

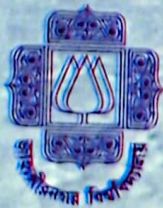
ISSN 1729-8326

Annual Journal of the Department of English, Jahangirnagar University

# HARVEST

Jahangirnagar University Studies in Language and Literature

Volume 33 ■ 2017-2018



Annual Journal of the Department of English  
Jahangirnagar University

---

## Contents

---

- Md. Sayeed Anwar**  
ESP Learners' Learning Style Preferences: A Study on Bangladeshi Engineering Students 7-19
- Rumana Chowdhury**  
Analyzing Christopher's Personal and Professional Life through Other Characters in *When We Were Orphans* 21-29
- Md. Salah Uddin Al Faruque**  
Reading Mary's Derangement Existentially: A Study of *The Grass is Singing* 31-43
- Dr. U. H. Ruhina Jesmin**  
A Socialist Feminist Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* 45-58
- Rahman M. Mahbub**  
Absurd Writing Styles: A Comparative Study on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Sayeed Ahmad's *The Thing* 59-68
- Dr. Laizu Nasrin**  
Statement-/Call-and-Response: Reading Hughes' "Afro-American Fragment" and Brooks' "To the Diaspora" as an Afrocentric Duo 69-82
- Dr. Md. Momin Uddin**  
Regicide in *Macbeth*: A Metaphor of Political Changeover 83-94
- Naziba Hoque**  
**Faria Alam**  
Looking at Generations: Evaluating Identities in Shirshendu Mukhopaddhay's *Durbin* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* 95-103
- BOOK REVIEW
- Dr. Sanyat Sattar**  
*The Topeka School* 105-108



Rahman M. Mahbub\*

## Absurd Writing Styles: A Comparative Study on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Sayeed Ahmad's *The Thing*

### ABSTRACT

This study offers an in-depth analysis of the influence of Samuel Beckett on Ahmad's works with focus on their dissimilitude as well as similitude. These two are extraordinary playwrights of Absurd Theatre; one from the West and the other from the East. So, a meticulous survey on their works unfolds trajectories of convergence. Conversely, despite the fact that Ahmad often takes his model in writing from Beckett, one can easily detect the various points of difference in their plays. Regardless of the projection of the same messages about human condition in the world, their techniques and their way of expression tend to differ in some ways. This is a narrative research that follows descriptive-cum analytical method. The textual references are given as evidence to support the argument of this study. This paper explores and shows how the absurd plays of Beckett and those of Ahmad manage, in their own individual ways, to make us see the world differently and reflect upon our lives.

**Keywords:** Beckett, Ahmad, Absurd Theatre, Absurdity, Realism

Absurd Theatre was developed by a group of writers who lived in France during the Second World War. They are Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Arthur Adamov. These playwrights as well as Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and Sayeed Ahmad are the major practitioners and leaders of the Theatre of the Absurd. Plays within this group are absurd in that they often focus not on logical acts, realistic occurrences, or traditional character development; they, instead, focus on human beings who are trapped in an incomprehensible world and are subject to any occurrence, no matter how illogical it is. In spite of being influenced by other writers, each of these Absurd playwrights has his specific approach to render his

---

\* Mr. Rahman M. Mahbub: Associate Professor, Department of English, City University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh

vision. The content and structure of their writing are a witness to their beliefs.

This study is narrative research and follows descriptive-cum analytical method. The textual references are given as evidence to support the argument of this research. Some key concepts relating to 'Absurdity', 'Alienation', 'Waiting and Hope' are discussed in relation to the texts in this paper as well. The different facets of the texts of their plays are studied and analyzed on the bedrock of Theatre of the Absurd. Relevant quotations, references and extracts have been taken in MLA style from the primary and secondary data on the subject of this paper. In this study, the primary source is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Sayeed Ahmad's *The Thing* that have no clear doctrines or coherent situation like other traditional plays. The researcher would establish a detailed parallel study on Beckett's and Ahmed's plays.

