

Existential Hollowness in Ionesco's *The Chairs* Through a Vedantic Lens

Ms Sneha. G. S.

PG Student,

Department of English,

Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence Navanihal,

Okali Post, Kamalapur, Kalaburagi,

Karnataka-585313 India.

snehasuresh560@gmail.com

Dr. Phani Kiran

Associate Professor,

Department of English,

Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence Navanihal,

Okali Post, Kamalapur, Kalaburagi,

Karnataka-585313 India.

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Abstract:

An older man arranges chairs for guests who never arrive, hires a mute to deliver his life's message, and leaps into the sea certain he is free. Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* is not merely a theatre of the absurd; it is a portrait of a soul that spent an entire life looking in the wrong direction. This article examines the play through Vedantic philosophy, arguing that the Old Man's tragedy is not the universe's silence but his own failure to turn inward.

His invisible guests are *maya* (an appearance mistaken for essence). His speech is trapped in *vaikhari*, severed from the *para* (the transcendental), where Truth lives. His delegation of testimony violates the Bhagavad Gita's teaching that *svadharma* cannot be subcontracted. His final leap mirrors the *Chandogya Upanishad's* image of liberation, but he dissolves in avidya, ignorance dressed as fulfilment. The ocean was always there. He simply never asked: *Ko'ham*. (Who am I?)

Keywords: Existential hollowness, Indian philosophy, Ko'ham, Maya, Svadharma, Vedanta.

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Introduction:

The Chairs is considered one of the most insightful plays on existential hollowness, failed communication and, the human craving for meaning in life, yet it has never received the critical attention it deserves. Ionesco's plays represent a different dimension to existential problems: the emptiness left by the absence, the impossibility of meaningful communication, and humanity's desperate waiting to leave a mark before disappearing into nothingness.

The play portrays an Old Man and an Old Woman living in isolation on an Island surrounded by water; this setting represents the hollowness of human existence and communication functions not as a bridge but as a barrier. The invisible guests they invited, and empty chairs reveal the intensity of their loneliness. The Old Man hires an orator to deliver a message on his behalf, but this decision turns out to be the most shocking irony of the play.

Ākāśāt patitaṃ toyam yathā gacchati sāgaram |

Sarvadevanamaskārah keśavam pratigacchati ||

Just as water falling from the sky ultimately reaches the ocean,

all worship offered to various deities ultimately reaches the supreme.

This verse speaks about the profound Vedantic truth, how all pathways, all offerings, all prayers finally unite into one source. Nevertheless, what if there is no one to receive the worship? What if the ocean itself is missing, and the water falls into a hole of hollowness? What if all messages, all gestures made, all words spoken, are directed toward absent listeners? This is the existential condition explored in Eugene Ionesco's masterpiece of the Absurd, *The chairs*.

Camus analysed the absurd as "the collision between humanity's hunger for meaning and the universal's silence". Ionesco dramatizes that the silence with theatrical precision, he staged it

not as a philosophical argument but as a physical visible condition, showcased empty chairs as listeners and invisible guest as real people who could not come. However, the Vedantic tradition offers a counter question: is the silence truly empty, or have we simply lost the capacity to listen? The tragedy of Old Man is not only that no one listens, but that what he has to say may never been worth saying and was never conveyed. The hollowness is not only outside him, but also within. This existential condition was tremendously presented through several innovative theatrical techniques by Ionesco.

Ionesco is one of the most prominent dramatists of post-war European theatre, whose works challenge the conventional dramatic structures and rationality. His plays, such as *The Bald Soprano*, *The Chairs*, and *Rhinoceros*, reject linear plots, connected and meaningful dialogues, and logical progress of action. In fact, they foreground fragmentation, repetition, and the disjointed dialogues with the breakdown of the language. The empty chairs serve as a powerful visual metaphor for absence; each chair represents a listener who never existed. The invisible guests are treated as present and visible, while the characters end in nothingness by jumping into water; this inversion of presence and absence blurs the boundary between reality and illusion. The repetitive and meaningless dialogues represent the senselessness of human communication. Through these techniques, Ionesco showcases the crisis of existentialism.

