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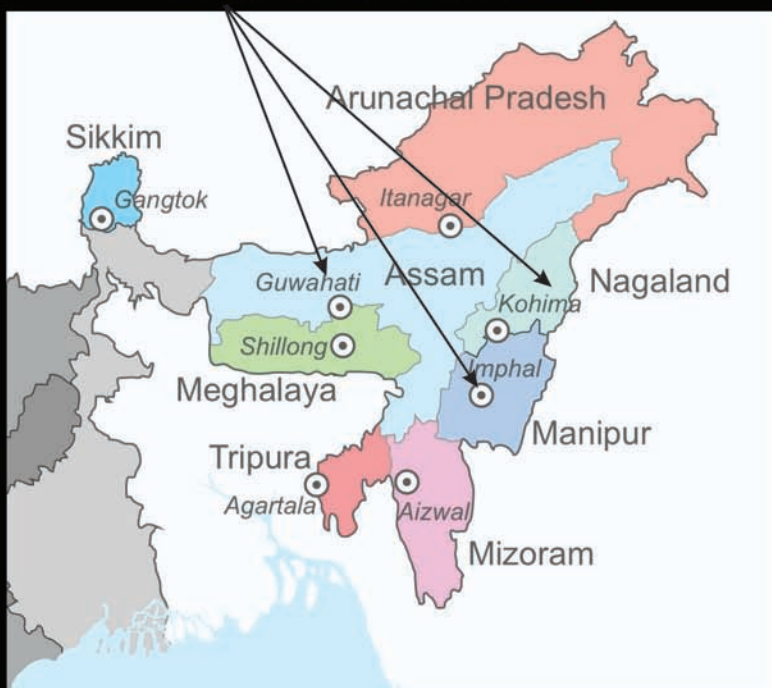
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VOICES OF THE NORTH EAST

Manipuri Meditations & More



Eds.

Amitava Roy, Ronan Paterson,

Bryan Reynolds, Subir Dhar, Shelia T. Cavanagh, Papia Mitra

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From the Editorial Desk

Dear readers,

International Journal of Cultural Studies and Social Science takes great pleasure in devoting a special issue (Vol.-XV No. XVIII) on Voices from the North East with particular focus on Research from Manipur, Bodoland and Nagaland. The opening paper is by the renowned scholar, linguist and critic **Dr. Irom Gambhir Singh**, Dept. of English, Manipur University. He brings his expertise to bear upon “Multilingual Classrooms of Higher Education” giving us an excellent model for teaching English Language in Manipur.

Research Scholar **Paveine Taishya** from Manipur University gives us a highly interesting paper on Code “Switching and Code Mixing”. From Bodoland University we offer a joint paper by **Priyanka Sana**, PhD Scholar, and Assistant Professor **Zothanchhingi Khiangte** on “Overcoming transgenerational trauma.” a case study using relevant materials from Netflix’s Sex Education courses. **Sachidananda Angom** from Imphal currently pursuing his Ph. D from Manipur Central University presents a rereading of Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* using the two poles of Pre-colonialism and Post colonialism to sharpen his argument. **Bandana Sapam**, PhD Scholar from Manipur University concentrates on Teaching English as Second Language through Literature. This field study has been disseminated through Final Year Postgraduate students of her University. **Chingalembi Devi**, Research Scholar, Manipur University highlights conflict and resistance in exploring Aruni Kashyap’s *The House with a Thousand Stories*. **Zin Me Soe** from Manipur University takes an informed look at Grade ten English Textbooks in the context of Myanmar, as she efficiently analyses the cultural contents in such school books. Veio Pou’s *Waiting for the Dust to Settle* is taken up by **Donkaolung Malangmei** research scholar, Manipur University in order to locate the Subaltern Voice in the text. **Dr. Chingtham Diana Devi** and research scholar **Paveine Taishya** take up the vexed and controversial question of translating Manipuri folk tales into English. The project is fraught with numerous cultural and linguistic barriers and the writers admit that much can be lost in translation. But it

is a pioneering work which also reveals what can be gained through such translations.

