

## Snippets of the Absurd in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*

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### Abstract

*The term 'Absurdism' was first used by Martin Esslin in 1960 to describe a novel theatrical movement which began after the Second World War. Although weird and untoward, the form and vision of the absurd theatre seem to be a genuine result of a close diagnosis of the human situation. Absurd plays therefore amplify a ridiculous departure and jettison of rational adherence to reason and realism as the epicenter of human situation. As a result, there is a general belief by absurdists that humans exist in a world with no purpose or order. Wole Soyinka seemed to have caught the absurdist bug after the Nigerian Civil War holocaust (1967 – 1970) which placed man at the acme of bestiality as exemplified in *Madmen and Specialists*. The paper looks at the nuances of absurdity inherent in the play, *Madmen and Specialists*, which suggests that Soyinka apart from being abreast with the pulse and idiosyncrasies of humanity, is equally a farsighted playwright in the mould of Beckett and Ionesco. This paper submits therefore, that snippets of absurdism permeate *Madmen and Specialists*.*

**Keywords:** *Weird, Untoward, Uncanny, Absurd, Saner plane*

### Introduction

Theatre of the Absurd is a term coined by Hungarian born critic, Martin Esslin, who made it the title of his 1962 book on the subject. The term is derived from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus. Camus sees the human condition as basically meaningless. Camus argued that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond its reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd. In one of the greatest seminals of our time, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus tried to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however

faulty, is a familiar world;  
But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions  
and of light, man feels a stranger. He is an irremediable  
exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost  
homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promise  
land to come.

This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his  
setting, truly constitute the feelings of Absurdity (15)

Furthermore, in an essay pushed in Kafka, Eugene Ionesco defined his understanding of the absurd as follows:

Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut-off  
from his religions, metaphysical and transcendental  
roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless,  
absurd, useless (cited in Krasner 331).

This sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, basically speaking, the theme of the plays of absurdists like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet and others. Apart from the senselessness of life which permeates absurd plays, there is also the inevitable debasement of ideals, purity and purpose. Man as a result, is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened. Absurdists believe fervently that “man” lives in a meaningless world and that there are no standards for measuring truth, or measuring right or wrong, but each person finds his own meaning for life (Otete-Akpofure 131).

The Theatre of the Absurd rebelled against conventional theatre for it was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. The dialogue often seemed to be complete gibberish-non-sequitur. The Absurd Theatre distrusts language as a means of communication. Language, it seems to say, has become nothing but a vehicle for conventionalized, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. In the meaningless and Godless post Second World War dispensation, words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Absurd Theatre constituted an onslaught on language, shows it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama was conventionalized speech, cliches and technical jargons which it distorts, parodies and breaks down. Emmanuel Otete-Akpofure says that conventionalized speech acts as barrier between ourselves and what the world really is: in order to come into direct contact with natural reality, it is necessary to discredit and discard the false crutches of conventionalized language (133).

The age-old traditions that the Theatre of the Absurd displays in new and individually varied combination and of course as the expression of wholly contemporary problems and pre – occupations –might perhaps be classified under the following:

1. In Absurd Dramas, all values, knowledge, behaviors are illogical.
2. There is no objective truth. Everybody constructs a set of values for himself, but must also willingly recognize and accept the fact that in the end his values are based on unverifiable premises.
3. Setting, (if there was any) reflected the emptiness and boredom of modern life.
4. The characters are defined by the given situation rather than psychological details of growth and developments.
5. Facts and events are meaningless: human beings arbitrarily give meaning to them.
6. Ultimate truth to them is made up of chaos, contradictions and senselessness which makes up our everyday existence.
7. Characters are often like those in the dream world and fantasy; which often have a strong allegorical component (Otete-Akpofure 134).

These Absurdist features are easily discernible in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs*, Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. this paper examines snippets of Absurdism in Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*.

### **Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists***

In a note to the play, it is clearly stated that the play 'is set in the context of war and aftermath of war' (Wole Soyinka, preface, 1971). This identification, for the reader sets the frame within which he/she is to view the actions within the world of the play (Angya, 133). According to Jones:

There are many themes in *Madmen*...but it seems that the central enveloping theme is the erosion of humanity in a well-organised, tightly controlled authoritarian society (107).

This leaves us clearly with the picture of a bestial milieu where images of the absurd hold sway. In order to commence an analysis of the play, a-cursory synopsis of *Madmen* ... is expedient.