Absurd play portrays man as an alien in the complicated universe. S/he lives in solitude and prefers to be a hermit in the modern society. On the surface level, Absurd drama appears to be comic, since the dialogues between the characters seem purposeless. They are expressed in a thoughtless manner. The nonsensical and repetitive language draws the audience's attention and makes them laugh. But, as soon as they connect to the main theme of the play, the nonsensical words become meaningful: "Though Theatre of the Absurd may seem as nonsense, they have something to say and can be understood" (Rajeshwar 218).

Beckett is considered as the father of Theatre of the Absurd. He is the one who wins international fame by making free the contemporary playwrights from the restriction of conventional drama. He wrote his plays in both French and English. He said that writing in French made him to select the words more carefully and brought more discipline to his writing. His works present a bleak and gloomy outlook on man and define his situation with gallows humor and tragicomedy. His way of writing is known as the Beckettian technique. He is also the most influential absurdist dramatist who inspired other playwrights through his magical word power. His impression on Ahmad is indisputable as Ahmad himself directly admitted: "The impact Samuel Beckett had on my mind was deep and stimulating" (Ahmad 163). This study agrees with Rehana Raha and believe that "Ahmad's encounter with western theatre during his study at London School of Economics in the 1950s paved a way and created a passion for theatre in him. The most important event in the London period is his encounter with a play- Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*- which was staged in London in 1955. The play and Ahmad's subsequent friendship with Beckett shaped a substantial part of Sayeed Ahmad's oeuvre" (*New Age*). Having been excited and seized by the idea, it is inevitable that Ahmad



would be turned 'the Asian absurdist'. It is he who has fused western compactness of form with eastern sensibility for the first time in Bengali literature.

Beckett's impression on Ahmad is undeniable. In his essay, "Beckett's Signed Book", Ahmad brings it to our attention that when he was studying at the London School of Economics in 1955, he used to frequent The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) because of his interest in theatre.

My friends told me about Samuel Beckett and I was enthused with interest to find out this playwright whose first play *Waiting for Godot* was in town. This new form of a stage play which was shown on the bills as an 'absurd' play was quite unique. I had read Jean Paul Sartre's and Camus's plays on existentialism but this play of Beckett went right over my head. I left the theatre with a sense of confusion. None of us could explain or fathom the meaning of the play. I decided to collect and read more of Beckett, [...] It was a new world of intellectual discovery. The 'Absurd' theory is based on meaninglessness and nothingness. The Second World War had ended with a note of emptiness after the loss of millions of lives, and resultant black marketing and profiteering. The meaning of 'words' had changed now [...]. Nothingness, emptiness and loneliness became the watchword of the Absurdist writer. As I read and saw *Waiting for Godot*, I realized the void in which Estragon and Vladimir were groping in search of Godot. Normal speech was being replaced by incomprehensible words and actions. The 'absurd' style touched me so much that I wrote my first play in this form entitled *Not I*. I showed it to my friends in Karachi and Lahore and their reaction was that it was not understandable. I tore and threw it away. It was not till the autumn of 1961 that I buried myself away from friends and wrote my first absurd play called, *The Thing* on the theme of cyclone (Ahmad 161).

In fact, the association among Beckett, absurd drama, and Sayeed Ahmed is very close. Many people failed to assign Sayeed Ahmed his right place in the history of Bengali drama as well as in the world drama. Sayeed Ahmed is not only a unique absurdist but also an avant-garde dramatist of Bangladesh. Abdus Selim, in his article, "Sayeed Ahmad: The Lone Absurdist", mentions Ahmad as "—a man who experimented new ideas connecting our tradition and culture with the dramatic philosophies of the western world, and he did it with incredible skill and success. This was possible because he could involve himself perfectly into the latest developments of the world theatre. Sayeed Ahmed experimented—that too with remarkable success—writing absurd plays back in 1965, only six or seven years after Beckett had written his plays" (Selim). It should be highlighted, however, that it is not easy, for apprehending a western interpretation of life's absurdity and meaninglessness and interpreting it in



our language and lifestyle with refinement is no doubt a unique achievement on the part of Ahmad. Notably, Shamsur Rahman, a renowned poet and critic of Bengali literature, believes that his plays do not go against the tradition, in general, he says: "the brevity of his language is stunning. He is the pioneer of modern theatre in Bangladeshi stage. His *Three Plays* can be termed as gems of our literary heritage. He has very successfully, for the first time, caused a fusion of western compactness of form with eastern sensibilities" (Ahmad 140). It is mentioned in the *Asia Week* that Ahmad is "Bangladesh's pre-eminent modern dramatist. Like his legendary forebear (Tagore) Ahmad also seeks to meld ancient and modern literary forms (*Three Plays*).

