

EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN ANUAR NOR ARAI'S "VACUUM"

(KRISIS EKSISTENSI DALAM "VAKUM" KARYA ANUAR NOR ARAI)

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Abstract

The period of experimental theatre in the 1970s significantly changed the history of modern Malay theatre. The plays staged during that era could be categorised as absurd because they contained strong inclinations towards absurd theatre techniques. The existential philosophy which underpinned the foundation of these works drew much controversy at its peak. This paper intends to highlight the portrayal of two main characters in Anuar Nor Arai's "Vacuum" (Vakum) who are constantly in conflict: the Old Man, who resists change but wants to stay relevant, and the Young Man, who perceives existence as being present and believes that change should be accompanied by wisdom. This intergenerational conflict also reflects the existential crisis that makes the play unconventional. In addition, the paper delved into the existential conflicts experienced by the two characters and their respective journeys through the philosophical lens of existentialism. "Vacuum", written in 1993, employed clever elements of absurd theatre techniques as it placed delicate issues into the mainstream discourse of local theatre at that time. Despite calling attention to various controversial issues through absurd theatre, such bold attempts by the playwrights are widely accepted today. Consequently, their boldness allows for more creative experimentation in the current mainstream Malay theatre.

Keywords: *Theatre of the Absurd, Malay Experimental Theatre, controversial, existential crisis, change*

Abstrak

Zaman teater eksperimental pada tahun 1970-an telah membawa kepada perubahan yang signifikan dalam sejarah perkembangan teater Melayu moden. Teater yang dihasilkan pada era ini sering dikaitkan sebagai teater absurd kerana falsafah absurd yang sarat mendasari pembikinan dan pementasannya. Oleh itu, teater pada era ini sering menimbulkan kontroversi sepanjang era popularitinya. Kajian ini memfokuskan kepada dua watak utama yang sentiasa berada dalam konflik yang berterusan iaitu, Orang Tua yang berkeras tidak mahukan perubahan dan mahu kekal relevan dalam masyarakat. Watak Orang Muda pula melihat kewujudan yang relevan itu sebagai keberadaan dalam keadaan semasa dan menerima arus

perubahan dengan kematangan akal. Konflik jurang antara dua generasi ini memperlihatkan krisis eksistensi yang membuatkan karya ini bukanlah sebuah karya teater yang konvensional. Kajian ini juga membincangkan berkaitan permasalahan konflik eksistensi yang dialami oleh dua watak utama dan derita saraf yang mereka alami melalui lensa falsafah eksistensialisme. *Vakum*, tulisan Anuar Nor Arai, telah diterbitkan pada tahun 1993 dan telah mengaplikasikan elemen-elemen teater absurd dan mengangkat isu yang rumit dan jarang diperkatakan dalam karya teater Melayu ketika itu. Walaupun karya Teater Absurd Melayu telah mengangkat isu-isu kontroversi melalui falsafah absurd, eksperimen berani yang telah dilakukan oleh dramatis pada zaman itu telah diterima baik oleh dramatis aliran kini. Eksperimen yang tidak konvensional ini telah membuka ruang kepada dramatis generasi kini untuk lebih berani dan kreatif berkarya tanpa kekangan dalam aliran semasa teater Melayu masa kini.

Kata Kunci: Teater Absurd, Teater Eksperimental Melayu, kontroversi, krisis eksistensi, perubahan

Introduction

The emergence of Theatre of the Absurd in Malay theatre in the 1970's has brought a significant change in the Modern Malay theatre industry. This period of change had witnessed the appearance of new playwrights who were bold in their diverse theatrical approaches, and the late Anuar Nor Arai was no exception. He was better known as a theatre and film scholar than as a playwright, however gained fame in Malay theatre when his big hit production, *Tuk Selampit*, won the prestigious Literary Award for Drama in 1987. Soon after the award, Anuar Nor Arai received much attention from many theatre scholars and critics. Anuar had always been known for his eccentric ways in his works and through *Vacuum*, his discourse in highlighting personal existential experience reflected his strong inclination towards existentialism, the philosophy which highly influenced the epistemology of the absurd theatre. Nevertheless, his experimentations had created ongoing doubts and criticisms, as this style was perceived by many to be vague and difficult to comprehend (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 1992, p. 154).