This issue includes **Dr Tapu Biswas**'s (D.Litt from Manipur University currently Assistant Professor Department of English, Visva-Bharati) critique of Edward Albee's *Zoo Story* where he gives an illuminating exposition of Aesthetics and Politics of Absurdism.

Nagaland is represented by **Sazono Sibbo** of Patkai Christian College who deftly provides a significant critical summery of conflict in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*.

This issue can be summed up as showcasing a selection of young scholars from the North East with a fair sprinkling of leading lights like the legendary **Professor Gamvir** and the much acclaimed **Dr. Tapu Biswas**.

Happy Reading

Amitava Roy and Sheila T. Cavanagh

The Aesthetics and Politics of Absurdism in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*: A Study

Tapu Biswas

The twentieth century witnessed remarkable experiments in all sorts of artistic forms and almost every artist tried to express the experiences of European modernity and its socio-political as well as cultural ramifications through new art. The experimentation reached a climactic point with the rise of absurd literature that marked a discernible shift from the problematics of representation to the contours of abstraction swayed by the philosophical impetus of existentialism. The American theatre like the British and the Continental theatres was tremendously influenced by the absurd art. In Continental theatre a series of experimentations through Symbolism, Marxism and Surrealism found its culmination by unsettling the predictable and the knowable universe through the discourses of the irrational and the absurd. Theatre was no longer interested in presenting a narrative through a linear plot and fractured scenes and circular action problematized the notion of traditional plot and shook the foundations of the realistic theatre. The practice of transparent exchange of dialogues was replaced by verbal opacity and a sense of lack of communication was shown.

The dramatist who changed the history of drama was of course Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) with his magnum opus written in French in 1948 and translated by the author as *Waiting for Godot* (first premiered in Paris in 1953; in London in 1955). Arthur Adamov (1908-1970), Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994) and Beckett were the three chief western practitioners of absurd drama. From India names Badal Sircar (1925-2011), Mohit Chattopadhyay (1934-2012) should be mentioned. Though they were not writing from a direct common agenda through any manifesto and they did not know each other, they revolutionized theatre forever. Their

plays are usually analyzed under the term “Theatre of the Absurd”, a label popularized by Martin Esslin. The baptism of American theatre in absurdism was done by Edward Albee and his one act play *The Zoo Story* (first performed on 28th September 1969, at the Schiller Theatre Werkstatt, Berlin) inaugurated the tradition of Absurd Theatre on American stage defying the expectations of the audiences and the conventions of theatre that had governed plays till then. This paper is an exploration of the aesthetics and politics of absurdism in Albee’s *The Zoo Story* with a critical investigation of the political, historical, cultural and philosophical aspects that made the platform of absurd theatre in America.

In music, the term ‘absurd’ is conceptualized as ‘out of harmony’. In the context of the theatre of the Absurd, the term is used to categorize the plays that defy to establish a harmony with reason and existing conventions. The absurd plays are also termed as theatre of revolt, theatre of derision, anti-theatre, and meta-theatre. In Bengali such absurd plays are called *Kimitibadi* Natak or *Udbhat* plays. Though it may sound like gross generalizations, it would not be wrong perhaps to claim that all absurd plays especially share a self-conscious critical approach to theatre. The philosophical influence of Friedreich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) cannot be denied.

Nietzsche was a spiritual guru to all the absurd writers. Briefly existential philosophy shows that human beings exist in a universe that does not have any overarching moral order or meaning. Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of the God created a sense of flux and a state of indeterminacy in a world that no longer witnesses the idea of an unflinching faith in God and the omnipotence and omnipresence of God. Nietzsche believed that art played the role of an agent that tranquilizes absurd situations and claimed in *The Will to Power* Man that “in order to endure life, would need a marvelous illusion to cover it with a veil of beauty” (853). The function of art for him is not to reproduce reality but to function as a momentary obliteration of reality. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886) Nietzsche views the chorus not as a bridge between the characters on stage and the spectators, but as a separating impassable wall and asserts that “art is not an imitation of nature but its metaphysical supplement, raised up beside it in order to overcome it” (vii).

