrasts between light and dark exemplifies Expressionism's focus on depicting internal conflict. His works provide insight into the disillusionment of a generation scarred by war and societal upheaval, while also serving as a call for collective political action.

3. Reinhard Sorge

Reinhard Sorge's *The Beggar* (1912) is one of the earliest examples of Expressionist theatre. In this play, Sorge presents a symbolic struggle between life and death, where characters embody abstract ideas rather than represent fully developed individuals. *The Beggar* challenges traditional narrative structures, relying on stark imagery and minimalist dialogue to evoke a sense of existential dread. The play's spare, fragmented structure and philosophical depth foreshadow the future direction of Expressionist drama.

Sorge's work reflects a deeply personal exploration of religious and existential themes, blending intense psychological conflict with symbolic action. His plays, while not as widely performed as those of some of his contemporaries, remain important for their pioneering role in the development of the movement.

4. Walter Hasenclever

Walter Hasenclever's play *The Son* (1914) deals with generational conflict, a theme that resonated deeply with Expressionist artists who were questioning the authority of previous generations. *The Son* presents a young man's rebellion against his authoritarian father, a theme that mirrored the social upheaval of the time, as many young people sought to break free from societal expectations.

Hasenclever's work is characterized by its emotional intensity and its focus on the psychological consequences of this conflict. He uses heightened, poetic language and stark, symbolic settings to depict the protagonist's inner turmoil and eventual tragic downfall. The play also reflects the larger societal discontent brewing in pre-World

War I Europe, where questions of authority, identity, and personal freedom were coming to the fore.

5. Hans Henny Jahnn

Hans Henny Jahnn's plays, such as *Pastor Ephraim Magnus* (1917) and *Coronation of Richard III* (1922), delve into dark psychological states and extreme emotional experiences. Jahnn's work is known for its intense exploration of themes such as death, sexuality, and power. His characters often find themselves trapped in morally ambiguous situations, reflecting the broader Expressionist concern with the complexity of human nature.

Jahnn's use of shocking, sometimes grotesque imagery, and his willingness to confront taboo subjects, set his plays apart from other Expressionist works. His dramas offer a glimpse into the darkest corners of the human psyche, while also commenting on the societal pressures that drive individuals to extreme actions.

6. Arnolt Bronnen

Arnolt Bronnen's plays *Parricide* (1922) and *Bird of Youth* (1922) are provocative explorations of violence, family conflict, and rebellion. In *Parricide*, Bronnen examines the act of killing a parent, using this as a metaphor for breaking free from societal and familial constraints. The play's shocking content and intense emotional depth mark it as a quintessential work of Expressionist theatre.

Bronnen's plays are notable for their boldness in addressing taboo subjects and their exploration of the psychological roots of violence and rebellion. His works reflect the turbulent atmosphere of the early 20th century, where traditional values were being challenged, and new forms of personal and political expression were emerging.

7. Eugene O'Neill

Although Eugene O'Neill is better known for his naturalistic plays, his works *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), and *The Great God Brown* (1922) incorporate Expressionist elements. *The Hairy Ape* follows the story of a laborer who becomes disillusioned with the dehumanizing effects of industrial society, while *The Emperor Jones* explores themes of power, race, and

identity through the psychological disintegration of its protagonist. O'Neill's use of non-linear narratives, stark symbolism, and exaggerated emotions aligns him with the Expressionist tradition, even as his works maintain a distinct American context.

8. Sophie Treadwell

Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928) is a landmark of American Expressionist drama. The play tells the story of a woman who, trapped in a loveless marriage and an oppressive society, eventually murders her husband. Treadwell uses Expressionist techniques such as fragmented dialogue, stark lighting, and a non-realistic set to depict the protagonist's increasing alienation. The play is a powerful critique of the societal constraints placed on women in the early 20th century, and its exploration of emotional and psychological entrapment resonates with many of the themes central to Expressionism.

9. Elmer Rice

Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1927) is another key example of American Expressionist theatre. The play critiques the dehumanizing effects of mechanization and modern society through the story of Mr. Zero, an office worker replaced by a machine after decades of service. Rice's use of surreal, non-realistic settings and his focus on the protagonist's internal struggle highlight the emotional and existential concerns of Expressionist theatre.

Rice's work reflects the broader societal concerns of the time, particularly the fear that industrialization was stripping away individuality and human agency. His plays, like those of his contemporaries, blend social critique with a deep exploration of psychological conflict, making them key works in the Expressionist canon.

10. Lajos Egri

Lajos Egri's plays, such as *Rapid Transit* (1923) and *Believe Me or Not* (1933), deal with the personal dilemmas of individuals struggling within modern society. Although Egri is better known for his work on playwriting theory, his plays explore themes of alienation and personal conflict, employing Expressionist techniques

to convey the emotional turmoil of his characters. Egri's work is less well-known than that of other playwrights in this tradition, but his contribution to Expressionist theatre remains significant, particularly in his focus on the psychological underpinnings of character behaviour.

Check Your Progress

1. How did Expressionist playwrights like Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller use their works to address the themes of individual alienation and societal pressures? Provide examples from their plays to support your answer.
2. In what ways did American playwrights like Eugene O'Neill and Sophie Treadwell incorporate Expressionist elements into their works? Discuss how their plays reflect the emotional and existential concerns central to the Expressionist movement.

2.6 Summing Up

Expressionism in theatre emerged as a ground-breaking movement in the early 20th century, primarily in response to the limitations of Realism. Where Realism focused on depicting everyday life and external events with objective accuracy, Expressionism turned inward, prioritizing the emotional and psychological experiences of individuals over their interactions with the outside world. It sought to capture the inner turmoil, alienation, and existential struggles of human beings in a rapidly changing society. Through exaggerated gestures, non-linear narratives, and symbolic representations, Expressionist theatre aimed to provide audiences with a visceral sense of the characters' emotions, often reflecting the angst and upheaval of the time.

Expressionism was especially prominent in Germany, where it first took root, but it soon spread to other parts of Europe and America, leaving a lasting impact on modern drama. As Sharma et al. note, "Expressionism is a movement that tries to express the feelings and emotions of the people rather than objects and events" (Sharma et al. 76). This shift in focus from external reality to internal experience is one of the defining features of Expressionism. It makes an extreme reaction against Realism, which was often criticized by

Expressionists for being too concerned with surface appearances and not delving deeply enough into the subjective experiences of individuals.

Prominent playwrights of the Expressionist movement, such as Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, and Reinhard Sorge, used their works to explore themes of alienation, rebellion, and existential anxiety. For instance, in plays like *From Morn to Midnight*, Kaiser depicted characters who break free from societal constraints, only to encounter inner conflict and disillusionment. Toller's *Transformation* and *Man and the Masses* focus on the struggles of individuals against oppressive political and social forces, using symbolic settings and fragmented dialogue to mirror the inner chaos of their characters.

Expressionism also spread beyond Germany, influencing American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Sophie Treadwell, and Elmer Rice. O'Neill's plays like *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones* combine social critique with Expressionist techniques, portraying characters whose internal crises reflect broader societal issues such as dehumanization and racial oppression. Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* powerfully uses Expressionist techniques to depict the suffocating constraints placed on women in modern society, particularly through fragmented dialogue and non-realistic sets that convey a sense of psychological entrapment.

The Expressionist movement's influence on modern theatre is also seen in its thematic concerns with societal disintegration, industrialization, and the erosion of individual identity. As seen in Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, the dehumanizing effects of modern life are highlighted through characters trapped in mechanized, bureaucratic systems. The play's symbolic, non-naturalistic elements further emphasize the sense of alienation and existential dread that pervades much of Expressionist theatre.

Another critical aspect of Expressionism is its focus on abstract ideas and symbolic representation. Playwrights like Walter Hasenclever and Hans Henny Jahnn often used surreal settings and extreme emotional intensity to depict struggles between individuals and oppressive social structures. Hasenclever's *The Son*, for example, dramatizes the generational conflict between a young man

and his authoritarian father, while Jahn's *Pastor Ephraim Magnus* delves into darker psychological and existential themes, pushing the boundaries of conventional theatre.

In conclusion, Expressionist theatre made a significant break from the Realist tradition, focusing instead on the subjective, emotional experiences of individuals. This movement, which began in Germany, quickly spread to English and American drama, influencing a wide range of playwrights. By using non-linear plots, fragmented dialogue, and symbolic imagery, Expressionist dramatists sought to convey the inner turmoil and existential crises of their characters, often as a response to the social and political upheavals of their time. Through their innovative techniques and intense focus on emotional truth, these playwrights left an indelible mark on the landscape of modern drama, shaping the way we understand and engage with theatre today.

2.7 Reference and Suggested Readings

Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Wordsworth Engage Learning, 2005.

Bradbury, Malcolm, and James Mcferlane. *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature*. Penguin Books, 1991.

Styan, J.L. "Modern Drama in Theory and Practice". *Expressionism and Epic Theatre*, volume 3, 978-0-521-22739-1

xxx

UNIT- 3
THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Unit Structure:

3.1 Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Camus, Esslin and the Theatre of the Absurd

3.4 Key Elements of the Theatre of the Absurd

3.5 Notable plays and playwrights in the Theatre of the Absurd

3.6 The Theatre of the Absurd's Legacy and its Influence on Subsequent Theatrical Movements

3.7 Summing Up

3.8 References/ Suggested Reading

3.1 Objectives

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- *analyze* the Theatre of the Absurd as a literary genre;
- *understand* the key features of the Theatre of the Absurd;
- *know* about its evolution, influence and contribution to drama and theatre;
- *learn* about the contributions of Absurdist playwrights to literary drama.

3.2 Introduction

In this unit, we will learn about the Theatre of the Absurd, a distinct theatrical movement that emerged in the mid-twentieth century. The movement reflected the existentialist notion that human existence is inherently devoid of meaning. The Absurdist theatre developed following the ravages of the two World Wars, and the spiritual and moral aridity that characterized the era. That human existence is meaningless was articulated by French philosopher Albert Camus in

his 1942 essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”, where he described the human condition as “absurd”.

The term “Theatre of the Absurd” was coined by critic Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1960). In his book, Esslin identified a group of playwrights whose works exemplified the aforementioned philosophy, including Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. These dramatists shared a common theme: the portrayal of human life as nonsensical and purposeless, and the futility of communication where comprehension is unreachable. Absurdist plays often blend elements of tragedy and comedy, resulting in a tragicomic tone. This juxtaposition highlights the paradoxes inherent to the human condition – moments of happiness and levity exist alongside those of profound despair and grief.

The roots of the movement can be traced back to the avant-garde experimentations of the 1920s and 1930s. However, it gained prominence in the post-World War II era. The widespread devastation and existential angst following the war led many to question traditional narratives of hope, meaning, and purpose; this created optimum conditions for Absurdist themes to resonate with audiences and readers. To reflect the chaos of the time, Absurdist theatre uses nonsensical language, illogical scenarios, and unconventional stage settings. Audiences are confronted with the absurdity of seeking inherent meaning in a chaotic world.

3.3 Camus, Esslin and The Theatre of the Absurd

Albert Camus introduced the concept of the “absurd” in his 1942 essay “Le Mythe de Sisyphe” (or, “The Myth of Sisyphus”). In the essay, Camus explores the human quest for meaning in an indifferent universe, using the Greek mythological figure Sisyphus as the central metaphor. According to the myth, Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to eternally push a boulder up a steep hill in Tartarus, only for it to roll back down each time he reaches the summit. Camus interprets this endless and futile labour as representative of the human condition – man persistently seeks purpose and significance in a world that offers none. This realization leads to what Camus terms the “absurd”, a conflict between

humanity's desire for meaning and a silent, indifferent universe (an essentially godless world).

Camus argues that once people become aware of this absurdity, they face a fundamental choice – to succumb to despair and contemplate suicide, or to embrace the absurd and continue living in defiance of it. He argues in favour of the latter, stating that acknowledging the meaninglessness of life allows one to live more authentically. Therefore, Camus raises Sisyphus to the stature of 'absurd hero', one who is fully conscious of his plight but nevertheless, embraces his fate without the hope of redemption. Camus concludes that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy", since doing so grants him and us a measure of contentment. Camus attempts to make us confront the absurd, hopeless nature of our world without resorting to false hope or nihilism. His concept has impacted the Theatre of the Absurd profoundly, resulting in works that depict the futility and perseverance found in the human condition.

Martin Esslin proposed the name of the 'theatre of the absurd' for the dramatic movement in his 1960 book *The Theatre of the Absurd*. In this work, Esslin identified and analyzed a group of dramatists whose work shared a common theme: the portrayal of human existence as fundamentally absurd and devoid of meaning. He focuses on playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. Their plays often featured illogical plots, nonsensical dialogue, and characters trapped in incomprehensible situations; they reflected the existentialist philosophy of the times. Esslin's analysis provided a framework to understand these unconventional works; these plays deviated from traditional narrative structures and challenged audiences to confront the irrationality of the human condition. Esslin's text was instrumental in bringing recognition to the Theatre of the Absurd as a distinct movement. By analyzing the similarities in the works of the above playwrights, he provided critics and audiences a lens through which to interpret and appreciate the plays. The text also encouraged further experimentation in the theatrical community, and fostered a tradition of new works that embraced the principles of absurdity and existentialism.

Esslin's book, therefore, defined and analysed a significant movement of modern theatre. By identifying the characteristics of Absurdist drama and exploring its philosophical roots, Esslin's book

influenced the development of the genre, and contributed to the discourse on the role of art in understanding human existence.

Self-Asking Questions:

1. What does Camus conclude at the end of his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”?

.....
.....

2. In brief, what was the context in which Absurdist theatre developed?

.....
.....

3. Which notable playwrights does Esslin include in the Absurdist theatre movement and why?

.....
.....

Stop to Consider:

- **Existentialism:** It is a philosophical movement that asserts that people create meaning in an inherently meaningless or absurd world. Its proponents include Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger.
- **Nihilism:** A philosophical doctrine that suggests the absence of intrinsic meaning or value in life. Its most famous proponent is Friedrich Nietzsche, who declared “God is dead” to signify the collapse of traditional religious and moral values. Other proponents include Ivan Turgenev, N.G. Chernyshevsky, and Prince Peter Kropotkin.

3.4 Key Elements of the Theatre of the Absurd

Since the Theatre of the Absurd sought to represent a meaningless and absurd world, it used unconventional and innovative dramatic techniques. Key elements of this dramatic movement include:

- **Illogical Plots and Nonlinear Structure:**

Absurdist plays often abandon traditional narrative structures, presenting events in a disjointed, circular, or repetitive manner. This reflects the unpredictability and irrationality of life. For example, in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the protagonists engage in seemingly purposeless activities while awaiting someone who never arrives, emphasizing the futility of their actions.

- **Minimalist Settings:**

The settings in these plays are typically sparse and undefined, creating a sense of universality and timelessness. This minimalism strips away specific contexts, focusing attention on the existential themes being explored. In *Waiting for Godot*, the barren landscape with a single tree shows the desolation and emptiness experienced by the characters.

- **Incongruous Dialogue:**

Language in Absurdist theatre is often fragmented, filled with clichés, puns, repetitions, and non-sequiturs. This reflects the inadequacy of language as a tool for genuine communication. In Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, characters engage in nonsensical conversations, highlighting the breakdown of meaningful dialogue.

- **Existential Themes:**

Central to Absurdist plays is the exploration of existentialist themes, such as the search for meaning, the isolation of the individual, and the absurdity of the human condition. These themes challenge audiences to confront the uncertainties and inherent meaninglessness of life.

- **Tragicomedy:**

Absurdist plays often blend elements of tragedy and comedy, creating a tragicomic tone. This juxtaposition reflects the simultaneous humor and despair found in the human experience. As Nell remarks in Beckett's *Endgame*, "Nothing

is funnier than unhappiness... it's the most comical thing in the world." (Beckett 14)

- **Cyclical or Static Action:**

Rather than progressing towards a resolution, Absurdist plays often feature repetitive or cyclical actions, emphasizing the futility and monotony of human endeavors. This structure mirrors the existential belief in the repetitive nature of life.

- **Existential Characters:**

Characters in Absurdist plays are often archetypal or symbolic, lacking detailed backgrounds or development. They represent universal aspects of the human condition, such as the struggle for meaning or the experience of isolation.

- **Disruption of Time and Space:**

Absurdist theatre often manipulates time and space, presenting them as fluid or distorted. This challenges conventional perceptions and underscores the instability of reality.

- **Use of Silence and Pauses:**

The strategic use of silence and pauses in dialogue emphasizes the inadequacy of language and the isolation of individuals. These moments of silence can be as expressive as dialogue, conveying the unspoken tensions and existential angst of the characters.

- **Metatheatrical Elements:**

Some Absurdist plays incorporate self-referential or metatheatrical elements, blurring the line between performance and reality. This technique invites audiences to reflect on the nature of theatre and its relation to life.

Stop to Consider:

In this unit, we are discussing the dramatists of the Absurdist Movement. However, several fiction-writers have also contributed to the genre, most notably Franz Kafka with his *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*, and Albert Camus's *The Stranger and the Plague*. A precursor to Absurdist writing was the 19th century poet and writer Edward Lear, who was noted for his limericks and literary nonsense. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* also employs nonsensical language and illogical scenarios. Polish writer Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, and Russian writers Daniil Kharmis and Nikolai Erdman were also known for exploring Absurdism and the nature of reality through their works.

3.5 Notable Plays and Playwrights in the Theatre of the Absurd

According to Esslin's text, the following playwrights were prominent exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd:

a) Samuel Beckett (1906–1989): He was an Irish playwright, novelist, and poet, renowned for his significant contributions to the Theatre of the Absurd. Beckett's works often depict characters in bleak, minimalist settings, grappling with themes of existential despair, the futility of action, and the inadequacy of language.

Notable plays by Beckett include:

- **Waiting for Godot (1953):**

This play features two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait endlessly for the mysterious Godot. Their wait is punctuated by repetitive dialogue and encounters, emphasizing the absurdity and purposelessness of their situation. The absurdity is further heightened by the presence of Pozzo and Lucky, a master-servant duo who may not be who they seem to be. The play is a cornerstone of the Theatre of the Absurd, highlighting existential themes through its minimalist setting and circular

structure. Beckett himself translated his original French into English, making the play available for a wider audience.

- **Endgame (1957):**

Set in a confined, post-apocalyptic environment, the play centers on Hamm, a blind and paralyzed man, and his servant, Clov, who is unable to sit. Their interactions, along with Hamm's legless parents confined to ashbins, explore themes of dependency, the passage of time, and the cyclical nature of existence.

- **Krapp's Last Tape (1958):**

An aging writer, Krapp, listens to recordings of his younger self, reflecting on his past aspirations, regrets, and the passage of time. The play delves into memory, identity, and the inevitable decline associated with aging.

- **Happy Days (1961):**

The protagonist, Winnie, is buried up to her waist in the first act and up to her neck in the second, yet she maintains an optimistic demeanor. Through her monologues and interactions with her husband, Willie, the play examines human resilience, denial, and the persistence of routine amidst encroaching oblivion.

Beckett's plays are characterized by their minimalist settings, repetitive dialogue, and exploration of existential themes, making him a pivotal figure in the Theatre of the Absurd.

b) Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994): He was a Romanian-born French playwright and a leading figure in the Theatre of the Absurd. His works often highlight the futility of communication and the absurdity of human existence, employing nonsensical dialogue and surreal scenarios to reflect the existential dilemmas of modern life. Here are some of his notable plays:

- **The Bald Soprano (*La Cantatrice chauve*, 1950):**

This play satirizes the banality and meaninglessness of human communication. It features two couples, the Smiths and the Martins, engaging in nonsensical conversations filled with clichés and non sequiturs, ultimately highlighting the breakdown of meaningful dialogue.

- **The Lesson (*La Leçon*, 1951):**

A young female student arrives for a lesson with an elderly professor. As the session progresses, the professor becomes increasingly domineering and aggressive, leading to a tragic conclusion. The play explores themes of power, domination, and the dangers inherent in authoritarianism.

- **The Chairs (*Les Chaises*, 1952):**

An elderly couple prepares to deliver an important message to a gathering of invisible guests. As they arrange chairs for the unseen audience, their anticipation grows, but the orator they hire to convey the message turns out to be mute. The play delves into themes of isolation, the search for meaning, and the futility of human endeavors.

- **Rhinoceros (*Rhinocéros*, 1959):**

In a small town, inhabitants begin transforming into rhinoceroses, symbolizing the spread of conformity and the loss of individuality. The protagonist, Bèrenger, resists the metamorphosis, highlighting the struggle to maintain personal integrity in the face of mass movements.

Ionesco's plays are characterized by their innovative use of language, absurd scenarios, and deep existential themes, making him a pivotal figure in modern theater.

c) Jean Genet (1910–1986): He was a French playwright, novelist, and poet whose works delve into themes of identity, power, and societal marginalization. His plays often

challenge conventional morality and explore the complexities of human relationships through provocative and symbolic narratives. Here are some of his notable plays:

- **The Maids (*Les Bonnes*, 1947):**
Inspired by the true story of the Papin sisters, this play portrays two maids, Solange and Claire, who engage in elaborate role-playing games, alternating between the roles of mistress and servant. Their fantasies escalate, leading to a plot to murder their employer. The play examines themes of power dynamics, identity, and class struggle.
- **Deathwatch (*Haute Surveillance*, 1949):**
Set in a prison cell, the drama revolves around three inmates: Green-Eyes, who is on death row for murder, and two others, Maurice and Lefranc, who vie for his favor. The play explores themes of jealousy, power, and the human desire for recognition.
- **The Balcony (*Le Balcon*, 1957):**
Set in a high-class brothel during a revolution, clients enact their fantasies of power by dressing as figures like judges, bishops, and generals. As the external political situation becomes chaotic, the lines between reality and illusion blur, questioning the nature of authority and the constructs of societal roles.
- **The Blacks (*Les Nègres*, 1959):**
A troupe of Black actors stages a ritualistic play-within-a-play, enacting the trial and execution of a white woman before an all-Black court. The performance challenges racial stereotypes and confronts colonial oppression, exploring themes of identity, performance, and rebellion.
- **The Screens (*Les Paravents*, 1961):**
An epic and controversial play set against the backdrop of the Algerian War of Independence, it presents a fragmented narrative focusing on a peasant named Saïd and his experiences. The play delves into

themes of colonialism, resistance, and the complexities of identity amid conflict.

Genet's plays are renowned for their poetic language, complex characterizations, and exploration of taboo subjects, making him a significant figure in 20th-century theatre.

d) Arthur Adamov (1908–1970): He was a French playwright of Armenian descent and a prominent figure in the Theatre of the Absurd. His works often explore themes of alienation, the futility of human endeavors, and the complexities of identity. Some of his notable plays include:

- **La Parodie (*The Parody*, 1950):**
This play features a handless clock looming over characters who incessantly question one another about time, symbolizing humanity's futile search for meaning in an indifferent universe.
- **L'Invasion (*The Invasion*, 1950):**
The narrative delves into the human condition, portraying characters grappling with existential dilemmas and the encroachment of external forces disrupting their lives.
- **Le Professeur Taranne (*Professor Taranne*, 1953):**
The protagonist, a university professor, faces accusations of various misdemeanors, including public nudity and plagiarism. As he vehemently denies these charges, his denials are twisted into further evidence against him, highlighting the absurdity of his predicament.
- **Le Ping-Pong (*Ping-Pong*, 1955):**
The play centers on characters obsessed with a pinball machine, to which they surrender themselves in a never-ending, aimless game of chance. This serves as a metaphor for humanity's adherence to false objectives and the futility of their endeavors.

Adamov's plays are characterized by their exploration of existential themes, innovative structures, and a deep engagement with the human psyche, solidifying his place as a key contributor to modern theatre. Other than these

dramatists, Harold Pinter is also an important playwright of the movement.

Check Your Progress:

1. What do the major elements of Absurdist theatre include? (60 words)
2. Who were the playwrights included by Esslin in his text? Discuss one major work by each. (60 words)

3.6 The Theatre of the Absurd's Legacy and Its Influence on Subsequent Theatrical Movements

At its core, the Theatre of the Absurd redefined the relationship between form and content in drama. By abandoning logical narratives and embracing fragmented, non-linear structures, it paved the way for experimental storytelling techniques. This shift encouraged playwrights to explore the human condition through abstract and symbolic means; drama now focused more on existential themes and the absurdity of human existence. The movement's focus on the breakdown of communication and the inadequacy of language inspired dramatists to experiment with dialogue, often employing disjointed, repetitive, or nonsensical speech to reflect the complexities of human interaction. This introspective approach allowed for a deeper exploration of psychological and philosophical themes, influencing the development of character-driven narratives in contemporary theatre.

The extensive influence of the Absurdist movement is evident in its global reach and its role in shaping various theatrical movements. Its emphasis on existential themes and the human condition resonated with audiences worldwide, leading to adaptations and interpretations across diverse cultures. The movement's challenge to traditional theatrical norms inspired subsequent movements such as Postmodern Theatre, which further deconstructed narrative structures and embraced meta-theatricality. As stated before, it encouraged a more introspective and critical approach to storytelling which has been adopted by contemporary playwrights. Its legacy lies in its continuous inspiration to subsequent movements to challenge and redefine the boundaries of theatre.

3.7 Summing Up

In this unit, I have provided an introduction to the Theatre of the Absurd as well as philosophers and critics who were influential in it. I have also provided details of prominent playwrights of the movement and their notable plays. We have also discussed the legacy of the Theatre of the Absurd, and its influence on subsequent theatrical movements. In further units, you will be reading Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a pivotal text of the Absurdist movement. I hope it will give you greater insight into the movement's proponents and general themes.

3.8 References and Suggested Readings

- Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame*. Faber and Faber
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Anchor Books, 1961.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Vintage Books, 1955.

xxx

UNIT- 4

FEMINIST AND QUEER THEATRE

Unit Structure:

4.1 Objectives

4.2 Feminist Theatre

4.2.1 The rise and roles of Feminist Theatre

4.2.2 British Feminist Theatre

4.3 Queer Theatre

4.3.1 Queer Theatre and Performativity

4.3.2 The Queer turn in American Theatre

4.3.3 Lesbian Theatre

4.3.4 Broadway and Queer Theatre

4.3.5 British Queer Theatre

4.4 Summing Up

4.5 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives:

Cambridge Dictionary defines “theatre” as “the art or activity of writing and performing plays, or the public performance of plays.” In common usage, theatre is used synonymously with drama. Theatre as a literary genre is distinct from other genres such as poetry, prose and fiction with regard to its performative essence. The literary success of a drama is predicated on its staging. This unit seeks to make the learner familiar with two categories of literary theatre— (a) feminist theatre and (b) queer theatre. By “literary theatre,” I imply “any performance that is based on written script” (Kirby 103). The objectives of this unit are as follows:

- *to define* the categories and trace their literary genealogies;

- *to explain* the generic aspects of each category;
- *to discuss* how historical events play a vital role in shaping their literary journeys;
- *to show* how theatre companies contribute to the rise of political theatre (feminist theatre and queer theatre);
- *to discuss* how they bring a revolution in theatre;
- *to cite* examples of significant feminist and queer plays;
- *to make* the learner acquaint with key concepts;
- *to clarify* terminologies that are required to discuss the two forms of theatre.

4.2 Feminist Theatre

It is self-evident that the word “theatre” is prefixed by the adjective “feminist.” From the role played by the adjective in forming the expression it can be deduced that feminist theatre is informed by feminist overtones. In her book *Feminist Drama: Definition and Critical Analysis*, Janet Brown defines feminist drama in the following words: “If the agent is a woman, her purpose autonomy, and the scene an unjust socio-sexual hierarchy, the play is a feminist drama” (16). Feminist theatre, according to Helene Keyssar, concerns “the creation of significant stage roles for women, a concern with gender roles in society, exploration of the texture of women’s worlds and an urge towards the politicisation of sexuality” (xi). Keyssar, in *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women*, goes on to argue that “feminist plays attempt to pay attention to the lives of women— as individuals, in relation to each other, and in relation to men” (3). Lizbeth Goodman calls feminist theatre “action-oriented political theatre by and/or for women, concerned with one or more of the following: positive images in the representation of women, issues of women’s status, women’s rights, women’s creativity, and

the basic tenets of the Women's Liberation" (66). Feminist theatre resists the hierarchical power structure of conventional theatre practice. As Nancy S. Reinhardt argues, "[T]he structure of traditional Western drama, an "imitation of an action," is linear, leading through conflict and tension to a major climax and resolution . . . One could even say that this aggressive build-up, sudden big climax, and cathartic resolution suggests specifically the male sexual practice. (36-37). Traditional western drama's masculine aspect is not noticeable in feminist drama that depicts experiences "central to women's collective history— childbirth, nurturing, mother-daughter bonds, sexual exploitation etc." are represented and stresses "the alternative dramatic forms (usually cyclic) and the uniquely female language best suited to dramatizing them" (Schroeder 108, 108). From the explanations provided by the scholars it can be deduced that feminist drama is rooted in the politics of the gender binary and seeks to challenge it through strong women characters.

Stop to Consider

Gender: Gender, in the words of Judith Butler, is "the social significance that sex assumes within a given culture" (5).

Gender roles: They "are socially created behaviours differently assigned to men and women" (Mackie 3).

Sexuality: It refers to both identity and act (Tauches 173). To put it simply, sexuality, as an identity, depends on the object of desire that an individual craves for, and it, as an act, is based on sexual acts performed by an individual.

The gender binary: It refers to the binary of masculine and feminine. It is regarded as the false belief that there are only two genders and one has to choose either of the two genders.

SAQ:

1. What makes feminist theatre political? (30 words)

.....
.....
.....

2. Provide a definition of feminist theatre. (20 words)

.....
.....
.....

3. Write two objectives of feminist theatre. (20 words)

.....
.....
.....

4.2.1 The rise and roles of Feminist Theatre

The 1960s that was a testimony to social movements laid the foundation for feminist drama. As Helene Keyssar notes, “[F]eminist drama had its most immediate roots in the political and aesthetic disruptions of the 1960s” (*Feminist theatre: An Introduction*1). As a theatrical genre, it “emerged . . . in both Great Britain and the United States” (Keyssar1). Feminist theatre became a means to amplify the fact that the personal is political. Theatrical representations of women’s lived experiences¹ demonstrated the impact of patriarchy on women’s lives and connected them “to a large pattern in the material oppression of women” (Canning 531). Feminist theatre was informed by an aim to critique not only the politics of theatre but also the politics of identity. As Charlotte

¹Experience implies “the process of constructing an identity in context. The events, emotions, impressions, and thoughts, comprising that context are inseparable from the identity they produce” (Canning 530)

Canning argues, “Through stage production women could create historical identities for themselves and offer challenges to male hegemony that had so long controlled theatre history both on and off the stage” (533). History became a subject-matter for feminist playwrights who sought to represent forgotten histories of women or to retell history from a female perspective (Keyssar, *Feminist theatre: An Introduction* 3). Women dramatists began to challenge gender bias endemic to theatre, thereby rewriting its generic ambitions.

Some examples of American feminist theatre groups are—The Westbeth Playwrights Feminist Collective, The B & O Theatre, The Rhode Island Feminist Theatre in Providence, Circle of the Witch, and Boulder Feminist Group. The tropes exploited by the theatre groups to fulfil their objectives are as follows: i) the device of sex-role reversal, ii) satirical representation of society, iii) representations of women historical personages, iv) women are placed in oppressive social contexts. Janet Brown argues that “the use of sex-role reversal as a rhetorical device is unique to feminist drama” (88). Men and women shy away from adhering to socio-cultural norms. By reversing the traditional gender roles assigned to the sexed bodies (the male body and the female body), feminist drama illustrates that the gender roles shaping the identity of the sexed bodies are contingent. *Restaurant Blackout* by Patricia Horan and *The Pick Up Schtick* by Dolores Walker and A. Piotrowski exploit the literary device of sex-role reversal.

Although the list of American feminist theatre is exhaustive, let me discuss a few significant feminist plays. Associated with the seventies, Megan Terry, Maria Irene Fornes, and Ntozake Shange are vital feminist playwrights whose plays have received critical recognition. Between the years 1956 and 1970, Terry wrote at least twenty-two plays and that helped her gain the title “Mother of American Theatre” (Keyssar, “Feminist theatre” 178). Terry’s first

play *Approaching Simone* is about Simone Weil, a French girl of Jewish extraction who chooses self-imposed starvation. The play gives fantastic insights into the girl who later canonizes as a saint. The play won an Obie award for best play. Some of her other plays are *Calm Down Mother*, *Do You See What I'M Saying*, and *Comings and Goings*. Maria Irene Fornes's *Fefu and Her Friends* is a prize-winning play that was first performed in May 1976. One of Off-Broadway's best-loved plays, it depicts the lives of eight women. Fornes's other plays include *In Service*, *Eyes on the Harem*, *Evelyn Brown*, *Blood Wedding*, *Life is a Dream*, *Sarita* and *The Conduct of Life*. African-American playwright Ntozake Shange became well-known for her play *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975). The play consists of a series of poetic monologues and has no continuous plot. In the play, "performance power is divided among seven women, articulated by colours, as in "lady in red," "lady in blue," "lady in yellow," until the rainbow is complete" (Keyssar, "Feminist theatre" 190). Shange's other productions include *A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty*, *Boggie Woogie*, *Landscapes*, *Spell No. 7*, and *Black and White Two Dimensional Planes*. She is known for her artistic innovations, especially "the choreopoem." Susan Griffin was an American feminist playwright whose Emmy-winning play *Voices* revolves around the lives of five women who are not familiar to each other. The notion of female autonomy and strength is made clear at the end of the play "when the five actors briefly set up of their unique roles to speak chorally of historical female oppression" (Schroeder 109). In her reading of the play, Patricia R. Schroeder argues, "Griffin's play illustrates that the attempt to create a distinctly female form can provide important insights into women's experiences and that the study of women's history can empower women. . . *Voices* is noteworthy not only for the fluidity of its form

and the poetry of its language, but also for the detailed individuality of its five characters” (109).

Stop to Consider

Choreopoem: It is an innovative literary form created by Ntozake Shange. It is a blend of poetry, storytelling, music, and dance. It is used primarily to portray the emotional states of the characters. Shange’s word for her breakthrough feminist play *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* is choreopoem. Other examples of choreopoem are *How to Exterminate the Black Woman* by Monica Prince, *I Am A Black American* by Peter Shaffer, and *Langston* by Tom

SAQ:

1. Why is the 1960s important in terms of the evolution of feminist drama? (30 words)

.....
.....

2. How does feminist drama prove that gender is contingent? (20 words)

.....
.....
.....

3. Who is known as the “Mother of American Theatre” and why? (20 words)

.....
.....
.....

4. What are feminist theatre groups? Name two scholars of feminist theatre. (20 words)

.....
.....
.....

4.2.2 British Feminist Theatre

Bertolt Brecht's theory and practice influenced the rise of British feminist theatre (Reinelt 154). This implies that British feminist theatre was mainly concerned with the way the sexual division of labour affected women at large. The Red Ladder Theatre, a theatre company swayed by the Labor Movement, created a play titled *Strike While the Iron is Hot* that dealt with "the problem of the relationship between gender and class as well as the problem of the relationship of wage labour to household and family activity" (Reinelt 157). The play dramatizes how the women protagonist, Helen, discovers that women are paid less than their male counterparts and depicts her fight against economic injustice. It "shows how sexist behaviour cuts across class" and establishes "that the traditional division of labor in the home duplicates the oppressive exploitation of workers in work place" (Reinelt 157, 157). Claire Luckham's *Trafford Tanzi* was another feminist drama that was written for the Everyman Theatre Company. Written for a working-class audience, it narrates the story of Tanzi, a young woman from a working-class background. The play depicts Tanzi's ambition to become a women wrestler and employs "wrestling as a metaphor for the struggle against gender-specific oppression and conditioning" (Reinelt 159). The two plays are examples of socialist feminist plays that call for a major shift in social structure.

Some of the examples of British feminist theatre groups are as follows: The Women's Theatre Group (WTG), Monstrous Regiment, Gay Sweatshop, and Siren. Gay Sweatshop and Siren were notable for producing plays about lesbians. Plays about lesbians produced by these theatre companies are feminist in the sense that they challenged socio-cultural apprehension of gender and sexuality, thereby satisfying the objectives of feminist theatre.

SAQ:

1. Explain why lesbian theatre is congruent with feminist theatre? (30 words)

.....
.....
.....

2. Name some unique aspects of British feminist theatre? (20 words)

.....
.....
.....

4.3 Queer Theatre

Queer theatre is a sub-genre of theatre functioning as “a transgressive social practice that demonstrates, through notions of “performativity,” the profitable instability and fluidity of sexuality, as well as of gender, race, and ethnicity” (Dolan 486). Queer theatre does not tend to provide a univocal representation of sexuality, rather it shows how sexuality is ideologically forged “in various ways in different historical moments across cultures” (486). Choosing gender and sexuality as subject matters, it attempts to reorient conventional apprehensions of sexuality and gender. It is believed that “the genre derives its power and definition from identity, infusing its content with preoccupations, styles, and concerns “true” and “authentic” to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and/or queer communities” (Dolan 486). Queer theatre, according to the creators of *The Harvey Milk Show*, creates “a sense of solidarity in their audience by recounting a common history, articulating common problems, and galvanizing the audience to continued unification and resistance” (Pruitt and Hutchison). Since resistance can be considered as an important aspect of queer drama, queer theatre comes close to political theatre.

Political theatre is “theatre, that is made by, about and for certain groups of people— those who are not male, not white, not straight” (Wiltshire et al. 1). Queer theatre looks at the issues faced by the queer community and asks the audience to think about them. Theatre practitioners advocating for political protest use queer theatre as a means to speak out against homophobia.

Stop to Consider:

Donald E. Hall says, “Queer, a term commonly used to deride and vilify same-sex desire people, was reclaimed by the Queer Nation and others as an umbrella term to celebrate, rather than castigate, difference from the “norm” at a time when the oppressiveness and implicit violence of that norm was clear and undeniable. Just as other oppressed groups and individual have “turned the tables,” so to speak, on oppressors by occupying and rewriting meaning of slurs (such as “bitch” or “nigger” in music culture and certain intra communal usages), political action groups responding angrily to governmentally sanctioned homophobia took back a term that drew immediate attention to itself as a (now positive) marker of difference, and that more broadly drew attention to the way language has long been used to categorize and devalue human lives and lifestyles” (53-54)

SAQ:

1. What does queer theatre resist? (20 words)
.....
2. What is unique about queer drama (20 words)
.....
3. What do you understand by the term “queer”? (20 words)
.....

4.3.1 Queer Theatre and Performativity

What hinders queer people from coming out the closet is challenged by the possibilities offered by queer theatre. For a man who is gay, being in the closet means seeking to create his identity by executing the right gender associated with the male sexed body and trying to present himself as a heterosexual person. Queer theatre is interpreted as a metaphor for “anti-closet” (Noreiga et al. 3). Because, staging queer lives provides a means to acknowledge queer voices, represent queer lives, tell queer stories and form a community comprising queer artists and audiences. Queer theatre aims at proving the fact that gender and sexuality is shaped by society. The performative aspects of gender and human sexuality are complemented by theatre. Theatre hinges upon a successful rendition of written plays. In case of human sexuality, rendition implies an individual’s attempt to perform sexually as per sexual norms. Like sexuality, gender “proves to be performative” (Butler 33).²Theatre “best mirrors the performance of gender and the awareness of performativity that have historically been part of the gay experience” (Clum).

Stop to Consider

Judith Butler: She is one of the poststructuralists theorists who argues that gender ends up being performative. She claims that one makes oneself available for comprehension by “becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler 22). Butler talks about “a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female)” (194).

Gay: It is a sexual identity that is exclusively attributed to men who are attracted to men.

²The case of the closeted gay man

SAQ:

1. How does theatre complement the way queer people lead their lives? (100 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. What do you understand by gender performativity? (20 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

4.3.2 The Queer turn in American Theatre

The early part of the twentieth century saw the production of plays like *The Drag*(1927)and *The Captive*(1926). Because they both centered around queer characters, the police tried to shut them down. Hence, playwrights had to look for alternate spaces to stage their plays. Joe Cino’s Café Cinnowas “a storefront coffeehouse and

impromptu performance space” that “offered a fertile workshop for playwrights eager to experiment outside of realist formal conventions that typically ostracized or punished lesbian or gay men” (Dolan 488, 488). An important gay playwright whose career was bolstered by it was Doric Wilson whose play *And He Made a Her* “became ubiquitous in the Café’s repertoire” (Dolan 488). The play is a satire on Adam and Eve and features gay angles, one of them is a gay angel and the other a supper club sophisticate. Wilson’s another play *The Madness of Lady Bright* recounts a drag queen’s loneliness and horror at growing up. Recent work argues that the Stonewall riots of 1960s became a turning point in the rise of queer theatre (Dolan 488; Noreiga et al. 3; Pruitt and Hutchison). The death of Harvey Milk intensified the rise and allowed theatre practitioners to use theatre as a site where they could articulate their voices. Harvey Milk’s life became a source of inspiration for Dan Pruitt and Patrick Hutchinson who jointly produced a gay musical titled *The Harvey Milk Show* which had its first premiere in September 1991 at Actor’s Express, Atlanta. In 1974, Doric Wilson founded the queer theatre company TOSOS (The Other Side of Silence). It was the first professional theatre company to deal exclusively with the gay experience. Wilson, a gay activist, was one of the founders of the Off-Off-Broadway movement. Wilson’s play *Street Theatre* (1982) beautifully sums up the way theatre complements queer life. The play depicts how “openly and collectively performing queer identities in public space” resisted “the forces that criminalized and stigmatized those identities” (Noreiga et al. 3,3). It imagines a panoply of Greenwich Village types congregating just outside the soon to be iconic Stonewall Inn.

Stop to Consider

Harvey Milk: He was the first openly queer person to be elected as a member of the San Francisco City Council. Milk was murdered by the ex-council member Dan White, and his case turned out to be an example of socially sanctioned gay-bashing.

Queer-bashing: It is a physical or verbal assault against someone who does not follow any prescribed sexual and gender norms.

TOSOS: The first professional theatre company to deal openly and realistically with queer experience. Plays written by Brendan Behan, Christopher Hampton, Charles Jurrst, Joe Orton, Terrence McNaly, and Robert Patrick were featured by the company which later was resurrected as TOSOS II.

Drag queen: It refers to men who wear clothes and make-up associated with the other gender.

Stonewall Inn: It is a bar on Christopher Street in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. It is the birthplace of the LGBT rights movement and is declared as a historical site.

SAQ:

1. How is the rise of queer theatre predicated upon the lived experience of the queer man? (50 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

2. Explain how cafes acted as alternate spaces for theatrical productions. (50 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

4.3.3 Lesbian Theatre

So far as American lesbian drama is concerned, it developed parallelly with feminist theatre. Feminist theatre companies played a vital role in producing and staging queer plays centering around lesbian characters. The Women's Experimental Theatre (WET), a theatre company, formed by Roberta Sklar, Sondra Segal and Clare Closs in 1977 "produced performances that quoted canonical texts like Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* to invest them with new meanings about gender and sexuality" (Dolan 489). One point worth noting here is that lesbian drama can be read as a literary endeavour to decenter the way classical theatre produced stereotypes about men and women. Jane Chambers is regarded as the first openly lesbian American playwright who "revolutionized American theatre by her participation in second-wave feminism and the nascent gay and lesbian movement" (Warner 40). Chambers sought help from The Glines, a not-for-profit organization that worked towards dismantling gender stereotypes through art, in staging her play *Last Summer at Bluefish Cave* (1980). The play became an instant success and "played an extensive run at Westbeth Theatre, which is housed in a city-subsidized artists' buildings near the west side pier in Greenwich Village" (Dolan 490). The narrative concerns a group of lesbian friends taking their annual beach vacation at Long Island" (490). The concept of organizing women's theatre festivals in the states was borrowed by Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw from the European festival. Taking inspiration from women's theatre festivals in Europe, they hosted the first Women's One World Festival at the Allcraft Center on St. Mark's Place in October, 1980 (Solomon 42-43). The 1980s witnessed the staging of lesbian plays by the organizers of Women's One World Festival, as a result, the festival had to shift its location to organize the second edition of the festival to other places (44). Maureen Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron contributed to the

development of American lesbian theatre. These five playwrights “emerged as the Five Lesbian Brothers in 1989 at the WOW Café, the now-celebrated feminist theatre collective in New York’s East Village” (Sloan 72). Together, they created four plays about lesbians— *Voyage to Lesbos* (1990), *Brave Smiles . . . Another Lesbian Tragedy* (1993), *The Secretaries* (1994), *Brides of the Moon* (1996). *Voyage to Lesbos*, “a wild, highly sexual romp” (Dolan et al. 66), is “set in a pre-Stonewall midwestern town and focuses on preparations and events leading up to a wedding, the ultimate rite of passage into a future of domestic bliss.” (Davy 164). *Brave Smiles... Another Lesbian Tragedy* mocks “the history of lesbian stereotypes in film and television with a wry, smart, tongue-in-cheek style that won the Brothers audiences beyond the regular denizens of WOW” (Dolan et al. 66). Satire was their weapon which manifests in *The Secretaries* that satirizes “the caricature of lesbians as man-hating Furies by taking the archetype to its extreme” (Dolan et al. 66). “Their aesthetic strategies and method of creating performance material mark them as descendants of the Split Britches troupe,” says Kate Davy (9).

Stop to Consider:

Jane Chambers: Her literary reputation as a queer playwright rests on six plays written by her. They are as follows: *A Late Snow* (1940), *Last Summer at Bluefish Cave* (1980), *My Blue Heaven* (1981), *Kudzu* (1981), *The Quintessential Image* (1982). Her literary contribution is honoured by an annual prize given in her name, The Jane Chambers Award for Playwriting.

