



NIHILISTIC AND ABSURD VIEWS IN JEAN GENET'S *THE BALCONY*

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Abstract: The study is an attempt to discuss the social deficiencies in Europe in post-war times. European countries are in a dilemma after the first and second World Wars. Many scholars and literary writers reflect on this dilemma in their literary writings. Jean Genet is at the top of the list due to his unique living experiences within French society. His life provides a vivid image of the living conditions of Europeans after the wars. Genet adds a unique flavour to the literary canon by depicting the real life he goes through. In one of his masterpieces, *The Balcony*, he paid much attention to shifting roles inside and outside the brothel. In doing so, he reveals the sense of nihilism and absurdity in European societies after experiencing war. Thus, the study focuses on the nihilistic and absurd views of Genet in *The Balcony* to show his disdain for the social norms, traditions, and even customs, as the main feature of Avant-Garde theatre.

Index Terms - absurdity, Avant-Garde, nihilism, post-war drama

I. INTRODUCTION

On December 10th, 1910, Genet was born in Paris, France, where he shared a home with a prostitute named Camille Gabrielle Genet. The following summer, she decided to send him to an orphanage, and she disappeared from Genet's sight during his life. Genet immediately found himself in a foster home, but problems soon developed. He was charged with theft at age ten, even though he was innocent due to being rejected by society. In return, it pushed him to leave the community and commit crimes. Theft and crimes led Genet to be taken away from his foster home and school at thirteen years old, under mental therapy. He was given a two-year term at the Mettray Penitentiary Colony in 1926 after several unsuccessful escapes attempts from the authorities. In addition to strengthening Genet's criminal propensities and his hostility toward French bourgeois society, his stay in prison also allowed him to explore his feelings about writing stories reflecting his own experiences.

To be out of the prison's wall, Genet enlisted in the French army in 1929. He gained compassion for the Palestinians and the Algerians, two colonized peoples, due to his belief that the French bourgeois was oppressing homosexuals, orphans, and the needy, where he was deployed to Syria in 1930. Genet spent the following ten years earning a living as a thief and prostitute across Europe after being discharged from the military in 1933, with sporadic stays in jail. He added his first book in the early 1940s, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, to the literary canon. The original manuscript was found and burned, but Genet recreated it from memory and smuggled it out, where it ended up in possession of renowned French authors Jean Cocteau and Jean-Paul Sartre. The book was released in 1943 with the help of Cocteau. Cocteau, Sartre, and other authors fought to have Genet's life sentence reduced after he was caught stealing once again. Genet sensibly quit crime after being released from prison after his sentence was reduced to three months, even if he never stopped writing about it. His stay in Mettray served as some of the inspiration for his 1946 novel *Miracle of the Rose*, but he soon changed genres and looked for experiences that were radically different from his own. Genet's popularity expanded into the mainstream due to Sartre's incredible support of him and the publication of *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, a biographical and critical study of Jean-Paul Sartre in 1952. While continuing Genet's lifelong literary obsessions of illusion and oppression, his writings deal with sex, race, and revolutionary politics. After the 1960s, his creative production decreased, but he increased political activism by backing Palestinian soldiers fighting abroad and the Black Panthers in the United States. His final book details these political activities, released shortly before his death in 1986 and known in English as *Prisoner of Love*.

Genet is known for his ability to write in different literary genres. Drama is not an exception in Genet's literary contributions, in which he wrote some plays during his lifetime. Jean Genet is recognized as one of the most significant post-war playwrights. His first play was *Deathwatch* in 1940, followed by *The Maids* in late 1940, *The Balcony* in 1956, and *The Screens* in 1961. Jean Genet's early works were vehemently political. His works primarily raise political issues, especially with his third play, *The Balcony*. Many critics label the Balcony as one of Genet's masterpieces despite being written after his insistence to give up writing for the theatre. It is the first play to be a commercial success to motivate Genet to continue his literary career. The writer reflects his disdain for society through his obsession with the issues of prostitution, revolution and politics. He knit his play to be set in a brothel as a place of power and illusion where all the clients from different social statuses enjoy their fantasies. *The Balcony* reflects the actual society that Genet experiences during his life which lacks morals, ethics and societal roles. It shows the parallel between illusion and reality in which the characters enjoy their fantasies rather than facing reality.