Vacuum, is Anuar Nor Arai's best abstract play that employs experimental styles which also depicts some philosophical issues. The play takes place in a vacuum which also signified by a huge ball, and since it is the vacuum that is the centre of this play, an empty space is exposed to the audience at large, from the beginning towards the end of the play. This also symbolizes that the space will be a place where anything and nothing can happen. The place is controlled by a dogmatic Old Man who philosophizes about existence, about living, the ideals and perfection of life in the vacuum without even making the attempt to get out from the ball or the vacuum. In contrast, a young man is dying to get out from the utopian world that the vacuum has to offer. The young man is tempted to make the efforts to seek the door which can lead him to another world. Throughout this play, it is interesting to note that Anuar Nor Arai has put forward a contrast between two distinct generations which symbolizes vacuum as, a confrontation between the old and the young. The old is satisfied and contented with the "perfection" while: the young is bored, restless and sees only imperfection. Anuar Nor Arai's characters continue to philosophize as they try to find their meaning of existence.

The paper aims to highlight the significance of the unique appropriations of absurd theatre techniques in Anuar's *Vacuum*. It is argued that the play does not merely deal with the absurd representation but it also extends to the philosophical underpinnings that highlight the existential crisis experienced by the main characters; the Old Man that has made him resisting change, and becomes a pessimist instead, whilst on the contrary, the Young Man from being a person who ever so wanting for a change becomes a person who embrace the meaning of life to the fullest. The theme of generational gap has made this play unique because Anuar has made the discourse so relevant until today even though his representation of the play was subtle. His use of symbolism such as that is the vacuum itself as a free, and timeless setting is indeed clever. The main characters in this play are being presented to have their own internal conflicts of their self-existence and therefore it would be thoroughly studied in this paper.

The Emergence of Theatre of The Absurd in Malaysia

The rise of absurd plays in Modern Malay theatre was believed to be during the period of political upheaval following the tragedy of May the 13th riot. The influence of the Theatre of the Absurd is believed to begin in Malaysia during the same period. Political turmoil following the tragedy of May 13th 1969 riot¹. Tracing back to the origins of absurd theatre, it was an anti-literary movement in the 20th century that was born and nurtured in Europe during the post-World War II era. The existentialist notions and impression of pessimisms, which arose after the terrible and horrifying war, had led to the birth of this form of theatre. Some of the European playwrights questioned the truism of the so-called progress, civilization, and the reality of individuals in their plays.

In Malaysia, the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd on the Malay playwrights occurred very much later; especially in the early 1970s when the Malay playwrights were confused and were seeking new alternatives as an approach to theatrical production. Krishen Jit once mentioned "What distinguishes each play from the next and brings out a response from many playwrights in each generation, are the political events, which have shaped and scarred the country"². Therefore, events such as the May, 13th 1969 riot became a starting point for the restructuring of the society, especially for the Malays. Solehah Ishak (1992) pointed out in her article, "*Trends of Modern Malay Theatre*", as a response to the riot, the government began to strengthen the Acts and new ones were introduced. The New Economic Policy was introduced as a solution to eradicate the economic problems faced by the Malays. The policy which was implemented on July 1st, 1969 had encouraged the Malays to leave their "kampungs" to move to urban areas to venture into labour intensive industries and obtain the 30% of the Malay equity capital (p. 163). According to Solehah, the change in political and social milieu had indeed brought a significant change to the Modern Malay Theatre in that period. She added that events such as May the 13th, resulted in a more earnest and serious response from the local playwrights. She further mentioned that it was the period that playwrights were more sensitive towards the changes inherent in the society. "The anger, hopelessness, turmoil and chaos prevalent in their society are reflected in the abstract plays of this decade as dramatists grope to find meaning and give direction to their shattered and splintered milieu" (p. 170). It can be said that Theatre of the Absurd had become an alternative tool to channel the playwrights' response, insights and feelings towards the social changes in the society at that time. The racial riot led to the requisitioning of national identity and purpose, which affected a wide range of spheres of Malaysian life.

With regards to style, the playwrights of this era tended to experiment with new approaches in combination with traditional theatre techniques. This would in lined with other theatre scholars and researchers who perceived that theatre in this country past two decades in 1980s and 1990s as an era of the continuation of the development of experimental stream theatres in Malaysia (Syarul Azlina Sikandar, Zolkipli Abdullah & Busra Aini Zulkifly, 2020, p.1272). The new approaches not only reinforced Malay culture but also gave the plays a dynamic contemporary meaning and image (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 1992, p. 145). It was during this time that many playwrights had a strong tendency to experiment with the absurd theatre. The struggle within an individual self became one of the most experimented subject matter in these works, in which it resembles a soul who was confused in the vortex of change in the new society. Hence, the absurd technique was deemed fit to portray the struggles within an individual who intended to seek his roots and identity as the absurd techniques contain strong allegorical elements³. Therefore, the strong allegorical elements became a suitable mode for the playwrights to express their insights in their works.

