

DISCOURSE ON DINSMAN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN MALAY THEATRE

MAS RYNNA WATI AHMAD
UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA

Abstract

Modern Malay theatre in the 1970s had witnessed a drastic change when Experimental Theatre was first introduced. The plays that were produced during this time had been associated with absurd plays as these plays contained strong tendencies towards the application of the absurd theatre techniques. Realizing the social and religious backgrounds of the Malays generally, the playwrights of this period tend to appropriate the typical absurd theatre techniques which were commonly practiced in the West. From the typical no resolutions plays, the experimental absurd plays have provided closures that resemble hopes and marked out any forms of pessimisms. This paper will discuss on Dinsman, as a prominent experimental playwright during the upheaval period of The Experimental Theatre in Malaysia. For the purpose of this paper, his famous experimental play, *It Is Not A Suicide* that was produced and staged in the 1970s is selected. The play was highly criticized not only for it was incomprehensible, but also, it was unable to disseminate good religious values to the masses. However, after a thorough discourse on this specific play, the paper had found out that, the play delves further into a metaphysical search that seeks answer through the path of religion. Therefore this paper aims to highlight his method of appropriation in creating a play that is distinctively his own. With such bold experimentations, Dinsman had led the new playwrights to continue the experimental traditions in re-creating new styles which would contribute highly not only to the Malay theatre productions generally but also to the field of Malay theatre criticisms specifically.

Keywords: *Discourse, Absurd theatre style, appropriations, closure, Malay theatre criticisms.*

WACANA SUMBANGAN DINSMAN DALAM PERKEMBANGAN TEATER MELAYU MODEN

Abstrak

Zaman teater eksperimental dalam tahun 1970an telah membawa perubahan yang besar dalam sejarah perkembangan teater Melayu Moden. Dramatis telah melakukan percubaan dalam teater dengan menggunakan teknik absurd. Menyedari perbezaan agama dan kepelbagaian adat resam kalangan masyarakat, dramatis telah membuat perubahan dengan menggunakan teknik absurd yang berasal dari Barat ke suatu bentuk teater yang lebih sesuai untuk penonton tempatan. Dari bentuk teater absurd barat yang tidak mempunyai pengakhiran, teater eksperimental berbentuk absurd ini menyediakan suatu pengakhiran yang dapat memberi jawapan kepada isu yang diketengahkan. Perbezaan ini telah memberi nafas baru kepada teater berbentuk demikian kerana teater absurd versi percubaan ini telah menolak pesimisme. Makalah ini akan membincangkan karya Dinsman *Bukan Bunuh Diri*, iaitu satu bentuk karya eksperimental absurd yang terkenal pada era Teater Eksperimental. Karya ini telah mencetuskan kontroversi hasil daripada pelbagai pemikiran skeptikal umum tentang keberkesanan nilai baik yang boleh disalurkan kepada masyarakat. Namun, dengan penelitian yang lebih mendalam, kajian ini mendapati bahawa karya *Bukan Bunuh Diri* sarat dengan persoalan metafizik yang berunsur keagamaan. Hal ini telah menjadikan karya Dinsman sebuah karya yang lain daripada yang lain. Namun demikian, hasil kajian terkini mendapati bahawa percubaan itu tidak diberi penumpuan yang khusus mahupun dibincangkan secara terperinci oleh pengkritik drama. Oleh itu, makalah ini akan memberikan tumpuan kepada bentuk tersendiri yang telah dilakukannya dan seterusnya mengangkat karya Dinsman sebagai karya yang unik. Dengan percubaan berani yang telah dihasilkan beliau, Dinsman telah membuka ruang kepada penulis generasi muda untuk lebih berani mencuba teknik baru yang lebih kreatif sesuai dengan perkembangan arus semasa. Ia dapat menyumbang kepada perkembangan dunia teater Melayu dan kritikan kesusasteraan

Melayu Moden secara keseluruhannya.

Kata kunci: *wacana, teater absurd, perubahan, kesimpulan, kritikan kesusasteraan Melayu.*

INTRODUCTION

The Malay theatre in Malaysia has been evolving through time. From 'bangsawan' plays to contemporary plays, the Malay theatre production has experienced many changes under the winds of modernization in the country. The forms and contents of the modern Malay theatre change as Malay playwrights respond to the dynamic political and social milieu. From the period after the Second World War till the present day, there has been no definite theatrical form which dominated the local theatre productions.

