



The Cage, the Card, and the Void: Tracing Camusian Absurdism in Tagore

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ABSTRACT

Albert Camus and Rabindranath Tagore are usually put in different sides of the literary world. Camus is the thinker of the Absurd, gazing at the silence of the universe; Tagore is the poet of the cosmos, singing to the God in nature. However, under the spiritual reputation of Tagore is a keen, satirical edge that challenges the same meaningful structures that Camus discovered. This paper will discuss how the works of Tagore later to be known as Parrot talk (Totakahini), The Land of Cards (Tasher Desh), Red Oleanders (Raktakarabi), Chapter Four (Char Adhyay) and The wife letter (Strir Patra) reiterate the Camusian themes of bureaucratic absurdity, mechanical life and existential rebellion. Where Camus promotes rebellion with the use of consciousness, Tagore promotes rebellion with the use of creative freedom and human association. Through the analysis of these readings in light of existing literature, we discover that Tagore recognized the absurdity of human systems way before the terminology came to be popular. It is not only a philosophical research but a story of two men attempting to find meaning in suffering as a response to the emptiness, which provides a distinct Eastern humanism.

Keywords: Absurdism, Albert Camus, Rabindranath Tagore, Satire, Existentialism, Comparative Literature, Rebellion, Modernity



I. Introduction: Two Men, One Question

Think of the situation in a full room where everybody is executing a rulebook that no one has composed, and spending time on tasks that do not get you anywhere. There is something in your stomach--just that something is wrong but you do not know what. This would be what Albert Camus would refer to as the Absurd. He would tell you to know the insignificance and go on living in defiance. Rabindranath Tagore, an observer of the same scene, may create a story about it. He may laugh at the tragedy of it, or weep.

Tagore and Camus have been discussed as mystic and existentialist respectively, over decades. This difference, however, frequently ignores the darkness of Tagore in old age. With the world heading towards the World War II, Tagore became even more immediate, more critical about institutions and more conscious of mechanical character of contemporary life. He was a senior citizen who was witnessing the world being burnt, just as Camus was a younger man who was witnessing the burning of Europe.

In this paper, I argue that although Tagore never identified as a philosopher like Camus, his plays expound the Absurd condition. They depict the human beings who are trapped by meaningless systems in search of an escape. The distinction is not in the diagnosis, but in the remedy: where Camus would go to the stone, Tagore to the song. But both options are spawned by the same origin, a very human unwillingness to allow the world to take victory without resistance..

II. Literature Review: Bridging the East-West Divide

In order to see the point where this research will be placed, we need to examine what has been said first. Scholarship on Albert Camus is enormous and one of the major areas of concern is his role in the Western existentialism. Other critics such as Cruickshank (1960) and Sprintzen (1988) have carefully traced the transformation of the Absurd to Rebellion by Camus. They emphasize on his European setting, the Resistance, the Algerian War and the loss of religious conviction. It is obvious that Camus is the prophet of meaninglessness that sees meaning in human unification against emptiness.

Rabindranath Tagore scholarship has followed another route on the other end of the world. Early Western criticism including that of Yeats depicted Tagore as a spiritual follower first of all. This was later rectified by other scholars such as Sen (2005) and Bhattacharya (2001) who noted Tagore, his rationalism, his criticism of nationalism and also his strong humanism. Nevertheless, much attention is paid to his philosophy of the Upanishadic unity and experiments in education at Santiniketan.

III. The Gap in the Conversation

An observable silence prevails in the library where these two voices are supposed to collide. There are comparative studies of the Western existentialism and Indian philosophy (often 1991 Camus vs Buddhism or Hinduism in general) but few direct textual comparisons of Camus and Tagore. In most cases, especially when Tagore is being treated with a satire (i.e. in an analysis done by Ghosh on Tasher Desh, 2010), he is placed in the realm of colonial resistance or educational change, as opposed to existential absurdity.

This is a missed opportunity. Critics which tend to regard Tagore as a spiritualist overlook the hard-boiled, disenchanted realism of his later writings. On the other hand, the fact that Camus was a philosopher based in the west only makes critics overlook the universal applicability of his concepts in non-Western contexts.

This door has started to open with the recent changes in postcolonial studies. It is becoming of interest to scholars how non-Western writers were able to work with the dislocations of modernity without nihilism of the West. This paper is based on that foundation which is emerging. It does not purport Tagore a Camusian, but makes of Camus a prism through which he sees the darker and more knotty sides of Tagore's satire which might not be conceived by a traditional spiritual reading. It attempts to address a question that has not been answered by other literature: *What does a humanist such as Tagore do with the silence of the universe in the event of the failure of spirituality?



IV. Critical Reception: The Silence Between the Voices

Comparing the reception of these two authors by their critics we have an interesting detachment. One feels as though two neighbors have lived many decades down the same block, but have only been talking about the weather, but never knocking on the doors.