This study offers how *The Chairs* stages the crisis of existentialism, and how Indian philosophical thought, predominantly the Vedantic concepts of Brahman, Shunya and the nature of self-expression, exposes both the depth of that crisis and the possibility of moving through it. In the face of meaninglessness, in the absence of listeners, in the silence of the universe, how shall we survive? These questions that haunt his characters will be analysed and discussed through the lens of Indian scriptural philosophy.

Absence as Presence

The most striking theatrical device used by Ionesco in *The Chairs* is the chairs themselves. As the play moves forward, the Old Man and Old Woman rush to set up chairs across the stage for guests no one else can see: generals, scientists, philosophers, and even the Emperor. By the end, the stage is packed with empty chairs, and the two can hardly find room to walk. What the audience watches is simply absence, piled up until it becomes a kind of show. The text makes this plain:

The stage holds nothing but chairs now, row after row, all vacant, turned toward the unseen audience. The Old Man and Old Woman struggle to weave through them.

OLD MAN: There are so many of them! So many! We must bring more chairs!

OLD WOMAN: Yes, yes- more chairs for everyone!

Martin Esslin, in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, states that “Ionesco’s objects take on a life of their own, becoming more real than the human characters themselves”. In the Western theatrical tradition, the chairs have been read as a straightforward metaphor for existential emptiness; they represent the void at the centre of human life, the hunger for an audience that never truly arrives. So, Ionesco’s chairs do not only represent absence, but they also overwhelm the Presence itself by displacing the living until the stage is ruled entirely by what is not there.

The invisible guests of *The Chairs* are neither real nor fully absent; they exist within the consciousness of the Old Man and Old Woman, occupying a space equivalent to the dream state. *Mundukya Upanishad* identifies four states of consciousness: waking (jagrata), dreaming (swapna), deep sleep (Sushupti), and turiya, which underlies and transcends the other three. It is the pure, undivided consciousness. Not sleeping, not dreaming, not waking, but just being.

The sages encoded these states of consciousness into a single syllable called AUM. (A-Waking — the beginning, the outer world, U-Dreaming — the middle, the inner world, M-Deep sleep — the dissolving, the causal. The most important facet of AUM is not the sound created but the silence that comes after. That is turiya, the unspeakable.

'Drishyam drishyate yasmaa' this verse from the Yoga Vasistha states, which is perceived has no independent existence apart from the perceiver. The reason the guests exist is the discernment of the Old Man; without his perception, the chairs are merely chairs. This is a tragedy and not a comfort. In the *Yoga Vasistha*, it is believed that the recognition that perception constructs reality is the beginning of liberation. The condition of the Old Man is that of bondage. He spent his ninety-five years in just constructing an audience in his mind, and he never recognises that the act of construction was itself a problem. His perception pushes him to suffer instead of attaining liberation.

The Inversion of Presence and Absence

The empty chairs make absence visible; the invisible guests make presence invisible. They exist only in the words and gestures of the Old Man and Old Woman. Ionesco instructs that the guests must be treated as entirely real by the Old Man and Old Woman, while remaining completely invisible to the audience.

The guests included the Lady, the Colonel, the Photographer, and the Beauty, upon whom Old Woman remarks, and even the Emperor himself, who is treated with military respect and fear. They all have names, titles, preferences and positions. Yet none of them appears, and the audience never sees them. The result of this inversion is that what is present on the stage feels progressively unreal, whereas what is absent feels gradually real.

OLD MAN: (To an invisible guest) Please, come in, come in.

(He bows, steps aside to let the invisible guest pass.)

OLD WOMAN: How lovely that you could come! We have been expecting you.

(She gestures toward an empty chair.)

Please sit here, right here. You must be tired from the journey.

OLD MAN: (To another invisible guest) And you- welcome, welcome!

How many years has it been? You have not changed at all. (Ionesco 72).

In the *Mundaka Upanishad* and Shankaracharya's *Vivekachudamani*, maya is not simply illusion. It is the force through which Brahman, the one undivided reality, breaks apart or seems to into a world of many things and distinctions (Shankaracharya 102). The visible world is not unreal because it does not exist. It is unreal because we read it wrongly. We take appearance for fact, and we follow the shadow rather than what casts it.

