

“THE ABSURD PROFESSOR”: MARIA IRENE FORNES’ *DR. KHEAL*

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First, you know, a new theory is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant; finally, it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves have discovered it (Hassan 1987:xi).

The term “absurd,” which was once shunned, had become a metaphor for tendencies in literature, art and philosophy in the post-war period. In theatre in particular, it kindled new dimensions of thought/philosophy and was also revolutionized by more of showing than saying. The Theatre of the Absurd — the new “theatrical virus” as it was called then — spread to the women’s theatre as well. Its anti-conventional mode was a significant influence in the women’s and particularly the feminist theatre, in which were flouted the traditions of dialogue, action, emotions and acting styles. But now, theatre has come a long way from the times of World War II, which, through the loss of hope/faith, culminated in the philosophy of the absurd. Therefore, the time has come to view theatre in the light of the post-absurdist era. I define “post-absurdism” in the historical context in terms of the definition of “post-modernism”: “. . . a kind of Dionysiac virus within modernism, tempting it to the extremes of madness and self-dissolution, and partly as the secret inner principle of modernism” (Connor 1989:111).

The post-absurdist era in terms of post-modernism is the era of “Indeterminance,” i.e., indeterminacy + immanence (Hassan 1987:87). Being historically related to the post-war/absurdist period, the post-absurdist era is deficient in responses akin to the absurdist. Hence, in spite of adapting the techniques/philosophy of the absurd, it becomes a parody or even the decadence of the absurdist philosophy.

Maria Irene Fornes is a playwright representing such a post-absurdist tendency in theatre. Her plays have inherent absurdist tendencies, and at the same time are a parody of the theatre of the absurd too. Yet it is not to be taken that she is opposed to the tradition of the Absurd. Her plays have the absurdist trend but lack the same spirit of the post-war absurdist theatre. This is indeed not unnatural, since they are belated in occurrence when compared to the Absurd theatre. Therefore Fornes can be viewed as a post-absurdist writer within the absurdist tradition. To support this statement, I quote Hassan’s (*ibidem*) idea of juxtaposing post-modernism with modernism: “The word postmodernism sounds not only awkward, uncouth; it evokes what it wishes to surpass or suppress, modernism itself. The term thus contains its enemy within, as the terms romanticism and classicism, baroque and rococo, do not.” Therefore, the post-absurdist vision of Fornes lies coiled within the great corpus of absurdism.

Maria Irene Fornes’ *Dr. Kheal* is a good example of the post-absurdist play. The focus is limited to the Professor image in *Dr. Kheal*, in comparison with two other images — the professors in Eugene Ionesco’s *The Lesson* and Arthur Adamov’s *Professor Taranne*, which obviously are absurdist plays.

Fornes’ *Dr. Kheal* is a burlesque on the query of knowledge and also on the theatre of the absurd itself. It is therefore a piece of self-mockery. Playing both the actor and the audience, the professor and the student, Dr. Kheal stages a one-man show of mock-lecture on varied subjects ranging from poetry to brussel sprouts. He has become stunted as a stage object in a set comprising reading stand, table, study charts and water containers, with

Fornes (1987:129) specifying: "He is small, or else the furniture is large," thereby typifying the absurdist image. The play is also a parody of man's needless pride on his rationalizing instinct.

The professor's message through his song ("Man is the rational animal") sounds absurd as his lectures reflect how foolish and pedantic the rational can be. The illogicality of the logical, the irrationality of the rational — it is the crux of the absurdist theme. Further, the play constructs a total butt of traditional modes of theatre through the mockery of its elements like dialogue, action, conflict, dramatic emotion. For the lecture of the professor is fragmentary, apparently meaningless, and proceeds in "non-sequiters," i.e., illogical or unsystemic arrangement of ideas/subjects. This play is indebted to Ionesco's *The Lesson*, which advocates anti-theatre.

Ionesco's *The Lesson* is a funny yet pessimistic drama on the manipulation of power divested even in the harmless relationships like that between the teacher and the pupil. The professor in this play kills forty students with his "lesson" comprising a variety of subjects, in their nonsensical form as in *Dr. Kheal*. The play is the scene of his crime on his fortieth pupil. At the end of the play (or is it the beginning?), neither the lesson nor the crime is complete; the door bell announces the entry of the forty-first student and marks the beginning of the lesson. Here again, the play is a serio-comic treatment of the theme — power politics in language.