A closer look at the works that were produced by these playwrights of the 1970s shows that their works give primary attention to individual existence. More accurately, the plays presented psychological dilemmas experienced by most of the characters in the plays (Nur Nina Zuhrah & Rahmah Bujang, 1988, p. 144). The plays that were written during this period reflect on the issues that are existential and commonly represented by individuals who are caught in self-conflict to find the meaning of life. The playwrights depicted the dilemmas and confusion in their works through the characters in the plays. The pain and confusion further reflect the playwrights' insights and their concerns over social issues which were prevalent then. (Mohd. Ramli Raman, 1991, p. 21-23). Fazilah et al. (2019) mentioned that, typical theatre approaches commonly found in traditional and realistic plays were found to be limited in giving ways and space for other new elements to be applied (p.22). Evidently, theatre in Malaysia was looking for something that was new and suitable to adopt the vortex of change at that time. While the priority of realistic plays is to have a realistic representation, absurd plays on the other hand highlight conflicts of the individual self and provide insights into the truths and meanings of life.

Playwrights in this period were found to apply the common absurd techniques such as repetitive, nonsensical word or phrases which are evident in the dialogues, and these playwrights were also found using similar techniques. It is perceived that the experiment made by many playwrights during this period is more like an attempt to produce something different in the concept of the Malay absurd. However, it is found here that the experimentations made by Anuar Nor Arai were not widely accepted by the local theatre critics and the audience. This is mainly because the plays were distinguished to be vague and difficult. As a result, the absurd plays have created confusion among the audience, as they cannot comprehend the meaning that the playwrights intended to bring. The rise of the Theatre of the Absurd during the period of Experimental Theatre is not widely accepted in the history of Modern Malay theatre. Since Malaysian society is perceived to be basically religious, western influences on the absurd plays which contravene with the Islamic principles, are looked upon as elements that negate religious values. This points out the origins of the absurd and its epistemology has created much confusion among the audience and most of the local theatre critics. The advent of Islamic revivalism in Malay theatre in the 1980s had eliminated any possibility of the absurd play sustaining its popularity in the Malay theatrical arena.

In relation to this, looking at the plays closely, it is found that most absurd works are not as simple as it might seem or even as absurd as it was once labelled. The plays are indeed philosophical. Mohd. Ramli Raman (1991) mentioned that in accordance with some sociological issues raised by the playwrights, the characters displayed in the absurd plays are actually searching for a man's dignity in the essence of life (p. 21-23). The absurd level in these works reveals the search of an insatiable soul finding the meaning of life. He suggested that these absurd plays are somehow not just a simple application of the absurd elements. Indeed, these absurd plays are by nature very existentialistic and bring the audience into a metaphysical perspective. Mohd. Ramli Raman indicates that absurd plays are solely highlighting the tumult of the internal conflicts experienced by humans in finding the authenticity of life (Mohd. Ramli Raman, 1991 p. 22). His notion seems to conform with the earlier findings by Abdul Rahman Napiah or Mana Sikana (1983: p. 20) in his book, *Esei dan Kritikan Drama*, that most absurd plays that were written during the period of experimental theatre such as Anuar Nor Arai's *Vacuum* can be categorized as "metadrama" or metaphysical drama.

Most of the works that were produced during the reign of the Experimental Theatre in the 1970s reflect a strong basis of the absurd elements. Rahmah Bujang and Nur Nina Zuhrah (1988) commented that not many playwrights intended to delve into the individual existential crisis and psychological dilemmas, or even attempt to raise local concerns at the universal level. The playwrights are more focused on their responsibilities to raise the issues at hand and "thus made the works to be socially oriented" (p. 144). Syahrul Fithri Musa and Mohd Effindi Samsuddin (2020) mentioned that the playwrights during this period experimented with unconventional approaches in their play as a discourse to share their concerns and insights about the socio-political issues pertinent at that time (p.181). Hence, it denotes here that the playwrights' techniques and new approaches are perceived as an alternative deemed fit to represent the texts with different perspectives and ideologies. Anuar Nor Arai is one of many who was known for his experimentations within the absurd framework and was successful in raising local concerns at a universal level. Unfortunately, his effort and creativity have not received much attention. On the contrary, much criticism has been hurled at the absurd theatre during its short life span on the local theatre scene.