Theatre experts on local Malay theatre use the term Modern Malay Theatre to refer to all the plays that were written within the period of realism during the 1960s. It is believed that the realistic plays then marked the breakthrough in the history of local productions. When *Bukan Lalang Ditiup Angin (It is not the Grass That is Blown by the Wind)* by Noordin Hassan was first staged in 1970, the play reflected the first transformation in modern Malay plays. The play which was first staged in Petaling Jaya Civic Centre shocked the audience. Throughout the play, the stage displayed no sitting room set. Noordin Hassan had made a new transformation in which no other playwrights had done before. Many plays written by the later playwrights such as Johan Jaafar, Dinsman and Syed Alwi seemed to follow the trend of no sitting room, and therefore, had slowly diminished the strengths and popularity of realistic plays. A proper setting such as a sitting room set that was once believed to lie in the heart of realistic plays could no longer sustain its dominance in the local productions. The new experimental plays written by contemporary playwrights during the 1970s and 1980s marked a drastic change in the theatrical scene in this country. Many later productions benefited from these bold changes made in the techniques, styles and approaches in experimental plays. Nowadays, many new eclectic approaches have become prominent in the current local productions as the local theatre scene becomes more confident and breaks away from the conventional and the stereotypical theatre arts. This represents a positive approach towards the advancement of theatre as an art, which reflects the current social and political stability of the country. This is seen in Krishen Jit's opinion in an interview published in *The Star*, dated 23rd May 2003, "There is something about Malaysian plays. They are more textured and complex, as there is this reluctance to make things simple. There never has to be finality." Hence, there are new theatrical styles and approaches that later contribute to a more progressive development of Malay theatre productions.

BACKGROUND

Absurd theatre has never been successfully accepted by many theatre activists and the local audience. Since the absurd plays originated from the theory of existentialist, the society refused to accept its influence in the local productions. The audience rejected the emergence of Theatre of the Absurd mainly because, it contradicted with the socio-cultural background of the society since the society still basically upholds its religious beliefs and traditions. (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 1992). She further added that, the subjects and techniques used in Theatre of the Absurd appear to be incomprehensible and difficult to be understood by viewers. Therefore, the experimental theatre was to be viewed as insufficient in giving the entertainment expected by the local viewers who wish to escape from the pressures of daily life. (p. 154). Television dramas became an indispensable feature on television in Malaysia, hence it could be mentioned here that television dramas seemed to be one of the major sources of entertainment for local audience in the 80s and 90s (Juliana Abdul Wahab, Wang Lay Kim & Sharifah Shahnaz Syed Baharuddin, 2013, p. 160-161). With these eminent reasons, Theatre of the Absurd was deemed to be unable to sustain its popularity in the local theatre scene.

Absurd theatre has created ongoing doubts and criticisms, as this style is perceived to be vague and difficult to be comprehended by many. This has resulted in confusion among the audience as they fail to appreciate these works. Thus, to many theatre critics, they feel that absurd plays are unable to relate its significance to the audience. It is through Mohamad Amin Arshad who stated that, any forms of literary works which includes drama, should be able to communicate well with the society as literature works function as a medium to disseminate good values for the people at large (p. 105-115). With this perception, absurd works are believed to have no values for the benefit of the society. Furthermore, the society is not familiar with the idea of pessimism of the future as what is presented by this theatre. The audience prefers to be in their own comfort zone to watch plays that they can really associate with. The society's mentalities are basically bound by their ethnicity, religion and cultural beliefs. Hence, theatre of the absurd is not feasible to be promoted as a creative presentation for the audience.

Absurd theatre is seen as negating the Islamic principles. This is also in line with the guidelines by the local censorship board that, any media such as television channels, films or even the works of plays should not contain elements that portrayed the effect of anti- God, polytheism of Allah and anti- religion in all forms and manifestations (Wan Amizah, Chang Peng Kee and Jamaluddin Aziz, 2009, p. 42). Consequently, by having elements of absurd theatre in the works of Malay plays were immediately perceived inappropriate. Many theatre critics and scholars are in view that the absurd theatre is flawed by the western atheistic existentialism, hence not many scholarly articles or research have been pursued especially to bring about the importance or the significance of these

works to the development of Modern Malay Theatre. Kalam Hamidy (2003) had also viewed that absurd plays in Malaysia were not having a clear direction since the philosophies that influence the styles had been found unstable and thus inappropriately (p. 135). It is the philosophy that stands on the idea that humans should not be bound by any religious principles and values since these will limit their actions and the way they think. The philosophy also completely accepts the meaningless of life, and solely based on human's struggles to achieve an authentic human existence. Apparently, with these basic principles of the epistemology of the absurd theatre, have absolutely contradicted the basic principles of Islam, which is the official religion of this country. Even though the Malaysian society nowadays is living in the threshold of modernization, it is still deemed to many that the society still adheres to the religious and social values. The surge of Islamic consciousness resulted in many comments and critics of the contemporary practitioners who are of the opinion that proponents of the theatre of the absurd were ignorant because being Muslims themselves, their attempts seemed to be unaware of the origins and the philosophy which became the foundation for this type of theatre (Siti Jasmina Ibrahim, 2005, p. 31). The criticisms had shown that absurd theatre does not receive good feedback neither from the audience nor from the critics. These criticisms have created a gap that distance the plays from the audience, since these plays are labeled as not suitable for Malaysian viewers.

On the contrary, experimental dramatists viewed the Western form of absurd theatre as no longer appropriate in the period of intensified efforts to promote Malay culture and language. (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 1992, p. 154). Although Malay absurd styles do have some aspects in common with the western contemporary theatre, many new dramatists tend to create their own platform to flourish new ideas and styles to compensate the new theatrical production which represents the social and political scenarios in the country. As a result, experimental dramatists gave priority to sources of inspiration from their own background and imagination thus leading the modern theatre to a distinctly Malaysian identity. 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 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 realistic plays and most of their works are difficult to understand as the writing is not based on solid, philosophical or cultural tradition. "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." (Solehah Ishak, 1990, p. 170). Her statement

sheds some light and hence cleared many doubts and confusions on the unique adaptation of Malay absurd plays.

