



Nietzschean Nihilism and Alternative Modernities in Select ‘Absurd’ Plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter

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ABSTRACT

The plays that Martin Esslin famously classified as belonging to the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ are characterised by the presence of nihilism and the influence of pessimism of existential philosophy. The plays of such Absurd playwrights as Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco have been criticised for portraying a world of nihilism and dominated by the angst of existentialism. The major mode of criticism is dominated by the sense of hopelessness and despair of the post Second World War. It has been argued that the plays comprising the absurd theatre are characterised by their depiction of the sense of senselessness and the inadequacy of rationality. While acknowledging the presence of nihilism and the influence of existential philosophy in the plays of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, this paper claims that the nihilism in these plays is essentially Nietzschean and hence not pessimistic. This paper will argue that the plays of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ is essentially based on Nietzsche’s concept of ‘Amor fati’ and that they project an alternative modernity in its response to the pessimistic tone of the existential philosophy.

KEYWORDS

Nihilism, Existentialism, Angst, Alternative Modernities, Theatre of the Absurd, Amor Fati

Introduction

The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, which have been so famously classified by Martin Esslin as ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ (Esslin, 1961) are generally looked upon as a response to the existential angst caused by the two world wars, leading to a sense of disillusionment by the European peoples in the 1940s and 1950s. Apart from the war leading to the feelings of emptiness, anxiety and horror, faith in religion started to fade with the enlightenment and the social revolutions’ turning into a totalitarian regime. All these served people well to be in a position where they cannot find any rationale to explain their existence and the surrounding world. It is no coincidence that absurd plays started to be produced at these times. Absurd playwrights theorized and produced plays that thoroughly expressed the absurd human condition in universe. Absurd plays are also responses to the dominant philosophy of Existentialism of the post-war times, expressing human condition such as the tension between the individual and the “public”; an emphasis on the worldly or “situated” character of human thought and reason; a fascination with liminal experiences of anxiety, death, the “nothing” and nihilism; the rejection of science (and above all, causal explanation) as an adequate framework for understanding human being; and the introduction of “authenticity” as the norm of self-identity, tied to the project of self-definition through freedom, choice, and commitment.

‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ depicted the problematisation of the absolutes, historically against the backdrop of the two world wars, which have been considered nihilist. In its devaluation of language, for instance, the play depicts the “existence of an elemental or originary mode of communication underlying all interpretative acts whichever the content of the interpretation may be.” (Wotling, 63) The purpose of this paper is to analyse the existential angst depicted in select plays belonging to the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ and the nihilism in it from the Nietzsche’s philosophy. Chronologically, Nietzsche belonged to the nineteenth century. However, “against the trend of nineteenth-century optimism Nietzsche rejected many of the central tenets of Enlightenment though (the value of reason, the value of science, the value of truth, the inevitability of progress).” (Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, 377) It is this aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy that establishes a link with the plays of ‘Absurd’ theatre. By means of an analysis of nihilism in select plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, the paper will argue that the plays classified by Esslin as ‘Absurd’ in fact depict an alternative modernity – a term which implies that the plays can be viewed as a culturally situated phenomenon. Arguments for alternative modernities confirm the need for cultural theories of modernity—theories that foreground place as well as time—but also lead us inevitably to the issue of local agency.

Absurd Theatre, Existentialism and Nihilism

The ‘absurd’ plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter have generally been read against

the background of the two world wars and have been taken to represent the pessimistic view of the world that followed the immediate aftermath of the world wars. The faith in the basic tenets of life, considered to be the driving force of life in the planet, was destabilised. The plays dramatise the existential angst in their analysis of the post world war holocaust that has resulted in loss of faith in human values which were considered to be at the root of the development of human being. It is against this background that the philosophy of existentialism has assumed a great significance in readings of the plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. The philosophy of nihilism propagated by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, which sought to draw the consequences of the death of God, the collapse of any theistic support for morality, can be seen as the precursor of this existential angst that found its theatrical manifestation in the ‘Absurd’ plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter.

