



## **A World of Defamiliar Realities: *The Chairs, Endgame and No Exit***

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### **Abstract**

This paper suggests that the three playwrights, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Jean-Paul Sartre in their plays *The Chairs*, *Endgame* and *No Exit*, respectively, create a defamiliar reality that gives authenticity and new meaning to life. It puts forward the view that these playwrights use different modern techniques to achieve their purpose; they experiment with stage techniques by using the technique of defamiliarization and surrealism. The paper presents a summary of the views of different critics about the content and form of these plays and contests their views by suggesting that the plays are not meaningless or absurd but only different. It proposes that the audience or readers do not see that which they often see in traditional theatre. The plays, rather, lay bare the possibilities of a more meaningful and authentic life by detaching the readers' minds from the automated, habitual, and monotonous world they live in.

**Key Terms:** defamiliarization, surrealism, existentialism, phenomenology, absurdism

### **Introduction**

Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean-Paul Sartre in their plays *Endgame*, *The Chairs* and *No Exit*, respectively, reconstruct a new reality that gives a new meaning to life by detaching whatever they create on the stage from its habitual and automated state. They realize this purpose through certain innovations in theatre and drama. Since these playwrights belong to the literary and philosophical movement of modernism, they make use of the modern theatrical and dramatic techniques to achieve this purpose of renewing the phenomenon of the world so that life may be given a new meaning. Traditionally, the plays of these playwrights have been criticized and judged in terms of the existential dilemmas that men and women face in the modern world. It is conventionally believed that the subject-matter of these plays is nothingness



and absurd human situation. Yet, structural study suggests that the plays do convey a philosophy and meaning but in way different from how the traditional drama conveyed meaning and philosophy. Traditional drama, like the drama of Shakespeare, represented or imagined a real or life-like situation on which the laws of probability and necessity could be applied. In other words, the subject-matter of traditional drama was quite close to what we call real life. However, Beckett, Ionesco and Sartre do not seem to have thought of meaning and purpose in terms of how the traditional dramatists thought of it. Their preoccupation is more with form than with subject-matter. Nonetheless, renewal in form is a renewal in the subject-matter. This paper proposes that the new reality in the plays of the selected playwrights is constructed through the formalist technique of defamiliarization propounded by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky. It theorizes that the approach of these playwrights towards the use of this technique is different from each other. They approach it through other modern artistic instruments of form-renewal and innovation. Ionesco defamiliarizes the so-called real by experimenting with stage and theatre while Beckett and Sartre do it by using surrealist stage images and objects.

### **Theoretical Framework**

‘Defamiliarization’ was an artistic and formalist technique propounded by Viktor Shklovsky. According to Shklovsky:

the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important... After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it – hence we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways. (Shklovsky 24)

‘Defamiliarization’ removes objects from their automated, habitual and traditional state and renews them. The renewal is necessary because it makes the objects reappear in their original state. The originality does not lie in the objectivity of the objects. It lies in the renewed perception in the mind of the reader or audiences. It makes the objects significant and meaningful in a new way. The new perception is a product of a differential relation between the



automated or habitual state of the objects and their defamiliar or renewed state. The renewed perception differs from the habitual perception and defers it too. This difference and rejection is possible only when the audiences are not emotionally involved in the dramatic performance. The little distance between them and the performance enables them to make use of their judgment. This paper uses this technique to analyse the selected plays of the selected dramatists.