In relation to this, looking closely at the plays that were produced during the period of experimental theatre, it is found that most absurd works are not as simple as it might seem or even as absurd as it was once labeled. The plays are indeed philosophical. Mohd. Ramli Raman (1991) mentions that in accordance with some sociological issues raised by the playwrights, the characters displayed in the absurd plays are actually searching for human dignity in the essence of life (p. 21-23). Therefore, it will be deemed inappropriate to classify all plays with elements of absurd theatre as being atheistic and pessimistic. The concept of Malay absurd is still left unrevealed by many. There is a call for another approach to read through these plays, thus bring about the quality that these works might contain. Apparently, approaches in existentialism or even absurd theatre techniques are to be found inadequate and misleading, especially in the works of Dinsman during the period of experimental theatre. This is simply because Dinsman's plays mainly seeking for solace through religion, in this context Islam. *It Is Not A Suicide* is a perfect resemblance of a metaphysical quest in search of divine power to fulfill the insatiable need for a total happiness.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

It is found that in *It Is Not A Suicide*, Dinsman had experimented with an absurd theatre style which made him a significant dramatist during the experimental period. Not only that he was known for the absurd style, his discourse in highlighting personal existential experience has indeed reflected his strong inclination towards existentialism, the philosophy which highly influenced the epistemology of the absurd theatre. Thus, Dinsman had created plays uniquely of his own. However, his experimentations had created ongoing doubts and criticisms, as this style was perceived to be vague and difficult to be comprehended by many (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 1992, p. 154). It was argued that the philosophy which emphasized this play had been associated with being atheistic and negating the cultural values of the Malays specifically. These have resulted in confusion among the local audience as they fail to appreciate these works.

After more than three decades, researchers have shown that the works of Dinsman had managed to reveal the other side of the reality in the mainstream of modernization (Mohd. Ramli Raman, 1991). The plights and personal predicament in achieving happiness and life perfections mainly become his major discussions in his works. Dinsman's appropriation towards the once known controversial theory and philosophy, marked the end of realistic period, that set himself to become a prominent figure in the Experimental Theatre period in the history of Modern Malay Theatre.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

This paper intends to discuss the playwright's unique experimentation of the more absurd elements, in his famous play, *It Is Not A Suicide*. His appropriation of the theatre techniques critically provides an avenue for young playwrights to continue experimenting with different eclectic approaches in bringing up the local concerns to become socially oriented.

For this reason, this paper will analyze in detail on Dinsman's experimentation with the typical western absurd theatre style which had been incorporated in his *It Is Not a Suicide*. The play that highlights the personal predicaments and concerns over social issues in the mainstream of modernization: the one play that is heavy with metaphysical underpinnings that anyone should not be ruled out from studying his work specifically. This will further justify that Dinsman's play is not as pessimistic and atheistic as thought and claimed by many local theatre critics. Thus, the discourse will highlight greatly on how Dinsman's works contributed to the Modern Malay theatre generally.

METHODOLOGY

Dinsman is known for his contemporary style, even though the style it was only at the experimental stage. Being a bold playwright, his works reflect his vast knowledge that would include philosophies and literary elements. Therefore, to simply discuss his contributions through a single approach in evaluating his works is deemed to be inadequate. Realizing this, Dinsman's works demand a multi-faceted of approaches as well. This paper will evaluate his well-known work, *It Is Not a Suicide* through two different approaches. Firstly, the paper will look at repetition as a form of common technique in the western absurd theatre which becomes the foundation in studying the playwright's early influence in his play. The absurd theatre form continues when the play progresses deeper into a metaphysical quest in search of the meaning of life through the path of Islam. This is the part that delineates the typical Western absurd theatre, thus marks Dinsman's points of departure in the typical absurd form. Hence, in highlighting this part, I will bring the discussions of *It Is Not a Suicide* through the lens of Al-Ghazali. The approach through the lens of Islamic metaphysics will shed some light on the issues that are portrayed in this play. Dinsman focuses on his existential discourse and he seeks answers through Islam. Hence, it will be wise to look at Al-Ghazali to understand the plight that Muslims are getting into, and the solution rose in the play. The discussions and analysis on this part will become the second focus of this paper to study Dinsman's unique appropriation in setting apart his plays with the typical absurd theatre. Finally, after discussing all of the two major approaches, this paper will further highlight Dinsman's method in providing a closure in this play, which makes *It Is Not A Suicide*, an entirely different absurd play. Closure in his plays will be the significant method of appropriation in presenting that his play still functions within the Islamic

parameters specifically. With all the approaches, it is hoped that the audience and readers will appreciate his contributions to the contemporary theatre productions, as experimenting with new elements and philosophies is deemed possible.

