

Finding God In Dinsman's *It Is Not A Suicide*: An Islamic Metaphysical Approach

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ABSTRACT

Dinsman, whose real name is Che' Shamsuddin Othman, was known for his experimentation on the absurd theatre techniques during the period of Experimental Theatre in Malaysia in the 1970's. His play *It Is Not A Suicide* reflects strong philosophical underpinnings that highlight the deep emotional setbacks experienced by an individual who is caught in the tumult of finding the right path. Even though his experimentation seems to be vague to many scholars and theatre critics, his appropriation of absurd theatre techniques had successfully transformed a play that was once known to be atheistic in nature to be distinctively his own. Unfortunately, his experimentations on absurd theatre were not clearly understood by many. This is because most theatre critics and local audience remain sceptical towards the fundamental philosophy of the absurd. As a result, the concept of the Malay absurd in Modern Malay theatre is still not fully received. Although the intellectual and religious maturity of the audience and the theatre scholars has grown over the years, the view of absurd works being pessimistic remains. For the purpose of this paper, the author focuses on Dinsman's *It Is Not A Suicide*; reading it through the lens of Al-Ghazali's *The Alchemy of Happiness*. Through the Islamic metaphysical approach, this article offers a more optimistic perspective to his work. It argues that the play still functions within the Islamic parameters thus eliminating the atheistic label which clouded this work for more than three decades.

Keywords: theatre of the absurd; pessimistic; religious; metaphysical approach; Al-Ghazali's The Alchemy of Happiness

INTRODUCTION

The Malay theatre in Malaysia has experienced many changes due to developments and modernization in the country. From "bangsawan" to modern plays, the forms and contents of the modern Malay theatre change as Malay playwrights respond to the dynamic political and social milieu. However, 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.

Nevertheless, the period of Experimental theatre in the 1970's had witnessed the emergence of new playwrights who were bold in their diverse theatrical approaches, and Dinsman not an uncommon name in the local theatre scene. In *It Is Not A Suicide*, Dinsman experimented with absurd theatre style which made him a significant dramatist during the Experimental Theatre period. Not only was he known for the absurd style, his discourse in highlighting personal existential experience has also reflected his strong inclination towards existentialism, the philosophy which highly influenced the epistemology of the absurd theatre. However, 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). It was apparent that the philosophy which was emphasized in this play had been associated with being atheistic and negating the cultural values of the Malays, specifically.

The play revolves around Adam, who leads an unhappy life. Thus he sets out in search of the meaning of his existence. Lacking religious knowledge, he fails to find what he

is looking for. It is at the final stage of the play that Adam goes back to basics, in which he learns the knowledge about God in order to fulfil his thirst for a meaningful life. Once he understands the concept of happiness, he feels contented and accepts his nature of existence in this world.

The paper aims to highlight the significance of the unique appropriations of absurd theatre techniques in Dinsman's *It Is Not A Suicide*. The paper also argues that the play does not merely deal with the absurd representation but it also extends to the philosophical underpinnings that highlight the issue of existence in Islam especially in confronting the challenges of modernity. Reading through the lens of Al-Ghazali's *The Alchemy of Happiness* provides a better perspective on his play thus negating the view of many local theatre critics that the play is pessimistic. As a result of this reading, this study argues that Dinsman's play can be considered as socially-oriented¹, specifically addressing issues relevant to Malay Muslim audience.

THE RISE OF THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD IN MALAYSIA

The influence of the Theatre of the Absurd is believed to have emerged in Malaysia during the political upheaval following the tragedy of the May 13, 1969 riot². Tracing back to the origins of this type of theatre, absurd theatre was an anti-literary movement in the 20th century that was born and nurtured in Europe during the post-World War II era. Existentialist notions and impression of pessimisms, which arose after the terrible and horrifying war, led to this form of theatre. Many European playwrights questioned the truism of the so-called progress, civilization, and the reality of individuals in their plays (Esslín, 1968).

