

INFLUENCE OF ABSURD THEATRICAL TRADITION IN MODERN ASSAMESE DRAMA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO THE PLAYS OF ARUN SHARMA

Mohammad Rezaul Karim

Department of English, College of Science and Humanities,
Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al Kharj, Saudi Arabia
E-mail: karimrezaul318@gmail.com

Received: 2023-05-12

Accepted: 2023-06-13

Published: 2023-06-30

Abstract

The contemporary Assamese plays have developed as a result of numerous interwoven influences and channels. And it is clear that western influences were what shaped the Assamese plays into their perfection. After independence, Assamese writers of prose, poetry, and theatre, produced works that were on pace with the period. It demonstrated identical compositional experimentation and sociological analysis. The Assamese plays exhibit a strong western heritage from playwrights like Ibsen, Shaw, Beckett, and other absurd dramatists. A few dramatists, like Dr. Arun Sarma, Ratna Ojha, and Himendrakumar Borthakur made reflections of works of Lonesco and Beckett and despite the fact the impact of absurd dramas was not very common. In this article, the researcher investigated the works of the most renowned and esteemed Assamese playwright, Dr. Arun Sarma (1964), to emphasize the distinguishing components and similarities of *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharya* and *Aahaar* with those of absurd dramatic tropes. The researcher discovered, using the comparative technique of analysis, that, despite frequent assertions to the contrary, *Aahaar* has much in common with the absurdist movement, whereas *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharya* cannot be regarded as a fully-fledged absurd drama.

Keywords: *absurd play; assamese absurd play; modern assamese play; theatre of absurd*

1. Introduction

The phrase 'Theatre of the Absurd', as it is now commonly known, was "applied to a group of dramatists in the 1950s who did not consider themselves a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes towards the predicament of man in the universe; essentially those summarized by Albert Camus in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)" (Taylor, 1974: 7-8). It was Martin Esslin who first applied the term to drama in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), but it "has since become a catch-phrase, much used and much abused" (Esslin, 1968: 7). It should be noted that the prominent playwrights linked with this theatre, including Beckett, Lonesco, Adamov, and Renet, did not form an organized movement; rather, their works are similar solely because of a few key elements in common (Esslin, 2004). These plays disobey every norm by which drama has been evaluated for many years. The salient features of a well-made play—characters, dialogue, and plot—are hardly to be found in these plays (Esslin, 1968). They are a typical Western product, where life

currently suffers from disillusionment and loss of certainty. Al Hammadi & Al-Salih (2018: 631) concluded that "this theatre has seemed to be a reaction to the loss of the spiritual dimensions of life". Since Nietzsche's publication of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in 1882, a large number of people now believe that God is dead, and after the two terrible wars, there are many who are searching for a way in which they can politely face a cosmos devoid of a widely acknowledged integrating principle. One manifestation of this search is the Theatre of the Absurd. As such, it has two aspects. Its first and most obvious role is satire, when it pillories a society that is inauthentic and petty. Its other and more positive aspect is revealed when it confronts "a deeper layer of absurdity—the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certitude", revealing its other, more admirable side (Esslin, 2004: 289–290). Siuli (2017: 565) observed in his research that "it is true that basically the Theatre of Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face-to-face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it". Mane (2014: 395) asserts that the chief concern of the absurd dramatists "seems to project the futility of modern man's life due to the changing global scenario".

A sense of despair and disappointment runs counter to a way of life in which faith in God has been a major factor; therefore, such a perspective on life is unquestionably not fundamentally Indian. However, since the beginning of the impact of the West, Indian life has undergone enormous changes, as already mentioned. According to Mohanta (1985: 346), a tragic sense of life, which was almost anathema in pre-British Indian thought, now informs much of our literature. The last great war and the events following Independence have markedly upset life in India, so that the Indian, too, no less than the Westerner, suffers from a sense of loss of purpose and direction. The study of such thinkers as Camus and Nietzsche has also undoubtedly contributed to the development of such an attitude to life in the younger generation of Indians.