Lesbian: It is “just one variety of a larger category called “queer,” which consists of women, and more ambiguously sexed and/or gendered people who differ from the mainstream by their sexual practices or identities” (Eliason et al. 48).

The WOW Café: It grew out of a 1980 feminist theatre festival whose organizers wanted a fixed space for their creative endeavours. Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver established the WOW Café, “a collectively run feminist performance space focusing on work by and for women, which also remains in operation today” (Gillespie 223). This permanent space “allowed for the open exploration of nonnormative desire on stage at a time when male voices dominated both the mainstream and the experimental margins in theatre” (Gillespie 223).

SAQ:

1. Explain what makes lesbian drama different from gay theatre. (20 words)

.....

.....

.....

4.3.4 Broadway and Queer Theatre

American playwrights had to face a lot of difficulties in staging their plays on Broadway. Mart Crowley’s *Boys in the Band* was an off-Broadway show that exploits realism to dramatize “the story of a group of close friends gathering to celebrate a birthday, whose drunken revelries and game of truth inspire vicious accusations and painful confessions and revelations” (Dolan 490). Running for 1001 performances, it was a scathing and honest representation of gay men in New York. Plays like *Bent* (1979) by Martin Sherman and *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982) by Harvey Fierstein, however, opened on Broadway. *Bent* dramatized events that took place over forty years earlier. The persecution of gay men in Nazi Germany shocked audiences. In the play, “gay male love represents

human struggle against a culture of death; the play's realism and its historical themes made its depiction of a gay relationship redemptive and tolerable" (Dolan 490). Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982) comprises three moving plays that are told over three acts— "International Stud," "Fugue in a Nursery," and "Children's First!" It revolves around Arnold Beckoff, a gay Jewish New Yorker who is a drag queen. It shows an effeminate gay man's longings for love and family. The play is semi-autobiographical as Fierstein himself spent most years of his life performing, in drag, in plays written by H. M Koutoukas, Robert Patrick, Ronald Tavel, Megan Terry, and John Vaccaro. Because of its mainstream success, it managed to win Tony Awards in 1983 for Best Play and Best Actor. The success of *Torch Song Trilogy* implies that queer plays not only challenged the ideology of heteronormativity endemic to Broadway but also rewrote the requirements for a Broadway production. So far as lesbian drama is concerned, it has been less successful in finding its way into mainstream commercial venues like Broadway. Lily Tomlin's solo performances *Appearing Nightly* (1977) and *Searching for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1985; revised 2000) were the only two lesbian productions that opened on Broadway (Dolan 497).

Stop to Consider:

Broadway: It is a street in New York City. It is agreed upon that a theatre must reside within a certain radius of Broadway to qualify as a Broadway venue.

Tony Awards: They are prestigious awards for theatrical productions. They are given annually to people for their excellence in plays and musicals staged on Broadway.

SAQ:

1. Why was it difficult for playwrights to stage their queer plays on Broadway? (30 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

2. What is a solo performance? (10 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

4.3.5 British Queer Theatre

In the UK, the rise of gay political theatre was entangled with leftist political agenda. Billy Cowan defines gay political theatre as “work that was specifically made by an organised group of gay people (gay writers, performers and producers), about gay people and for gay people” (158). General Will, a political theatre company that was formed to perform shows about the issues of the working class, played an important role in representing the lived experiences of British queer people. Noel Greig, a member of the theatre company, spoke out against its tendency to focus exclusively on class issues and tried to refashion its objectives. Greig was a playwright, actor and director. Between 1975 and 1977, the company produced plays like *Les Be Friends*, *Present Your Briefs*, *All Worked Up*, *All Het Up*, *I Just Don't Like Apples* in which lesbian and gay issues became the primary subject matters. Noel Greig's *Men* which he co-wrote with Don Milligan was “a play

about masculinity and trade unionism” that “reminds us that the left, was uncomfortable with homosexuality” (Cowan 159, 159). Causes like the decriminalization of homosexuality, the Gay Liberation Movement, and the Theatre Act 1968 resulted in the formation of the British theatre company called Gay Sweatshop. The important figures responsible for the setting up of the company were Roger Baker, Lawrence Collinson, Alan Wakeman, Drew Griffiths, Gordon MacDonlad, Gerald Chapman and John Roman Baker. The company “reached out to universities, trade union venues and Campaign for Homosexual Equality groups as well as theatres by telling personal stories” (Osment and Woddis). After becoming a member of Gay Sweatshop, Noel Grieg wrote his groundbreaking play *As Times Goes By* which became the first historical gay play. Other queer plays produced by the company are *Limitations*, *Thinking Straight*, *Ships*, *Fred and Harold*, and *One Person*.

SAQ:

1. Give two examples of British queer plays. (10 words)

.....
.....

2. Who challenged the exclusionary practices of British political theatre and why? (30 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

3. What are the functions of political theatre? (20 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

Check Your Progress:

1. Discuss how Judith Butler's notion of performativity satisfies the objectives of queer theatre.
2. Explain how queer theatre become a means to represent the political rights of the queer community.
3. Provide a short note on a leading queer figure and explain how his/her life function as a source of inspiration for queer theatre.
4. Try to locate a few similarities between queer theatre and feminist theatre?
5. Trace the growth of American feminist theatre.
6. Discuss how British feminist theatre explores the entanglement between class and gender.
7. Explain how class provides a new perspective to understand the woman question.
8. Define feminist theatre and explain how it strives to challenge the patriarchal set-up of society.
9. Discuss the difficulties faced by playwrights in staging queer plays on Broadway.
10. The exploitation of human sexuality as a subject matter in queer theatre lends a distinct essence to it. Justify this statement.
11. Elucidate how queer theatre rearranges theatre's aims and objectives.
12. Discuss how theatre becomes a means to challenge social injustice.
13. Explain how conventional theatre is interrogated by feminist drama.
14. How does the technique of sex-role reversal fulfil the literary ambitions of feminist theatre.
15. Explain how the use of innovative literary forms like choreopoem enriches the domain of theatre.

4.4 Summing Up

Feminist theatre and queer theatre are examples of political theatre. They qualify as political theatre because these two categories of theatre aim at critiquing the politics of the gender binary and complicating the notion of rights. It can be concluded from the above sections that gender, sexuality, the sexed body become suitable subject matters through which feminist and queer plays critique the gender binary. These two forms of drama do not consider the sex/gender system as absolute, rather they try to demonstrate how the system is responsible for silencing voices. For, the above-mentioned practitioners of feminist theatre and queer theatre, theatre acts as a vehicle for demonstrating how society arranges bodies in terms of class, gender, race, and sexuality. Writers of feminist theatre and queer theatre illustrate how representations can not only challenge existing social hierarchies but also pave the way for empowerment and independence. The domain of theatre is enriched by feminist theatre and queer theatre that re-write the contours of theatre.

4.5 References and Suggested Readings

Brown, Janet. *Feminist Drama: Definition and Critical Analysis*. The Scarecrow Press, 1979.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

Canning, Charlotte. "Constructing Experience: Theorizing a Feminist Theatre History."

Theatre Journal, vol. 45, no. 4, Dec. 1993, pp. 529-540. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3209019>.

Clum, John M, editor. *An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theatre*. Westview Press, 1996.

Cowan, Billy. "Queer Theatre: Introduction." *Scenes from the Revolution: Making Political*

Theatre 1968-2018, edited by Kim Wiltshire and Billy Cowan, Edge Hill University Press and Pluto Press, 2018, pp. 158-169.

Davy, Kate. *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers: Staging the Unimaginable at the WOW Café Theatre*. The University of Michigan Press, 2011.

Dolan, Jill. "Lesbian and Gay Drama." *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*, edited by David Krasner, Blackwell Publishing 2005, pp. 486-503.

Dolan, Jill, et al. *Memories of the Revolution: The First Ten Years of the WOW Café Theater*. University of Michigan Press, 2015.

Eliason, Michele J., and Kris S. Morgan. "Lesbians Define Themselves: Diversity in Lesbian Identification." *Journal of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1998, pp. 47-63. *Springer* *Link*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1026204208243>.

Gillespie, Benjamin. "Split Britches: Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin (New York City, 1980—)." *Fifty Key Figures in Queer US Theatre*, edited by Jimmy A.

Noriega and Jordan Schildcrout, Routledge, 2023, pp. 72-75.

Goodman, Lizbeth. "Feminist Theatre in Britain: a Survey and a Prospect." *New Theatre*

Quarterly, vol. 90, no. 3, February 1993, pp. 66-84.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/new-theatre-quarterly/article/abs/feminist-theatre-in-britain-a-survey-and-a-prospect/7865FA047FF2152345DC79CC2BC5A5FA>.

Hall, Donald E. *Queer Theories*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Keysar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women*. Macmillan Education, 1984.

- . “Feminist theatre of the seventies in the United States.” *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, edited by Brenda Murphy, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 173-194.
- Kirby, Michael. “On Literary Theatre.” *The Drama Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, Jun. 1974, pp. 103-113. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1144907>.
- Mackie, Marlene. *Constructing Men and Women*. Rinehart and Winston, 1987.
- Martin, Carol, editor. *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage*. Routledge, 1996.
- Noriega, Jimmy A., and Jordon Schildcrout, editors. *Fifty Key Figures in Queer US Theatre*. Routledge, 2023.
- Osment, Phillip, and Carole Woddis. “Noel Greig obituary.” *The Guardian*, 23 Sep. 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/sep/23/noel-greig-obituary>.
- Pruitt, Dan, and Patrick Hutchison. “The Harvey Milk Show.” *Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theatre*, edited by John M. Clum, Routledge, 1996.
- Reinelt, Janelle. “Beyond Brecht: Britain’s New Feminist Drama.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 38, no. 2, May 1986, pp. 154-163. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3208116>.
- Reinhardt, Nancy S. “New Directions for Feminist Criticism in Theatre and the Related Arts.” *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: the Difference It Makes*, edited by Elizabeth Langland and Walter Gove, University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 25-51.
- Schroeder, Patricia R. “American Drama, Feminist Discourse, and Dramatic Form: In Defense of Critical Pluralism.” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Spring 1993, pp. 103-118. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/235887961.pdf>.

Sloan, Lisa. "The Five Lesbian Brothers: Moe Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron (New York City, 1989-)" *Fifty Key Figures in Queer US Theatre*, edited by Jimmy A. Noriega and Jordan Schildcrout, Routledge, 2023, pp. 72-75.

Solomon, Alisa. "The WOW Café." *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage*, edited by Carol Martin, Routledge, 1996, pp. 42-51.

Tauches, Kimberly. "Transgendering: Challenging the "normal"." *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, edited by Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, and Chet Meeks. Routledge, 2012, pp. 173-179.

"Theatre." *Cambridge Dictionary*,
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/theater#google_vignette.

Warner, Sara. "Jane Chambers" *Fifty Key Figures in Queer US Theatre*, edited by Jimmy A. Noriega, and Jordan Schildcrout, Routledge, 2023, pp. 40-43.

Wiltshire, Kim, et al. Introduction. *Scenes from the Revolution: Making Political Theatre 1968-2018*, edited by Kim Wiltshire and Billy Cowan, Edge Hill University Press and Pluto Press, 2018, pp. 1-11.

xxx

UNIT- 5
POST-COLONIAL AND POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE

Unit Structure:

5.1 Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Post-Colonial Theatre

5.3.1 Definitions and histories

5.4 Language and power in post-colonial theatre

5.5 Important Works

5.5.1 Post-colonial theatre: significant plays and authors

5.6 Post-Dramatic Theatre

5.6.1 Definitions and histories

5.7 New trends in Post-Dramatic theatre

5.8 Important Works

5.8.1 Post-Dramatic theatre: significant plays and authors

5.9 Summing Up

5.10 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives

In this unit you will be introduced to the field of Post-Colonial and Post Dramatic theatre and their growth and development. After going through this unit you will be able to-

- *explain* the ideas of what constitute Post-Colonial and Post-Dramatic Theatre;
- *discuss* the themes of both the forms;
- *analyse* how these forms are different from other forms of theatre;
- *discuss* the important plays and playwrights of both the forms.

5.2 Introduction

This unit will introduce you to the meaning, history of evolution, philosophical basis and theatrical conventions of the Post-Colonial and Post-Dramatic theatre. The origins and the theories associated with both the forms of theatre will be explored. This unit will also look into the important playwrights and their works that have led to the significant developments of the field. Since both the forms of theatres are constantly evolving with new theories developing at a rampant rate, this unit will seek to see only some of them in great detail.

5.3 Post-Colonial Theatre

5.3.1 Definitions and histories

According to Anita Loomba, “Postcolonial studies have been preoccupied with issues of hybridity, creolisation, metize in-betweenness, diasporas and liminality, with the mobility and crossover of ideas and identities generated by colonialism” (173). However, the term post colonialism is often misinterpreted as merely describing the period after colonialism, rather than encompassing the complex issues outlined by Loomba. In fact, this misappropriation stems from a lack of understanding that colonialism as an ideology was concerned with not just the civilizational, political aspect but instead impinged on every aspect of life of the colonised. The concept of postcolonial theory can also be understood as a framework for examining the cultural dynamics of both third-world societies and marginalized cultures within the first world. Emerging from the intersection of traditional indigenous forms and colonial influences, this theory provides a nuanced lens for analyzing the complex power relationships between language, culture, and identity.

The main aim of post colonialism is to break away boundaries and identify “determinants that create unequal relations of power based on binary oppositions such as ‘us and them’, ‘first world and third world’, ‘white and black’, ‘coloniser and colonised’ (Gilbert & Tompkins, 3). Post-colonial texts are often written with a political aim, that of destabilizing the forces that had once governed them. This aim is rooted in a desire to challenge the dominant narratives and power structures. By destabilizing these forces, post-colonial authors seek to chart out their own. In the words of Stephen Slemon,

post-colonialism is “a form of cultural criticism and cultural critique: a mode of disidentifying whole societies from the sovereign codes of cultural organisation, and an inherently dialectical intervention in the hegemonic production of cultural meaning” (Slemon in Gilbert and Tompkins, p. 3)

This perspective highlights the critical stance of post-colonialism in challenging power structures. Building on this idea, many other scholars have emphasized on the importance of post-colonialism as a political and historical movement. Alan Lawson further develops this notion, describing post-colonialism as a “politically motivated historical-analytical movement [which] engages with, resists, and seeks to dismantle the effects of colonialism in the material, historical, cultural-political, pedagogical, discursive, and textual domains’ (1992,156).

Theatre can emerge as a powerful tool of protest against authority and dominant forces when considered from the postcolonial contexts. However, several obstacles lie in its way, such as censorship and increased restrictions from authorities, as seen in countries like South Africa and Nigeria. The legacy imperialism carried had a profound impact on the cultural landscape, imposing European values and cultures on the oppressed, thus marginalizing indigenous voices. This continues to influence the power dynamics at play, making it even more challenging for local and indigenous forms to gain their due expression and be recognized.

Post-colonial theatre refers to the study of theatrical works which address the ways in which theatre has come up as instrumental in resisting the forces of imperialism. It aims to bring about representation to the former colonies namely India, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, Canada and other former colonial regions of the Empire. During the beginning of the regime certain forms of theatres like the one established in Jamaica in 1682 and proscenium arch theatres in India didn't cater to the Indigenous populace. Rather, the plays were directed for the elite officials of the regime and people of high stature. Plays performed for European officials were expected to be European in style and content, reflecting the colonial bias towards Western culture. Over time, theatre became a powerful tool for resistance, evolving into a

dynamic force that challenged dominant narratives and amplified marginalized voices.

Postcolonial theatre emerges from two key sources: Traditional performance practices rooted in local cultures and the adaptation of Western theatrical forms introduced during colonialism. The power of postcolonial writing lies in its ability to contest the ideas of power and structures established by the colonial regime, which perpetuated the notion that anything pertaining to the Western world was progressive, modern, and linear, and therefore legitimate, while dismissing those belonging to the colonies as inferior. Since decolonization occurred within the colonies, significant emphasis has been placed on developing a theatrical form that reflects not only the cultural traditions of the previously oppressed lands but also their local history and indigenous traditions. This has led to a process of rewriting history and reconfiguring the notion of power, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

According to the book *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, theatre or performance in the postcolonial context can be stated as that which includes the following features:

- “• acts that respond to the experience of imperialism, whether directly or indirectly;
- acts performed for the continuation and/or regeneration of the colonised (and sometimes pre-contact) communities;
- acts performed with the awareness of, and sometimes the incorporation of, post-contact forms; and
- acts that interrogate the hegemony that underlies imperial representation.”

(Gilbert and Tompkins, 11)

For ages, since Shakespeare wrote his classics, his texts have remained at the centre of what can be called 'high' texts. The idea of Shakespeare was what society termed as the 'high arts', categorising anything that didn't fall into that particular idea of refined, English behaviour as 'low'. Deemed as the greatest cultural icon (BBC News, 2014), Shakespeare's works embody the epitome of English culture. His works were used to carry the myth of English civilization alive, imposing a notion of superiority over colonised

nations, whose own cultures and geographies were erased or marginalized in the process. However, over time, the figure of Shakespeare has evolved, assuming a universal position that transcends time and age. In postcolonial nations, his plays are reimagined to fit local contexts, often with political undertones. These reworked plays frequently serve as sites for deconstructing Eurocentrism and the dominant narratives thus offer fresh perspectives. In the Indian context, Utpal Dutt's Bengali theatre productions around 1964 are significantly important because they facilitated a decolonization of Shakespeare, liberating his works from the legacy of colonialism. By reinterpreting Shakespeare's texts and figure within the Indian context, Dutt's productions broke free from the shackles of colonial influence, allowing for a fresh understanding of Shakespeare's works, free from the biases of the colonial era. Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest* (published in 1623), is considered a seminal work that explores themes of racism. The play portrays the colony as "the other world," in a stark contrast to Europe and, by extension, what may be termed as "civilization". In the play, Caliban, a central character, embodies the role of the colonized and victim of psychological and cultural oppression. Due to colonial connotations, *The Tempest* has been widely reinterpreted to see a postcolonial perspective. In 1969, Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* became the earliest influential postcolonial rewriting of Shakespeare's play, offering a critical perspective on colonialism and its legacy. In this adaptation, Caliban rejects his submissive role and seeks to spark a revolution. He refuses to accept the name given to him by his oppressors and demands to be called by a name of his own choosing. Throughout the play, Caliban expresses deep regret over his enslavement and actively resists his oppressors, fighting for his own freedom and autonomy.

When discussing counter discursive writings of a particular text, the work of Derek Walcott becomes crucial. *Robinson Crusoe* written originally by Daniel Defoe is about a man's quest for authority and power. In his rewriting of the text of *Crusoe*, Walcott explores the Caribbean experience after the advent of colonialism. The relationships between *Crusoe* and Friday, as well as Prospero and Caliban, illustrate the dynamics of colonialism, where masters and servants engage in a complex power struggle. Similarly, in Walcott's work, published in 1978, the traditional master-servant relationship is subverted, with the servant, Jackson, becoming a powerful figure,

and the master, represented by Harry Trewe, taking on a subordinate role. Through his use of language and humour, Walcott sheds light on the construction of societal structures and challenges the status quo.

Stop to Consider:

Post Colonial -African Theatre:

African literary and cultural heritage has largely been preserved through oral traditions, as in the initial stages before and when the colonists came , many African languages lacked written scripts, resulting in limited written documentation of stories, poems, and performances. As a result, much of their rich cultural heritage and tradition has been passed down through oral means, including folk tales, epic poems, songs, proverbs, and storytelling. In the context of postcolonial African plays, the division is often between:

1. Francophone African plays: These plays come from countries that were formerly colonized by France, such as Senegal, Guinea etc. Often written in French, these plays reflect the unique cultural and historical experiences of these countries. Some notable Francophone playwrights are Aimé Césaire (Martinique), Koffi Kwahulé (Côte d'Ivoire), Werewere Liking (Cameroon) and many others.

2. Anglophone African plays: These plays are from countries that were formerly colonized by Britain, such as Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa. Often written in English, they present the unique cultural and historical experiences of these countries. Some notable Anglophone playwrights include Ama Ata Aidoo (southern Ghana), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria) etc.

5.4 Language and power in post-colonial theatre

The emergence of postcolonial writings by playwrights has been accompanied by a major linguistic dilemma. One of the key challenges faced by them is the question of language: whether to write in their indigenous language or in the language of their colonizers. Kenyan author and academic Ngugi wa Thiong'o's in his collection of essays entitled "Decolonising the Mind" talks about

language and its constructive role in national culture, history, and identity. He argues for the importance of African writers to use their native languages as it will serve as a means of reclaiming their cultural identity and resisting the legacy of colonialism. According to him language isn't just a tool for communication; it's a powerful carrier of culture. According to Ngugi, "The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own." (1986, 16)

The Western world mostly prioritized the written word as the ultimate symbol of civilization, dismissing unwritten forms of expression as inferior or mere 'noise'. This led to the marginalization of the rich oral traditions and cultural heritage of non-Western societies, where stories, histories, and knowledge were passed down through mainly through the medium of the spoken word, performance, and other non-written means.

Ngugi's argument highlights the importance of indigenous languages in reclaiming cultural identity, but not all authors agree on the role of language in postcolonial writing. In contrast, Chinua Achebe proposes a different approach to language in postcolonial writing, one that seeks to adapt and transform the colonial language rather than reject it outright. Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe refutes Ngugi's claim of Colonial language as a bomb as he believes European languages could be Africanized so as to carry and advance the African experiences .English according to him could serve as the linguistic medium that resonated with and effectively communicated the African experiences and would provide him a broader audience to speak about the issues he wanted to address. But he suggests that this English has to be a new kind so as to suit the African surroundings and relate its experiences. He states "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings" (Achebe, 8).

This perspective underscores the complex relationship between language, culture, and power, echoing the ideas of Ashcroft et al., who argue that language plays a crucial role in perpetuating or challenging dominant power structures. He states "Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth,' 'order,' and 'reality' become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice" (Ashcroft et al., *Empire*, 7). According to Gilbert and Tompkins, "A particularly effective form of subversion occurs when one character moves between registers, showing that s/he is quite capable of using all manner of linguistic codes but chooses certain ones strategically" (188). This concept is exemplified in the play by Derek Walcott, where the character Jackson Phillip skilfully switches between his Caribbean Creole language and English. By doing so, Phillip showcases his linguistic versatility, thereby subverting the traditional master-slave narrative present in Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe". Language was a tool of control for colonisers, who imposed foreign tongues to erase cultural identities and silence indigenous voices. By using Creole and code-switching, Jackson resists this imposition and reclaims his cultural voice. His mastery of both languages destabilizes the power structure, allowing him to challenge the dominant narratives.

Stop to Consider:

Post-Colonial Indian Theatre:

The Indian subcontinent has a rich tradition of theatre, dating back to the ancient *Natya Shastra*, written by Bharata Muni. In the pre-independence era, playwrights like Aurobindo Ghosh and Rabindranath Tagore laid the groundwork for a vibrant theatre scene. After independence, theatre became a powerful tool for resistance against colonial authority and for subverting dominant narratives. Playwrights like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, and Badal Sircar have made significant contributions to this genre, reflecting the ongoing struggles of the Indian subcontinent and its journey from colonialism to freedom and modernity.

The Theatre of Roots movement, started by like-minded individuals, aimed to liberate theatre from Western traditions and infuse it with

Indian genius. Focusing on the growth of Indian drama in regional languages, this movement sought to promote indigenous theatre practices and showcase the diversity of Indian culture. Girish Karnad, Ratan Thiyam, Habib Tanvir etc are some of the playwrights associated with this movement. Contemporary playwrights like Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, Abishek Majumdar, and Asif Currimbhoy continue this legacy, exploring issues affecting urban, middle-class, English-speaking society, including violence, caste, homosexuality, patriarchy, gender, identity, and migration.

Check Your Progress:

1. What are the key themes and concerns that postcolonial theatre raises?
2. Who are some of the most famous postcolonial playwrights?
3. Discuss the use of language in postcolonial plays to subvert colonialist discourses.
4. Role of identity, culture and history in the context of postcolonial writing.

Self Asking Questions:

1. How does Derek Walcott's play Pantomime serve as a powerful reflection of the postcolonial experience, and what insights does it offer into the complexities of cultural identity?
.....
.....
2. In what ways does language play a crucial role in shaping identity in postcolonial contexts, and how do playwrights harness language to challenge dominant narratives?
.....
.....
3. How do postcolonial playwrights subvert dominant narratives and challenge colonial legacies through their work, and what impact does this have on our understanding of history and culture?
.....
.....

4. What is the significance of code-switching in postcolonial theatre, and how does it reflect the complexities of cultural hybridity and identity formation?

.....
.....

5. How does postcolonial theatre reflect the tensions between mimicry and subversion, and what strategies do playwrights use to negotiate these tensions?

.....
.....

6. In what ways do postcolonial plays challenge traditional notions of identity, culture, and belonging, and how do they create new legacies and possibilities for representation?

.....
.....

7. How does the use of language in postcolonial theatre reflect the power dynamics of colonialism, and how do playwrights use language to reclaim and reassert their cultural identities?

.....
.....

8. What role do postcolonial plays play in challenging dominant narratives and promoting social justice, and how can they be used as a tool for social change?

.....
.....

5.5 Important Works

5.5.1 Post-colonial theatre: significant plays and authors

Pioneering postcolonial playwrights, known for their powerful works that confront the legacy of colonialism and explore the complexities of identity, culture, and social justice, include:

Derek Walcott, a Nobel Prize winner and prominent voice of postcolonial theatre from the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, known for his writings about colonial legacy, identity, and cultural heritage. Some of his most notable works include *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *Pantomime* etc.

Girish Karnad's plays offer profound insights into Indian identity, culture, and history. "Tipu Sultan" challenges colonial narratives,

uncovering the injustices suffered by this historical figure. His other notable works, including *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana*, have been praised for their masterful storytelling and thought-provoking themes.

Wole Soyinka is a renowned playwright, poet, and essayist, and the first African to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (in 1986). His works often explore themes of culture, politics, and social critique. Some of his works include *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *A Dance of the Forests*

5.6 Post-Dramatic Theatre

5.6.1 Definitions and histories

Post-dramatic theatre emerged as a term coined by German theater scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann, in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). According to the translator of *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999), Karen Jürs-Munby, “Post-dramatic Theatre refers to theatre after drama.” (2, 1999). While using the term Post Dramatic the translator pays focus on the fact that “‘post’ here is to be understood neither as an epochal category, nor simply as a chronological ‘after’ drama, a ‘forgetting’ of the dramatic ‘past’, but rather as a rupture and a beyond that continue to entertain relationships with drama and are in many ways an analysis and ‘anamnesis of drama. To call theatre ‘post-dramatic’ involves subjecting the traditional relationship of theatre to drama to deconstruction and takes account of the numerous ways in which this relationship has been refigured in contemporary practice since the 1970s.”

(Munby, 2) .This brought an end to the traditional form of drama marked by text based approach characterised by development of plot, narrative structure and characterization. Lehmann states that in such forms, “the traditional hierarchy of theatrical elements has almost vanished: as the text is no longer the central and superior factor, all the other elements like space, light, sound, music, movement and gesture tend to have an equal weight in the performance process” (2009, 3). In post-dramatic theatre, the text is no longer the primary focus. It shares equal importance with other elements of the *mise-en-scène*, and is no longer considered superior

to them. Spectators rooted in traditional theatre, where text is the primary focus, often struggle to appreciate the elements of post-dramatic theatre. In contrast, audiences accustomed to more dynamic and multidisciplinary performances, featuring elements like song, spectacle, and dance, tend to embrace post-dramatic theatre more readily. In such theatrical forms, the ideas of narration and representation are discarded to favour the virtual aspect of theatre, consisting of sound, images, music, bodies, and gesture. The elements which characterize post-dramatic theatre thus are non-linearity, hypernaturalism, heterogeneity, ambiguity amongst others. The origins of such a remarkably modern approach lies in the works of 20th century avant-garde movements like surrealism, Dadaism etc which were significant in the departure from traditional methods of theatre and its performance. In the postmodern era the idea of what can be defined as "absolute" is not fixed. In such a theatrical arena the boundaries between the performer and audience are blurred. As we move towards a new age of advancement, with our existence being largely dependant on technological developments, the shift from the text based model comes up more prominently. Hans-Thies Lehmann's study led to a significant change in the way the idea of theatre existed and led to emergence of the field now popularly known as performance studies .In his view the idea of post-dramatic had to deal with the "unacknowledged anxieties, pressures, pleasures, paradoxes and perversities that surround the performance situation as such." (Lehmann, 4) Even the idea of space underwent change and the space that the theatre covered, expanded. Boyle et.al states that the post-dramatic theatre itself is "concerned first and foremost with interrogating theatrical form" (2019, p. 1).

Now it was no longer limited to the closed, traditional setting, where the audience watched whole actors on stage performed. Instead theatre could now be performed anywhere without limitations. Although Brechtian theatre was groundbreaking in its critique of capitalist structures and ideological biases, post-dramatic theatre marks a significant departure from Brecht's didactic approach. In the postmodern world, there is no single truth. Instead, the idea of truth is multifaceted. The playwrights chart out their own version of the truth.

The post-dramatic theatre is post-Brechtian in its approach. While talking about the departure from Brecht, Lehmann states “it leaves behind the political style, the tendency towards dogmatization, and the emphasis on the rational we find in Brechtian theatre; it exists in a time after the authoritative validity of Brecht’s theater concept” (33). Such theatres respond by shifting the emphasis from representation to presentation, prioritizing the embodied experience of performance itself over the conveyance of a specific message or truth. After this shift in emphasis from representation to performance, the focus is on the performance, rather than the conveyance of a predetermined message.

The classical Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place, which traditionally governed the norms of theater, are challenged by post-dramatic works. These works deviate from realistic plot structures, characterization, and mimetic representation. By breaking away from these conventional guidelines, such contemporary theatres question the long-held principles of unity of action, unity of time, and unity of place, as well as the theory of mimesis, which emphasizes that all artistic creation is a form of imitation. This shift brought about new forms of representation, innovative storytelling, experimentation with non-linear narratives, and a redefinition of the idea of performance. This leads to a remapping of the boundaries of what define theatrical expression. According to Jürs-Munby the post-dramatic is marked by a “historical shift out of a textual culture and into a ‘mediatized’ image and sound culture.” (Munby, 2)

Stop to Consider:

Body in Post Dramatic Theatre:

According to Lehmann, “the body becomes the center of attention, not as a carrier of meaning but in its physicality and gesticulation. The central theatrical sign, the actor’s body, refuses to serve signification.” (95). In post-dramatic theatre, the body becomes a central focal point, with great importance placed on physicality and movement. Georg Fuchs wrote in *The Revolution of Theatre*: ‘Drama in its simplest form is rhythmic movement of the body through space’. Since there is no heavy reliance on dialogue, movement and physical presence become crucial in conveying the story or emotions. Post-dramatic theatre often uses the physical presence of actors and movement to tell a story or convey emotions,

rather than relying heavily on dialogue. This shift in focus continues into the post-dramatic step, where the body's role is further redefined. While talking about the post-dramatic step, Hans-Thies Lehmann states: "The most severe instillation of significance into the body concerning social reality occurs when the body ceases to demonstrate anything other than itself and shifts from a body of signification to a body of meaningless gesture. The body is now the sole topic" (*Postdramatic Theatre* 96). The body is portrayed on the stage through performance without hiding anything on stage. This is one important characteristics of post-dramatic theatre where there is no attempt to censor or moralize. In talking about the physicality Lehmann states "a deviant body, which through illness, disability, or deformation deviates from the norm and causes an amoral fascination, unease, or fear" (*Postdramatic Theatre* 95).

Carmen's description of a fight with another person in Simon Stephen's play *Carmen's Disruption* is depicted as follows, "I kick him in his ribs with my bare feet, which kind of hurts but kind of doesn't. I kicked him in the side of his arm. I stamp my foot on his neck. I kick the side of his head. His skin breaks by his cheekbone, so that blood spits out onto the carpet and catches between my toes. I hear the break of teeth under my feet. He's crying" (219). Carmen, a character in Simon Stephens' play *Carmen's Disruption*, describes a violent confrontation with another man, employing physical violence and pain to elicit a response from the audience. This explicit portrayal of bodily harm on stage is a deliberate choice, characteristic of post-dramatic theatre, where the body becomes a site of expression and experimentation.

Self Asking Questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of Post-Dramatic Theatre, and how does it differ from traditional dramatic theatre?

.....
.....

2. How does Post-Dramatic Theatre challenge conventional notions of narrative, character, and plot?

.....
.....

3. What role does the audience play in Post-Dramatic Theatre, and how is their experience different from traditional theatre?

.....
.....

4. How does Post-Dramatic Theatre incorporate elements of performance art, installation, and multimedia?

.....
.....

5. What are the implications of Post-Dramatic Theatre for our understanding of the relationship between theatre and reality?

.....
.....

6. How is truth represented in Post-Dramatic Theatre, and what are the implications of this representation?

.....
.....

7. How is the body represented in Post-Dramatic Theatre, and what does this reveal about the relationship between the body and identity?

.....
.....

5.7 New trends in Post-Dramatic theatre

The character is the most essential element of traditional drama, yet it's the first aspect that post-dramatic theatre departs from, as noted by Elinor Fuchs in "The Death of Character" (1996). Another aspect

that post-dramatic theatre targets is that of sound. In post-dramatic theatre, sound plays a pivotal role, deviating from traditional theatre's text-centric approach. Unlike conventional theatre, where sound is secondary to the written word, contemporary theatre bestows equal significance to the aspect of sound. This shift in focus acknowledges the profound impact of sound on the theatrical experience, creating a more immersive and multisensory environment for the audience. According to Mladen Ovadija, the immanence, fluidity, and sensuality of the human voice and the expressiveness of stage sound – traditionally considered secondary to the primacy of the text – are essential elements of the performativity and scenic dynamics that propel dramaturgy in contemporary theatre.” (3)

Jean Baudrillard's philosophical ideas resonate with the themes of post-dramatic theatre. As John Bodyguard noted, "The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks, and command models - and with these, it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times, no longer needing to be rational since it's no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance, no longer alive, and no longer having any destination, merely operational, and in fact, since it's no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it's no longer real at all" (Baudrillard, 167). This notion aligns with post-dramatic theatre's challenge to traditional representations of reality, instead embracing a fragmented and constructed understanding of the world. By blurring the lines between reality and performance, post-dramatic theatre reflects Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, where copies without an original proliferate, and reality becomes a mere representation.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the role of Hans-Thies Lehmann in the field of post-dramatic theatre?
2. Who are some notable postdramatic playwrights and their works?
3. How does postdramatic theatre challenge traditional notions of drama?

4. How are technology and media forms used in postdramatic theatre?

Sarah Kane, whose life was short-lived yet exemplary, was a renowned English playwright, screenwriter, and theatre director. She directed a number of plays and wrote works that are characterized by a sense of rupture from the ordinary and feature controversial content. Two of her most notable works, *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*, have garnered significant attention for their shocking nature, both in terms of written text and visual presentation on stage.

In *4.48 Psychosis*, the character's mental state undergoes significant changes, triggering a change in the narrative's structure, settings, and overall dramatic landscape. As the character's psyche unravels, the play's non-linear structure, fragmented dialogue, and blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy all reflect their disintegrating mental state.

Martin Crimp is considered one of the most remarkable British playwrights, whose work has revolutionized contemporary theatre by breaking traditional dramatic conventions. In his most famous play *Attempts on Her Life*, the character of Anne never appears on stage and is only referred to by other characters, giving her multi-dimensional characteristics. Each character reveals their own version of Anne, but she is never brought to the forefront. She takes on multiple personalities, including that of a car. As Vicky Angelaki notes in her book *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*, "She is everywhere and nowhere, in multiple conceptualizations that cause her identity to fluctuate wildly" (54). This innovative approach to character development challenges traditional notions of identity and presence in theatre. This is one of the classic examples of the post-dramatic where Angelaki states "in Crimp's theatre it is in language where everything begins and ends, where lives and identities are built and destroyed" (36)

Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh are Lebanese theatre artists belonging to the post-war generation of performance artists. Their play *33 Rpm and a Few Seconds* is a seminal work in post-dramatic theatre. Notably, the play features no characters on stage. Instead, it revolves around the story of Dia Yamout, a young Lebanese political activist

who commits suicide, leaving behind a farewell letter stating that his reasons are personal and unrelated to politics.

The play's performance is marked by the absence of performers onstage. The suicide letter is played automatically, accompanied by machine-answered phone calls and an automatic reply on an answering machine. The only visual element is the projection of Yamout's Facebook page on screen, displaying people's messages and memories. This work exemplifies post-dramatic theatre, relying solely on technology rather than characters. It can be seen as an "anthropological mutation," reflecting our screen-dominated world, overrun by media and mobile phones.

5.8 Important Works

5.8.1 Post-Dramatic theatre: significant plays

Some of the most important post-dramatic playwrights known for their works which depart from traditional theatre to in search of a theatre which is post-dramatic are:

Sarah Kane was a pioneering British playwright celebrated for her experimental style and innovative ideas. Her plays explored trauma, identity, and the human condition, featuring segmented structures, genre-bending, and a focus on performance. Some of her notable works include *Blasted* (1995), *Phaedra's Love* (1996), and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000).

Martin Crimp is a British playwright known for his innovative and provocative works. His play *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) brought him to fame, showcasing his unique blend of dark humor, poetic language, and fragmented narratives. Some of his notable works include: *The City* (2008), *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), and *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other* (2019).

Some other forms of post-dramatic theatre include: The Sydney Front (Australia), Action Hero (United Kingdom), Nature Theatre of Oklahoma (United States), Scum! Theatre (United Kingdom).

5.9 Summing Up

This chapter explored the intersections of postcolonial and post-dramatic theatre, examining how they challenge dominant narratives and power structures. Post-colonial theatre subverts colonial legacies, while post-dramatic theatre pushes boundaries, experimenting with form and structure. The chapter also discussed how postcolonial playwrights like Derek Walcott use language and code-switching to reclaim cultural identities. Post-dramatic theatre emphasizes the body's materiality and physicality, integrating technology to new boundaries. The intersection of post-colonial and post-dramatic theatre offers new possibilities for representation, identity formation, and cultural expression. In conclusion, postcolonial and post-dramatic theatre intersects in powerful ways, offering insights into identity, culture, and power dynamics. By understanding these intersections, we can unlock new potential for creative expression, social critique, and cultural transformation. This chapter highlights the significance of these theatre forms in contemporary cultural and social contexts, demonstrating their capacity to challenge, subvert, and transform.

5.10 References and Suggested Readings

Achebe, Chinua. "The African Writer and the English Language". 1965. pp. 8.

Angelaki, Vicky. "Introduction: Dealing with Martin Crimp." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2014, pp. 307-312. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2014.921031>.

Ashcroft, Bill. "The Empire Strikes Back." *New Literary History*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1992, pp. 7.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Shelia Faria Glaser. University of Michigan Press, 1994.

BBC News. "Shakespeare 'a Cultural Icon' Abroad – BBC News." BBC News, 23 Apr. 2014,

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-27110234.am>. Accessed 27 Jul. 2024.

Boyle, Michael Shane, Matt Cornish, and Brandon Woolf. "Introduction: Form and Postdramatic Theatre". In *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*. Edited by Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Brandon Woolf. London: Bloomsbury, 2019.

Fuchs, Georg. *The Revolution of Theatre*. 47.

Gilbert, Helen, and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. Taylor & Francis, 2000.

Lawson, A. (1992) 'Comparative studies and post-colonial "settler" cultures', *Australian-Canadian Studies* 10, 2:153-9.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2016. Print.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies, and Patrick Primavesi. "Dramaturgy on Shifting Grounds". *Performance Research* 14, no. 3 (2009): 3.

Munby, Karen Jürs. "Introduction". *Postdramatic Theatre*, Routledge, 2006, p. 2.

Ovadija, Mladen. *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-Garde and Postdramatic Theatre*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston • London • Ithaca, 2013.

Stephens, Simon. *Carmen Disruption*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015. Print.

Thiong'o, Ngũgĩwa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986.

xxx

UNIT- 6
INTRODUCTION TO MODERN THEATRE

Unit Structure:

6.1 Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 The Great Innovators

6.4 Understanding the ‘modern’ in English Drama

6.5 Understanding the ‘modern’ in European/American Drama

6.6 A Note on Theatre of the Absurd.

6.7 A New ‘Tradition’ of Modern Drama

6.8 Pirandello and His Theatre

6.8.1 The Playwright

6.8.2 About *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

6.9 Summing Up

6.10 References and Suggested Readings

6.1 Objectives

After you finish reading this unit, you should be able to

- *discuss* the meaning of the ‘modern’ in modern drama;
- *list* the names of the great innovators of modern drama from around the world;
- *explain* the idea of the ‘modern’ in British drama;
- *discuss* the idea of the ‘modern’ in European drama;
- *analyse* ‘modernism’ in world drama.

6.2 Introduction

Before the work of pioneers like Henrik Ibsen of Norway, August Strindberg of Sweden, and George Bernard Shaw of Ireland, it is difficult to describe or to define what drama look like in the modern period. Of course, you must understand that drama is not ‘modern’ simply because it is created in the modern period. The pioneers we have mentioned began with breaking away from the kind of theatre

that characterised much of 19th century dramatic works. Instead of continuing with the earlier realism of the ‘well-made’ plays which resulted in too much moralising, sensationalism, and farcical melodrama modern dramatists encouraged the audience to participate in a kind of ‘open-endedness’. What this amounted to was what Shaw called in his book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) a ‘socially conscious drama’. In that sense modern drama has always made important a sense of experimentation, where rather than the plot it is the open-ended discussion which invited the spectator to participate in and not remain a passive audience. Modern drama, in the hands of such pioneers made use of, besides realism, expressionism, surrealism, absurdism, epic theatre, agit-prop, and meta-theatre.

6.3 The Great Innovators

(Some ideas and information on these great innovators are adapted from Wikipedia)

Eric Bentley in *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, traces the ‘modern’ in drama to the mid – eighteenth century. Changes appear on the stage with the work of dramatists like Richard Wagner, W. B Yeats, Emile Zola and Bernard Shaw. Bentley lists ten great innovators of world drama who introduced theories and techniques that departed from convention and which are rightfully to be considered as being modern.

Subsequently, he makes a list of ten all time great innovators of world drama. These innovators are called modern because the theories and techniques of drama which they formulated are not to be found in conventional drama. In this section, I have tried to focus on some of these great innovators and their innovative contributions.

Adolphe Appia: (1862-1928):

The Swiss architect and theorist of stage-lighting and décor, Appia was born in Geneva. Best known for his scenic designs for Wagner’s Operas, Appia rejected painted ‘two-dimensional sets’ for ‘three-dimensional living sets’ as he believed that shade was as necessary as light to form a connection between the actor and the setting of the performance. Thus, he made himself the pioneer of modern staging in general. In the subsequent periods, theatre directors and designers have both taken great inspiration from the

works of Adolphe Appia, whose design theories and conceptualizations of Wagner's Operas have helped to shape modern perceptions of the relationship between the function of space and lighting. The significance of Appia's works and theories lies also in the fact that he was working at a time when electrical lighting was just evolving.

Antonin Artaud: (1896-1948):

The French playwright, poet, actor and theatre director, Antonin Artaud was a significant member of the French theatrical avant-garde between the two World Wars. Artaud believed that theatre should affect the audience as much as possible. So, he used a mixture of strange and disturbing forms of lighting, sound, and other performance elements. In his book *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), which contained the first and second manifesto for a "Theatre of Cruelty", Artaud expressed his admiration for Eastern forms of theatre, particularly the Balinese. He admired Eastern theatre because of the codified, highly ritualized and precise physicality of Balinese dance performance, and advocated what he called a "Theatre of Cruelty". At one point, he stated that by 'cruelty' he meant not exclusively sadism or causing pain, but often a violent, physical determination to shatter false reality. He believed that the idea of a dramatic 'text' had been a tyrant over meaning, and advocated, instead, for a theatre made up of a unique language, halfway between thought and gesture.

Stop to Consider:

Antonin Artaud, surrealism and modernism:

Artaud emphasised the role of surrealism in the theatre in his search for the total liberty that he thought would make drama the adequate art form capable of projecting the catastrophic conditions that the modern world seemed to promise. Realising that old values could no longer offer meaning to modern civilisation, he declared realism and all its traditional forms of representation, declaring traditional "master pieces" to be irrelevant.

However, the most significant and influential development of Surrealism in the theatre came with Antonin Artaud, who rejected everything ethereal in pursuit of "the truthful precipitate of dreams . . . imprinted with terror and cruelty." Artaud's principles are

essentially modernist - his aim being specifically “to return to the theatre that total liberty which exists in contemporary music, poetry, or painting, and of which it has been curiously bereft up till now.” Like many of his contemporaries in the 1920s and earlier, Artaud was sensitive to the destabilizing effect of modern conditions, of being faced with a period “when the world . . . sees its old values crumble.” He attacked realism, and all traditional European forms of representation by proclaiming all “masterpieces” as irrelevant. He worked for direct communication and explored irrationality. As Eric Bentley writes Artaud’s manifestos shed lights on the phenomenon which Mr. Martin Esslin has called ‘Theatre of the Absurd.’

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956):

The German poet, playwright, and theatre director, Bertolt Brecht worked with Piscator, another German Theater director, and developed his concept of an “epic theatre”, which broke down characterization by emphasizing the act of acting. Since his first plays were ‘expressionist’, his work effectively moved towards the major streams of theatrical Modernism. Brecht dismissed both the “Aristotelian” dramatic forms and “culinary” commercial entertainment, and in 1929 posed a question that remains the fundamental challenge for contemporary theatre too: “Can we speak of money in iambics? . . . Even to dramatize a simple newspaper report one needs something much more than the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen.” It is a typically modernist question; and for Brecht the only solution was to represent the world “as being capable of transformation.” That formed the thesis of *Man is Man* in 1926, which demonstrates that personality is completely changeable, indeed interchangeable, being the product of social conditioning.

