



---

**Modes of Resistance: Influence of Absurd Drama and Progressive  
Theatre on Albert Camus and Girish Karnad**

**--- Dr.Indhu M. Eapen  
Associate Professor  
Department of English  
Government First Grade College  
Varthur, Karnataka**

**Abstract**

The Theatre of the Absurd is the return to the old and archaic traditions, but with a difference. Its novelty lies in its unusual combination of its antecedents and the expansion and revaluation of procedures that are familiar and completely acceptable in only slightly different contexts. The dream motifs and the elements of fantasy are frequently found in the Theatre of the Absurd. Albert Camus' *Caligula* and Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* present an absurd vision of the world through tyrannical protagonists who use their power absolutely. An existential revolt as well as a struggle for asserting one's existence is clearly pervading throughout both the plays. This article focuses on both Absurd Drama and Progressive Theatre being the major influences for Camus and Karnad in their plays *Caligula* and *Tughlaq*.

**Keywords: Theatre of the Absurd, Progressive Theatre, Existentialism, Identity**

**Introduction**

The roots of the Theatre of the Absurd can be traced to the two World Wars that had a major impact internationally. The Second World War particularly brought into focus the cruel forces of fascism that lead to the extinction of human values and the disintegration of Christian faith. This development created disillusionment among several people all over the world. It further led to the development of various organisations and resistance groups to create a common awareness among the people regarding contemporary reality. One such is the resistance movement by Jean Paul Sartre which grow out of his interest in existential philosophy. This philosophy is based on the conception that life has no purpose or meaning at all.

## Theatre of the Absurd

The Theatre of the Absurd is the return to the old and archaic traditions, but with a difference. Its novelty lies in its unusual combination of its antecedents and the expansion and revaluation of procedures that are familiar and completely acceptable in only slightly different contexts. The age-old traditions that have been developed by the Theatre of the Absurd can be classified under 'Pure' theatre which had abstract scenic effects as they are familiar in the circus, clowning, fooling and mad scenes, verbal nonsense and the literature of dream and fantasy. The 'Pure' theatre led to the Theatre of the Absurd in taking an anti-literary stand, that is, turning away from the concept that language is an instrument for the expression of the deepest levels of meaning. For this theatre, performance is the only manifestation. Performance is capable of bringing out all the deep and metaphysical meanings of the play on stage.

The Theatre of the Absurd is influenced by literary, cinematic and psychoanalytic concepts. Foremost among them is the ancient mime play wherein the clown appears as the 'moros' or the 'stupidus' whose absurd behaviour arises from his inability to understand the simplest logical relations. But these mime plays were soon outdated because they were only half-improvised and were not bound by any of the strict rules of the regular tragedy or comedy. Shakespearean plays, too, do not strictly confine themselves to the unities of time and place; yet they are another great influence on the Theatre of the Absurd. Especially, the Histories of Shakespeare were of great importance. The personification of the subconscious part of man in Falstaff or Caliban and the exalted madness of Richard II and King Lear who directly dealt with the realms of irrational were often found in the plays of Ionesco, Camus and the others who had staged their plays based on this Absurd convention.

The silent film comedy was another major influence on this theatre. Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* says, "The silent film comedy has the dream-like strangeness of a world seen from outside with the uncomprehending eyes of one cut off from reality. It has the quality of nightmare and displays a world in constant and wholly purposeless movement." (Esslin, 335). Charlie Chaplin films are the perfect representatives of the silent film comedy and its parallel is evident in the Theatre of the Absurd. This was further developed by the arrival of sound into cinema. The popular comic characters Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields and Marx Brothers also exercised their influence on the Theatre of the Absurd.

This theatre also tends to move towards a radical de-valuation of language. In that case, they rely upon another factor and here it is poetry. For, poetry emerges from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. Here, a repeated demonstration of the deep poetic power is expressed on purposeless action. Thus, the human condition is presented on the stage as being broadly comic as well as deeply tragic.

The dream motifs and the elements of fantasy are frequently found in the Theatre of the Absurd. The dreams are highly symbolical. The real events are made to look similar to a

dream. This leads us to the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. Freud talks about the dream-like modes of thought as the projection of the subconscious mind into the concrete terms of psychological realities. Myths are also often considered a very close link to the dream sequences. Myths have been called the collective images of humanity. Thus, we can also trace the major influence of Freud. He talks about a “delight in nonsense” in his study of the sources of the comic and is of the opinion that this delight in nonsense is rooted deeply in the feeling of freedom which one enjoys when logic is rejected. ‘Freedom’ is a term of great importance in the Theatre of the Absurd. The protagonists are in a constant search of ‘freedom’ often to assert their own individuality.