In Malaysia, as a result of the 1969 riot, the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd occurred in the early 1970s when the Malay playwrights were confused and were seeking new alternatives as an approach to theatrical production. Krishen Jit once said "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" (2005, p. 3). Therefore, events such as the 1969 riot became a starting point for the restructuring of the society, especially the Malays. Solehah Ishak (1992) points out in her article, "Trends of modern Malay theatre" that, as a response to the riot, the government began to strengthen the acts such as the Internal Security Acts and the New Economic Policy. 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 1, 1969 encouraged the Malays to leave their villages and move to urban areas to enter into more industrious economic activities such as labour intensive industries and obtain 30% of the Malay equity capital (1990). According to Solehah (1992), the changes 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 the 1969 riot resulted in a more earnest and serious response from the local playwrights. They became more sensitive towards the changes inherent in the society. "The anger, hopelessness, turmoil and chaos which are 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). The racial riot led to the requisitioning of national identity and purpose, which affected too many spheres of the Malaysian life. Gay McAuley (1996) in his article, "Theatre practice and critical theory" highlighted that it was the artists who feel the urge to create theatre as a 'site of interaction' rather than a 'product' which has led to a radical rejection of the traditional material forms of art (p. 143). It can be said that the 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.

With regards to style, the playwrights of this era tend to experiment with new approaches in combination with traditional theatre techniques that not only reinforce the Malay culture but also give the plays a dynamic contemporary meaning and image (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 1992, p. 145). It was during this time of change, that many playwrights had a strong tendency to experiment with the absurd theatre. Abdul Rahman Napiah (2009) in an online interview added that “the struggle within an individual self had become one of the most experimented subject matter in these works and the absurd technique, with its strong allegorical elements, was deemed fit to portray these struggles”. Hence, absurd theatre style had become the common choice among the young playwrights popular in the era of Malay Experimental Theatre.

A closer look at the works that were produced by these playwrights of the 1970's shows that primary attention was given to psychological dilemmas experienced by most of the characters (Nur Nina Zuhrah & Rahmah Bujang, 1988, p. 144). These plays reflect on the issues that are existential and commonly represented by characters that are caught in self-conflict in their quest for the meaning of life. The portrayal of pain and confusion further reflect the playwrights' insights and their concerns over social issues of that time (Mohd. Ramli Raman, 1991, pp. 21-23). While the main priority of realistic plays is to represent realistic representation of theatre, absurd plays on the contrary highlight the conflict in the individual self, the search for meaning and truth in life. However, it is found that the experimentations made by these playwrights are not widely accepted by the local theatre critics and the audience. As a result, the absurd plays have created confusion among the audience, as they cannot accept the meaning that the playwrights intended to present.

The rise of the absurd theatre in the period of the Experimental Theatre has been perceived as unfit for the Malay theatrical arena. Since the Malaysian society is still basically a religious society, therefore the western influence on the absurd plays is seen to be negating religious values. With the advent of the Islamic revivalism in Malay theatre in the 1980s, it was difficult for the absurd plays to sustain its existence in Malaysia.

PROGRESSION AND REGRESSION IN THE HISTORY OF MODERN MALAY THEATRE: THE CASE OF THE ABSURD PLAY

The advent of the absurd theatre had resulted in the growth of many young and talented playwrights who celebrated the fame of this new movement which promises an alternative mode of expressionism to the arts and society. However, absurd theatre has never been fully accepted by many Malay theatre activists and 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 the Theatre of the Absurd mainly because; it contradicted the socio-cultural background of the society that upholds religious beliefs and traditions. As a result, the Theatre of the Absurd had a short span of popularity in the local theatre scene (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 1992, p. 154).

Mohamad Amin Arshad (1987) states that any forms of literary works should communicate well with the society as these works function as a medium to disseminate good values for the people at large (p. 105-115). With this perception, absurd works were believed to have no value for the society. Furthermore, the society was not familiar with the idea of pessimism as presented by this absurd theatre. The audience preferred to be in their own comfort zone to watch plays that they could connect with. The society's mentalities were basically bound by their ethnicity, religion and cultural beliefs. Hence, the theatre of the absurd was not feasible as a promotion of creative presentation for the audience.

The theatre of the absurd is also seen as unsuitable for Malaysian viewers who are perceived to generally uphold their religious beliefs, as the absurd theatre is seen as negating

Islamic principles. Many theatre critics and scholars feel that the absurd theatre is flawed by the western atheistic existentialism. As a result, not many scholarly research have been pursued especially to highlight the importance or the significance of these works to the development of the Modern Malay Theatre. Kalam Hamidy (2003) also observed that absurd plays in Malaysia did not have a clear direction since the philosophies that influence the styles had been found to be unstable and thus inappropriate. It is a philosophy that stems from the idea that humans should not be bound by any religious principles and values since these will limit their action and the way they think. The philosophy also promotes the meaninglessness of life and that it is solely based on human's struggles to achieve an authentic human existence. These basic principles of the epistemology of the absurd theatre are seen as contradictory to the basic principles of Islam. The surge in Islamic consciousness resulted in many comments and critics from contemporary practitioners who are of the opinion that the proponents of the theatre of the absurd were ignorant because being Muslims themselves, they seemed to be unaware of the origins and the philosophy which became the foundation for this type of theatre (Siti Jasmina Ibrahim, 2005). These criticisms have created a gap that further distances the plays from the audience.