Adamov's *Professor Taranne* is the play of the world seen as devoid of reason/logic, by a professor. Like Fornes and Ionesco, Adamov refuses message and identity and thereby brings out the ridiculous and absurd mood. The charges of plagiarism, bad behavior and unrewarding lectures pose a threat to his public identity. All his defence against these charges are not heeded. Ultimately, in the clash between his public and private identity, he gives up both. His removal of his clothes in

front of the blank/vast "tabula rasa" is a typical absurdist metaphor.

The Absurd Professor in all these three plays is a representative of the incongruity within/outside himself. The Professor figure is not an outright modern figure, but has his roots in the theatre of the ancients. He is familiar from Greco-Roman times till now under a variety of names — Doctor, Professor, Pedant, Logician, Physician, Dottor Graziano, Faust (Faustus), Frankenstein, and so on. Through the Medieval/Greek/Roman theatre, he was a figure of incongruity, the incongruity arising from his nocturnal/diurnal qualities, i.e., the serious/the laughable. Aristophanes gives a ridiculous treatment of Socrates in *The Clouds*, condemning him for questioning established knowledge. The image of the Professor-Doctor type from the Greco-Roman through the Middle Ages and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is characterized thus:

He is a member of the Academia della Crusca, a philosopher, an astronomer, a grammarian, a rhetorician, a cabalist and diplomatist. He can talk upon any subject, but notwithstanding that his studies were abnormally prolonged, he knows absolutely nothing, which, however, does not hinder him from citing inappropriately the Latin tags which he garbles (Fischler 1978:139).

Further, as a physician, he extends his knowledge/practice beyond medicine to occultism. As a person, he is greedy/weak/lecherous. This perversion of medical sciences into occultism is seen in Marlow's *Dr. Faustus*. The Faust figure is in fact a symbol of misuse/evil of knowledge. He, in the later era, in the hands of Goethe, symbolizes the "Faustian" intellectual who faces the complex moral/philosophical issues raised by life in the modern world. The Faust figure probably has its antecedents in the subtype called "Mountback" of the Middle Ages, combining the "quack doctor, half astrologer, half magician" (*ibidem*). The "lawyer/scholar/medical doctor" type was also a stock character (usu-

ally with a secondary role) in the Italian Comedia dell'Arte and was presented as a "lustful, garrulous, boastful and bumbling old man" (*Encyclopedia Americana* 1984:vol.7, p.377). In the modern era, the Professor-Doctor figure remains almost the same as its antecedents, except that it has assumed the protagonist figure. We have both the extreme types — the comic figure as seen in the "absent-minded professor" or the boastful pedant in plays like Shaw's *Pygmalion* and the serious figure, almost like Frankenstein, in Stoppard's *Jumpers* and Simon Gray's *Butley*; or the "serio-comic figure" as seen in Ionesco, Adamov or Fornes.

Here arises the question of why a traditional stock figure like the Professor-Doctor is chosen by absurd dramatists, who claim to construct something modern. This choice could have been made for several reasons. First, the Professor figure symbolizes knowledge and thereby a celebration of reason. But in a world deprived of reason, there is no place for him. Hence he becomes an incongruous and therefore an absurd figure. Secondly, though the Professor is a familiar figure, he also operates on the fringes. He is a pedant figure — reasons, argues, not accepting defeat. He also likes to make a show of his knowledge. This is the public identity which is given to him with which his private identity is judged. But this public identity has to fail as it is not his true identity. When it fails, he becomes a truly absurd figure. When Professor Taranne is charged for bad behavior, he does not accept it. He accepts his public identity — his ideal image as a University Professor — is lost. Fornes' (1987:129) Professor claims: "My answer wrong? It couldn't be that my answer is wrong. I am the master," but is not too sure of his perfection. Finally, the Professor is a figure who represents the sense of isolation/alienation in the life which is absurd. Physically, this isolation is observed in the geographical space which he occupies and which is looked up to by the classroom. But

this isolation is not only with others but with himself. This isolation within himself begins once he starts ignoring his true identity and warms up to his public identity. Ionesco's (1958:187) Professor, however hard he might try, gives in his true self, as revealed in this bit of dialogue between him and his pupil:

- Professor : Excellent. That's excellent, Mademoiselle. Then if you really don't mind . . . we could . . . begin?
- Pupil : Yes, Sir. I'm quite ready for you, Sir.
- Professor : Ready for me? . . . (A gleam in the eye, quickly dispelled, a gesture immediately checked.) It is I who am ready, for you, Mademoiselle. I am at your service.