Repetition In *It Is Not A Suicide*

The birth of the absurd theatre had shaken many conventional styles in the mainstream theatre in the West. New approaches were discovered, created, and applied (Esslin, 1968, p. 22). Its origins which were rooted in the avant-garde experiments in the art of the 1920s and 1930s and the strong influence of 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. Theatre of The Absurd often incorporates clowning and mad scenes as life itself is confusing. Nothing can bring meaning to it as everything in life has become meaningless as everything has lost its meaning, and the Theatre of the Absurd portrays this chaos and confusion through its characters who talk nonsense among themselves. Life through the perspective of the absurd is perceived to be devoid of purpose and language a futile means of communication.

Important features of the Theatre of the Absurd are its focus on whimsical plots and verbal nonsensical language. In terms of plot, the plot of the Theatre of the Absurd has no structure at all. According to Solehah Ishak (1982) in her article "*Tahap Drama Kontemporari – Abstrak atau Absurd*", absurd plays have a circular structure in which the play will end the way it begins. In other words, there will be no conflicts in between or resolutions of the conflicts (p. 66). Often the characters have no character at all. They are represented as puppets who are just waiting, and their waiting is always perceived to be endless and pointless. Another important aspect in absurd techniques is verbal nonsensical language. Absurd Theatre seeks to break down the functions of language which are usually conventionalized and stereotyped, as it is evident in the other forms of theatre. The Theatre of the Absurd emphasizes that words fail to express the essence of human experience, and because of that, words are not able to penetrate beyond the surface. George R. Kernodle (1967) notes that the Theatre of the Absurd involves, to varying degrees, the following special elements: a breakdown of language and communication, incongruity, senseless logic, discontinuity, senseless repetition, identity loss, conformity, hopelessness, despair and futility (p. 310-311). It is clear here that language is one of the most important elements that distinguish an absurd play from other plays.

In *It Is Not a Suicide*, it is to argue here that Disnman had followed the classic form of Theatre of the Absurd which is the use of language that focuses on the repetition of words. The repetition of words further reflects the sense of void and meaninglessness experienced by the main characters. It also reflects the element of 'pure' abstract in Absurd Theatre that illustrates the emptiness in communication among human beings. Since Absurd Theatre assumes an anti-

literary attitude, language is no longer an instrument for the expression of the deepest level of meanings (Esslin, 1968, p. 319). The language used lends the plays a deep metaphysical meaning and the conflicts within express more than any language can. Thus, the language in these plays is dislocated and full of clichés and repetitions.

When critics talk about the features of the absurd plays, they often mention the effect that arises from the similarity of the language used in everyday speech. One of the most significant features in everyday conversation and dramatic discourse in the Theatre of the Absurd is repetition. Repetition is a major stylistic feature in absurd plays, and this technique is also employed by local experimental playwrights, such as Dinsman. Schnebly (1993) states that repetition not only creates meaning and promotes interaction between the characters, but also signals discord between them (p. iii). This is simply because repetition can be employed to evade giving pertinent responses, to verbally dominate other characters, and to show contrived involvement. In addition, repetition can create harmony by involving us emotionally in the musical patterns of the dialogue, by bonding with the repetition of our everyday speech to produce dialogue that feels comfortable, and by making us laugh. Yet, repetition can also create disharmony owing to too much repetition, or noise. Repetition also illustrates communication systems in a state of collapse (p. iv).

AL- GHAZALI AND *The Alchemy Of Happiness*

In this groundbreaking work, al-Ghazali described human happiness through the keys to the basic tenets of life in the perspectives of Islam. He explained the key concepts through what he called as the alchemy that had been long taught by many earlier prophets, in order to teach men the prescription for a blessed life in this world and the next world. However, it is my intention to focus on the one major key constituent as these are the most suitable to the focus of this paper. Adam is confused with himself and he intends to search for God. Nevertheless, little does he realize that he needs to learn about himself first before arriving at the knowledge of God. Without recognizing himself and his true purpose of existence, he will fail to know about God and gain what he seeks: the meaning of life entirely.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF SELF

Knowing the self is the most important thing as this is the basic step to understand better for the purpose of living. Knowing “myself” is not only looking to the outward self, meaning, recognizing the self as having shape, body, face, senses, and so forth, such knowledge cannot be entrusted to the knowledge of God.

According to al-Ghazali, that men are created with two animal instincts; whether they should subdue and lead you captive, or whether you should subdue them, and in your upward progress, make it your strength and your other weapon

(p. 4). Every human has the outward shape called the body, and inward entity, called the heart or soul. The soul or the heart is not a piece of flesh that belongs to the visible world. It is a piece of flesh that resembles the invisible truth that holds the “knowledge of this entity and its attributes which is the key to the knowledge of God.” (p. 5) Since the heart holds the invisible truth of the meaning of life, the existence and the relationship between God and self, sometimes the truth can be elusive to find. In truth, it is the knowledge of this entity and its attributes which is the key to the knowledge of Allah. The intangibles can be possible to comprehend if men intend to look further. To seek the reality of the heart, or the spirit, al-Ghazali suggested that man closes his eyes, and forgets everything around except his individuality. Man will see glimpses of his unending nature of that individuality. Once the knowledge of God is obtained, al-Ghazali indicates that one can control accordingly where reason and passion can properly function to fulfill. But, if passion and resentment master reason, the ruin of the soul infallibly ensues. A soul which allows its lower faculties to dominate the higher is as one who should hand over an angel to the power of a dog or a Muslim to the tyranny of an unbeliever. The aim of moral discipline would be to purify the heart from the rust of passion and resentment, till, like a clear mirror, it reflects the light of God.