Sayeed Ahmad is inspired by both Beckett and Ionesco; but he does not imitate like one under a spell. Rather, he uses his judgment and preference and blends the new form with the subject familiar to the audience. To judge the form of his play, one has to realize the blending of the modern with the traditional. Bazlul Karim, director and actor of the Drama Circle, the first group theatre in the former East Pakistan, says that "the heir to James Joyce, Samuel Beckett has influenced *The Thing* in respect of structure and dialogue, making it an absurd play. Here the comments of a character follow the thoughts of another and replies come not in sequence, but after intervals" (Ahmad xii). After analyzing Ahmad's absurd plays, we see the presence of a plot and an ending and he himself announces that "I took the character types in *Waiting for Godot* but developed my theme on the problem of 'waiting' by localizing the experience to my own situation" (Ahmad 169). His plays are very much realistic. He blends the absurd form with the real incidents familiar to the audience. The subjects of his plays are the relentless cruelty, caused by cyclone, famine, and of contemporary social and political crises. Martin Esslin says that the Theatre of the Absurd is concerned with the ultimate realities of the human condition and problems and that it is "intent on making its audience aware of man's precarious and mysterious position in the universe" (Esslin 402). This preoccupation with making the audience aware of man's condition is a dominant characteristic in Ahmad's plays also.

Being one of the most innovative devotees of Samuel Beckett, Sayeed Ahmad owes his fame to the fusion of absurdist and realism. He fashions his dramatic writing based on reality and perpetually employs real characters in his works. Ahmad's plays, like Beckett's, take the audience into the anxious world and all on a sudden they find themselves in an uncanny and bizarre atmosphere. The theme of *The Thing* is interwoven with folk rituals, traditional customs and natural disaster. Though the dialogue follows the absurd style, the action of actors, events on the stage, and the dramatic ending echoed with the audience.



Both Beckett's, and Ahmad's plays, like other absurdist plays, foreground the pathetic figure of human in this vast universe and express his absurdity in various ways. Unlike Ahmad, who always depicts his imagination through a real setting and characters, Beckett mostly dehumanizes his personas and portrays his idea via a surreal world. The language presented by Ahmad and rendered by Beckett also differ in some ways. Ahmad uses his language to display the fracture in communication with an aim to highlight the failure in communication. His characters mainly apply language for domination on each other or use it as a prophecy rather as a means of communication as Ahmad understands the ways in which people can use language obliquely as a camouflage. For instance, the Girl, in *The Thing*, uses words as a revelation. She endeavors to conceal her isolation.

U. Peng: U.Nen is gone. U. Nen .....

The Girl: The Thing is coming. The Thing is coming. I will tell you the future. True to every detail. The future of humanity. (Act I p. 11)

Beckett, on the other hand, employs language to express man's isolation and alienation in the world as well as his inability to communicate; that he thinks language is a great barrier to communication.

Being passive is one of the traits of the Absurd characters; both Beckett and Ahmad use the passive characters in their works with slight differences. Accordingly, in *The Thing*, Ahmad presents this characteristic through the character called Man, as he does nothing important within the play, but at the very end of the text he declares the philosophic message and real position of human beings in the world.