Brecht’s actors were also trained to present their roles objectively: for instance, through rehearsing speeches replacing the first-person “I” with “s/he said . . .” Frequently masked, his actors were required to demonstrate the act of acting instead of pretending to “be” the characters, an approach derived partly from Chinese theatre. The aim was to prevent empathy, although the effect was a precise theatrical rendering of the fragmented and dissociated personality that preoccupied the modernist poets and painters. This is what formed his notions of ‘epic theatre’.

Stop to Consider:

Epic Theatre:

Epic theatre was a theatrical movement arising in the early to mid-20th century from the theories and practice of a number of theatre practitioners like – Erwin Piscator, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and, most significantly, Bertolt Brecht. Epic theatre incorporates a mode of acting that utilises what he calls ‘gestus’. The epic form describes both a type of written drama and a methodological approach to the production of plays: “Its qualities of clear description and reporting and its use of choruses and projections as a means of commentary earned it the name ‘epic’.” Brecht however, preferred another term “dialectical theatre” to it. One of the goals of epic theatre is for the audience to always be aware that it is watching a play: “It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion.”

Gordon Craig: (1872-1966):

Edward Henry Gordon Craig, commonly known as Gordon Craig, was an English modernist theatre practitioner. He worked as an actor, director and scenic designer. Craig is famous for a number of innovations like the use of neutral, mobile, non-representational screens as a staging device. In 1910, Craig filed a patent which described in considerable technical detail a system of hinged and fixed flats that could be quickly arranged to cater for both internal and external scenes. He presented a set to William Butler Yeats for use at the Abbey Theatre in Ireland, who shared his symbolist aesthetic. Craig’s second innovation can be located in stage lighting. Doing away with traditional footlights, Craig lit the stage from above, placing lights in the ceiling of the theatre. Colour and light also became central to Craig’s stage conceptualisations. The third remarkable aspect of Craig’s experiments in theatrical form was his attempts to integrate design elements with his work with actors. He promoted a theatre focused on the craft of the director – a theatre where action, words, colour and rhythm combine in dynamic dramatic form.

Stop to Consider:

Gordon Craig wrote *On the Art of the Theatre* (1911) as a dialogue between a playgoer and a stage director, who examine the problems of the nature of stage directing. Craig argues that it was not dramatists, but rather performers who made the first works of drama, using action, words, line, colour and rhythm. Craig goes on to contend that only the director who seeks to interpret drama truly, and commits to training in all aspects of dramatic art, can restore the “Art of the Theatre.” Maintaining that the director should seek a faithful interpretation of the text, Craig argues that audiences go to the theatre to see, rather than to hear, plays. The design elements may transcend reality and function as symbols, he thought, thereby communicating a deeper meaning, rather than simply reflecting the real world.

Luigi Pirandello: (1867-1936):

Luigi Pirandello was an Italian dramatist, novelist, and short story writer who won Nobel for Literature in 1934 for his “bold and brilliant renovation of the drama and the stage.” Pirandello’s tragic farces are often seen as forerunners for the ‘Theatre of the Absurd.’ About Pirandello’s, *Six Characters In Search of an Author*, Bernard Shaw wrote: “I have never come across a play *so original*.” To this day, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is considered a watershed in modern drama. Subsequently, the success of Pirandello’s *Henry IV* consolidated his reputation as one of Italy’s foremost playwrights. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the theatre in Italy was undergoing a radical transformation. In the late 1800s, naturalistic dramas (like those of Henrik Ibsen and Gerhart Hauptman), Sentimental melodramas (like the plays of the younger Alexandre Dumas), and elaborate spectacles had dominated the stage. These trends continued to be performed in the early 1900s. However, another generation of Italian dramatists was emerging to give theatre a bold new voice - many were influenced by the *commedia dell’arte*, a tradition of masked Improvisational comedy that originated in Tuscany during the sixteenth century, then spread throughout Europe, enjoying popular appeal into the early eighteenth century. Pirandello emerged as the best exponent of such drama in Italy during the early part of the 20th century.

Konstantin Stanislavsky: (1863-1938):

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski was a Russian actor and theatre director. Stanislavski organized his realistic techniques into a coherent and usable 'system.' Stanislavski's 'system' acquired an unprecedented ability to cross cultural boundaries and developed an international reach, dominating debates about acting in the West. Stanislavski treated theatre-making as a serious activity that requires dedication, discipline and integrity. Throughout his life, he subjected his own acting to a process of rigorous artistic self-analysis and reflection. His 'system' resulted from a persistent struggle to remove the problems he encountered. Stanislavski's work was important to the development of Socialist Realism in the USSR and to the development of Psychological Realism in the United States. Stanislavski's work draws on a wide range of influences and ideas, including his study of the modernist and avant-garde developments of his time (Naturalism, Symbolism and Meyerhold's constructivism), Russian formalism, Yoga, Pavlovian Behaviourist Psychology, James-Lange's Psychophysiology and the Aesthetics of Pushkin, Gogol, and Tolstoy. He described his approach as 'Spiritual Realism'. Stanislavski wrote several works. Those notable in English translation include *An Actor's Work*, *An Actor's Work on a Role*, and his autobiography *My Life in Art*.

6.4 Understanding The 'Modern' in English Drama

The name of Wyndham Lewis comes first to mind in our survey of modern English drama. His close association with James Joyce, T.S.Eliot, and Ezra Pound puts him at the vanguard of the English modernist movement. Significantly his conception of the 'modern' was transposed from his 'Vorticist' painting into dramatic form, *The Enemy of the Stars*, published in the first issue of the Vorticist journal, *Blast*. The thematic structure of the play foreshadows Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*.

Stop to Consider:

Percy Wyndham Lewis (18 November 1882 – 7 March 1957) was an English painter and author (he dropped the name 'Percy', which he disliked). He was a co-founder of the Vorticist movement in art, and edited the literary magazine of the Vorticists, *BLAST*. His novels include his pre-World War I-era novel *Tarr* (set in Paris), and *The Human Age*, a trilogy comprising *The Childermass* (1928),

Monstre Gai and *Malign Fiesta* (both 1955), set in the afterworld. A fourth volume of *The Human Age*, *The Trial of Man*, was begun by Lewis but left in a fragmentary state at the time of his death. He also wrote two autobiographical volumes, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) and *Rude Assignment: A Narrative of my Career up-to-date* (1950).

Mainly residing in England from 1908, Lewis published his first work (accounts of his travels in Brittany) in Ford Madox Ford's *The English Review* in 1909. He was an unlikely founder-member of the Camden Town Group in 1911. In 1912 he exhibited his Cubo-Futurist illustrations to *Timon of Athens* (later issued as a portfolio, the proposed edition of Shakespeare's play never materialising) and three major oil-paintings at the second Post-Impressionist exhibition. This brought him into close contact with the Bloomsbury Group, particularly Roger Fry and Clive Bell, with whom he soon fell out. In 1912 he was commissioned to produce a decorative mural, a drop curtain, and more designs [1] for The Cave of the Golden Calf, an avant-garde cabaret and nightclub on London's Heddon Street. In the years 1913–15 that he developed the style of geometric abstraction for which he is best known today, a style which his friend Ezra Pound dubbed "Vorticism." Lewis found the strong structure of Cubist painting appealing, but said it did not seem "alive" compared to Futurist art, which, conversely, lacked structure. Vorticism combined the two movements in a strikingly dramatic critique of modernity. In his early visual works, particularly versions of village life in Brittany showing dancers (ca. 1910–12), Lewis may have been influenced by the process philosophy of Henri Bergson, whose lectures he attended in Paris. Though he was later savagely critical of Bergson, he admitted in a letter to Theodore Weiss (19 April 1949) that he "began by embracing his evolutionary system." Nietzsche was an equally important influence.

(The passage above has been downloaded from the Wikipedia) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wyndham_Lewis)

The following passage will help you to understand the diversity within the movement that finally becomes for us 'modern drama' – "drama in the twentieth century has been highly international, with English-speaking playwrights and directors responding to

innovations from Europe, and having their experiments picked up in turn. It is also true that theatrical developments over the century do not fit the same chronological frame as that for poetry or the novel, where the two decades from 1910 to 1930 are generally held to mark the boundaries of the movement. By comparison, drama had already staked out a distinctively modernist territory by the turn of the century with a work like August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902). But perhaps the main explanation for the omission of drama from the history of Modernism up to this point is that, for various reasons connected with the nature of theatre itself, on the stage the movement has produced extremely diverse work. Directors and dramatists, several of whom were primarily poets and made significant contributions to Modernism in their poetry, may have had the same artistic aims and been responding to the same perception of twentieth-century realities. But their plays and productions use a wide range of stylistic solutions to express this. So any discussion of dramatic Modernism must take a wide focus in following a multifaceted development." [*The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, p.130]

The entry of modernist principles on the stage is, in most ways, easier to identify than it would be to trace what happens in the case of the novel. It was clear to the artists and modernist innovators that projecting the modernist vision within the parameters of stage performance and stage requirements would mean adaptations of modernist qualities. The alternative vision which underlay the whole modernist understanding of the world and civilization could not be achieved through the application of known techniques or familiar dramaturgy. In the experiences of modernist writers like Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf, the effort to project inner, subjective experience as reality, led them to use impressionist techniques in the depiction of the "stream of consciousness". In drama, however, expressionist techniques came to the fore in the projection of the interior unconscious.

SAQ:

1. Attempt to distinguish between Expressionism and Impressionism with examples. (70 words)

.....
.....

Modernist writers, especially in poetry, rejected the Victorian preference for a stable, logical narrative structure reflective of their belief in a logically explicable universe. For the modernist writer this was an untenable philosophy since the nature of ‘reality’ itself was available to human understanding only through the individual, subjective apprehension of a so-called ‘objective’ reality. In the work of August Strindberg which really set the mode, as well as that of the Expressionists’, we see the rejection of Western civilization’s faith in rationalism and materialism. The Expressionists too showed their awareness of a decaying culture that denied integrated personalities or consciousness.

“The rejection of Victorian orthodoxies, along with the logical and chronological structures of traditional narrative, may be standard for modernist poets. The theatre took this to an extreme, following Strindberg in denying the whole of Western civilization, with its emphasis on rationalism and its materialism. The Expressionists reflected the same sense of a disintegrating culture, dissociated personalities and fragmented consciousness, but went further in working for spiritual transcendence. Their themes also tended to be more extreme, intensified by the physicality of performance. A good example of this is Kokoschka’s *Murder Hope of Women*.”[*The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, p.140]

Stop to Consider:

Theatre and abstraction:

Christopher Innes points out for us the elements that limit experimentation in the theatre: the actor-audience relationship, the physical reality of stage performance, amongst others. “Any stage has a pre-set architectural frame, which conditions the dramatic material and is inherently resistant to change. Even an alternative space outside the format of mainstream theatre establishes specific actor-audience relationships that automatically become interpreted in conventional terms, as the example of the Dadaists indicates. By contrast with other forms of authorship, playwrights cannot communicate directly with those being addressed, and so retain only a limited control over their creation. Their work becomes literally interpreted by actors whose techniques are normally already established, and therefore liable to mould the final product in traditional ways. Indeed, this problem was recognized as so

crucial that several of the leading modernist theatre-artists either trained actors in their own theatre companies, like Artaud and Brecht, or used untrained amateurs, like Gordon Craig who ended up by rejecting actors altogether.”

The work of W. B. Yeats and Gordon Craig claim our attention in the development of modernist principles on the stage. For Yeats, writing for the theatre was a natural outgrowth of his practice in verse. We see his writing for the theatre in two phases: between 1902 and 1908 which showed its fullest expression in the play of 1916, *At the Hawk's Well*, while the second phase is to be seen as achieving its fullest form in his last work, *The Death of Cuchulain*. Yeats attempted to resolve the dilemma which he encountered in his work in creating a nationalist symbolism for his Irish themes while retaining the modern creed of abstract symbolism signifying a radically new perspective on contemporary civilization. He borrowed from the Japanese Noh drama to emphasize a Brechtian 'strangeness'. While borrowing from an ancient Oriental tradition can seem least 'modern', yet "Even so, borrowing from Oriental models in fact becomes a standard characteristic for the dramatic side of the movement. Craig and (more indirectly) Brecht draw on Chinese theatre; Artaud took Balinese trance drama as his ideal; and, like Yeats, Stravinsky's *Les Noces* copies the Japanese Noh model." In his search for anti-realistic drama, which would clearly reflect a modernist perspective, "in the Noh Yeats found his model for a style of theatre close to pure music . . . that would free [the stage] from imitation, and ally [dramatic] art to decoration and the dance." [C.Innes in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, p.135]

In 1912, Yeats joined effort with Ezra Pound to sponsor the work of Gordon Craig whose dramatic productions he declared to be "not drama but the ritual of a lost faith". Craig's real strength lay in his paintings and designs even though he had come to be known as an actor in the 1890s in England. What is striking for us is that his designs for the stage avoided any realistic references. We are referred back to Yeats who sought to perfect a least representational mode of stage performance, the dance.

SAQ:

1. Why did Yeats choose to move beyond representation?
How does this clarify one of the basic tenets of modernism?
(60 + 70 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

The work of Yeats and Craig show the difficulties inherent in giving to the stage its modernist shape. “Eliot recognized drama as the logical development of his poetic aims, since in his view “The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste - stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration. The ideal medium for poetry . . . and the most direct means of social “usefulness’ for poetry, is the theatre.” And the continuum between his poetry and his plays is nowhere clearer than in *Sweeney Agonistes*.” This is commentary by Christopher Innes reminding us of the undoubted importance of the name of T. S. Eliot in the Anglo-American modernist movement. *Sweeney Agonistes* can be seen as Eliot coming closest to the Surrealists. With the powerful figure of Sweeney who recurs through Eliot’s works, this play is considered to be Eliot’s most viable modernist drama. It was written in the mid-1920s but finally being staged in 1933 in America. The play incorporates elements popular music-hall culture, some elements of Noh drama (following Yeats) like the use of masks and rejection of a familiar narrative structure.

“Compromises had to be made if viable work was to be produced for the stage; and in drama the most influential practitioners of Modernism are defined by the infusion of a modernist spirit into standard theatrical forms.” This is Innes pointing out what we have already noted above: the limitations of a living theatre in receiving innovative principles like modernism. This should strike us as being of particular importance in the case of hugely successful dramatists like Bernard Shaw who was finally able to achieve a combination of the demands of both modernism and standard dramaturgy.

‘Inversion’ and ‘paradox’ are strategies used by him to give the structure of ‘long operatic solos’ to the speeches of his characters – most clearly visible in *Man and Superman*. In effect, the naturalist surface of his plays is imbued with an element of the irrational, and the abstract. Finally, Shaw ruled over the British stage with the sheer volume of his work and its naturalistic appeal till his end in 1950.

SAQ:

1. Attempt to analyse Shaw’s appeal as a popular dramatist within the context of the modernist movement in the early years of the twentieth century. (90 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

6.5 Understanding the ‘Modern’ European/American Drama

The idea of the ‘modern’ in European and American drama provide yet another enriching experience to both readers and critics. You will find it interesting to read the European and American playwrights who were heavily influenced by the various intellectual and artistic movements that gained tremendous popularity in the early part of the 20th century. Modernist plays during this period prepared both the readers and the theatregoers to undergo many shocking experiences while watching a play in the theatre hall. Another way to consider the idea of the ‘modern’ in European and American drama is the emergence of very well-organized theories of theatricality and performance at a time when every genre of literature was undergoing changes following the modernist zeal for experimentations. You must note the fact that the great German playwright Bertolt Brecht was not only famous as a dramatist but was also a renowned theorist of the ‘Epic Theatre’ that altered the ways one receives a play. For your convenience of reading and understanding, the discussion of the ‘modern’ in this section has been done keeping in view the various intellectual and artistic movements in the late 19th century and the early 20th century that

finally shaped the tradition of modernist world drama. You should also note that many of the theatrical and technical renderings in modern European drama emerged through an ‘anti realistic’ approach to dramaturgy.

To start with, Realism in Theatre perhaps provides the first elements of the ‘modern’ in European drama. Realism as a theatrical movement of the 19th century emerged out of the portrayal of real life in dramatic texts and performances. In fact, Realism rendered the most pervasive and long lived effect in modernist theatre. Many playwrights even conceived Realism as the laboratory in which societal ills, familial problems and human relationships could be ‘objectively’ represented to be judged by unbiased readers and observers. Beginning in the 19th century Russia, and then in Europe, Realism gave Modernism a unique status of its own. Through the works of Russian Ivan Turgenev, Aleksandr Ostrovsky, Aleksey Pisemsky, there emerged a tradition of Russian Realist drama which later culminated in the establishment of the “Moscow Art Theatre” by Constantin Stanislavsky. While Anton Chekhov stylized the realist plays in which the minor and ordinary characters were abundantly used and in which, plot and theme developed simultaneously, Stanislavsky developed a unique ‘form’ of acting to train actors to represent Psychological Realism. Such developments were to influence play writing in the other parts of the world as well. As the drama critic Martin Harrison explains that the Realist trend in modernist drama was more effectively used by the Norwegian playwright Henric Ibsen whose plays focused on contemporary everyday life of the lower classes that skilfully revealed psychological conflicts. So, Realism has a rich history of its own if seen in the context of world theatre and you will do well if you make it a point to study some of the Realist playwrights as mentioned above in course of time.

Naturalism is another independent, but concurrent movement, which dramatized human reality in its most extreme form. While the Realist plays would address social issues, the Naturalist plays offered to represent simple ‘slice of life’ free from dramatic conventions. Although developed in the 19th century, as a movement in modern European drama, it actually flourished in the 20th century. In order to create the illusion of reality through technical innovations like three dimensional settings, dialogues

borrowed from everyday speech and rejection of divine influence on human action, Naturalist drama tried to portray reality of a 'given circumstance'. The Darwinian belief that one's heredity and social environment determines one's character could have influenced the French writer Emile Zola to pen down in 1881 an essay entitled "**Naturalism in the Theatre**". Subsequent Naturalist playwrights came to conceive human beings as a mere biological phenomenon, whose behaviour was mostly determined by heredity and environment. Even in the works of the famous Realist Henric Ibsen, we find traces of Naturalism. For example, we can consider his play *The Wild Duck* in which heredity plays a significant part.

Stop to Consider:

Moscow Art Theatre:

MAT is a theatre company in Moscow that the renowned Russian theatre practitioners Constantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich founded in 1898. First staging naturalistic dramas it regularly put on shows plays that implemented Stanislavski's system which later proved hugely influential in the acting world and in the development of modern American theatre.

Psychological Realism:

Psychological Realism is that mode of writing which places more emphasis on experiences in its interior form. In this type of writing, character and characterisation are more than usually important and an attempt has been made to delve deeper into the mind of a character. In some cases, the stream of consciousness technique, interior monologues have also been employed to better illustrate the inner workings of the human mind at work, as has been best reflected in the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

As a counterforce to Realism and Naturalism, Symbolism emerged. Symbolism initiated the trends of modern antirealistic theatre in the late 19th century France. The main objective was to explore the inner realities of human experience through images and metaphors. Symbolism called for the use of suggestion instead of direct presentation, and the actor was conceived as a 'depersonalized symbol' suggesting meaning beyond immediate consumption. This movement spread quickly and gradually affected every aspect of theatrical productions in Europe. The French Symbolist writers even

used the plays of Ibsen and Strinberg as the point of departure. The Danish director Herman Bang talked about the staging and acting of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* by the French director Aurelien Lunge Poe like this: "The actors wander restlessly over the stage, resembling shadows, drifting continuously on the wall. They like to move with their arms spread out...like the apostles of old painting who looks as if they've been surprised during worship." Auguste Villiers of France (His play *Axel*), Maurice Maeterlinck of Belgium (His plays *The Blind*, *The Intruder*, *The Interior*), the later Chekhov and Stanislavsky of Russia are some of the playwrights who experimented with the symbolist mode of playwriting and staging. Subsequently, the emphasis on dreams and fantasies further made Symbolist drama reconcile with more radical dramatic trends like Surrealism and Expressionism. These movements consciously stylized new dramatic formats. This 'antirealist' theatre did not all together discard reality but enhanced it with specific symbols and metaphors, parable and allegory, lighting and aspects of theatricality. From the emotional and irrational perspectives of Andre Breton's "Theatre of Cruelty" to the rational and thought-provoking intellectual comedy, the Wartime Expressionist and French Avant Garde Theatre challenged and extended the limits of theatrical art. This information necessitates our delving deeper into the ideas of Expressionism and Surrealism in theatre.

Expressionism as a theatrical movement began in the 20th century German theatre with the works of playwrights like Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller. They, in fact, accepted Strinberg and Frank Wedekind, the German actor, as their precursors. Gradually, expressionism helped in the production of an artistically very rich dramatic culture. The famous German theatre director Leopold Gessner soon became renowned for his expressionist productions often unfolding on "stark, steeply raked flights of stairs" which soon became a trademark. During the 1920s Expressionism became popular in America through the plays of Eugene O'Neil (His plays *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* etc.), and Elmer Rice (His play *The Adding Machine*). O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) depicts a journey into the subconscious while in *The Hairy Ape* (1921) he extends the same theme into a condemnation of urban industrial civilization which has deformed and destroyed humanity. Though in O'Neill's other plays such Expressionist elements became increasingly disguised, the distorted worldviews of the universalized characters he introduced, reflected the depiction of

dreams and the symbolic representation of reality. Such dramaturgies continued to appear on the American stage up to the end of the 1930s in the work of Elmer Rice, Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, particularly in Williams' autobiographical plays *After the Fall* (1964) or *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). Expressionism transferred to England and Ireland through the political verse drama of W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Sean O'Casey (His play *The Silver Tassie*). Subsequently, their move to depict collective unconscious was sought to be replaced by the Surrealist 'free flow of imagination' that liberated the deepest levels of the psyche.

The term Surrealism, following its first use in France by Guillaume Apollinaire in a 1917 play *The Breasts of Tiresias*, came to be adopted for operas by Francis Poulenc, the French composer. An early Surrealist Antonin Artaud thought that the rational discourse comprised "falsehood and illusion." The belief that imagination could liberate the deepest level of the psyche led to experimentations like 'automatic writing' which is a type of writing produced directly from the unconscious. Also known as psychography it is a type of writing written without conscious awareness of the content. Andre Breton's concept of 'psychic automatism' is another example of the Surrealist technique. The other major theatre practitioners to have experimented with Surrealism in the theatre, is the Spanish playwright and director Federico García Lorca (His plays *The Public* (1930), *When Five Years Pass* (1931), and *Play Without a Title* (1935)). Other famous Surrealist plays include Louis Aragon's *Backs to the Wall* (1925) and Roger Vitrac's *The Mysteries of Love* (1927) and *The Children Take Over* (1928). Gertrude Stein's opera *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938) has been described as an example of "American Surrealism", though it is also related to a theatrical form of Cubism.

Stop to Consider:

Psychic Automatism:

Andre Breton defined Surrealism as 'Pure psychic automatism'. So, the idea of automatism is of serious importance in this movement. In 1919, Breton and Philippe Soupault claims to have written the first automatic book, *Les Champs Magnétiques*, while *The Automatic Message* (1933) was one of Breton's significant theoretical works about automatism.

Cubism:

Cubism is a 20th century avant-garde art movement, initiated mainly by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Cubism revolutionised the traditions of European painting and sculpture, and inspired similar movements in music, literature and architecture. The first branch of cubism, known as ‘Analytic Cubism’, was both radical and influential as a short but highly significant art movement between 1907 and 1911 in France. While its second phase, ‘Synthetic Cubism’ spread and remained alive until 1919, when the Surrealist movement gradually gained popularity.

Another modernist movement in theatre can be located in the ideals of Futurism that flourished during the 1920s. To blur the distinction between art and life, the Futurists believed to have reached below the surface reality. Furthermore, heavy use of machinery attracted the Futurists a lot. However, their theatrical ideas sought to discredit great works of theatre. Vsevolod Meyerhold of Russia and Erwin Piscator of Germany represented the Futurist principles to a considerable extent. Meyerhold, through his system of biomechanics, applied industrial technology directly to stage performance. He presented each episode of the drama as a independent ‘turn’ that produced highly exciting performances and emphasized ‘theatricality’. On the other hand, in Germany, Piscator’s ‘documentary drama’ sought to dramatise how modern technology and mechanization could control contemporary existence. For instance, in his 1927 production of plays like *Rasputin, the Romanoffs, the War, and the People who Rose Up Against Them*, Piscator gave the outline of an era by integrating “Capitalism” or “class struggle” with acted scenes and a mechanized stage construct.

However, the emergence of the “Epic Theatre” during early to Mid-20th century is significant. It emerged through the theories and practices of a number of renowned figures like Piscator, Mayakovsky, Meyerhold and most importantly, Bertolt Brecht. Epic Theatre often incorporated a mode of writing that utilizes what can be called *gestus*. Whether, the theatrical movements of the 20th century influenced Brecht is a matter of serious critical discussion. Yet, he prescribed a methodological shift to the production of plays. As a contrast to the linear plot construction, Brecht used techniques to present events as narrative, hence his label of “Epic Theatre” and tried to create discontinuous action from a montage of scenes. For

example, each half of his play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* starts at the same point, and covers the same time-frame from completely opposed perspectives. The double action is then fused together in the final scene to provide a solution to the problem raised in the preface. With the exception of his first play, *Baal* which is an Expressionistic exploration of a poet's vision, Brecht's approach is the opposite of the "Stream of Consciousness" technique. Yet, his 'Epic' play-construction echoes the curvilinear forms of modernist painting, as well as the technique of discontinuity and montage of the modernist literature. In addition to the fragmentation of traditional plot structures and characterization, Brecht tried to separate speech from gesture, voice from music. All such techniques established Brecht as one of the most powerful modern playwright of the century. Moreover, his overt theatricality highlights the form of presentation purely as a means of communication. But, despite the avoidance of conventional techniques through his alienation effect, Brechtian theatre is by no means purely rational. Perhaps, this is what makes Brecht the only modern dramatist of the early 20th century to translate the principles of Modernism to the stage and create strikingly successful theatre. His plays almost immediately attained the status of modern classics, and unlike most modernist experiments, have become as much a part of the theatrical mainstream as those of Bernard Shaw. In Brecht we also find traces of Marxism yet his contributions can be called modern in that he marked a significant departure from all conventional norms of dramatic presentations.

So, you have by now understood that through redefining the function of language, extending characters to represent abstract forces or archetypes, reconstructing stage imagery through lighting and exploring themes often tinged with anxiety, the various movements in theatre have stylized and created much of the theatrical forms and language used in today's theatre. You will do well if you read the idea of the 'modern' against such a background and inculcate your own ways to deal with the plays prescribed for you in this course.

SAQ:

1. Name the major artistic and intellectual movements that influenced theatre in the early 20th century? (50 words)

.....

 2. Trace the great examples of American Modernist Drama?
 (50 words)

 3. What type of innovations exemplifies the idea of the modern
 in European drama? (100 words)

 4. What makes Bertolt Brecht the most prominent playwright
 of the 20th century? (60 words)

6.6 A Note on the Theatre of the Absurd

The Theatre of the Absurd, a term coined by the critic Martin Esslin in his 1961 book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, refers to a style of drama that emerged in the mid-20th century. It is marked by its portrayal of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence, often through unconventional and abstract dramaturgy. Absurdist playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, and Edward Albee produced works that sought to reflect the existential philosophy of thinkers like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. This theatre was a response to the disillusionment of post-war Europe when the horrors of World War II had shaken the foundational beliefs of religion, reason, and progress.

Esslin’s recounting of a performance of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin State Prison is a significant episode in the history of the Theatre of the Absurd. According to Esslin, the prisoners were highly receptive to the play’s portrayal of meaninglessness and futility offering their own interpretations of the enigmatic figure of "Godot." The prisoners’ engagement with the play highlights how

Waiting for Godot and similar absurdist works resonated with audiences who lacked preconceptions about traditional drama. Their interpretation underscores that absurdist theatre communicates through moods and feelings rather than through rational or intellectual structures.

Esslin's observation draws attention to one of the crucial aspects of absurdist drama: it breaks away from the Aristotelian concept of drama as an imitation of life in terms of plot, character development, and resolution. Instead, absurdist plays present a world where actions seem aimless, where characters are often bewildered by their surroundings, and where traditional logic is turned on its head. The prisoners at San Quentin unburdened by traditional expectations were able to perceive the emotional and philosophical undertones of Beckett's play, reflecting its broader accessibility despite its perceived complexity.

6.6.1 Absurdism and the Twentieth Century:

The Theatre of the Absurd reflects a profound shift in human thoughts and ideas in the 20th century. Key historical events and intellectual developments contributed to this change. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, for example, challenged the traditional religious beliefs that underpinned European culture, while Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis revolutionized the way individuals understood themselves. In addition, the rise of nationalism and totalitarianism in the early part of the century, followed by the unprecedented destruction of World War I and World War II, deeply undermined the optimistic belief in human progress that had dominated the 19th century.

The wars, in particular, made people question everything they earlier believed in. The devastation and human suffering made many individuals question the existence of a benevolent God or the possibility of human progress. While post-war Europe saw various social and political movements aimed at reconstructing the future, the existential void persisted. Many turned to absurdism to capture the essential futility of life. The Theatre of the Absurd can be seen as an outcome of this mood in a world where the human quest for meaning seemed futile.

6.6.2 What is Absurdity?

At its core, absurdity refers to the incongruity between human beings' desire for meaning and the world's indifference to that desire. As the philosopher Albert Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, absurdity arises when individuals become conscious of this contradiction. Camus begins with the fundamental question of whether life is worth living, suggesting that the moment of realizing life's absurdity prompts the question of suicide. However, he argues that instead of surrendering to despair, individuals must embrace the absurd and live in defiance of it. This revolt, the conscious acknowledgment of life's meaninglessness while still choosing to live, is a key theme in absurdist drama.

Camus defines human existence as a kind of exile—an irremediable isolation where humans are cut off from their past and have no clear future to strive towards. This "existential impasse" is the very condition of absurdity. Absurdist plays reflect this sense of exile and isolation, where characters are often trapped in repetitive, meaningless actions. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon's endless waiting for the elusive Godot can be seen as a metaphor for human existence itself—an endless wait for a purpose that may never arrive.

Existentialism, closely related to absurdism, posits that individuals must create their own meaning in a world devoid of intrinsic value. Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the leading existential philosophers, asserts that humans are "condemned to be free"—with no predetermined essence or fate, they must choose their own path. This freedom, however, is a burden because it places the weight of responsibility entirely on the individual. The absence of an external guiding force like God or fate means that humans must navigate life's choices alone, without any guarantee of success or meaning.

A similar theme of freedom and responsibility appears in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the character Ivan suggests that if God does not exist, then "everything is permitted." In the Theatre of the Absurd, this existential freedom is often portrayed as a terrifying burden. Without a clear purpose or direction, characters must make choices in a world that offers no clear guidance. This freedom does not lead to liberation, but rather

to paralysis, as seen in the stasis of Beckett's characters or the grotesque cycles in Ionesco's plays.

6.6.3 Subject Matter and Form in Absurd Theatre:

Absurdist theatre deals with the absurdity of human existence not through intellectual debate, but through vivid, often surreal stage images. Playwrights do not argue about life's absurdity; they present it. The form of absurdist plays is as crucial as the subject matter. Traditional plot structures, coherent dialogues, and character development are abandoned in favor of disjointed, circular narratives and illogical scenarios.

- The conventional arc of conflict, climax, and resolution found in classical drama is largely absent from absurdist works. In Beckett's *Endgame*, for instance, the characters are trapped in a room with no clear backstory or goal. The repetitive, circular dialogue and static setting highlight the futility of their existence. In Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, characters engage in nonsensical conversations that reveal the emptiness of human communication, with no sense of plot or narrative direction.
- A defining feature of the Theatre of the Absurd is its treatment of language. In contrast to traditional plays, where dialogue serves to advance the plot and reveal character, absurdist plays often present language as a flawed, inadequate tool for communication. In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, language degenerates into gibberish, highlighting the failure of words to convey meaning. Harold Pinter's pauses and silences, meanwhile, emphasize the gaps in human understanding and the inability of language to bridge the existential divide.
- Absurdist theatre often employs surreal, symbolic stage imagery to convey its themes. For example, in Beckett's *Happy Days*, the protagonist Winnie is buried up to her waist in a mound of earth, and by the second act, she is buried up to her neck. This image

encapsulates the gradual, inevitable entrapment of human beings by their own existence. Similarly, in Genet's *The Balcony*, the characters inhabit a brothel where they dress up in costumes of authority figures, creating a distorted, symbolic reflection of the human condition and its obsessions with power and identity.

6.7 A New 'Tradition' of Modern Drama

You must note that the modern period and its drama were shaped by world-changing forces, such as industrial revolution, democratic revolutions, and an intellectual revolution that would disrupt earlier conceptions of time, space, the divine, human psychology, and social order. Consequently, a theatre of challenge and experimentation emerged. Following World War II, "Theatre of Alienation" would introduce new theatre practices and reawaken the sense of social responsibility, while the "Theatre of the Absurd" would express the futility of all action and pointlessness of all direction. Philosophical Melodrama accepted the Absurdist notion that human being is alone in a silent universe, but takes it as a challenge to creating an effective life.

Although the main creative period of the modernist drama is occupied by the first thirty years of the 20th century, arguably it has not yet been completely superseded by postmodernism in drama. In a sense, you must know that Samuel Beckett's plays represent a decisive new breakthrough, as does Robert Wilson's work. Yet, it was Bertolt Brecht's theatre which gained fresh influence in the late fifties and through the 1960s, Similarly, Antonin Artaud became the ideal of American radicals in the late sixties and 70s. An example of the way in which Modernism continues to inform contemporary developments can be seen in the work of Harold Pinter, who is usually seen as a follower of Beckett. Pinter not only subverts realistic sets but through his "memory plays" of the 1970s, he creates a drama of the mind, which directly corresponds with Walter Pater's principle in aspiring to the condition of music through the emotionally evocative, rhythmic patterning of the dialogue and the associative repetition of images. Pinter has become a standard feature on the commercial stage as well as in the National Theatre and his examples demonstrate the degree to which Modernism has become the norm for drama. The inherently conservative nature of

the stage may have meant that the adoption of the modernist principles is delayed in mainstream drama. However, these are now diffused everywhere, even if the modernist enterprise is no longer clearly identifiable, and in the theatrical Modernism has become merged with other interdisciplinary approaches.

SAQ:

Can we say that the ‘new tradition’ of modern drama is best reflected in the ‘Absurdist Drama’?

.....
.....

6.8 Pirandello and his Theatre:

6.8.1 The Playwright:

Luigi Pirandello is one of the most important names associated with European dramatic Modernism. Born in a feudal province of Sicily in Italy in the year 1867, Pirandello completed his study at 19 to come back home and join his father’s mining business, the job which soon exhausted him. He went to enter the University of Rome in 1887 and then shifted to Bonn University. There, he completed his doctoral thesis in Romance Philology. Pirandello married Antonietta, daughter to his father’s business partner. Pirandello had a most fraught married life, and Antonietta’s mental breakdown eventually led her to death. Pirandello started teaching Italian literature at Normal College for Women in Rome, and taught there for a long 24 years.

Pirandello has written a number of books, both fiction and drama. His dramas are published between 1918 and 1935; a large number of his plays appeared under the collective title ‘Naked Mask’. In fact, the playwright is obsessed with the problem of self and identity and its search. In 1934 Pirandello received Nobel Prize for literature. With *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, he established himself as a major and important playwright of the time in Italy and abroad. Some other important and well known dramatic works of Pirandello include: *Right You Are*, *Henry IV*, *Tonight We Improvise*, *Each in his Own Way*, *Leola*, *As You Desire Me*.

6.8.2 About *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

In this section I will discuss a play by Pirandello in some detail: *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. It is a crucial text in the context of advent of Modernism not in Europe alone but globally. This play raises important questions about authorship, performance, creation of illusion and notion of theatrical truth, as well as authenticity of a character.

As the play starts there is complete continuity between the stage and the audience. The play does not start with any artistic pretension to tell a fictional story. An ambience of theatre rehearsal is created through initial snippet of exchange among characters on stage and their various and minute technical engagements. Hence, the play starts not with the story of a particular family, but with the idea of a 'theatre'. Thus, initial gesture of the play itself introduces a self-reflexive consciousness: the audience enters the auditorium to see director and actors on stage, speaking about the prospective rehearsal of a play.

Theatre, within the 'performed' discourse of the play, is not a performance per se, but a 'game of assigned roles'. An actor enters the 'role' and strives to become the role. Once an actor internalizes the role and performs it, there is no self and identity outside of that character. This whole idea of becoming character at the expense of one's own identity calls for a Stanislavskian mode of realistic acting. (It may be mentioned that Pirandello himself directed some of his plays and adopted the method of Stanislavski).

The question of character assumes a new significance and importance in this play. A character is an abstract entity awaiting materialization through acting and manipulation of stage situations. A character, in the obvious sense in which we understand it, is not a real entity in the sense that a human being is real. What Pirandello does is a re-definition of both 'character' and 'realism'. The aesthetic/emotional target of the play has behind it a basic premise on the idea of character and realism. A character must be *somebody* to reckon with; its existential authenticity must be granted.

Characters, as one of the *Six Characters* explains, are more real than real people in that they are fixed and consistent entities unable to fluctuate through life's unforeseen exigencies. Still we are harrowed by such a queer and curious encounter: a group of 'characters'

facing theatre people at the rehearsal of drama. We find it strange and perplexing because till the entry of the characters, we are well acclimatized to the realistic ambience of the play, (the creation of realistic ambience at the start is necessary because it will prevent the audience from seeing the *Six Characters* in an allegorical fashion.) and unwittingly developed an ideology of realism. Had the play been a ghost story right from the start, we would have developed a non-realistic framework and known how to and when to *suspend* disbelief.

The artist's commitment to the flow of reality is more important than his commitment to any specific set of artistic conventions. But realism may not be the penultimate touchstone of life's myriad mysteries. If art (or theatre, for that matter) has a basic commitment to representation of life, the artist's commitment to artistic conventions is of secondary significance. The limits of art's conventions are eventually exposed in the face of such hidden, unexplored dimensions of life and the world. The characters in the play seek to rationalize their existence saying that life is also full of such strange exigencies. On the other hand, they also seek to outwit the dismissive troupe by connecting the latter's artistic venture to the element of falsity. But given the way in which the characters carry forward their case through shifting waves of theatrical moods and momentum, they do not appear to be any passive vehicle of certain emotions or mere pretext to explore life's mystique. They acquire a distinct ontological weight and autonomy. The play works through a distinct philosophy of character. A character, as Father says, one among many possibilities of being. A character, once conceived in the author's imagination, is an independent being beyond the reach of its creator's control.

The *Six Characters* in this play carry a peculiar existential predicament. They are immortal in the sense that they cannot die. On the other hand, characters from other playwrights emerge from a completed text, a self-sufficient imaginative unity. These immortal characters have engaged the emotions and imagination of the readers/audience down the ages. The *Six Characters*, in contrast, are bereft of this artistic unity and a complete text. They are not integrated into this artistic-imaginative unity and hence, doomed to a nightmarish and deeply troubled existence. If they exist as characters with some degree of autonomy (which, however, is not equally distributed among them), their situations lack completion,

closure and need concretization. To put it simply, the story of the Six Characters' life is yet to acquire a complete and concrete imaginative unity. Their search for the author therefore also suggests, among other things, a search for the text. But in the context of theatre, this search for the text also requires a process of improvisation from certain minimal lines of bare situations into an elaborate and theatrically viable and effective 'action'. As you must have inferred, this reverses the usual mode of theatre rehearsal. Conventional theatre usually starts with a pre-written text and transforms it into performance on stage through varying mechanisms. Here, we are moving from certain bare incidents towards its concrete representation- a finished performance text. Thus, the agenda of the characters here can be read as the agenda of a converse theatre.

Check Your Progress

Write a few lines about the 'Modernism' of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Do you think that the theatre envisaged by this play would contradict epic mode as expounded by Bertolt Brecht?

6.9 Summing Up

From the above discussions you have found that for understanding the idea of the 'modern' in modern drama, you must make a survey of the whole of Europe during the early part of the twentieth century. You have seen how through the works and experimentations of different innovators, modern world drama has emerged as a new trend. You must have also noted down the fact that there is a marked difference in terms of approaches to dramaturgy in European drama. In British Drama you have seen the prevalence of Realism while in European Drama, you can see the impact of other 'isms' that resulted out of the clash between the artists and the terrible socio-political conditions of the world after the World Wars. The experience may be enriching for you as the isms like Expressionism, Surrealism, Vorticism, Futurism and Cubism have transformed the way one looks at the world. Moreover, such influences are still at work. You perhaps also noticed that along with the emergence of modernism in modern drama, there is also an idea of emerging disciplines like

Performance Studies and Theatre Studies. You must have understood by now that such disciplines are the by-products of the innovative ideas, techniques and experimentations of the great theatre personalities of the world. In the following units of the block you will read in details about the works of many of the playwrights about whom you have studied in this unit.

6.10 References and Suggested Readings

Abbotson, Susan C. W. *Thematic Guide to Modern Drama*. Greenwood Press, 2003.

Levenson, Michael. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Bentley, Eric. (Ed.) *The Theory of the Modern Stage*. Penguin Books, 1968.

www.wikipedia.org

xxx

Block- III

Unit 1: Introduction to Sophocles's plays

Unit 2: Sophocles: *Antigone*

Unit 3: Moliere as a playwright

Unit 4: Moliere: *The Misanthrope*

Unit 5: Samuel Beckett as a playwright

Unit 6: Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*

UNIT- 1

INTRODUCTION TO SOPHOCLES'S PLAY

Unit Structure

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch
- 1.4 Sophocles' Works
- 1.5 Greek theatre
- 1.6 Aristotle's Exposition of Tragedy
- 1.7 Sophocles as a Playwright
- 1.8 Summing Up
- 1.9 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to

- *learn* about the life of Sophocles;
- *gain* a general idea of Greek theatre;
- *identify* the themes of Sophocles's plays;
- *appreciate* tragic play in terms of ideas expounded by Aristotle.

1.2 Introduction

Sophocles of Kolōnos (c. 496 - c. 406 BCE) stands as one of the most renowned tragedians of ancient Greece, whose works have left an enduring legacy on world literature. Composed during the 5th century BCE, his surviving tragedies, including classics such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Women of Trachis*, not only exemplify the Greek tragic tradition but also offer valuable insights into the political and social dynamics of the era, exploring themes like family relations and Greek religious beliefs. Sophocles' artistic innovations in drama and theatre significantly influenced the development of Western theatre, and his plays remain a vital part of modern stage repertoire.

Together with Aeschylus (c. 525 - c. 456 BCE) and Euripides (c. 484 - 407 BCE), Sophocles is regarded as one of the three great tragedians of ancient Greece. Their works were often showcased at religious festivals, notably at the City Dionysia in Athens, where they were performed in groups of three, though not always as trilogies. The popularity of these plays extended beyond Athens, as they were later staged in other Greek cities. The finest plays were preserved in written form as official state records, made accessible for public reading, and became a key component of Greek education, ensuring their influence for generations.

1.3 A Brief biographical Sketch:

Sophocles, the younger contemporary of Aeschylus and the older contemporary of Euripides, was born around 496 BCE in Colonus, a village just outside the walls of Athens. His father, Sophillus, was a wealthy manufacturer of armor, allowing Sophocles to receive an excellent education. His physical beauty, athletic skills, and musical talent marked him as an exceptional youth. At age 16, Sophocles was chosen to lead the paean—a choral hymn of praise to the gods—after the Greek victory at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE, highlighting his early prominence.

The limited details about Sophocles' civic life depict him as a well-regarded figure actively engaged in public affairs. In 442 BCE, he served as one of Athens's treasurers, responsible for managing the tribute funds from the city's allies in the Delian League. Two years later, he was elected one of the ten *stratēgoi* (military generals), serving alongside Pericles, and held this position perhaps twice more. At age 83, in 413 BCE, he was appointed as one of ten *probouloi* (special advisory commissioners) entrusted with restoring Athens's financial and domestic stability following its defeat at Syracuse. His last recorded act was a public tribute to Euripides, whom he mourned with a chorus just before his own death in 406 BCE.

Sophocles' life and career were closely intertwined with Athens, reflecting a commitment to its political, religious, and social institutions. Born into affluence, he was not only well-educated and socially connected but also maintained friendships with prominent statesmen of the time. He lived through Athens's golden age, dying

just before its surrender to Sparta in 404 BCE. In his later play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles expressed enduring affection for both his birthplace and the city of Athens.

His dramatic career began with a notable victory at the Dionysian dramatic festival in 468 BCE, where he defeated the great Aeschylus. This marked the start of a remarkable career spanning over 60 years, during which he wrote 123 plays for various festivals, competing around 30 times. Sophocles' works won at least 24 first-place prizes—more than those of any other Greek tragedian—with only a handful of second-place finishes. His unparalleled success, creativity, and innovations, particularly in character development and theatrical presentation, solidified his reputation as one of the most influential playwrights of ancient Greece. His tragedies, marked by their complex exploration of human nature, continue to be performed and studied today.