Absurd theatre continued to become the subject of negative criticisms as the philosophy of the absurd was deemed inappropriate for the Malay society, generally. This is simply because the Malay audience had not clearly perceived what was termed absurd in Malaysia and what was absurd in the West (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 1992). Although Malay absurd styles do have some aspects in common with the western contemporary theatre, many new dramatists created their own platform to show new ideas and styles to represent 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 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.

In addition, a closer look at the plays that were produced during the period of experimental theatre show that most absurd works are not as absurd as it was once labelled. It can be said that the plays are more philosophical in nature. Mohd Ramli Raman (1991) stated that in accordance with some sociological issues raised by the playwrights, the characters displayed in the absurd plays are actually searching for human dignity and the essence of life (pp. 21-23). Therefore it will be inappropriate to classify all plays with elements of absurd theatre as being atheistic and pessimistic. The concept of the Malay absurd is still unclear to many. There is a call for an alternative approach to read these plays, thus bringing about the quality that these works might contain. As it stands, approaches in existentialism or even absurd theatre techniques are found to be inadequate and misleading especially in understanding the works by Dinsman because his characters are mainly seeking for solace through religion, in this context Islam³. *It Is Not A Suicide* is a perfect example of a metaphysical quest in search of divine power to fulfil the insatiable need for total happiness.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The discussion will look at the Islamic metaphysics on the subject of human existence and happiness as portrayed in *It Is Not A Suicide*. The tension that is highlighted in the play depicts that the main character is distraught and trapped in hopelessness. The play portrays Adam as engrossed in his existential quests without having a good knowledge of God. Reading extensively and listening to great teachers will not strengthen his faith in God since it could not be found through mere logic. In order to find answers, Adam needs to gain not only the knowledge about God but also he has to acknowledge that the main source to arrive at this faculty is through revelation. For this purpose, Al-Ghazali's *The Alchemy of Happiness* shall be applied in defining the meaning of existence under the Islamic lens which also further explicates the measures to be considered in arriving at this desirable destination. By discussing the text using this approach, the twist in Dinsman's play will be revealed which many theatre critics have often missed. The ending portrays closure and when this concept is applied, it makes the closure highly significant. The discussion will further illustrate the subject of Islamic existentialism in relation to the nature of meaning and metaphysical needs.

AL-GHAZALI AND THE ALCHEMY OF HAPPINESS

In his work, Al-Ghazali described human happiness through the keys to the basic tenets of life from the perspective of Islam. He explained the key concepts through what he called "the alchemy" that had long been taught by many prophets, in order to teach human beings the way to a blessed life in this world and the Hereafter. However, for the purpose of this paper, the author will focus on two key constituents - the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God. These two constituents are able to guide through the metaphysical search suffered by the main character, Adam. Adam seems to have lost his way for he tried to commit suicide in order to seek solutions for his troubled mind and soul. By going back to the path of religion, Adam needs to gain a proper guidance that will become the thrust for his purpose to live. In view of this, the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God would explain how Muslims are generally required to understand thoroughly these basic knowledge in search of the true meaning of happiness in this world and the hereafter.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF SELF

Knowing the self is the most important thing as this is the basic step to understand better the purpose of living. Knowing "myself" is not only looking at the outward self, such as recognizing the self as having shape, body, face, senses, and so forth, as such knowledge cannot be entrusted to the knowledge of God alone since such outward physical attributes will not solely be the evidence to the existence of God, nor to depict that one understands the essence of God entirely.