Headman: Let us start. It is getting late

Man: No, we got it a bit too early. You could not tell the fairy tale; I could not play a full note. Others will get it tomorrow may be the day after tomorrow, like us, suddenly, unaware, someday ... someday somewhere, another island, another Whistlemanfluteman, somewhere else ... That is certain. My salutation to everyone. Three cheers – Hip-hip-hurray. Hip-hip-hurray. [All of them together] (Act II p. 24)

It should be mentioned here that after reading Ionesco's plays, Ahmad realized that he played with words by using them as an amalgam of quasi-meaningless sounds to puzzle audience; yet, there was a positive aspect in his plays as it would create a living space of reality which is broad enough to accommodate the rational and the irrational at the same time. In Ahmad's



plays, both the intellectual mood of Beckett and the creative, dream-like freedom of Ionesco are revealed, though in varying measures.

However, there is a remarkable difference between these two playwrights. Characters in *Endgame* are not real. No one can find a similar person like them in the real world: Hamm, an abnormal son and cruel man with odd features, who condemns the parents to live in the dustbin or a servant who is not able to sit, are not the real individuals of this world. Though Ahmad is highly impressed by Beckett, he merely takes his models from Beckett's characters and recreates them in the real society as real personalities.

In comparison with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *The Endgame*, characters of *The Thing* are not images of particular human attitudes; in contrast, they are real and portray the individuals in the world. Esslin believes that the personages in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Endgame* "are not characters, but the embodiments of basic human attitudes, rather like the personified virtues and vices in medieval mysterious play" (Esslin 76).

In the *The Thing*, the Man's striving for satisfying the Convict resembles Clov in *The Endgame*. *The Thing* has nine characters with the real traits of a human being. They are not non-human like in some plays of Ionesco or Beckett. Beckett's *Not I* is a short play in which the character is a mouth that is dangling in the mid-stage while darkness encompasses the whole stage. The mouth's voice belongs to an old woman, but her total face is not shown on the stage. Another character of this play is an enigmatic figure that wears a long Arabic cloak and silently listens to this voice. Obviously, both characters have got no existence in the real world.

Mingling of tragedy and comedy is another significant characteristic in Absurd drama. Absurd characters make audience laugh; but, in fact, the story behind their life is totally tragic and stimulates one's sympathy. These two Absurd play writers fuse tragedy and comedy in their dramatic works to render a better picture of the human situation in this mundane world. In this case, *Endgame* by Beckett, is one of the notable Absurd plays despite the pathetic situation of the characters that makes the audience laugh. The characters' action and dialogue are extremely comic, but at the deeper level one can feel the latent pain in the character's mind and life. *Waiting for Godot* shows also the picture of individuals who cause laughter in the theatre. But, actually their everyday expectation of Godot's coming makes their condition so pathetic that they prefer suicide to waiting for Godot: "We should have thought of it when the world was young, in the nineties [...] hand in hand from the top of Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up" (Beckett 40). Because of the presence of insufficient tools, they prefer to waiting to suicide. In this respect Esslin mentions:



Suicide remains their favorite solution unattainable owing to their own incompetence and their lack of practical tools to achieve it. It is precisely their disappointment at their failure to succeed in their attempts at suicide that Vladimir and Estragon rationalize by waiting or pretending to wait for Godot. (Esslin 57)

Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*, is another explicit example of this trait. Winnie, an obese woman, is captured in the soil up to her waist. But, little by little she sinks into the earth. Even her husband doesn't pay any attention to her. Her cheerfulness is completely in contrast with her woeful situation, "in one sense her cheerfulness is sheer folly and the author seems to make a deeply pessimistic comment on human life; in another sense however Winnie's cheerfulness in the face of death and nothingness is an expression of man's courage and nobility" (Esslin 83). Ahmad's characters in the face of horrific death in *The Thing* are also a representation of man's courage and valiant attitude towards life. As Gautam Dasgupta, Editor of *Performing of Arts Journal*, New York, mentions, "Sayeed Ahmad's plays always have a dominant ringing note of all-powerful Nature and man's ability to take on the challenge" (*Three Plays XI*). They are aware of their nemesis; but, because they cannot control it, they would rather not think about it and simply go on with their lives by occupying their attention with an outrageous conversation and/or by reminiscing their glorious past. Martin Esslin believes also that the dignity of man depends on his ability to face the pointlessness and meaninglessness of their existence "to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions – and to laugh at it" (Esslin 429), which reminds what Nell says, in Beckett's *Endgame*, that "nothing is funnier than unhappiness ... it's the most comical thing in the world" (Beckett 26). The researcher believes that the laughter Beckett and Esslin talk about has to do with acceptance. The fusion of comedy and tragedy demonstrates how individuals cope with various situations in life.

