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Eds.

Amitava Roy, Ronan Paterson,
Bryan Reynolds, Subir Dhar, Shelia T. Cavanagh, Papia Mitra

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In Memoriam

Shakespeare Society of Eastern India &
Tagore Gandhi Institute
mourns the passing away of

SHREELA ROY
(1946 – 2022)

Historian, author, former Head of the Department of History, Loreto College, Kolkata, (1969 – 2006), Visiting Professor West Bengal Institute of IAS Aspirants & Diamond Harbour Women's University, Former President TGI, Lover of Shakespeare & Tagore. Secretary Nivedita Vrati Sangha, Editor *Vrati* & Long time associate of RKM Institute of Culture, Golepark.

You left your hundreds of students and admirers disconsolate on 15th March 2022 after a brief illness bravely borne.

Farewell and Rest in Peace after your journey's end.

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From the Editorial Desk

Dear readers,

We are happy to present another volume of **International Journal of Cultural Studies and Social Sciences** here. As you know during Corona Pandemic we tried our best to bring these volumes out. Now that relative normalcy has been restored, we are trying to play catch up. In this volume we present different aspects of the culture of modern world as reflected in literature and research surveys. The themes dealt with here are timeless. Hope this volume will strike the readers as offering a fresh perspective.

This volume begins with a paper by **Dr Bijender Singh** from Meerpur (Rewari), Haryana who pinpoints how the problem of casteism in forms & permeates all facts of our existence in India even today. Autobiographies by Dalits show that education has failed to solve the problem because the mindset of people, have not changed. Educational institutions replicate social values of the dominant class so that students and teachers alike discriminate verbally and physically against Dalits even in the classroom. Experiential evidence shows that even if a Dalit becomes highly educated, gets a good job and earns good money he or she is never accorded the respect that, people of higher castes enjoy. Consequently, there is no class solidarity: a poor woman of upper castes would treat women of Scheduled castes whether rich or poor with contempt. Additionally Dalit women also face abuse and violence from their menfolk. A new kind of education is needed that teaches that all humans beings should be respected equally.

Prosenjit Saha discusses how gender affects literacy in India. After independence there was a massive boost in literacy levels. But from the beginning women were always lagging behind, even in the most literate states. Orthodox society feels that a girl is a burden and should be married off as soon as possible. Therefore they drop out of formal educational systems. Until we genuinely follow the advice of Swami Vivekananda to improve women's condition, our country cannot develop its full potential.

Shibani Chakraborti Aich commentes on selected stories from some of the best Indian anthologies. She focuses her gaze on the societal problems like misogyny, violence, corruption, communal riots, rampant greed as outlined in the stories. Her observations clearly shows that we must learn to be ‘good human beings’ first.

Tapu Biswas picks up the presence of absurdist and existentialist elements in many of Shakespeare’s plays. He begins by explaining the central tenets of modern Absurdist plays and then moves to demonstrate how such a philosophy runs through Shakespeare’s plays also. *King Lear* in particular deals with the themes of meaninglessness as reveales in the recurrence of the words Nothing & Nothingness over one hundred times throughout the play encapsulated in. When Lear accepts responsibility for his actions he becomes truly free. Biswas argues that Lear’s madness is true freedom that is uncaused and thus he is able to face death as a reality. Similarly, the concept of nothingness and meaninglessness underlie two other great tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

Monikinkini Basu focuses on something we, the ordinary viewing public, has not consciously realized before – how colour has been used in Satyajit Ray’s film *Joy Baba Felunath*. Ray used red to signify power and importance while green signals neutrality or powerlessness. While the villain Maghan Lal wears white to camouflage his intentions, red is the colour of the Goddess who slays such evil. Basu points out how the medium of film brings out the symbolism of the colours powerfully.

Mujaffar Hossain and Prasenjit Panda analyzes how violence of war and partition leave a permanent impact on their victims as portrayed in the Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie’s novel *Burnt Shadows*. The novel also destroys the idea of nationalism as an ideology. The heroine Hiroko Tanaka is a Japanese who loses her German fiancée in the Nagasaki bombing; she comes to India only to meet with people who have been affected by the violence over Partition. She marries a Muslim and is forced to migrate to Pakistan. Her daughter becomes a Japanese Pakistani who settles in USA but is met by suspicion due to 9/11 attack. The novel shows how identity is not a fixed quantity but constantly changing.

Musarrat Nazmi writes upon a little discussed topic, on how comics have been used as propaganda by governments. Comics are colorful simple and arouses instant attention and emotion. USA used comic superheroes like Superman, Batman to support their campaign in World

War II. In India also Bantul the Great was put to use by Indian Government during Bangladesh war of Liberation. She points out that common people identify more readily with such heroes who have secret identities as normal people.

