

# The symbolic dimension in "No exist" of Sartre

## The infernal look

**By: Dr. EL-KACIMI Badreddine**

Professor d'Enseignement Secondary Qualifying - University Ibn Tofail - Morocco

E-mail: [badreddine.e@yahoo.com](mailto:badreddine.e@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract:**

Sartre, perhaps, did not believe in the boundaries that exist between literary activity and philosophical reflection. For this reason, we find in his plays a certain philosophical meditation. "No Exist" is a great example -inspired from his conception "hell is others"- through which we have asked how Sartre treat the objectifying look of other in a philosophical and symbolic perspective.

**Keywords:** Symbolic, Dimension, "No exist", Sartre, Infernal look.

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is considered as one of the emblematic figures who animated the French intellectual scene for more than fifty years. Despite his Philosopher formation, this did not prevent him to devote a large part of his career to literature, especially the theater where he left a great heritage that had appreciated at home and abroad. For instance we quote: No Exit (1944); the Flies<sup>1</sup> (1947); the respectful prostitute<sup>2</sup> (1947); the Dirty Hands<sup>3</sup> (1948); the Devil and the Good Lord<sup>4</sup> (1951) and the Condemned of Altona<sup>5</sup> (1960).

However, the remarkable thing is that Sartre has always kept his philosophical reflection in his literary and dramaturgical writings. For this reason, it seems to us that reading or understanding Sartre's philosophy can only be realized if we rely on his literary creation. Because literature is perceived as a medium for the transmission and re-expression of his philosophical ideas.

At the beginning of the XX century, literature experienced a decline; it has become such a useless, ineffective and harmless act immersed in the abstract in disjunction with society. In this sense, Sartre wondered about the possible roles of literary creation. He concluded that reconcile the writer with his audience seems necessary. Moreover, he attempted to redefine the literature on the principle of engagement.

According to him literature is anchored in its time; it must communicate with an audience historically located in order to provoke the change, but this change cannot be made without the author political position in reality:

*«He is now obliged to take a position in reality... The work commits the reader to take responsibility for the world that presents itself to him.»<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> The Flies in French is "Les Mouches". The play recounts the story of Orestes and his sister Electra in their quest to avenge the death of their father Agamemnon.

<sup>2</sup> In French is "la putain respectueuse". It is a story of a wealthy family who asked the prostitute to present a fake witness in the court so that his sons who are in particular the killers of the black man are not imprisoned.

<sup>3</sup> Its title in French is « Les mains sales ». The story is about the assassination of a leading politician.

<sup>4</sup> The original title is « Le Diable et le bon Dieu ». Sartre tries to analyze Goetz personality through his moral choices.

<sup>5</sup> « Les Séquestrés d'Altona ». the writer aims to develop his idea : "Man is condemned to be free"

<sup>6</sup> Sartre J-P. (1947). Qu'est-ce que la littérature ? Paris : Gallimard. p. 62.

As we have already mentioned, there is a real continuity between philosophical reflection and Sartre's literary activity. Generally, his philosophy is based on three fundamental principles which are inseparable.

Firstly, existence precedes essence, this means that man must exist to be able to define and invent himself:

*«The paper cutter is both an object which occurs in a certain way and which, on the other hand, has a definite utility; and you can't imagine a man producing a paper cutter without knowing what the object is going to be used for. So we will say that, for the paper cutter, the essence – in other words the set of recipes and qualities which make it possible to produce and define it - precedes existence, and thus presence, in front of me, such a paper cutter or such a book is to be determined. So here we have a technical vision of the world, in which we can say that production precedes existence.»<sup>7</sup>*

Secondly, for Sartre, freedom is an ontological reality integral to human existence. Born free, man is predetermined neither by his body, nor by his past or by society; he is condemned to choose and create his own essence<sup>8</sup>. That is to say, man is like Sisyphus who carries freedom on his shoulders like a rock at every stage of his life and who is condemned to carry this burden unceasingly whatever the shape of his path<sup>9</sup> provided that he assumes responsibility of his choices.