The Old Man's invisible guests operate the same way; they are maya given dramatic form. The Old Man and Old Woman burn their lives chasing what only looks solid. The importance they feel, the legacy they believe they are building, the message they are certain must reach the world, none of it holds weight. It holds only the outline of weight. Moreover, that, for Shankara, is exactly what maya is: not nothing, but something wrongly taken for everything.

The guests are mithya appeared without essence. In contrast, Ionesco indicates that the Old Man built his life upon his reputation, his message, his belief according to his own significance. "The inversion of presence and absence is not a theatrical trick- it is a philosophical statement about the nature of all human striving (Esslin 145). As the Old Man is entrapped in maya, he fails to pose the simplest, most devastating question: Ko'ham (कोऽहम् Sanskrit) Kaḥ (*Who?*) Aham (I) Who am I, really? Because he never asked, he never had to find out the answer. And that was precisely the point. He never even suspected that what he was so devotedly tending to be his own reflection. The older man mistakes the projected Self, the version he performed for

others, for the real self. What the philosophical traditions call *maya* is not some grand cosmic illusion. It's the gap between whom you perform and who you are, a gap you stop noticing after enough years of not caring.

Language as a medium to understand the Truth

The rich element of *The Chairs* is the usage of language to show the meaninglessness in conversation. Throughout the play, the Old Man and Old Woman speak spontaneously, but there is no sense in their conversation. "Language in *The Chairs* is not a bridge between two consciousnesses- it is a wall, a flood of words that erodes rather than connects. This is clearly demonstrated in an exchange midway through the play:

OLD MAN: I could have been something, you know. I had plans.

OLD WOMAN: Of course you did. Of course.

OLD MAN: Big plans. Important plans.

OLD WOMAN: They should have listened.

OLD MAN: I tried to tell them.

OLD WOMAN: You told them. You told everyone.

OLD MAN: Nobody listened.

OLD WOMAN: Nobody. Nobody at all.

(Silence. Then they begin again, repeating almost the same words.)

The old Woman confirms everything to whatever the Old Man says, but here her confirmation has no meaning, it is just a habit and not understanding, they exchanged words but nothing meaningful was communicated. The Old Man believes he has something important to say, but in his ninety-five years of shared life he has never actually said it.

In Vedic tradition, this condition can be connected to the concept of *vāk* (sacred speech). Rigveda mentions about four levels of speech: *para* (transcendent, beyond sound), *pashyanti* (the level of pure meaning), *Madhyama* (the mental level before articulation), and *vaikhari* (spoken, physical sound). The verse in *Kena Upanishad* points toward the level at which truth lives by declaring:

Yat manasā na manute venahur mano matam |

tad eya brahma tvam viddhi nedam yad idam upāsate ||

That which is not thought by the mind, but by which, they say, the mind thinks know that alone as Brahma, not this which people worship here.

When a person functions only at the level of *vaikhari* (the outermost and superficial level of language), words become disconnected from their deeper spiritual source. The Old Man and Old Woman are trapped entirely within *Vaikhari* (most superficial level of speech); they merely spoke words disconnected from the deeper levels of meaning and being. The tragedy is that the Old Man believes that deepest truth can be spoken. He spent his life by preparing a speech, not understanding that the deepest meaning was never available to speech at all. What he wanted to communicate and what he wanted to be understood by his nature could not be by *vaikhari*, it required a *para* (transcendent, beyond sound), in which speech becomes silence and silence becomes truth.

The Old man's entrapment within *vaikhari*, the outermost layer of speech, is inseparable from the failure of the *Ko'ham?* Having never seriously confronted the question, "Who am I?", the Old Man remains unable to access the deeper levels of consciousness from which *para vak*, the primordial source of speech, arises. Thus, in the Vedic worldview, the quest for self-knowledge and the quest for the true origin of language are inseparable. The Old Man abandoned both self-inquiry and the deeper meaning of speech, confined himself to surface-level expression,

which is loud, articulate, endlessly performed, hollow and far away from the transformative awareness that unites language and consciousness.

The climax of *The Chairs* is the most devastating moments in twentieth century theatre. The Old Man hires an Orator to deliver his life's message to the invisible crowd. The Old Man and Old Woman leap from the window into water, believing their duty is complete, but the hired Orator turns out to be a deaf and mute, so the Old Man message is never conveyed.

The Orator faces the invisible crowd. He is a deaf-mute.

He writes on the blackboard: ANGELFOOD.