The tranquilizing aspect of art is not present in Albert Camus’s aesthetics and Camus stated in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) that art aggravates

worldly tensions. The absurd work constantly represents to man his existential predicament in “a sort of monotonous and passionate repetition of the themes already orchestrated by the world” (70). He differentiated between existential art and absurd art and remarked that Dostoevsky was “not an absurd novelist addressing us, but an existential novelist” (82) as he located in on Dostoevsky’s works a certain resolution and an answer to the absurd situation. The noted French writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre gave a lecture on “Myth and Reality in Theatre” in 1966 and there he clearly pointed out how the absurd playwrights were attempting ‘un theatre critique’. They had dispensed with ideas of plot and character and this lack of plot and impossibility of character, according to Sartre, constituted the subject matter of their plays. In the introduction to an edited volume of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Professor G.J.V. Prasad remarks: “The plotless plot and characterless characters then are subject to a series of senseless and, thus, actionless actions. This enables them to achieve the writing degree zero formulated by another famous French critic Roland Barthes in 1953” (xvi). Though America did not suffer the feeling of disillusionment that engulfed the European countries during and after the Second World War, Edward Albee who resisted the label ‘absurd’ fully shares the characteristics of Absurd theatre in *The Zoo Story*.

In *The Zoo Story* Albee was close to the aesthetic theory of Camus’s absurd art. Initially Albee did not find any suitable producer for this play and it was first performed at the Schiller Theatre Werkstatt in West Berlin on September 28, 1959. Provincetown Playhouse performed the play in 1960 for the first time in America and the play was grouped with Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*. This association with Beckett underlined his status as a practitioner of the absurd drama. His pessimism behind the façade of bohemian life, the terrible breakdown of communication not only with human beings but also with a fellow dog directly foreground his remarkable affinity with the theatre of the Absurd. He continued to write in the vein of the absurd in one -act plays like *The Sandbox* (1959) and *The American Dream* (1961). In 1962, his famous play, *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* took the American theatre by storm. The introduction of the *Theatre of the Absurd* in the American stage by Albee revolutionized the new sense and sensibility of the theatre.

T.S. Eliot in “The Waste Land” had already depicted the total vacuity of the Western civilization after the First World War and shown how the post industrialized Europe is characterized by sterility. Following Beckett

playwrights like Albee projected a dark and gloomy atmosphere triggered by the Post Second World War Europe where a vision of the absolute meaninglessness and a devastating sense of the absurdity of existence has been encapsulated. Albee firmly believed that “All art is useful because it tells us more about consciousness. It should engage us into thinking and re-evaluating, re-examining our values to find out whether the stuff we think we’ve been believing for 20 years still has any validity. Art’s got to help us understand that values change’. This shares close proximity with what Raymond Williams calls ‘structures of feelings’. Liam Kennedy while analyzing contemporary American culture comments: “New patterns of cultural existence, immigration and migration, and ethnic and racial boundary-marking have accentuated these decentring tendencies, fragmenting and dislocating the common culture of reference” (2000, 52).

Albee explores the absurdity of human life in the one-act play that consists of only two characters- Peter and Jerry. The play is characterized by a spectacular lack of communication and an inexplicable sense of alienation emanating from a pervading existential angst. T.S. Eliot has already mourned over the lack of communication when he said in “The Wasteland”, “On Margate sand/I can connect/Nothing with nothing” (669). By the time Albee was writing all models and attempts of establishing communication miserably failed. He shows American theatre how to write a play doing away with the traditional notion of what constitutes the plot of a play and builds up a narrative where “nothing happens” (as we see in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*) until an ending with violence. The theme of the lack of communication and the irrationality and absurdity of life is clearly underlined at the very beginning of the play through Jerry’s inability to communicate with Peter.