For Nietzsche, ‘nihilism’ is a cultural experience, a profound sense of disappointment and not only the failure of philosophy to justify moral principles. It questions the very basic values, objectivity and rationality that we associate with our lives. The caustic strength of nihilism is absolute, Nietzsche argues, and under its withering scrutiny “*the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking, and ‘Why’ finds no answer” (*Will to Power*, 9). Inevitably, nihilism will expose all cherished beliefs and sacrosanct truths as symptoms of a defective Western mythos. This collapse of meaning, relevance, and purpose will be the most destructive force in history, constituting a total assault on reality and nothing less than the greatest crisis of humanity:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. . . . For some time now our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end. . . . (*Will to Power*, 3)

In Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, two men, Vladimir and Estragon, are shown to be awaiting the arrival of Godot. While waiting, they meet two other men – Pozzo, who is on his way to the market to sell his slave, Lucky. After their departure, a boy enters and tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming tonight, but that he will surely come tomorrow. After his departure, Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave, but they do not move as the curtain falls. The second act of the play present Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot. Lucky and Pozzo enter again, but this time Pozzo is blind and Lucky is dumb. Pozzo does not remember meeting the two men the night before. They leave and Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait. Shortly after, the boy enters and once again tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming. After he leaves, Estragon and Vladimir decide to leave, but again they do not move as the curtain falls, ending the play.

The play presents the thwarting of the expected 'waiting' for Godot to be frustrated as its sense of certainty giving an impression of the monotony of life and its indefiniteness.

Boy: Mr. Godot –

Vladimir: I've seen you before, haven't I?

Boy: No, sir.

Vladimir: It wasn't you came yesterday?

Boy: No, sir.

Vladimir: This is your first time?

Boy: Yes, sir.

[Silence]

Vladimir: Words, words. [Pause] Speak.

Boy: [In a rush.] Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely

tomorrow.

[Silence] (Act One, 49)

There are many issues concerning life, mocked and doubted. To look at one of those issues, Vladimir takes the story Bible and tries to tell it to Estragon:

VLADIMIR: Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other . . . (he searches for the contrary of saved) . . . damned.

ESTRAGON: Saved from what?

VLADIMIR: Hell.

ESTRAGON: I'm going.

He does not move.

...

VLADIMIR: One out of four. Of the other three, two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him.

ESTRAGON: Who?

VLADIMIR: What?

ESTRAGON: What's all this about? Abused who?

VLADIMIR: The Saviour.

...

VLADIMIR: But one of the four says that one of the two was saved.

ESTRAGON: Well? They don't agree and that's all there is to it.

...

ESTRAGON: Who believes him?

VLADIMIR: Everybody. It's the only version they know.

ESTRAGON: People are bloody ignorant apes

This conversation between the two characters in the play is significant as it not only depicts the loss of faith in the Holy Bible and, by extension, Christianity, thus reminding us of Nietzsche's criticism of the religion, which forms the basis of his analysis of nihilism, but also positing the possibility of alternatives to understand the symbolism inherent in the Bible.

This experience of uncertainty and indefiniteness provokes a troubled laughter, so characteristic of the audience response to the 'absurd' theatre - troubled because the play refutes any consistent allegorical interpretation. Jonathan Kalb observed that the audience's response to the plays is essentially based on the following 'local' questions – 'Who is Godot and why doesn't he arrive? Why do Didi and Gogo stay together and keep returning?' The more comprehensive questions seem to be – 'For whom is any performance given and with what expectations? Why am I in the theatre and what am I waiting for?' It is questions such as these that relate the plays to the 'philosophy' of Nietzsche. However, it must be simultaneously admitted that casting Nietzsche as a philosopher is difficult, not only because Nietzsche was not academically a student of philosophy, but of philology. Moreover, the major concerns of philosophy, revealing universal phenomenon, was the least of his concerns. Nietzsche was, as Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes argued, was a 'local' philosopher than a 'global' one. His major concerns were not the search for universal phenomenon, but were like 'How does a particular phenomenon affect an individual in a given context?'. (Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, 377) It is against this background that the 'contradictions' in his writings is explained. The playwrights of the 'Absurd' theatre do not provide an adequate background that the audience was so familiar with, thereby provoking/forcing them to create their own interpretations of the possible 'backgrounds' to the action of the plays. Against the background information created by the audience, the plays pose questions that relate to the 'local' concerns of each audience.