The other movements that have had a profound influence on the Theatre of the Absurd are Dadaism, Surrealism and Expressionism. Dadaism began in Zurich during the War, among French, German and other European refugees and its aim was the destruction of art, the conventional art of the bourgeois era that had produced the horrors of War. To destroy this world and to bring in another world in which nothing exists is their objective. The plays produced by the Dadaists are essentially nonsense poems in dialogue form. Surrealism believed in the great positive, healing force of the subconscious mind. Andre Breton, the fore-runner of this movement gave a definition of Surrealism in his work *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924: “Surrealism is pure psychic automatism by which it is proposed to express verbally in writing or in any other way, the real functioning of thought.” Expressionism began as a Movement in Germany and it had a strong influence on theatre design. This was a general Movement in the Arts during and just after First World War which expressed extreme feelings of personal, familial and general social breakdown. The fundamental drive behind Expressionism was a drive towards freedom. This aspect was also taken up by the Theatre of the Absurd and it is evident in the plays of Camus, Ionesco and others.

Thus, we can notice that the Theatre of the Absurd drew significantly from various movements. Bertolt Brecht also wrote a number of plays that were also similar to those of this theatre, both in the use of clowning and humour and in their pre-occupation with the problem of the identity of self. The picture that Brecht had presented of the capitalist world was essentially negative and absurd. But there is one essential difference between Brechtian Epic Theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd. The Theatre of the Absurd projects its author’s personal world and therefore, it lacks objectively valid characters. It is totally against the word ‘passion’ and it does not deal with the narration of a story to communicate some moral or social concern which is exactly what the Epic Theatre aims at. In the Theatre of the Absurd, the intention is to communicate a pattern of poetic images. These poetic images project this idea: “that nothing really ever happens in human beings’ existence.” (Beckettian intuition)

Martin Esslin explains this difference in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*: “While the Brechtian Epic Theatre tries to widen the range of drama by introducing narrative epic

elements, the Theatre of the Absurd aims at concentration and depth in an essentially lyrical, poetical pattern.” (Esslin, 121).

Greater emphasis is given to the poetical element in the Theatre of the Absurd by the rejection of psychology, characterization and plot in the conventional sense. Thus, we see that this theatre is totally against the Romantic movement that preceded it and here, the audience is confronted with characters whose motives and actions remain largely incomprehensible. When it is so, the characters appear less than human. They show the world as a grotesque and distorted place and the people of the world, mad. Their projected visions of the world come up from the depths of this subconscious. But their vision as embodied in their images is a representative of truth and reality.

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* is the first novel that fully represents the Theatre of the Absurd in its mid-twentieth century form. It precedes the performance of the work of Ionesco, Adamov and Beckett. But it is Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi – The King* which created a flutter for its absurd realizations. Martin Esslin assesses this play in these words: “Ubu is a savage caricature of a stupid, selfish bourgeois seen through the cruel eyes of a school boy, with Falstaffian greed and cowardice. He makes himself King of Poland, kills and tortures all and is finally chased out of the country. He is mean, vulgar and incredibly brutal.” (Esslin, 357-8).

Camus' *Caligula* is based on this play, but the difference lies in the fact that this is not seen through the cruel eyes of school boy. Caligula can be envisioned by anyone and history provides a lot of parallels for Caligula: Nero, Claudius, Tiberius, Galba, Vitellius, Herod, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Richard III, Ivan the Terrible, Hitler, Mussolini, and so on.

*Caligula* is basically a critique of the fascist movement that was prevalent in Italy and Germany and which shook the world, finally leading to the destruction of Christian values in Europe. The play's initial success was due to its theme: clear-cut and relevant political implications: “the dangers of philosophical absolutism”. (Freeman, 81)

### **Progressive Theatre**

Girish Karnad had also been deeply influenced by Sartre's existential philosophy and Camus' *Caligula* when he began writing *Tughlaq*. The Progressive movement in Kannada literature was a short-lived affair. In a period of about ten years or so, before it paved the way to the *Navyas*, it nonetheless left behind a sizeable volume of literature. Their contribution had been mainly in fiction even though there were great poets of the Navodaya period still writing. During the Fifties, it was the ‘Progressive Writers’ who had played a major role in Kannada literature. They called themselves the ‘*Pragatisheelas*’ and established themselves in the genre of fiction rather than of poetry or drama. Some of the prominent Progressive writers were A.N. Krishna Rao (Aa Na Kru), T.R. Subba Rao (Ta Ra Su), Niranjana, Basavaraja Kattimani and Chaduranga (Subramanyaraje Urs).

The *Pragatisheelas* believed that the external behaviour and thinking of human beings is pretentious. They found everything deceptive in front of them and believed that in exposing this deception, they can reveal the cruel nature of the society. They were also highly influenced by Marxist ideologies and Romanticism. Aa Na Kru's statement substantiates this: "Life should be pure and pleasant and tolerable. The desire of every progressive writer is that man should become aware of the meanness of the soul."