Some would ask that if men are created with such animal qualities, as well as angelic qualities, how the real essence of man can be constituted, that the essence of each creature is to be sought in that which is highest in it and peculiar to it. Al-Ghazali, mentioned that man is created by God to be the highest rank of all God’s creations. However, if man fails to place himself to that highest rank, he will fail miserably. Man is the highest faculty in all God’s creation because in him there is reason. Man is inferior to many animals, but reason makes him superior as it is written in the Qur’an: “To man, We have subjected all things in the earth”(Quran 31:20). If man fails, he will not be able to escape from the wrath of God.

Now the rational soul in man abounds in, marvels both of knowledge and power. Man is gifted with five senses that are according to al-Ghazali, like five doors opening on the external world. Reasons have made man to seek, to acquire and to grasp the knowledge that he requires to survive in this world and be blessed in the next world. The more a man purifies himself from fleshly lusts and concentrates his mind on Allah, the more conscious will he be of such intuitions or becomes more sensitive to all divine impressions. Al-Ghazali suggests that if man trains his mind sufficiently, and by due discipline, he will become receptive of such impressions. However, he reminds us to be aware of that but some hearts and minds are like mirrors so befouled with rust and dirt that they give no clear reflections or impressions. Thus, any impressions can be misleading and disguising men from seeing and interpreting the truths.

Anyone who seeks real happiness will realize that true happiness is necessarily linked with the knowledge of God. Each faculty of human delights was created by God. The highest function of the soul of man is the perception of truth; in this

accordingly it finds its special delight. As humans, we do experience in seeing beautiful objects, listening to beautiful melodies and sweet sounds of nature, we have the ability to learn and acquire skills to play, to create new things to live better in this world and achieve a blissful life after death. All of these can be seen as a perfect way of living, the happiness of living a good life according to the correct path that is taught by the prophets. Therefore, happiness is actually related to the knowledge of God in which without it human beings will be living in darkness.

The man's soul is such a great creation that he who neglects it will be doomed to rust and or to suffer in this world and the next. The greatness of man lies in his capacity for eternal progress, otherwise, he will be the weakest of all things, which is subjected to hunger, thirst, heat, cold and sorrow. As for his intellect, his mind is so powerful that it can lead to great inventions, great innovations. Sadly, if he fails to control and channel it properly, his brain is sufficient enough to destroy him as well. The truth is that man is vulnerable, and contemptible; it is in the next that he will be of value. But, that only depends on his ability to rise from the rank of beasts to that of angels. In addition, it also depends whether he is able to contribute with all the greatness that God has bestowed upon him to do good deeds for his happiness in this world and the next.

DISCUSSION

Repetition In *It Is Not A Suicide*

It has been said that Dinsman frequently employed the classic absurd images in his plays and invented the play as his own (Krishen Jit, 2003, p. 143). In *It Is Not A Suicide*, Dinsman applied the absurd techniques through his images of the main character, Adam. To manifest the confusion that is experienced by Adam, the playwright purposely creates an absurd setting. The audience is confronted by the scene where Adam sits and meditates atop the pile of books. He faces the audience with his eyes closed and his head bowed down; he is really lost in deep thoughts to find God. Adam seems to be engaged in a monologue in which he talks to himself whilst the audience is unaware of the presence of other characters until Adam talks to Dewi whose voice is heard but unfortunately not seen on the stage.

Dinsman experimented with the absurd techniques not only in the setting and the representation of the main character, Adam, but also with repetitive words often found in Adam's dialogue. Dinsman conforms to the absurd theory that communication between people can sometimes become futile. Dinsman's experimentation in repetition further illustrates the self-conflict that is experienced by Adam. In addition, Adam becomes more confused in his quest for answers as he finds out communicating with other people seem useless. This can be seen in the lines,

Adam: (speaks softly, hardly audible to the audience).

So many years I have waited.

So many years I have waited.

But you never, you never, not even once, let me hear your voice.

(Looks straight ahead. But his voice is still inaudible),

So many years I have waited.

So many years I have waited.

But you never, not even once, you never, not even once,

showed your countenance to me.

(It Is Not Suicide, 1988, p. 152-153)

The words mostly repeated in the lines are 'waited' and 'never'. This further indicates to the audience that Adam has been longing for answers for quite some time. The pile of books indicates his vast reading in his search for what he yearns and still he has not found the meaning of life. Adam is losing hope since in his opinion there is no alternative left to seek what he desires most. When the waiting seems endless, Adam thinks that the fastest way to seek the answer is through his belief in the afterlife and the possibility of meeting with God, and to achieve this, ending his life is the only thing that he can think of.

The repetitive words also suggest frustration that lies within Adam. Initially, Adam is passionate in finding the meaning of life. He is even more confused since the very fact that as a humble servant of God, his existence is to worship God and be a good servant to his Master. In contrast, the portrayal or the existence of Dewi is like a temptation to him. Adam is angry that his passion and love for Dewi intoxicates him to the extent that he forgets his responsibility in finding God. It is a mixed feeling that Adam experiences; between what he yearns for and his own passion for Dewi. This can be seen in the lines,

Dewi: Adam what are you looking at?