Beckett's portrayal of a world of insignificance and incomprehensibility has led many critics to identify *Waiting for Godot* with existentialism, the Theatre of the Absurd, postmodernism, and nihilism. Although his works contain slapstick and dark comedy, his characters are often grotesquely exaggerated caricatures—oblivious to predictability and their impending demise. Many critics contend that Beckett's progression from language to silence and light to darkness reflects the author's growing pessimistic vision, yet some feel that by stripping down the characters to the basest levels, Beckett actually proposed rebirth. Some commentators note the numerous biblical allusions, repetitions, and ironic devices in his plays. His works have been interpreted as religious ideologies, chess analogies, atheist texts, and Eastern existentialism, yet Beckett warned against trying to perceive his intended thought, often commenting that his

works have no definitive meaning and advocating the individual's right to personal interpretation.

Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, presents Krapp, a sixty-nine year old man, surrounded by darkness in his room as he sets up an old reel-to-reel tape recorder reliving his previous selves and the decisions and circumstances that have led to his current state. Finally he turns the tape off, fetches a microphone and feeds a blank spool onto the deck and begins to record his last thoughts. When he has finished he puts one of the earlier spools back onto the deck and listens once more to his younger self, to a moment of happiness, as he stares ahead the tape runs to an end and the darkness engulfs him. Much effort is made in *performance*: looking, touching, doing the mechanical, robotic almost: "*Krapp remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, takes out an envelope, puts it back, fumbles, takes out a small bunch of keys, raises it to his eyes, chooses a key, gets up and moves to front of table*" etc. . . We, as readers or viewers, are spared the emotional component of Krapp; he stops the tape whenever it seems he ponders the truth of his life or attempts to answer any existential question: "What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely -- (*Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*). . . unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire -- (*Krapp curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)". However, it is exactly what is left unsaid that is unsettling to us. We do not hear any proposed answers on the meaning of Krapp's life as he reflects. We are left, as is Krapp, in the bleak void of ennui. We are left to face Krapp's pessimism and the fact that there are no answers, that there can be no justification for one's existence. Krapp does not want to hear about his old conclusions about his beliefs or the eventual questioning of formerly relied upon beliefs. He considers his former selves to be foolish for presuming that he once claimed to have any answers: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway. . . . Nothing to say, not a squeak. What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool. (*Pause.*) Revelled in the word spool" (24-5). The finale of the play involves Krapp listening to the portion of the tape that describes a final sexual encounter with a woman; perhaps this illustrates Krapp's last chance for happiness but he does not want those years back: I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side. . . . Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back. Thus Beckett creates the effect that Krapp's focus is always on the sensory aspect of each of his life experiences and not on personal meaning or significance. Krapp's excessive physical detail is a coping mechanism that allows him to avoid facing his own emotions and regrets, but his

avoidance of emotion makes it difficult for him to establish sense of continuity over the years. His objective and straightforward tone produces the sense that he is superficially but not emotionally attached to his memories. Krapp's inability to connect with his recorded past suggests that, "As a character he has no depth, since the memory is not inside him" (Langbaum 85). Such treatment of his past prevents him from the self-actualization necessary to construct a consistent identity for himself.

A similar sense of uncertainty prevails in the plays of Harold Pinter. The initial recognisability of the stage setting to the audience turns into a resistance to rationalisation. As Rabey points out, '*... verbal gestures of ostensible accessibility become, in dramatic usage, ironic indications and reiterations of the persistent separateness of individual perspective and interests.*' (Rabey, 52) *The Birthday Party*, Harold Pinter's second full-length play, depicts Stanley Webber's life at a rundown seaside boarding house is disrupted by the unexpected arrival of two mysterious and sinister strangers called Goldberg and McCann, who terrorise him and eventually take him away. The play distorts the conventional sense of speech in theatre to illustrate how bids for linguistic communication seek not *dialogue* but *confirmation*. This becomes evident from the early scenes: -

Meg: Is that you, Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

Petey: Yes, it's me.

Petey: What?

Meg: Is that you?

Petey: Yes, it's me.

Meg: What? (Her face appears at the hatch.) Are you back?

Petey: Yes.

Meg: I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) Here's your cornflakes. (He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat. Meg enters by the kitchen door.)

Are they nice?

Petey: Very nice.