Methodology

Anuar's *Vacuum* is a representation of his creative experimentation of absurd theatre styles. Even though his attempt did not gain much appreciation, his appropriation of absurd styles deserves a special attention. Although the western style of absurd theatre is flawed by the philosophy which underpins the origins of this theatre, the playwright had transformed the style that was known to be unsuitable for the local audience into a play that is socially acceptable. *Vacuum* is heavy with the trappings of existential crisis experienced by two different characters, belonged to the different generations. Young Man becomes restless and relentlessly is trying to find his way out from Vacuum, whilst the Old Man insists the Young Man to stay and confront the banality of that space that they are both trapped in. The Old Man knows he was once eager and rebellious like the Young Man but living in the depressing environment such as in the vacuum, has made him stronger and succumbed to the challenges that were before him. And, for that the Old Man wants the Young Man to follow his steps and be strong with life in that cooped space. The conflict between these two generations

continues towards the end of the play, and this revealed the internal existential crisis in both characters.

Apparently, this play requires an appropriate theoretical approach to understand the characters tumultuous existential dilemmas highlighted by the playwright. The conflicts and dilemmas faced by these main characters have indicated that the play needs to be read through the philosophy that highly influenced the concept of the absurd play, that is the existentialist theory. It will be deemed wise to begin the discussion with the definition of Absurd theatre and its concept before going further into detail the discussion of Existentialism and Sartre's concept of individuality and absolute freedom. Hence, this lengthy explanation will be able to provide some insights to the situations pertinent to the play.

Absurd Theatre Techniques

The birth of the absurd theatre has shaken many conventional styles in the mainstream theatre in the West hence, quite different approach had been found created and applied (Esslin, 1968, p. 22). Its origin which was rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s and the strong influence by the horrors of the Second World War can be the reasons why absurd theatres required different methods in bringing their subject matters to the stage performance. As a result, the techniques reflect the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness. Theatre of the Absurd often display clowning and mad scenes as life itself is so confusing and nothing can bring meaning as everything in life has become meaningless. When everything has lost its meaning, Theatre of the Absurd portray this chaotic and confused condition with characters talking nonsense among them. Life through the perspective of the absurd is perceived to be devoid of purpose and language as a means of communication has become futile.

Absurd theatre techniques used important aspects with focus on its whimsical plot and verbal nonsensical language. In terms of plot, it is being described that the plot of absurd theatre has no structure at all. According to Solehah Ishak (1982) in her article "*Tahap Drama Kontemporari-Abstrak atau Absurd*", absurd plays contain a circular structure in which the play will end the way it begins. In other words, there will be no conflicts in between and resolutions to the conflicts (p. 66). Often the characters have no characterization at all. They are represented as puppets waiting and their waiting is always perceived to be endless and pointless. Another important aspect in absurd techniques is verbal nonsensical language. Absurd Theatre intends to break the functions of language which used to be conventionalized and stereotyped as commonly found in other forms of theatre. Theatre of the Absurd highlights that words have failed to express the essence of human experience, and because of that, words are not able to penetrate beyond its surface. George R. Kernodle (1967) further adds that Theatre of the Absurd involves to varying degrees the following special elements: a breakdown of language and communication, incongruity, senseless logic, discontinuity, senseless repetition, loss identity, conformity, hopelessness, despair, and futility (p. 310-311). Here, it indicates that language has become one of the most important elements that distinguish an absurd play from any other plays.

The Existentialist Philosophy

Existentialism is often seen as a revolt against traditionalist philosophy. It contradicts Descartes's views in that man is open to the world and the objects in it without intermediary stratum of ideas or sensations. Also, there is no distinct realm of consciousness on which one might infer, project, or doubt the existence of the external objects. Existentialists are more concerned with being rather than with knowing; this is a rejection of Cartesian dualism (Custance 1). Two major contributors were German philosophers Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). There are also several French writers like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) often used the term "existential" where he introduced themes that were developed further in the 20th century. Friederich Nietzsche had a lot of influence over subsequent major existentialists. As a distinct philosophical and literary movement, 20th century existentialism had its roots in the 19th century romantic revolt against reason and science in favour of passionate involvement in life.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) once mentioned that "God is Dead". With these words, Nietzsche had begun the study of modern existentialism. The modern existentialism was born from the social chaos and the havoc of war. It proclaimed a world where man is essentially alone and "condemned to be free" (Blackham, 1965, p.1). The theory rejects all traditional values and social customs. It perceives life as something, which each man must in some way make for himself out of the depths of his own being. The theory completely accepts the meaninglessness of life and solely based on man's struggle to achieve an authentic human existence.