Check Your Progress

1. Write a short note on the life of Sophocles.

1.4 Sophocles's Works:

Sophocles is known to have written around 120 plays, though most of these works have only survived in fragmentary form. A notable portion of his satyr play, *The Searchers*, is extant, but for many other plays, only a few lines remain. Of the approximately 120 plays Sophocles composed, only seven complete tragedies have survived, offering a glimpse of his dramatic mastery:

Antigone (c. 442 BCE): This tragedy revolves around Antigone, who is torn between obeying the state and fulfilling her duty to her family. She defies King Kreon's edict to leave her brother Polynices unburied. This leads to a moral conflict resulting in her tragic death.

Oedipus Rex (aka *Oedipus the King*, 429 - 420 BCE): Perhaps Sophocles' most famous play, it tells the story of King Oedipus, who unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother, Jocasta.

The play touches upon the theme of fate, blindness (both literal and metaphorical), and the relentless search for truth.

Philoctetes (409 BCE): Set during the Trojan War, this play follows Odysseus's attempt to persuade the wounded hero Philoctetes to rejoin the Greek forces and help secure victory in Troy. It deals with themes of betrayal, isolation, and moral dilemmas.

Oedipus at Colonus (401 BCE): The final installment of the Oedipus trilogy, it depicts the aged Oedipus's last days in exile in Colonus, where he seeks redemption. The play highlights themes of reconciliation, fate, and the endurance of suffering.

Ajax (date unknown): This play focuses on the hero of the Trojan War, Ajax, who is driven to madness after being denied the honour of Achilles' armor. It explores themes of honor, pride, and the devastating consequences of personal downfall.

Electra (date unknown): The tragedy centers on Electra and her brother Orestes, who seek revenge for the murder of their father, Agamemnon, by their mother, Clytemnestra. The play delves into themes of vengeance, familial duty, and the ethics of retribution.

Trachiniae (aka *The Women of Trachis*, date unknown): This play follows Deianeira, the wife of Heracles, and her efforts to regain her husband's love, which unwittingly lead to his death. It examines themes of love, betrayal, and tragic irony.

1.5 Detailed Discussion of Major Works:

Sophocles wrote approximately 120 plays, though most have been lost to time. What remains are seven complete tragedies, about 400 lines of a satyr play, numerous fragments, and 90 titles. The complete plays are works of Sophocles' maturity, but only two—*Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*—have relatively certain dates. *Ajax* is generally regarded as the earliest of the extant plays, while some evidence suggests that *Antigone* premiered in 442 or 441 BCE. *Philoctetes* was first staged in 409 BCE when Sophocles was 90

years old, and *Oedipus at Colonus* was produced posthumously by his grandson. We have already hinted at the themes of the major plays by him. Let us more on to a more elaborate description.

Ajax

The plot of *Ajax* (Greek: *Aiasmastigophoros*) centres on the titular hero of the Trojan War, whose pride leads to treachery and eventual suicide. Enraged over losing the armor of Achilles to Odysseus, Ajax plans to assassinate Odysseus and the judges, Agamemnon and Menelaus, but is thwarted by the goddess Athena. Humiliated, Ajax kills himself, leaving the Greek commanders to debate whether to deny him burial. Ultimately, Odysseus intervenes, securing an honorable burial for Ajax and demonstrating an awareness of the volatility of human fortune.

Antigone

Antigone tells the story of Oedipus's daughter, who defies King Creon's edict forbidding the burial of her brother, Polyneices. In her resolve to honor familial and religious obligations, Antigone faces capital punishment. Despite warnings from the prophet Tiresias, Creon refuses to relent until it is too late. Antigone dies by suicide, followed by the deaths of Creon's son Haemon and wife Eurydice, leaving Creon broken. The play explores conflicts between civic duty, personal loyalty, and divine law.

Trachinian Women

Trachinian Women (Greek: *Trachiniai*) follows Deianeira, who tries to win back her husband Heracles's love with a supposed love charm that turns out to be a deadly poison. Heracles's insensitivity in sending his concubine Iole to live with his wife and Deianeira's ignorance result in tragedy, culminating in Deianeira's suicide and Heracles's painful death. The play highlights themes of love, betrayal, and tragic irony.

Oedipus the King

Oedipus the King (Greek: *Oidipous Tyrannos*, Latin: *Oedipus Rex*) is considered the pinnacle of classical Greek drama. The play opens with Thebes stricken by a plague. King Oedipus vows to find and

punish the murderer of the former king, Laius, only to discover that he himself is the killer. Oedipus learns that he fulfilled the prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother, Jocasta, who hangs herself. Oedipus blinds himself in despair, embodying the tragedy's themes of fate, self-discovery, and blindness.

Electra

In *Electra* (Greek: *Ēlektra*), Orestes returns to avenge the murder of his father, Agamemnon, by killing his mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. The focus is on Electra, who is consumed by grief and driven by a burning desire for revenge. Her emotional journey, marked by rage, despair, and eventual triumph, is central to the play. Debate persists over whether *Electra* portrays the triumph of virtue or the corrupting power of hatred and resentment.

Philoctetes

Philoctetes (Greek: *Philoktētēs*) follows the Greeks' attempt to retrieve the abandoned hero Philoctetes from the island of Lemnos to secure victory in the Trojan War. Odysseus enlists Neoptolemus, Achilles's son, to manipulate Philoctetes, but Neoptolemus ultimately rejects deceit in favor of friendship. A divine appearance by Heracles convinces Philoctetes to join the war effort and be healed. The play examines themes of integrity, manipulation, and reconciliation.

Oedipus at Colonus

Oedipus at Colonus (Greek: *Oidipous epi Kolōnō*) depicts the final days of the blind, exiled Oedipus. He arrives at Colonus, near Athens, seeking refuge, and is protected by King Theseus. Oedipus curses his son Polyneices, who plans to attack Thebes. Ultimately, Oedipus experiences a mysterious death, merging into the earth of Colonus, where he becomes a protective spirit for Athens. The play is renowned for its lyrical odes and spiritual themes.

Trackers

The satyr play *Trackers* (Greek: *Ichneutai*) survives in 400 lines and is based on two stories of Hermes's early deeds: the theft of Apollo's cattle and the invention of the lyre. The play's chorus of

satyrs searches for the cattle, and their comical reactions to the sound of Hermes's new instrument provide the chief source of amusement. *Trackers* offers a glimpse into the lighter, more playful aspects of Sophocles' work.

Sophocles' tragedies, marked by their intricate plots, psychological depth, and exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas, have had a profound influence on Western literature. They not only reflect the tragic human condition but also reveal the complexities of fate, personal responsibility, and the quest for truth.

Stop to Consider:

Have you read any plays by Sophocles so far? You may consider reading at least *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. *Oedipus Rex* sets the stage for *Antigone*, focussing on the downfall of Antigone's father, Oedipus. *Oedipus at Colonus* highlights the conflicts between Antigone's brothers Polynices and Etecles, leading directly to the central conflict of *Antigone*.

1.6 A Note on Greek Theatre

Ancient Greek theatre emerged from religious festivals, particularly those honoring Dionysus, the god of wine, fertility, and theatre. Dramatic activities centered around this revered figure, gaining prominence in the 5th century BCE with the performances of plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. Due to the limited number of actors available in these productions, the role of the Chorus became crucial. The Chorus, an integral component of Greek drama, provided commentary on the unfolding dramatic action and deepened the audience's understanding of events.

Greek drama was divided into three main genres: tragedy, comedy, and satyr play. The era saw the rise of its most notable tragedians—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—who thrived during the zenith of Greek culture and civilization. The backdrop of these dramas often reflected Athens's conflicts, including the ongoing wars with Persia, Sparta, and the protracted Peloponnesian War. Among Aeschylus's surviving works are *Agamemnon*, *The Persians*, *The Suppliants*, *Seven Against Thebes*, and *The Eumenides*. Sophocles' repertoire, aside from *Antigone*, includes *Ajax*, *Oedipus*

Rex, Electra, and Oedipus at Colonus. Euripides' tragedies include *Medea, Heracles, The Trojan Women, Hecuba, Orestes, Iphigenia in Tauris, and Electra.* Aristophanes, the leading comic playwright of ancient Greece, is credited with such comedies as *The Acharnians, The Birds, The Clouds, The Frogs, The Knights, and Plutus.*

Tragedy was the most significant genre of Greek drama, epitomized by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Aristotle's well-known definition of tragedy in his *Poetics* was based primarily on the plays of these master tragedians. In a broader sense, the term 'tragedy' refers to catastrophic events of great magnitude. While sad or unfortunate events are common in everyday life, they do not necessarily meet the criteria of tragedy as a dramatic form. Aristotle's *Poetics* outlines the fundamental characteristics of tragedy, which emphasize the elicitation of emotions such as pity and fear, leading to a cathartic experience for the audience.

As this section aims to introduce the key tragedian Sophocles and his seminal work *Antigone*, a deeper discussion of the concept of tragedy is essential. This discussion will be followed by an exploration of Aristotle's exposition of tragedy.

Check Your Progress

2. Write a note on the major playwrights of Greek theatre.

1.7 Aristotle's Exposition of Tragedy:

Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action which is serious and of a certain magnitude, complete in itself in a language that is pleasurable and appropriate, in dramatic rather than narrative form, effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions." This definition emphasizes the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of tragedy, positioning it as a continuation of Plato's thought. While Plato was critical of poetry for its tendency to evoke excessive emotions, Aristotle recognized the potential for tragedy to balance emotions through a cathartic process, achieving an ethical and psychological end.

For Aristotle, a poet or tragedian is defined by their skill in imitation, not merely by metrical form. Tragedy, unlike mere

historical accounts, presents a coherent sequence of actions, illustrating what a person would do in specific situations. Greek tragedians drew their plots from myths and legends, treating them as a body of facts rather than pure imagination.

Aristotle's conception of tragedy is grounded in two qualities essential to aesthetic beauty: size and order. A well-constructed plot must have a clear beginning, middle, and end, maintaining unity throughout. While a beginning must be linked to preceding events, it should also establish a clear and engaging initial situation. For instance, *Oedipus Rex* opens with the city of Thebes suffering from a plague, setting up a chain of events that drive the plot forward.

Aristotle also emphasizes the importance of plot length, noting that it should allow the protagonist's journey from happiness to misery while remaining concise enough for the audience to grasp in a single sitting. Central to his theory are the principles of probability and necessity, which dictate that events in a tragedy should follow a logical cause-and-effect chain, creating coherence and rationality within the plot. However, Aristotle allows for elements of surprise, as unexpected outcomes can arise logically from previous actions.

In Aristotle's framework, plot holds more importance than character. While action defines character, it is action that ultimately drives the narrative. The tragic hero must possess *hamartia*, often translated as a "tragic flaw" or "error of judgment." This flaw is not moral depravity but rather an unintentional mistake, often rooted in ignorance. The concept of *hamartia* implies that a tragic hero must be imperfect, as pure perfection would undermine the audience's sense of justice and prevent the arousal of pity.

Key structural elements of tragedy include *peripety* (reversal of intention) and discovery (a shift from ignorance to knowledge), which enhance the dramatic impact. The cause-and-effect chain must lead to *catharsis*, a purgation or relief of the emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle argues that pity arises from undeserved misfortune, while fear stems from recognizing that such misfortune could befall us.

Catharsis does not imply the total elimination of emotions, but rather a restoration of emotional balance. This process transforms potential emotions into active ones, ultimately bringing them back

to a trained potentiality, allowing the audience to leave the theater with a sense of relief. Some modern interpretations, such as F.L. Lucas's, criticize the medical metaphor of catharsis, arguing that theater should aim for pleasure rather than therapeutic purgation. However, Aristotle's concept of catharsis suggests a refinement of emotional responses, aligning aesthetic experience with ethical outcomes.

Check Your Progress:

3. What is Aristotle's theory of tragedy? Explain.
4. Explain the concept of catharsis. (60 words)

1.8 Sophocles as a Dramatist

Ancient sources credit Sophocles with numerous innovations, both major and minor, that significantly influenced the evolution of Greek drama. Among the minor innovations, he is believed to have introduced "scene paintings" or pictorial props that helped establish the play's locale or atmosphere. Another adaptation attributed to Sophocles is the increase of the Chorus size from 12 to 15 members, allowing for more dynamic choral interactions. His major and most impactful innovation was the introduction of a third actor into the performance. Previously, two actors were allowed to "double" roles, assuming multiple characters within a play. The addition of a third actor not only increased the number of characters but also expanded the scope of dramatic conflict, making plots more fluid and situations more intricate. This innovation allowed for more complex character interactions, enhancing the dramatic structure and emotional depth of Greek tragedy.

Sophocles' typical dramas are characterized by a small number of characters who possess striking determination and specific traits or flaws that, combined with unfolding circumstances, lead them inevitably to tragic outcomes. His approach is marked by economy, concentration, and dramatic effectiveness, creating coherent and suspenseful narratives that epitomized classical tragedy. A central theme in Sophocles' plays is the collision of truth with ignorance, delusion, or folly, often dramatized through deceptive reports,

rumors, hasty judgments, or even madness. The protagonist typically commits a grave error that sets off a chain reaction, affecting others who respond in ways that propel the tragic action forward, often resulting in shared ruin. Importantly, those who suffer from the protagonist's errors are usually contemporaries, emphasizing the communal nature of tragedy.

This shift towards more complex, self-contained tragedies demanded a third actor and led to the abandonment of Aeschylus's connected trilogy format. Sophocles focused on crafting single, unified plays where the entire dramatic action unfolded within one piece. From his time onward, a "trilogy" typically consisted of three separate plays by the same author, rather than a connected narrative sequence.

Sophocles' language is notably versatile, adapting to the dramatic needs of the moment. It can range from ponderous and weighty to swift-moving and emotionally charged, shifting effortlessly from highly decorative to plain and simple. His mastery of diction and form was highly respected by his contemporaries and continues to be admired today. Sophocles is particularly lauded for his vivid and sympathetic portrayal of characters, especially his tragic women, like Electra and Antigone, whose strength and depth resonate profoundly.

Sophocles' command over plot and situation is widely recognized, with his play *Oedipus the King* frequently cited by Aristotle in the *Poetics* as a masterpiece of tragic construction. Sophocles excelled in creating high dramatic tension and effective use of tragic irony, elements that heighten the emotional impact of his plays and enhance their complexity.

Some critics have argued that Sophocles was "merely" a superb artist, suggesting that unlike Aeschylus or Euripides, he did not grapple deeply with religious or intellectual questions. However, it is essential to understand that, for Sophocles, the gods represented the natural forces of the universe to which humans are subject. His characters often appear cut off from these enduring forces, living in a state of ignorance. Yet, through pain, suffering, and endurance, his protagonists achieve a more profound contact with universal truths, becoming more genuinely human in the process. To Sophocles,

tragedy was not merely a showcase of human conflict but a means of exploring how individuals relate to the larger, unchanging structures of reality. This engagement with the fundamental human condition reflects his belief in the transformative power of suffering—a core theme that has cemented his legacy as one of the greatest dramatists of all time.

Sophocles was immensely popular during his lifetime and remains a central figure in the history of Greek drama. He is celebrated not only for his superb storytelling and character development but also for his significant innovations in the tragedy format. Among these innovations was the addition of a third actor to performances, which allowed for more intricate and sophisticated plots. This change was instrumental in expanding the scope of dramatic conflict, enabling more fluid action and complex character interactions. Sophocles also introduced painted scenery, sometimes changing it during the play to suggest different settings, such as a rural backdrop. The use of three actors, who often played multiple roles while wearing masks, marked a major breakthrough, positioning Sophocles as a transitional figure between the earlier Aeschylus and the later Euripides.

Sophocles' approach to drama was marked by a heightened sense of realism compared to his predecessors. While he retained the chorus as a vital part of his plays—consisting of up to 15 actors who sang rather than spoke their lines—he integrated the chorus more actively into the drama. For Sophocles, the chorus functioned both as a participant in the action and a commentator on events, forging a closer connection with the audience. This use of the chorus as both protagonist and commentator distinguished Sophocles' work and contributed to a more immersive theatrical experience.

One of Sophocles' signature techniques was his use of theatrical metaphors to convey deeper meanings. For instance, blindness serves as a metaphor for ignorance in the *Oedipus* plays, while bestiality symbolizes uncontrollable instincts in *Women of Trachis*. Sophocles often sought to challenge and unsettle his audience's conventional notions of what is 'normal' by presenting characters who were forced to confront impossible moral dilemmas. Other dramatic techniques included memorable entrances and exits of characters, along with the repeated use of symbolic props, such as

the urn in *Electra* and the sword in *Ajax*. These devices added layers of meaning and heightened the emotional impact of the plays.

In terms of language, Sophocles introduced innovations that enhanced the dramatic experience. His language was rich and formalized, yet it featured natural speech rhythms, running sentences, and the unusual use of pauses, all of which contributed to greater fluidity, rhythm, and dramatic tension. This linguistic flexibility allowed him to achieve a depth of expression unmatched by many of his contemporaries.

Sophocles' plays, like those of other tragedians of the time, drew heavily on classical Greek mythology, a common convention in tragedies (*tragōida*). The familiarity of the stories enabled Sophocles to reinterpret specific elements and emphasize the 'how' rather than the 'what' of events. His plays often featured a hero with exceptional abilities whose over-confidence or pride (*hubris*) leads to a tragic downfall.

One of Sophocles' most famous works is *Antigone*, which exemplifies his focus on moral dilemmas. In this play, the protagonist, Antigone, defies King Kreon's decree by burying her brother Polynices, leading to her tragic death. The play presents a conflict of 'right against right'—the political right of the state to deny burial to a traitor versus the moral right of a sister to perform burial rites for her brother. Sophocles often portrayed characters who were convinced of their moral stance, only to realize, too late, the tragic consequences of their actions. This theme of tragic misunderstanding, where characters recognize the truth only after the damage is done, is a hallmark of Sophoclean drama.

While some critics argue that Sophocles did not grapple with religious or intellectual issues as deeply as Aeschylus or Euripides, his works are far from mere artistic exercises. To Sophocles, "the gods" symbolized the immutable forces of the universe to which humans are unwittingly subject. His tragedies explore the human condition, emphasizing that suffering, pain, and crisis can bring individuals closer to a deeper understanding of universal truths. In the process, his characters often achieve a more profound sense of humanity and self-awareness, making Sophocles not just a master

dramatist but a thinker who profoundly engaged with the human experience.

Check Your Progress:

5. Formulate your idea of Sophocles as a playwright, highlighting his themes and craft.

1.8 Summing Up

Sophocles not only created several masterpieces of literature but also helped establish the standard formula for Greek tragedy. His innovations, alongside Greek comedy, defined the foundations of Western theatre for millennia. The influence of his work extends far beyond the realm of theatre, provoking discussion and analysis in various fields, including psychology. Notably, Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex was inspired by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, underscoring the enduring psychological depth and interpretative complexity of Sophoclean drama. This lasting impact serves as a testament to the profound themes, moral dilemmas, and human insights woven into the plays of this great Greek master, making his work a central pillar in the study of classical literature and culture.

1.9 References and Suggested Reading:

- Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Penguin Classics, 1997.
- Easterling, P.E.. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Hornblower, Simon, and Antony Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Knox, Bernard. *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time*. Yale University Press, 1998.

xxx

UNIT- 2
SOPHOCLES: ANTIGONE

Unit Structure:

2.1 Objective

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Origin of the Story

2.4 What Happens in *Antigone*

2.5 Characters of the Play

2.6 Critical Analysis of *Antigone*

2.7 Summing Up

2.8 References and Suggested Reading

2.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to

- *learn* about the play's origin;
- *appreciate* the plot of the play;
- *write* about the themes of the play;
- *explore* the characters of the play;
- *evaluate* the text as a drama.

2.2 Introduction

Antigone is one of the seven extant plays by Sophocles. It is a brief drama, yet one of the most performed ones. Antigone is still widely performed across the globe in different cultures and languages and among diverse audiences. One of the reasons of its continuing popularity is the fact that the play deals with a central contradiction that has permeated in all human societies, albeit in different disguises and forms: the conflict between individual and the structure of authority. Besides it is amazing to see how a playwright so distant in time than ours articulates his radical modernity by foregrounding a morally powerful woman character who has stood against the all-powerful authority alone. The consequences of this

extraordinary resistance is fatal, making a perfect situation for tragedy. It is a truism that Greek tragedy has influenced European and non-European theatrical traditions for a vast expanse of time, but one must give *Antigone* its due credit when one remembers this classic theatrical heritage. The very term 'tragedy' might sound a little antiquarian, but the tragic situations have persisted in human history because the perennial contradictions of human society have not resolved, and hence the appeal of the tragic plays. The plot of *Antigone* is simple enough: Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, buries her deceased brother Polyneices against a prohibitive decree of the state. A wise seer of the city advises the king against giving her capital punishment as well as for giving the corpse its due burial rite. It was too late, however, and disaster befalls the king bringing him to realization of his blunder. The plot is linked to other plays by Sophocles, and its structure is linear with no sub-plots, yet it offers an inexorable tragic experience to the reader/audience.

2.3 Origin of the Story:

There is a Theban legend about burning the corpses of Polyneices and Eteocles on the same pyre. The edict against burial and Antigone's resolve to defy the law are mentioned by Aeschylus. His play *Seven Against Thebes* contains the edict denying sepulchre to Polyneices, and Antigone decides to bury him, supported by a section in the chorus. In Sophocles's play, the resolve and action of the protagonist are singular, and she stands alone. In *Seven Against Thebes*, the rivalry and fight between Eteocles and Polyneices, the sons of Oedipus, are dramatized. After Oedipus's exile, the two brothers contend for the throne. It is agreed that Eteocles will rule first, but at the end of his term, he refuses to step down for his brother. Polyneices is forced into exile and resolves to avenge the treachery of his brother. He aligns himself with the King of Argos, leading to a war on Thebes, now ruled by Eteocles. Eteocles sends seven soldiers outside the seven gates of Thebes against seven soldiers from Argos. At the war's climax, Eteocles is made to fight his brother at the seventh gate, where both are killed. Antigone attempts to bury her brother Polyneices against the state decree prohibiting burial. Antigone and Ismene make their appearance at the play's end.

In a way, this is the pre-history of the Antigone narrative. We can put it together in this way: the city of Thebes had been besieged by an Argive army and the associated of the exiled Polyneices. To go a little further back, Oedipus, father of four children named Antigone, Ismene (daughters) Polyneices and Eteocles (sons), had unwittingly married his own mother Jocasta and killed his father Laius—all taking place ordained by an oracle. Having learnt of his guilt, Oedipus blinded himself and left Thebes. Later, a quarrel ensued between his sons, as we have related. After both the brothers are killed in the battle, Jocasta's brother Creon takes over as the new king of Thebes, and orders a prohibition on the burial of Polyneices, who is now seen as a traitor. The decree prohibiting Polyneices's burial comes with a concomitant declaration of Eteocles to be accorded a grand state honour.

2.4 What happens in the Play

The action unfolds against the backdrop of a changed political landscape in Thebes. Antigone declares to her sister, Ismene, her intention to defy the king's decree by performing burial rites for their brother. Ismene, however, opposes the idea, citing the tragic history of their family, already marred by repeated encounters with death. The sisters' arguments over whether to honor their brother in defiance of the law reveal a sharp contrast in their characters and highlight the unique challenges faced by their family.

The Chorus—a group of fifteen Theban elders representing the citizens—enters with an ode celebrating the city's survival and victory in the battle against the forces of Argos. Creon, the newly crowned king of Thebes, proclaims an edict forbidding the burial of Polyneices while granting full honors to Eteocles. The elders express their agreement with the royal decree, suggesting that their support stems more from fear of punishment than genuine conviction.

A sentry then arrives to inform Creon that Polyneices' corpse has been buried by an unknown individual. Enraged, Creon immediately accuses the sentry of being complicit in the act. He declares that the sentry will only be absolved if he identifies and apprehends the real culprit. When the Leader cautiously suggests that the burial might be the work of the gods, Creon dismisses the idea outright,

attributing the act to a subversive conspiracy against his authority. He further accuses the sentry of succumbing to bribery, blaming his actions on the corrupting influence of money.

Stop to Consider:

Think about the arguments between Antigone and Ismene. What do these exchanges reveal about their personalities? Take a moment to think about it! Additionally, consider the Chorus's reaction to Creon's prohibitions. Do you believe they genuinely support the edict, or is their agreement influenced by fear or coercion?

The choral ode that follows reflects on humanity's ingenuity, highlighting the ambivalent nature of human actions as both a force for good and a potential source of destruction. It suggests that both the citizen and the city thrive when secular laws and divine laws are harmoniously aligned. However, the central theme of the play lies in the tension between man-made laws and divine justice. While the city does not endorse humanity's "reckless daring," the fundamental contradiction between these two forms of authority remains unresolved

Antigone is brought before Creon and readily confesses to her actions. Firm and resolute, she shows no fear, anxiety, or guilt and is fully aware of the fatal consequences of her defiance. She argues that above all temporal and earthly laws stands a divine law that mandates honoring the dead with burial rites. Creon summons Ismene as well, and, in contrast to her initial opposition to Antigone's plan, Ismene now pleads guilty alongside her sister. Antigone, however, rejects Ismene's attempt to share responsibility for the act, insisting that her sister played no part in honoring their brother in defiance of the state's edict. She argues that Ismene should be spared punishment, as she did not participate in the "crime." Antigone firmly rebuffs Ismene's plea to share in the consequences, asserting her solitary ownership of the act. Meanwhile, Creon is troubled by the situation, especially as Antigone is betrothed to his son, Haemon.

This is followed by a choral ode reflecting on the nature of destiny. It suggests that while some fortunate individuals escape devastation, others endure untold misery that spans generations. At this moment,

with both sisters ordered to be imprisoned, a sentence that ultimately leads to death, the Chorus intensifies the sense of impending doom. The ode emphasizes the overwhelming power of Zeus and the futility of human free will in the face of divine forces.

Haemon—Creon's son and Antigone's betrothed—enters, and Creon anxiously seeks his son's affirmation and a pledge of obedience. Initially, Haemon responds positively, expressing his commitment to his father above all else. Encouraged by this reply, Creon proceeds to explain Antigone's case in detail. However, Haemon soon counters, arguing that Creon is "reasoning badly" and urging him to consider public opinion, which favors Antigone. The confrontation between father and son revolves around their differing perspectives on justice and governance. Though reassured by Haemon's initial loyalty, Creon grows increasingly anxious about his son's stance on Antigone. In a lengthy speech, Creon demands unwavering assurance of Haemon's opposition to her, seeking to ensure that his son's views align fully with his own decision.

Haemon's reply is notable for its composure, clarity, and balanced reasoning. He contends that Creon is disconnected from the true sentiments of the people, who sympathize with Antigone. The Chorus Leader begins to waver in their support of Creon. As the argument escalates, Haemon transitions from imploring his father to outright defiance. Frustrated by Creon's stubbornness, he boldly declares, "I see my father offending justice—wrong." When Creon refuses to heed Haemon's appeal, Haemon's tone becomes resolute. He storms out, vowing not to outlive Antigone, marking a turning point in the conflict.

After Haemon's departure, Creon announces, in response to a question from the Chorus, that Ismene will be spared as she has been proven innocent. However, Antigone is to be imprisoned in a stone vault on the banks of Acheron, left alone to die of starvation in the desolate, uninhabited place.

The enormity of the situation and the severity of Antigone's punishment deeply affect the Chorus. In the following choral ode, they reflect on the power of love, which heightens the tragic pathos surrounding Antigone's plight.

The sight of Antigone being led to the banks of Acheron deeply moves the elders. Facing her imminent death, she expresses a natural anxiety and profound sorrow. In her lament, she invokes the story of Niobe, who wept so bitterly that she turned to stone on a mountain. Antigone reflects on her family's ancestral guilt, which she sees as a curse affecting generations. Her grief also reveals her unfulfilled longing for marriage, as suggested by her references to "wed," "wedding songs," and the "marriage bed." In her despair, she lashes out at the elders, accusing them of mocking her plight. While the elders sympathize with her suffering, they also remark that defiance against authority cannot go unpunished—a sentiment they express after Creon enters. Creon scolds the guards for their delay in carrying out his orders.

Antigone, in her final moments, accepts her fate, expressing the belief that love awaits her after death and that she will soon be reunited with her deceased family members.

Teiresias, the blind seer, arrives to meet Creon and recounts strange occurrences: violent quarrels among birds, signaling unnatural discord. Teiresias explains that he performed rites to avert danger but discovered that animals feeding on the unburied corpse of Polyneices have defiled the sacred rituals. He warns Creon that these signs portend disaster and urges him to bury Polyneices properly. Creon stubbornly rejects Teiresias's advice, clinging to his decree. He accuses the seer of delivering false prophecies for personal gain. In response, Teiresias predicts dire consequences for Creon's pride and obstinacy: deaths in his family, widespread mourning, and curses from his people. After Teiresias departs, Creon begins to question his own judgment.

The Chorus Leaders remind Creon that Teiresias's prophecies have never proven false. Humbled, Creon turns to the elders for guidance. Acting on their advice, though reluctantly, Creon resolves to free Antigone from the rocky vault and give Polyneices a proper burial. Accompanied by his men, he departs to carry out these tasks.

At this point, the Chorus calls upon the gods and invokes the radiant presence of Dionysus to help avert the catastrophe befalling the people of Thebes. They urge Dionysus, "the giver of all good

things," to bring relief and joy, symbolized through the act of dancing.

Stop to Consider:

As you have learned, Polyneices is symbolically honored by his sister through the performance of burial rites. Why, then, does Teiresias insist that Creon himself perform the burial? Reflect on the significance of this.

Creon has been a symbol of unyielding resolve and inflexibility throughout the play. How should his sudden change of heart be interpreted? Is it simply the result of his realization of Teiresias's prophetic power? Or does it reveal an underlying self-doubt in his convictions and decisions? If so, can you identify textual evidence that supports this interpretation?

A Messenger—one of Creon's servants who accompanied him to the plain—enters and recounts the events that transpired after Creon set out to avert the disaster foretold by Teiresias. Eurydice, the Queen of Thebes, overhears the Messenger's account and swoons. Upon regaining consciousness, she steps forward to hear the full story.

The Messenger narrates the following sequence of events: Creon first approaches the site of Polyneices' body and performs burial rites with prayers to the gods, raising a tomb on the spot. He then proceeds to Antigone's tomb, only to find her already dead—she has hanged herself using her veil. Haemon, frenzied with grief, is discovered embracing her corpse. In a fit of despair, Haemon draws his sword, first attempting to strike Creon, but ultimately turns the blade on himself, ending his own life.

Eurydice, upon hearing this tragic news, silently returns to the palace without uttering a word. The Leader and the Messenger, puzzled and apprehensive, speculate about the meaning of her quiet departure. The Messenger enters the palace to investigate further.

Meanwhile, Creon arrives, shattered by grief, as his attendants carry Haemon's body. Overwhelmed by the loss of his son and the devastation caused by his own decisions, Creon laments his folly

and the havoc it has unleashed. The Messenger soon reappears with more tragic news: Eurydice has taken her own life. Her body is brought out, and it is revealed that she stabbed herself, unable to endure the agony of Haemon's death.

Desolate and utterly wretched, Creon now prays only for death, consumed by an inconsolable grief. The Messenger indicts him for the tragedy, while the Leader remains sternly detached. The play concludes with Creon's profound realization of his moral failings and the devastating consequences of his pride and stubbornness. The Chorus emphasizes the supremacy of divine justice over human pride and power, reaffirming the wisdom that divine intervention and destiny ultimately govern human life.

Check Your Progress:

- How are the unities of time and place maintained in *Antigone*?
- Narrate the story of *Antigone* in your own words.

2.5 Characters in the Play

Antigone: Antigone, Oedipus's daughter, is the protagonist of the play. She defies the newly established edict prohibiting the burial of her brother Polyneices, performing symbolic burial rites against all odds and entirely on her own, as her sister refuses to join her. Antigone is firm and resolute, embodying three key aspects of her personality: her commitment to familial values, her deference to religious duty for the dead, and, most significantly, her resistance to secular authority.

In the context of the lower status of women in ancient Greek city-states—where neither women nor slaves held civic status—Antigone's fierce defiance of patriarchal royal authority allows her to be seen as an embodiment of female power and feminist agency. At the familial level, she upholds ethical values of compassion and devotion, transcending the discriminatory lens of politics. Religiously, she enacts divine will, obeying natural and divine laws above human decrees. However, it is her political defiance and anti-establishment stance that leads to her downfall. Fully aware of the

consequences, Antigone knowingly sacrifices her life and the expectations of marriage at the altar of divine justice.

Antigone stands in stark contrast to other characters. Her firm resolution and fearlessness highlight Ismene's timidity, acquiescence, and hesitation. Similarly, Eurydice's silence in the face of her husband's ruthless punishment of Antigone underscores Antigone's vocal and assertive opposition to injustice. Another critical aspect of Antigone's character is her profound isolation—physical, mental, and psychological. She is physically separated from the citizens when she is condemned to die alone in a stone vault by the river. Mentally, she is isolated as her sister declines to support her burial act, and the Theban elders fail to side with her. Emotionally, her isolation deepens when only Haemon, her betrothed, defends her against Creon. Ultimately, Haemon chooses to die with her, emphasizing the depth of her isolation and the tragic nobility of her sacrifice. We know from Haemon's speech that news of Antigone's punishment stirred some public unrest, but there is no textual evidence suggesting that Antigone herself is aware of this public sympathy. In her speech before being taken by the guards to the rocky vault, she expresses her agony and despair, describing herself as a "stranger" who goes to her death "unmourned by friends."

Creon: Creon, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, emerges as a complex character embodying both the strengths and flaws of leadership. As the new ruler of Thebes, he ascends the throne after a period of chaos marked by the war with Argos and the mutual destruction of Oedipus's sons, Eteocles and Polyneices. His initial actions, such as restoring peace and order, highlight his commitment to Thebes and his role as a stabilizing force. However, Creon's rigidity and obsession with authority gradually expose his tragic flaws. Creon's decree forbidding the burial of Polyneices—whom he deems a traitor—is central to the play's conflict. This edict reflects his political motive to establish his rule firmly by demonstrating that loyalty to the state takes precedence over familial bonds. His stance underscores his belief in the supremacy of law and order, but it also reveals his inability to balance justice with compassion. Creon clings stubbornly to his decision, even when confronted by Antigone's moral defiance and the warnings of others, including his son Haemon and the blind prophet Tiresias.

Despite his authoritarian demeanor, Creon is not wholly devoid of humanity. When Tiresias warns him of the dire consequences of his actions, Creon hesitates but ultimately relents, deciding to bury Polyneices and free Antigone. Tragically, his change of heart comes too late to avert disaster. The suicides of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice leave him broken and isolated, highlighting the devastating cost of his hubris and delayed realization. Creon's character exemplifies a lesson about the dangers of excessive pride and the refusal to heed wise counsel. While his initial intentions to uphold order are understandable, his inability to adapt and recognize the limitations of human authority leads to his downfall.

Chorus:

The Chorus in *Antigone* represents the senior citizens of Thebes, embodying the voice of traditional wisdom, societal values and conscience. They play a dual role, both participating in the play's action and providing commentary that bridges the audience and the unfolding drama. Initially, the Chorus supports Creon's edict forbidding the burial of Polyneices, viewing it as a necessary measure to restore order to Thebes after the devastating war with Argos. However, their acceptance of the decree is not entirely voluntary—it is tinged with fear of Creon's authority, suggesting that their compliance is as much about self-preservation as loyalty to the state. This duality reflects the tension between submission to power and the internal conflict of moral conscience.

As the play progresses, the Chorus's role evolves, becoming a barometer of the shifting moral and emotional stakes. While they do not openly endorse Antigone's defiance of Creon, they are sympathetic to her plight, acknowledging the tragedy of her circumstances. Their commentary, such as the observation that "attacks on power never go unchecked," underscores the risks inherent in challenging authority, even when such defiance may be morally justified. At the same time, their lamentations and reflections heighten the sense of impending doom as Antigone and Ismene face imprisonment, creating an atmosphere of inevitability and tragedy.

The Chorus also provides broader philosophical reflections, such as their meditation on humanity's ambivalent nature—its capacity for

both creation and destruction. These odes deepen the thematic resonance of the play, exploring the complexities of human existence, the fragility of societal order, and the interplay between divine and human laws.

By the climax, the Chorus begins to question Creon's decisions more openly, particularly after Tiresias's warnings. Their gradual shift from compliance to critique underscores the tragic trajectory of Creon's hubris and rigidity. Ultimately, the Chorus serves as a moral compass and a mirror of the audience's evolving perspective, reflecting the profound dilemmas at the heart of the play. Through their commentary and participation, they enrich the narrative, offering a nuanced exploration of justice, authority, and human fallibility.

Stop to Consider:

There are other characters such as Ismene, Haemon, Eurydice. Read the play and write down your impressions of these characters. We have hinted at these characters in previous sections, and now a fresh reading will enrich your understanding of them.

2.6 Critical Analysis of the Play

Sophocles' *Antigone* is a masterpiece of classical tragedy that resonates with timeless relevance, capturing the complexities of human morality, justice, and the tension between individual conscience and state authority. At its heart, the play is a profound exploration of conflict—between familial and divine obligations on the one hand and secular authority on the other. Antigone's defiance of Creon underscores two deeply cherished principles: the rights of family and the sacred duty of burial for the dead. These cardinal values clash with Creon's decree, which prioritizes the authority of the state over all else. This irreconcilable confrontation sets the stage for a tragedy in which no third party, not even the prophet Tiresias, can mediate or fully resolve the deadlock.

The central conflict between Antigone and Creon epitomizes the opposition of divine justice and human law. Antigone's private conscience aligns with divine rule, compelling her to honor her brother Polyneices with burial rites despite Creon's prohibition. For Antigone, this act is not only a sacred duty but also a moral

imperative. In contrast, Creon embodies the rigid authority of the state, justifying his actions by deeming Polyneices a traitor for waging war against Thebes. By denying Polyneices burial, Creon commits what the Greeks regarded as a profound violation of sacred law, as the burial of even an enemy was considered inviolable. His edict is not merely an act of severity but a breach of moral law, emphasizing his tyrannical misuse of power.

Antigone's tragic stature lies in her unyielding resolve and moral conviction, which she upholds despite the inevitability of her death. Her defiance transcends personal rebellion and becomes an assertion of universal principles, challenging the conventional definitions of law and justice. Charles Segal, in *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, notes that Antigone discovers and accepts her life as part of a larger design, where her inward self and destiny coincide. She recognizes that her sacred duty warrants her death and performs this duty not in spite of her death but through it, achieving heroic stature through her sacrifice.

Moreover, Antigone's lamentation for her unfulfilled desire for marital life adds a poignant layer to her humanity. This aspect of her character amplifies the tragic effect, presenting her not only as a figure of unshakable determination but also as a woman torn between life's possibilities and her moral obligations.

Creon's character serves as a counterpoint to Antigone's moral clarity. His edict, issued without broader constitutional mechanisms, represents a singular and flawed assertion of power. Though the Chorus acknowledges Creon's authority, it does not fully endorse his actions. Tiresias, in stark contrast to the Chorus's ambivalence, fearlessly condemns Creon's refusal to bury Polyneices and his harsh punishment of Antigone. Only when Creon begins to doubt the moral ground of his actions does the Chorus affirm his realization, heightening the dramatic tension. This shift underscores Creon's tragic flaw: his inability to balance the laws of the state with the moral laws of humanity.

The Chorus, representing the Theban citizens, occupies a complex position in the play. While initially refraining from outrightly supporting or condemning Creon's edict, they align with him after Antigone breaks the law. However, their stance is marked by

ambiguity, reflecting their subjection to the prevailing power dynamics. The Chorus's eventual recognition of natural moral law enhances the dramatic tension, as their earlier ambivalence contrasts with their later acknowledgment of Creon's errors. This dramatic irony intensifies the tragedy, as Antigone's isolation becomes more pronounced.

Sophocles employs the Chorus and the play's language to juxtapose humanity's capacity for greatness with its potential for baseness. In one choral ode, human ingenuity and intelligence are celebrated as transformative forces, yet this image is ironically contrasted with the violence and despair that plague Thebes. The tragic fate of Oedipus's sons, reduced to mutual destruction, symbolizes humanity's downfall when stripped of order and civility. Creon's treatment of Polyneices' corpse, denying it burial and reducing it to mere decay, epitomizes this degradation, blurring the distinction between human and beast. This duality—humanity's exalted status and its susceptibility to savagery—forms the thematic core of the play.

The ethical tensions in *Antigone* resonate profoundly in modern contexts. The play's exploration of the conflict between individual conscience and state authority mirrors contemporary struggles for justice and human rights. Antigone's alignment with the organic rhythms of nature contrasts sharply with Creon's rigid adherence to human constructs, suggesting that balance and adaptability are essential virtues. Haemon, advocating for harmony, underscores this lesson, challenging Creon's absolutism and pointing toward an ethic of reconciliation.

Check Your Progress:

- Write a note on Antigone as a tragic play.

2.7 Summing Up

In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner attributes tragedy to a worldview in which humanity is seen as an unwelcome guest in the world. Tragedy can arise from the self-destructiveness inherent in human nature, from mankind's fall, or from demonic forces embedded in a hostile environment. In this tragic vision of life,

neither reason nor sensibility can prevent tragedy. According to Steiner, the Judaic tradition knows no tragedy because it demands justice; the ways of God, over time, prove just. The *Iliad* contains several tragic motifs, including the fall of Troy, the brevity of heroic life, and humanity's exposure to the inhuman. Steiner writes, "The Greek tragic poets assert that the forces which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the governance of reason or justice. Worse than that: there are around us daemonic energies which prey upon the soul and turn it to madness or which poison our will so that we inflict irreparable outrage upon ourselves and those we love." Steiner further observes that Antigone is fully aware of her impending death. In Greek tragedy, however, protagonists "stride to their fierce disaster in the grip of truths more intense than knowledge" (7). Among the many interpretations of *Antigone*, one enduring perspective is to read it as a tragedy. The profound emotional situations dramatized in this short play—arising from the perennial conflict between the individual and authority—include vivid images of disaster, desperation, and anger. The transformations undergone by the protagonist, despite never averting the disaster, are key aspects of the play that keep it relevant and resonant in our present times.

2.8 References and Suggested Readings

- Knox, Bernard M. *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*. University of California Press, 2023.
- Segal, Charles. *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.
- Steiner, George. *Antigones: How the Antigone Legend has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and Thought*. Yale University Press, 1996.

xxx

UNIT- 3

MOLIERE AS A PLAYWRIGHT

Unit Structure:

3.1 Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 About the Author

3.4 Moliere's Works

3.5 Moliere's Influence on French Literature

3.6 Moliere's Comedy Techniques

3.7 Summing Up

3.8 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- *know* about Moliere as a playwright;
- *learn* about his works;
- *understand* his influence on French literature;
- *analyze* his dramatic techniques.

3.2 Introduction

Moliere was one of the most celebrated and renowned French playwrights whose contribution to French literature as well as Western drama is immense. His literary compositions influenced literature and art all across the world through the centuries, especially drama and theatre. His works included comedies, tragedies, farces, comedie-ballet, etc. His influence and contribution to the French literary arena is so great that French language came to be referred to as the 'language of Moliere'. He revolutionized French theatre, turning it into a popular art form from being a predominantly aristocratic entertainment. He often included slapsticks and farcical elements to his plays. He portrayed nuanced,

believable characters that were so iconic that they became part of the popular culture around the globe. Moliere's plays are known for the witty dialogues and his narratives usually critiqued the contemporary society. He commonly satirized human relationships and ridiculed the institution of marriage, intellectual pretention as well as religious hypocrisy in his works. He has immensely contributed in establishing comedy as a respectful genre of literature. His works were translated into many languages and gained excessive readership across the world.

3.3 About the Author

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, or most popularly known as Moliere, was born on 15 January, 1622, to Jean Poquelin, a tapestry merchant, and Marie Cresse, in Paris. He attended the College de Clermont and later studied law at the University of Orleans in France. He studied law for two years but eventually abandoned it to pursue his career in theatre. He joined the Illustre Theatre Company that performed in Paris and the surrounding provinces. He collaborated with his friend and an actor, Madeleine Bejart, and took up acting along with being a playwright and a director. He developed his own comedic style of theatre narratives and performances that were readily accepted by the audience of the contemporary time. He gained royal patronage from King Louis XIV and aristocrats like Phillippe I, Duke of Orleans, and soon became a favourite of the royal court. He was granted permission to use the sale du Petit-Bourbon for theatrical performances. Later, he even gained access to perform at the theatre in the Palais-Royal where some of his most successful plays such as *The Learned Women*, *The Imaginary Invalid*, *The School for Husbands*, and *The School for Wives* were premiered. He married Madeleine's sister, Armande Bejart, in 1662 and had three children. Moliere lost his mother when he was ten years old. After his mother's death, he and his father moved to Rue Saint-Honore, near the royal palace. In 1631, his father purchased the title of *valet de chambre ordinaire et tapissier du Roi* (valet of the King's chamber and keeper of carpets and upholstery) from the royal court. The post was assumed by Moliere in 1641 but he abandoned it two years later in 1643 when he decided to work on the stage. He founded the Illustre Theatre in 1643. In 1661, Moliere introduced the comedies-ballets, a

transitional form of dance and drama performance. He produced and directed a number of successful plays and acted in over thirty of his own plays. He suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis but continued to write and perform despite his ill health. In 1673, during a performance of his final play, *The Imaginary Invalid*, he collapsed on stage. He died on February 17, 1673, and was laid to rest in the cemetery of Saint-Joseph.