### Analysis

Ionesco is known for his experimentation with stage techniques. He shuns the traditional and realistic method of making characters appear on the stage, the way they do in real life. The most controversial and oft-read book on Beckett's and Ionesco's dramaturgy is Martin Esslin's book *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Esslin labels Beckett's and Ionesco's theatre as the 'theatre of the absurd' because he thinks that their plays present the absurd human situation. This absurdity of the human situation, according to Esslin, is the theme of Ionesco's and Beckett's plays. It is not only the subject-matter that makes their plays absurd but other characteristics as well. The absurdity of human situation, says Esslin, can be found in the plays of Sartre as well; but Sartre's treatment of it is quite logical and linguistically lucid while "the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought." (Esslin 24) It is by virtue of intuition and instinct that these dramatists capture this situation. They do not comment about the absurdity of human situation; they merely "present" it through explicit stage images (25). Esslin is quite critical of the view that a clear and solid interpretation can be derived by analyzing Beckett's plays. He is of the view that such an interpretation is possible only in the plays of those dramatists who have a clear philosophical and moral position, and who have an intention of transforming their philosophy and moral views into a well-constructed theme through the use of plot and character. But Beckett, he claims, had no such content beforehand. His plays lack plot and his characters are merely puppets (44-45). There is a fundamental problem with Esslin's view about Beckett's plays. He places Beckett along with other dramatists in a new theatrical movement, yet the criteria of meaning for him is the traditional way of writing plays in terms of translating some moral view or philosophy into plot



and characters as if meaning derives only from social objective realities. If Beckett is complex and difficult, so is Shakespeare; he himself claims it. But saying that Beckett has no philosophy is a view much criticized by critics later on. The revolt against tradition does not make Beckett's plays empty of any philosophical or even moral view. Another fundamental flaw in Esslin's argument is that he considers drama as a representative art; but, as expounded earlier, dramatic art is not representational. Dramatic art becomes even more immaterial in the hands of Beckett and Ionesco.

Michael Guest in his article "Paul Ricoeur and Watching *Endgame*" explains that Esslin judges Beckett's plays by considering them as a representational art. He states that "Esslin proposes that a cataclysmic event [in *Endgame*] has placed the characters in their present situation" (Michael 72). Esslin puts *Endgame* in some historical reality which, he thinks, is part of the life of the watcher. He speaks as if the play is the representation of some historical reality. But there is no evidence in the play that such event really occurred. The idea of 'nemesis' is therefore invalid (72). In the case of Ionesco, his view is different: Esslin first prioritizes human condition over art and ideology and then suggests that Ionesco's plays are the expression of that human condition. He claims that Ionesco revolted against social realism so that he may depict the true reality of human condition. This claim is not rooted only in individualism but in the expressive theory of art as well. It would not be wrong to say that he thinks of Ionesco as a formalist because he states that "[f]ormal experiment, Ionesco argues, is more closely concerned with reality than social realism" (32). There is a sense in which he says it but it is a contradiction to label Ionesco as the dramatist of the new movement of 'the theatre of the absurd' and then place him again among the formalists. Esslin suggests that Ionesco rejects the traditional use of language because he does not aim at representing the so-called social reality (132). It appears that Esslin puts Beckett and Ionesco together in one and the same movement not in terms of dramatic theory but in terms of the use of language and the treatment of the subject-matter. He argues that the theme of the plays of Beckett and Ionesco along with a few others is the 'absurd human situation' and that these dramatists use language "as merely one—sometimes dominant, sometimes submerged—component of its multidimensional poetic imagery" (406). His view that Beckett's and Ionesco's plays cannot be studied by focusing on one particular dramatic or



theatrical element is appreciable; but his attempt to reduce these plays into nothing but an expression or a representation of meaninglessness is contradictory in that he first endorses the view that these plays are complex and then reduces them with a simple approach to the category of ‘absurdism’. Claiming that Beckett always begins with his own consciousness rather than with any established truth, he judges that Beckett’s existential concepts are more genuine than Sartre’s because he derives them through his own consciousness. Beckett, therefore, is the most consistent existentialist. Following Heidegger, Esslin states that Beckett considers his own “being-there-in-the-world” or his own experience as the criteria for reaching after any concept (Esslin 14-15).