Existentialism concerns the subject of individuality. However, existentialism wants us to learn that the freedom that we experienced, and the sense of the freedom that we feel is just an illusion. Existentialism tries to bring to light the awareness that we are all being deluded. Not only that, the existentialists also want other people to share the same view with the way they view the subject of human freedom where they hope that when we accept and understand this theory, we will perceive life differently. Because of the diversity of positions associated with existentialism, the term is impossible to be defined accurately. However, certain themes and key features found to be virtually common to all existentialist philosophers can be identified. The term itself suggests a major theme which stresses on concrete individual existence, that is, on subjectivity, freedom, and choice.

As a distinct philosophical and literary movement, 20th century existentialism had its roots in the 19th century romantic revolt against reason and science as against the passionate involvement in life. The two world wars have also become the catalyst to this movement that witnessed the decadence of religious faith and values among the society that were once involved in the tragic wars.

Sartre's Individuality and Human Freedom

The Existentialist conceptions of freedom and value arise from their view of the individual. Since we ultimately are alone, isolated islands of subjectivity in an objective world, we have absolute freedom over our internal nature, and the source of our value can only be internal. The Existentialist views human nature through the famous slogan that insists on the idea that Existence precedes Essence. This means Existentialism wants us to understand that we have

no predetermined nature or essence that controls what we are, what we do, or what is valuable for us. What is important is that we are radically a free soul acting independently and not determined by any outside influences. Therefore, we are able to create our own human nature through these free choices and not only that we also create our values through these choices. Based on these basic premises, we are perceived to be thrown into existence first without a predetermined nature and only later do we construct our nature or essence through our actions. This slogan is opposed to the traditional view that essence precedes existence, according to which we are seen as having a given nature that determines what we are and what our ultimate purpose or value is. We are understood by analogy to artifacts which are made with a pre-existing idea or concept of what they will be and what they will be good for.

Existentialism characterized human situations by three different situations which follow:

- a. **Facticity** (thrownness): We find ourselves existing in a world not of our own making and indifferent to our concerns. We are not the source of our existence but find ourselves thrown into a world we do not control and did not choose.
- b. **Anxiety**: We are faced with a lack of any external source of value and determination. We are faced with the responsibility of choosing human nature and values, and in doing so we are faced with the awesome responsibility of choosing human nature and values for all men in our free choices.
- c. **Despair**: In seeing the contrast between the world we are thrown into and which we cannot control and the absolute freedom we have to create ourselves, we must despair of any hope of external value or determination and restrict ourselves to what is under our own control. (The summary is taken from online lecture by David Banach)⁴

Through all these basic premises on human nature, and individuality, Sartre had supported these concepts and further developed his own view on human's happiness and freedom in making choices in life. Sartre defines human individuality as a major conceptual theory of existentialism. Since we are all alone, isolated island of subjectivity in an objective world, we have absolute freedom over our internal nature, and the source of our value can only be internal. Only we feel our pain, our pleasures, and our fear. Other people will only see us from the outside, objectively, and no matter how hard we try we can only see them on the surface. No one else can tell how much we feel, and we cannot feel what is going on in anyone else's mind. In other words, to be an individual is to be trapped within ourselves, unable to perceive anything. It is to be an island of subjectivity in an objective world.

Sartre's ideology on existence precedes essence, however, gives a notion on the concept of freedom, which he tried to define as free without any restrictions from the preconceived ideas of religions, ethics, and traditional values. Sartre argues that we perceive our nature from outside of us, the preconceived ideas of what or how we shall be. Our happiness and fulfillment consist of our living up to the standards that God had in mind when creating us. Both nature and value come from outside (Banach, 2003, p. 2). Thus, it gives the idea that there is no source of determination and value.

He explicitly tells us that our own path and destiny are not determined. Sartre (1957) in *Existentialism and Human Happiness* implies in his notion of existence precedes essence which signifies, "Man is nothing but what he makes of himself" (p. 15). It means that man is

what he conceives himself to be and what he wills himself to be after his existence. Here, it is clear that we as individuals have to decide everything and we must do it ourselves from the inside. What will be and what will be good for us is radically an individual matter. If we are radical individuals, there is no place else for our nature and value to come from, except from within us since freedom for existentialists is a nature for all men. But somehow men tend to deceive themselves and act as if they are not free; as if they are really determined by nature, their body, or the expectations of other people. This is the conception viewed by the existentialists on freedom and value.