Prisith Biswas explores Keats' 'effeminate' qualities decried by his contemporaries. Romantic poetry follows conventional idea about female passivity. Keats as a man is socially superior to a woman but possessing feminine qualities is inferior. Therefore, Keats' critics while discussing his literary output gives more importance to this issue.

Sazano Sibbo takes up Achebe's *Anthills of Savannah* as a manifesto about corruption in newly independent African countries. Everywhere when the British went away, they bequeathed a bad government. The new elites soon copied their erst while masters and became corrupt. Even good men become bad when survival is the only objective. Sibbo points out that Achebe's writings are about the concept of power and search for an alternative order of society.

Subham Bhattacharjee takes up a new genre, a web series that has been streamed on an OTT platform. He chooses highly popular and controversial series *Game of Thrones*. There he analyzes the concept of power and legitimacy in the web series. Set in a medieval fantasy background, the society portrayed is a hierarchal one, with explicit misogyny and patriarchy, where inheritance follows the law of primogeniture. But he points out that there are strong women characters who entered the sphere of authority and separates it from traditional patriarchy.

Srijata Saha turns her attention to Queer feminist myths. Women have always been disempowered and lesbians are in a worse marginalized situation. But, they have also contributed to literature. In particular she focuses on the works of Suniti Namjoshi who subvert traditional fairytales and canonical texts. Through them she fashions her own identity living in multiple worlds.

Panchanan Halder's paper in this volume explores the cultural and religious life of the Santhali tribe. He has very scholarly described the language, music, dance used by this community. He has also suggested some measures so that the marginalised Santhals may be mingled with the mainstream of the society, coming out from the periphery.

The volume ends with the paper by **Indrani Sarkar** on Larval Metamorphosis and Behaviour of *Macrobrachium lamarrei lamarrei* (H. Milne Edward, 1837). Here she points out the growth and importance of the *M. lamarreilamarrei* for global market and can enhance the socio economic condition of the poor people of India. This will contribute the possibilities of commercial culture of this species in fresh water.

Happy reading
Amitava Roy, Ronan Paterson,
Papia Mitra

Absurdity and Existentialism in Select Shakespeare's Plays: A Study

Tapu Biswas

As E.R. Dodds showed in his book *The Greeks and the Irrational*, the idea of the 'absurd' goes back at least to the Greek culture of antiquity. For the purpose of this paper, I shall focus on a few texts that are concerned in one way or the other with the idea of the Absurd. The first is Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* in which the King's unanswerable question in the final scene is flung to both the Gods as well as to man: 'Why should a dog, a rat, a horse have life, and thou no breath at all?' (5.3) Lear's point is that we live in a world where lowly insentient animals have life even as the human good die horribly, that there is no relation between cause and effect, and that we live in an arbitrary, violent and hostile universe that is unsympathetic to Man's continued existence. In this connection we may recall the German philosopher Nietzsche's declaration that 'God is dead' and remember all the terrible consequences related to this conclusion. Relevant also in this context is Dostoyevsky's observation: 'If God is dead, why isn't everything permitted?' And finally there is the ancient myth which Camus in his essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (written in 1942) cited, in which Sisyphus rolls a rock up a steep hill only to have the rock roll down from the top, and Sisyphus to start rolling it up all over again throughout eternity. The story was Camus's metaphor for the meaninglessness and futility of existence.

In the European tradition, the Absurdist writers not only include playwrights but also novelists like Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Albert Camus (1913-1960), and Robert Musil (1880-1942). Well known playwrights of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Eugene Ionesco (1909-1934), Harold Pinter (1930-2008), Edward Albee (1928-2016) amongst others. There may be a case made out for the inclusion of two other Indian (specifically Bengali) dramatists in this group, and these are Badal Sircar (1925-2011)

who is famous for his play *Evam Indrajit*, and Mohit Chattopadhyay (1934-2012) who is well known for his plays *Captain Hurrah* and *Nil Ranger Ghora*. In the Bengla language, such Absurd plays are called *Kimitibadi Natak* or *Udbhatt* plays. Both terms have passed into the lexicon of modern Bangla theatre. The basic traits of the Absurdist writers include a willed violation of the traditional structuring of a play into a beginning, a middle and an end, of a refusal to tell a straightforward story through a use of a proper plot, and a complete rejection of virtually all traditional dramatic forms and techniques. The arbitrary patterns and constructions of the plays are of course intentional, incorporated to reflect the arbitrary and irrational nature of life itself. Moreover, the playwrights of the Absurd viewed life existentially, expressing the senselessness of the human condition by abandoning everything approximating to rational practices in drama writing. Most of their plays therefore express a sense of alien wonder and incomprehension, and at times even communicate a deep sense of despair at the meaninglessness of human existence.