2. Literature Review

The Balcony, a play by renowned French dramatist Jean Genet, was written in 1957. Since the first performance of this particular literary work at the Arts Theatre Club in London, there have been numerous analyses. Many studies have included it in the extensive category of Avant-Garde theatre.

After the publication of Genet's *The Balcony*, Many critical analyses and articles deal with the social deficiencies of European countries throughout Genet's works as reflections of his life. Genet experiences living conditions in a corrupted and spoiled French society. These studies are different due to the conclusions reached. Some of them examined the social norms and traditions and the rage effects of war on European society. Other studies showed that post-war writers, especially Jean Genet, had to reject the traditional values with the principles of the community to reform them based on alternatives for these values.

There are countless reasons behind the post-war dramatists' reflecting the sense of hopelessness in the social factors which led to World Wars. A study by Rebwar Zainalddin Mohammed and Ari Najm Omar titled "An Artaudian Study of Jean Genet's *The Balcony*" shows that the theatre of cruelty highly influences Jean Genet. It shows that all the characters in *The Balcony* are power-ambitious and prestige-loving, which are repressed by civilization and religion (80). All the play's characters represent the sense of hopelessness in reality to reform and revolt against the ruling class. They turn to illusion to play a fake role as influential individuals (80). The study concludes that Genet uses illusion as a medium to dig a buried reality for the audience to stimulate their revolutionary spirit to evaluate the social factors and the ruling system principles.

To reform the social construction of European society after the war, Doaa Haroun Abdel-Naeem's paper "Reforming Society through Metatheatre in Jean Genet's *The Balcony* (1956)" claims that Genet uses metatheatre technique to express his negative responses to the society. The study concludes that Genet's view of society as a hypocrite, chaotic, and ruthless led him to take theatre not as a tool for amusement or entertainment but as a way to reform society by urging the audience to do so.

Another technique that Jean Genet uses in *The Balcony* is the switching of roleplaying. The study of Liu Chin-Li and Hsueh-Yen Wang, "An Analysis of the Characters in Jean Genet's *The Balcony*", tackles this technique to show the dramatist's intention. It aims to stimulate the audience's role in society which is switched in their fantasy as a way to escape the harshness of reality. Power is the only way to challenge reality, enabling powerful social members to avoid switching roleplaying. In Genet's views, society is based on illusion rather than facts because ordinary people lost their sense of power.

Even though there is a good number of academic papers on Genet's *The Balcony*, they concentrate primarily on roleplaying techniques. They need to be made aware of the relations between the dramatist's life and the post-war time that he experiences during his course of life. This paper examines Genet's disdain for social orders and principles of European societies. Therefore, his play is intended to reveal the dramatist's nihilistic and absurd views, which target his audience to stimulate their essence of the actual existence. Genet uses the illusionary side, which enables his characters to enjoy the sense of power and the impossibility of having the same meaning in reality. This study can provide a new perspective for the readers to look at *The Balcony* as an Avant-Garde play and reflect the nihilistic and absurd modern society.

3. Theoretical Background

Many literary critics pay much attention to Avant-Garde theatre and how it reflects modern society. The discussion provides a vast space for some prominent thinkers with remarkable theories on post-war drama concerning nihilism and absurdity as the dominant characteristics of the Avant-Garde theatre reflecting modern society after experiencing the deadly impacts of war. The Oxford Dictionary defines "nihilism" as "a belief that nothing has any value" (Hornby, 1029). In contrast, it defines "absurdism" as "the belief that humans exist in a world with no purpose or order" (ibid, 6). These beliefs were ripe in European countries in the post-war period as responses to pre-social norms and principles led to devastation. The study selects Jean Genet's *The Balcony* as the representative of Avant-Garde theatre based on nihilism and absurdity.