3.4 Moliere's Works

Moliere's literary works spans across a multitudinous genre of composition, ranging from comedies and farce to tragedies and satire. His works mostly explores themes like love and relationships, social class and status, morality and ethics, besides satirizing issues like intellectual pretensions, hypocrisy, and deception. His works derive inspiration from the ancient Greek and Roman theatre with a unique blend of realism to address the contemporary social and cultural issues. He was also influenced by French Neoclassicism. His writings bear elements of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte to create a more refined French comedy. His works are known for the wit and irony alongside psychological insights and moral lessons, which creates a fascinating narrative style that entertains as well as mirrors the concerns and conventions of the 17th century French society.

Let us discuss some of his major works in details:

- ***Tartuffe***

Tartuffe is one of the best and most widely-read works of Moliere. A comic five-act play, *Tartuffe* was first performed in 1664, during the reign of King Louis XIV. The play mirrors the social and cultural dilemmas of 17th century France, particularly with the rise of the bourgeoisie. The narrative revolves around the titular character, Tartuffe, a cunning imposter who uses his charm to deceive Orgon, a wealthy bourgeoisie and his family for personal gain. Tartuffe appears as a pious and devout man to Orgon to manipulate and deceive him. Tartuffe's malicious schemes to manipulate Orgon highlight the dangers of hypocrisy and the destructive power of deception in the play. Orgon's wife, Elmira, an intelligent and observant woman, can see through Tartuffe's façade and tries to warn her husband. Orgon's son, Damis too tries to

expose Tartuffe's pretention but to no avail. Orgon is blinded by Tartuffe's hypocrisy which symbolizes his gullibility and the dangers it entails. The play critiques the social aspirations of the rising bourgeoisie in the 17th century French society. Dorine, a clever and witty maid provides comic relief amidst the manipulation and tension in the play. The first act opens with the arrival of Tartuffe and the introduction of Orgon and his family. As the play progresses, Act II depicts Tartuffe's pretention and deceptive schemes to manipulate Orgon. The next Act reveals Tartuffe's true nature and intentions while Act IV reveals Tartuffe's deception to Orgon and he realizes how he has been manipulated. The final Act recounts Orgon's redemption from Tartuffe's hypocrisy and his eventual downfall. The play reflects on the conflict between appearance and reality and emphasizes the importance of moral virtues in the life of every individual. Moliere employs a variety of comic elements in the play like wit, humour, and irony to ridicule and expose Tartuffe's hypocrisy and deceit. The witty dialogues and speeches add comic relief amidst the satiric portrayal of the bourgeoisie society. *Tartuffe* has had a significant impact and contribution to Western literature and theatre in popularizing the genre of Comedy of Manners. *Tartuffe* remains a classical example of French theatre and one of the best pieces of Moliere's literary oeuvre. The play was performed at Versailles in 1664 which aroused a scandalous situation for Moliere as a playwright. The portrayal of hypocrisy and deception of the dominant class had outrageous reaction from the audience and the play was eventually banned from the stage.

- ***The Learned Women***

The play, *The Learned Women*, by Moliere is a five-act play that satirizes the intellectual pretensions of women in 17th century France. The play revolves around Philaminte and her daughter Henriette as it reflects on the French society's perception of women, particularly with the rise of feminism. The play was first performed on 11 March, 1672, during King Louis XIV's reign, at the Theatre du Palais Royal. Written in verse, *The Learned Women* is one of Moliere's most popular comedies and greatest work in verse. The play follows Philaminte's pursuit to establish a literary salon for intellectual women. The five acts of the play narrate Philaminte's intellectual aspirations and her deception by Trissotin, a pseudo-intellectual and the antagonist of the play. He manipulates

Philaminte by pretending to be a learned scholar and win Henriette's hand in marriage. The play critiques superficial intelligence and pretension as Moliere explores the role of women and education in society. The play has significant impact on French literature as scholars and academicians through the ages have debated on Moliere's representation of women, beginning with the play, *The Learned Women*. Along with Philaminte's intellectual pretence, Henriette's romance with Clitandre forms another significant aspect of the novel. Philaminte does not approve of their relationship and believes Trissotin to be a better match for her daughter. However, in the final act, Trissotin's true character is revealed and the play ends with the happy union of Henriette and Clitandre with everyone's approval for the marriage, including Philaminte.

- ***Don Juan***

Don Juan is a comedy by Moliere, first performed in 1665 and specifically reflects on the rising libertine culture of the 17th century. The play recounts the life of Don Juan, the titular character of the play, a charismatic, unrepentant libertine who defies societal norms and moral conventions and lecherously lives a life of debauchery and deception which ultimately leads to his downfall. Don Juan's character becomes a popular archetype of libertine literature. The play consists of five acts that follow Don Juan's manipulative actions of lies and deception and his refusal to repent for his sins until his final redemption when he falls into hell fire as the earth breaks open to swallow him. The play, *Don Juan* is derived from a Spanish play, *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest* (1630) by Tirso de Molina. The play illustrates the risk of uncurbed credulity and emphasizes on the need to follow the path of goodness and morality. The play explores the consequences of Don Juan's libertine actions that lead to his inevitable downfall by the end of the play.

- ***The Imaginary Invalid***

Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid* is a comedy drama that recounts the story of Aregon, a severe hypochondriac who feigns illness that no doctor could diagnose him with. It is a three-act comedie-ballet, accompanied with dance sequences and musical interludes. It was first performed on 10th February, 1673 at the Theatre du Palais Royal in Paris. It was originally choreographed by

Pierre Beauchamp. Aregon is constantly manipulated by his second wife, Beline, in order to have a huge share of his money and property. The play critiques the institution of marriage and relationships like that of Beline and Aregon which is motivated by personal gain and deception. The play satirizes pretentious knowledge and expertise through the portrayal of the doctors who diagnoses Aregon with all his imaginary illnesses and even suggests ways to cure them. Aregon's obsession for his health takes over his ability to think rationally. His rationality becomes clouded by his imaginary obsession with his undiagnosed illnesses. His obsession reaches its peak when he decides to marry off his daughter, Angelique, to a doctor so that he can have a doctor handy near him whenever the need arises. His desire to have a doctor son-in-law overtakes his daughter's happiness and desire to marry the love of her life, Cleante. Towards the end of the play, Beline's manipulation and deception unveils before Aregon as he feigns his own death to test Beline and Angelique's love and concern for him. Beline was overjoyed to hear about Aregon's death so that she could take hold of his money while Angelique was inconsolable over the loss of her father. She decides to become a nun to honour her father's last wish and never marry and forget Cleante as her father wanted of her. Hearing everything, Aregon breaks his pretence and wakes up to everyone's surprise. He throws Beline out of the house and happily approves Angelique's marriage to Cleante and decides to become a doctor himself.

- ***The School of Wives***

The School of Wives is a comic play by Moliere, often considered one of his literary masterpieces. Premiered on 26th December, 1662, *The School of Wives* has been seen as a precursor to feminist movements and feminist literature. The narrative revolves around Arnolphe, a middle-aged man, fearful of being cuckolded by having an unfaithful wife. He raises a young girl, Agnes, since she was four years old. He insisted on Agnes living in a nunnery until she turns seventeen, after which she moves to one of Arnolphe's mansion known to be owned by Monsieur de La Souche. Not soon after, despite strict restrictions and vigilance, Agnes starts seeing Horace, the young son of Arnolphe's friend, Oronto. Unaware of the fact that Arnolphe was Monsieur de La Souche, Horace confides in him about his secret courtship with Agnes urging Arnolphe to help him rescue her. Some misunderstanding arises

between Arnolphe, Horace, and Agnes as the play progresses. However, all misunderstandings and doubts clear up in the last act when Oronto and Enrique announce Horace's marriage to Enrique's daughter who happens to be Agnes herself. Thus, Arnolphe's schemes fails and the play ends with Agnes and Horace eventually marrying each other. The play explores the societal norms of 17th century France with patriarchal dominance and control as one of the most significant concerns of the play. Agnes' character can be seen as a staple feminist persona as her assertiveness and independence challenges the traditional gender roles in the play.

Moliere's first known play was *The Jealousy of Le Barbouille*, published in 1653. Other popular comedies of Moliere include *The Fly-Swallower* (1654), *The Pretentious Ladies* (1655), *The School for Husbands* (1661), *The Love Doctor* (1666), *Melicerte* (1666), *Amphitryon* (1668), *George Dandin* (1668), and others. He wrote two tragedies, namely, *La Mort de Cleopatre*(1660) and *Dom Garcie de Navarre* (1661). His most popular farces include *The Forced Marriage* (1664) and *Princess d'Elide* (1664). Moliere collaborated with Philippe, Duke of Orleans, for a play in 1661, entitled *Les Facheux*. He also wrote a play in collaboration with King Louis XIV known as *L'Impromptu de Versailles* in 1663.

Check Your Progress:

- Q.1. When and where was the play *Tartuffe* first performed?
- Q.2. Name a verse play written by Moliere.
- Q.3 .Name the play that inspired Moliere to write *Don Juan*.
- Q.4. Who choreographed Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid*?
- Q.5. When was Moliere's *The School of Wives* premiered?
- Q.6. When was Moliere's first known play published? Name the play.
- Q.7. Name the two tragedies by Moliere?

3.5 Moliere's Influence on French Literature

Moliere has a profound and lasting impact on French literature and theatre. He adapted classical form imbued with contemporary themes of 17th century French literature. He pioneered the genre of the Comedy of Manners, specifically for critiquing the societal norms and behavior by introducing characters from common walk of life. He introduced everyday language of the common people in his works. He depicted relatable situations to shape his narratives as well as hold a mirror to the society's ill practices and perceptions through irony, wit, humour, and comedy. Moliere's emphasis on character development and psychological insight revolutionized comedy in theatre. His emphasis on naturalistic acting influenced French acting traditions. Moliere's theatre company became the Comedie- Francaise, France's national theatre while his continued promising theatrical success led to construction of new theatres in Paris.

Moliere's plays remain an integral part of the French theatre curricula. His works were translated into many languages across the globe and inspired new interpretations and adaptations through the ages. Moliere's images and quotes are deeply ingrained and remains literary icon in French literature. His characters often bear cultural references in French literature, art, and music. Moliere's plays witnessed over 400 performances and are annually performed in France even today. His works has been adapted into films, T.V shows, and operas in original as well as the translated versions. His innovative story-telling and narration and the social commentary have revolutionized French literature and the theatrical arena. His legacy inspired theatre and literary analysis across genre and age, continuing until the present times.

3.6 Moliere's Comedy Techniques

Moliere is one of the most renowned and celebrated playwright who revolutionized comedy into a respectable genre of literature and a popular art form embraced by audience across the world. His plays are mostly composed as social satire or commentary, usually critiquing societal norms, politics, and moral conventions. He extensively employed wit and irony in his works to explore hypocrisy and foolishness, one of the central themes in most

of his plays. He mostly portrayed relatable and common characters, their flaws, actions, and speeches usually amplified and exaggerated for adding comic effect to the narratives as well as the performances. Moliere uses familiar stock characters inspired from the Classical comedy conventions. He digs deeper into the psychological insights of the characters as he explores human nature and the human conditions in his plays. He employs wit and wordplay through puns and innuendos as well as slapsticks and physical comedy through humour and mishaps in his plays. Misunderstandings and mistaken identities are common elements in his works that shapes the plot of the narrative. He uses stock characters like the Alazons or the pretentious fools who mostly exaggerate their own importance and brags about it, the Eirons or the clever servants who outwits the master through their amusing use of wit and humour, and the Agelasts or the fools who provide comic relief in rather dense situations. Some of his most popular comedies include *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope*, and *The Imaginary Invalid*. Moliere's innovative use of satire to mirror the societal ills and the enduring relevance of his comedic themes explore and address the complexities of human life through his plays.

SAQ:

Q.1. Discuss Moliere's impact as a playwright on French literature and theatre.

.....
.....

Q.2. Can you analyze any similarity between Moliere's depiction of characters in plays such as *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan*? Discuss.

.....
.....

Q.3. From your reading of Moliere, discuss his use of satire in the plays discussed in this unit.

.....
.....

Q.4. Discuss the various comedic techniques employed by Molier in his lityerary works.

.....
.....

3.7 Summing Up

Moliere was a pioneering French playwright and actor who revolutionized the theatrical landscape of 17th century France. He composed comedies with his innovative wit and humour that satirized the social conventions, hypocrisies, and follies of his time. Moliere’s unique character development gave birth to iconic characters like Alceste from *The Misanthrope* and Turtuffe from *Turtuffe* who were fallacious and flawed protagonists, non-confirmative of the stereotypical expectations of the society. He navigated the complexities of love and relationships, morality and ethics, desires and societal expectations in his plays. His literary and theatrical works are marked by clever dialogue, physical comedy, and ingenious observation of human natureenraptured the audience as well as challenged the norms of French society. His contribution to French literature and theatre is trememdous. His impact and influence not only enclosed France but extends beyond, shaping the development of comedy and theatre globally. His literary compositions and theatre performances continues to captivate readers and audience, inspiring newer adaptations to this day.

3.8 References and Suggested Readings

Bernard, L. Leon . “Moliere and the Historian of French Society”.*The Review of Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Oct., 1955, pp. 530-544
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1405005>

Eustis, Alvin. “The Nature Of Molière's Satire”.*Romance Notes*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1973, pp. 5-14
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43801249>

Lanson, Gustave. And Ruby Cohn. “Molière and Farce”. *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1963, pp. 133-154

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1124703><https://www.jstor.org/stable/1124703>

Moore, W. G. "Molière's Theory of Comedy". *L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1966, pp. 137-144
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26277404>

Moore, W. G. "Molière: The Comic Paradox". *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4, Oct., 1973, pp. 771-775
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3726043><https://www.jstor.org/stable/3726043>

Moore, W. G. "Tartuffe" and the Comic Principle in Molière". *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Jan., 1948, pp. 47-53
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3717969><https://www.jstor.org/stable/3717969>

Nicholas, Brian. "Is Tartuffe a Comic Character?" *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 75, No. 4, Oct., 1980, pp. 753-765
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3726584><https://www.jstor.org/stable/3726584>

Young, Stark . "Molière: Comedian of Society". *The North American Review*, Vol. 215, No. 795, Feb., 1922, pp. 241-248
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25120967>

Zwillenberg, Myrna Kogan . "Dramatic Justice in Tartuffe". *MLN*, Vol. 90, No. 4, May, 1975, pp. 583-590
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2906842><https://www.jstor.org/stable/2906842>

xxx

UNIT- 4
MOLIERE: *THE MISANTHROPE*

Unit Structure:

4.1 Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 *The Misanthrope*: An Overview

4.4 Critical Reading of the Play

4.5 Major Themes

4.6 Significant Symbols and Imageries

4.7 Summing Up

4.8 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- *learn* about the play, *The Misanthrope*;
- *understand* the themes and techniques of the play;
- *analyze* the play critically;
- *understand* Moliere's style of dramatic compositions.

4.2 Introduction

A 17th century verse drama, *The Misanthrope*, is one of the best theatrical compositions by Moliere. Premiered on 4 June, 1666, at the Theatre du Palais- Royal in Paris, the play depicts the ostentatious lifestyle of the contemporary French aristocratic society. A comedy of manners, the narrative recounts the story of Alceste, a cynical French aristocrat who despises the societal hypocrisies as well as their pretentious conventions. However, his disdain for the aristocratic society clashes with his passion for Celimene, a witty flirtatious woman who represents the same kind of people he despises. Alceste, the protagonist of the play,

represents individualism and resistance through his non-conformity and rejection of societal pressure to abide by certain prescribed constructs and approaches, especially that of the aristocratic genteel class. Moliere emphasizes on moral integrity and personal responsibility echoing classical humanist values through his portrayal of the character of Alceste in the play. Alceste's misanthropic behavior often ends him up in trouble, especially his uncompromisingly forthright and brusque conduct towards the high officials and influential members of the society. The play illuminates the duplicity and hypocrisy of the civilized society concurrently with the need to be unprejudiced and thoughtful to one's fellow beings, maintaining a balance between honesty and mindfulness. Moliere critiques the superficiality of certain societal norms and explores the complexities of human relationships in the play. *The Misanthrope* satirizes the French aristocracy through Alceste's disgust of societal hypocrisy as well as reflects on the universal human condition and their flaws and limitations. A sequel to the play, *Celimene and the Cardinal*, was published in 1992 by the playwright Jacques Rampal, resuming Alceste and Celimene's story after twenty years from where *The Misanthrope* ended.

4.3 *The Misanthrope*: An Overview

The play, *The Misanthrope*, centers on a tenaciously forthright aristocrat, Alceste, who is utterly intolerant of the genteel society's hypocrisy, pretention, and snobbery. He believed that honesty and truth must be the basic values of a respectable human to live by. Despite his friend, Philinte's persistent appeal to be understanding and considerate of the basic human nature to flatter one another and that a little flattery does no harm, Alceste continues to be stubborn in his principles. He despises and rejects the fallacious and faulty conventions of the society. Alceste's blunt and outright behavior towards his fellow members often ends him up in trouble and conflicts. Alceste is romantically engaged with Celimene, a snobbish, coquettish woman. Though he harbours deep feelings and passion for her, he often reprimands her for her flirtatious behavior and indifferently favouring all men with the same attention and charm.

Alceste despises the conventional 17th century French ruelles (salon) and refuses to entertain such pretensions to fit into the society. He complains to his friend, Philinte, about the deceptions and manipulations of the people and his revulsion for such behavior. He asserts that hypocrisy is one of the worst flaws in men and one must strictly adhere to truth and honesty in every situation. Just as the two were engaged in a conversation regarding their conviction on the ways of life, Oronte, a court official joins them and presents before them a sonnet he wrote himself. Philinte praises the work while Alceste bluntly criticizes it asking him to favour himself and give up his aspirations to be a poet but rather try something he is really good at. Oronte was extremely upset and offended by such humiliation and Alceste was put on trial. He files a lawsuit against Alceste and seeks retribution for his crude remarks regarding his poem. Despite being in a vulnerable situation, Alceste refuses to make amends or abide by stupid social norms to flatter or give false compliments to someone. He also discovers that Celimene used to write similar love letters to all her suitors, including Alceste and Oronte. He confronts Celimene for her treachery to which she reacts indifferently, asking him to believe whatever he wishes to. Soon, after Alceste's servant, Du Bois, brings the news that he has lost the court trial and might be arrested anytime. The court charged him for his obdurate behavior and Alceste, disgraced and desolate, decides to go on an exile, leaving the pretentious society behind. Though he was disgusted and mortified by Celimene's frivolous act, he decides to forgive and marry her but only if she resolves to a life of exile and solitude with him. Celimene outrightly refuses to do so because she believed she was too young to take such a decision. Meanwhile Celimene's promiscuity gets revealed before her other suitors. Acaste and Clitandre, two of her suitors discover her letters to them containing insulting remarks about the other. The two men read the letter aloud, announcing that they end whatever association they had with Celimene. Eventually she turns to Alceste but he decides to leave alone. The play ends with Philinte and Eliante going after him to convince him to return back home.

Check Your Progress:

Q.1. When and where was the play, *The Misanthrope*, first performed?

Q.2. Who wrote the sequel to the play, *The Misanthrope*? What was the name of the sequel play?

Q.3. Why do you think, Alceste despises the aristocratic society?

Q.4. Why did Oronto filed a lawsuit against Alceste?

Q.5. Why did Celimene refused to go on exile with Alceste?

4.4 Critical Reading of the Play

The play, *The Misanthrope*, consists of five acts, narrating Alceste's growing disgust for the hypocrisies of the aristocratic society as he suffers the trials and tribulations for his non-conforming nature and perceptions. Act I opens with introducing Alceste, the misanthropist, and other major characters like Philinte and Celimene. While Alceste was disgusted with the superfluous society and behaves outwardly blunt while expressing it, Celimene was a coquettish and flirtatious woman who profusely dwells in social manipulations and flattery. With contrast to both, the character of Philinte is the voice of reason and rationality who strikes a balance between the two as he represents a more pragmatic outlook to live in the society and maintain harmonious social relationships. Philinte suggests Alceste needs to be more tolerant and accepting of human flaws and be less critical of other's behavior and their way of life or he might get himself into trouble. Soon, Philinte's words manifests as Alceste invites trouble for his blunt remarks for a poem composed and recited by Oronto, a pompous and outspoken court official. Oronto files a lawsuit against Alceste for humiliation. Oronto even challenges Alceste to write something better which Alceste outrightly declines. Act II consists of six scenes, mostly revolving around Alceste and Celimene's relationship. Celimene represents the stereotypical rich spoiled aristocratic woman who enjoys society as much as Alceste despises it. The irony here lies in that Alceste passionately loves the one who represents the society he abhors. One significant trait of both the characters is illuminated by their own misanthropic practices in their own distinct ways. While Alceste is outspoken about his views and perception regarding his hatred for the pretentious society, Celimene criticized people behind their back while maintaining cordial relations to them all throughout. Celimene's mockery is

overshadowed by her honed sense of humour while Alceste's remains distinctly visible. Act III introduces the audience to two of Celimene's suitors, Acaste and Clitandre. Here, Moliere satirizes the typical approaches to romance. Acaste and Clitandre both suffers from anguish and anxiety regarding their association with Celimene. However, they are not vocal in expressing their anguish whereas Alceste expresses his feelings, values, and preferences ferociously. In this act, Moliere brings in the concept of mask or disguise that the characters feign to refrain from exposing their true self. For instance, Arsinoe pretends to be a proper woman, uninterested in men and their attention whereas in reality craves a relationship with Alceste. This concept of mask symbolizes the similarity that lies between theatre and life, the performances and roles one plays in both. Eventually, the characters begin to reveal their true self, exposing the complexities of their characters. In Act IV, Philinte recounts of Alceste's peculiar behavior to Eliante. They appreciate his honesty and nobility as well as his affection for Celimene, who is basically snobbish and fickle-minded. However, Celimene do harbour true feelings for Alceste though she feels struck and confused. The play, *The Misanthrope*, transcends the realm of being a simple, typical satiric comedy but rather seeks to represent the true essence of human emotions and relationships despite various distractions and obstructs. In Act V, Alceste decides to retire to a life of solitude after losing his court case. Throughout the play, Celimene gradually matures from being a frivolous gossipy flirtatious woman to realize her true affection for Alceste. However, when Alceste proposes to marry her but only if she leaves with him, she outrightly refuses to do so. As a young woman, she cannot fathom about living away from society while Alceste cannot live in it. Moliere depicts two contrasting characters which ends the play with despondent consequences. The play has a relatively vague and unhappy ending as the protagonist, Alceste, stubbornly sticks to his core values and decides to distance himself from the society.

Moliere extensively employs wit and irony to ridicule and expose the societal hypocrisy and pretention of the French society. The play is replete with symbols and imageries to highlight the significant aspects of society that otherwise remains unaddressed. It explores themes like social criticism, hypocrisy, and deception as it reflects on the conflicts and tension of the 17th century French society.

SAQ:

Q.1. From your reading of the play, give a character analysis of Celimene as depicted in the play, *The Misanthrope*?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.2. Compare and contrast the characters of Alceste and Philinte in the play, *The Misanthrope*. How do you think they represent the 17th century French aristocratic society?

.....
.....
.....
.....

4.5 Major Themes

The play, *The Misanthrope*, explores miscellaneous themes like love and relationships, social relationships, social class and status, deception and hypocrisy, as well as the universal human condition. Let us discuss some of the major themes of the play:

- **Hypocrisy and Pretension**

Moliere ridicules societal hypocrisy and the pretentious behavior of the aristocratic class in the play, *The Misanthrope*. He critiques the superficiality of the 17th century French society through Alceste's unyielding non-conformity to adhere to the superfluous practices and social conventions. All the characters in the play, except Alceste, maintains some form of flattery and deception in maneuvering their social life whereas Alceste's frankness and bluntly honest remarks lends him up in trouble. Celimene's hypocrisy rises from her attachment to the high elite society life of entertainment and gossip. She dispenses her grace and attention upon all her suitors alike but her true feelings were exposed to be otherwise towards the end of the play, especially when Acaste and Clitandre discovers her letters and read them aloud. Arsinoe claims to be with Celimene though it was she who tried to strain Alceste's

fancy for Celimene by revealing to him about her letters to other suitors. Though Moliere satirizes social hypocrisy, he nonetheless recounts on maintaining a balance between being amiable and snobbish. The character of Philinte strikes a balance between truth and deception as he tries to explain to Alceste that a little flattery does no harm but instead helps you be part of the larger society with harmony. Philinte is truthful but at the same time he is tactful and pragmatic when it comes to social associations and camaraderie.

- **Universal human flaws**

Though Moliere mocks the hypocrisy of the society, the play also focuses on the acceptance of the human flaws and the need to be considerate to other's way of being. Alceste is not welcomed into the French society and often remains isolated because of his bluntness and brutal honesty that have earned him more foes than friends. Very few people like Philinte and Eliante appreciates Alceste's honesty and noble pursuits. Alceste recognizes his shortcomings but is reluctant to change because he has his own definite rules and ways of life to live by. He believes truth and honesty to be the greatest virtues that one should never forsake, no matter what. Moliere suggest that it is important to strike a balance between integrity to live harmoniously in a society. Philinte serves as a perfect prototype for Moliere's depiction of the proper way to be a responsible part of the social mechanism. Moliere asserts that it is important to accept and embrace people as they are without a rigorous attempt to change them but at the same time to be pragmatic and considerate while choosing one's social associations and relationships.

- **Morality and rationality**

The play, *The Misanthrope*, explores social relationships and moral dilemmas through the complexity of the characters' emotional and intellectual determinant. Alceste and Philinte, both represent the two significant aspects of morality and rationality respectively. While Philinte believes that living in a social set up requires tact and discretion while Alceste believes in ultimate truth and honesty as prime virtues of men, no matter what. Philinte has his own opinions but is mindful and considerate in expressing them in ways that offends no one. Philinte is more rational and understands the need to compromise at times. But Alceste, on the other hand, never bends to

situations demand but is outwardly outspoken about his own set of values and perceptions. The play also focuses on the role of freewill in a relationship and in maintaining social balance and choices. The play, *The Misanthrope*, questions the morality of societal norms and the importance of personal integrity.

4.6 Significant Symbols and Imageries

The play, *The Misanthrope*, is replete with imageries and symbolisms reflecting the characters' emotional conflicts and turmoil, their relationships, societal conventions, etc. Let us discuss some of the symbols and imageries in details:

- **The Salon**

The salon forms a pivotal setting in Moliere's *The Misanthrope*. The salon is a place for social gatherings, usually for hosting parties and receptions, showcasing the aristocratic social life. It is also a place that facilitates intellectual discussions, literary debates, as well as artistic performances entertaining the elites as they engage in exchanging their socio-political views or artistic expressions or simple witty repartees. The salon also served as a place for suitable matchmaking and forming social alliances as all the influential people of same class hierarchy gather together in one place. The salon in *The Misanthrope* serves as a microcosm of the aristocratic French society, reflecting on social norms, power dynamics, and individual agency of the characters in the play. The salon represents the rigid social structure, status, and influence through its emphasis on appearance, gossip, and flattery, exposing the superficiality of the aristocratic society. The salon symbolizes conformity to the social norms as the characters perform social roles, wearing a mask of politeness and courtesy even though in actuality they feel things differently. The salon was Celimene's domain in the play, *The Misanthrope*. Her mastery of salon politics and flirtation mirrors the potential role and position of women in the patriarchal society. On the other hand, Alceste's disdain for the salon symbolizes his non-conformity of the pretension and hypocrisy that exemplifies the salon's obsession with class, status, and social standing. The salon mostly becomes the site of conflict and rivalry in the play. Alceste's confrontation with Oronto and Celimene marks a turning point in the play. Alceste's departure

from the salon symbolizes his rejection of societal norms and conventions prevalent amongst the French nobility in the play.

- **Celimene's Fan**

Celimene's fan is a potent symbol in the play, *The Misanthrope*, with several layers of meanings. During the 17th century, the fans were popular accessories, especially among aristocratic women, often seen as a symbol of feminine charm and seduction. The use of the fan in the initial scenes of the play sets the tone for Celimene's character and her potential relationships. The fan represents Celimene's flirtatious nature and her ability to manipulate men. It signifies her social status and her expertise to maintain social etiquettes as well as her performative aspects of her social interactions. It also embodies her power to assert agency and control over her relationships and her resistance to patriarchal norms and expectations. The fan is also symbolic of deception and secrecy as it allows Celimene to hide her true intentions and duplicitous nature. She often used the fan to convey subtle messages and signals to her suitors. At times, she also used it as a tool of provocation to provoke men, including Alceste, fueling his jealousy and frustration. The fan may also symbolize her unconscious desires and repressed emotions. Celimene's fan serves as a significant imagery that offers insight into her character as well as critique the performative nature of social aristocratic interactions.

- **Alceste's Letters**

Letters were a popular 17th century epistolary tradition, a literary device used for communication and as a means of self-expression. Alceste's letters in the play, *The Misanthrope*, serve as a significant symbol representing his personality, his individuality, as well as his relationships. The letters symbolize his genuine emotions, honesty, and sincerity, and his true love and devotion to Celimene. The letters serve as confessions, revealing his inner thoughts and feelings, his sensitivity and emotional depth. His letters prove his authenticity, contradicting the superficiality and pretense prevalent in common social interactions of the time. It asserts his uniqueness and non-conformity. For Alceste, his letters were the medium to express his emotions and admiration to Celimene. However, for her, his letters were symbolic of his possessiveness and emotional demands. Celimene's dismissal of his

letters not only fuels his frustration but also highlights her agency in rejecting her affection and emotional expressions. Alceste's letters serves as a powerful symbol that reflects on the problematic societal norms and the suppression of genuine emotions. Towards the end of the play, Alceste's withdrawal from writing letters can be seen as symbolic of his departure from the societal norms and the prevalent conventions of his time.

SAQ:

Q.1. How did the salon influence the 17th century aristocratic social life and interactions? Discuss.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.2. Discuss the significance of letters during the 17th century as a means of expression and communication with reference to the play, *The Misanthrope*.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

4.7 Summing Up

Moliere's *The Misanthrope* is a biting satire that critiques the social conventions and hypocrisies of 17th century French society. The narrative recounts the story of Alceste, a cynical aristocrat who is disillusioned by high society and reject the superficiality and flattery culture to fit into it. His tumultuous relationship with the witty, flirtatious Celimene mirrors the perception of love and relationship of the contemporary era as well as serves as a significant irony in that Alceste detests the snobbish aristocratic culture but adores the one who ideally represents it. As Alceste navigates the complexities of love, deception, and morality, Moliere holds a mirror to show the flaws of aristocracy, particularly their

obsession with appearance and social status. The play is marked by clever dialogue, physical comedy, and astute observations as Moliere challenges the audience to confront the tension between reason and emotion, honesty and deception, love and pretension. The play, *The Misanthrope*, remains one of the timeless classics of theatrical comedy, offering a scathing critique of societal norms that resonates across time and place, and remains relevant until this day.

4.8 References and Suggested Readings

- Cholakian, Patricia Francis. "The "Woman Question" in Moliere's *Misanthrope*". *The French Review*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Mar., 1985, pp. 524-532 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/392817>
- Gossman, Lionel. "Molière's "Misanthrope": Melancholy and Society in the Age of the Counterreformation". *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 3, Oct., 1982, pp. 322-343 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3206923> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3206923>
- Jauss, Hans Robert. "The Paradox of the Misanthrope". *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 1983, pp. 305-322 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1770840> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1770840>
- Moore, W. G. "Molière's Theory of Comedy". *L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1966, pp. 137-144 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26277404>
- Moore, W. G. "Molière: The Comic Paradox". *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4, Oct., 1973, pp. 771-775 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3726043> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3726043>
- Rudin, Seymour. "Moliere and "The Misanthrope". *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Dec., 1965, pp. 308-313 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3205214> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3205214>
- Simon, John. "Laughter in the Soul: Molière's "Misanthrope"". *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1975, pp. 404-412 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3849841> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3849841>

xxx

UNIT- 5

SAMUEL BECKETT AS A PLAYWRIGHT

Unit Structure:

5.1 Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) as a Playwright

5.4 Other Important Works of Samuel Beckett

5.5 Themes in Samuel Beckett's Plays

5.6 Samuel Beckett's Contribution to Modern Theatre

5.7 Summing Up

5.8 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- *appreciate* Samuel Beckett's contribution to modern theatre;
- *learn* about some of other works of Samuel Beckett;
- *explore* certain dimensions of Beckett's plays.

5.2 Introduction

In the previous unit, we went through the life and literary contributions of the Theatre of the Absurd playwright, Samuel Beckett. We also delved into the text of the prescribed play *Waiting for Godot*. It provides us an insight into the themes and core content of the play. This unit shall provide the learner a broad overview of Samuel Beckett and highlight some other important works by him. By the end of the Unit, the learner will be able to discuss Samuel Beckett as a playwright with special reference to *Waiting for Godot* and also discuss a few other plays written by him.

5.3 Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) as a Playwright

Samuel Beckett was born on April 13, 1906, in Dublin, Ireland. He grew up in a Protestant family. He attended Portora Royal School and later Trinity College. There he studied languages like French, Italian, and English. His academic background shaped his literary career. Beckett was well versed in classical and contemporary literature, philosophy, and languages. James Joyce was one of the significant authors who influenced Beckett. Beckett worked as Joyce's assistant in Paris and it was there that he came across Joyce's narrative techniques and literary works. Joyce's works, in a way, shaped Beckett's approach to writing. Joyce's use of language inspired Beckett to delve into similar themes but with a different style. The late 1920s marks a significant turning point in Beckett's life and career after he moved to Paris. The intellectual and artistic scene of the city provided him with a ground for his creative development. He joined a literary circle that had important figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus as its members. The existentialist philosophy popular in Paris at that time influenced Beckett's works. He experimented with the themes of absurdity, meaninglessness of life, and human suffering.

Beckett was also profoundly influenced by World War II. During the war, he joined the French Resistance. The experiences of war and the subsequent period of hiding left him with a sense of the absurdity and brutality of life. These experiences influenced the major themes in his works. His works are often associated with the "Theatre of the Absurd". The term is not coined by Beckett. It was coined by Martin Esslin. This movement emerged in the 1950s and it included playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and others. It highlighted the existential belief that life is inherently meaningless and that human beings must go through a chaotic and indifferent universe.

Beckett's most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, which premiered in 1953, is a defining work of The Theatre of the Absurd. The play lacks a conventional plot and is cyclical in nature. It highlights themes of waiting, uncertainty, and existential doubt. The characters' wait for an unknown someone who never arrives is symbolic of the human quest for meaning in an incomprehensible world. Beckett's other plays, like *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Happy Days* explores similar themes which we will look at in the

subsequent sections of this unit. In short, these plays reflect Beckett's preoccupation with time, memory, and the persistence of human beings in the face of suffering and isolation. In almost all of these plays Beckett uses bare settings and the dialogues seem superfluous. Beckett's philosophical influences were from existentialists such as Sartre and Camus, and the nihilistic strains evident in Friedrich Nietzsche's writings. His voice as a playwright was therefore unique due to these philosophies which were shaped by modernist literature as well as his experiences during the war.

To sum up, Samuel Beckett was a playwright who was profoundly affected by World War II, his time in Paris, his association with James Joyce, and academic career. His writing, which is often described as existentialist and part of the Theatre of the Absurd, has always appealed to people because it investigates the most basic elements of being human. Beckett's plays and ideas about existence have had a lasting impact on drama around the globe.

5.4 Other Important Works of Samuel Beckett

Let us look at some of Beckett's other plays that belong to The Theatre of the Absurd.

Endgame (1957) is a one-act play by Samuel Beckett. The setting of the play is a sparsely furnished room with only two high windows. The setting evokes a sense of confinement and isolation. The central characters of the play are Hamm and his servant Clov. Hamm is an old man who is wheelchair bound. He is blind as well. His servant Clov can barely walk too. Hamm is controlling and Clov, on the other hand is submissive. However, their relationship is co-dependent. When the play begins, we get an insight into Clov's routine of caring for Hamm. The routine is monotonous and it reflects the repetitive and cyclical nature of their lives as well as the play. This is, in a way, similar to *Waiting for Godot* and its cyclical nature. In the play, we also observe that Hamm constantly demands attention, validation, and companionship from Clov. Clov, however, wishes to leave but he is unable to do so. Their conversations are absurd, highlighting Beckett's themes of existential dread and the futility of human actions. Hamm often thinks about the past and tries to understand his identity and purpose in life. The play's ending

is ambiguous. We see Clov preparing to depart and is standing by the door with his suitcase. However, we see once again, that he is unable to leave. He just waits there. Hamm delivers a soliloquy towards the end that reflects the despair and uncertainty of both of their existences. The play reflects the human condition, focusing on themes of dependency, isolation, and the cyclical nature of life.

Krapp's Last Tape (1958) is another one-act play by Samuel Beckett. The play's central and only character is Krapp. He is an old, disheveled man who spends all his days listening to tape recordings of his younger days and self. He even makes new recordings recounting his current reflections. The setting of the play is a dimly lit room. It has a desk with the tape recorder. When the play begins, Krapp is seen to be going through his drawers, eating and drinking. His actions are repetitive and the routine is monotonous. Krapp begins listening to a tape that he recorded on his 39th birthday. His younger self is full of enthusiasm and optimism. He goes back to his past and recounts his old ambitions and relationships. He is also seen to be disappointed at times of his younger self's naivety and ambitions. As the play progresses, Krapp is seen to be making a new tape recording. He talks about the passage of time and the way his dreams of the past have eroded eventually. The play ends with Krapp replaying parts of the old tape. He is sad as he listens to his younger self full of hope and possibilities and as he realizes that his life remains unfulfilled. The play reflects the passage of time and the way memory functions. Beckett deals with the theme of inescapability of time and the fragmented nature of identity.

Happy Days was written by Samuel Beckett in 1961. The play has two central characters, Winnie and her husband Willie. There are two acts in the play. When the play begins, we get to see Winnie buried up to her waist under a mound of earth. However, she is optimistic. The first act of the play is dominated by Winnie's monologue. Her speech consists of trivial happenings her observations on it, bits and parts of classical poetry, and also parts of long forgotten memories. The setting of the play, like the other Theatre of the Absurd plays, is very bare and minimal. Willie, her husband, is mostly silent and hidden from view. His dialogues are just monosyllabic words. Even though they don't interact with each other much in the play, yet we can see a kind of dependency between them. As the play progresses to the second act, we observe

that Winnie is now buried up to her neck. Even though she is confined she is cheerful. This shows that she is hopeful despite her situation. The ending of the play is ambiguous. Winnie continues to sing fragments of a song; Willie, on the other hand, tries to climb the mound but he falls before he can reach Winnie. He is unable to connect with her. This highlights the theme of isolation and the futile struggle for meaning. In this play too, Beckett delves into the themes of passage of time, and the absurdity of human existence.

Play is a one act play by Samuel Beckett that was written in 1963. It features three characters – M (Man), W1 (Woman 1), and W2 (Woman 2). They are encased up to their necks in large urns. Only their heads are visible. The three characters are positioned in a triangular fashion, and they are seen to be facing the audience directly. When the play begins, all the characters are simultaneously speaking, overlapping each other's words. This highlights the chaos and confusion prevalent in their inner lives. A spotlight keeps moving between the characters, and each character speaks only when the light falls on them. The story revolves around a love triangle that involves M, W1, and W2. M used to have an affair with W2. This caused W1 great pain because she was M's wife. When the light falls on them, each character recounts their perspective on the affair. They deliver their words in a robotic, monotonous manner. Emotions are not witnessed when the characters speak. The repetitive dialogues that the characters deliver underscore that they are trapped in their own memories. This also highlights the cyclical nature of their suffering. They are unable to escape their past. The spotlight also dominates their speech because each character can speak only when it falls on them. As the narrative progresses, the speed of their dialogue delivery increases. The spotlight randomly falls on the characters and this reflects a sense of unpredictability in their lives. This also highlights the chaotic nature of human consciousness and the fragmented nature of memories. The play concludes without giving any resolution and leaving the characters in their existential loop.

Beckett's next play is *Not I* which was written in 1972. The character that this play features is actually a disembodied female mouth, referred to as "Mouth". It is suspended about eight feet above the stage in the dark. There is another presence, referred to as "The Auditor" who is silent and motionless. This character is positioned to the side of the stage and it makes very minimal

gestures throughout. When the play begins, Mouth starts delivering a monologue. The words are fragmented and disjointed. It speaks at a rapid pace and recounts a series of memories and experiences in the third person. Mouth's monologue consists of the story of a woman who has been isolated and marginalized in her life. Then it goes on to speak of a series of traumatic events like a premature birth, an unhappy childhood, and a life full of silence and isolation. The woman, as said by Mouth, has experienced a traumatic event at the age of seventy and this has left her unable to speak for much of her life, until recently when she began to deliver her thoughts in the form of uncontrollable outbursts. Throughout the monologue, Mouth denies her existence by saying "not I". It seems as though the story that Mouth is narrating is of Mouth itself. Mouth is seen to be trying to constantly dissociate from the woman in the story. The Auditor who is mostly inactive in the play highlights the lack of engagement between the two characters and this, in turn, highlights the isolation faced by Mouth and the solitude that comes with human existence. The play concludes abruptly with Mouth suddenly stopping the speech delivery. This play, like the other plays of Beckett, captures the fragmented and incomprehensible nature of human experience and the struggle to find meaning in life.

Stop to Consider

Did you know that Samuel Beckett was a master of using silence and pauses in his works? He believed that silence could be as powerful as speech which can create a space for reflection. According to him, silence also emphasized the absurdity and emptiness of the characters' lives in his plays. His unique style has inspired countless artists and writers across different genres.

5.5 Themes in Samuel Beckett's Plays

Some of the major themes in Beckett's plays are existential despair, the absurdity of human existence, and the passage of time, isolation and alienation etc. Let us look in general what these themes mean. This section will also try to give you examples from the prescribed play *Waiting for Godot* to help you better understand Beckett's masterpiece.

- 1. Existential Despair:** This is one of the dominant themes in Beckett's plays. His characters are often seen to be stuck in helpless situations where they try to understand their

purpose, as well as, the meaning of life. However, they rarely succeed. For example, in the prescribed play *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon are portrayed to be waiting for someone named Godot, who never arrives. They wait for Godot throughout the play and this waiting reflects the human search for purpose and meaning in life and human beings' failure to find them. This state of anticipation and hope in the midst of uncertainty highlights the existential belief that human life is a never-ending wait for something that might actually never happen. The play, thus, features existentialist ideas by portraying life as an endless waiting game that is full of uncertainty. The characters' repetitive dialogues and actions also highlight the despair they feel which is characteristic of existential despair.

2. **Absurdity of Human Existence:** According to Samuel Beckett, life is inherently meaningless and this becomes one of the central themes of all his Theatre of the Absurd plays. *Waiting for Godot* is a powerful exploration of the theme of absurdity of human existence. Beckett portrays life as inherently meaningless, repetitive, and uncertain. The act of waiting for someone named Godot by the two characters Vladimir and Estragon depicts the absurdity. It symbolizes the endless human search for meaning and purpose in life. Their waiting too is uncertain because they don't know if Godot will ever arrive to meet them.
3. **The Passage of Time:** In Beckett's plays, time plays an important role because it reflects the existential concerns of monotony and uncertainty of human existence. Time is depicted as cyclical and stagnant rather than linear and progressive. This also highlights the characters' feeling of entrapment and their monotonous existence. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon's endless wait for Godot, engaging in repetitive actions illustrates the cyclical nature of time as well as their existence. They are portrayed to be in a continuous loop. In this play, and most of other plays of Beckett, the passage of time is portrayed as cyclical, monotonous, and uncertain. This captures the characters' existential plight and human beings' experience of dealing with a seemingly indifferent universe.
4. **Isolation and Alienation:** In the plays of Samuel Beckett, the characters are often seen to exist in a state of

disconnection, not only from society but also from each other and themselves as well. This sense of isolation and alienation, which is a recurrent theme in Beckett's plays, highlights the existential situation of the characters, and human beings in general, in a world that is indifferent to human sufferings. The characters' placement in barren, desolate landscapes and confined spaces emphasize their solitude. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon wait in a place with only a barren tree which symbolizes their isolation from the wider world. They are not just physically isolated from the rest of the world, but also mentally and emotionally isolated. They struggle to connect to one another by engaging in meaningless conversations that further reveal their inner emptiness.

Check Your Progress

1. Can you describe some common themes in Beckett's plays?
2. How do the settings in Beckett's plays emphasize the theme of isolation and alienation?
3. Can you link the themes that we have discussed to other plays by Samuel Beckett like *Krapp's Last Tape* or *Happy Days*?
4. How does Beckett's minimalist style contribute to the thematic depth of his plays?
5. In what ways does Beckett's use of repetitive dialogue and actions reflect the existential concerns in his works?
6. Discuss how Beckett's characters embody the themes of futility and hopelessness. Provide two examples from two of his plays.

5.6 Samuel Beckett's Contribution to Modern Theatre

Samuel Beckett has profoundly contributed to modern theatre. His plays mark a significant departure from traditional narrative structures and themes. After the World Wars, Beckett's plays painted a picture of the fragmented world. He is associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, a movement that emerged in the mid-20th century. The Theatre of the Absurd reflects the existential philosophy of the time which portrayed life as meaningless and

chaotic. His plays challenge audiences to engage with complex and often uncomfortable themes. By presenting characters in situations that reflect the uncertainty of human existence, he challenges his audience to confront their own existential questions. His works don't offer any solutions or answers but it mirrors the complexity of human existence. Beckett's departure from traditional narrative structures is also noteworthy. His plays often don't have a conventional plot progression. Instead, his plays are cyclical and also static in nature. Such an approach allows the audience to focus on the thematic content of the plays and the philosophical underpinnings rather than just on the plot development. Language also plays an important role in his works. The dialogues in his plays are often characterized by repetition and fragmentation which reflect the characters' struggles to convey absolute meaning. His exploration of existential themes has left a mark on modern theatre. His characters often deal with questions of meaning, purpose, and identity. Such a focus on existential themes aligns him with the broader philosophical movement of existentialism, which was prominent in the mid-20th century and which influenced contemporary thought and art. Playwrights like Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Edward Albee have drawn from Beckett's techniques, integrating elements of absurdity, fragmentation, and existential enquiry into their works. Beckett's works still remain relevant because they address universal aspects of human existence, and the complexity of human life and relationships. His plays challenge us to reflect on our own existence, making his contribution to modern theatre all the more profound and timeless.