### **The play: *Madmen and Specialists***

The play opens with the Mendicants' attempt of their antics of extorting money through exhibiting their deformations. In between this, they play a bizarre game which is an apt depiction of the grim nature of the theme of the play. Si Bero's entrance and interaction with the mendicants cements her role as a healer, essentially as we see in gossip that emanates after she moves to talk with the old women. The mendicants continue to indulge in their weird games reminiscent of horror films quiet a lot of absurdity is depicted in this by-play by the mendicants. When the old women emerge on stage, they are shown as close to the earth, referred to as earth mother and they are portrayed as tutors of Si Bero in the art of herbs. Their own exchange equally brings to light this concern with killing and living.

It is in the ordinary actions of the characters that the story of the unravels. Bero, a medical doctor, has gone to the battlefield (war) and returns changed completely; instead of healing bodies, he is more concerned with power and control, and killing becomes only a morbid hobby. His return is greeted with joy by his sister who has kept his practice going in his absence with her knowledge of herbs and with the aid of these earth mothers who demand payment. This payment revolves around the sacrifice or a life, as the event of the play later unfolds. The mendicants also not what they appear to be. Although they have earlier been under the tutelage of the Old man, Bero's father, they are now being used by Bero to discover the secret of what the play wright refers to as "As". The doctrine seems elusive and Bero's superiors believe that for them to achieve the kind of spiritual or mind control which Old Man exercises over his 'pupils', this would give them the kind of control they need, not just physically but spiritually. The Old Man, who has been incarcerated by his son, refuses to yield in spite of the denial of his privileges by his son, Bero. The mendicants too, play along with the Old Man, by bringing the past to the open, and re-enacting the mental and intellectual thinking which he has released to them.

As happenings unfurl to a climax, with the Old women demanding their pound of flesh, Bero, spying and awaiting the moment when he will grasp the truth that will afford him the power he is craving for, confronts the Old women and is resolved to see them move from the hut which is located on the family land.

The Old Man's discussion with the mendicants gets to a crescendo as they attempt to open up the cripple to see what makes such a person tick. Bero kills the Old Man as the mendicants crowd

around him, helping him to spread out the cripple on the table. He shoots the Old Man before the act is carried out. The Old Man therefore, becomes the payment for the Old women's keeping of Bero safe during the war and teaching Si Bero the art of herbs for healing. The hurling of the embers of fire towards the doors of the filled with dried herbs of every kind signifies the burning of the store, thereby bringing to an end. The resources for healing which Si Bero has accumulated over the years. This final act is what serves as the play's denouement.

Snippets of the Absurd in *Madmen and Specialists*. The play is one of Soyinka's most pessimistic plays. The reason, for this can be found in the time and circumstances which gave birth to it. Written almost immediately after the Nigeria civil war (1967-1970), the play, according to Tunji Azeez, mirrors man at his basest, bestial nature. On another level Azeez says that the play moves close to the post-second World War theatre of the absurd, theatre of pessimism and total meaninglessness of hope, (Azeez, 48).

Martin Esslin's analysis of the tenets and features of the theatre of the absurd submits thus:  
 The devaluation of or even downright dissolution of language, the disintegration of plot, characterization and final solution which had hitherto been the hallmark of drama, and to substitution of the new elements of form-concrete stage imagery repetition or intensification a whole new stage language (220).

Inferred from the above, language in this play is in part used to effect "a strangeness and distance akin to Brecht's alienation effect" (Jones, 107). Language does reveal the locale of a play; but in this play, the language is not specific as to the actual locale or milieu of the play as Angya reports. Although in some parts of the play Africa is faintly recalled. This is Soyinka's most unlocalized play, the scenes being performed is a vague 'down here' with constant references to 'out there' with from which fearful deals are reported (cited in Jones 106). Charity Angya says that through the use of language, grim events are unfolded in a macabre game of dice in which body parts are gambled away by the mendicants as well as other actions that clearly portray the sinister and uncanny. SiBero tells Bero "We heard terrible things. So much evil" (*Madmen...* 30). The dialogue is bizarre and downright weird as can be seen in this exchange between Old Man and Bero:

Old Man: In a way I should be flattered. You want to borrow my magic key. Yours open only one door at a time.

Bero: Why As?:

Old Man: And rusty? Bent? Worn? Poisonous? When you're through the lock is broken? The room is empty?

Bero: What is As?

Old Man: As was, is now, As Ever Shall be...

Bero: (quiet menace) Don't play with me, Old Man.

Old Man: As doesn't change.

Bero: (increases pressure) From what? To what? ('b2)

Intriguingly, Angya reports that the exchange above builds up to a violent and ghoulish action typical of the absurd as we see here:

Old Man: (choking, tugs at the swagger-stick. Bero lets go. The OLD MAN gets up. Chaffing his neck.) Do you know what one of those men once said? Let's send our gangrenous dressing by post to those sweet smelling As agencies and homes.