According to Al-Ghazali, every human has the outward shape called the body, and an 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." (2007, 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. It is possible to comprehend the intangibles if humans look further. To seek the reality of the heart, or the spirit, Al-Ghazali suggested for humans to close their eyes and forget everything around them except their own individuality. Humans will see glimpses of their unending nature of that individuality (2007, p. 5). Once the knowledge of God is obtained, Al-Ghazali indicates that one can control reason and passion. 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 hands 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 humans are created with such animal qualities, as well as angelic qualities, how could the real essence of humans be understood. Al-Ghazali states that humans are created by God to be of the highest rank of all God's creations. However, if humans fail to place themselves at that highest rank, they will fail miserably. Humans are the highest faculty in all of God's creation because in them there is reason. Humans are physically inferior to many animals, but reason makes them superior as it is written in the Qur'an: "To [human], We have subjected all things in the earth" (Quran 31: 20). If humans fail, they will not escape from the wrath of God. The rational soul in humans is abound, marvels both of knowledge and power. Humans are gifted with five senses that are according to Al-Ghazali, like five doors opening on the external world. Reasons have made humans seek, acquire and grasp the knowledge that they require to survive in this world and to be blessed in the next world. The more humans purify themselves from fleshly lusts and concentrate his mind on Allah, the more conscious will they be of such intuitions or become more sensitive to all divine impressions. Al- Ghazali suggests that if humans train their mind sufficiently, and by due discipline, they 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 (2007, p. 9). Thus, any impressions can be misleading and disguising humans from seeing and interpreting the truths.

Anyone who seeks the 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 functions of the souls of humans are the perception of truth; in this accordingly it finds its special delight. As humans, we do experience 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 right 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 writer's postulations based on Al-Ghazali's views)

The humans' souls are such a great creation that those who neglect it will be doomed to suffer in this world and the hereafter. The greatness of humans lie in their capacity for eternal progress, otherwise, they will be the weakest of all things, which is subjected to hunger, thirst, heat, cold and sorrow. As for their intellect, their minds are so powerful that they can lead to great inventions, great innovations. Sadly, if they fail to control and channel their minds properly, their brains are sufficient enough to destroy themselves as well. The truth is that humans are vulnerable, and contemptible; it is in the world of the hereafter that they will be of value. But, that only depends on their ability to rise from the rank of beasts to that of angels. In addition, it also depends whether they are able to contribute with all the greatness that God has bestowed upon them to do good deeds for their happiness in this world and in the hereafter.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Knowledge about God cannot be found easily. Many who contemplate themselves to such notions do not find God. According to Al-Ghazali, there are two methods of arriving at this knowledge but one is so abstruse that it is not comprehensible to ordinary intelligence and therefore is better left unexplained. Alternatively when humans consider about themselves, they realize that they have nothing, in a way that they were created by God from a drop of

water, neither with intellect, nor with any sight, hearing, hands, feet, and many more that make humans special. Such condition is described by Al-Ghazali as helpless (2007, p. 18). Humans are depicted as helpless without the aid of God. When humans further realize their need for food, water and lodging, they have to depend on the mercy of God to fulfil their needs. Thus, from God's creations, humans come to know of God's existence. Not only are humans' attributes reflected in God's attributes, but the mode of existence of humans' soul affords some insights into God's mode of existence. Both God and soul are invisible, unconfined by space and time, and outside the categories of quality and quantity. This mode of existence is difficult to comprehend as everything else in the realities of the world is measured by quality and quantity, as a basis of logic. However, the definition of the concept of God is difficult to be placed in such a manner. The concept of God and human soul is in the region in which sense-concepts can bear no part (2007, p. 20).

God's greatness immeasurably transcends our cognitive faculties, and that we can only form a very dim and imperfect idea of it. Moreover, such imperfect knowledge of God as we can attain to is not a mere speculative knowledge, but must be accompanied by worship and devotion. Such devotions will be reflected in a high degree of concentration to the remembrance of God. It is required that humans will have to curb their self-appetites and detach themselves with unimportant worldly associations. It is important to note that when humans die, they will die alone, and therefore they have to deal with God alone, and if we have to live with a person, our happiness depends entirely on the degree of our affection. Love is the seed of happiness, and loving God is fostered and developed through worship and devotion to God (2007).

Human must realize that they have to know themselves better than knowing others as they have to be aware that they have nothing as servants of God. Realizing that humans cannot survive without the aid of God, and humans are also aware that their lives are totally dependent on God, it can be said that the knowledge of God is the key to achieve a happy life. The concept of happiness that is being outlined and discussed by Al-Ghazali, adds to a more meaningful concept of the knowledge of God. Al-Ghazali also states that the knowledge of God alone will not help humans to seek happiness. The concept of happiness that is being discussed in this book emphasized on the importance of the relationship between human and God. A blissful life can only be achieved if humans seek the correct path in leading their lives in this world. If God permits, humans will lead happy lives in this world and after death. Life is perceived to be meaningful if we know the reason for living. When we know God, we believe in the right way to live, and to achieve happiness in this life. God has given the guidelines as how humans are supposed to function and lead the life that is blessed by Him. With such clarity, it can be easily related that life is not perceived as being meaningless anymore.

ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY, *IT IS NOT A SUICIDE*

As westernization in various forms is still influential in the present context of globalization, much contemporary knowledge is highly manipulated by the West as a result of hundreds of years of colonization⁴. In this regard, knowledge on philosophy of existence is no exception. However, the philosophy that is derived from the West is somehow limited in providing solutions to local context of existential issues. Through the play, *It Is Not A Suicide*, Dinsman highlights existential issues through the techniques proposed by western existentialism. He opted to apply the absurd theatre techniques that were found to be able to portray human meaninglessness in its own unique way. However, towards the end of the play, Dinsman welcomes the audience to a new path as a closure to this play. The path that would lead the audience to realize that the solution to all matters is to seek solace through religion. Western

existentialism puts so much emphasis on the meaninglessness in human life⁵, whilst on the contrary such notion is unacceptable as Islam prohibits such pessimistic notion.

Islam rejects the notion of hopelessness and encourages efforts in seeking solace for a meaningful life. In search for the meaning of life, Al-Ghazali emphasizes that knowing one's self is the most important thing since without it, such knowledge cannot be entrusted to the knowledge of God (2007, p. 3). 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. It leaves the human feeling worthless and life seems to be without a purpose. Answers to questions about the nature of existence and the purpose of life cannot be found in the physical world. They can only be found deep in the heart. Hence the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God have become a foundation for humans to look further and find 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 fulfil 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. However, the vast knowledge has failed to provide him the answers to the nature of his existence. Adam does not know himself anymore. He demands meaning to his life. He reads extensively, still his search seems to be futile. As he states:

Adam: And I don't know for what I must live if I don't understand anything. For what do I live? What do I want to do with this empty life?
(It Is Not A Suicide, 1988, p. 155)

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. Any given comments or advice to him will be deemed useless. Nevertheless he persistently wants to fulfil his yearnings. This can be seen in the lines,

Adam: It's not that 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 more he reads, the more he gets upset as he cannot find what he is looking for. The confusion has created a void that only Adam can actually feel. No one around seems to understand what his yearnings are and what has caused his pain. This is evident throughout the play, Adam seems to be talking to himself most of the time and at times he seems to be speaking to two other characters, Father and Dewi (who are both unseen on the stage but their voices can be heard by the audience). This would further reflect that no one understands him or even able to give what he yearns for.

Adam is alone and the only way for him to get answers and fulfilment is through asking God himself about the meaning of his life. He knows God holds meaning, but again he just does not know what else to do since everything he does to gain what he wants seems futile . 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 given 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 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 find answers. Adam knows he cannot wait anymore and starts to become impatient:

Adam: Today, (holds the noose) today I will go to you. I will not commit suicide.

This is my last attempt to meet you. There is only left for me to do.

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

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 of. Adam is ignorant of the fact that to know God, he must know himself better, as this is the basic step to understand the purpose of living. Al-Ghazali stated that, knowing one's self does not rely so much on looking at the outward self. The knowledge of self is far beyond knowing the physical attributes that the self holds. Such physical attributes only appear to be on the surface that cannot entirely become part of the knowledge of God (2007, p. 4-5), due to the reason that the knowledge of God does not belong to the visible world, but to the invisible, far elusive from the typical vision to reflect its validity. In this case, Adam tries to seek God through his sense of logic as what he sees and feels become his measurement to seek the answer which he will never find. Since he fails to appreciate life as the basic fundamental for his real quest of finding meaning, it resembles how meaningless life is to him. The act of killing will not solve his problems but contributes to a more meaningless solution.