Existentialism is always being associated with themes of the absurdity of human existence. From this condition, Sartre raised an issue of human happiness. His opinion stated that if all the sources of external values were taken away, we could still find the value within ourselves. Happiness is not vulnerable to the uncontrollable contingencies of the natural world. If we can find ourselves isolated from the external value, we can make a world of ourselves, a world of our own experience, which is the only place where we can and must find happiness (Banach 6). By doing this we will find the happiness that cannot be taken away by external forces beyond our control. Sartre philosophical views, which he related to life, literature, psychology, and political action, stimulated so much popular interest that existentialism became a worldwide movement.

Analysis of The Play: *Vacuum*

Vacuum, by Anuar Nor Arai unveils a different approach in absurd theatre 'ala' Malaysia⁵, when the play itself is represented by unchanged and yet vague setting in the entire play. The stage is empty, which reflected the concept of a vacuum, and equipped with huge balls and balloons as the props. The setting is a manifestation of the title, *Vacuum*, in which is a total absurd to many plays that had ever been staged during the era of modern Malay theatre. To compliment the absurd styles, Anuar Nor Arai added a final touch by having an old and also futuristic music as the background music for the play. The costumes suggested by the playwright further reflect the absurd representation, where the Old Man wears an old fashion set of clothes, whilst the Old Woman have a set of modern clothes with traditional elements. On the contrary, the young couple will have a pair of contemporary clothes each indicates modern people living in a current society. The portrayal of the two generations of young and old couple indicates a conflict that is yet to be revealed in the plot. The young denotes changes and hope and the old symbolizes dogmatism and complacency. Anuar Nor Arai unravels this issue creatively and yet the discussion to resolve this issue is not as simple as anybody might have thought it would be. Certainly, there is no definite resolution to this kind of problem, thus the playwright's solutions seem to be philosophical, as to signify the fragile and yet tough issues at hand.

Since the central issue in this play is about the conflict revolved between two different generations in dealing with leading a better life, in which have a proper faith and values in achieving utopia, therefore, the words that is applied in this particular play is somehow repetitive, yet philosophical. Not only that, it also begins when the Old Man wakes up from a long slumber and talking to himself:

Old Man: We have **lost** our mind. **Lost** our thoughts. **Lost** our senses. **Lost** our usefulness.

(*Vacuum*, 1993, p.184)

From the sentence above, the word “lost” is repeated several times. The Old Man is commenting the loss in life, the meaningless life that he encounters in modern days. Although Anuar Nor Arai’s words are repetitive, yet they seem to be rhyming and echoing with one another. The first encounter with his language application in this play will not be noticeable, nonetheless, after a few times the same phrases become a real sense to his intended meaning. Every repetitive words are not random, as compared to many absurd plays, where he selectively chooses the words to lead the reader or the audience to the meaning of his work. Most importantly, the repetition will never be more than two to three times. This is evident in the next dialogue:

Old Man: Don’t go anywhere. Here is **perfection** personified, **perfection** of all those times. It is here that everything comes to an end. You don’t have to search. You will not find what’s not there.

(*Vacuum*, 1993, p.184)

The next word that Anuar Nor Arai choose to highlight is the word, “perfection”, in the sentence when the Old Man gets irritated with the Young Man that seems not satisfied with his explanation and tries to escape from the vacuum. The word “perfection” is repeated twice to indicate that whatever that is found in the vacuum will be perfect for the ideal living for all mankind. Close to all man-made reality, as it deceives humans from the reality made-believe by the Old Man. In other words, the Old Man is trying to persuade the Young Man to abandon his worldly pursuit and stay in the vacuum. The playwright represents his ideas in between the repetitive words and phrases that indicate his subtle ways in bringing a delicate yet problematic issue that needs to be handled intelligently. What the playwright intends to highlight here is not something that is apparent, or even tangible, indeed it is something that one can feel at heart when one is really sensitive with the current surroundings. The repetitive words are also an indication the Old Man’s state of mind, who refuses to change as he feels his sole purpose of existence in the vacuum is to sustain the traditions for the place to continue to survive.

Vacuum by Anuar Nor Arai highlights a conflict faced by younger generations to protest and rebel against the dogmatism of ethics and values that have been set long enough to be practiced for generations. Vacuum is a representation of a place that is restricted and highly controlled. The Old Man represents the older generations who are accustomed to the values and ethics. He is content with the ideals of life and keeps preaching others especially the young ones who highly tempted to search the ways to escape from the reality. However, the Young Man sees only the imperfection of living the ideals of life in that vacuum, since according to him, he needs to explore the world outside. He knows deeply that he has to escape. Nevertheless, his effort seems pointless. He needs to search further as he yearns to seek the way out from that place in his limited ways. His legs are tied, and he fails to move his legs, therefore, searching for an exit seems a daunting task for him. He has a follower, the Young Woman, however, both of them cannot find the way to escape. It is a tough experience for him, and he is desperate. He has to win the fight in order to seek his happiness and leads the life the way he wants. He does not want to succumb to the dogmatism that pulls him down from getting what he needs, and what he perceives important. He realizes that the Old Man has taken away his freedom, and his life is dictated. He wants to end that, and he fights for his freedom.