Besides Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw were two other writers whose contributions to early Assamese contemporary drama were significant (Patgiri, 2019). Assamese theatre has seen various stages of development, from folk dance-dramas to mobile theatre that gained popularity to contemporary proscenium Assamese plays that were influenced by Western ideas (Bhattacharjee, 2021). However, the later modern Assamese drama, especially post-independence drama, witnessed the growth of a dramatic form modelled on the Theatre of the Absurd. Gogoi (2014) observes that:

"The post-Independence trauma has shaken up the whole of India in a deep way. The class-conflict, wearing and tearing of ethnicity, the dreams and the lost dreams of a desired country etc. were among the hundreds of other mental trauma that India was facing" (p. 108).

Gain (2016) concluded in her study that the two world wars caused the ludicrous scenario to develop. After the horrifying event's stunning and catastrophic effects, people's beliefs, ideas, acceptance, assurance, confidence, and presumptions underwent significant upheaval. Their tranquil existence came to an end, and they started to doubt their own faith. The conditions were accurately described by the dramatists in their work. Their plays were based on themes from present-day events that were occurring at the time. Smaller tribal and non-ethnic groups taking up weapons to establish their existence, the painful divide between brothers caused by economic scales, the spark of revolution sprung in response to society's bad judgments, the fight between an individual and his inner self, and more, took

on true color in the playwrights' compositions. Vora (2020: 51), in her study, found that "they did not want to show life as it really was, but rather, the inner-life of man – what was going on inside his head". Balkaya (2013: 5) found that "in absurd drama, the inharmoniousness between the human being and the world is portrayed through the use of language and the behaviours of the characters, but dissimilarly, the language and the actions seem to be absurd, which imply that life itself is absurd".

Like their counterparts from diverse backgrounds, Assamese dramatists also produced outstanding works. Ratna Ojha, Himendra Barthakur, and Arun Sarma were part of the post-independence Assamese literary community who gradually shifted their focus away from portraying external social realities and toward examining the darker, more inside human emotions. The Assamese educated middle class audience was the target audience for this type of urban experimental theatre. The best dramatist from this generation of new-wave playwrights ultimately proved to be Arun Sarma. The earliest plays by Arun Sarma were *Jinti* and *Urukha Paja*, which in Assamese literally means 'a leaking roof', in the early 1960s. Both of these plays had mediocre success in their early stage productions. His writing style had significantly changed by the time he finished his third play, *Purusa* (1964). Its narrative does not strictly follow acts and scenes, and its plot elaborates on the intricate nuances of gender and interpersonal interactions, much like many of his subsequent plays. He is keenly aware of the close connection that exists between drama and reality. Therefore, he consistently tries to depict one or more serious human conditions in these plays. The plays of Arun Sarma clearly reflect this impact. They eventually evolved into the manifestation of that period's civilization. Each of his pieces offers a fresh perspective on how society affects people. An influential Assamese theatre critic claims in an article titled *Trends in Post-War Assamese Drama* (1978) that Arun Sharma's plays "present familiar themes in an unconventional dramatic form" (Bharali, 1978: 52). As a result, the issue of the absurd theatrical impact on Arun Sarma's plays might be the subject of meticulous investigation. In this study, the researcher has attempted to examine the influences of the absurd theatrical traditions on the plays of Arun Sarma with references to his plays - *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharya* and *Aahaar* .