As the audience, we could feel that it is not easy for Adam to find what he yearns for. To look forward to the meaning of life is like chasing after something elusive to our eyes, or even our minds. Despite how elusive it can be, it is worth pondering and finding the meaning of this life thus strengthening the bond between God and self. This would be paralleled with Al-Ghazali's notion that, since the heart holds the invisible truth to the meaning of life, the existence and the relationship between God and self can be difficult to find. 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 elusive. However, Al-Ghazali also suggested that, it is possible to comprehend the intangibles if humans persevere in their search. To seek the reality of the heart, or the spirit, he suggested that humans close their eyes, and forget everything around them except their individuality. Humans will see glimpses of their unending nature of that individuality (2007, p.5). God cannot be found in the ray of light like most things in this world. Therefore, it is obvious that, humans shall not find God through their eyes only. 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 (Mohd. Ramli Raman, 1991, pp. 35-36).

Adam is a man who is gifted with high intellectuality and is strong-willed in looking further for knowledge. He has inspirations to delve into the serious matters that involved the issues of the existence of God and human beings. However, what Adam needs is to look further into himself, understand his purpose of living in this world, before embarking on the next step in knowing God. The thorough knowledge of the self is not by just walking 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" (Quran 29: 69). This will circumvent the misunderstanding of the concept of God and existence so as not to let humans end up with further confusions.

The search towards finding the definition of the concept of God will never end. It is a void that needs to be fulfilled and humans will find the most logical presumptions to fit with this concept. Similarly, Adam too is trying to find the meaning of this concept through his knowledge which is based on what he had learnt and read. Unfortunately, his search is futile. He is lost in his thoughts and he is left feeling forlorn with his endless existential quest. 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*, 1988, p. 165)

According to Al-Ghazali, anyone who seeks happiness will realize that true happiness is linked to the knowledge of God. Each of the faculty of human delights was created by God. The highest function of all the souls is the perception of truth; in this accordingly it finds its special delight (2007, p. 33). However, such knowledge cannot be found easily and committing suicide is definitely not the way to solve his quest to seek God. This is because 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 (2007, p.35). Adam's devotion to worship God is a symbol that he truly believes that God holds meaning, but sadly he could not find any. This can be seen in the lines,

Adam: I have obeyed you for a quarter of century. But you have never given me meaning.

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

His devotion to God is found to be insufficient as devotion without faith is pointless. He is questioning his own faith that he holds for a quarter of a century. Many who contemplate themselves to such notions have indeed failed. Al-Ghazali suggested that there are two ways to arrive at this knowledge. One that is so abstruse that it is not adapted into ordinary intelligence and is better left unexplained. Alternatively, it is that when humans consider 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 of His creations. In this way, the knowledge of one's self becomes the key to the knowledge of God. The mode of existence of the human soul offers some insights into God's mode of existence (2007, p. 34-35). Adam has to realize that faith is a great gift from God that is yet to be achieved. By committing suicide, it will not fulfil what he seeks. In fact, his action will be condemned as suicide which is forbidden in Islam.

The play ends when Dewi suddenly appears to tell Adam that she is also longing for answers. Adam is surprised that all this while, he is not alone. There are others too who are in similar situations. This can be seen in the dialogue,

Dewi: I too longed for eternity. (The noose begins to move upwards slowly)

I longed for eternity

I longed for a part of myself.

I longed for a part of myself.

(The noose disappears above)

Adam: (Bewildered to see the noose together with Dewi-Who-Is –Unseen move and disappear above).

Dewi! Dewi! Is that you?

Is that you, Dewi?

Dewi!!!

.....
Dewi: You don't recognize me?

Adam: Yes, I think I know you. But, actually, who are you?

Dewi: I am you and you are me.

(*It Is Not A Suicide*, 1988, pp.171-179)

Dewi's lines above become a point of departure from the tension that Adam feels as it is actually felt by others too. Her reply made Adam dumbfounded as he has just realized that the answer is in front of him all this while. He needs to continue searching until he finds the ultimate answer. This is the closure that Dinsman intended to highlight in this play. The main character Adam will continue his search. Even though the search is very subjective, one thing that is necessary here is that Adam realises that he needs to find his way to attain what he yearns all this while. As the search continues, the noose slowly disappears to indicate that Adam has found a solution. Finally, the idea of killing himself has not become his ultimate choice.

CONCLUSION

Dinsman, has created plays that are not only creative but portrays more than just a representation of unparalleled artistic demonstrations against the conventional styles and techniques. It also represents a well-orchestrated knowledge that is unique during the period of Experimental Theatre. He portrayed doubts and confusions over the matter of self and existence and he dealt with these issues with theatre as his source to find the answers. He highlighted his concerns and insights through his creativities and the application of the absurd theatre techniques⁶. Judging from this play, it is evident that it would be deemed unfit or even impossible to deal with existential and metaphysical issues by only using realistic theatre techniques. Therefore, Dinsman had successfully incorporated the western absurd theatre style to portray the elements of confusions and entrapment of the mind, body and soul in search of the meaning of happiness in this life.