The clash between the public self and the private self creates the absurd twist to the Professor figure. In fact, as Fischler (1978:137-138) says, the incongruity in the traditional Professor figure is accentuated and accelerated in the Absurd theatre. By doing so, the theatre of the Absurd turns the Professor into a central figure for the representation of man's condition in the modern world. This disjointedness and the separation of the Professor is effectively communicated in the theatre of the Absurd. Ionesco's Professor becomes more and more alien to his student in the course of his lecture. The lecture becomes increasingly nonsensical and jabberwocky: Professor Taranne's arguments in defense of his charges only make him more alien, and Fornes' Professor revels in this alienation through his apparently meaningless, non-sequiter lecture.

The textual analysis of these three plays further reveals the different/identical qualities in the three Professor images, juxtaposing the post-Absurdist figure in Fornes' play to the absurdist figures in Ionesco and Adamov. The Professor figure in Fornes' *Dr. Kheal* is not identical/unique as a speaking voice. It has the co-participation of the dramatist, the actor, the character, and the audience/reader, who speak together at the same time. Two in-

stances from the text support this assumption — in the beginning of the play, Dr. Kheal (the character) says: "The Professor picks up the chalk . . . He looks at the class with an air of superiority and counts to three demanding their attention" (Fornes 1987:129). When the Professor picks up the chalk, the stage direction says that Dr. Kheal picks up the chalk. So, the voice of the character mixes with the actor and the dramatist, all the three playing the imaginary audience themselves, whereas in the plays of Ionesco and Adamov, the speaking voice is very clear. The speaking voice is that of the dramatist who gives a monochromatic vision to the plays. The Professor in Ionesco is a timid figure in the beginning and gradually turns authoritative/violent. Ionesco (1958:123) has characterized him thus: "Excessively polite, very shy, a voice . . . very professional . . . In the course of the drama his timidity will slowly disappear; . . . the Professor will grow more and more sure of himself . . ." The self-eulogy and the pride of Taranne in Adamov's play gives an obviously picturesque figure of the Professor — a lecherous, absent-minded, self-conceited Professor who takes pride in his knowledge and position as a University Professor.

Dr. Kheal's lecture on the subjects of Truth/Will/Beauty present or juxtapose contradictory notions at the same time. On Truth, he says: "You see, people believe that truth is the order in which they live. Others, the bright ones, believe that there is no truth at all but only an arrangement. Both are mistaken" (Fornes 1987:132). Here, the speaking voice seems to be more than that of a professor. On Will, he confuses the two meanings of "Will" — one as "ambition" and the other of the male genital. In his lecture on Beauty, he brings in the binary oppositions of beauty/ugly, clean/unclean, thereby trying to rationalize "beauty." But the rational voice (at least this belongs to the Professor) breaks down when he realizes his inability to speak of beauty and love. Therefore, the audience, character, dramatist

— all participate in one or other viewpoint without any hegemony.

The conception that the Professor figure in Fornes stands as an idea and not as a protagonist is strengthened by the techniques of toppling down the hierarchies. From the beginning to the end, we find the Professor subverting binary oppositions like good/evil, beauty/ugly, etc. We find him rationalizing every subject such as love, truth, beauty, ambition, and so on. One might infer that the image is that of the Professor as a rational figure. But, if so, it is crushed towards the end, through subversion of the hierarchy, and thereby that of the set/play itself. This is evidenced in the final song of Dr. Kheal:

The other day,
Looking at a weird-looking spider,
With legs ten times longer than its body,
Who moved in the most senseless and
Insane manner,
I said, "Spider, you are spastic and I am
A superior beast."
There! That is what it is all about.
Man is the rational animal (*ibidem*:135).

Unlike the absurd tradition, where the subject position of the intellect remains the same, here, it is toppled down, through the upbringing of the animal over man/sense over intellect.

Here, the dichotomy between self and other is abolished. Thus, the play becomes a piece of self-mockery, the Professor laughing at himself, the dramatist laughing at herself. In the Absurd theatre, it is only the character's fall which is observed while reason stands on the top. Whereas in Taranne, the whole world goes berserk, with the Professor trying to rationalize things in a futile effort and finally giving up reason. The Professor in Ionesco rationalizes the irrational and thereby ends up in a non-ending cyclical action of giving nonsense lessons. Whereas the Professor in Fornes also rationalizes things, the reversal towards the end subverts the whole question of rationality. Not just the irrational, but the rational too can become absurd.

This post-Absurdist Professor in Fornes is thus not only a traditional figure — of the “serio-comic” nature, — but also a parody of the traditional absurd figure. The parody does not leave the Absurd Professor. The geographical space which separates him from his audience is effectively used to drive home the idea that the Professor is separated physically by the stage on which he stands and mentally, through his knowledge. It is also a commentary on the psychic/physical distance between the audience and the actor. Therefore, the Professor figure is also a parallel figure of the dramatist/actor.

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