Adam: I am looking at your eyes. Your eyes. Once I saw your eyes aglow with artistic passion. Eyes which inflamed my heart. Eyes which once obscured my eyes. Your eyes. I have seen heaven in your eyes. Your magic eyes. Dazzling. Enticing. Cruel. Savage. Wild. Unknowing. Torturing. Eyes of heaven and hell. Eyes of loneliness. Eyes of suffering. Eyes of the sea. Eyes of the fish. Eyes of the bird. Eyes of the lion. Eyes of the wolf. Eyes of the prostitute. Eyes of the stone.

(It Is Not A Suicide, 1988, p. 167).

Adam's reply seems to reflect the absurd technique termed as 'verbal nonsensical'. He is speaking nonsense and this reflects his confusion. The metaphor found in Adam's speech symbolizes Adam's conflict inside him: his depression at not finding what he is looking for and his passion for Dewi inevitably disturbs him. By emphasizing the word 'eye' in almost every line, the playwright is trying to signify a symbol of hope. Adam feels that there is hope in life; hope to seek the meaning of life, hope to achieve an eternal love with God. Later however, he runs out of patience when he fails to find God and the meaning of life. The 'eye' is no longer giving him the hope. It begins to deceive him and he ends up feeling confused.

The application of the absurd theory does not end with the usage of repetitive words. Dinsman, however, explicates what was once mentioned by Esslin, that the growing specialization of life has made the exchange of ideas of an increasing number of subjects to specialized jargons (Esslin 399). Many absurd playwrights have invented their own specialized jargons to conceptualize their portrayal of human inadequacies in life. Dinsman has been found to follow with this this trend.

Al-Ghazali and *It Is Not A Suicide*

The key concepts that he highlighted had long been taught by the Prophets in giving men a prescription to a blessed life. The analysis of this study will solely focus on his two concepts of knowledge; the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God that are pertinent to this research. In search for meaning of life, Al-Ghazali emphasized that knowing one's self is the most important thing since without it, such knowledge cannot be entrusted to the knowledge of God. Humans will not find peace and solace since the selves are unable to be recognized and they can easily lose the sense of meaning and purpose. Without this basic knowledge, humans will feel empty and unhappy.

When discourse on the nature of existence and the purpose of life started to eating away at the mind; answers will not be found in the physical world as they can only be found inside. Hence, the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God have become a foundation for humans to look further to grasp for meaning. This is the case with Adam in *It Is Not A Suicide*. Adam's attempt to kill himself to meet God seems to be a genuine quest to fulfill his troubled mind and soul. Adam is portrayed to be a knowledgeable man, and the piles of books represent how much he has read in order to seek answers. He demands meaning to his life. He reads extensively, still his search seems to be useless.

Adam feels that being religious has never helped him to find what he is looking for. The more he reads, the more he gets confused. Neither the book nor his faith helped him much to gain what he is looking for. He seems to be lost in his search. This can be seen in the lines,

Adam: It's not I don't believe in religion, Father. It's

not that I don't want to believe. Look! Look at this pile of books. Among all these books, not even one can answer my questions. (Adam listens to Father talking). For years I have been religious. Instead of questions being answered, more questioned have plagued me. (It Is Not A Suicide, 1988, p.155)

The confusion wraps him. No one around seems to understand what are his yearnings. The entire setting reflects that Adam is alone. This can be seen through only two characters that Adam mentions in the play, Father-Who-Is-Unseen, who talks without voice, and Dewi, who appeared on stage is unknown but only the voice that can be heard. He is alone in confronting his own fear and insecurity.

Adam's main search is to find God and he wants to communicate with God himself all the things that he yearns for which is the meaning of his life. He knows God holds meaning, and he knows God's love is more fulfilling, but again he just does not know what else to do since everything he does in order to be closer to God seems pointless. This can be seen in the lines,

Adam: Aah!! ...Don't disturb me. Thoughts that never give meaning. Emotions that never give meaning. I have obeyed you for a quarter of century. But you have never give me any meaning. (Jumps up. Walks wearily. Talks while pondering the noose) so many years I have waited for you. And you never, not even once, showed your countenance to me. (Talks from different place while reflecting upon the noose). So many years I have waited. and you never wanted to let me hear your voice. And I must still wait for you. Day after day after day. And I still remain like this, forced day after, after day to be here. And I must wait until... until when?

(It Is Not A Suicide, 1988, p.153)

He feels that his life is so miserable and meaningless as he cannot seek answers. Adam becomes impatient. Unfortunately, he does not perceive killing himself as a wrong thing to do since his main objective here is to meet God. Therefore, his reason justifies his action. Life has no meaning to him as he fails to find meaning.