It starts with the definition of the word "Avant-Garde" or "van-guard," which means "the troops which precede an armed land, sea or air force and prepare the way for its entry into action" (Krasner, 310). Literally, the Avant-Garde is an artistic and cultural phenomenon of a pioneering type. It would be a sort of "pre-style" that pointed in the general direction of everything that would ultimately succeed—a transformation that would genuinely change everything (ibid). In other words, it is a literary and artistic phenomenon calling for an urgent change which aims to change everything at the end of the event. Mainly, the Avant-Garde is realized at the end of the show to its unique nature to convey the entire scene for its audience. It is a form of antagonism and fragmentation. Self-conscious artists and authors who consciously try to create in a new form are known as avant-garde writers. They go against the traditions and customs of art and social discourse since they are adversaries and critics of the current system. They also introduce previously unexplored and often taboo subject matter. An essential goal of Avant-Garde artists is to shock the traditional reader and to challenge the conventions and pieties of the predominately bourgeois culture. They frequently portray themselves as detached from the existing order, against which they express their autonomy.

In a broad sense, plays written between 1892 and 1960 are considered Avant-Garde dramas. There are three main generations of Avant-Garde dramatists: the symbolists of the turn of the century, such as Maeterlinck and Hauptmann; the interwar revolutionary playwrights, such as Brecht and Pirandello; and finally, the absurdists of the 1950s, represented by Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter. All three stages reflected a revolt against traditional theatre and realism's tenets. In general, the Avant-Garde is the political and revolutionary cutting edge of modernism as a whole, from which it sometimes presents struggling decisively to be free.

Moreover, the Avant-Garde is also a critique of art as a critique of society to challenge the norms and principles of both art and society. As Christopher Inns points out in his book *Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant-Garde*, drama takes on self-criticism by posing basic queries to interpret and describe this literary genre. It also questions the nature of an actor and the spectator and what kind of relation connects them. Avant-garde plays go away from the usual or natural manner of writing to critique and rethink the fundamental institution of theatre. Drama seeks its purpose and place in social institutions, and dramatists imply their literary works as a mirror to reflect the social condition after the war.

Distinctively, the Avant-Garde dramatists utilize fragmentary and montage writing techniques. As Lilia Nemchenko puts on, montage is the technique of separating components in a cohesive form to develop the literary genres with a distinctive perspective to look at the world (115). Since Avant-Garde dramatists argue that a harmonious appearance of a work of art conceals the signs of discontinuity and leads to "false reconciliations." There must be an attempt to write and present a cohesive and natural play. Peter Burger writes in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that organic art promotes the illusion of a world by its complete form, even when the explicit contents may reflect a wholly different meaning rather than baring the inconsistencies of society in our time (86).

Burger continues to explain that the fragmentary technique of Avant-Garde drama is to observe rather than to present an integrating unified perspective on reality. Such avant-garde texts offer a "mono perspective," a skewed and eccentric view, in which it is unlikely to find either an accommodating "Subject-position" or any other source of compensation within a unified imaginary (qtd. In Murphy, 20). He adds that the impression that any feeling of a peaceful world has also disappeared, along with traditional orienting conceptions of time, space, and causality, is further reinforced by the plot's reduction to a succession of shifting scenes without a crucial and dramatic relation to a central struggle (ibid).

The appearance of "meaninglessness" is also triggered by conflict or disjunction between the fragmented parts, which commonly causes ambiguity and epistemological doubt. By further developing the Avant-Garde, Dramatists employ montage and fragmentary avant-garde tactics to demonstrate the absence of absolute reality. The audience or readers are forced to consider numerous alternative meanings, each of which may be as relevant to the text and equally irrelevant at the same time due to the inconsistent and fragmentary nature of the writing. By creating these misunderstandings in readers' comprehension, the authors hope to divert the thoughts of the typical audience from concluding and compel them to focus on the content of the work rather than trying to discover an ending or conclusion. Instead of imposing a unified form and conclusion without any room for audiences' thoughts, avant-garde writers believe that a work of art should impress the audience and make them doubt specific familiarity. They established beliefs and values to shake their concrete foundations. It ultimately causes the readers to quickly forget what the literary work intends to say and becomes a vague image of colours and sounds in the reader's mind. The Avant-Garde is a philosophical and political movement that uses style and aesthetics to attain political and philosophical goals rather than merely being concerned with art's aesthetic and stylistic components.