Meg: I thought they'd be nice. (She sits at the table.) You got your paper?

Petey: yes (I, 19).

Unlike Petey, Stanley does not automatically confirm Meg's impressions and insistences regarding cornflakes and the world. In an early statement on his craft, Pinter writes that the language his characters speak, like that we also speak, 'is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken.' But from speech acts rooted in the habits of evasion, unreliability, and defensive obstruction, 'a language arises... where under what is said, another thing is being said'. As a consequence, the act of speaking is rife with its nominal opposite. In effect,

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent language is being employed... The speech we hear is an indication of that which don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant strategem to cover nakedness. (Writing for the Theatre': Speech at the National Student Drama Festival, 1962).

The intrusion of McCann and Goldberg is employed as a destructive force that reduces Stanley to a cipher by the end of Act III. When Goldberg asks Stanley about his opinion of "such a prospect" (p.94), Stanley responds with nonsense and meaningless sounds that reveal his psychological condition. But Goldberg and McCann insist on Stanley to say something while they are watching him break down: "He [Stanley] concentrates. His head lowers, his chin draws into his chest, he crouches." (p. 94). Thus Stanley vanishes from the old couple's life. The old couple, Meg and Petey are reborn.

The same theme of dominance, as manifested in *The Birthday Party*, is explored further in *The Caretaker*. When the play opens, Aston invites Davies home, which is messy and neglected. Because Aston wants him to stay, Mick finds a job for Davies. He wants Davies to be their caretaker and fix up the flat. However, Davies starts making fun of Aston for not doing much work and being lazy. He talks around Aston's brain damage but never says it outright. This angers Mick who tells Davies to stop getting above himself. Aston and Davies continue to fight with each other until Aston tells Davies to leave. Davies doesn't care what Aston says because he thinks Mick will take his side, because he's doing a good job looking after the flat. However, Mick sides with his brother and tells Davies to leave at once. Davies protests and begs Aston for forgiveness, but Aston won't listen. Davies leaves and watches them from the garden, but they don't let him back in. The brothers exchange a small smile which suggests they'll become closer after this drama.

The play poses the nihilism in the interaction between the personal and the social. The play focuses on what it means to take and offer care and the implications of interpersonal

behaviour when the balance of those things is impossible to achieve. The play depicts the demeaning of the value of generosity as the character of Davies, who is ‘morally’ indebted to Aston, who saved him from some altercation at the latter’s work place, gives him shelter and even gives him money to see him through the next few days. The audience response to this act of charity is significant. Firstly, the audience seems to be curious and uncertain as to whether in his acts of charity, Aston is exposing himself too much to an ‘unknown’ man and becoming vulnerable. Simultaneously, the audience is also curious to know what does he stands to gain in doing this act of charity.

Aston’s motivations in being charitable to a homeless old man come across as nothing but innate, unconditional altruism, which chimes with popular conceptions of Buddhist philosophy. This reminds us immediately of the statue of Buddha that forms a part of the setting. That the idiosyncratic Buddha statue stands on top of disconnected gas stove, is indicative of the prevailing nihilism in loss of faith in religious sentiments. This conviction is further strengthened by Mick’s smashing of the statue which might be read as Pinter’s rejection of all systems of thought that pretend to instruct and contour what should be our primary instinctive motivation. Additionally, the character of Mick stands in contrast to Buddhist philosophy of kindness and compassion in his various interactions with Davies. He makes it obvious that he is not welcome and that he is “in the wrong territory” (Taylor-Batty, 47). In contrast to Aston’s charitable and innocent nature, Mick is a worldly wise man who can understand the motifs of Davies.

The audience response to this interaction is double-edged. The audience is aware that Davies is not there on his own but has been permitted to stay there by Aston. Simultaneously, the audience also feels relieved that Mick might be able to limit the exposure that Aston had made himself susceptible to. As the play progressed, Mick sets the trap to expose Davies as he gets him to dig his own grave and caused him to have the confidence to deride and threaten Aston. Wielding the vocabulary of his xenophobia, Davies suggests to Mick that his brother “should go back where he come from”, revealing a confused response to the revelation of Aston’s mental illness that finally shattered the bonds of generosity that gave him access to the house. The final scene has Davies pleading to remain to a silently resolute Aston. If the play has been a game of domination for a right to remain in this space after the offer of care from Aston to Davies, Mick’s care for Aston has necessitated a strategic scheme of manipulation of Davies’s myopic selfishness. Care has been taken to correct an imbalance, when a care tendered unconditionally was not taken with appropriate reciprocity.