Adam's search would relate to the situation whereby he tends to know God the way he wants it, through the concept that he knows. Al-Ghazali mentioned that, knowing one's self does not rely so much on onto looking to the outward self, meaning, recognizing the self as having shape, body, face, and senses. This is simply because such mere knowledge cannot be entrusted to the knowledge of God. "Knowledge of this entity and its attributes which is the key to the knowledge of God" (*The Alchemy of Happiness* 4-5). Without it, man will never be revealed to the greatest gift ever given by God that is life itself. Adam fails to open his minds to look from another perspective. Therefore, he cannot find what he is looking for, since he fails to appreciate life as the basic fundamental for his real quest of finding meaning. By ending it, is a resemblance of how life is not precious to him.

In search of the meaning of life is like chasing for something illusive to the eyes, and the minds. Despite how illusive it can be, it is worth to ponder and find the meaning of this life and to strengthen the bonds between God and self. This would be parallel with Al-Ghazali's notion that, since the heart holds the invisible truth of the meaning of life, the existence and the relationship between God and self, sometimes the truth can be illusive to find (*The Alchemy of Happiness*, 1909, p. 4-5). Therefore, Adam is called to find it. It is painful for him because he cannot find any meaning since it is difficult to search for it. The solution to his troubled heart and mind is always illusive to find. However Al-Ghazali also suggested that, the intangibles is possible to comprehend if humans intend to look further. To seek the reality of the heart, or the spirit, he suggested that humans close their eyes, and forgets everything around them except their individuality. Human will see the glimpses of their unending nature of that individuality (*The Alchemy of Happiness*, 1909, p. 4-5). God cannot be found in the ray of light like most things in this world. Humans will find the meaning of existence and comprehend the intangible bonds between humans and the Creator if they are able to see deep within their hearts.

Adam is an intelligent man who is gifted with high intellectuality and strong-willed in looking further for knowledge. What Adam needs is to look further into himself, understand his purpose to live in this world, before embarking on the next step in knowing God. The thorough knowledge of the spirit is not the necessary preliminary to walk in the path of religion, but comes rather as the result of self-discipline and perseverance in that path, as it is said in the Qur'an: "Those who strive in Our way, verily We will guide them to the right paths"(29:69). The search will only strive along the perimeters of faith in God and Islam. This will circumvent the misunderstanding of the concept of God and existence so as not to let humans end up with further confusions.

Adam finds meaning through the existence of himself and the existence of God through logic minds. Unfortunately, his search is futile. He is lost in his thoughts; he is lost in his meaningless search. This can be seen in the lines,

Dewi: Adam! You are not happy with my presence?

Adam: My presence. Not your presence. It is my presence that I question. Your presence is for yourself to question. (It Is Not A Suicide, p. 165)

According to Al-Ghazali, anyone who seeks happiness will realize that true happiness is necessarily linked with the knowledge of God. The highest function of all the souls is the perception of truth; in this accordingly it finds its special delight (*The Alchemy of Happiness*, 1909, p. 33). Adam realizes this; therefore he seeks the ways which can make him closer to God. Unfortunately, his action to end his life is wrong. The greatness of God immeasurably transcends our cognitive faculties, and we can only form a very dim and imperfect idea of it. Such imperfect knowledge is not a mere speculative knowledge, but must be

accompanied by worship and devotion (*The Alchemy of Happiness*, 1909, p. 35). However, devotion to God alone is insufficient. What he lacks here is faith. Al-Ghazali suggested that there are two ways to arrive at this knowledge. One that is so abstruse that it is not adopted to ordinary intelligence and therefore is better left unexplained. The other way, is that when humans considers themselves, they realize that they have nothing, in a way that they were created by God, they would realize that they are helpless without the aid from God. From their wonders of bodily frame, to their various needs, they all come from God's power, wisdom and love to all His creations. In this way, the knowledge of oneself becomes a key to the knowledge of God.

CONCLUSION

Dinsman had created a play that is heavy with the discussions of human existential issues. Hence, it is deemed impossible to depict the issues raised through typical realistic style in which realistic style had proven its limitations. Absurd theatre style was perceived to be fit to represent humans' psychological dilemmas into interesting visual representations for further reflections and discussions by the audience at large. Even though his appropriations on absurd theatre style had created plenty of misleading criticisms, *It Is Not A Suicide* is a creative depiction of the playwright's insights. As compared to the typical absurd style, there is no conclusion to the matter raised. The play ends well with a closure when Adam decided not to pursue his suicidal plan; that signifies that there is hope. This is the part that represents Dinsman's mode of appropriation from a typical pessimistic ending to a play with a closure which resembles hope for the betterment of the newly structured society.

Meaninglessness is only presented at the beginning of the play; hence the repetition technique was used. However, as the play progresses, meaninglessness had turned to optimism. With such hope and purpose, life is then perceived as meaningful once again. The readings on the Islamic metaphysics have revealed that in search for answers, humans have to know their own self first as a key to other knowledge especially that pertains to God. Knowledge of self would explicate the purpose of living thus making humans realize they are existential beings with essence and this would easily relate to the knowledge of God. In achieving meaning in life, it depends greatly upon the ability of humans in making choices in their lives. This has further clarified that his play reflects his strong inclination towards Islamic metaphysics specifically in search for answers rather than to hold on to the western existentialist school of thought.