Jerry: I’ve been to the zoo [Peter doesn’t notice] I said, I’ve been to the zoo, MISTER, I’ve BEEN TO THE ZOO!

Peter: Hm?...What?...I’m sorry, were you talking to me?

Jerry: I went to the zoo, and then I walked until I came here. Have I been walking north? (Albee 1)

Peter, a publishing executive in his early forties lives in his own world with little or no knowledge of the outside world while Jerry is an alienated individual in his late thirties and lives in a boarding house. Jerry seems to be very troubled and most of the dialogues of the play are told by him

and Peter talks very little when they somehow meet as strangers at New York City's Central Park. Jerry is desperately trying to engage in a conversation intruding upon the personal space of Peter. The desperate urge to have a dialogic interaction with Peter underlines how Jerry is thrown into a state of trepidation and alienation. Jerry and Peter represent two different worlds altogether- the world of absurdity and alienation and the world of success and development. They are barricaded by their social class, intellectual interests, and ways of seeing life: "Peter is the embodiment of the model capitalist man that is confronted with the emotional isolation of the social exile" (Debusscher 10). Jerry is described "the central figure exhausts himself and finally dies of trying to integrate himself, to re-establish lost contact, to belong" (48). Anderson has observed: "The play can be explained as a socio-political tract, a pessimistic analysis of human alienation, a modern Christian allegory of salvation, and an example of absurdist and nihilist theatre, but the play has managed to absorb these perspectives without exhausting its many levels of meaning" (Anderson 93)".

The pervading sense of alienation in American culture created text like *The Zoo Story* that underlines a note of discord in the contemporary social and cultural life, thereby depicting the conditions of the absurd. Albee's exploration of the alienation conforms to M. Seeman's five components of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, normlessness and self-estrangement. Albee's Jerry brings out all these aspects of alienation. He leaves no stone unturned to get integrated into the highly fragmented society. Despite his attempts, he remains as an outcast or a stranger or a voice of counter culture. Just after a casual introduction Jerry puts forward a number of uncomfortable questions like why he did not have sons, whether there was possibility of having any and whether his wife was the cause of not being able to give birth to a male child. One of the defining features of an absurd play is to introduce a note of discord and this note of discord has successfully been launched by Albee by putting into Jerry's voice some questions for making communication that can really "connect nothing with nothing". There was a widespread discussion of alienation after the Second World War. Those who had taken part in it include not only Marxists but also existentialists, sociologists, literary critics and writers. It is not surprising then that an experimental art like absurd drama would be interested in tearing apart the conditions of alienation. This sense of alienation is essentially an urban phenomenon.

Jerry is aware of the fact that it is hard to find order and sense in his existence. In the conversation between Peter and Jerry a existence marked by chaos and disorder is clear.

PETER: [almost pouncing] Oh, I thought you lived in the Village.

JERRY: What were you trying to do? Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeonhole bit? Well, that's easy; I will tell you." (2)

The story of his parents, love, sex and landlady may not seem absurd but to unlock these stories to a stranger to establish a communication definitely creates an absurd situation. The sense of the absurd within the play seems potent in Jerry's story about the dog:

JERRY :... It's just ... it's jus that ... [Jerry is abnormally tense, now.] ... it's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS ! [*Much faster now, and like a conspirator*] Don't you see.? A person has have to some way of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people... SOMETHING. With a bed, with a cockroach, with a mirror... no. that's too hard, that's one of the last steps. With a cockroach, with a ...with a...with a carpet, a roll of toilet paper... no. not that, either... that's a mirror, too; always check bleeding. You see how hard it is to find things? (4)