5.7 Summing Up

After having gone through some other works of Samuel Beckett and themes found in his plays, the learners will now be familiar with the writing style of Beckett. The learners must try to read other plays in detail by the playwright and try to link the themes so that they can understand Beckett and his works better. An attempt has been made in this unit to familiarize the learners with other plays by the playwright which will benefit the learners in appreciating Beckett's works in a holistic manner.

5.8 References and Suggested Readings

Atkins, Anselm. "Lucky's Speech in Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot': A Punctuated Sense-Line

Arrangement." *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1967, pp. 426–32. *JSTOR*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3205022>. Accessed 18 June 2024.

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Keller, John Robert. "A Strange Situation: Self-Entrapment in Waiting for Godot."

Samuel Beckett and the Primacy of Love, Manchester University Press, 2002, pp. 133–

71. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155jffd.9>. Accessed 18 June 2024.

Kubiak, Aubrey D. "GODOT: THE NON-NEGATIVE NOTHINGNESS." *Romance Notes*,

vol. 48, no. 3, 2008, pp. 395–405. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43803087>.

Accessed 18 June 2024.

Velissariou, Aspasia. "Language in 'Waiting for Godot.'" *Journal of Beckett Studies*, no. 8,

1982, pp. 45–57. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44782289>. Accessed 18 June 2024.

xxx

UNIT- 6

SAMUEL BECKETT: “WAITING FOR GODOT”

Unit Structure:

6.1 Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Introduction to the Theatre of the Absurd.

6.4 Samuel Beckett: The Playwright

6.4.1 His Life and Works in Short

6.5 Reading the Play

6.5.1 Act I of *Waiting for Godot*

6.5.2 Act II of *Waiting for Godot*

6.5.3 Tropes/Symbols/Motifs/Themes in *Waiting for Godot*

6.6 Summing Up

6.7 References and Suggested Readings

6.1 Objectives

This Unit attempts to take you through Samuel Beckett’s prominent play *Waiting for Godot*. After studying this unit, you will be able to–

- *describe* the term “The Theatre of the Absurd”;
- *explain* the text of the prescribed play;
- *understand* some important tropes from the play.

6.2 Introduction

A thorough study of this unit shall help you understand Samuel Beckett’s well-known play titled *Waiting for Godot*. But before diving into the text let us go through some very basic yet important points related to the play.

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is one of the most iconic and profound works of the 20th century theatre. It was initially written in French and titled as *En Attendant Godot*. The French

version was published in October 1952 and it was first performed on stage in Paris, in 1953. Later it was translated into English by Beckett himself and titled as *Waiting for Godot*. The English version of the play was produced in London in 1955 and in the United States in 1956. The play is a prime example of the Theatre of the Absurd. *Waiting for Godot* is a tragicomedy that explores themes in existentialism, particularly human existence and the idea that life is essentially meaningless and absurd.

Waiting for Godot is well-known for its almost cyclically structured plot. It revolves around two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait for the arrival of someone called Godot. The set is very simple and almost bare, with the presence of only a country road, a tree, and 'nowhere' in time, because the time or the day or the date is not mentioned anywhere in the text. The barrenness of the set elevates the existential nature of the play and the emptiness of human existence. As they wait for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon repeat similar actions and exchanges. Their dialogues often consist of meaningless and trivial exchanges which further emphasize the lack of meaning and the absurdity of life. The two characters' constant waiting for Godot and their lack of knowledge as to why they wait for him are symbolic of mankind's state of being and its uncertainty towards finding meaning.

The dynamics between the two characters is also a key aspect of the play. Vladimir and Estragon are dependent on each other, which, in a way, represents how humans need companionship to overcome the dread of existentialism. Vladimir and Estragon meet two other characters throughout the duration of the play: Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo is a self-important, loud and dictatorial character who exerts his dominance over Lucky, who is meek, carries a heavy weight on his back and seems to be his servant/slave. This relationship brings in the idea of the power of hierarchy and authority. Lucky's only notable contribution in the entire play is a long, almost nonsensical monologue in Act I which will be discussed later.

Godot's constant delay tires the characters as well as the audience and many theories have been formulated as to who he is. He has been seen as everything from God to the eventual saviour of mankind or a symbol of purpose and meaning. However, Beckett didn't intend Godot to symbolize anything; he was indifferent to any

interpretations of Godot's identity. The meaning of Godot is left completely ambiguous for the audience to decide. Nowhere in the play does Beckett state who Godot is or why the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for him. The play, thus, perfectly encapsulates the Theatre of the Absurd; a movement in post-WWII theatre which is characterized by the representation of the absurdity of life in a seemingly meaningless and purposeless world. The repetition of dialogue, the absence of a traditional plot development and the focus on menial and empty aspects of life in the play go against the natural progression of conventional theatre but it does encourage the audience to question the nature of humanity and of life itself.

6.3 Introduction to The Theatre of the Absurd

The Theatre of the Absurd is a genre of drama that appeared in the 1950s and 1960s. It was influenced by important existentialist philosophers like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. This genre focuses on portraying how absurd and meaningless human existence and human life can be. The term 'Theatre of the Absurd' was coined by the critic Martin Esslin in his 1961 book that goes by the same name. He described this type of theater as a reflection of the existentialist worldview, where human actions have no purpose or logic. The plays in this genre often break away from traditional storytelling structures. Instead of following a linear plot with logical sequences, they constitute fragmented, disjointed, and cyclical narratives that reflect the irrationality of life. The settings are usually bare, minimal, and abstract, focusing on the existential and philosophical aspects of the human condition. Martin Esslin in the book *The Theatre of the Absurd* writes, "...while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 5).

Language plays an important role in the Theatre of the Absurd. In plays belonging to this genre, the dialogue often seems nonsensical and repetitive. This aspect highlights how language fails as a means of communication. Characters in such plays engage in meaningless conversations that go in circles, reflecting the futility of trying to make sense in a senseless world. The Theatre of the Absurd deals with central themes like: the search for meaning in a

meaningless world, the passage of time, and the nature of human existence. Characters in these plays find themselves in situations like facing hopelessness and struggling with the lack of purpose in their lives. These plays explore the human condition in a universe that seems indifferent to individual struggles and desires.

Some notable playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter. Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is one of the most iconic examples of this genre. As mentioned in the introductory section of this unit, this play features two primary characters named Vladimir and Estragon who are shown to be waiting endlessly for a mysterious figure named Godot. At the same time, they engage in seemingly pointless activities and conversations to pass the time. The play's lack of a traditional plot and its focus on themes of waiting and uncertainty illustrate the absurd perspective.

Let us look at some other playwrights' works that belong to the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd:

Eugène Ionesco's works like *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and *Rhinoceros* (1959) also fall in the category of the Theatre of the Absurd. *The Bald Soprano* is an interaction between two couples and it satirizes the absurdity of everyday conversation. In *Rhinoceros*, the individuals of the play turn into rhinoceroses further adding to the theme of the absurd. Ionesco's plays often start with ordinary situations that turn into absurdity, revealing the illogical aspects of everyday life. Through exaggerated scenarios and characters, Ionesco highlights the absurdity of social conventions and the existential void.

Jean Genet's plays, such as *The Balcony* (1956), set in a brothel where its patrons act out fantasies of power and authority, and *The Maids* (1947), delve into themes of identity and power through two maids Solange and Claire, engaging in role-playing games where they interchange their roles with that of their employer's, thus, sharing some characteristics with the Theatre of the Absurd genre. His works challenge reality and illusion, blurring the lines between them, and showcasing the absurdity of societal roles and structures.

Harold Pinter incorporates absurdist elements in plays like *The Birthday Party* (1957) and *The Homecoming* (1964). Pinter's use of ambiguous dialogue, pauses, and silences creates unease and highlights the difficulties of communication and the uncertainties of human relationships.

While describing the success of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin writes, "That plays so strange and puzzling, so clearly devoid of the traditional attractions of the well-made drama, should within less than a decade have reached the stages of the world from Finland to Japan, from Norway to the Argentine, and that they should have stimulated a large body of work in a similar convention, are in themselves powerful and entirely empirical tests of the importance of The Theatre of the Absurd" (Esslin 9). The Theatre of the Absurd, thus, is a significant and influential movement in modern drama. Its exploration of existential themes, innovative use of language and structure, and its challenge to traditional theatrical conventions continue to inspire playwrights and resonate with audiences worldwide, offering an important commentary on the human experience in a seemingly meaningless universe.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What do you understand by the term "Theatre of the Absurd"?
2. Who coined the term "The Theatre of the Absurd"?
3. Describe some characteristics of the plays written in The Theatre of the Absurd.
4. Name some playwrights belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd and mention two works each.

6.4 Samuel Beckett: The Playwright

Before we explore the prescribed play of Samuel Beckett, let us gain an insight into his life and works in the following subsection so that we may understand the time and context in which he lived and wrote.

6.4.1 His Life and Works in Short

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in 13th April, 1906 in a suburb of Dublin, Ireland. He belonged to a Protestant family. At the age of 14, Beckett enrolled at Portora Royal School in Northern Ireland which was a highly regarded institution for the Anglo-Irish middle class. He received his bachelor's degree in 1927 from Trinity College, Dublin. He studied modern literature and Romance languages (French, Italian, English) as part of his bachelor's degree study program. A fascinating fact about him is that he excelled as a cricket player. He played for Dublin University as a left-handed batsman and a medium-pace bowler. After briefly teaching in Belfast, he moved to Paris in 1928 as a lecturer of English at Ecole Normale Superieure. It was there that he met James Joyce; that would change his life forever as far as literature was concerned. Among other things, he also helped Joyce with some of the research for his book *Finnegans Wake*.

In 1930, Beckett returned to Trinity College as a lecturer but he resigned soon because of his plans to travel across Europe. This plan led him through London, France, Germany, and Italy. It was during these travels that he began writing his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, although it was not published for a long time. It was published in 1992. His first notable works include the poem "Whoroscope" (1930) and the short story collection "More Pricks than Kicks" (1934). In 1937, when he was settled in Paris, his life was disrupted by World War II. He joined the French Resistance in 1941 despite being from Ireland. When his group was betrayed in 1942, he went into hiding in the unoccupied zone of France and he lived in the village of Roussillon. However, he continued with his resistance efforts indirectly due to which he was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Medaille de la Resistance for his bravery.

He wrote his first play in 1947 which was titled *Eleutheria*. However, he was not allowed to publish it during his lifetime and it became a matter of controversy when Beckett's American publisher, Barney Rosset, published an English translation going against the wishes of Beckett estate. In 1948-49, Beckett wrote his popular play *Waiting for Godot*. It was produced in Paris in January 1953 by director and actor Roger Blin (Beckett's lifelong friend). This play brought him great fame and success. During the 1950s and 1960s, Beckett's playwriting continued and he wrote a series of plays like

Endgame, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*. He also produced a large number of plays across Europe and the United States. In 1969, Beckett received the prestigious Nobel Prize.

Towards the later stages of his life, Beckett began to suffer from emphysema which is a lung disease. During his hospitalization, he wrote his final work which is a poem called "What is the Word". As his health continued to deteriorate, he refrained from writing and he directed his attention to translating his works. He died in 22nd December, 1989.

Stop to Consider

Did you know Samuel Beckett himself translated his play *Waiting for Godot* from French to English? Beckett, however, preferred the French version of the play. It premiered on January 5, 1953, at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris. Initially, it received mixed reviews from the audience. Some critics and audience members were surprised by its unconventional structure and minimalist plot because it differed from traditional plays. It gradually gained recognition as a groundbreaking work and in 1969, Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The play retains its importance and is frequently performed. Its themes of waiting, uncertainty, and the search for meaning continue to resonate with contemporary audience.

6.5 Reading the Play

This section will acquaint you with Beckett's prescribed play *Waiting for Godot*. For better understanding, this section will be divided into two subsections, namely, Act I and Act II.

6.5.1 Act I of *Waiting for Godot*

At the very beginning of the play, we are told about the setting which consists of "A country road. A tree" (Beckett 5) and the time is "Evening" (Beckett 5). The setting sets the mood of the play.

The first character to be introduced to us is Estragon. When the play opens, he is sitting by the side of a country road on a "low mound" and is trying to pull off one of his boots from his foot. We observe that he is constantly trying to take it off but is not

successful. Vladimir enters next and both of them engage in a conversation. The first words that Estragon says to Vladimir are, "Nothing to be done" (Beckett 5). These lines can mean two things: first, that there is nothing to be done because he is unable to take off his boot; second, there is nothing to be done about their lives. Vladimir proceeds to ask Estragon as to where he spent the night to which Estragon replies that he spent it in "A ditch" (Beckett 5). Vladimir asks if he was beaten up by someone to which Estragon replies in affirmative. Vladimir tells Estragon that he would be "nothing more than a little heap of bones" (Beckett 6) without Vladimir. This section gives us an idea of the relationship shared by the two characters and one's dependency on the other. This dependency is also visible in small tasks, like when Estragon requires Vladimir's help to take off his boot. One section of the act is entirely dedicated to this conversation about taking off boots every day from one's feet. The two characters also keep on repeating each other's sentences while carrying on with the conversation. This implies that their lives are repetitive and cyclical. This is also one of the central themes that governs the entire play.

Suddenly the two tramps go on to talk about the story of the two thieves in the Bible. They even wonder why one version is considered more accurate than the others. Vladimir tells Estragon about the two thieves. The repeated stories and dialogues also reflect the monotony in Vladimir and Estragon's lives. Vladimir asks Estragon if he has read the Bible, and Estragon says he only remembers the colourful maps of the Holy Land. Vladimir jokes that Estragon should have been a poet, and Estragon says he was, though it's unclear if he is serious. They then go on to discuss the story of the two thieves crucified with Jesus. Vladimir points out that only one of the Gospels mentions that one thief out of the two was saved. Estragon, uninterested, asks "Saved from what?" and Vladimir answers, "From hell" (Beckett 9). Vladimir wonders why only one Gospel mentions this and why people believe it. Estragon dismisses the discussion by referring to people as "bloody ignorant apes" (Beckett 9), showing a bleak view of humanity, while Vladimir keeps questioning, showing his scepticism. This conversation further brings up the theme of uncertainty in the text, the search for meaning, and the repetitive, meaningless nature of life. It highlights their doubts in a world where there is no divine salvation, as they wait endlessly for the mysterious Godot. It should also be mentioned

that the phrase “Nothing to be done” keeps on repeating throughout their conversations.

After discussing the story of the two thieves, Estragon tells Vladimir that they should go from the place. But Vladimir stops him and tells him that they can't yet leave because “We're waiting for Godot” (Beckett 10). As the story proceeds, Estragon's forgetfulness is portrayed as he keeps on asking as to where they are and why they're there. Vladimir, on the other hand, though he's more sure than Estragon, still doubts if Godot will show up. The two tramps then get confused about the day and it is evident from the lines, “But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? Or Monday? Or Friday?” (Beckett 11). They even argue about the nearby tree. They try to find out if the tree is dead or if it's even a tree at all, showing how they're stuck in a loop of confusion and uncertainty. Vladimir makes a suggestion. He says that they should just keep waiting for Godot forever as if they're caught in a trap. Furthermore, Estragon's confusion about time also adds to the feeling of being stuck in a never-ending cycle. Vladimir dislikes being alone so much that he wakes Estragon up from his sleep, also portraying how much they rely on each other in their strange situation. Even though Estragon talks about leaving or even ending their lives, they end up deciding to keep waiting, showing how resigned they are to their pointless routine. This section of the play also reveals to the audience that Vladimir and Estragon are also known as Didi and Gogo.

In the midst of their unending wait for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon constantly engage in conversations filled with uncertainty and hope. Vladimir, then, wonders about the potential gifts that Godot might bring, acknowledging that they didn't make any specific requests, just hoping for something good. Vladimir says, “I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it” (Beckett 14). They are not sure as to whether Godot will even appear or offer assistance but they still hold onto the hope of rescue. Their discussion hints at a sense of being controlled by Godot, comparing him to a powerful authoritarian figure. However, no one is sure as to who Godot is actually. Vladimir's mention of approaching Godot on their hands and knees suggests subservience rather than salvation. Their conversation delves deeper into the theme of losing their rights, highlighting their lack of power under Godot's influence. When Vladimir believes he hears Godot, both the

characters become anxious. But the moment they realize that they are mistaken, they become relieved. This makes the audience wonder about Godot as to who he is and what kind of power he holds over the two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir. Amidst their conversation, Estragon becomes hungry and Vladimir offers him a carrot, momentarily brightening both of their moods.

Continuing their wait for Godot, Estragon reflects on their relationship with Godot and questions his identity. Estragon asks if they are “tied” to Godot in some way. The phrase “Nothing to be done” is repeated again in this section. Despite the uncertainty surrounding Godot’s name, they refrain from delving too deeply into the question of Godot’s identity. Their conversation circles back to feelings of boredom and resignation, further exacerbating the theme of waiting for a great change. Suddenly, a terrifying scream interrupts their conversation. The shock of that scream makes Vladimir and Estragon embrace each other. In that moment of fear and uncertainty, their reliance on one another also becomes apparent. They become each other’s hope in the midst of all the chaos and confusion. Despite the ambiguity surrounding Godot and their circumstances, their bond remains steadfast, acting as a source of strength in the face of uncertainty and difficulty.

In the next section, we see two more characters called Pozzo and Lucky entering the scene. When Pozzo and Lucky come around, everything changes. Pozzo enters carrying a whip which he uses to control Lucky. Pozzo treats Lucky like an animal, pulls him with a rope around his neck and, controls his behaviour. Vladimir wants to help, but Estragon stops him. At first, Estragon thinks Pozzo might be Godot, with him asking, “Is that him?” (Beckett 19). This shows how mixed up they are about things. It also underscores the uncertainty and their vulnerability in life. Pozzo’s ill treatment of Lucky continues throughout with Lucky, at times, being referred to as ‘pig’. Throughout all this, Vladimir and Estragon just watch and don't do anything to help Lucky, even though they feel bad for him sometimes. Pozzo orders Lucky around and tells him to place a stool where he would sit. In the scene, Pozzo starts eating chicken and drinking from a bottle. Estragon proceeds to ask for some chicken bones, which shows he is hungry, but Pozzo is mean about it. Vladimir and Estragon talk to each other about Lucky. They observe a “running sore” (Beckett 22) around his neck caused by Pozzo’s pulling of the rope. When Vladimir speaks up about how Lucky is

being treated, Pozzo acts like it is nothing serious. Vladimir wants to leave, but Pozzo makes them stay longer, even after Vladimir gets mad. In the end, Vladimir and Estragon are still stuck with Pozzo, feeling helpless and not sure what to do. They just accept things, even though they know it is not right. Pozzo's treatment of Lucky like an animal, evokes a sense of sympathy and discomfort in both Vladimir and Estragon, as well as in the audience. The encounter between Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky reveals the intricate dynamics of human relationships and the harsh realities of suffering and degradation. They want to help Lucky but they are unable to do so and this signifies a sense of resignation and helplessness. The encounter with Pozzo and Lucky, thus, serves as a significant reflection of the human condition. It emphasizes the complexity of human relationships and the various difficulties faced by individuals in their search for meaning.

There have been multiple interpretations of Pozzo and Lucky's relationship. One interpretation suggests that their relationship is that of a master and a slave, with Pozzo being the master, and Lucky being the slave. Their relationship also symbolizes the relationship between capital and labour. However, despite their differences, they are mutually dependent on each other. This mutual dependency is also visible in the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon; the only difference is that Vladimir and Estragon are portrayed as equals in the play unlike Pozzo and Lucky.

Before moving to the end of Act 1, let us look at Lucky's long speech that he delivers in the play.

At first glance, the speech of Lucky seems trivial and without meaning. But many have tried to give meanings to his speech by trying to understand the words he says in between. One interpretation of the speech suggests that, at first, it seems like a serious, scholarly talk starting with "Given the existence... of a personal God.." (Beckett 40) but it is actually a parody. The meaningful parts are hidden, and the speech mocks God. Scholarly terms like "qua" are used, but repeated absurdly as "quaquaquaqua" makes it sound like quacking. The speech includes words like "aphasia" (Beckett 40) which means loss of speech, suggesting God's silence and words like "apathia" (Beckett 40) suggesting God's indifference. This interpretation tries to link Lucky's speech

to a statement made about man and God. This parody, however, also shows how pointless it is to try to find meaning or clear answers about God and existence through discussions. The repetitive and nonsensical language, like “quaquaquaqua,” mocks the overly complex and obscure way these topics are often talked about. Furthermore, Lucky’s speech is also symbolic of the play’s existential themes. It highlights that life has no meaning and that trying to make sense of it is pointless. The confusion in the speech is also symbolic of the chaos, absurdity, and uncertainty of life.

After Pozzo and Lucky’s departure, Vladimir reminds Estragon that they cannot leave because they are still waiting for Godot. Towards the end of Act I, a boy without any reference to his name enters and he reveals that he has a message from Mr. Godot. Vladimir asks the boy if he’s the one who visited yesterday to which the boy replies in negative. The boy goes on to tell them that Mr. Godot will indeed come tomorrow but not today. Vladimir further asks him if he works for Godot. The boy replies that he just works with goats. The boy also mentions that Mr. Godot does not beat him but beats his brother who, unlike him, minds the sheep. Vladimir tells the boy to go and inform Mr. Godot that he has seen Vladimir and Estragon waiting for him. After the boy leaves, it becomes night. This section is also indicative of the uncertainty and helplessness that both the tramps go through while waiting for the mysterious Godot, whose identity is not revealed by Beckett. Alan Schneider, who was supposed to direct the first American production of this play, once asked Beckett “who or what was meant by Godot” (Esslin 24), to which he received the reply as, ““If I knew, I would have said so in the play.”” (Esslin 24). Esslin further writes that “This is a salutary warning to anyone who approaches Beckett’s plays with the intention of discovering the key to their understanding of demonstrating in exact and definite terms *what they mean*” (Esslin 24). Towards the end, both Vladimir and Estragon agree to go which is indicative of the words, “Yes, let’s go” (Beckett 51) but they are shown to not move from the setting. This implies their inability to make a decision for themselves or for their lives.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the relationship that Vladimir and Estragon share with each other?
2. After reading Act I, can you make an idea of what kind of play *Waiting for Godot* is?
3. Can you describe in short, the setting of the play and what it symbolises?
4. Does Samuel Beckett mention in Act I who Godot is? What are your thoughts on it?

6.5.2 Act II of *Waiting for Godot*

Not much action happens in this act. Act II begins the “Next day. Same time. Same place” (Beckett 52). This indicates the cyclical nature of the play. However, the tree that appears barren in the first act, has four or five leaves on it. This is indicative of the passage of time. When Vladimir and Estragon meet again in the beginning of this act, they begin to talk about themselves and Estragon suggests that Vladimir is happier without Gogo because he was heard happily humming a tune in the absence of Estragon. He too states that he seems happier without Vladimir but somehow, he always ends up returning to his companion. To this, Vladimir replies, “No, but I do. It’s because you don’t know how to defend yourself. I wouldn’t have let them beat you” (Beckett 54). The incident of Estragon being beaten by some people, as mentioned in Act 1 seems to repeat itself in Act 2, further highlighting the cyclical nature of the play. This also illustrates Estragon’s dependency on Vladimir and the protectiveness Vladimir feels for Estragon.

Estragon seems to have forgotten their encounter with Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir tries hard to make him remember but he fails. A pair of boots is witnessed on side of the road. Vladimir thinks that it is Estragon’s but Estragon denies owning it. So, Vladimir asks him to put it on to see if it fits and it does perfectly. Estragon sits down on the side of the road and goes to sleep. Vladimir is seen to be singing him a lullaby but he soon wakes up with a start because of a nightmare. Vladimir finds Lucky’s hat on the ground and he is happy because the presence of the hat confirms Lucky’s and Pozzo’s presence in that same place. A series of hat exchanges happen between Vladimir and Estragon. This scene is also indicative of the repetitive nature of the play and the actions of the characters, and

their words. Then they began to act like Lucky and Pozzo. Vladimir imitates Lucky and Estragon, Pozzo.

Estragon, after some time, turns to go from the place but comes back again because he hears someone arriving. Afraid, Estragon tries to hide behind the lone tree of the setting but when he realises that he is not well hid, he comes out. Vladimir, on the other hand, deciphers that Godot is the one who is coming. However, after the entry of the character, the audience witness that it is not Godot but Pozzo and Lucky that enter the setting. This time Pozzo appears blind and because he cannot see, he bumps into Lucky and both of them fall down. Both Vladimir and Estragon try helping him but they all fall down. As they all lie on the ground, Didi and Gogo fall asleep but they are woken up by Pozzo's shouts. Vladimir tries to make him stop shouting by calling him different names. But Pozzo doesn't stop. He is called by the name "Abel" (Beckett 80) and Pozzo responds to that. Then, they refer to him as "Cain" (Beckett 80) and he replies to that as well. This Biblical reference to Cain and Abel is symbolic of Pozzo representing the plight of the entire human race. It is also indicated by the words uttered by Estragon, "He's all humanity" (Beckett 80). Pozzo further tells them that he is unable to recognize them because of his blindness. Even Pozzo does not remember meeting them the previous day, just like Estragon, a few scenes earlier. They also come to know that Lucky has become dumb. Pozzo's blindness and Lucky's dumbness is indicative of the passage of time. This time there's not much action revolving around Pozzo and Lucky and they eventually leave the setting to go on their way, leaving Vladimir and Estragon alone in the location.

A little later, the boy enters again and calls out to Vladimir. Vladimir is aware of the everyday routine and is kind of prepared to hear the same words from the boy regarding the arrival of Mr. Godot. However, it is established that it is not the same boy who visited them yesterday. However, the message is the same, Mr. Godot says that he is going to come tomorrow but not today. The boy asks if he should convey a message from them to Mr. Godot. To this Vladimir tells him to tell Mr. Godot that he saw them. This action is similar to what happens towards the end of Act 1, again suggesting the cyclical and repetitive nature of the play.

As the sun sets, Estragon, again like the previous Act, wants to go but Vladimir tells him that they cannot go far away because

they still have their waiting to do. In Vladimir's words, "We have to come back tomorrow...To Wait for Godot" (Beckett 89). Estragon suggests hanging themselves and that "[he] can't go on like this" (Beckett 91). Vladimir replies by saying that if Godot doesn't come tomorrow, they will hang themselves. This nonchalant reference to suicide confuses the readers/ audience of the play. They also imply that they will be saved if Godot comes to visit them. So, we see that, till the end of the play Vladimir and Estragon keep waiting for Godot but Godot never arrives.

This section aimed to provide you with a basic summary of the text. The next section will take you through some important tropes that are recurrent in the text.

Check Your Progress

1. How has the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky changed in Act II compared to Act I?
2. What is the significance of the changes observed in the tree in Act II?

6.5.3 Tropes/ Symbols/ Motifs/Themes in *Waiting for Godot*

Let us look at some important tropes/motifs/themes of Beckett's play. This section will provide you with ideas in point wise format for better understanding of the play.

1. **The Hat:** After reading the play you must have noticed the appearance of the 'hat' in both the acts. Both Estragon and Vladimir are portrayed to be wearing hats throughout the play. They are often seen to be engaging in activities concerning the hats. For example, in Act II, both of them engage in a series of hat exchanging activities. This indicates that they are all the same and that their identities can be exchanged. When Pozzo and Lucky arrive, they are portrayed to be wearing hats too. In Act I, we observe that in order to stop him from continuing with his long monologue, Vladimir knocks off the hat from Lucky's head. When Vladimir wears Lucky's hat in the next Act he pretends to 'think'. This shows that he has taken on the identity of another person, probably Lucky because after that he asks Estragon to act like Pozzo and says that he will act like Lucky.

2. **The Tree:** The tree remains constant in both the acts of the play with changes in the growth of leaves. In Act I, the tree is barren and in Act II, the tree has some leaves on it. This is indicative of the passage of time. “This tree [also] portrays the world as barren and lifeless, emphasizing the lack of purpose and meaning the characters must contend with. The apparent growth of leaves on the tree in Act 2 does nothing to ease the sense of meaninglessness; it only adds to the characters’ uncertainty about the place and the passage of time” (Alsharadgeh 35).
3. **Lucky’s bag:** In both the acts, when Lucky arrive with Pozzo, he is seen to be carrying a suitcase. He takes out things from it when he is ordered by Pozzo to do so. In Act II, however, when Vladimir asks what is inside the bag, we come to know that the bag contains sand. This, it must be noted, further adds to the absurdity of the play.
4. **The rope:** The symbol of the rope is seen to appear in both the acts. One is shown to be tied around Lucky’s neck which is controlled by Pozzo. In Act I, the rope is long and Pozzo uses it to control Lucky’s movement. However, in Act II, the rope is seen to have become shorter and this illustrates the loss of power that Pozzo used to have on Lucky. This is because in Act I, Lucky is completely controlled by Pozzo but in Act II, due to Pozzo’s blindness, he becomes completely dependent on Lucky. The symbol of the rope appears again when Estragon suggests hanging themselves by the rope on the tree if Godot doesn’t arrive the next day. Like the control seen in Pozzo and Lucky’s relationship, it can be inferred that such a control is also present in Godot and the two tramps’ relationship, with Godot, despite his absence, still controlling the actions of Vladimir and Estragon. The rope, thus, symbolises some sort of submission to power.
5. **Theme of Absurdity:** After reading the play, you must have noticed how nothing meaningful practically happens and the Godot that the two tramps wait for, never arrive. There is no beginning, middle, and end. The play is cyclical in nature, and the actions of the characters are repetitive. The setting is also indicative of the absurdity. “The setting of the play reminds the post war conditions of the world which brought violence, uncertainty, despair and pessimistic outlook...Vladimir and Estragon, show the condition of

modern men and they live a meaningless life...” (Khan et al. 312).

- 6. Theme of Meaninglessness of Life:** After reading the text of the play, you must have realised how the characters portrayed in the text have little to no purpose in life. For Vladimir and Estragon, waiting for someone named Godot seem to add meaning to their lives but till the end of the play Godot doesn't arrive. This reflects that their action of waiting for Godot is pointless. The journey that Pozzo and Lucky seem to be making is also without meaning because we are not told as to where they are going or where they are coming from. Till the end of the play, the reader/ audience isn't provided with any resolution to Vladimir and Estragon's waiting.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the repeated exchange of hats between Vladimir and Estragon in Act II symbolize their interchangeable identities?
2. What does the change in the tree's appearance between Act I and Act II suggest about the passage of time and the characters' perception of it?
3. What is the significance of Lucky carrying a bag filled with sand, and how does this contribute to the theme of absurdity in the play?
4. How does the shortening of the rope between Pozzo and Lucky from Act I to Act II illustrate the shift in their power dynamic?

6.6 Summing Up

After having gone through this unit, the student will be familiar with Samuel Beckett's theatre of the absurd play *Waiting for Godot*. Through the discussion of the prescribed play in two parts, the learner will also be able to provide a detailed explanation of the play and provide their own critical ideas concerning the play.

6.7 References and Suggested Reading

Alsharadgeh, Samer Ziyad. "The Themes in Samuel Beckett's Play *Waiting for Godot*."

European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, vol. 8, no. 2, 2020, pp.

31-39. <https://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/The-themes-in-Samuel-Becketts-play-Waiting-for-Godot.pdf>.

Atkins, Anselm. "Lucky's Speech in Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot': A Punctuated Sense-Line

Arrangement." *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1967, pp. 426–32. *JSTOR*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3205022>. Accessed 18 June 2024.

Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Faber and Faber, 2010.

Biswas, Subrata. "Reality and Vision of Suicide in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and

Act without Words I." *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, vol. 11, no. 2,

2015, pp. 1-4. <https://worldlitonline.net/2015-july-articles/Subrata-Reality-and.pdf>.

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Keller, John Robert. "A Strange Situation: Self-Entrapment in *Waiting for Godot*."

Samuel Beckett and the Primacy of Love, Manchester University Press, 2002, pp. 133–

71. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155jffd.9>. Accessed 18 June 2024.

Kubiak, Aubrey D. "GODOT: THE NON-NEGATIVE NOTHINGNESS." *Romance Notes*,

vol. 48, no. 3, 2008, pp. 395–405. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43803087>.

Accessed 18 June 2024.

Valentine, John. "Nihilism and the Eschaton in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*." *Florida*

Philosophical Review, vol. 9, no. 2, 2009, pp. 136-147.

<https://cah.ucf.edu/fpr/article/nihilism-and-the-eschaton-in-samuel-becketts-waiting-for-godot/>.

Velissariou, Aspasia. "Language in 'Waiting for Godot.'" *Journal of Beckett Studies*, no. 8,

1982, pp. 45–57. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44782289>.
[Accessed 18 June 2024](#).

xxx

UNIT- 1

HABIB TANVIR AS A PLAYWRIGHT

Unit Structure:

1.1 Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch

1.4 A Note on Habib Tanvir's Plays

1.5 The Theatre of Habib Tanvir

1.6 Summing Up

1.7 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to

- *learn* about the life of Habib Tanvir;
- *understand* the work of Habib Tanvir in relation to his life experiences;
- *identify* the plays of Habib Tanvir';
- *appreciate* Tanvir as a theatre personality;
- *write* about the traits of his theatre.

1.2 Introduction

Habib Tanvir stands out as a pioneering figure in modern Indian theatre. The most remarkable achievement of Tanvir is the way he blends traditional folk art with contemporary themes to create a modern drama. Tanvir himself denies the label revivalist, because his ideas and temperament is distinctively modern. He was committed to decolonizing Indian theatre and fostering a collective cultural identity. A multifaceted personality, Tanvir excelled in multiple roles—playwright, director, actor, poet, composer, and designer—while managing his iconic Naya Theatre. His innovative dramaturgy introduced Chhattisgarhi folk actors and gave them creative freedom, resulting in a dynamic, two-way relationship between director and performer. What is remarkable in Tanvir is

that a person devoted to theatre trained in the West and exposed to western theatre, decides to evolve a new form that could lend it an Indianness and also carry the legacy of progressive theatre with narratives that carried profound social messages. His integration of folk songs and dances enriched his productions, using them not only as artistic elements but also as tools for social commentary. Tanvir's theatre was simple yet impactful, offering a voice to marginalized art forms and addressing critical social and political issues. In this unit, we will discuss Habib Tanvir's theatre in a way that will enable us to read *Agra Bazar* in a fruitful way, offering a perspective on the play.

1.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch

Habib Tanvir was born in 1923 in Raipur, into a religious family. Despite growing up in a conservative environment, his exposure to the arts began early. During his school days, he regularly attended Parsi theatre performances, where his brother acted. These early encounters with theatre left a lasting impression on him. As a teenager, he performed in a Shakespearean play as well as a large-scale production by Mohammed Isaakh, earning prizes for both. Although theatrical activities were not encouraged at home, Tanvir persisted, continuing to act while studying at Nagpur College.

Later, he enrolled in Aligarh Muslim University to pursue an MA in Urdu but did not complete the degree. Tanvir initially showed an inclination toward a career in civil services but soon lost interest in the field. His passion for the arts was evident from his college days, and his fascination with cinema only deepened as he grew older. In Nagpur, he developed a habit of watching Indian and foreign films, an experience that broadened his artistic vision. Eventually, this interest led him to Bombay, where he explored various creative pursuits.

In Bombay, Tanvir engaged in a wide range of activities. He organized poet conferences, worked as a casual artiste for All India Radio, and wrote film reviews and scripts. He also contributed book reviews to *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and edited a textile journal. Additionally, he worked with an English weekly, *Box Office*. Despite these commitments, Tanvir's creative interests kept

drawing him toward cinema. He acted in films but soon realized that the commercial nature of Bombay's film industry left little room for artistic experimentation.

From 1948 to 1950, Tanvir became an active member of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), serving as a secretary and playwright. He also joined the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), where he collaborated with prominent figures like Balraj Sahni and Dina Pathak. His association with IPTA and PWA was formative, introducing him to the rich diversity of Indian folk traditions. During this period, he frequently encountered police surveillance and censorship, as many of the plays he was involved in addressed themes of social harmony and workers' rights. Despite these challenges, Tanvir's commitment to socially relevant theatre remained steadfast.

Disillusioned with the commercial limitations of Bombay cinema, Tanvir relocated to Delhi. This shift marked a significant turning point in his career. In Delhi, he formed a professional association with Elizabeth Gauba, a pioneer of progressive education. Gauba's emphasis on child-centered learning inspired Tanvir to experiment with children's theatre. He wrote several plays for young audiences, including *Har Mausam Ke Khel*, *Doodh Ka Gilas*, and *Chandni Ka Chamcha*. His involvement in children's theatre not only broadened his creative scope but also deepened his understanding of the educational potential of drama.

While in Delhi, Tanvir also joined Qudsia Zaidi's Hindustani Theatre, where he further honed his skills as a playwright and director. It was during this time that he met Maneeka Mishra, a fellow theatre enthusiast, whom he later married. In 1954, Tanvir wrote *Agra Bazar*, a play inspired by the life and works of the 18th-century poet Nazir Akbarabadi. The play was revolutionary in its use of non-professional actors and its focus on the lives of ordinary people, setting the stage for Tanvir's lifelong commitment to folk theatre.

In 1955, Tanvir traveled to London to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). Although he enrolled in a two-year course, it was at the Old Vic Theatre School that he found a more enriching experience. Here, he learned various aspects of theatre,

including mask-making, production, and playwriting. His exposure to European theatre was diverse, ranging from classical productions to avant-garde performances. To support himself, he took on various jobs, including grape-picking, writing for radio, and singing in nightclubs. This period of artistic exploration was crucial in shaping his understanding of theatre, although it also reinforced his belief that true innovation in Indian theatre required a return to indigenous traditions. He particularly realized it during the production of *Mitti Ki Gadi* in 1958.

Upon returning to India, Tanvir put his newfound knowledge into practice. In 1958, he staged *Mitti Ki Gadi*, an adaptation of Shudraka's *Mrichchakatikam*. For this production, he collaborated with folk artistes from Chhattisgarh's *nacha* tradition. The play's folk style received mixed reviews, with some critics praising its innovation and others criticizing it for a perceived lack of aesthetic harmony. Despite this, Tanvir remained committed to integrating folk traditions into his work. However, the folk style of *Mitti Ki Gadi* was not appreciated by the theatre scholars who cited its lack of harmony of rasas.

In 1959, Tanvir and Maneeka founded Naya Theatre, a company dedicated to exploring new theatrical forms. Naya Theatre marked a significant departure from the Stanislavskian mode of realism, incorporating elements from Sanskrit theatre, folk traditions, and Brechtian techniques. This fusion of styles allowed Tanvir to develop a unique theatrical language that resonated with both rural and urban audiences. His collaboration with Chhattisgarhi artistes not only enriched his work but also required him to unlearn many of the Western techniques he had previously mastered. Through productions like *Gaon Ke Naam Sasural*, he successfully bridged the gap between traditional and modern theatre, creating performances that were both entertaining and thought-provoking.

One of the most significant collaborations in Tanvir's career was with Safdar Hashmi, a prominent street theatre activist. In 1988, the two worked together on *Moleram Ka Satyagrah*, an adaptation of Premchand's story *Satyagrah*. Tanvir reworked Hashmi's draft, enhancing its structure, adding songs, and infusing it with a comic spirit. Tragically, Hashmi was killed during a street performance in support of industrial workers, an event that profoundly impacted

Tanvir. This loss inspired him to make his later works more explicitly political, addressing themes of social justice and resistance.

Among Tanvir's many notable works, *Charandas Chor* (1975) stands out as a landmark in Indian theatre. The play, a blend of folk narratives and modern sensibilities, was widely acclaimed and translated into several languages. It won the Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1982, cementing Tanvir's international reputation. In addition to his theatrical achievements, Tanvir appeared in films such as *Yeh Woh Manzil To Nahin*, *Prahar*, *Mangal Pandey*, and *Black and White*. His contributions to Indian arts were recognized with numerous awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the Kalidas Samman, and the Padma Bhushan. He also received honorary doctorates from several universities and served as a member of the Rajya Sabha in 1972.

Habib Tanvir died on 18 June 2009 in Bhopal.

Check Your Progress:

- Write a note on Habib Tanvir's association with the Indian People's Theatre Association.
- Discuss the factors that influenced Habib Tanvir's transition from Bombay cinema to theatre. How did this shift shape his artistic vision?
- Explain the significance of Naya Theatre in Habib Tanvir's career. How did his collaboration with Chhattisgarhi folk artistes contribute to the evolution of his theatrical style?

1.4 A Note on Habib Tanvir's Plays:

Habib Tanvir, a luminary of Indian theatre, authored nearly twenty plays, each marked by his unique ability to blend folk traditions with modern theatrical elements. Some of his most notable works include *Agra Bazar* (1954), *Shatranj Ke Mohrey* (1954), *Lala Shohrat Rai* (1954), *Mitti Ki Gaadi* (1958), *Gaon Ka Naam Sasural*,

Mor Naam Damaad (1973), *Charandas Chor* (1975), *Uttar Ram Charitra* (1977), *Bahadur Kalarin* (1978), *Ponga Pandit* (1960), *Ek Aurat Hypathia Bhi Thi* (1980), *Jis Lahore Nahi Dekhya* (1990), *Kamdeo Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna* (1993), *The Broken Bridge* (1995), *Zahreeli Hawa* (2002), *Raj Rakt* (2006), *Kartoos* (published posthumously in 2016), *Dekh Rahe Hain Nain* (2005), and *Hirma Ki Amar Kahani*. Each of these plays reflects Tanvir's commitment to addressing social and political issues while drawing deeply from India's cultural heritage.

Among these, *Charandas Chor* stands out as perhaps the most remarkable. Adapted from a Rajasthani folk tale collected by Vijaydan Detha, the play was initially workshopped in Rajasthan but did not achieve its desired impact. Undeterred, Tanvir revisited the story in a 1974 workshop held in Bhilai, this time collaborating with Chhattisgarhi folk artistes. The play, then titled *Chor Chor*, was performed before a congregation of *Sanatanis*, who responded with great enthusiasm. The thematic core of the play—truthfulness—resonated deeply with the audience, enhanced by the inclusion of *Sanatani* devotional songs.

Charandas Chor tells the story of Charandas, a thief who, despite his criminal profession, is unwavering in his commitment to truth. At the outset, Charandas takes an oath of truthfulness before his guru and makes four additional vows: never to eat from a gold plate, never to ride an elephant, never to marry a queen, and never to accept kingship. These promises set up a series of dramatic conflicts. When a queen falls in love with Charandas and offers him her hand in marriage as well as the throne, his refusal leads to his execution. The play's tragic conclusion underscores the tension between societal norms and personal integrity, making it a poignant exploration of ethical steadfastness.

Charandas Chor was a dynamic work-in-progress, evolving through performance and improvisation. Tanvir's method involved continuous refinement, adding scenes and modifying the ending based on audience response. The final version became a masterful blend of folk narrative, music, and Tanvir's modern theatrical sensibilities. The play garnered widespread acclaim and remains a landmark in Indian theatre, earning the Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1982.

Tanvir's first major play, *Agra Bazar*, was staged in 1954. This musical drama is based on the life and works of Nazir Akbarabadi, an 18th-century poet often considered marginal in the literary canon. Through *Agra Bazar*, Tanvir highlighted the poet's relevance and brought to life the vibrant cultural milieu of the Mughal era. The play is notable for its innovative use of non-professional actors, often drawn from local communities, which lent authenticity and energy to the performance. It was a bold experiment that showcased Tanvir's prowess as both a playwright and director, earning him recognition as a transformative figure in Indian theatre.

In both *Charandas Chor* and *Agra Bazar*, as in much of his work, Tanvir demonstrated an extraordinary ability to elevate marginalized voices and integrate folk traditions into mainstream theatre. His plays not only entertain but also challenge audiences to reflect on issues of social justice, morality, and cultural identity. Habib Tanvir's legacy endures as a testament to his unflagging dedication to a theatre that is both deeply rooted in Indian traditions and unafraid to innovate.

Besides his own plays, Tanvir directed a rich assortment of drama such as those written by Asghar Wajahat, Rahul Verma, Moliere, Shakespeare, Brecht as well as the Sanskrit classics.

Check Your Progress

- What are the main themes explored in *Charandas Chor*? How do Charandas's vows create conflict in the play?

1.5 The Theatre of Habib Tanvir

Habib Tanvir was not a playwright alone. It is important to discuss him as a towering figure of Indian theatre. Please note that Sudhanva Deshpande, a theatre activist and scholar, calls him "a renaissance man" (Tanvir viii). His creative genius includes writing plays, translation, adaptation, direction, performing as an actor, singing and composing music, designing and managing a theatre company, writing criticism, and formulating a theory of theatre. There was a historical context to Habib's evolution of theatre. In the wake of India's independence, when questions of cultural autonomy

of the newborn nation, alongside those of political and economic independence, gained new importance. But the path ahead for Indian theatre was not as clear. There was a huge pressure of the colonial legacy of western theatre and avant-garde movements. While Parsi Theatre thrived in small towns and villages, modern proscenium theatre occupied urban spaces.