Thirdly, Sartrean philosophy rejects any possibility of predestination or submission to the will of God because there is no other universe apart the human subjectivity universe:

*«Many will be surprised by what I have to say here about humanism. We shall attempt to discover in what sense we understand it. In any case, let us begin by saying that what we mean by “existentialism” is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity.»<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. (1970). L'existentialisme est un humanisme, Éd. Nagel, pp. 17-24. DR.

<sup>8</sup> J.-P. Sartre. (1993). Existentialisme, trad. en turc, Asim Bezirci, éd. Say, İstanbul, p. 110. 19.

<sup>9</sup> J.-P. Sartre. (2003), Rappelons que d'après l'œuvre intitulée “Le Mythe de Sisyphe” de A. Camus, le héros qui fut condamné par les dieux à faire rouler éternellement un rocher jusqu'en haut d'une colline dont il redescendait chaque fois avant de parvenir à son sommet.

<sup>10</sup> J. P Sartre. (2007). Existentialism Is a Humanism. Yale University Press, p 108.

Perhaps classical theater tended to plausibility, respecting a set of strict rules and paying more attention to dialogue. Contemporary theater essentially aspires to represent the idea of the thing as the thing itself. In our view, the aesthetics of contemporary theater resides on the one hand in its critical and existential reaction to the degradation of the human and civilizational value system, on the other hand its philosophical and symbolic penchant.

In this article, our aim is to define the symbolic dimension from the dialectic of being and appearing in Sartre's "No Exist".

First of all, this play is written in a period imbued with an existential distrust of the human condition. Sartre wrote it to be able to develop his conception "hell is others" which was misunderstood. Along with, he looks for showing the importance of freedom:

*«I wanted to show for the absurd, the importance of freedom, that is to say the importance of changing acts with other acts. Whatever circle of hell we live in, I think we are free to break it.»<sup>11</sup>*

Indeed, the poetics of the play and its expressiveness do not exist in the subject it deals with but in the way in which it develops it from an existential perspective.

#### **a- The symbolism of being and appearing**

This drama is so rich in meanings with a generally absurd and dark sequence of events which puts us in front of three "undead" characters exceeding during their ephemeral incarnation the natural laws. They are dispersed and disgusted in movement in a filthy place enclosed and dominated by the absence of bright colors to the detriment of a strong presence of gray. This dramatization pushes the reader until the fall which gives the play more expressiveness and symbolism.

These three dead: Inès, Estelle, and Garcin are condemned for eternity to live together without any possibility of escaping from an anguished fate. Being a timeless story, the trio has no more future. The future will only be a constantly restarted present. No external event will change their fate. They are doomed to stand still.

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<sup>11</sup> These texts were collected by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka - Folio essays- Gallimard in 1999.

In addition, each of them feels their life examined, judged and criticized by the other two. Garcin is a coward, Estelle is vain and Inès is hateful. Their company is a hell for everyone.

Knowing that all actors are guilty and deserve to be locked up in this place. They disavow what they committed in their lifetime. By opposition, it is the look that each carries for the other that will reveal them.

Look is omnipresent from the beginning of the story. It is equivalent to a mirror because it allows us to identify ourselves through the judgment of others. The look in "No exist" compensates the mirror. The three characters can no longer pretend. They come out of their appearance because the mirror has this function. In fact, it only reflects the outside of a person and what a person wishes to see. However, the look focuses on the being because it has a reflexive attitude on the person. It has this capacity to objectify.

Sartre notes that the relationship between appearance and reality is influenced by mirror's game and the look. Indeed, the look of others is a crueller than mirror:

*«The appearance of the look is apprehended by me as an upsurge of an ekstatic relation of being, of which one term is the "me" as for-itself ... and of which the other term is still the "me" but outside my reach, outside my action, outside my knowledge.»<sup>12</sup>*

The usefulness and the efficiency of the look become clear especially in the situation of Ines. By becoming the mirror of Estelle, Ines draws her failure. In the hope of seducing Estelle, she resigns herself to being only her reflection, to being symbolically her mirror. She accepts to be an object in order to better please. To satisfy her homosexual desires, she gives up being looked at to be nothing more than looking. Disappointed in her desires, she is denied.

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<sup>12</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1957). Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Lib, 1957); p. 310.