Then: NNAA NNM NWNWNW V.

He looks at the invisible crowd with a kind of smile, then bows deeply and exits.

The stage is empty except for the chairs.

From outside, the sound of laughter, murmuring, then silence.

The Old Man did not follow his Svadharma; instead, he passed it to an Orator to deliver his message. Svadharma cannot be delegated. *The Katha Upanishad* further teaches:

Nāvam ātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhayā na bahunā srutena |

The Self cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellect,

Nor by much learning. It reveals itself only to the one whom it chooses.

The Old Man believed that the transmission of a message was the transmission of truth, but the Orator could not deliver the message what the Old Man himself had never fully understood.

The violation of *svadharma* reminds us of the failure of asking Ko'ham in disguise. In the Indian metaphysical tradition, *svadharma* cannot be determined merely by society or circumstances. It ascends from an understanding of one's indispensable nature. Only one who

has sincerely confronted the question “Ko'ham?” (“Who am I?”) can distinguish the duty that flows from the Self. The Old Man, having never undertaken this inquiry, remains alienated from his authentic being and consequently inept at recognising his true dharma.

In Vedic view, *svadharma*, and *para vak* originate in the same ground of consciousness. To know one's dharma is to perceive the inner resonance of *para* before it descends into thought and utterance. Because the Old Man remains confined to the peripheral realm of *vaikhari*, he can neither hear the call of his *Svadharma* nor articulate the truth that emerges from the depths of the Self. His decision to delegate the message is therefore more than a failure and it is a spiritual abandonment. He handed over not merely a spoken task but the very weight of self-realization that the message was meant to exemplify. The Orator's silence is the logical consequence of the Old Man's lifelong internal silence and nothing to transmit.

The Old Man and Old Woman jumping from the window into the sea is the play's final and most tragic ending. They die in a moment of perfect, terrible faith, announcing their departure with these words:

OLD MAN: The moment has come. We have done our duty.

Our life's work is complete. The message will be delivered.

OLD WOMAN: At last. At last we can rest.

OLD MAN: We are free.

(He takes her hand. Together they climb to the windows.)

Long live the Emperor!

(They jump. Two thuds. Silence.)

They die in confidence rather than gloom; this moment is so unbearable. They believe the ocean will accept them and their message will reach the world. The Orator's failure and their death constitute the tragic final irony of the play. The Old Man and Old Woman do not die in darkness, but they die in a faith that is completely and irreversibly misplaced.

This scene of dissolution into the ocean carries deep philosophical significance within the Indian tradition. The *Chandogya Upanishad* offers an image that the individual self, like a river, spending a long time believing in its own separate identity dissolving into the ocean to annihilate self and merges with the ultimate. It is the moment the river stops *being a river*. What remains is not nothing. Its silence is not emptiness. It is the ocean.

Yatha nadyah syandamanah (Chandogya Upanishad, 8. 13. 1)

Just as flowing rivers disappear into the ocean, giving up name and form,
so, the wise one, freed from name and form, attains the Supreme.

However here the old couple's situation is a shattering irony. Two figures leaping into the sea, surrendering their names and forms, resembles the idea of moksha, but here in their case it turned into irony. The *Chandogya Upanishad* describes the dissolution of the one who attained *vidya* (true knowledge). The Old Man and Old Woman dissolve in *avidya* (ignorance). They jump into the sea, not from wisdom but from delusion; they jump holding their belief in the importance of the message, in the significance of ego, all the very attachments that Vedantic liberation requires one to release from all these obstacles. *Vivekachudamani* draws the difference clearly:

Brahmavidya na kevalam jnanam

It is not knowledge alone that liberates,

But the transformation of the knower.

The knower must be changed, not merely informed.

The opening verse with which the chapter opened: all water reaches the ocean, all offering reaches the supreme, by a devotee who has genuinely offered. The Old Man has not offered his true self. He has offered, but he has offered the ego's construction of itself. The water does not reach the ocean. It falls into the hole of hollowness he spent his life digging. The old man never attempted to pose the question "*Ko'ham*". Had he undertaken the inward journey of asking "*Who am I?*", he would have found that the ultimate audience was not another person but the Self itself. *Avidya* is not mere ignorance of the facts; it is the failure to seek the Self, the origin from which all true knowledge comes.