Stop to Consider

This is how Sudhanva Deshpande wrote about Tanvir:

“Habib Tanvir was a renaissance personality. There was nothing he could not do in theatre—he wrote, translated, adapted and evolved plays; he was a master director, a superb actor and a good singer; he wrote poetry and songs; he could compose music; he was a designer; he was manager of his company Naya theatre, which he ran first with his wife Moneeka (and single-handedly after her death) for exactly 50 years; he was a critic and theoretician; more, he was a seer, a guru for generations of younger theatre artistes. In all this, and through his prodigiously prolific theatre career spanning over 60 years, he remained an artiste with a deep social conscience and engagement, a public intellectual who never shied away from taking a stand and lending his name to progressive and secular causes.”

In the first place, Tanvir’s appreciation and use of folk performative forms is an answer to the question of indigenous and ethnic theatrical form. The Orientalists discovered the ancient Indian classical texts such as Sanskrit drama, paving, in the post-colonial times, the way for their renewed performance on stage. The regional and folk performative traditions were another source that Indian theatre could draw on. The use of folk forms by the Indian People’s Theatre Association in the 1940s for the upliftment of political consciousness and social harmony was an important sub-plot in the narrative of modern Indian theatre. In the countryside, a vast tradition of oral performance existed for long, though it waned with the advent of modernity. Tanvir was deeply connected to the folk and performative tradition. The story of the evolution of Naya Theatre testifies to Tanvir’s relentless struggle to evolve a theatrical language through the use of folk and oral performative traditions.

(For a contrast, you may go through the units on Mohan Rakesh in the second semester. *Adhe Adhure* requires a theatre steeped in the western tradition of the proscenium arch, lighting, and performance.)

However, as Anjum Katyal notes, Tanvir does not merely use the folk forms. He shapes his theatre around the folk performers so that the performers, rather than a form, become the center of his theatre (Tanvir xii). Tanvir's theatre brings together the thematic concerns of contemporary issues and the vibrant oral tradition of people on the ground. This is also how he refrains from exorcising the folk tradition but interfuses it with modern consciousness. His theory and practice of this theatre exemplify the rich and diverse cultural tapestry of the Indian nation, where classical and folk, Sanskrit and oral theatre traditions, Hindu and Muslim cultures subsist together.

Another important feature of Tanvir's theatre is its departure from a text-centric tradition and focus, instead, on improvisation. (I have already hinted at how *Charandas Chor* in its present form evolved from a Rajasthani folk tale.) In Tanvir's theatre, the actors gradually evolve into a character through continuous improvisation, invention of dialogue, and interaction with the audience. Both the form and the story evolve through modifications in a flowing manner. You may have a look at Tanvir's confessions regarding his art, especially how he learned from the Chhattisgarhi folk artistes about the space and freedom one should give to the actors and not impose upon them one's rules, in his conversation. (Please read the chapter "My Milestones in Theatre" in *Charandas Chor and Other Plays*, as mentioned in the "References and Suggested Reading" section.) To give you a closer view of what this art of improvisation involves, let us

Look at Tanvir's daughter Nageen's comment:

"He would explain the story to the folk artistes and say what was supposed to happen in a scene. He would say, take three dialogues and work on them—alone, with others—and then show it to me. If there was comedy and he thought there is no meaning in it, he would say, *Ab is mein meaning dalo* (now put meaning into it)" (Nandini Sahu et al. 207).

Music is an integral part of Tanvir's theatre. Music offers a commentary on action in the play and gives a moment for reflection. Tanvir's plays popularized quite a few songs, while some of his folk artistes were powerful singers themselves. Tanvir himself was a poet and singer, while his knowledge of Urdu poetry gave him a sense of meter and prosody. Music, however, had never been alien to Indian performative/theatrical tradition. In the context of Assamese theatre itself, the *Ankia Bhaona*, a dramatic form evolved by Sankardeva, is replete with song and music. In fact, Indian theatrical tradition in both folk and classical strains always integrates music into performance, action, and visual design. As we will discuss in the next unit, in *Agra Bazar*, songs are used to offer a commentary on the action. And this is distinctively Brechtian about Tanvir's theatre. Songs offer a critical perspective on whatever goes on, on stage, intervening in the action rather than accentuating the emotions built up by the action.

Stop to Consider

Some of the songs that Tanvir wrote from various plays include
“Saasgarideve” from *Gaon Ke Naam Sasural Mero Naam damad*
“Ek Chor ne Rang Jamaya sach bolke” from *Charandas Chor*
“Bela Sanjh Ki” from *Mitti Ki Gadi*
“Aadmi” from *Agra Bazar*
“Lali Gandali Churpur mirchachane Ki daar” from *Sadak*
“Chola Mitti Ke Hai Ram” from *Bahadur Kalarin*
“Khooon Phir Khooon Hai” from *Jis Lahore Nahin Dekhya*

An important dimension of Tanvir's plays is the social critique they offer. In *Charandas Chor*, the protagonist, a thief, vows never to tell a lie, and death ultimately becomes the price he pays for his moral integrity. The queen falls in love with him, but as Charandas has also vowed never to marry a queen, she fails to make him break his oath. We witness the limits of her love as it transforms into tyranny, typical of a politician, when her power and anger take over. While an ordinary man of a supposedly 'low' moral category confronts authority and refuses to yield to its dictates, the tragic consequence exposes the fragility of personal integrity in the face of systemic power. Besides the figure of authority epitomized in the queen, the play critiques the system of law and order. The establishment of

IPTA was crucial to the emergence of a non-commercial, progressive theatre in India—a form committed to the issues of the common people. Broadly, stories of common men and women, their joys, sorrows, and struggles were popularized by IPTA. In *The Living Tale of Hirma*, Hirma, a tribal king of Bastar, comes into conflict with a host of officials representing the democratic system. The play critiques the corrupt practices operating under the guise of democracy, exposing how the forces of ‘progress’ disrupt indigenous ways of living and exploit tribal communities under the pretext of development.

Tanvir owes a significant debt to Brechtian theatre., Tanvir was drawn to Brecht’s *Epic Theatre*, which emphasized intellectual engagement over emotional immersion. This inspiration prompted Tanvir to return to his roots and develop his own version of Modern Indian Theatre. He credited Brecht with teaching him that imitating Western art was futile unless it was contextualized within one's own culture. Tanvir adopted Brechtian techniques, such as the use of songs as a didactic tool and the alienation effect to encourage critical reflection. By blending Brecht's ideological and theatrical methods with Indian folk traditions, Tanvir created a hybrid form that merged the freedom of folk art with Brecht’s emphasis on social and political critique, ultimately giving birth to Naya Theatre.

Stop to Consider

Naya Theatre:

Founded by Habib Tanvir in 1959, Naya Theatre represents a pioneering movement in Indian theatre, breaking away from the dominance of Western theatrical conventions. Its most significant achievement lies in articulating an authentic Indian identity—a historical necessity in the post-independence era of the 1950s. Although Naya Theatre draws heavily from folk performance traditions, it does not engage in mere revivalism. Instead, Tanvir crafted a form of theatre that is distinctly modern while remaining rooted in tradition.

Naya Theatre transcended language barriers by utilizing the Chhattisgarhi dialect in a manner that resonated universally with its audience. Another notable feature of Naya Theatre was the

integration of *Nacha*, a traditional Chhattisgarhi dance form, which was later supplemented by *Pandavani*, a folk ballad tradition. Overall, the simplicity and profound expressiveness of its productions became the hallmarks of Naya Theatre's aesthetic.

SAQ:

Identify the basic traits of Habib Tanvir's theatre. (100 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

1.6 Summing Up

In this unit, we have learned about Habib Tanvir as a playwright and a theatre personality. If we look at his life, we can notice a number of factors that shaped him as a prominent figure of modern Indian theatre. His exposure to the vast realm of western theatre and his training in the West definitely enabled him for achieving a new and modern theatrical idiom and form. At the same time, his break with the western mode and experimentation with the indigeneous form would explain his distinctive place in Indian theatre canon. You may make an obvious distinction here with Mohan Rakesh, another key voice in Indian theatre who, for all his debt to the classical tradition, basically used the western style. (Ashad Ka Ek Din, for instance, exemplifies how Rakesh sticks to the modern conventions of western drama even as he draws on the Indian content.) We have also elaborated how engagement with the folk artistes as well as involvement in the theatre activities under the aegis of the IPTA

enriched Tanvir in a remarkable way. We have, besides, briefly dwelt on the plays by Tanvir, of which, of course Charandas Chor stands out as the most remarkable one. Yet, Charandas Chor did not happen overnight; there was a long trajectory of Tanvir's theatrical enterprise which culminated in Charandas Chor. For one thing, you may take note of how Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* as a full fledged theatrical text came into being. Further, we have discussed some of the features of Tanvir's theatre such as his use of the folk form, the social critique that he articulated through his plays, his incorporation of the Brechtian mode, among others. For a better perception of Tanvir's theatrical production, you may watch such plays as *Agra Bazar*, *Charandas Chor*, *Mitti Ki Gadi* etc on Youtube. Hope you have gained some understanding of this brilliant theatre personality and his work, and it should provide you a context for your reading of *Agra Bazar*, to which we now turn in the next unit.

1.7 References and Suggested Reading

- Bharucha, Rustom. *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. Routledge, 1993.
- Dalmia, Vasudha. *Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*. Oxford University Press India, 2006.
- Katyal, Anjum. *Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre*. SAGE India, 2012.

xxx

UNIT- 2

HABIB TANVIR: *AGRA BAZAR*

Unit Structure:

2.1 Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 What Happens in the Play

2.3.1 Scene I

2.3.2 Scene II

2.4 Critical reading of the Play

2.5 Summing Up

2.6 References and Suggested Reading

2.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- *learn* about the play *Agra Bazar*;
- *understand* the themes and techniques of the play;
- *analyze* the play critically;
- *understand* Tanvir's style of dramatic compositions.

2.2 Introduction

The play *Agra Bazar* was conceived by Habib Tanvir in 1954 when he was asked to write a play for the observance of Nazir Day at Jamia Millia Islamia. Nazir Akbarabadi, the poet celebrated on this occasion, fascinated Tanvir due to the socially relevant themes and poignant images of society reflected in his poetry. Nazir's works stood in contrast to the Urdu literary tradition, which typically celebrated stalwarts like Mir and Ghalib. While these canonical figures were central to the literary elite, Nazir's poetry resonated with the common people, maintaining a legacy in oral traditions despite being marginalized in formal Urdu literary history.

Nazir's poetry was characterized by its colloquial Hindustani language, which breathed fresh life into Urdu poetry by rejecting the hackneyed idioms of his contemporaries. His themes were rooted in the lives of ordinary people, celebrating their resilience and humanity. Mendicants, vendors, and others from the working class would sing his verses, preserving his work as part of their lived culture. Despite his appeal among the masses, Nazir remained neglected by elite and educated circles, who failed to acknowledge his literary significance. In the play, you may take note of the impressions of Nazir from the two contrasting social worlds represented by the characters of Kite-seller and Book-seller.

Nazir lived through a tumultuous historical period, particularly in the early 19th century. By 1810, when he was 75, the Mughal regime was in decline, and British colonial rule was ascending, leading to widespread political anarchy and economic deterioration. This transition had a profound impact on the lives of common people, whose struggles and humanity Nazir captured in his work. His poetry became a socio-historical archive of sorts, offering glimpses into the lived experiences of people during this transformative era.

Tanvir chose not to present Nazir Akbarabadi as a biographical figure in the play. Instead, he highlighted Nazir's vibrancy, humanism, and connection with the common people, avoiding the mysticism that sometimes-surrounded Nazir's persona. This decision aligned with Tanvir's goal to explore the intersection of the literary and political worlds through Nazir's work. By focusing on Nazir's poetic themes and the socio-historical contexts embedded within them, Tanvir reconstructed an imaginative yet grounded vision of Nazir's world.

The characters in *Agra Bazar*—such as the Potter, the Kite Seller, and others—were drawn directly from Nazir's poetry, reflecting his celebration of everyday life. The bazaar setting served as a microcosm of society, showcasing its vibrancy and the struggles of ordinary people. This theatrical choice emphasized Nazir's love for the common people and their resilience in the face of adversity.

Tanvir wrote the play in just a week, integrating Nazir's poetry seamlessly into the script. The production was an ambitious project

involving 75 performers, including Jamia Millia Islamia staff and residents of nearby villages. The play was performed on an open stage, enhancing its accessibility and reflecting Nazir's connection to ordinary people. This unique blend of professional and amateur performers, along with the play's focus on everyday themes, made *Agra Bazar* a ground-breaking experiment in Indian theater.

Stop to Consider:

The first production of *Agra Bazar* was remarkable in a particular dimension. The creation of the ambience of a marketplace was captivating. It is because of the abolition of a boundary of 'theatrical space' through the performance of the 'real' characters themselves. Tanvir's brilliance lies in his use of the non-actors to create an authentic air of actuality on stage. As Tanvir writes: "Jamia's real paan-seller in the role of Paanwala, the real tailor in the role of the Tailor, and the silent presence of a donkey in front of the potter's shop throughout the play was very effective. An addition to the realistic atmosphere of the performance was provided by the quiet and patient donkey who produced a whole lot of dung on stage. Now the stage had both the colours and the smell of a traditional bazaar." (Tanvir *Charandas chor* 21)

2.3 What Happens in *Agra Bazar*

2.3.1 Scene I

The play is set around 1810 AD in a busy intersection of Kinari Bazar in Agra, with the location remaining fixed throughout. Before the curtain rises, two Fakirs (mendicants) enter, singing a song that hints at the economic distress of the time, with businesses struggling to survive.

As the curtain rises, various vendors—the Laddoo-seller, the Melon-seller, the Kakri-seller, the Ear-cleaner, the Paan-seller, and others—clamour to attract customers to their wares. Petty disputes arise among them, with the Kakri-seller and the Laddoo-seller quickly engaging in a quarrel over their business spots. The arrival of the Madari, a street performer with a monkey, further escalates the situation. When the Kakri-seller's loud calls threaten to divert attention from the monkey show, the Madari reacts angrily, leading

to another round of verbal conflict. The Madari eventually leaves in frustration.

The Fakirs, acting as a chorus throughout the play, return with another song that reflects on the chaos and conflicts as a manifestation of the broader struggle for survival. Meanwhile, the vendors attempt to outdo each other with creative methods to attract customers. The Chana-seller's poetic style catches the attention of the Kakri-seller, who becomes curious about his secret strategy to boost business. This curiosity sparks tension among the vendors, who demand to know the Chana-seller's 'clever idea.' The situation turns chaotic as tempers flare, and a few urchins seize the opportunity to steal from the vendors, worsening the commotion.

The Fakirs return once again, singing about how poverty lies at the root of these struggles and conflicts. In the midst of this turmoil, the Kakri-seller seeks out a passer-by to ask if he can write poetry. This leads to the entrance of the Poet, whom the Kakri-seller approaches with a request to compose verses about his kakris to help him hawk them more effectively. The Poet listens but responds with sardonic remarks that hurt the Kakri-seller, who accuses him of mocking a poor man's plight, saying, "You are making fun of a poor man, sir" (Tanvir 51). The other vendors join in mocking the Kakri-seller, adding to his humiliation.

The Poet, the Book-seller, and the Companion begin discussing Mir's poetry and his remarkable creative power. However, their conversation quickly veers from genuine literary discussion to an exchange of flattery. As the Poet and the Book-seller engage in mutual praise, the Companion interrupts, commenting, "You are both being modest." The Fakirs then interject with a melodic song, highlighting the pervasive theme of flattery—a practice that dominates religion, politics, literature, and other spheres of life.

The conversation at the bookshop shifts to the brawl that had occurred earlier in the marketplace. Against the backdrop of such everyday conflicts and clashes, the question of poetry's role and its representational scope is raised. The Book-seller and the Poet defend the refined literary culture and elevated taste embodied by poets like Mir. The Companion, however, critiques the narrow focus of dominant genres like the *ghazal*.

When the Kakri-seller persistently pleads with the Poet to compose verses about his kakris to improve sales, the Poet reacts with outrage. Dismissing the request, he declares, "I don't want to pollute my speech by talking to riff-raff" (Tanvir 56).

The Book-seller finds himself gripped by a crisis, lamenting the lack of customers. Book publication in Urdu has become unprofitable, prompting musings about relocating the business to Delhi.

A group of villagers enters, singing about Baladevji's fair. At the same time, a group of Sikh devotees approaches from the opposite direction, singing hymns of Guru Nanak. Tensions rise, and they come close to rioting, but eventually, everyone bows before a portrait of Guru Nanak, diffusing the situation peacefully.

Next, the courtesan Benazir and her suitor, the Rake, appear. In a brief yet lively scene, the Rake pleads with her for intimate company, creating a moment of romantic levity. This is followed by a return to discussions of literature at the Book-shop. The group laments the increasing vulgarity in contemporary literature, identifying Nazir as a representative of this new trend. The Kakri-seller's persistent demand for poems about his kakri becomes an example of the perceived vulgar tastes gaining popularity. A bystander dismisses the Kakri-seller, further highlighting this divide between high and low culture.

Meanwhile, a celebration takes place at the Potter's shop to mark the birth of his newborn baby. The scene is vibrant, with the Potter initiating a song about his craft. Eunuchs join in, singing about Lord Krishna's childhood pranks. However, the celebration is abruptly interrupted when the Constable arrives. The crowd quickly disperses, and the shopkeepers return to minding their businesses.

The Constable, investigating the earlier conflict, questions the Book-seller. In an appeasing tone, the Book-seller blames the brawl on the "low caste" street vendors, singling out the Kakri-seller as the primary culprit. After instructing all the vendors to report to the police station, the Constable grabs a melon without paying for it and leaves.

Nazir's granddaughter, referred to as "the Girl," arrives at a grocer's shop to buy mango pickle. Through the Grocer's words, we gain

insight into Nazir's significance as a poet in a time of crisis and corruption. The *Tazkiranawis* offers a dual perspective on Nazir: he praises him as "a human being unparalleled in the world" but criticizes his poetry as vulgar and nonsensical in rhythm.

The Girl leaves but soon returns to return the pickle, revealing that it contains a dead rat. She hands the Grocer one of Nazir's humorous poems, *Rat Pickle*, which elicits laughter from the onlookers.

As evening approaches, activity enlivens Benazir's chamber. Before her guests, she sings one of Nazir's songs, revealing her own deep admiration and concern for the poet. The Constable arrives, seeking her intimate company, but Benazir refuses. This refusal sparks a rivalry between the Constable and the Rake. Before leaving, the Constable summons the Kakri-seller to the police station and imposes a fine.

Meanwhile, the Poet and the Book-seller engage in monetary negotiations. The Poet requests an advance payment, but the Book-seller advises him to seek the support of a patron instead. The Fakirs enter with a song reflecting on the centrality of money in contemporary life. The Kakri-seller, overhearing their song, is captivated and plans to enlist their help to compose songs about his wares. However, the Fakirs leave before he can approach them.

Check Your Progress

From the sequence of events mentioned, observe how *Agra Bazar* portrays the marketplace as an allegory for a society marked by class divisions and conflicts.

2.3.2 Scene II

The scene begins with the Fakirs entering the auditorium, mirroring the play's opening. Their song carries a profound philosophical message, reflecting on the transience of life and the inevitability of death. Addressed to the 'big trader,' the song critiques the relentless pursuit of wealth and possessions. The setting shifts to early morning as vendors begin opening their shops. The Kakri-seller, having heard that the police patrolled the market to arrest him, laments his dire financial struggles. In a moment of desperation, he

offers to court arrest, reasoning that at least in the lockup, he would be spared from starvation. Meanwhile, the Book-seller, burdened by debt, avoids any interaction with his creditor, Choudhary Ganga Prasad. Another character, the Kite-seller, returns from the swimming festival at the river Jamuna only to discover that a fine has been imposed on his shop as well.

The Poet, following advice to seek a patron, approaches Choudhary Ganga Prasad. However, Ganga Prasad declines to sponsor the Poet's book. It is revealed that the Book-seller has yet to settle an old account with the patron, while the Poet himself is also indebted to him.

The Kite-seller enters, cheerful and humming a song, congratulating the Potter on becoming a father to a newborn baby. He shares details about the swimming festival, describing how countless people waded through the river with birds perched on their heads.

When it is mentioned that Nazir also attended the festival, the Book-seller and the Tazkiranawis criticize his moral depravity and vulgar taste, accusing him of going to watch 'semi-naked mermaids.' The Companion, however, counters their judgment by highlighting the festival's splendid poetic ambiance.

The Poet, in turn, mocks the song of the festival, leading the conversation to shift toward whether swimming can be considered a proper subject for poetry. As the debate continues, the Kakri-seller and the Laddoo-seller nearly quarrel over the location of their businesses but halt abruptly when they notice policemen near the paan-shop.

Hamid, a young boy, enters the Kite-seller's shop and buys a kite. When asked to sing a song by a classical poet, he performs a ghazal by Nazir. Despite his usual dismissal of Nazir as a poet, the Book-seller begrudgingly acknowledges the composition's quality. Tazkiranawis then quotes a specimen of 'great poetry,' and the Poet recites lines from Insha's work. The Companion, however, defends Nazir's merit, arguing that he is no lesser a poet. A debate ensues over the criteria of poetic excellence, with the Companion advocating for 'truth and fire' as the hallmark of grandeur, while others emphasize rhythm and beauty. When Hamid sings the song of the swimming fair, the repeated performances of Nazir's

compositions irritate Tazkiranawis, prompting him to leave. Passers-by gather to hear Hamid sing, further annoying the Book-seller, who disperses the crowd in anger. In the ensuing silence, the Kakri-seller's calls to customers add to his irritation, causing the literary circle to leave. The Kite-seller then takes Hamid to his shop, where, at his request, Hamid resumes the song of the swimming fair, drawing another crowd around the Kite-seller's shop.

Meanwhile, a blind beggar enters and sings another of Nazir's songs, delivering a heartfelt message and prayer for universal happiness and prosperity. The emotional tone of the supplication moves one of the listeners to tears. This man, shabbily dressed and destitute, is revealed to be Manjoor Hussain, once a renowned horse dealer in Agra. Through the crowd's conversation, we learn more about Manjoor's tragic fall from grace. Once a wealthy and jovial merchant, he became impoverished after being robbed and has since been silent for a year, consumed by the pangs of lost love. As his story unfolds, it is revealed that Manjoor was once accidentally struck with a whip by Nazir. In a gesture of remorse, Nazir offered him the chance to strike him back, but the incident left Manjoor guilt-ridden, and a deep friendship grew between them. This poignant narrative is interrupted by revelers entering the scene, singing a festive Holi song that shifts the atmosphere from tragedy to jubilation.

At this moment, the play highlights the unique power of Nazir's poetry, deeply rooted in the everyday speech of common people. The Kite-seller recounts an anecdote about a scholar teaching his disciple the art of poetry, illustrating how the most ordinary conversations can be profoundly artistic and poetic—challenging the elitist notion that poetry must stem from a refined, detached language. This serves to underline the accessibility and beauty of Nazir's work, which resonates with the lives and voices of everyday people. Finally, when requested again, Hamid sings an autobiographical song by Nazir. Although the poet himself does not appear in the play, the song reflects his humility, poverty, and simple yet dignified life: "God to him was very kind, and though he had no luxury/His basic needs were always met, and he lived with dignity" (93). This final performance underscores Nazir's contentment and grace, leaving a lasting impression on the audience.

Two cops approach the paan-shop, intending to arrest the Rake as directed by the Constable. Meanwhile, the Madari enters the scene, performing with a bear to entertain the crowd.

The Girl reappears, revealing Nazir's disdain for money through her words. The Kite-seller reinforces this idea by recounting a story about how a bagful of money sent by Nawab Saadat Ali Khan kept the poet awake all night. Shortly after, the Kakri-seller arrives, eagerly inquiring about Nazir's address. The Kite-seller provides the information, and the Kakri-seller hurries off, excited at the prospect of meeting the poet.

The Book-seller grows increasingly irritated by the Kite-seller's remarks about how Nazir sees no difference between a Kite-seller and a Book-seller. His frustration deepens when a customer inquires about a new writer's book of poetry, but his exasperation only draws loud laughter from the crowd.

Ganga Prasad then enters, expressing his disappointment with the Book-seller for sending the Poet to request financial support for publishing his book. Observing a decline in the market for Urdu and Persian books, Ganga Prasad shares his plan to launch an English newspaper from Delhi. He even suggests that the Book-seller work for the newspaper from Agra, marking a pragmatic shift in priorities.

The Book-seller expresses his desire to publish a few books but laments his lack of funds to invest. It is revealed that the recent publication of *Diwan-e-Hafiz* failed to sell, resulting in financial losses for both him and Ganga Prasad. Disheartened, Ganga Prasad exits the scene.

The cops arrest the Rake upon his return from Benazir's brothel, accusing him of instigating a riot. However, it is evident that the charges are false and part of the Constable's scheme to settle a personal grudge over an earlier incident at Benazir's chamber.

The arrest sparks mixed reactions among the vendors. The Potter insists that the police have apprehended the wrong person, while the Laddoo-seller and the Melon-seller disagree. Amid this commotion, the Kakri-seller enters, his face beaming as he sings a lively song promoting his kakri, attracting customers. Inspired, the Melon-seller

and the Laddoo-seller also begin singing about their respective wares, adding a vibrant and bustling energy to the marketplace.

The Constable enters and heads straight to Benazir's residence, making it evident that the Rake's arrest was orchestrated at his behest. Benazir, prepared to welcome him, offers to serve him *paan*. However, finding the *paandan* empty, Manzoor Hussain volunteers to buy *paan* for the Constable himself. It is revealed that Benazir is, in fact, Manzoor Hussain's beloved. Through her words, we learn that Manzoor embraced mendicancy, humility, and silence out of a profound and selfless love for her, transcending jealousy and possessiveness.

Manzoor Hussain soon returns with the *paans*. As he departs, the Constable bursts into laughter, his demeanor mocking and dismissive. In the closing moments of the play, the Fakirs enter, singing a soulful song about the essence of humanity. They are joined by the actors, uniting in a poignant and reflective finale.

Check Your Progress

1. Explain how the Constable orchestrates the arrest of the Rake and his actions at Benazir's residence.
2. Describe the transformation of Manzoor Hussain's character as revealed by Benazir and how it reflects the themes of love and humility in the play.

2.4 Critical Reading of the Play

One of the most popular plays by Habib Tanvir, *Agra Bazar*, was a crucial landmark both for the playwright and in the trajectory of modern Indian drama. As we have discussed, the staging of the play resonates with its theme of representing the lives of the underprivileged in contrast to the narrow worldview of the literate elites of Agra. In its first performance, Tanvir brought together both trained artists and folk performers, as well as untrained individuals from the streets. While Tanvir's experiment with Chhattisgarhi folk artists remained a significant aspect of his Naya Theatre, the play

itself presents the everyday lives of unlettered street vendors in all their contradictions, voices, aspirations, and crises. The opening of the play reveals the urban space of the city of Agra, with vendors calling out to customers in their distinctive styles. The externality of the urban space, the cries of the vendors, and the dynamics of their relationships with the more privileged people at the bookshop are what the play depicts. There is less of an epic narrative unfolding, but the play has its moments of dramatic tension and emotional texture.

The use of the Fakirs as a chorus is one of the remarkable aspects of the play. The Fakirs lend structure to the dramatic situations, but more importantly, they intervene in the action through commentary. It is through the Fakirs that the playwright provides a perspective for assessing the incidents and the behavior of the characters in *Agra Bazar*. Notice the beginning of the play, where vendors clamor to sell their wares and quarrel over what seem to be petty issues. It is the Fakirs who establish order within this cacophony, explaining that the clashes among the street people are manifestations of their struggle for survival during a time of crisis and business slumps.

This is not a lifeless or arid vision of everyday life, nor is it a bleak view of human nature. As the vendors jostle to outwit each other with their inventive ways of wooing customers, the Kakri-seller becomes attracted to the poetic style of the Chana-seller, creating a comic uproar. Inspired, the Kakri-seller begins toying with the idea of attracting buyers with songs about his cucumbers, a notion he keeps secret from the other vendors. Throughout the play, he is seen searching for a potential composer to write poems on cucumbers. This playful endeavor inevitably leads the narrative towards the historical figure of Nazir Akbarabadi, known as the "father of the Nazm" and one of the first poets to write in Hindustani. While the play is centered around Nazir, he does not appear as an onstage character but rather as an absent presence, conveyed through songs, poems, anecdotes, and memories. The focus is less on Nazir's biographical self and more on the ideas and values he championed through his life and poetry. The central conflict of the play—the opposing claims about art and poetry, tied to the contrasting social worlds of the vendors and the literate elites at the bookshop—is unified through the figure of Nazir, whose absent presence permeates the narrative through songs and celebrations. This

conflict begins to emerge prominently when the Kakri-seller asks the poet to compose poems about his cucumbers, only to be met with a sardonic refusal that deeply hurts the vendor.

Again, it is the intervention of the Fakirs that sustains the vision of this central contradiction. The literate elite circles at the bookshop, engaged in literary discourse detached from the cacophony of everyday life, are revealed to be a group of mutual flatterers, as illustrated by the Companion's curt yet witty comment: "You are being modest, sir." The Fakirs' song further underscores this aspect of the privileged circles in Agra:

The social roots of art and poetry, extensively addressed in the play, become clear: two distinct social worlds are juxtaposed in the marketplace—the upper-middle-class circle at the bookshop and the 'low life' of the street vendors clamoring to sell their goods. This contrast is emphasized by the persistent disdain of the elites for the lower classes. They dismissively discuss the "brawl happening among some low-caste persons." The most appalling instance of this disdain occurs when Tazkiranawis scorns the Kakri-seller's request for a poem about cucumbers. He refuses even to 'pollute' his tongue by speaking to the vendor. The use of the word "pollution" here symbolizes the elitist notion of preserving the so-called purity of high poetry and the determination to maintain an unbroken tradition of high literary culture, untainted by the "debased" language of everyday life. This class-based prejudice is reflected in the attitudes of the Book-seller and the Poet toward both the street vendors and Nazir's poetry.

The cultural traditions of the lower-class people, often disdained as vulgar and impure, are, in fact, diverse, harmonious, and teeming with life. In one scene, Hindu and Sikh devotees enter the marketplace with their distinctive songs. Initially, their songs seem to clash, but eventually, everyone bows before the portrait of Guru Nanak and departs peacefully. The Hindus singing of Baladevji's fair and the Sikhs praising Guru Nanak create a vivid picture of cultural and religious diversity and integrity. Though brief, this scene has a profound effect on the audience, illustrating how the diversity of everyday life sustains an ethical principle of unity.

It is no surprise that the people at the bookshop find the Kakri-seller's search for a poet ludicrous. Their apathy toward the needs of the social 'other' reflects their resentment toward the democratizing impulse of art. One of the key issues highlighted in this play is the status and function of art in a class-divided society. The dichotomy presented is clear: the contrasting domains of poetic practice in elite circles versus among the broader masses. The Poet and the Book-seller inhabit a secluded realm of high art, canonizing classical poets and repudiating the artistic and cultural practices rooted in the everyday lives of common people. This aversion to broad, democratic cultural-aesthetic practices underscores the class prejudices of the cultural elites. In contrast, Nazir's poetry permeates every nook and corner of people's lives. A courtesan sings his song fervently; a beggar sings his song with spontaneous gaiety; even Hamid, the young boy, sings Nazir's *ghazal*, a genre highly respected among the elites. While his poetry is rich with images and metaphors drawn from everyday language, the anecdote of the scholar teaching the art of expression to his disciple highlights the beauty and richness of this common language. This connection to the everyday is a key source of strength in Nazir's poetry, bridging the divide between art and life.

The play vividly portrays the everyday lives of the people on the street, marked by both crises and festivities. The rhythm of life, already strained by the deep financial crisis gripping society, is further disrupted by state interference, embodied by the Constable. The Constable levies unjust fines for the riot and arrests the wrong person to settle personal grudges. In a poignant moment, the Kakri-seller, upon learning that the Policeman intends to arrest him, willingly offers to surrender, saying: “.”

Amidst these challenges, there are also moments of mirth and celebration. The community gathers at the Potter's shop to rejoice in the birth of a baby. The Potter sings about his pots, followed by the eunuch's lively song recounting Krishna's childhood pranks. The Kite-seller adds to the festivity with a vivid description of people participating in the swimming fair at the Jamuna, a scene that might scandalize the self-righteous elite but is, in fact, a joyous celebration of life. While people quarrel over their business spots or their tricks to attract customers, reconciliation comes just as spontaneously and

instinctively, showcasing the resilience and vitality of the street vendors' world.

As previously mentioned, the play revolves around the figure of Nazir, who never appears on stage. A notable reference to Nazir occurs when his granddaughter—the Girl—enters and buys mango pickle for her grandfather. Nazir's significance as a poet during a time of crisis is underscored by the Grocer's words. He elicits contrasting responses from the lower classes and the elites: while he is widely celebrated among the common people in their daily lives through his diverse compositions, the bookshop circle is, at best, ambivalent and, at worst, disdainful toward him. They appreciate Nazir as a human being but dismiss him as a poet, accusing his work of vulgarity and poor taste. His poem on "rat-pickle" evokes laughter, while his song about the swimming fair is resented. Even more scandalous to the self-righteous elites is the courtesan's celebration of Nazir's poetry. This dynamic highlights the clash of two cultural paradigms within the marketplace: the principle of aestheticism upheld by the elites opposes the vibrant, broad-based culture of the common people that reflects their struggles and aspirations. The Kakri-seller's plea for a poem about his cucumber is ridiculed by those who, ironically, are themselves engaged in monetary negotiations surrounding the "high art" they claim to uphold. The murky business dealings between the Poet and the Bookseller expose the hypocrisy behind their façade of refined poetry. This tension is further compounded by the financial crisis, which affects both social worlds and intensifies the contestation between them.

Beyond highlighting social disparities, the playwright, through the figure of Nazir, upholds the principles of humanity and love for common people. This is most evident in the episode of Manzoor Hussain. Once a fun-loving and sociable personality, Manzoor is transformed into a poor, solitary soul who barely speaks. A tragic figure, his change in fortune is linked to a failed love affair in the suggested prehistory of the character. Amidst his personal suffering and the challenges of life, an incident involving Nazir stands out as a profound example of humanity. Nazir, deeply regretting having unintentionally wronged Manzoor, offers to let him retaliate by whipping him back. This act of remorse deeply moves Manzoor, and the two ultimately become good friends. In a world dominated

by materialism, Nazir's anti-materialistic stance, liberalism, humility, and humanism are not only ideals but also principles articulated and practiced through his songs. One of Hamid's numbers features Nazir's autobiographical song, where he candidly reveals his life of poverty and ordinariness, further emphasizing his connection to the struggles and aspirations of the common people.

Check Your Progress

- Discuss the Akbarabadi's "absent presence" of Nazir Akbarabadi in the play. How is the figure of Nazir linked to the themes of the play?
- How does *Agra Bazar* balance its critique of the literate elites with its sympathies for the struggles and aspirations of the poor working people in the marketplace?

2.5 Summing Up

Agra Bazar by Habib Tanvir is a seminal play that intricately weaves the everyday lives of common people with profound social and cultural critiques. Set in the bustling marketplace of Agra, the play juxtaposes the vibrancy of the lower classes with the elitist detachment of the literate circle at the bookshop. The marketplace is a microcosm of social disparity, where street vendors, marked by their struggles and aspirations, clash with the rigid aestheticism of the elite. Through the figure of Nazir Akbarabadi—absent yet omnipresent—the play underscores the enduring value of poetry rooted in the lives of ordinary people. Nazir's songs, anecdotes, and values permeate the narrative, celebrating humanity, inclusivity, and resistance to class prejudices.

Scenes I and II depict the rhythm of everyday life in the marketplace, marked by financial crises, state interference, quarrels, and reconciliation. While the elite circle dismisses Nazir's poetry as vulgar, the common people embrace it with joy and fervor, reflecting the contestation between two cultural paradigms. The play also highlights Nazir's humanism, evident in his remorse for wronging Manzoor Hussain and his anti-materialistic ethos.

Ultimately, *Agra Bazar* celebrates the democratizing impulse of art and the resilience of people's culture, offering a vibrant critique of societal inequalities.

2.6 References and Suggested Reading

Alam, Md Khursheed. "Foregrounding the Folk Ethos in Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor*". *International Journal of English Research*, vol. 6, no. 5, 2020, pp. 01-03. <https://www.englishjournals.com/assets/archives/2020/vol6issue5/6-5-11-854.pdf>

Kumari, Vandana. "Ideology in the Selected Plays of Habib Tanvir". *Representing the Concept of ideology and its Implications in the plays of Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt and Habib Tanvir*. PhD Thesis, Shri Jagdishprasad Jhabarmal Tibarewala University, 2021, pp. 101-167.

Matthews, Meera. "Habib Tanvir and the Process of Experimentation: A Select Study". *Experimentation in Post-Independence Indian Drama: A Study of the Select Plays of Habib Tanvir*, K.N. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam. PhD Thesis, Pondicherry University, 2017, pp. 42-71.

Tanvir, Habib. *Agra Bazar*. Translated by Javed Malick, *Charandas Chor and Other Plays*. Seagull Books, 2018.

xxx

UNIT- 3

DARIO FO: ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST

Unit Structure:

3.1 Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Dario Fo: A Literary Bio-brief

3.4 Context of the Play

3.5 Plot Overview

3.6 Composition and Production History

3.7 Critical Reception of the Play

3.8 Summing Up

3.9 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives

In this unit, you will be introduced to a political farce written by Italian playwright, Dario Fo .By the end of this unit, you should be able to—

- *familiarize* yourself with Dario Fo as a playwright and his works;
- *identify* the major themes of Fo's plays;
- *read* each act and the development of themes throughout each act;
- *visualize* the social commentary on Italian politics provided by the playwright;
- *understand* the power of performance and oral storytelling as used by Fo;
- *follow* the development of the characters.

3.2 Introduction

Accidental Death of an Anarchist, originally written in Italian, was published in 1970. The narrative of the play revolves around the actual occurrences of December 12, 1969, at the Piazza Fontana in Milan which resulted in the mysterious death of Giuseppe Pinelli, a Milanese railway worker. The fact that he uses folk and oral traditions, to bring about a commentary of society earned him a lot of accolades in the field of theatre. The main elements of the play that makes it unique are the use of farce and slapstick comedy by Fo which appeals to a wide range of people. In the Postscript to the play, Fo states how he was asked to write a full length piece on the Milan bombings, and the political motives and consequences of these events. The play serves rightly as a sharp political commentary on the Italian political establishment. As a satirist, his works were majorly aimed at educating the minority groups including workers, women etc. and made use of theatre as a medium to do so. He did it by employing the elements of folk narratives and the rich cultural traditions of communities and bring about a retribution for the downtrodden communities. While talking about the political activism of Fo, Scuderi states, “Validating and ennobling folk culture has been a great part of Fo’s mission and of the overall *raison d’être* of his theatre” (Scuderi 67). Fo was a famous name in the world of theatre since a long time with his commercial plays bringing him large audiences and accolades. However he wanted to write plays that brought about change and reflected on the nature of the society of the time and this gave birth to his new left-wing theatre company, *La Comune*, whereby he tried to perform to audiences with a more radical potential.

The script of the play underwent significant revisions from its initial version, as Fo aimed to stay current with the developments in the Pinelli case. Between 1970 and 1972, he updated the script to reflect the ongoing trial of the policemen involved in the case. The hearings of the case provided him with the dialogues that were to be introduced. Despite these changes, the core essence of the play remained intact. The play’s premiere coincided with the first anniversary of Guiseppe Pinelli’s death, which helped it to become an important intervention in the public debate surrounding the idea of power and corruption within bureaucracy.

3.3 Dario Fo : Literary Overview

Born on 24 March 1926 in San Giano, Dario Fo was an Italian avant-garde playwright, who went on to receive the Nobel prize for literature in 1997 for his immense contribution to the field of theatre. His childhood was spent amidst the community of glass blowers and smugglers, where the popular folk narrative and the art of storytelling was alive and running in full swing. This storytelling tradition was majorly dedicated towards a sharp criticism of the authorities and people in power. Fo is credited with authoring around 80 plays. All of these were co-authored by his wife Franca Rame. Coming from a family of traveling players, she had established for herself a good reputation in the theatre world from a young age. *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (1970; *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*) and *Non sipaga, non sipaga!* (1974; *We Can't Pay? We Won't Pay!*) are some of Fo's most popular plays. Some of his later works, which he co-authored with Rame include, *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (1978; "All House, Bed, and Church"; Eng. trans. *Adult Orgasm Escapes from the Zoo*), *Clacson, trombette, e pernacchi* (1981; *Trumpets and Raspberries*), *Female Parts* (1981), *Coppiaaperta* (1983) and many more. His works make rampant use of the Italian style of *Commedia dell'arte* with the help of which he brings about a commentary of the proletariat classes. Fo was so deeply involved in the political scene of Italy that he began targeting his plays towards the working-class audiences instead of the typical theatregoers. According to writer Tom Behan, the gravity of Fo's success is due to "his commitment to giving the working class a voice, a voice which is infinitely louder and richer than that of the establishment" (2000 4).

Commedia as a form of art grew substantially in the carnivals following the Middle Ages and then according to Rudlin, later during the sixteenth century in Italy, actors took pre-existing folk forms, improvised masking, music and dance and developed them into a theatrical medium. In 1959, he along with his wife Rame founded the *Compagnia Dario Fo-Franca Rame* (Dario Fo-Franca Rame Theater Company) and then during the later years two others namely the *Associazione Nuova Scena* theater collective and *Collettivo Teatrale La Commune* respectively. Both of them faced wide ranging censorship from the state due to their sharp edged critical commentary of the state which led to the couple being

banned from Italian entertainment industry for more than a decade. The most outrageous of all of these acts was his wife's kidnapping and subsequent rape by a group of Neo-fascists in 1973.

In spite of this ordeal both of them went on to actively work in producing theatre meant to educate the masses and agitate them to take action about the ordeals faced by them. In Spite of the injustice meted out on her body, Franca Rame came out strong and at a later point scripted and even performed in an autobiographical monologue about her traumatic experiences titled *I Don't Move, I Don't Scream, My Voice is Gone*.

3.4 Context of the Play

The play took shape from the events happening in Italy in 1960 throughout the 1980s involving the working class struggle commonly referred to as 'Hot Autumn' of 1969. Following the strikes and the general unrest and public outrage, an incident involving the death of a police official led to a lot of tensions in the state. Subsequently, on December 12, 1969, a bomb exploded at the Piazza Fontana in Milan, killing 17 people and injuring many others. In the aftermath of the bombing, Guisepe Pinelli was detained by the police for questioning as a suspect in the bombing. This was followed by Pinelli's fall from a window of the police headquarters in Milan. In their attempt to avoid more scandal and public outrage the police tried to cover up the death and concocted a story stating that his death was a suicide attempt as a result of his guilt over the bombings. In the meantime the police officer Calabressi, who was implicated as the murderer by the left wing newspaper, *Lotta Continua*, sued that publication for libel. The proceedings of the case and the outrage that followed provided Fo with enough materials to write up a satire meant to critique the state and its unlawful activities. Describing it as his attempt at providing facts and out ruling misinformation he adjusted the script according to the court proceedings. In one of his interviews Fo states, "Using authentic documents and complete transcripts of the investigations carried out by the various judges as well as police reports - we turned the logic and the truth of the facts on head. But the great and provocative impact of this play was determined by its theatrical

form: rooted in tragedy, the play became farce - the farce of power.”
(Fo)

The power of the play lies in the fact that it still has a universal appeal transcending languages and borders. The play stands as a testament to unrest and violence which is the reason for its many translations and adaptations across the world. Fo’s tactic of using absurdity and humour to expose the contradictions and injustices within the Italian justice system works well because satire appeals to the masses laying bare their inhibitions and setting them to action. In this manner his play is not just a political activity but a dialogue involving the ideas of performance and power to bring about change in the society. According to author Ron Jenkins “Fo has developed a modern style of epic performance that speaks to his audience with the immediacy of a newspaper editorial, shifts perspectives with the fluidity of cinematic montage, and pulsates with the rhythmic drive of a jazz improvisation” (173).

3.5 Plot Overview

The play looks at the police corruption rampant in Italy in the 1960s and early 1980s and the suspicions of the government's involvement in the. Additionally, it explores the death of an anarchist who was being held in the police headquarters following the bombing of the Milan bank which lead to the death of around 17 people and wounded around 100 others. The action of the play takes place at the Central Police Headquarters in Milan. The main characters in the play consist of Inspector Bertozzo, the Maniac, Inspector Pissani (Commissariosportivo, portraying the most prominent of the policemen in the real incident), one Superintendent (Questore), two Constables, and a female journalist (Giornalista) named Felletti.

The entire crust of the play is centered around “notorious following a sordid little incident a few weeks ago when an anarchist, under interrogation in a similar room a few floors above, fell through the window” (Fo 1). The character of Inspector Pissani is based on Fo’s satirical representation of Commissario Luigi Calabresi who brought the case to limelight by charging a suo moto against the ideas that we're floating around him having something to do with the anarchist's death. He was the chief interrogating officer implicated

in Pinelli's death. This is followed by the entry of the maniac who forces the police authorities to admit the murder of the anarchist in their custody. The maniac represents the figure of the *giullare*, who is an archetype of the typical "clown". According to author and artistic director, John Townsen as quoted in his most famous work *Clowns*, the jester was not a figure invented by a single individual or a product of Western civilisation but has been perpetually rediscovered by society because - as fool, jester, and trickster to meets compelling human needs. The Italian tradition of employing the juggler arose from the figure of the *guillare*, the strolling medieval performer who went around entertaining the peasants of Europe. His tricks comprised of the comic tricks and talents of a clown combined with the masterful artistry of a magician and the "physical prowess of the tumbler, juggler, and ropedancer" (Mitchell 47). However in the present times the circus clown has unfortunately, for the most part, "lost its provocative-subversive import and has been reduced to entertaining children with puerile simple-mindedness" (Manuale 265)

According to Scuderi, Fo's comedy comprehends those principles identified and expounded by M.M. Bakhtin " folk laughter, the saturnalian spirit, and the carnivalesque" (271). In the play, much of the comic principle arises from the Maniac's use of the carnivalesque and cross-dressing to expose the hypocritical and self-serving techniques of those in power, where an innocent man is put to death without any objection .The main idea was to ensure that the audience kept laughing while also objectively seeing through the injustices and hypocrisy that lay within the system. In one of his interviews he was quoted as stating "I do the same thing as a clown. I just put some drops of absurdity in this calm and tranquil liquid which is society, and the reactions reveal things that were hidden before the absurdity brought them into the open" (Fo as cited in Malick, 2016).