Absurdity and Amor fati

It is curious to note that despite the apparent absurdity of the situations depicted in the plays under consideration, all the plays re-create the world afresh in the end. All of these plays

depict a situation of imbalance and the end seems to correct the same. This feature of the plays relate them to the early Nietzsche, who, in his “The Birth of Tragedy”, analysed the two impulses in man that presented themselves in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, viz the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Apollonian represents the intellectual, form-giving faculty. The Dionysian represents the more primordial, instinctive, sexual drives. When one first reads “The Birth of Tragedy”, it seems that Nietzsche is calling for a reversal, for the overthrowing of the Apollonian in favour of the Dionysian. However, it has to be understood that in championing the Dionysian, Nietzsche is in fact trying to create a balance between the two forces represented by these. The failure of the Apollonian intellectual, as represented by the crises of the two world wars, giving rise to the cultural modernity, represents the necessity of a Dionysian force to oppose it so that the Apollonian emerges stronger and re-creates itself. The nihilism in the plays is required to be analysed in terms of Nietzsche’s concept of ‘Amor fati’ or ‘love of fate’, which repelled the “middle-class ethos – its stifling conformities and banalities; by its discounting of enthusiasm, imagination and moral passion in favour of pragmatic calculation and the soulless pursuit of money; and, more than anything else, by its pretensions, complacencies and hypocrisies as represented by the figure of the philistine.” (Gaonkar, 2)

— 56 — Viewed from the point of view of Nietzsche’s philosophy, these early plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter seem to be championing the cause of the Dionysian in propagating the nihilism. The nihilism in these plays is also the result of the Apollonian doctrine which has analysed the term negatively. On the contrary, a Nietzschean reading of the nihilism projects it as a necessity that is an essential requirement. As Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes argue, Nietzsche advocates the Dionysian because it has been oppressed and is therefore in need of a champion. The nihilism in the plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter is not entirely due to the loss of faith subsequent to the world wars, but because of the failure of the Apollonian aspect of man to account for “the pull of sameness and the sources of making for difference” interacting in different ways under the exigencies of history and politics to produce alternative modernities.

Nihilism and Amor fati

‘Nihilism’ is the loss of faith in every aspect of life. This phase is generally associated with the holocaust due to the massive destruction caused by the two world wars. However, the thing that requires to be understood is that life must go on and that the lessons learnt from the holocaust and existential crisis must be incorporated. Nietzsche’s concept of ‘Amor fati’ is extremely significant here. Nietzsche considered the theme of amor fati [love of fate] of essential importance: he referred to it in his later work as his ‘formula for greatness in a human being’ (EH: 258), ‘the highest state a philosopher can attain’ (WP 1041), or again his ‘inmost nature’ (EH: 325). The term is often mentioned by commentators in connection with the eternal

return and implicitly taken as an illustration of the sort of existential attitude characteristic of someone who would respond positively to the challenge of the daimon and affirm his or her life as worth living over and over again.

The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, as discussed above, projects an ending that is affirmative, and is against the dominant mode of criticism that looks upon them as essentially pessimistic. Despite the difficulties and eternity of waiting – Beckett once said that *Waiting for Godot* is not about ‘Godot’ but about ‘waiting’ – the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, continue to wait, despite a clear depiction of the change of fate of the other two characters, namely Lucky and Pozzo. It may well be argued that notwithstanding the downward shift of the fate of Lucky and Pozzo, Vladimir and Estragon take the cycle of change of fate in an affirmative note, to affirm in the end that their luck will go upward, perhaps because they are aware that their luck cannot go downward any more. Similarly, in Krapp’s search for a better self in his past, what he essentially does is an introspection of his own self. Such introspection definitely gives him an outlook that makes him aware that he has not evolved, but has lost his own life and has given away any chance of being better. While the tone of Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* is definitely pessimistic, it nonetheless provides the audience with a methodology of introspection of the self that can be used to evolve as a better human being, so necessary especially to avoid recurrence of the destruction such as caused by the world wars.