- Old Man: What's your choice now?
(Young Man rubs all over his body. He tries to move. He does not succeed).
- Old Man: Don't look for something that's not there.
(Young Man tries to move. He does not succeed).
- Old Man: Sway your legs.
Young Man tries to move his legs, but he does not succeed).
- Old Man: (Laughs).
Be proud of what you have. At the very least, your abilities are the result of my re-creation.
(Silence, the Young Man looks at everything with pent-up anger and emotions). There, it's nothing, right? Don't look all over your body again. You don't have what is already there. Surely what you don't have was never, there, right? You should be proud that you have something from nothing.
- Young Man : (Angrily) What is the meaning of all this? I've been made a fool like this for far too long time.
- Old Man : I have already answered it hundreds of times.
- Young Man: Your response too is such that from nothing it becomes something.

(*Vacuum*, 1993, p. 185).

The dialogue above indicates that the Young Man fails in his attempts to seek for an exit door, and to make things worse, he cannot even move his legs. He is angry, and he knows the Old Man is trying to manipulate him. Young Man is aware that he is desperate to make a decision to what he deems fit. This situation however, is explained by Sartre, that man,

“As the only sentient being on earth, was forced to define who he was through living, while objects are what they are until destroyed. With our ability to think, grow, and change, mankind is in unique position of defining itself. We are each in charge of defining our own lives” (Wyatt, 2003, p. 9).

Young Man realizes that something is not right according to his judgment, and little that he can do about it, and because of that, he has to make a choice whether or not to stay and succumb or have the freedom to be what he wants to be. He wants to be free without any restrictions from the preconceived ideas that the Old Man has outlined for him. Furthermore, Young Man knows that his life path is not determined by the Old Man and therefore, he goes against the Old Man's ideology that vacuum is utopia to all humankind. This parallels to Sartre, that “Man is nothing but what he makes himself” (*Being and Nothingness*, 1972, p.15). Hence, Young Man wants to draw away and only if he knows how and able to find his way out from that place.

The conflict that revolves in this play is subtle but it is strong enough for readers to feel its presence. At a point that, readers might understand what the Young Man goes through, no one will truly understand this experience until they are really being confronted with such similar situations. It is like being in an isolated island of subjectivity in an objective

world, we have the absolute freedom over our internal nature, and the source of value can be only internal. In this case, Young Man only knows how he feels, his pain, his pleasures and his own fear. Other people will only see him from the outside, objectively, and no matter how hard the people outside try to reach and understand, they can only see them on the surface. No one else can tell how much he feels, we cannot feel what is going on in anyone else's mind. Therefore, Young Man has to fight to gain what he deems right for himself. No one else should tell him what to do, since the path to seek freedom and happiness are purely his. It is his fight, and he deserves a chance to make the change.

The Old man in the above lines mentioned, "Be proud of what you have. At the very least, your abilities are the result of my re-creation. (Silence, the Young Man looks at everything with pent-up anger and emotions). There, it's nothing, right? Don't look all over your body again. You don't have what is already there. Surely what you don't have was never, there, right? You should be proud that you have something from nothing" (ibid), represents the Old Man's reminder to the Young Man that what he is experiencing, was once the same struggle that the Old Man faced before. Old Man reminds Young Man that, the life in vacuum is nothing, but later, the Young Man will understand that he too will overcome this and be solace with the situations and escaping from the situation will never be seen as wise. The two characters have different views of their purpose in life, while the Old Man perceives life as following rules and respecting the values set by traditions, the Young Man feels that life is so much more than just being trapped by life ordinariness, where life is to embrace change thus that what makes life so enriching.

Even though the character of Young Man is fictional, his strives to seek his own path in life is not uncommon to many young generations. This is the phase of life when young people seek to discover their own selves. However, the search is a long process that comes with age and maturity. Once we found what makes us a better person, we realized then the search is worth fighting for and a wise decision indeed. We'll start to look back, being once a naïve, and innocent, the process of finding oneself is a process that everybody will experience, hence will make us wiser each day.