Form belongs to the domain of literature, and the content obviously is the philosophy the plays embody. Garin Dowd in his book *Abstract Machine: Samuel Beckett and Philosophy after Deleuze and Guattare* (2007) devotes a considerable part to this predicament. Deleuze is of the view that a renewal in form is hard to achieve without having achieved the renewal of content. He gives priority to content in that “[i]t is what one has to say, what one thinks one has to say, that imposes new forms.” (qtd in Dowd 25) But philosophy, Deleuze thinks, has not undergone revolutions like literature and science. It is static, and its content revolves around a few dominant figures like Plato and Kant (25). Garin Dowd quotes these lines from an interview of Deleuze based on the topic of his interest in literature. Dowd puts the question exactly the way it is asked in the interview and directly quotes the lines without commenting on them. However, what Dowd suggests is quite clear: he seems to be countering Deleuze’s view by suggesting that Beckett through his new dramatic form renews the content of philosophy. It is, therefore, the linguistic aspect of dramatic art that gains much weight. Dowd praises Beckett’s ability to disfigure the traditional language stylistically and structurally. Literature and philosophy, in this regard, becomes converged, for the renewal in the latter owes its possibility to the renewal in the former. Therefore, literature becomes prior to philosophy. Dowd concludes it systematically: “Despite this convergence literature is in a privileged position with regard to philosophy, in that the problem of formal renewal is more urgently and frequently addressed by literary authors.” (26-27) There is a sense in which Dowd makes this convergence explicit. Beckett’s plays are



appreciated much for the new form that imposes newness on the content. It connects his art quite successfully to Ionesco's and even Sartre's in terms of formal ingenuity.

Following Dowd's argument, it is relevant to see how the philosophy contained in form and content is comprehended by the audience. Michael Guest in his article "Paul Ricoeur and Watching *Endgame*" deals with this relation from a phenomenological and hermeneutic perspective by analyzing Beckett's play *Endgame*. His concept seems to be quite similar to the structuralist view of structure or narrative when he explains Ricoeur's view of narrative and states, unlike Esslin, that the characters in *Endgame* are not puppets: rather, "their very existence is by virtue of and subject to a complex and paradoxical temporal 'action' of narration that manifests itself in the audience's perception of their action and dialogue." (Guest 69) Binding the dialogue and action of the characters with the perception of the audience is a phenomenological approach. Hermeneutics draws on the argument that the text (in this context, the dramatic performance) contains a schema of meaning in which there are certain lacunas or a "semiotic void" filled by the role of the audience (69). Saussure's structural linguistics also maintains that signifier and signified in a sign are just like the two sides of the same paper; and signified lies in the mind of the listener. The watcher, therefore, is in no way detached from the performance. He has a role to play in this process. The watcher is not concerned with anything other than what happens on the stage, what he hears from the characters and his own perception of them. It is through this phenomenological view that Michael criticized Esslin. He states that "Esslin proposes that a cataclysmic event [in *Endgame*] has placed the characters in their present situation" (72). Esslin puts *Endgame* in some historical reality which, he thinks, is part of the life of the watcher. He speaks as if the play is the representation of some historical reality. But there is no evidence in the play that such event really occurred. The idea of 'nemesis' is therefore invalid (72). What Michael seems to be establishing is the phenomenological idea that the past is nothing. It is only the present experience of the mind with whatever it encounters that matters. His idea that Beckett focuses on the experience of consciousness in his plays paves way for what is known as a 'synchronic' or structural study of Beckett's plays; only the dramatic performance and the audience watching it is what should be studied and analyzed without taking any historical reality or any intention of the writer into consideration.



Ionesco had affiliations with the new artistic school of formalism, and formalism had many things in common with structuralism. *The Chairs* seems to be influenced by some of the ideas propounded by the formalist school of thought. Ionesco experiments with stage techniques for a purpose. The invisibility of the guests in *The Chairs* is an example of this experimentation. It not only renews the form of drama but explains the connection between audiences and performance as well. In the context of Sartre, the dramatic performance as a whole (the signifier) and the audiences (the signified) seemed to be interwoven because Sartre does not experiment with dramatic form as much as Ionesco and Beckett do. Ionesco, on the other hand, keeps the audiences at a little distance by ‘defamiliarizing’ the appearance of the guests on the stage. Thus, the invisible appearance of the guests on the stage in *The Chairs* defamiliarizes the characters’ dramatic role making the perception of the audiences changed. They are not given what they expected; and this aesthetic shock keeps them at a distance to think about the unusual appearance of the characters on the stage. The invisibility of the other characters is made visible by virtue of the performance of the Old Man and Old Woman. It seems like the Old Man and the Old Woman otherize themselves to differ from and defer their existential angst. They distance themselves for a while from the inauthenticity of their own selves to defamiliarize the nature of human relationships. This idea can well be explained after observing the performance of the Old Man when the invisible Colonel appears on the stage. The Old Man hurries to the door when the doorbell rings, and the stage directions of Ionesco regarding the performance of the Old Man inform us:

He hurries, opens door No. 2, and the invisible Colonel enters. Perhaps it would be useful for us to hear discreetly several trumpet notes, several phrases like ‘Hail the chief’. When he opens the door and sees the invisible Colonel, the Old Man stiffens into a respectful position of attention. He lifts his hand vaguely towards his forehead, so as to roughly sketch a salute. He presses the invisible hand that the invisible Colonel gives him, bending forward ceremoniously, then straightening up again. (9)

The Colonel neither speaks nor is he visible to the audiences, yet the audiences know that he has arrived. The whole story comes to the audiences only through the performance of the Old Man and Old Woman. It is the Old Man who creates the identity of the Colonel by acting before





him like a soldier lower in rank would do before the Colonel. The significant point here is that the Old Man creates this identity of the Colonel by virtue of a differential relation that occurs between the invisibility of the Colonel and language. It is announced in language that the Colonel has arrived, but his picturization gets reflected only in the performance of the Old Man at the door. The invisibility of the Colonel is in opposition to the announcement of his arrival in language; and then by virtue of his dramatic performance, the Old Man signifies this invisibility before the audiences. Thus, what language conveys is deferred by the invisibility of the Colonel – the invisibility that becomes visibility in the performance of the Old Man. From the perspective of Ionesco’s dramatic art, this fact holds much importance because, as mentioned in the introduction, Ionesco wanted to bring the real into light. The real, he thought, “is in its unreality”. It is for this reason that Richard N. Coe calls Ionesco’s theatre a “pure theatre” the meaning and goal of which is that “truth is a tale told without words to people who cannot hear it.” (qtd. in Schechner 65) The people cannot hear this truth but they are enabled to understand it. Thus defamiliarizing what is usually considered as real by making it unreal brings about a change in ‘the collective consciousness’ of the audiences who are given time to judge it by distancing them from the dramatic performance.

Beckett’s *Endgame* is marked by such a defamiliar aura that the audiences do not seem to be much involved. In the very beginning, we are informed that the picture hanging on the wall has its face towards the wall. It is symbolic of the fact that Beckett is never going to show anything clearly to the audiences. There are so many pauses in the dialogues of the characters and so much subjectivity that they all seem to be addressing only each other and not the audiences. The yellow light adds to the death-like situation in such a manner that everything else seems to be dead and perished. Everything seems to be in its last moment. Nonetheless, the presence of the audiences cannot be completely ignored. Hamm tells Clov: “Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough... To think perhaps it won’t all have been for nothing!” (108) These lines quite well explain that their situation if observed has something meaningful to offer. No matter how absurd and disordered their situation is, it is not devoid of the possibility of being observed with a purpose. This way, Beckett seems to be not completely ignorant of the audiences. Whatever





happens on the stage does not happen for nothing as Hamm admits. So, the meaningless babbling of the characters is sometimes contrasted with the meaningful phrases or sentences that they utter. Without presenting the absurdity of life, it is not possible to understand the meaning of life. This theatrical distance in Beckett serves the purpose of detaching the audiences from what is commonplace so that their attention may be diverted towards something new and defamiliar. The defamiliar reality presented before the audiences enable them to think differently of the world so that automated and habitual phenomenon that has always been the cause of meaninglessness and purposelessness may be renewed in such a manner that new meanings are derived from it.