While commenting on the use of the Maniac as a central character, Fo states "I realized we needed a decoy character, a surety, so to speak. And then I got the idea that this surety could be a madman who holds the key to all the madness, and he becomes normal, while everything else is abnormal. A total reversal. Another important thing we noticed in explanations of the story was indignation. We realised that indignation is really a means of catharsis, liberation and

letting off steam. This became central... The play was conceived in a grotesque style to avoid any dramatic catharsis” (Fo 1970)

The narrative begins with Inspector Bertozzo and a constable discussing the Maniac, who is being charged for the twelfth time with impersonation. The charges faced by him stem from his repeated attempts to deceive people by posing as various professionals, including a psychiatrist. His impersonation is representative of the trend of left wing groups in Italy infiltrating the ranks of police headquarters with the aim of divulging hidden information. Despite the gravity of his offenses, the Maniac employs clever and dim witted banter to defend himself, highlighting his adeptness at manipulation. During the interaction, he not only rummages through some arrest files but also audaciously answers a call from another inspector on the fourth floor. This opening sequence is crucial as it introduces the Maniac's character and sets the stage for the play's exploration of themes such as authority, deception, and the subversion of institutional power. By using humor and wit, Fo critiques the absurdity and corruption within the police forces.

The act progresses to show the maniac impersonating a judge and conducting the investigation himself. He acts out as the Counsel to the High court and goes on to interview both the superintendent and the Inspector asking them to recreate the events of that night which led to the death of the suspected anarchist. He then convinces the policemen to “construct a new version of events which will win them public sympathy, and which involves singing an anarchist song to prove how well disposed they were to the suspect” (Mitchell 362). As the play progresses, the Maniac adeptly coerces the policemen into acknowledging their role in covering up the circumstances surrounding the anarchist's death. As the Maniac continues questioning them, they begin to contradict themselves on many grounds, such as jumbling up the precise time of the anarchist's “raptus”. At one point the Constable Pissani goes on to admit that “We invented it ...our job is to interrogate suspects and we might be required to employ a few intimidating tactics...Er deception strategy” (Fo 27-29) . Through a series of strategic questioning and psychological tactics, he exposes the inconsistencies in their versions and forces them to admit their responsibility in causing the anarchist's death. As the act ends the

policemen are shown confused and perplexed at the tight spot the Maniac has driven them into, as they sing an anarchist song in chorus with the Maniac. Dario Fo thus employs the character of the Maniac as a subversive narrative device in the play to deconstruct official version of events and highlight the absurdity of bureaucratic processes and the hidden lies beneath the surface. The Maniac's unique role allows him to manipulate and expose the inconsistencies in the police's account of the anarchist's death, thereby questioning the reliability of institutional narratives.

In the second act, he continues his act of questioning them on the events of the day. The manner in which he conducts his interrogation is so perplexing that the officers begin to change their narratives, thereby contradicting their official statements. At one point, the Constable admits, "I only just managed to grab him by the foot... but his shoe just came off in my hand" (Fo 43). This admission is particularly shocking as it implies that the anarchist might have been pushed from the fourth floor, rather than falling accidentally. This sheds new light on the incident, suggesting a more sinister explanation for the anarchist's fall.

The figure of the reporter, Maria Felletti, serves as a foil to the character of the Maniac in Dario Fo's play. Her role is crucial as she poses central questions that hold the police accountable for the events surrounding the anarchist's death. For instance, she questions, "Perhaps you can explain the bruises seen on the young man's neck. It's not at all clear what caused those" (Fo 52). The Maniac's response provides a detailed account of police brutality: "These were caused during the final interrogation just before midnight. One of the policemen became slightly impatient and struck the suspect with a hard blow on the nape of the neck... Sixteen times precisely. The suspect was partially paralyzed by the blow and had momentary difficulty breathing" (Fo 52). This exchange is integral to the plot as it reveals the extent of the violence inflicted by the police and highlights the misuse of power.

Felletti's condemnation of the police and its misuse of authority resonates deeply with Michel Foucault's conception of power. She states "When there aren't scandals, they need to be invented, because it's a good way of maintaining power and defusing people's anger." (Fo 33). Foucault argues that "Power is not an institution,

and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society.” (Foucault 93). This perspective aligns with Felletti's assertion that the police, when lacking genuine scandals, fabricate narratives to maintain control and diffuse public dissent. By attributing scandals to the police's strategic manoeuvres, Foucault's framework illuminates how power operates through the manipulation of discourse and the construction of truth. The police's invention and perpetuation of misinformation and false narratives surrounding the anarchist's death vividly illustrate the lengths to which authorities will go to safeguard their authority and obscure their wrongdoing.

The play has two possible endings one where the maniac bombs the station while the policemen are handcuffed by him to the windowsill calling it a “happy ending” allowing Felletti the chance to use the evidence she gathered to incriminate them. In yet another version, after the Maniac exposes the corruption and entraps the police officers, journalist Felletti finds herself in a moral dilemma of allowing the policemen to die handcuffed while the bomb goes off. Hence, she returns and frees them. Initially, the police officers thank Felletti for unlocking their handcuffs. However, in a quick turn of events they realize that she possesses incriminating knowledge about them and the issue with the death of the anarchist. In a twist of events, they return back and lock Felletti to the window, ensuring she cannot reveal the truth. The play ends with the officers laughing, leaving the audience with a grim reflection on the pervasive nature of corruption and the struggle for justice in a morally corrupt world. The maniac ends the play with the lines “Whichever way it goes, you see, you’ve got to decide” (Fo 75).

The play even brings the idea of Repressive state apparatus to the forefront highlighting how it works to maintain the hegemony of the ruling class and uphold the status quo. The maniac with his constant role-playing and mockery of bureaucratic formalities serve to destabilize the seemingly rigid structures of authority that are at work. Another approach used by Fo lies in the fact of breaking the fourth wall that lies between the audience and the characters of a play. By breaking the fourth wall and directly involving the audience in the unfolding drama, the figure of the Maniac encourages viewers to actively question and scrutinize the

happenings on stage and the information presented to them. This transforms the audience from passive recipients of a play into critical participants in the process fostering a deeper engagement with the themes involved. In his very first speech the Maniac mentions "I have a thing about dreaming up characters and then acting them out. It's called 'histrionomania'— comes from the Latin *histriones*, meaning 'actor.' I'm a sort of amateur performance artist." (Fo 3) In reminding the audience about the fact that he is an actor , he prevents them from losing themselves unthinkingly in the action.

Stop to Consider:

Agitprop Theatre:

Agitprop, short for "agitation propaganda," is a form of political theatre designed to incite the audience to take action against social injustices. This form first developed in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s. It emerged as a form of political activity aimed at promoting the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution and educating the masses about socialism and communist ideology, where it referred to various forms of popular media including theatre, films, and more.

Agitprop theatre avoids using elaborate sound effects, makeup, and props that are common in commercial, capitalist, and classist theatre. It is concerned with the day-to-day issues of class struggle. Instead, it focuses on minimal elements to appeal more to the working class. This approach removes distractions and highlights the play's political and social themes. By using fewer material resources, agitprop theatre makes the performance more accessible to the working class and ensures that the social and political messages resonate more strongly with them. The actors involved in it are more activists than merely artists. The main idea of such theatrical forms is to transform simple acts of drama into integral weapons to challenge class-based discrepancies and those in power.

Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is considered a prime example of agitprop theatre, because Fo used theatre not for entertainment but as a means to educate and inform the audience about their rights. Through this play, he aimed at exposing the corruption and injustice within the police force and government.

He used satire and farce to convey serious political messages. He was not interested in making profit out of theatre; instead, his goal was to provoke thought and inspire action amongst the audience. By highlighting real-life events and issues, Fo's work exemplifies the core principles of agitprop theatre: to teach, to mobilize, and to challenge societal norms and injustices.

Self Asking Questions

Q. Reflect on the idea of power in relation to the play and how Fo brings forward his commentary of the authorities involved . (30 words)

.....
.....
.....

3.6 Composition and Production History

The original version of the play was written in Italian by Dario Fo that premiered on 5th December 1970, at Capannone di Via Colletta, Milan and was entitled *Morte accidentale di un anarchico*. The play, according to Fo, has been the most performed play in the world over the last 40 years. (14) And this claim can be attested to by the fact that the play garnered productions in at least 41 countries including Chile, Romania and South Africa during times of civil unrest. In the UK the play remained relevant since its first publication due to the police atrocities that befell on the public and innocent deaths of Blair Peach and Colin Roach at the hands of the Metropolitan police in the late 90s.

In October 1998, the *Central Experimental Theater Company (Zhongyang Shiyang Huaju Yuan)* in Beijing presented a Chinese adaptation of the play by the name *Yigewuzhenfuzhuyizhe de yiwaisiwang*. The production was directed by Meng Jinghui, a leading figure in avant-garde theater in contemporary China. This adaptation marked a significant moment in the history of Chinese theater, as it blended Fo's satirical critique with Meng's innovative

directorial approach. At a later point in time, the play was adapted into a film titled *Dhool Me Lipta Sach*, which ran in Pune in 2009. In another adaptation, the film was titled *Bechara Mara Gaya*, written by Chanakya Bhardwaj and directed by Ashwini Kumar.

Legendary actor Tom Basden's plays the part of the Maniac brilliantly in adaptations including the ones in Sheffield Theatres, 2022; Lyric Hammersmith and West End, 2023 where it symbolises “the police are putting on a show of their own, rearranging the facts like so much stage furniture, and delivering fictitious monologues designed to drive suspects into a state of ‘raptus’ (sudden suicide)” (Saville).

3.7 Critical Reception of the Play

When the playwright first introduced the play in its initial production, he may not have expected it to remain relevant for so long. However, it continues to resonate today because of its universal themes. As a result, the play has been translated into many languages and has been produced extensively in Europe and the United States. The context of the play, whether set in 1970s Italy, as in the original, or in 2008 Britain, as adapted by Deborah McAndrew, stays remains critically important due to its critical examination of the abuse of human rights and corruption. This aspect has made it one of the most relevant and significant plays of the second half of the twentieth century.

When asked about the audience reactions to the first performances of the play in Milan, Fo commented that “The public who came to the theatre – progressives, students, workers, but also large numbers of the lower middle classes – was overwhelmed by the grotesque and apparently mad way in which the play worked. They split their side laughing at the effects produced by the comical and at the same time satirical situations. But as the performance went on, they gradually came to see that they were laughing the whole time at real events, events which were criminal and obscene in their brutality: crimes of the state.” (Fo)

Although the government tried their best to try and censor the play heavily due to its open critique of their way or working, the the play was a hit in Milan as Fo states “Every evening the theatre was sold

out half an hour before the performance began, and we ended up performing with people on the stage, in the wings. Despite the provocations; the usual phone calls from unnamed callers telling us that there was a bomb in the theatre; the interventions of the Flying Squad' (Fo 144). Although he mentions narratives of them being "subjected to provocation and persecution of all kinds, sometimes more grotesque and comical in their repressive stupidity than the very farce were performing." (Fo)

While talking about the success of the play Franco Quadri comments "This is an example of great theatre, in which the wild inventiveness of the writing blends harmoniously with the aims of counter-information, and succeeds in having a concrete effect on consolidating public opinion in a way one rarely sees happen." (Quadri 1989) . In yet another review by Valentini in 1977 , the power of Fo's plays resisting to be categorised into watertight genres has been applauded by quoting "Because of this unusual mixture of popular and high cultural elements, and an attempt to combine the refined lessons of mime and the French avant-garde with the gags of the 19th century guitti, the lazzi (see below) of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, circus tricks and Brechtian anti-naturalism into a single theatrical form, the critics found themselves in a dilemma: were Dario Fo's plays vaudeville, pochades, a new kind of revue, or avant-garde theatre? Probably this confusion was the greatest strength and popularity of a type of theatre which had too much vitality to be easily labeled' (Valentini, 1977 as quoted in Playograph). Like the plays of his ideal, Bertolt Brecht, he was deeply interested in writing plays that appealed to the middle class and guided them on how to make informed judgment in matters of politics and take prompt action. The aim of his theatre was solely to bring about change by using the medium of theatre as a tool.

Stop to Consider:

Repressive State Apparatus (RSA):

Marxist sociologist, Louis Althusser in his 1970 article, titled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", states how the bourgeoisie in their attempt to maintain power make use of two apparatuses namely repressive state apparatus (coercive power like

the police and the army) and ideological state apparatus like schools, Church etc. These institutions help spread the bourgeois ideology and ensure that the proletariat remains in a state of false consciousness so as to control the balance of their position in the society. The Police use the force of control and power to exert authority over the masses, often at the expense of the ideals of truth and justice. In the play the figures representing the police are the ones who create the narrative of the anarchist as one responsible for the bombings, arrest him and then accidentally murder him in the course of his custody by causing his fall from a three-storeyed building. The fact that these acts, even if questioned, do not come under open scrutiny attesting to Althusser's idea of how power is vested in the hands of a select few and how this power permeates through creating a sense of hierarchy and fear. According to German sociologist Max Weber, "power is the ability to exercise one's will over others" (Weber 1921). The play resonates with many examples where the police are seen as using the power vested on them in a wrong way for their own benefits. According to Tom Behan, "the scandal revealed the blackness at the heart of the state machinery" (69). At one point the Maniac highlights the misuse of power in the hands of the state machinery and their idea of diverting people from what real justice looks like through his statement "They want revolution? And we'll give them reforms ... loads of reforms ... we'll drown them with reforms. Even better, we'll drown them in the promise of reforms, because we won't even give them any reforms!!" (Fo 111) The idea of the state and the judiciary as ideating a regime of power and authority and trying to bring everything under their control in a hegemonic manner was evident to Fo and hence he states "they are the most direct expressions of the bourgeois state, the class enemy to be smashed" (Fo 28).

Check Your Progress:

1. What do you think about the play's portrayal of the police and judiciary?
2. Discuss in brief about the significance of the title "Accidental Death of an Anarchist".
3. How does the play's themes relate to current events or political issues?

4. How does the Maniac's interaction with the audience enhance the play's message?
5. Discuss how Dario Fo's use of elements of farce and slapstick comedy to convey serious political messages.
6. How do the interactions between the Maniac and the police officers reveal their underlying power dynamics?
7. How does the character of Felletti affect the unfolding of the plot?

3.8 Summing Up

The Accidental Death of an Anarchist is one of Dario Fo's most remarkable plays, maintaining its relevance even decades after its initial production. Often being known as a farce, the play continues to remain relevant even today due to its critique of corruption, abuse of power, and systemic injustice that permeates through bureaucracy. This is what makes it appealing to contemporary audiences and is the reason for its innumerable translations across nations. Since its premiere in 1970, it has been performed countless times around the world, demonstrating its everlasting impact and universal appeal. Through its sharp satire and powerful themes, *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* continues to challenge authority and provoke a space for debates and discussions about power, making it a timeless piece of political theatre.

3.9 References and Suggested Reading

Behan, Tom. *Dario Fo: Revolutionary Theatre*. Pluto Press, 2000.

Dario Fo, *Marino Libero! Marino è innocente!* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), p. 14.

Fo, Dario. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. 1970.

Fo, Dario. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Translated by Gavin Richards, London, 1980, p. iii.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Vintage Books, 1990, p. 93.

Jenkins, Ron. "Dario Fo: The Roar of the Clown." *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 30, no. 1, Spring 1986, pp. 171-179. The MIT Press.

Malick, Javed. "Dario Fo's Politics of Subversive Laughter." *The Wire*, 30 Oct. 2016, thewire.in/the-arts/dario-fos-politics-absurdist-laughter.

Manuale in un modello dell'attore. Ed. Franca Rame. Turin: Einaudi, 1987.

Meldolesi, Claudio. *Su un comico in rivolta*, Feltrinelli, 1978, pp. 178-79.

Mitchell, Tony. *Dario Fo: People's Court Jester*. Great Britain: Methuen London Ltd, 1984. Print, pp. 47-362

Playography - List of the Plays of Dario Fo and Franca Rame, www.geocities.ws/dariofoarchive/playography.html. Accessed 28 July 2024.

Quadri, Franco. *Introduction. Le commedie di Dario Fo*, vol. 3, 1989, pp. xiii-xiv.

Rudlin, John. *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actors Handbook*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Saville, Alice. "Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Lyric Hammersmith Review: Terrific New Version of the Dario Fo Classic." *Time Out*, 4 May 2023. Accessed 25 June 2024.

Scuderi, Antonio. "The Cooked and the Raw: Zoomorphic Symbolism in Dario Fo's 'Giullarate'." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 99, no. 1, 2004, p. 67. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3738866>

Towsen, John. *Clowns*. Canada: Prentice Hall of Canada Limited, 1976. Print.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1921).

xxx

UNIT- 4
DEREK WALCOTT- PANTOMIME

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives**
- 4.2 Introduction**
- 4.3 Introducing the Author**
- 4.4 Derek Walcott and the World of Drama**
- 4.5 Plot Overview**
- 4.6. Language in the play**
- 4.7 Critical Reception of the Play**
- 4.8 Composition and Production History**
- 4.9 Summing Up**
- 4.10 References and Suggested Readings**

4.1 Objectives

After completing this unit, you will be able to-

- *examine* the life of the author in detail;
- *identify* Derek Walcott as a major contemporary Postcolonial Writer of the 20th Century;
- *understand* the principal traits and the unique features of his writings;
- *analyze* Walcott's writings by employing perspectives derived from the above.

4.2 Introduction

The play *Pantomime* is a postcolonial text that offers a reinterpretation of the colonial experience. Written by Derek Walcott, a West Indian author known for his unique perspective on the ideas of colonialism and postcolonial identity, his writings reflect the Caribbean cultural experience in his works and

ideologies. The play has to do significantly with the idea of colonialism and how colonisers have depicted the idea of the colonised throughout discourses. The play can serve as a counter discursive text that would be instrumental in discussing in depth the ideas of domination that permeates throughout. By presenting an alternative lens with which to see colonial history and identity the play serves as a challenge to the Eurocentric idea of Colonialism.

The play was written in 1978 by the West Indian writer and poet Derek Walcott. Considered to be one of the most important postcolonial writers of the 20th century, he made significant contributions to the field of Caribbean literature and tried to rewrite the Caribbean cultural experience through his works. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. His works explore themes such as cultural heritage, the legacy of colonialism, exploration of identity. The play can be seen as consisting of “a multiplicity of Crusoe’s who collectively dismantle the very idea of hierarchical positions” (Thieme 78).

The play is situated in a small guesthouse or hotel with a minimal setup. The play is markedly led by two characters namely Henry Trewe and Jackson Phillip. The former one is a hotelier while the latter is a native of Trinidad and his employee. The Englishman tries to convince his employee to act together in a play which is a satire of Robinson Crusoe. The plot of *Robinson Crusoe* is, however, played in reverse with Harry playing a white Man Friday and Jackson as Crusoe.

Walcott's aims to reveal the continued exploitation at the hands of the Empire. He uses the dominant colonial narrative of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in order to 'write back to the empire', as Salman Rushdie has written in his 1982 article entitled “‘The Empire Writes Back’ with a Vengeance”. In doing so, Walcott reimagines Daniel Defoe's classic novel by subverting the traditional roles of the black and white characters, namely Crusoe and Friday, thereby reversing the power dynamics and offering a postcolonial perspective to the play. Through his postcolonial reimagining of *Robinson Crusoe*, Walcott also challenges the traditional binary distinctions that existed between the Occident (West) and Orient (East), as conceptualized by Edward Said in his seminal book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978). Walcott repurposes these terminologies through his play, thus subverting the

conventional meanings they portray, and thereby reconfiguring as a counter narrative produced by the postcolonial world .

4.3 Introducing the Author

Sir Derek Alton Walcott was a Saint Lucian poet and playwright. He was born on the island of Saint Lucia, which was a former British colony in the West Indies. Initially trained as a painter he took to writing as a young man and wrote numerous poems and plays the first being a poem in the local newspaper titled *The Voice of St Lucia* at the age of 14. His love for the arts was fostered by his family, his father being a talented painter and his mother an art enthusiast who believed in his potential far more than anyone ever did. However due to his mixed lineage, white grandfathers and African grandmothers, he constantly battled with his dual identity and a sense of in-betweenness. This sense of a void was often found in his writings as he stated “I am a kind of split writer; I have one tradition inside me going in one way, and another going another. The mimetic, the narrative, and dance element is strong on one side, and the literary, classical tradition is strong on the other.” (Meanings 1970). By the age of 19 he had already published his two collections: *25 Poems (1948)* and *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos (1949)*.

His major writings explored the idea of Colonialism and its after effects on the life of its inhabitants and the Caribbean cultural experience. He was best known for his poems the major ones being “In a Green Night: Poems 1948–1960” (1962), “The Castaway” (1965), and “The Gulf” (1969), “The Prodigal” (2004), “Selected Poems” (2007), “White Egrets” (2010) etc. Also a renowned playwright, he wrote 30 plays, the renowned ones being *Dream on Monkey Mountain (1967)*, *Drums and Colours: An Epic Drama (1958)* , *Ti-Jean and His Brothers (1958)*, *Pantomime (1978)*, *The Odyssey: A Stage Version (1993)* . He was awarded the Obie Award for his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* .

In 1992, he was conferred with the Nobel Prize in Literature for his outstanding contribution to the field describing his career as “a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision,

the outcome of a multicultural commitment” (Nobel Prize Committee). He died on March 17, 2017 at the age of 87.

4.4 Derek Walcott and the World of Drama

As a renowned playwright Walcott was known for his plays dealing with the Caribbean experience and the postcolonial themes of hybridity, language, power, identity, etc. He authored around 300 plays. Walcott founded the *Trinidad Theatre Workshop* in 1959 as the *Little Carib Theatre Workshop*. Today the Trinidad Theatre Workshop has grown into an internationally recognized repertory company which is based in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. In 1950 at the age of 20, Walcott aligned with the *Saint Lucia Arts Guild*, a theatre group that would stage his first play, *Henri Christophe*, written in verse, Elizabethan style, about the Haitian Revolution and independence. Later he won a scholarship to study at the University College of the West Indies, in Jamaica. He wrote a play titled *Ione*, set in Saint Lucia taking inspiration from the Greek classics. Walcott later moved on to his home where he started to train actors and produce plays from his home and worldwide. As mentioned above he later established the *Trinidad Theatre Workshop* in 1959. With the help of the *Little Carib Theatre Workshop* he produced some of his most renowned plays including *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and *Ti Jean and His Brothers* amongst many others. While working at the University of Boston, Walcott founded the *Boston Playwrights’ Theatre* and taught and practiced theatre for about twenty years while writing some of the most important dramatical texts.

Self Asking Questions:

1. What are the various influences on the writings of Derek Walcott?
(30 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

2. What are the main themes in his works? (30 words)

.....
.....
.....
3. Mention three quintessential features of Walcott's works that distinguish him from others in the field? (50 words)
.....
.....
.....

Check Your Progress:

1. What role does mimicry and imitation play in Jackson's performance, and how does it relate to his own identity formation?
2. How does the play's use of performance and role-playing enable Jackson to negotiate and reclaim his own identity, separate from his role as a servant?
3. In what ways does the play suggest that performance and acting can be a means of resistance and empowerment for marginalized individuals?
4. How does the play's exploration of performance and identity speak to the broader themes of colonialism, power, and resistance?

Stop to Consider:

Post- Colonial writings:
According to Ania Loomba, “Postcolonial studies have been preoccupied with issues of hybridity, creolisation, metize in-betweenness, diasporas and liminality, with the mobility and crossover of ideas and identities generated by colonialism” (2015, 173). Postcolonial writings are creative works that emerge from formerly colonised countries, seeking to challenge the dominant narratives and power structures perpetuated by colonial regimes. Through these writings, colonised subjects reclaim their agency,

redefine their identity, and recreate their sense of self. By 'writing back' to the empire, postcolonial authors contest the imposed ideas of power and culture, instead offering alternative perspectives on history, identity, and culture. This process enables them to come to terms with their own identity and creative expression, rewriting their stories through a postcolonial lens.

The writings of Derek Walcott can be classified as postcolonial because they navigate complex ideas of power, identity, and colonial history in the Caribbean context. His works explore the intricacies of the Caribbean experience, grappling with cross-cultural identity issues and the legacy of colonialism. By examining the intersections of power, culture, and identity, Walcott's writings offer a nuanced perspective on the postcolonial condition, making him a prominent voice in the literary landscape of the Caribbean. While talking about his native land he exclaims "I come from a place that likes grandeur; it likes large gestures; it is not inhibited by flourish; it is a rhetorical society; it is a society of physical performance; it is a society of style.... Modesty is not possible in performance in the Caribbean, and that's wonderful. It is better to be large and make huge gestures than to be modest and do tiptoeing types of presentations of oneself." (Walcott as quoted by Hirsch) The Caribbean Islands are a region inhabited by people who are ancestral exiles, and hence, the place is perceived to be lacking history or originality. These are exactly the issues that Derek Walcott explored in his writing, as he grappled with the complexities of cultural identity, colonial legacy, and the quest for authentic expression.

In the context of *Pantomime*, the subaltern voice emerges as a powerful force, challenging the dominant narratives of the Empire. Through Jackson's character, the marginalized perspective is amplified, reclaiming agency and contesting years of oppression. This process of rewriting history enables new forms of historiography to emerge, embodying Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern's voice being heard. By reworking the colonial master-narrative, the play disrupts hegemonic discourse, offering a counter-narrative of resistance and resilience that underscores the subaltern's capacity for self-expression and

empowerment. The play gives voice to the small voices of history, bringing to the forefront the stories and experiences of those who have been historically marginalized.

4.5 Plot Overview

The play is written in two acts. Walcott explores the power relationship between an English hotel owner and his Creole servant in Tobago, Trinidad. The play critically engages with the theme of colonialism. Walcott tries to subvert the dominant discourse that has historically misrepresented the colonised 'Other'. The play works as a counter discursive one; it facilitates a nuanced examination of the power dynamics that which facilitate colonial domination. However the theme is overtly explored with the help of humour, clever dialogue and playful words to drive the message home.

The opening scene of Act I introduces Harry Trewe, an Englishman, who is shown rehearsing a play in the empty lobby of his newly acquired hotel, Castaway Guest House which is in a state of deplorable condition. Jackson Phillip, works as a waiter in the hotel owned by Harry during the season, and otherwise as his butler and handyman Jackson describes it, "This hotel like a hospital. The toilet catch asthma, the air-condition got ague, the front-balcony rail missing four teet', and every minute the fridge like it dancing the Shango ... brrgudup ... jukjuk ... brrugudup.

Is no wonder that the carpenter collapse. Termites jumping like steel band in the foundations" (Walcott 105).

His frustration is due to the absence of guests in his hotel. While portraying his frustration he exclaims to his servant Jackson, "We're closed for repairs. We're the only ones in the guest house. Apart from the carpenter, if he ever shows up..." (Walcott 103). Henry suggests that they rehearse the play together, just as the hotel's advertisements promise, providing "Nightly Entertainment" for the guests, in an attempt to bring some life to the empty hotel. However Jackson suggests that instead of focusing on the play he should rather invest on rehearsing the hotel as the facilities seem run down. The dilapidated and empty state of the hotel replicates his own situation as he feels out of place in the underdeveloped locale after

being a British actor who self exiled himself due to domestic issues . He states “I’m so bloody bored I could burst into tears” (Walcott 102). Even Jackson notices his insomnia and his sad state of being and remarks “No, is loneliness that sucking your soul as dry as the sun suck a crab shell....Walking round restless, staring at the sea. You Remembering your wife and your son, not right? You ain’t get over that yet?” (Walcott 146).

Henry tries to persuade Jackson to take part in his rendering of the play *Robinson Crusoe* as he has heard him sing his “calypsos... Right back there in the kitchen” (Walcott 109). However Jackson remarks that he doesn't want himself to be the entertainer Henry demands. He even suggests that he moved to Tobago for the peace and quiet away from the hustle and bustle he earlier was a part of . He remarks “If you ain’t want me to resign, best drop the topic” (Walcott 109).

In an attempt to create a satirical piece to bring in audience, and “to make a point about the hotel industry, about manners, conduct, to generally improve relations all around” (Walcott 119) , Harry suggests switching roles, with Jackson playing Crusoe and himself playing a white version of Friday. But Jackson is hesitant, pointing out the absurdity of the situation: "You have a black man playing Robinson Crusoe and then a half-naked, white, fish-belly man playing Friday, and you want to tell me it ain't shit?" (Walcott 119) .Despite his reservations, Jackson continues to listen as Harry persists, shedding his clothes to get into character."Manners, sir. Manners," (Walcott 112). Jackson cautions, trying to maintain some decorum amidst the absurdity.

By reversing the roles of the Orient and the Occident and the whole narrative , Walcott tries to offer a voice to the marginalized in history , particularly to the figure of Friday from Defoe's , Crusoe in this regard . By the end of the act the hesitant Jackson no longer abstains from performing in the play. Instead he is the one who persuades Harry to carry on with it as it gives him some amount of authority over his master . He starts "making Harry see the myth from Friday's perspective”(Juneja 262). He even goes on to construct a new character calling it Thursday , a black Crusoe who commissions Trewe to regard his commands stating “ Robinson

obey Thursday now. Speak Thursday language. Obey Thursday gods.” (Walcott, 121)

As the play progresses he starts improvising on the plot of race reversal. He tries to make Harry act as a seagull, which Harry sees as humiliating. At some point Harry asks Jackson to stop his improvisations but he doesn't tag along with the idea. He even goes on to the extent of threatening Harry when he tries to stop him from the act. He states “You see, it's your people who introduced us to this culture: Shakespeare, Robinson Crusoe, the classics, and so on, and when we start getting as good as them, you can't leave halfway. So, I will continue? Please?” (Walcott 133). However he refuses to stop exclaiming “ I getting into my part and you object. This is the story ...this is history. This moment that we are now acting here is the history of imperialism; it's nothing less than that. And I don't think that I can—should—concede my getting into a part halfway and abandoning things, just because you, as my superior, give me orders. People become independent.” (Walcott 133). Act I ends with Jackson angry over Harry not showing him any respect. He goes back to fixing a table, not wanting Harry to interrupt or help him.

Act II begins with Jackson noisily hammering, disrupting Harry's attempt to sleep. Harry tries to apologize for the previous day's play rehearsal debacle, but Jackson ignores the topic. Harry blames the isolated location and the loneliness of managing the hotel alone, but Jackson suggests he return home if he finds it dull. Jackson then takes a more personal tone, saying, "So you lonely, but I could make you forget all o' that. I could make H. Trewe, Esquire, a brand-new man. You come like a challenge" (Walcott 146). But Harry quickly evades the conversation by asking Jackson to recite a monologue from Crusoe's perspective, written in a serious tone. This however marks a shift in their relationship from master-servant to equals with him suggesting Harry ways to dissuade his loneliness. He even states “Let's sit down man to man, and have a drink" (Walcott 143) which is a major shift from the master slave dialectic to a man to man conversation. Harry, fed up with Jackson's relentless bickering and taunts, bursts out: "You've got logorrhea, Jackson. You've been running your mouth like a parrot's arse. But don't get sarcastic with me, boy!" (Walcott 163) .While Jackson looks away, Harry hides under the table with an ice pick as part of the performance. To counteract Harry's intimidating performance, Jackson kills the hotel

parrot and tosses it to Harry to show the violence of which he is capable. The theme of mimicry, crucial to postcolonial ideology, emerges when Jackson assumes the role of Harry's ex-wife, Ellen. He holds up a photograph of Ellen as a crude mask and mimics an Englishwoman's voice, prompting Harry to vent his anger towards Ellen. Through this mimicry, Jackson coaxes Harry to confess his lingering resentment towards Ellen, who not only caused the death of their son in a drunk-driving accident but also left Harry to grapple with loneliness. Harry finally admits, "Stop! I forgive you!

That's the real reason I wanted to do the panto. To do it better than you ever did. You played Crusoe in the panto, Ellen. I was Friday. Black bloody greasepaint that made you howl. You wiped the stage with me... Ellen... well. Why not? I was no bloody good." (Walcott 175). Harry's confession reveals his motivation for playing Robinson Crusoe was to outdo Ellen and prove a point, driven by feelings of inadequacy and competition, particularly since Ellen has surpassed him in their acting careers.

Immediately after confronting his trauma, Harry reverts to downplaying his emotions and negates them. Jackson suggests they resume the pantomime. Harry attempts to make a joke about his pain but this is met with a rebuke from Jackson for being too casual. After a couple of dialogues Jackson exclaims to Harry that his true calling lies in the art of calypso, and he can no longer continue serving Harry. He states, "I going back to the gift that's my God-given calling. I benignly resign, you fire me. With inspiration. Caiso is my true work, caiso is my true life" (Walcott 182). He then asks Harry, addressing him as Robinson, that, starting from Friday, they should talk about a raise. The lights fade out as the play comes to an end.

In bringing about the characters of Crusoe and Friday, Derek Walcott aims to utilize the device of a play within a play to situate the postcolonial experience and subvert the singular narrative voice of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. By doing so, Walcott challenges the dominant narrative and presents an alternate perspective. This technique is consequential as it allows him to bring in the themes of colonialism, identity and power. The text of *Robinson Crusoe* acts as a reference point from which the act of writing back to the regime begins in the play.

Stop to Consider:

The novel *Robinson Crusoe*, considered by many to be the first English novel, serves as a crucial reference point in Walcott's play. Based on the real-life experiences of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who was marooned on a deserted island in 1704, Daniel Defoe's novel tells the story of Crusoe's journey to Guinea, where he intends to buy slaves and return to Brazil. However, his ship encounters a storm in the Caribbean, and he is washed up onto a desolate shore, becoming the sole survivor.

This classic tale of survival and colonization is cleverly subverted in Walcott's play, which reverses the roles of Crusoe and Friday, handing power to a black Crusoe while a white man assumes the role of Friday. This role reversal ridicules the notion of the "civilizing" mission, highlighting the absurdity of colonialism's power dynamics.

By engaging with the historical context of Defoe's novel, including its depiction of the transatlantic slave trade, Walcott's play offers a powerful critique of colonialism's ongoing impact on contemporary society. The play can be seen as a form of literary resistance, challenging dominant narratives and asserting the agency and voice of the colonised subject.

In one of the play's poignant speeches, Jackson highlights the absurdity and complexity of colonialism, particularly in the context of the Caribbean and postcolonial experiences. He says:

"All right, so it's Thursday. He comes across this naked cannibal called Thursday, you know. And then look at what would happen. He would have to start o... well, he'd have to, sorry... This cannibal, who is Christian, would have to be taught... I mean... he'd have to be taught by this African... that everything was wrong, that he was doing... I mean, for nearly two thousand years... was wrong. Barbarous, I mean, you know. And Crusoe would then have to teach him things like, you know, about Africa, his gods, patamba, and so on... and it would get very, very complicated [...]." (Walcott 135). His words resonate with the broader postcolonial experience, where cultures were systematically erased, and foreign cultures were imposed as dominant. Jackson masterfully captures the complexity and cruelty of colonialism, inviting us to reflect on the enduring

impact of cultural imperialism and the importance of preserving indigenous cultures.

Overall, Walcott's play cleverly subverts and challenges dominant narratives, providing a nuanced exploration of identity, power, and resistance in the context of colonialism and its legacy.

Self Asking Questions:

1. How does the play's use of pantomime and performance subvert the traditional power dynamics between coloniser and colonised?
2. In what ways does Jackson's performance of Robinson Crusoe challenge and disrupt the dominant narratives of colonialism?
3. How does the act of "playing" Crusoe allow Jackson to momentarily escape his servitude and imagine himself as a free man?

4.6 Language in the Play

In *Pantomime*, Derek Walcott employs the concept of mimicry to appropriate the language of the coloniser, but with a strategic twist. By mimicking the coloniser's language, Walcott subverts its dominance and bends it to his own advantage, a common tactic in postcolonial literature. Writers from formerly colonised nations often utilize the English language to suit their needs, adapting it to convey their unique experiences and cultural spirit. As Raja Rao aptly puts it, they seek to "convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own". (Rao 6). Through this linguistic appropriation, Walcott challenges the erasure of Caribbean identity and culture, instead revealing a rich tapestry of experiences, myths, and traditions. By doing so, he reclaims the power of language and redefines the terms of cultural expression.

The Caribbean island region consists of many small islands, each having its own language specific to their own region. Walcott uses Trinidadian-English Creole in his play. Derek Walcott's mixed ancestry, combining European cultural heritage with African roots,

inherently led to an exploration of creolized identity in his writings. The unique blend of cultural influences enabled him to delve into the complexities of identity formation, skillfully weaving them to form a rendering of the creolized experience.

In Derek Walcott's play *Pantomime*, Jackson uses abrogation to challenge linguistic norms and subvert authority. He code-switches between English and Trinidadian-English Creole, refusing to conform to normative language usage. For instance, when he says "Mr. Trewe, your scramble eggs is here! Are here!" (Walcott 101), Jackson asserts his identity and undermines Harry's imperial authority. Language was a tool of control for colonisers, who imposed foreign tongues to erase cultural identities and silence indigenous voices. By using Creole and code-switching, Jackson resists this imposition and reclaims his cultural voice. His mastery of both languages destabilizes the power structure, allowing him to challenge the dominant narrative. Jackson's linguistic abrogation is an act of resistance, challenging fixed identities and embodying the complexities of Caribbean identity. Through language play, he creates space for self-expression, cultural affirmation, and resistance, challenging the imperial legacy. By speaking in his own way, Jackson exercises agency and subverts Harry's authority. His language use becomes a tool for empowerment, allowing him to assert his identity, culture, and autonomy. Jackson's abrogation of linguistic norms is a deliberate act of defiance, reclaiming his voice and challenging the dominant narrative. Through this, he reclaims his cultural heritage and challenges the power dynamics between coloniser and colonised.

4.7 Critical Reception of the Play

The play has been lauded as a postcolonial piece and considered as a classical timepiece for its relevance. Jackson from the very beginning portrays himself as a man of his ways as he tries to assert himself in whatever he does. Even though he is Trewe's servant, he conducts his tasks as he likes. He truly identifies with Homi Bhaba's idea in his 1985 essay "Sly Civility," that "The native refusal to unify the authoritarian, colonialist address within the terms of civil engagement gives the subject of colonial authority - father and oppressor - another turn." (Bhaba 78)

Mimicry emerges as a form of subversion when characters appropriate the coloniser's language and culture to challenge dominant power structures. This is exemplified by Jackson, who, in his conversation with Trewe, employs English while subtly incorporating Creole syntax, as seen in the line: "Mr. Trewe, your scramble eggs is here!" (Walcott 101). By doing so, Jackson cleverly uses the coloniser's language against them, bringing in his native Creole voice into the dominant discourse and thereby subverting its authority.

In an interview with Stephen Moss from "The Guardian", he states that the play is not just about the coloniser colonised relations but also about a dialogue between two artists from different cultures. He states "The surface of the play looks like a cliché: a situation between a black guy and a white guy. But what I wanted to talk about more was the relationship between two artists from different cultures – basically the same kind of person, one working in music hall, the other in calypso. There's an affinity between them" (Walcott as quoted by Moss).

Stop to Consider:

Calypso:

Calypso is a Caribbean art form with the power to create transformative performances. Calypso, a genre began in Trinidad in the early 19th century and is a testament to the resilience of the Caribbean spirit. Though its roots are often traced to West African Kiso. The idea of a Calypso is linked to one of sorrow and resistance. Enslaved Africans, torn from their homeland and forced to toil on foreign soil in sugar plantations, used calypso as a means of expression and defiance. With their freedom and identities stripped of them in the sugar plantations, the African sang of their motherland. It was often used as a subversive tool to mock their masters and to communicate with each other in coded messages. In the face of oppression, they found solace in the African rhythms and melodies that lingered in their memories, using them to subtly resist the oppressive regime that sought to silence them.

Walcott has used the art form in his play *Pantomime* to create a form of subversion, resistance, and overturning of power structures. As such, calypso can be said to possess a transformative power of resistance in the play. Jackson is a former calypsonian artist who has given up his life as a performer in search of peace and quiet. Considered to be an informal art (oral culture, carnivalesque, and performance, calypso is a declining field in the face of formal arts like theatre and drama. In the play Jackson uses a particular Calypso to remind Harry how colonialism impinged on the minds of the colonised he states “I want to tell you bout Robinson Crusoe. He tell Friday, when I do so, do so. Whatever I do, you must do like me, He make Friday a Good Friday Bohbole. (Walcott 125) The particular Calypso is of great significance because he uses his speech to concisely describe the first classic novel of history in just about four lines.

Check Your Progress:

Q1. How does Walcott's mixed heritage (African and European) influence his depiction of the Caribbean experience in his writing?

Q2. In what ways does Walcott use the text of *Robinson Crusoe* to subvert colonial narratives and challenge dominant power structures?

Q3. How does Walcott's use of calypso music and other Caribbean cultural elements contribute to his exploration of identity, culture, and resistance in the play?

Q4. What role does the theme of cultural hybridity play in Walcott's work, and how does it relate to his own mixed lineage?

Q5. How does Walcott's portrayal of the complex relationships between characters like *Crusoe*, *Friday*, and *Jackson* reflect the nuances of colonialism and its legacy?

4.8 Composition and Production History

The play *Pantomime* was first produced by *All Theatre Productions* at the *Little Carib Theatre*, Port of Spain, Trinidad, on April 12, 1978 and directed by Albert LaVeau with Maurice Brash and Wilbert Holder as the main cast. Later on January 25, 1979 the play was produced by Liane Aukin for the British Broadcasting Corporation.

In his 1978 review of the play, Walter Goodman describes the play performed in *Hudson Guild Theater*, as “a vaudeville show struggling to become a play” (1978). Directed by Kay Matschullat, he states that “even during the dips into banality, however, the exchanges are spirited, and *Pantomime*’ stays with you as a fresh and funny work filled with thoughtful insights and illuminated by bright performances” (1978). In 2015 the play was directed by Artistic Director of the *Cayman National Cultural Foundation*, Henry Muttoo who is one of the foremost Theatre Arts practitioners of the Caribbean. In 2012, Derek Walcott traveled to Saint Lucia to direct a new production of his play at the *Lakeside Theatre* at the Colchester Campus, where he was Professor of Poetry. The show was a huge success, with the theatre packed for all three nights of its premiere, and fans from across Europe traveling to see the production. The lead roles were played by David Tarkenter and Trinidadian actor Wendell Manwarren, both of whom were handpicked by Walcott. A recording of the show was made available to the public afterwards and is now accessible on YouTube.

4.9 Summing Up

We have discussed salient aspects of the play by Derek Walcott on the revisiting of the colonial narrative in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Specifically, Walcott's play is a counter-discursive text that revisits and challenges the dominant colonial narrative, subverting its power dynamics and cultural assumptions. By reworking the classic tale, Walcott's play offers a critical commentary on the legacy of colonialism, highlighting the complexities of identity, power, and resistance. Through its role-reversals and performance, the play asserts the agency and voice of the colonised subject,

providing a nuanced critique of colonialism's ongoing impact and its continued influence on contemporary society.

As a postcolonial play, it reinterprets the colonial experience, offering a unique perspective on colonialism and postcolonial identity. The play challenges the dominant narratives of colonialism, scrutinizing how colonisers depicted the colonised in colonial discourse. While bringing about a counter narrative approach, it scrutinizes the ideas of domination, presenting an alternative lens on colonial history and identity. Through his work, Walcott challenges Eurocentric views of colonialism, exploring themes like cultural heritage, colonialism's legacy, and identity. Ultimately, the play features "a multiplicity of Crusoes" that dismantle hierarchical positions, offering a nuanced critique of colonialism's ongoing impact.

4.10 References and Suggested Readings

Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 1989.

Goodman, Walter. "The Stage: Pantomime Play by Derek Walcott." *New York Times*, 17 Dec. 1986.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/17/theater/the-stage-pantomime-play-by-derek-walcott.html>

Hirsch, Edward. *Derek Walcott, The Art of Poetry* No. 37. Interview.

www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2719/derek-walcott-the-art-of-poetry-no-37-derek-walcottlbsen

Bhabha, Homi. "Sly Civility." *October*, vol. 34, Spring 1985, pp. 78

Juneja, Renu. "Derek Walcott." *Postcolonial English Drama: Commonwealth Drama Since 1960*, edited by Bruce King, Palgrave Macmillan, 1992, pp. 236-266.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315751245>

Moss, Stephen. "Derek Walcott Interview." *The Guardian*, 3 May 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/03/derek->

walcott-interview . Rajarao. *Kanthapura*. Oxford University Press,
1947.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Chatto&Windus, 1993 .

Thieme, John. *Derek Walcott*. Manchester UP, 1999.

Walcott, Derek. "Meanings." *Savacou*, no. 2, 1970.

Walcott, Derek. *Remembrance; and, Pantomime: Two Plays*. Farrar,
1980.

xxx