The sense of predicament and urban ennui is in striking contrast with Peter who said "I don't live in your block". Peter's apparently stable mental order is shaken first, then broken by Jerry's garrulity and finally went to the level of absurdity in his struggle to defend "MY BENCH". It is as if his entire existence solely depends on holding the space occupied by him on the bench. Like the hats and boots in *Waiting for Godot*, the bench in *The Zoo Story* serves through vigorous, yet meaningless actions to bring out the elements of the absurd in the play. Peter is coerced to one end of the bench and tries to defend his honour. Their encounter ends with Jerry throwing himself upon the knife that he had tossed at Peter's feet; before he dies he explains that this is what happened at the zoo and instructs Peter to take his book and leave. The bench in the Central Park, where Peter sat for reading represents space and the concluding piece of action in the play stems from a desperate attempt to cling to that regularly occupied space. Albee exposes the absurdity of man's intellectual

preoccupations – the space of reading seems to be more important for Peter than the contents of his reading. Though Jerry is himself caught in a web of absurd situation of life, he is experienced from the churnings of his life to detect how the apparently well-ordered and organised intellectual world of Peter is couched in the absurdity of modern existence. A man like Peter cannot fight for the injustices of the society; they can just fight for the little space they occupy and reduce every trivial things in life to a tale of honour . Jerry aptly says:

JERRY :Why? You have everything in the world you want; you've told me about your home, and your family, and your own little zoo. You have everything, and now you want this bench. Are these the things men fight for? Tell me, Peter, is this bench, this iron and this wood, is this your honour? Is this the thing in the world you'd fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd?"

The notion of honour has been successfully rendered ridiculous by Peter who has cocooned himself in the emptiness of the self-centred world that has taught not to think of the situation of others. Jerry rightly said: "Don't you have any idea, not even the slightest, what other people need?"

The lack of communication is clearly visible since the beginning of the play and reaches almost its peak in the Story of Jerry and the Dog. When Jerry finds that in spite of feeding the dog, the dog does not seem to have any affection for him, he decides to kill it with rat poison. Jerry arrives at a situation where he realizes: "We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other." In the "Burial of the Dead" of Eliot's *The Waste land* there is clearly a depiction of a lack of contact between a woman and her husband when we see a desperate attempt of the woman to speak to her man. In Albee the situation is even worse than we find in Eliot. Martin Esslin discusses Jerry's inability to establish genuine contact with a dog, let alone a human being" (267). Albee himself comments on the dog story in an interview: "I suppose the dog story in *The Zoo Story* to a certain extent, is a microcosm of the play by the fact that people are not communicating, eventually failing and trying and failing" (Mann 32). The sense of one's own inability to communicate seems a source of agony for him. What is pertinent to note is Jerry also kills himself when he also loses all affection for life. He cannot accept the gradual decay into

nothingness and the infinitude of stasis of life.

The conceptualisation of the play foregrounds the constructed nature of theatrical space and time. It splits both actors and audience into various crisscrossing zones such as recent past and remote past and the performative and non-performative time. The spectator is recalled to his/her individual self and his/her consciousness of this self in conjunction with the selves around her in the theatre. Repetition and recollection of Jerry's events of life create theatricality and repetition produces boredom and recollection cannot make any sense and fails to establish communication. The painful past of Jerry's life can hardly show redemptive hope. The recollection of the past recent or remote that we glean from Peter and Jerry only provide a sense of gradual decline of all attempts to reach not merely human beings but also animals. Jerry's suicide is the only event that takes place though he does not face the oddest situations of life like a Macbeth or a Lear. The existential situation has consistently degenerated and the memories of the past can provide only a completely bleak picture of life.

Albee's aesthetics of the absurd comes very close to Camus by orchestrating 'monotonous' and passionate repetition of the theme of his play. What differentiates Albee from an absurdist like Camus is the portrayal of the absurd protagonist. While Camus's hero resists death and accepts the circumstances that bind him, Albee's protagonist loses patience and leaves the stage of life by killing himself. Albee gives his masterstroke in the ending of the play as he shifts from the pattern of showing 'nothing happens' to a sudden violent denouement. By choosing a violent ending, Albee creates a different kind of absurd play in comparison to that Beckett and Camus.

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