In *Endgame*, time and space do not appear to be ordinary concepts, as those that are much exhausted in philosophy. Rather, they are made defamiliar and detached from their ordinary burden of meanings to give them new meanings. For example, when Hamm asks Clove what time it is, he replies: “The same as usual” (94). It appears that Beckett considers time only an internal psychological phenomenon. Before Beckett, Bergson had already divided time into internal time and external time. This confusion was one of the major concerns of modern literary writers. Subjectivity or individuality was the most important feature of modernism. Among all modernist playwrights, Beckett is the most subjective. It is his focus on the individual’s private and subjective condition that makes him treat time as a psychological phenomenon. It must be kept in mind that time and space may appear as illusions in Beckett’s drama, but these illusions from a phenomenological perspective are rooted in intuition. Following what was explained in the previous paragraph, it appears that “the thing in itself” in the drama of Beckett does not count. For example, when Clov peeps through the magnifier to observe the world beyond the window, Hamm asks him what he sees there; Clov tells him ‘Zero’. This explains how the thing in itself is zero in Beckett’s drama; the objective existence of objects is put to question here. It is only the phenomenon of things that Beckett concerns himself with. This dramatic quality makes Beckett different from Sartre in whose plays the objective world not only exists objectively, but it has precedence also over the phenomenon. However, it does not suggest that Beckett is too subjective or solipsistic. The phenomenon is the phenomenon of the world, and if it is the phenomenon of the world, it cannot be said that it is only consciousness that shapes this phenomenon. What Beckett does is only to unveil the truth behind the psychological and



subjective existence of an individual. He creates a differential relation between phenomenon and noumena because phenomenon differs considerably from noumena though phenomenon is but the phenomenon of noumena. Beckett does this by using the avante garde technique of surrealism. By using this technique, Beckett defamiliarizes these concepts to detach them from their habitual and automated states. Making the stage-world surrealistic, he becomes able to deal with his concept of time and space. Following the same existentialist phenomenology, Beckett's philosophy of meaning is different from Sartre. Sartre defines meaning in terms of being-for-itself and being-in-itself while Beckett rejects Sartrean objectivity by considering time and space as subjective and intuitive entities. This quality makes Beckett truly modern in his dramatic approach.

In *No Exit*, the mere consciousness of Garcine (being-for-itself) encounters the world (objects) and in this encounter negates the world by getting the awareness that he is what the world is not and the world is what he is not. The negation is possible only in this relation; and in this negation he differs from the world as he makes the world differ from himself. Same is the case with his relation to the Valet. Though he first encounters the Valet as an object, but then the actions of the Valet inform him that his perception of the Valet is not what the actions of the Valet are. Through this differential and negative relation of Garcine to the actions of the Valet, Garcine's perception about the Valet gets changed; he gets the awareness that the Valet is not identical with other objects around him though the Valet is still not a pure subject for him like his own because the authentic experience of existence belongs only to subject itself. Thus the Valet is presented with the defamiliar and new image of Garcine. His perception is renewed and is blessed with a new meaning. This contrasting relation between Garcine and the Valet is marked by an aura of surrealism; the valet does not have eyelids at all, and Garcine's eyelids are 'atrophied'. The Valet is linked to Garcine in such manner that a surreal effect is created through a structural contrast between the two characters. Therefore, just like Beckett does, Sartre also uses surrealism to make a new and defamiliar reality.

### Conclusion

This paper focused on the defamiliar realities created in *The Chairs*, *Endgame* and *No Exit* by Ionesco, Beckett and Sartre respectively. The impact of different modern movements and



philosophies was analysed thoroughly both at the level of theory and literature. It was proposed that the three dramatists use the artistic and literary techniques of modernism to create a defamiliar reality. The major arguments of prominent critics such as Martin Esslin were contested; through the lenses of theoretical constructs such as defamiliarization, existentialism and phenomenology, it was concluded that the plays are by no means absurd or meaningless. They do convey a philosophy or meaning that gets unfolded when we look at these plays in terms of the new realities created in them and do not consider them as a representational art. It was found out that the three dramatists differ from one another in many ways; but one characteristic remains common among them—they deal with the basic problems of existence in such a manner that an estrangement from what is ordinary is made possible by presenting before the audience new world of meaning and possibilities. They in this way try to make the lives of the audience authentic and more meaningful.

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