All these theatrical devices: the empty chairs, the invisible guests, the collapse of language, the Orator's failure, and the death of Old Man and Old Woman in the play pose questions philosophically: what happens to an organised life which is around the need to be heard, to be received and to leave a mark? Western absurdism answers: nothing. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states directly "I said that world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. However, what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational world with the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."

In Indian scriptural tradition, this question has a different answer. The Old Man's tragedy is not that the universe failed to receive him, but he never turned inward to ask *Ko'ham* (Who am I).

The *Mundaka Upanishad* states:

Kasmin nu bhagavo vijnate (Mundaka Upanishad, 1.1.3)

By knowing what, revered sir, does everything become known?

The answer given by Upanishad is the Self- not the gathered biography of the Old Man, not his message, not his legacy, but the pure awareness that lies behind all of it. In the Vedic framework, where selfhood, language, and duty are inseparably intertwined, the failure to ask

“Ko'ham?” severs the individual from Para Vak, obscuring the knowledge of Svadharma and leading to the delegation of both responsibility and meaning, a spiritual emptiness ultimately manifested in the Orator's silence.

The empty chairs are not merely symbolising absent listeners, but they are the symbol of the Old Man's lack of self-knowledge. If he had found Brahman rather than an audience, then the chairs might still be empty, but he would not be empty. The ocean, the Vedantic tradition insists, was always there. He simply never looked in the right direction.

Conclusion: The Ocean Was Always There

The Old Man and Old Woman leap. Two thuds. Silence.

Furthermore, in that silence, the entire weight of a human life collapses, not into meaning, but into the echo of its own absence. The chairs remain. The Orator's chalk marks blur on the blackboard. The invisible guests dissolve back into the nothing from which they were summoned. What is left is only the architecture of longing, arranged in rows, facing nothing.

Ionesco does not mourn this. He stages it with the cold precision of a surgeon and the quiet devastation of a poet. The Chairs is not a play about a man who failed to be heard. It is a play about a man who spent ninety-five years building a theatre for his own significance and never once stepped outside it to ask whether the theatre was necessary at all.

Western Absurdism reads this as the human condition itself; the Sisyphean fate of creatures who crave meaning in a universe constitutionally incapable of providing it. Camus offers revolt as the answer: to live without appeal, to push the boulder knowing it will fall, and to imagine Sisyphus happy. It is a brave answer. It is also a lonely one. The Indian philosophical tradition does not disagree with the diagnosis. It deepens it. The Old Man's emptiness is not proof that the universe is silent. It is proof that he was listening in the wrong direction. The *Mundaka*

Upanishad does not say the ocean is absent. It says we have been standing with our backs to it, filling the land with chairs.

Tat tvam asi — That thou art. The supreme is not somewhere beyond the water. It was never the audience waiting to receive the message. It was the awareness behind the one who wished to send it. The Old Man searched for *Brahman* in the eyes of generals, philosophers, and emperors who were never there. He constructed *maya* and then mourned that it was insubstantial. He confused the vessel for the ocean, the echo for the voice, the stage for the truth.

Nevertheless, even in this tragedy, a strange tenderness remains. The Old Man was not wrong to hunger. The thirst itself — that unbearable human ache to matter, to connect, to leave something of oneself in the world before the silence swallows everything — that thirst is not the disease. It is the misdirected sign of something real. The *Mundaka Upanishad* calls it *jijnasa*, the desire to know, which when turned inward, becomes the beginning of liberation. The Old Man's longing, had it been redirected even once, even briefly, from the crowd to the self, might have cracked the whole construction open. However, it was not.

The empty chairs of Ionesco are among the most haunting images in modern theatre precisely because they are honest. They show us what we build when we forget to ask *Ko'ham* — Who am I? They show us the cost of a life lived entirely in vaikhari, in surface speech, reaching outward forever and never arriving at para, the silence beneath all speaking where truth lives without words.

The water falls. The ocean waits. The hole we dig in our forgetting is not the universe's fault, but our own.

Perhaps that is not the end of the story. Perhaps it is, as the *Upanishads* insist, only the beginning of the real one — the one that starts not with a stage full of chairs, but with a single, sovereign question turned inward like a flame:

Who is it that needs to be heard?

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