This paper shows that absurd techniques have revealed another side of reality that many people may not realize or wish to see. Therefore, it could be strongly suggested here that any Dinsman's absurd play that was once labelled as devoid of purpose and atheistic during the period of Experimental Theatre needs to be carefully re-examined. As being mentioned by Meor Zailan Sulaiman (1988), man is not only able to communicate easily but extensively (p.21). in this

context, Dinsman communicates his concerns through his play that resembles the struggle within the psyche of an individual. This can only be best portrayed by myriad experimental techniques, and for this, the current productions have indeed indebted to Dinsman's bold approaches to challenge the conventional styles in the history of modern Malay theatre.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mas RynnaWati Ahmad is currently a senior lecturer at Malay Language, Literature and Cultural Studies Department in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM, Bangi, Malaysia. Her areas of expertise are philosophy and thoughts in Theatre studies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express her gratitude to the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for sponsoring this study under the research entitled, 'Dramaturgical and Visual Arts Perspectives in Malay Absurd Theatre Performances' (Research Code: UKM GGPM-2012-039). This paper is an extension from previous PhD thesis that was later developed to become part of research funded by this grant. This paper was presented in International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences (ICHSS): The Rise of the Rest: Reimagining Southeast Asia, organized by Universiti Petronas, Kuala Lumpur: 3-5th June 2014.

REFERENCES

- Al-Ghazali. (2007). *Kimya al Saadat: The alchemy of happiness* (Claude Field, Trans.). London: J. Murray. (Translated work published 1909).
- Camus, A. (1975). *The myth of Sisyphus* (Justin O Brien, Trans.). London: London Hamish Hamilton. (Original work published 1942).
- Dinsman. (1988). It is not a suicide. (Solehah Ishak, Trans.) *Malay Literature Journal*, 1(1):151-181. (Original work published in 1979).
- Esslin, M. (1968). *The Theater of the Absurd*. London: Pelican Books.
- FazilahHusin. (2009). Bentuk-bentuk dialog sebagai elemen pengukuhan identiti drama Eksperimental Melayu. *Jurnal ASWARA*. 4(2), 104-115.
- Hasyim Musa et al. (2012). Hati budi Melayu: Kajian keperibadian sosial Melayu kearah penjanaan Melayu gemilang. *GEMA Online*, 12(1), 163-182.
- Juliana Abdul Wahab, Wang Lay Kim, Sharifah Shahnaz SB. (2013). Asian dramas and popular trends in Malaysian television industry. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*. 29 (2), 159-174.
- Kalam Hamidi. (2003). *PeganganPementasan Drama*. Kuala Lumpur: Ampang Press Sdn. Bhd.
- Kernodle, G.R (1967). *Invitation to the Theatre*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.,
- Krishen, Jit. (2003) *An uncommon position, selected writings*. Kuala Lumpur: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre.
- Lim Cheng Hoe. (2003, 23 May). Politics play a part. *The Star*, 3-4.
- Mas RynnaWati Ahmad. (2011). *Western existentialism in selected translated Malay absurd Plays from an Islamic perspective*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia.
- Mas RynnaWati Ahmad. (2013). Finding God in Dinsman's It is not a suicide: An Islamic metaphysical approach. *GEMA Online*. 13 (3). 223-235.
- McAulley, G. (1996). Theatre practice and critical theory. *Australasian Drama Studies*. 28 (4), 140-145.
- Meor Zailan Sulaiman. (1988). Film as a medium of expression: A choice

between censorship

- and social responsibility. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*. Vol. 4, 21-27.
- Mohd. Amin Arshad. (1987). *Karya absurd dan nilai 'baik' disisi Islam*. In Zahrah Ibrahim (Ed.) *Perkembangan sastera kebangsaan: Esei dan kritikan pemenang Hadiah Sastera 1982/1983* p. 105-115. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Mohd. Ramli, Raman. (1991). Absurdisme dalam drama melalui analisis karya empat penulis kontemporari: Anuar Nor Arai, Johan Jaafar, Hatta Azad Khan dan Dinsman. Unpublished Thesis Master of Arts, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- Nur Nina Zuhrah. (1992). *An Analysis of Modern Malay Drama*. Shah Alam: BIROTEKS MARA Institute of Technology.
- Rahmah, Bujang & Nur Nina Zuhrah. (1988). It is not a suicide: A Malaysian youth dilemma. *Malay Literature Journal*. 1(1). 144-147.
- Siti Jasmina Ibrahim. (2005, 27 March). *Absurd Barat Tiada Tuhan*. *Utusan Malaysia*, 1-4.
- Solehah Ishak. (1990). Trends of modern Malay theatre. *Malay Literature Journal*. 3(2), 162-172.
- Solehah Ishak. (1992). *Protest: Modern Malaysian Drama*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Solehah Ishak. (1982). *Tahap Drama Kontemporari- Abstrak Atau Absurd* in Dr. Rahmah Bujang *Drama Melayu*. (Ed). 25 Tahun. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1982 (pp.64-81).
- Wan Amizah WM, Chang Peng Kee & Jamaluddin Aziz. (2009). Film censorship in Malaysia: Sanctions of religious, cultural and moral values. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*. Vol 25. 42-49.