2. Literature Review

It was in the sixties that the Theatre of the Absurd came to exercise a definite impact on Indian theatre, particularly the theatre of Bengal. Badal Sarkar's *Evam Indrajit* and *Indrajit* (1965) in Bengali was the first to be widely recognized as a play belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd (Bhattacharyya, 1971). Many research works have not been done on this subject, especially when we refer to the influence of absurd theatrical influences on Assamese drama. Mahanta (1985) studied the western influence on modern Assamese drama and made some general remarks about the influence of Absurd Theatre on Assamese drama in his book *Western Influence on Modern Assamese Drama*. The topic was briefly touched upon by Sarma (1978) in *Playwright in Perspective*. Gogoi (2014) and Majumder (2019) examined the absurdities in their research, *Absurd Assamese Play: Dr. Arun Sarma's Aahaar* and *Arun Sarma's Aahaar: Reductio ad Absurdum* respectively. Chaudhuri . (2018) published her review of Arun Sarma's *Aahaar* in the newspaper *The Assam Tribune* entitled *An Iconic Play*. However, they have touched on the subject in a general sort of way. It is for this reason that the researcher has undertaken to examine the influences of the absurd theatrical traditions on Assamese drama in general and on the plays of Arun Sarma in particular.

3. Research Method

The method of comparative analysis is typically used throughout the research because the study's subject is comparative. The study combines both primary and secondary sources, and it mainly focuses on the technical details of the Theatre of the Absurd and the plays by Arun Sarma. There have been instances where the significance of the plots and happenings of the plays has been stressed, and there have even been instances where direct quotations from the plays' texts have been made. To strengthen the arguments and provide further evidence for the statements, the researcher tried to include references to the writings of other authors.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Influence on *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharya*

The Theatre of the Absurd started having an effect on Assamese play in the late 1960s. *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharyya* by Arun Sarma is the first play to show signs of such an impact. The play depicts the calamity of a writer who cannot reach the public with his ideas since no one attends his performances. Yet in his zeal for expressing himself, Shri Nibaran Bhattacharyya, the artist, goes on writing and performing plays even if he finds no audience. He writes his twelfth play and makes elaborate arrangements to perform it before five hundred guests, all of whom he has personally invited. But when the curtain rises, the playwright finds that all the chairs before him are empty. In utter frustration, he goes on reading the address of welcome, which he has so painstakingly prepared, before five hundred vacant seats, and in a freakish accident thereafter, he falls dead on stage. A disappointed man who has dedicated his entire life to theater is the subject of the play *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharyya*. Borkotoki M. (1978: 21) claims that Nibaran Bhattacharya's tragedy "is the tragedy of an intense artist" who is "cheated of his life's dream at the climax of his career and made to stare at a society without a soul". Arun Sarma's play very effectively halts the discussion of the subject of the place of art and artists in a rapidly changing capitalist order. However, Mahanta (1985) believes that, in terms of its dramatic style.

There appears to be no absurdity in the theme inasmuch as it shows the tragedy of an artist whom the world fails to understand. However, the influence of the absurdist technique, particularly that of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, is very much in evidence (p. 251).

In *The Chairs*, a husband and wife who are 95 and 94 years old, respectively, reside in a spherical tower on an island. The elderly man has invited a group of notable guests to hear the message he wishes to convey to future generations before he passes away, and the couple is anticipating a large group of renowned guests. The elderly guy, who lacks public speaking skills, has hired a professional orator to speak on his behalf. Imagining that the guests arrive in increasing numbers, they go on bringing more and more chairs onto the stage. They also engage themselves in polite conversation with the imaginary guests, who keep increasing in number. They also imagine that the emperor himself comes to listen to the message, which is now ready to be delivered by the orator engaged for the purpose. The elderly guy exits the stage and dives to his death into the sea after realizing that the message has been conveyed, being followed by his wife. The speaker rises in front of the rows of empty chairs, but he is deaf and dumb and speaks only incoherently guttural noises. He scrawls something on the blackboard, but it's just a bunch of letters with no real significance.

We get much the same thing in *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharyya*, too. The playwright, an old man, lives in a dilapidated room with a heap of odds and ends of articles used in theatrical performances lying about the entrance door. He writes the last play in his life, through which he hopes to hand over to posterity the message of his life. He has invited five hundred responsible people from different walks of life to listen to his message. His daughter and sons are seen busy arranging the auditorium where the guests are to be accommodated. But none of the invited people arrive, and the old man speaks incoherently before the empty chairs. Then he goes up the stairs, falls down, and dies. Thus, the parallels between the two plays are clear. It is true that Nibaran Bhattacharyya dies accidentally, while the old man in *The Chairs* willingly jumps into the sea with a sense of satisfaction.