These ideals were basically radical in the feudal society of the Fifties. Their use of the Romantic concept of life was portrayed in a manner that imitated European Realism. They tried to imitate the 'Realists' like Emile Zola and others. But they could never get anywhere close to them. Realism was meant to probe human life through external details. The novels were called 'Novel of Manners', 'Manners' which Lionel Trilling describes as the 'hum and buzz of culture'. But this concept of the 'Realists' was subverted by them. The Realists had used 'Description', for instance, Balzac in *Bere Gorio*, Emile Zola in *Nana* and Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*, to invite the reader to participate in it and draw his/her own conclusions. But the '*Pragatisheelas*' did nothing of that kind. Instead, the narrator is present throughout their bulky novels and controls the readers' responses. The story element which was reformatory in nature survived in the strong sympathy it drew from the reader. Some of the important works of this tradition are: *Sanisanthana*, *Sanjegathalu* and *Nagnasatya* of A.N. Krishna Rao which are supposed to be an inspiration of Zola's *Nana*; *Kambaniyakuyilu*, *Raktaratri*, *Tirugubana* and *Durgastama* of T.R. Subba Rao; *Madimadidavaru*, *Jaratari Jagadguru* and *Ballari Bus* by Basavaraj Kattimani; Niranjana's *Chirasmarane* and *Vimochane* and Chaduranga's *Uyyale* and *Sarvamangala*.

Most of the writers of this tradition were brahmins except Chaduranga and they were accused of their neglect and indifference towards the common masses. Chaduranga was influenced by the *Navya* movement. A major defect in these Progressive writers was that they used the standard dialect which was not understood by everyone. However, Chaduranga's diction is different from the others. He uses a dialect drawing heavily from the folk literature and culture with which he is familiar. The poetic nature found in his works lifts the writing to a poetic literature contrary to the *Pragatisheela's* commitment to write only in the standard dialect to reach maximum number of readers. In an interview for *The Hindustan Times*, Chaduranga reveals that he has learnt from the *Navyas*, the Dalits and even from a young boy who might have something to give to the literary world.

Prof. G.H. Nayak says: "Chaduranga is the only *Pragatisheela* writer to have shown different states of evolution in his career by writing absurd-play-like-drama *Rat Trap*." (Samakaleena, 93).

Thus, he believed in moving away from the strictly binding rules and took a lot from the *Navya* tradition too. The *Navya* Movement emerged with the writers like U.R. Ananthamoorthy and M. Gopalakrishna Adiga. These writers were brahmins too, but they were all educated; some, even abroad. U.R. Ananthamoorthy, for instance, was very much influenced by the West and when he came down to India, he brought several

philosophies and theories of the West to India. Flaubert, Tolstoy, Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre and other popular Western writers were thoroughly discussed in India and their writings were imitated to. However, history and myth were the favourite themes in his plays. Girish Karnad, too, belonged to this tradition. He, too, like Camus, was influenced by Sartre and his existential philosophy. This influence is evident in his plays. Adiga was another prolific writer of this *Navya* tradition. He earned his popularity with his novels and fiction. His *Bhoomigeetha* was a major success.

However, the *Navya* tradition lost all its prominence because of the standard dialect and the neglect of the masses. The Movement of Revolt came up soon and pointed out the drawbacks of the *Navya* tradition. However, it did not touch upon the theatre and thus, Karnad and his plays are still popular. But it may be noticed that Karnad had never staged his plays himself. His plays were staged by others. *Tughlaq* was a great success on stage. It was first published in Kannada in 1964 and later translated by Karnad himself into English.

The first production of the play in Kannada was in 1965 and about the same time, it was also done in Hindi by the National School of Drama. Bengali, Marathi and English productions followed.

U.R. Ananthamoorthy remarks in his Introduction to *Tughlaq*:

“It is not hard to account for the immediate response the play has received from Kannada as well as other audiences. One can enjoy the play on the stage without paying much attention to its rich and complex symbolism and the subtle weaving of its different motifs. The play has an interesting story, an intricate plot, scope for spectacle and uses dramatic conventions like the comic pair, Aziz and Aazam (the Akara and Makara of Natak performances), to which theatre audiences respond readily.” (Introduction to *Tughlaq*, vii).

## Conclusion

While Camus' *Caligula* is based on the last three years in the life of Caesar nicknamed 'Caligula' in his childhood as he wore the military boot *Caliga*, Karnad's *Tughlaq* is based on the historic Mohammad Bin Tughlaq, who had unleashed havoc in his kingdom. Camus also drew his material from history. But, if we consider the structure of the plays, *Caligula* is written in four Acts, while *Tughlaq* is written in thirteen scenes. Both these plays present an absurd vision of the world through tyrannical protagonists who use their power absolutely. Nevertheless, an existential revolt as well as a struggle for asserting one's existence is clearly pervading throughout both the plays.

## References

1. Camus, Albert. *Caligula and Other Plays*. (1939). England: Penguin, 1984.
2. Karnad, Girish. *Tughlaq*. (1964). Delhi: OUP, 1993.
3. Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Pelican, 1975.
4. Raghunath N.S. *History and Myth in Kannada Literature*. Bangalore: Karnataka Sahitya Academy, 1990.
5. Sartre, Jean Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1957.

\*\*\*\*\*