He sat down to compile a mailing list

Bero: Yes?

Old Man: I understood.

Bero: What did you understand?

Old Man: As (62 – 63)

Tunji Azeez jolts our consciousness to the assertion that Old Man, Dr. Bero and the Mendicant constitute the madmen while Si Bero, the two Old women, Iya Agba and Iya Mate are specialists. Indeed, throughout the play, Old Man is obsessed with his philosophy of 'As' which he taught to his followers in a very negative and pessimistic dimension. In response to the above, Abiola Irele calls the play:

A nightmarish image of our collective life as it

appears to a detached and reflective consciousness (<http://en.m.wikipedia.org>)

On another level, Soyinka presents to his readers and audiences, the absurd and grim consequences of war like we find in the Second World War, the Nigerian/Biafran Civil war and most recently Russian/Ukraine war.

Goyi and Blindman's speech is reflective of such morbid carnage.

Goyi: I have a personal aversion to vultures.

Blind man: Oh, come come, nice birds they are. They clean up after the  
Mess (11).

The Mendicants eating chunks of human flesh is cannibalistic as it is revolting. Old Man equally recounts serving human flesh to the Specialist (Dr. Bero) and his cohorts. These are all reflective of how depraved man can be when he loses his sense of reasoning.

This brings us again to Old Man's insistence on opening up the Cripple which he refers to as the Cyst.:

Old Man: Bring him over here. Lay him out. Stretch him out. Strip him bare. Bare! Bare! Bare his soul! Light the stove (77).

Actions like the one above and others are psychopathic, morbid and depraved in the world of play where human life amounts to nothing. This is why Angya opines that Si Bero, Iya Agba and Iya Mate are the only sane humans on a saner plane trying to bring the others (Old Man, Dr. Bero, and the Mendicants) to sanity.

Si Bero, Iya Agba and Iya Mate are far from the maddening crowd of disgusting and cannibalistic beasts that the other crowd represent. The wars that bedeviled the world (Second World War and Nigerian Biafran War of 1967 - 1970) and most recently the Russia and Ukraine could be responsible for this depraved and morbid demeanor of man in a world where man has become

demented and hopeless. In such situation, man vents his anger on man. Man's actions and dialogue becomes grotesque and illogical as we find here.

Blind man: (He points an imaginary gun) Bang! All in the line of duty AAFA (His hand makes the motion of half drawing out a gun) (11).

In Samuel Beckott's *Waiting for Godot*, we are served an obscene and bizarre dialogue and action as follows:

Estragon: It's revolting  
Vladimir: Quick! Give me your hand!  
Estragon: I'm going (Pause. Louder) I'm going.  
Vladimir: Well, I suppose in the end I'll get up by myself (He tries, falls) in the fullness of time.  
Estragon: What's the matter with you?  
Vladimir: Go to hell.  
Estragon: Are you staying there?  
Vladimir: For the time being (*Waiting for Godot*, 52)

These are images of amsternation, hopelessness and outrightly absurd condition of the human situation.

There is an eerie creepy feeling and atmosphere that skulks in the play, time seems to be on hold or of no essence until Old Man hollered "Time is running out" (11). Commenting on the aforesaid, Christopher Lee holds that:

...It accumulates an atmosphere of horror and the grotesque  
Through elements of escalating unreason and eventually  
Cannibalism which both contribute to a world of seemingly  
Post-apocalyptic disorder, indeed, there is a palpable sense  
of ordinary self-conscious reasoning being lost as the play  
progresses, leaving egos unchained except in their own  
ambitions (<http://www.warscape.com>).

Little wonder Old man tells one of the mendicants:

Old man: You have lost the gift of self-disgust (13).

Emphasizing on the absurdity of the play, Angya adds that "Soyinka's picture in *Madmen...* is quite uncomfortable. There is no tranquil moment from the macabre game of the mendicants to the squabbles between them and Si Bero... (143)



## Conclusion

The wars of the 20th and 21st centuries are responsible for man's drift into the abyss as witnessed in the unfolding of man's bestial and morbid nature. This is occasioned by man's hopelessness and fear of the unknown. Kindness and love becomes elusive amongst men as man resorts to the despicable philosophy of "every man to himself, God for us all". In the end, men become pessimistic and isolated, giving reign to horror in man's actions and verbal exchange. However, as the society totters on the abyss, the onus is on the playwright to nudge the society back to sanity. Here, Soyinka presents in *Madmen...* the playwright as a man of vision, a light bearer and someone who gives direction to the society (Angya 144) this is the sacred mandate of every playwright.

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