The entry on 'Absurd Drama' in the *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* states that the plays written in the Absurd tradition 'presented man's metaphysical absurdity in [an] aberrant dramatic style that mirrored the human situation. Never a formal movement, the playwrights of the absurd were centered in post-war Paris but they soared to international fame with the unexpected success of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.' In this context it may also be relevant to mention the concept of "Absurd Plays" as it is explained in *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*, which observes that 'The language of the absurd is often in conflict with the immediate action and is reduced to meaningless pattern to show the futility.'

The Absurd dramatists were (and are) all concerned with the failure of communication in modern society which leaves man alienated. Moreover, they are also concerned with the lack of individuality and with the overemphasis placed on conformity in our society. Additionally, they eschew traditional logic for a type or species of non-logic which ultimately implies something deeply significant about the nature of the universe. Implicit in many of these concerns is an attack on society or a world which possesses no set standards of values or behaviour. Martin Esslin in the Introduction to his famous book *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) defined the 'Absurd play' as one that has "renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being -- that is, in terms of concrete stage images...the difference between theory and experience"

(25). The aim and objective of this paper will be to discuss the term 'absurd' with reference to certain select plays of William Shakespeare.

The first of these plays to be discussed, Shakespeare's *King Lear* has occasionally been represented as a tragedy with absurdist undertones. The figuration of the idea of absurdity and meaninglessness in *King Lear* can be appreciated by analyzing the actions of the characters in the play. While Lear's actions lead him to confront a meaningless life, Goneril and Regan heap meaningless praise on Lear to achieve their ends, even as for Cordelia the entire act of justifying her love for her father in words turns out to be meaningless. Meaninglessness lies at the core of the void that fills Lear's life. Cordelia's 'nothing' is a ramification of the meaninglessness of her justifying her love for her father, and it is this preoccupation with 'nothing' which establishes the absurdity in the play. In Act 4, Scene 6 we notice the nearest approximation in Shakespeare to Absurd drama. Lear's vision of "unaccommodated man" is a *reductio ad absurdum* of man to almost nothing and an equation of man with beasts and animals. It was difficult in Shakespeare's time to create such a scene effectively in the theatre, and yet Shakespeare introduced just such a scene. This indicates that Shakespeare wanted it for a special purpose which is symbolic and philosophical. Edgar created an incredibly dizzy atmosphere with words and to Gloucester this world created by 'words' at the base of the Dover cliffs is more than real. The objective basis of reality is thus questioned and the relative truth of situations is emphasized. What is suggested is that every man has a world of his own and that this is subjectively fabricated. In such a world, therefore, no other value is so valid as that of freedom which is co-extensive with existence itself. The objective world being relative is itself an absurdity. When man sees inward, he sees nothing but freedom and he feels an urge to preserve this at all costs. Gloucester acts out this philosophy and makes Lear's 'dark design' visible in an important aspect. It is entirely fitting that the poignant 'mad' scene of *King Lear* in which the old King appears fantastically dressed should be a continuation of the 'grotesque-absurd' scene of Gloucester attempting to commit suicide. On his entrance in the 'mad' scene, Lear asserts: 'No they cannot touch me for coining; I am the King himself.' (4.6). This means that he is free and so he refuses to be pressurized on any account. This essential sovereignty of man is inseparable from his freedom-urge. Once man is ready to take responsibility for all consequences, he is free. The idea is that he is King himself no matter whether he is in a palace or in a hovel. It is this awareness of the sovereignty of the essential man that makes the mad, oppressed, and outcast Lear, a sovereign soul.

Theorists of 'redemption through suffering' have no explanation for why Gloucester whose suffering was ennobling him, should in Act 4, Scene 6 decide to die. Taking a leap into the dark symbolizes man's decision; but it is not freedom if it is caused by despair. Even though critics like R. K. Sharma, Jyoti Bhattacharya, Amitava Roy and A.C. Bradley take Gloucester as an embodiment of Christian piety, it has also to be noted that he has no religious scruples. As the murmuring surge is so feeble that it cannot be heard from so high. Gloucester is a man hurled into a sightless, soundless world. And with Gloucester the audience too stands on the verge of credibility. Also apart from this, the mock climbing and the mock leaping down while traversing a linear path is the epitome of absurdity. The technical excellence with which Shakespeare manages this scene gives all the more value to its philosophical implication. Gloucester is re-acting and re-living some of the afflictions of Lear, and so his role is mimetic. Indeed, he reenacts the scene of Lear's renunciation in the opening scene in which his task was also to "shake patiently my great affliction off." The renunciation in fact can be seen as being parallel to Lear's 'dark design' in order to gain freedom.