4. Nihilistic and Absurd Views in *The Balcony*

The post-war drama is an interesting ingredient to investigate the issues of nihilism and absurdity in Europe. The nature of post-war drama aims mainly to alter and adjust the social norms and principles according to the new findings. It rejects the previous social structure and attempts to create a new society. Most philosophers and writers follow a path to reclaim the new social order. Jean Genet supports this tendency due to the misery and harshness he experiences.

Discussing Genet's biography is tremendously reflected in most of his writings. After pointing out the presence of nihilism and absurdity in Genet's philosophy and creative output, Christopher Innes writes in his book *Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant-Garde* that Nihilism should be understood in the context of Genet's life. Genet passes through different stages during life, his poverty as an orphan, his living in a brothel with a prostitute, and his criminal history. Innes says,

Genet was a victim of this society, which he now seeks to destroy...But he does not try to correct the society he denounces. He does not try to substitute one order for another since he is against all order. (149)

In one of his letters to a friend, Genet confesses that his writings, especially plays, are not only against the social orders but also against the writer himself to identify his being (Innes, 149). He claims that all he has committed during his life is because of the social conditions he lives. For instance, he steals to buy some food (ibid). In this regard, the Austrian psychotherapist Alfred Adler claims that social forces rather than instincts direct man (qtd. In Sabates, 111). Therefore, the social factors that led to the post-war environment are the main cause of Genet's negative conduct.

Meanwhile, his experiences give him a uniqueness among his rivalries in the literary arena. He reflects on the social deficiencies of being a real actor in a real theatre. His role in post-war society is an excellent contribution for Genet by providing his readers with a chance to look at the reality of modern society. Besides, his literary works add a distinctive flavour to European literature.

Like his characters, Genet embellishes his guilt into an image of absolute evil by declaring himself to be condemned by all social standards. The fixation with hierarchy in Genet's plays runs counter to the notion that he is against all social orders. Genet's plays, influenced by his ideology and worldview, make an effort to convey this belief to the audience as moral lessons. It should be highlighted that Genet's ideology is considerably more nuanced than what may be expected from his life of crime and miseries. His experience as a criminal and social outcast, combined with the Avant-Garde aesthetic, led to the creation of his greatest works.

Like many other Avant-Garde plays, Genet's masterpiece *The Balcony* only has nine loosely connected scenes rather than an act as in normal plays. The story begins in a brothel, The Grand Balcony, which offers a setting customized to each customer's wishes and delusions. The brothel owner and a customer negotiate fees in Irma's opening scene. The client appears to be a bishop based on his name and attire, but it is difficult to believe that he is a bishop because of the convoluted and strange nature of the issue and discourse. He seemed fascinated by the revolution occurring outside and the veracity of the misdeeds the woman who provided him with service had admitted. Irma tries to rush him, but he refuses to move quickly. He keeps playing the role because he likes it. Even though his safety outdoors is in danger if he does not leave immediately.

Other actors appear in the second scene in another brothel room, one dressed as a Judge, a woman as a criminal, and an executioner. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that the judge is a client of the brothel, and his prostitute plays a thief who is about to be executed by the executioner, played by a male employee of the establishment named Arthur. The audience is given some hints in this scene that help them realize that the characters of Judge, the criminal, and the punisher are not real characters and are just acting according to the fantasies of the Judge. The Judge also enjoys acting out his role. However, he gets annoyed by any noise outside. He shares the most recent facts with the other two while fretting about the revolution. He may take his duty too seriously when he returns, which can frighten the woman. The judge is typically the one who is degraded by the other two for their amusement.

In the third scene, Irma sets up in another room to the preferences of a client who portrays the General. Like others, he worries about his safety but is also fixated on the specifics of his fantasy and demands that they are followed. The General's prostitute is virtually naked and behaves like his ride.