However, Ahmad, more like Pinter, mingles tragedy and comedy to create a dreadful atmosphere which cannot be escaped and the terror and menace leading to pain and distraction. Since menace is another fundamental characteristic of the Absurd Theatre, it is conveyed through different means. In case of Ahmad, the astounding natural forces like, cyclone, famine, etc. which demolish the existence of island dwellers, in a matter of hours is a recurrent theme of their perception. In this kind of play, characters are mostly controlled or menaced by an absent or present force, which is beyond their control.

*The Thing* is an absurd play where menace continuously hovers in the atmosphere of the play. A sense of comedy and menace is conveyed in a parallel manner. In *The Thing* (1963) and *The Milepost* (1976), the characters are menaced by outside and natural forces. In spite of Ahmad's



affiliation to Beckett, threat in his plays is more perceptible than in Beckett's works. There is metaphysical anguish or nothingness all around Beckett's characters. But, the feeling of Ahmad's characters is quite different – there is an existent force which is a source of threat that may be materialized at any moment. Ahmad strives to create a real menace around his characters who face death boldly:

Ahmad: It seems we are all going to see *The Thing* for the first time.

Munir: May be the last-time.

U.Nen: Once in a life time.

Headman: You kept us waiting, U.Peng.

mad: My dream is a reality.

U.Nen: Reverend one, shall we proceed with the rite?

U.Peng: A bud blooms in time; a leaf flutters in the breeze. Don't be impatient, U.nen. We have only one life. Let us hold it tight, not run wild and lose it.

Headman: Very true. We will be patient and maintain the dignity of our race. (Ahmad 7)

Absurd play's milieu is another challenging issue in Absurd Theatre. The theme of Ahmad's second play, *Milepost* (1976), is famine. It is a subject that is familiar to the people in the sub-continent. Through the dialogue of the gravedigger and the guard, the relentless cruelty of famine has been brought into sharp focus in the text. The appearance of a mother with her two sons adds a twist to the familiar tragedy of famine because she has to make a difficult choice – according to the dream she had, one of the sons has to be sacrificed, but there was no indication in the dream about which one to offer. The dilemma in making a correct decision has been presented as the essence of the human predicament. As Ahmad himself has pointed out in the preface: "Famine is not only the helplessness of the hungry, it is also a crisis of the human soul" (Ahmad XIII). *Milepost* is a modern psycho-analytical play with unconventional dialogue and sequences that create an absurd ambience. In the *Survival* (1976), using the folktale, Ahmad has sought to portray contemporary social and political crisis that he perceives as the outcome of greed and lust for power. It is essentially the age-old story of exploitation by those who have power and the seemingly helpless suffering of the weak. While condemning the guile and power of those who rule and decide the fate of the 'weak' Ahmad finds hope in their number, which one day will act to the disadvantage of the big and powerful. Beckett, in contrast to Ahmad, usually makes use of the surreal atmosphere in his works.

Ahmad's way of employing the 'waiting' theme is another sign of his binding to Beckett. *The Thing's* characters' act of waiting is similar to that



of *Waiting for Godot*. However, a noticeable difference between them must be considered as well. Beckett's characters' waiting is seemingly vain and fruitless because the appearance of Godot is apparently beyond the bounds of possibility. They just spend their time recklessly for their belief; such a kind of waiting is somewhat opposed to reality as their waiting has got no end. Even by the end of the play, they fail to meet Godot who probably won't never come to visit them.

But, for Ahmad's men this waiting is not apparently vague or stupid, as the thing (cyclone) they are waiting for shows up ultimately. In addition, Ahmad illustrates how the coming of the thing into one's world transforms their situation into an absurd world; however, Beckett shows this absurd status even without anything or anyone's arrival. In this regard, Esslin mentions that "waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion [...] the act of waiting for Godot is shown as essentially absurd" (Esslin 52-56). On the other hand, waiting has become a habit for Vladimir and Estragon, since it explicitly prevents them "from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being" (Esslin 59).