Mahanta (1985) continues after briefly contrasting the plot of *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharyya* with that of Ionesco's *The Chairs*.

This is not a play that can really be called an absurd drama. While the situation in the play is to some extent absurd, the dialogue is much of a realistic type with nothing of the silent language that is so characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd (p. 252).

The same argument has been advanced by Sharma (1978), who claims that although the drama deals with a few odd events "as a whole," it fails to qualify as absurd because of the way its storyline has been constructed. Yet in the Assamese play, as in *The Chairs*, the theme is that of what Esslin calls "the incommunicability of a lifetime's experience" (Esslin, 2004: 148). The playwright in *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharyya* fails to deliver the message because nobody turns up to listen to him, and in *The Chairs*, the message remains undelivered because not only the chairs are empty but the orator himself is deaf and dumb.

All of this demonstrates how Ionesco's play has affected *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharyya*. However, this piece cannot truly be categorized as an absurd drama. Even though the play's situation is somewhat absurd, the conversation is largely of a realistic nature and does not use the silent language that is so typical of the Theatre of the Absurd.

4.2 Influence on *Aahaar*

In his subsequent play, *Aahaar*, Arun Sarma not only uses absurdist techniques but also tackles a subject typical of this theater. The body of a woman was taken from a hospital morgue by four people: a writer, a businessman, a revolutionary, and a drunkard. They are all waiting for the right time to bury it beneath an old structure that is close to a public road. The stage has five platforms with a passage connecting them. The four people are initially observed conversing and drinking to pass the time, but subsequently, one of them is found alternately alone on one of the platforms sharing his own life experiences. The woman emerges from the dead body as the night grows darker, playing several characters on the middle platform, including the writer's lover, the businessman's wife, the revolutionary's mother, and the drunkard's prostitute. In each of her four different roles, she converses with the four people independently, oddly revealing their shared history with the woman. The woman with whom these guys interacted in various ways when she was alive is only encountered in their subconscious minds. When they regain consciousness, they quickly try to bury the dead body but are apprehended by the police. The hollowness and despair that the four male characters of Kamal, Nirmal, Dhiren, and Nabin encounter is objectified in

their own stories. *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter comes to mind when we consider Sarma's masterful usage of the 'guilt' concept.

The majority of the traits connected with the Theatre of the Absurd are displayed in the play. The story opens with Kamal, one of the four characters, vomiting since he can't take the smell of the dead body. And yet all of them go on chewing fried groundnuts. This is one of the means they use to pass the time. However, they find the waiting tedious and employ other strategies to pass the time. For example, the writer tries to read a book, the drunkard keeps using drugs, the businessman peruses his bag of papers, and the revolutionary muses to himself about the inevitable nature of social change. The dramatist seems to place a lot of emphasis on the waiting situation and the boredom that goes along with it. He clearly took inspiration from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which the characters Estragon and Vladimir amuse themselves by playing farcically to pass the time. "We are bored to death", says Vladimir (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 81), because they have been waiting and have to wait indefinitely for Godot to come. The four individuals are in *Aahaar*, waiting for nightfall so they can bury the deceased person in safety. Although their waiting is not endless, it is nevertheless monotonous because they are constantly bothered by the feeling that they are being watched and have nothing else to do. The Theatre of the Absurd frequently makes reference to waiting as a human circumstance. While it is the theme of Beckett's play, Ionesco makes one of the characters in *Amedee* or *How to Get Rid of It* speak thus: "Oh dear, I'm used to waiting, waiting, waiting, long uncomfortable years of waiting, that's what life has been..." (Esslin, 1968: 66). In *Aahaar*, one of the men, Nabin, says that waiting is very boring, and yet they wait because so many other people – Ahalya, Urmila, Buddha, Vladimir, Estragon – have waited. Nabin says, "Waiting is so tiresome, so exhausting, so painful" (Sarma 1964: 7). Undoubtedly influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd, this attempt at dramatizing a static scenario is novel in Assamese.