Similarly, in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, what has been considered an ‘intrusion’ by the two characters, Goldberg and McCann, may be looked upon as a confrontation of Stanley with his own ‘Dionysian’ self. It has been argued above that the play projects Stanley as a character who appears to be ‘hiding’ from something or someone. As the play progresses leading to the eventual transformation of Stanley in the last scene when he is being driven away by Goldberg and McCann, the character of Meg and Petey also undergo a change as their mutual relationship evolves from that of ‘Mother’ and a ‘pampered son’ to that of a husband and wife, despite the fact that this life is also based on an illusion. However, the play concludes with the impression that both Meg and Petey accept this ‘new’ life happily. This new life of Meg and Petey calls for an understanding of the love of life positively, as worth loving. Yet this observation poses two structural problems for amor fati. Firstly, it points towards a potential contradiction between the nature of the attachment and the putative value of its object. As Nietzsche puts it, ‘one will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering’. (WP §1052) Secondly, there are two main ways in which we can value a loved object: in relation to our own needs, for example because we deem its possession or enjoyment highly desirable or even indispensable to our well-being or happiness; or in relation to the object itself, because it appears to us as endowed with intrinsic value. In the first case, we perceive the object of our love as something that we should seek to

acquire or, should we be fortunate enough to have it in our possession already, prevent the loss of. In the second, we try to preserve or protect the beloved object for its own sake, regardless of our own happiness. Yet both these options raise further doubts about the suitability of fate as an object of love. Regarding the first, on either construal (Greek moira or necessity), fate is seen as indifferent to our needs and desires and would only fulfil them (or not) accidentally. We are aware that we cannot possess it and have no control over it.

These are not only instances of what Nietzsche considered *Amor fati* but also illustrate the methods to evolve as, to borrow another term from Nietzsche, ‘Superman’. The idea is that the playwrights of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, by generating plenty of opposing ideas and marshalling them as and when they become relevant, depict the possibility of *Amor fati* or, in other words, keep the life going despite hardships. The last scene of Pinter’s *The Caretaker*, where the usurper Davies is seen to be pleading to a resolute Aston to allow him to stay, is an example of how, from his supposedly mentally disturbed state, Aston has evolved as a resolute man (or Superman?) to be able to subdue the threat. However, the evolution of Aston need not only refer to the fact that he has lost his faith in the essential goodness and kindness in human being. As Pinter himself had suggested, he depicted a particular scenario of life and not the entire life itself. What the evolution of the character of Aston implied to the audience is that he had learned to differentiate between the deserving and those who don’t deserve the kindness. He has opened up the options of throwing out or keeping those who deserve or don’t deserve the kindness that he would like to offer.

Conclusion

The Theatre of the Absurd, by promoting the Nihilism from the Nietzschean perspective inspires its audience to love and embrace their fate, as emphasised by Nietzsche’s concept of *Amor fati*. The important point to note here is that arguing against the desirability of love in the name of our existing conception of morality, which is driven by the Apollonian impulses, presupposes precisely the standpoint that would be invalidated by the transfiguration of values resulting from such a love. Our current moral repugnance is the very thing that amor fati would overcome and is thus no decisive objection to it. The other, non Nietzschean, answer would consist in resisting this logic and holding that it is not desirable in principle that certain things, such as powerlessness in the face of the suffering of the people that are dear to us, should come to be loved. While the plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, as discussed above, definitely project the need for power, but it must be simultaneously appreciated that even to love the powerless and embrace them, requires the strength of character. The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter present this aspect of human life and in their depiction of the ‘Nihilism’, in fact, present an alternative modernity to that of the Apollonian doctrine.

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BIO

Abhinaba Chatterjee holds a Masters degree in English Literature and Translation Studies from Calcutta University & Annamalai University respectively and an M. Phil degree from Delhi University. He has published extensively on various fields of English literature, including Shakespeare, Indian Writings in English (IWE) and postcolonial theory. He has also presented papers in many National and International seminars, both in India and abroad. He is particularly interested in Indian Writings in English, Modernity in Indian Literature, Modern Drama, Postcolonial Literature and Translation Studies. He is presently pursuing doctoral research in Absurd Drama.