As a circular plot or having no story is extremely important in the Absurd theatre, most of the well-known absurd plays are formed with the A-B-A structure. It means that nothing really happens in the course of the play. One motif is repeated frequently in different ways with some specific words and sentences. *Waiting for Godot* is an explicit example of a circular plot; "nothing happens nobody comes nobody goes and it's awful" (Beckett 41). Regarding this, Esslin mentions that "*Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story; it explores a static situation" (Esslin, 2004, p.46). Beckett's *Endgame* and Pinter's *The Birthday Party* are other examples that have circular plots, as they end at where they started. This matter also is totally true about *The Caretaker*, as when this play ends, the audience returns back to the initial state of the play as if nothing has happened – Davies returns to his former status of tramp and the two brothers get back to their mood of isolation; Aston is back to his seclusion and Mick remains in his non-communicative mood with his older brother. But, Ahmad is totally different from them. According to Hasnat Abdul Hye, Editor of the *Complete Works of Sayeed Ahmad Vol.2*, "what differentiates *The Thing* from absurd plays is the presence of plot and an ending, two features absent in Beckett's plays." This study agrees with Hye that one has to realize that Ahmad imitated Beckett only half the way and came up with a form of play that retained elements of traditional plays while combining some aspects of absurd plays.

In contrast to Beckett, who just focuses on absurd traits and surreal aspect in his works, reality plays an important role in Ahmad plays as it is fraught with the harsh realities of life of real characters. Hence, there are



prominent differences that distinguish Ahmad's works from the other absurdist writers, especially like Beckett. Unlike Beckett, Ahmad has always felt strongly drawn to naturalism. He focuses on the local and the familiar. His characters, for the most part, bear ordinary names, wear ordinary outfit and walk around the real settings. They are not surreal, but real, as Aatur Rahman, a long-time friend-follower of Ahmad mentions "the absurd we talk about is as real as anything else" (*New Age*). Characters, in a way, are asking the audience to reflect on their own lives and ask themselves what they can do to either accept the absurdity of life or fight against it.

In Sayeed Ahmad's plays, we find that the characters are always threatened by real hazard and that the source of threat is totally obvious. So, it can be said that Ahmad's terror and threat are more poignant since they exist in our known world. Ahmad owes his fame to the fusion of absurdist and realism, but, he does not impersonate blindly. Rather, he uses his own judgment and inclination and blends the new form with the subject familiar to this part of the world by localizing and focusing on the experience of our own conditions and settings. The plays of Beckett and those of Ahmad manage to entertain us and make us laugh as well as make us see the world differently and reflect upon our lives. The similarity as well as the dissimilarity among their plays, show how closely connected Beckett and Ahmad are to each other.

### Works Cited

- Ahmad, Sayeed. (2012). *Complete Works of Sayeed Ahmad*, Vol. 2, ed. Hasnat Abdul Hye. Bangla Academy.
- . (1989). *Three Plays*. Bangla Academy.
- . (2008). "Samuel Beckett and His Waiting". *The New Age Extra*.
- Beckett, Samuel. (1997). *Waiting for Godot*, Ed. Javed Malick, Oxford University Press.
- Esslin, Martin. (2004). *The Theater of the Absurd*. New York: Vintage.
- Rajeshwar, T. (2012). *Modernism and Postmodernism in English Literature*. Jaipur: Ritu Publications.
- Selim, A. "Sayeed Ahmad: The Lone Absurdist". *Pipilika*, 10 February 2012  
[http://www.pipilika.com/site\\_ajax\\_calls/show\\_details/1538712/en/new\\_window](http://www.pipilika.com/site_ajax_calls/show_details/1538712/en/new_window).
- "Sayeed Ahmad as Playwright Analysed." *The New Age*, 17 Jan. 2015.  
<http://archive.newagebd.net/89606/sayeed-ahmad-as-playwright-analysed/>.