Garcin and Estelle also want to love each other. They try to live in illusion but under Inès look, they can no longer lie or hide themselves. As Sartre wrote in *Being and Nothingness*:

*«It is enough that the lovers are looked at together by a third party so that each one experiences objectification, not only of oneself, but of the other.»<sup>13</sup>*

The anxiety, the nervousness and the effect of the look are feelings which dominate the psyche of the characters and which have caused the hatred between the characters. They make the situation more conflictual: each of them wants to exclude the other for his own satisfaction. Duality and conflict are therefore the main relationships which reconnect the characters and which dominate the scene. These relationships have no chance of changing, they will remain stable since Inès, Estelle and Garcin are condemned to remain eternally together.

#### **b- The symbolic space:**

The whole story of "No exist" unfolds through two places that are so different and contradictory: one is characterized by existence and reality and the other by annihilation and symbolism.

The first one we can call it *outside world* since it is located outside of hell and whose stories of the characters refer to it. Formerly, it separated the characters -now coexisting on stage-. It was the universe in which they exercised their choices freely and without limits. At the moment it only exists in their memories.

The other one is a locked up and absurd hellish place that has a metaphysical significance. It is obviously symbolic thanks to the objects it presents: *bronze, paper-cutter and mirror*.

Sartrean hell is described in "No exist" in a way so different from what is found in the Bible or as one usually imagines. It is represented as a room in the style of the Second Empire. We notice the absolute absence of instruments of physical torture.

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<sup>13</sup> Id. Ibid., p 426.

There is no fire either, unlike the typical representation we have of hell. The only mean of torture is the eyes of the other. This place looks like a hotel:

*«There are other rooms and other corridors and stairs ... the rooms are not the same because they come from the Chinese, the Hindus»<sup>14</sup>*

As for the symbolic objects that we find attached to this place, they are inseparable there. Sartre did not place them randomly; each of them has a meaning, an important function and a precise role.

The bronze on the fireplace seems to be totally useless in the course of history. It is in fact a double symbol. On the one hand, it represents eternity and also allows characters and spectators to understand the immobility and immutability of their situation. It symbolizes the heaviness of the past that these characters must assume now.

The paper-cutter is a symbol where Sartre makes an intelligent comparison between this object and the characters. It represents the object in itself having a predefined essence. The paper-cutter is a conceptualized object produced for a specific purpose. Its essence, therefore, predates its existence. It opposes the idea of Man that existence precedes essence. However, this object here has no end because of the books' absence.

At one point, Estelle will try to divert it from its usefulness vainly trying to kill Ines, in her revolt against the *for-others* but then again, it is useless (Ines is of course already dead). The means is then separated from the end. Its presence here becomes absurd. This is why the absurdity of the freedom of the three heroes is represented by the presence of the paper-cutter in a living room without a book.

The absence of mirrors is not a free idea. It provides significant expressiveness and essential aesthetic value. This absence would indeed underline a common need: need to be judged, narcissistic need to observe oneself. Without a mirror, the only way to contemplate yourself is to see yourself in someone else's eyes. In other words, thanks to the intermediary of other, the characters will therefore look at themselves and judge themselves through the look.

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<sup>14</sup> J.P Sartre. (1996). *Huis Clos suivis les Mouches*. Paris: Gallimard, p 75.

The light's game destroys all hope of an instant of darkness which would be a truce for actors. Indeed, we see it at the beginning of the play, there is no switch. The permanent light means that the characters cannot blink or close their eyes. So nothing can be hidden from the other, there is no cheating possible. An escape from the look of the other is impractical:

*«So it will never be dark? ... Will you always see me? »<sup>15</sup>*

In conclusion, we see that the contemporary theater is inaccessible if the spectator is not informed about the playwright's thought. With this new sensitivity, most often the objective sought by the writer surpasses the presentation of the thing as it is in reality to the presentation of the idea of the thing in an aesthetic that is both philosophical and symbolic. First, philosophical in meditation, analysis and observation of the facts. Then, symbolic through the use of space, accessories and meanings.

It seems to us that Sartre succeeded in translating his intellectual ideas into literary works which facilitated the understanding of his philosophy.

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<sup>15</sup>Id. Ibid, p 15.



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