Another client plays the tramp in his fantasy. He examines his image in three mirrors and is overjoyed when his prostitute brings him a flea-infested wig to wear. In the distance, machine gun fire can be heard. The sixth scene begins in Irma's room as she discusses financial matters with Carmen, her bookkeeper and a former prostitute. Irma is concerned that her sweetheart, George, the chief of police, has not yet arrived. She observes recent changes in Carmen. She hears from Carmen that she is unhappy. She objected to the regulations Irma had imposed on the brothel workers. They cannot laugh or discuss what they do, as Carmen misses her daughter. Irma monitors her clients while they converse using a tool resembling a closed-circuit monitoring system. Irma does not seem to care much about Carmen's emotions. She is mainly concerned with her company and her worldly assets. Irma does not

seem to care when Carmen tries to explain her issues with the parts she has to play. The revolution taking place outside the brothel keeps her busy. At last, the police chief arrives, and everyone eagerly awaits him. In this regard, the pretending becomes a reality. The sixth scene takes place outside the brothel, where revolutionaries who have chosen an ex-prostitute as their emblem discuss their strategies for taking over the Palace. The next scene begins with the queen's envoy explaining that the establishment's leaders have been slaughtered in the revolt and outlining his strategies to end it in the brothel's funeral studio. In the eighth scene, which takes place on the brothel's balcony, Irma gets to wear the costumes of a Queen, Judge, General, Bishop, and the genuine police head to appear in front of the audience and deny that they have been killed to put an end to the uprising. The winning fake Queen, Judge, Bishop, and General are shown in the final scene while three photographers take their pictures. They are posed in specific ways that fit their roles in the outside world. A revolutionist dressed as the police head and castrating himself on the occasion of the revolution's defeat is simultaneously presented in the mausoleum studio.

The Balcony and all of Genet's other works have connections to expressionism and surrealism, which are grouped under the umbrella of the Avant-Garde movement. Both of these movements are anti-establishment and aim to overthrow the false ideals of contemporary bourgeois society, including its art, reason, and literature. His works portray societal realities as illusory, and since humans have such a great desire for illusion, no system can be based on fact. Revolutions are nothing more than "someone dreaming." As *The Balcony's* concluding lines make clear, audience members' everyday lives are more deceptive than "the house of illusions" symbolized by Genet's brothel. At the end of the play, Irma talks to all the other characters asking them to leave the brothel to go home as a falsar than the brothel (Genet, 96). It indicates that false social norms and values characterize European families as a unit of society.

Since revolutions are subsumed in the images they challenge and continue the reality structure they overthrow, they have the immediate effect of radical nihilism, an absolute negation of reality, which excludes any possibility of change. These images of dominance and submission are complementary rather than antagonistic. In *The Balcony*, the characters strive to "be nothing, though reflected ad infinitum in these mirrors, nothing but... [an] image" (Genet, 26), and they lose their influence when they attempt to control the course of events.

The Balcony falls under the third category of Avant-Garde dramas, which depicts the nihilism and absurdity of modern life and its lack of truth and reality. Genet creates a ritual theatre and ceremony to combat the existing ceremonial order and rituals. In this theatre, a Bishop is a brothel client, and clients order a Saint Teresa from the house.

5. CONCLUSION

As a play of Avant-Garde theatre, *The Balcony* is considerably related to Jean Genet's life regarding European society in post-war times. Nihilistic and absurd views are the feeling caught by people who experience wartime and its aftermath. Jean Genet is one of them who experiences the nihilistic and absurd purpose of life after the devastating wars. His disdain for social norms and principles is apparent in portraying his characters in *The Balcony*. He reveals how power can only be exercised for ordinary people in their illusion. They lost their sense of achieving peaceful life in the real world. Therefore, they turn to the illusionary world as a safe shelter from the actual consequences of war.

The current study concludes that Genet aims to reflect his feeling toward the society that deprives him of the most straightforward necessities of life. It is the main reason behind Genet's criminal record. He uses an unthinkable idea to reflect his feeling by portraying his characters enjoying the authority feeling only in their illusion provided by the brothel. His main intention is to show how European societies are characterised by nihilism and absurdity, lacking reality and truth.

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