The issue highlighted truly depicts a confused young man struggling to seek a meaningful life that is blessed and would bring him to a fulfilling happiness. When the play ends with Dewi telling Adam that she is also yearning for God, the noose slowly disappears. Suddenly, Adam feels that he is not alone. He feels possibly, there are quite a few people who might be in the similar situation. Therefore, what he should be doing is to continue searching and not lose hope. This gives the impression that the playwright has offered a solution. 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 the nature of existence and purpose of life which cannot be understood through finding the answer realistically. The concept of God and the meaning of life cannot simply be discussed based on logical thinking alone. This is simply because everything in the realities of the world is all measured by quality and quantity, as a basis of logic. Thus, the definite concept of God is difficult to be placed in such a manner⁷. In this context, Dinsman's had brought Islamic metaphysical attempts in his play to portray the void as a result of misconception by many who uphold logic in every aspects of their lives. By holding on to the physical world to seek

the existential meaning, humans would end up being misled. This would parallel with the current influence on secularism and liberalism, as a result of the advent of modernization that has placed the Malay Muslim society in a vulnerable situation, as these would affect their values and belief systems⁸. The situations call for special attention for all Malay Muslims, hence in order to confront with these challenges, proper grounding in Islam needs to be carefully emphasized.

Meaninglessness is only presented at the beginning of the play, and as the play progresses, meaninglessness turns 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 the self first as the 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 be related to the knowledge of God. In achieving true happiness, it depends greatly upon the ability of humans in making choices in their lives. Therefore, it is crucial to have proper knowledge in religion in order to confront any challenges in life. Knowledge that is gained will only become a guide for humans to seek peaceful and blessed lives in this world and in the world hereafter. 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.

Studies on both existentialism and religion have rarely been carried out and discussed in the field of criticism and other convergent areas, where the essence of human intelligence and omnipotence of the Divine are critically discussed. The lack of discussion in the field of criticisms has led to the rejection of experimental plays and Theatre of the Absurd in Malaysia. However, this paper shows that absurd techniques have revealed another side of reality that many people may not realize or wish to see. Therefore, it can be strongly suggested here that Dinsman's play that was once labelled as devoid of purpose and atheistic during the period of Experimental Theatre to be carefully re-considered.

END NOTES

¹Refer to the article by Rahmah, Bujang. & Nur Nina Zuhrah. 1988. It is not a suicide: A Malaysian youth dilemma."Malay LiteratureJournal. 1(1).144-147

²Racial 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: UtusanMelayu Press, 1969), and National Operations Council, The May 13th Tragedy (Kuala Lumpur: National Operations Council, 1969)

³Dinsman during an interview on 20th November 2009, stated that in *It Is Not A Suicide*, he tried to avoid portraying the characters as being trapped in hopelessness thus choosing suicide as a way out. He wanted to highlight that; Muslims should go back to the path of religion to prevent them from feeling hopeless and meaningless.

⁴Refer to Wan Mohd. Nor Wan Daud. 2013. Islamization of contemporary knowledge and the role of the university in the context of de-westernization and decolonization. Professorial Inaugural Lecture Series, UniversitiTeknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 28th of June.

⁵Refer to Camus, A. 1975. The myth of Sisyphus (Justin O'Brien, Trans.) London: London Hamish Hamilton. (Original work published 1942).

⁶Dinsman in an interview on 20th November 2009 had agreed that realistic plays had been found limited in relation to the issues that he intended to portray in his plays generally. He wanted to depict the internal struggle within a man not in a typical physical world. The play also reflects his experience while seeking for meaning in this confusing modern world. One of the many solutions was to refer to the path of religion in getting what he needed to find.

⁷ Refer to Al Al-Ghazali. (2007). *Kimya al Saadat: The alchemy of happiness* (Claude Field, Trans.) London: J. Murray. (Translated work published 1909) (p. 20).

⁸ This seems consistent with the article by HasyimHj Musa et al. (2012). Hati budi Melayu: Kajiankeperibadian social Melayu kearah penjanaan Melayu gemilang. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*. Vol. 12(1), 163-182.

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