Conclusion

Vacuum is not merely about the issues on generation gap. In fact, this play gives the problem of gap in generation a different perspective as Anuar provides a different perspective behind the conflict. Both Old Man and Young Man are fighting their own self-doubts and they are in constant battle within themselves. Old Man is resisting change as he wants to stay within the system and place that he is familiar with. It gives him the sense of control that makes his existence valid and relevant in that space. He controls the system, the ethics and values that were once alien to him. Being in the place for so many years, Old Man has turned from an eager young person into a pessimist as he grows older over the years. Unfortunately, he expects the same to happen to Young Man. Young Man is nothing but all the opposite of the character of Old Man. He wants change, as he perceives change is imminent. He is not afraid to embrace the challenges and confront them with feisty and bold energy. He feels upset knowingly that his existence in vacuum to bring change and freedom to that place is not welcome by the people in vacuum especially the Old Man.

Anuar Nor Arai's play, *Vacuum* attests to his creativity as a playwright and is more than just a representation of an unparalleled work of art that defies conventional styles and techniques. Coming from a playwright who wrote during that era, his work is well written and unique. Through the characters in the play, he portrays doubts and confusion over the matter of self and existence, and cleverly deals with these issues with the object of finding some kind of answers. He highlights his concerns and offers insights into human relationships through his creative ability and the appropriation of absurd theatre techniques. Having examined the play, it is evident that it would be impossible to deal with existential and metaphysical issues using realistic theatre techniques. However, absurd theatre methods are more than capable of depicting confusion and the entrapment of the mind, body and soul through characters who are caught in a vortex of modernisation, as they search for the meaning of their existence. The issues highlighted are highly controversial, but with the appropriation of absurd techniques, the issues are eloquently well portrayed. As such, it needs more than just knowledge of theatre techniques to explore and to discover the real meaning behind this play. In general, Malay absurd plays are not only about absurd experimentations but also the philosophical underpinnings that have gained the attention of some theatre scholars. Conflicts and dilemmas are presented using the techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd. Babbling jargons and nonsensical dialogues are symbolic of the confusion experienced by absurd characters. *Vacuum* takes it one step further to show that these characters not only experience confusion but they are also presented with rays of hopes at the end of the play, that the playwrights hinted that Young Man is trying to wrestle his way out from the vacuum. This further indicates his intention to gain freedom, hence becomes a symbol that he has not lost hope. It gives the audience or reader the impression that the playwright offers some sort of closure even though it is to be found in the midst of repetitive mode set in the play. This is important to note as it indicates the play's point of departure from the typical western absurd plays. Thus, denoting the significance of the playwright's appropriation of technique to produce a play that is uniquely his own.

The existential discourses that are highlighted in the play reflect on the nature of existence and the purpose of life which cannot be understood by just looking for the answers in the physical world. The physical world that is so tainted with material gains and manipulations have drawn men to search for something more substantial. The political upheaval which transpired after the May 13th incident became an eye-opener to many as it made them realized that the nation needed some kind of transformation. Transformation was indeed crucial, and the society must be prepared mentally and spiritually for the inevitable challenges ahead.

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¹ Racial riots of May 13, 1969. Much has been written on this topic. Amongst others see Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1979), Tunku Abdul Rahman, *May 13th and After* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu Press, 1969), and National Operations Council, *The May 13th Tragedy* (Kuala Lumpur: National Operations Council, 1969).

² Refer to the article by Lim Cheng Hoe. 2003. Politics play a part. *The Star*, 23 May: Theatre 3

³ Abdul Rahman Napiah Interview via email dated December 1st, 2009

⁴ Banach, D. "The ethics of Absolute Freedom". Second Year-Semester Unit 11-Sartre1/91 Lecture 2 15th July 2003. <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/sartreol.htm>.

⁵ In the article "Trends In Modern Malay Theatre", Solehah Ishak (1990) argued that "the absurd dramatic form further illustrates the absurdity that these young, highly educated Malay playwrights feel at their own inability and helplessness to make known on the shortcomings dominant in their society" (p. 163). She also added that the absurd plays that are written by local playwrights are far more objective than the typical absurd plays that

originated from the West. It must be stressed here that the “absurd” plays in Malaysia are called as such because they are not plays that can be labelled as realism. “Malaysian theatre scholars, rooted in the Western tradition are aware that Malaysian absurd plays are in a class of their own and have no connection to the western absurd plays. In fact, these theatre scholars have resorted to using the term “absurd ala Malaysia” or “abstract plays”(p. 170). Her statement cleared many doubts and confusions on the unique appropriation of absurdism in Malay plays