Gloucester tries to gain freedom through violent death. Death defies tyranny and assures man's freedom: 'Is wretchedness deprived of that benefit/ To end itself in death?' (Act 4, Sc 6). All Absurd drama is enacted on both a dizzy and sheer foundation. Gloucester is made to look down and up by turns without the help of his sight. He symbolizes the moral predicament of the human race in this respect. Here, 'above' and 'below' are the same just as Poor-Edgar and Devil-Edgar are the same. A piece of veritable folk-lore is invoked in *King Lear* in order to explore the absurd. Wilson Knight has characterized this drama as a 'comedy of the grotesque' or even farce. One is free to call it comedy or tragedy but a more apt description would be either 'absurd' of the Existential variety, or just Existential Drama.

The elaborate grotesque in Act 4, Scene 6 in *King Lear* has never been satisfactorily explained. It is more than just another scene with Gloucester. The elaborateness of the scene and the daring of the playwright in making such a biplane absurdity to be presented in ever-realistic detail cannot be dismissed easily for Shakespeare was fully aware of the constraints and limitations of the Elizabethan stage to produce it. Again, Gloucester in his conversation with Lear puts forward a theory of knowledge which brings us close to existentialism. Lear says: 'You see how this world goes.' (3. 2) Gloucester replies 'I see it feelingly.' (3.2) The world thus goes inward -- both for Lear and for Gloucester. The objective foundation of existence is taken away.

Seen from this point of view, Lear's madness itself may be viewed as being a comprehensive metaphor. Freedom is uncaused and so cannot be understood by reference to rationality or to the processes of cause and effect. In a world-view committed to causality, Lear is of course mad. However, that this is no more than a grand symbol will be clear if we fix upon Lear's 'image of authority' speech in Act IV, Scene 6. Though Lear is to be stark in madness, what he says has logic in it, and Edgar appropriately calls it 'logic in madness.' Only, the logic is sprinkled over with Lear's own vision of reality: 'None does offend, none, I say, none.' And at the end of one speech there is a metaphoric action suggested by Lear asking Gloucester to 'pull off' his boots. The playwright had no other means at his disposal to present the reality – which is in fact Lear's new philosophical awareness. The theme of justice only reveals the relativity of all such conceptions such as justice. Like his Fool earlier, Lear takes recourse to inversion. Rather similarly, the playwright of an Absurd drama does not present his play in a logical way. As Edgar pertinently observes, 'O! matter and impertinency mixed; Reason in madness.' (4.6). Lear wants to teach Gloucester his own world-view. Shakespeare's stage is very similar to the stage of Absurd Drama in which the unintelligible and illogical aspects of existence are emphasized. Lear through his 'antic disposition' gives his new interpretation of the world of man. The concept of death is part of this new philosophy which Lear accepts without any morbidity or fear. But Gloucester's prayer to the 'ever gentle gods' to bring his natural death so that he may not be tempted again, is not as brave as Lear's.

Camus and Kafka are as insistent as Heidegger on the need to face death as a reality- death which is the final absurdity. Heidegger attaches great importance to the consideration of death. The prospect of death gives us a most important decision: 'It is recognition of death which lets us truly live.' There is nothing to prevent consciousness from making a wholly new decision of its way of being. When Lear says 'I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom' (4.6) some commentators tend to accept it as an example of a mad man's incoherent raving. In a conventional interpretation it is no doubt difficult to see why a smug bridegroom should die at all and die bravely at that. But the philosophy of Existentialism may prove to be of some relevance here. It was Lear's awareness of his approaching death which prompted him to divide and distribute his kingdom. But more deeply considered, it becomes evident that the near-existential awareness of death had perhaps made it clear to him that life's

possibilities were open to the very point of one's death which is always a future event and is impossible to be realized by any man. This is more pronounced than any anxiety about an after-death situation, for example any future dissension over his kingdom. Even though such interpretations have sometimes given rise to studies on Shakespeare's politics with reference to *King Lear*, it is clear enough that Lear himself became suddenly desirous of his own freedom. To put this in an existentialist way, just as one can only die one's own death, so it is only when Bad Faith is removed that one can only be one's own Being. It is this supremacy of consciousness or Existence that makes Freedom the other name of Being. Lear is relieved of all morbidity the moment he can accept death not as a disastrous negation but as a phenomenon that makes life free and full of possibility. Lear will 'die bravely' because he is fortified with the consciousness of freedom. In other words, his words are a celebration of his victory over 'Bad Faith'. Lear's words are just symbols in words, but the Gentleman takes the words of Lear at face value and accepts his mundane kingship: 'You are a royal one, and we obey you.' (4. 6). Only, Lear needs no obedience any more at this point.