The dialogue also has some uniqueness. Because sentences are frequently short and words occasionally seem to vanish, silence often expresses more than spoken words. An instance of this is found when the four characters are trying to find out where the stink comes from. At one point, three of them stood motionless and oblivious as the fourth continued to speak to them. Even if the language is not offensive, it's undoubtedly not what a moralist would want to see in a play that will be played in front of an audience (Sarma, 1964: 18). This is significant because it demonstrates how the society that seems to be in order is actually completely corrupt.

The play itself actually seems to be conveying something deeper. The woman, who is represented by four different personalities, can be a metaphor for the bad things that man has done in the past. No matter how hard he tries to erase the past, its unpleasant effects on the psyche are unavoidable. Man may attempt to forget his sinful past while he is unconscious, but when he awakens, his conscience prickles and prevents him from being able to forget a past that has played such a significant role in his life. The woman, in her four separate roles, gave the four men both physical and mental food (Sarma, 1964), and now that she is dead, all they have left are fried groundnuts and narcotics. The four people's constant chewing of groundnuts may be interpreted in two different ways: on the one hand, it may represent their nostalgia for the past, and on the other, it may represent their complete helplessness in the face of the death of their beloved woman.

Thus, *Aahaar* is a novel Assamese play that differs greatly from a realistic, well-made play in terms of characterization, situational presentation, and dialogue. It is the first genuine drama that has been serious and intentionally modeled after the Theatre of the

Absurd. But Chaudhuri (2018) claimed in a recent play review that despite being frequently considered an "absurd" play in the tradition of *Waiting for Godot* and other works from a similar body of work,

The influences and intertexts are overt and obvious, especially when the four men parade around the stage declaiming *Opekxa! Opekxa! Opekxa!* But this is not an absurdist play, being replete with tangible storylines and episodes that are pregnant with meaning, unlike the nothingness that an absurdist play is won't to explore. In this interpretation, laden with absurdist intertexts, Arun Sarma's play hangs between the real and the surreal, where interior and exterior landscapes collide and the resulting devastation plays off one story against another (p. 10).

But Assamese theatergoers aren't quite ready to enjoy these plays yet. This is not a shocking development. When Ionesco's *The Chairs* debuted at the Theatre Lancry, the majority of the seats in the audience were empty, "and there were evenings when only five or six tickets were sold" (Esslin, 2004: 149-150). But in the West, the Theatre of the Absurd is now almost considered dated. The Theatre of the Absurd has not gained supporters among the younger Assamese authors, primarily due to the lack of response from theatergoers. It is a reality that only urbanites, or at the very least, those with a high level of sophistication, can support a theater like this. A play modeled after the Theatre of the Absurd is unlikely to stir up much interest among Assamese audiences in general, with the possible exception of a tiny segment who reside in urban regions. Therefore, if such a work is written at all, it will almost certainly be a closet drama rather than a play intended for a public theater.

5. Conclusion

Arun Sarma's narrative does not precisely follow acts and scenes, and its plot elaborates on the complex complexities of gender and human interactions. His writing style has also altered dramatically. He understands very well how closely theatre and reality are related. Because of this, he continuously aims to portray more serious human realities in his plays. This impact is evident in Arun Sarma's plays. At some point, they developed into the civilization of that era. He presents a unique perspective on how society impacts people in each of his works. Both his plays *Shri Nibaran Bhattacharyya* and *Aahaar* depict the disillusionment and frustration that the modern man suffers from – the chief quality of the Theatre of the Absurd. Though the plays do not have the major qualities of the absurd plays, from the above discussion, it is clear that both the plays in reference have unmistakably some elements of the absurdist theatrical tradition.

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