Just before this, Lear had talked apparently incoherently but actually not quite so about his stratagem of making a surreptitious attack 'upon these sons-in-law.' By his monologue he only emphasized that he was still free to act in so many different ways, not that he was actually planning to take any revenge action. The Edgar-Gloucester scene is repeated at the end of the scene (4.6) to stress that seeing is not always believing, but rather it is feeling which is believing. Gloucester laments that he lives with his 'ingenious feeling' and wishes that he were mad like Lear. Gloucester like other people thinks that Lear's is a case of absolute distraction full of unreal imaginations. He wants to imitate the outward Lear, not the Lear who is the master of his essential consciousness and essential freedom.

The action of *King Lear* incorporates significantly the traditional disorders of comedy – social hierarchies turned upside down, logic and even the precepts of sanity violated. A case in point is Edgar's shock treatment of his suicidal father to cure him of his melancholia when he is falls only headlong but is made to think that he has fallen from the great height of the Dover cliff and yet is miraculously alive. This tragicomic therapeutic action depicted in Act 4 Sc. 6 has been seen by some modern critics as being close to the tragicomic action of Ionesco's comedies of the Absurd.

According to Existentialism and Absurdity, death has a focus upon life. In *King Lear* we see this focus of death on life on a number of occasions. Gloucester seems to be specially chosen by Shakespeare for this purpose. At intervals his death will confront him as if from nowhere. Death is an ultimate state beyond which Being-in-itself has no being. Gloucester hopes to exercise his ultimate decision of killing himself but he is thwarted by Edgar. So in Act 5 Scene 2 when Edgar asks Gloucester to run away to escape from being killed or captured by Edmund's army, Gloucester asserts his death wish once again: 'No further, sir, a man may rot even here.' But Edgar is not aware of this awareness of freedom in Gloucester. He regards his father's death-wish only as 'ill thoughts.' Man's need to be free from all 'musts' is emphasized in all Existential thinking. Why must man 'endure' suffering if he feels like acting otherwise or even committing suicide? Lear's initial action – so very unexpected and unconventional – was a revolt against such 'musts'. Of the characters in the play some are 'good' and some 'bad', but none is free like Lear — and next to him, Cordelia. Lear alone takes the initiative, courts freedom and suffers the consequence freely. While others are perpetually in bondage, Lear is free. Being free is a value in itself. Only rather differently, Edgar says that we should be ready for death and be ready to accept it only when it comes. He is against premature death and feels that man is debarred from killing himself and from taking any initiative in this. This is a glaring example of Bad Faith or scruple which ideologically removes man from his essential freedom.

An obsession with the meaninglessness of the human condition can also be seen in Shakespeare's other great tragedies like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In the Gravedigger's Scene in *Hamlet* (Act 5, Sc. 1) when Hamlet comes upon Yorick's skull, he actually uncovers the truth of life. He realizes that all human achievements are futile as life ultimately ends in death. Hamlet's unforgettable and profound meditation on death, is a meditation that reveals Hamlet's mind to be completely logical and lucid, and philosophically mature: 'If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. Yet it will come –the readiness is all.' (5. 2) Hamlet interrogates the meaning of the human condition when he asks: 'To be; or not to be.' This famous soliloquy in *Hamlet* is known all over the world as an anguished relection on "Being and Nothingness." It is a reflection over whether life has a meaning or not, and Hamlet finally realizes that life is meaningless. Hamlet's preoccupation with Death as "a consummation devoutly to be wished" has made A. C. Bradely and Kenneth Muir to view

him as a sick, mentally unhealthy and excessively melancholic man with a doom-driven personality. The Gravedigger's scene juxtaposes with Hamlet's melancholic situation. As Shakespeare had used the Fool in *King Lear* to make Lear understand that his decisions were wrong, so too he uses the dead Fool Yorick to show to Hamlet the futility of life. Somewhat similarly, Macbeth too realized that human life is meaningless and that human existence is only possible if we give a meaning to it.

To conclude it may be pointed out that the mid-twentieth century playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter *et al* were not the pioneers in expounding upon existentialist and absurdist themes in literature. Such realizations had been contained and had been realized a long way back in the plays of William Shakespeare whose plays can be identified and described as icons of Absurdism in literature.

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