4.1 The Mystification of Tagore

Tagore used to wear robes, which Western critics found hard to see through throughout the 20th century. W.B. Yeats, who made Tagore known in the West, called him a representative of the entire life of India, whose references were nearly solely to the spiritual Gitanjali. According to Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson in *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (1995), this initial appreciation made a mask of the mystic which made Tagore obscure his critical social observations of the world. According to Dutta and Robinson, Tagore was much more contemporary and skeptical than what his Western fans allowed him to be. They point to his subsequent novels and plays as examples of a man who is striving with disillusionment, but few have made the leap of declaring this disillusionment to be existential in the Camusian sense.

4.2 The Humanism of Camus

Conversely, Camus critics have conventionally emphasized on his European ancestry. In *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life* (2010), Robert Zaretsky focuses on the issue of nihilism as opposed to morality in Camus. Zaretsky claims that Camus was not a nihilist but a moralist who discovered the meaning of solidarity. This can be closely related to humanism of Tagore, but Zaretsky analysis is squarely based on the Western canon. A severe reluctance to use Camus framework outside of Europe is common, many times because of a tendency to simplify non-Western writings.

4.3 The Emerging Bridge

Nonetheless, muttering has it to have a connection. In *The Argumentative Indian* (2005), Amartya Sen writes of Tagore, who insisted that logic is the key and he criticized the blind tradition and this can be compared to the insistence of Camus that needed clarity in the irrational world. Sen also speculates that humanism expressed by Tagore was a reaction to the nationalism organized madness- a theme adapted by Camus in *The Plague*. In the same vein, scholar Tapan Kumar Ghosh, in *The Masque of Discontent* (2010) examines Tagore dance dramas as psychological conflict and social alienation. Ghosh reminds the so-called absurdity of the social setups of Tasher Desh, without resorting to referring to Camus.

4.4 The Verdict

The critical consensus, accordingly, is that of near-miss. Critics admit that Tagore is a modernist and Camus a humanist, but they seldom give the two a platform to express themselves. This paper will attempt to remove that silence. Uniting these two points of view, we are able to observe that the reluctance to liken them is not related to the absence of the similarity, but to the practice of maintaining Eastern spirituality and Western existentialism in two different boxes. We become humanized to these texts as we understand that suffering is akin to geographical boundaries.

V. Methodology: A Comparative Lens

This research employs a qualitative comparative literature approach, grounded in thematic criticism. The goal is not to force Tagore into a Western philosophical box, but to place two distinct voices in conversation to see where their shadows overlap. The method rests on three pillars: textual analysis, contextual grounding, and philosophical mapping.

5.1 Thematic Mapping

We start by tracing essential Camusian themes, namely, the Absurd (the discord between the meaning seeking of man and the silent universe), Alienation (divisions within society), and Rebellion (residualness of arbitrary circumstances). These are not applied as hard and fast categories, but as Searchlights. We next examine Tagore, Parrot Talk, Tasher Desh



and Char Adhyay and Strir Patra, whether there are any such tendencies there. As an example, is the death of the parrot an absurd event? Is there alienation among the Cards? This will enable us to follow resonance without stating identity.

5.2 Contextual Grounding

Philosophy is not an empty space. Both authors were authors who lived in periods of great turmoil in the world. Camus wrote when the Nazi took control of France; Tagore wrote when fascism was on the rise and the British Empire was beginning to fall. It is an approach that would make us read the texts in terms of their historical contexts. How did the pressure of war and totalitarianism influence their ideas on human freedom? we ask. The fact that we locate the texts in their respective time (1940s France and 1930s Bengal) helps us not to excessively generalize their ideas.

5.3 Philosophical Mapping vs. Imposition

The difference between the approaches of Philosophical Mapping and Imposition. An important element of this approach is the recognition of the limits of comparison. Tagore, and Camus are based on Advaita (non-dualism) and humanism respectively, and atheistic existentialism. The methodology demands a negative capability, that is, the power to accept two opposing ideas without compelling them to resolve them. When Tagore talks of the freedom, we need to hear what he talks of, not what Camus talks about. We seek dissimilarity to the same degree as we seek similarity. Where Camus sees a nothingness, and Tagore a veil, the technique requires that we give faithful account of that difference.

5.4 Limitations

The barrier of language is recognized in this study. Camus wrote in French; Tagore wrote mainly in the Bengali language. We use existing English translations knowing that subtext can be lost. In addition, it is not a biographical work; we are not comparing the biographies of authors but rather comparing ideas in the texts, but the life experiences of the authors guide the work. This is done to humanize the philosophy and demonstrate how the two men applied literature to digest the pain of their generations.

VI. The Camusian Baseline: Bureaucracy and Repetition

In order to see the point of the parallel, we need to examine the motivation behind the Camus philosophy. The Absurd of The Myth of Sisyphus is the conflict of this world with our desire to have a meaning. This silence takes the form of bureaucracy and routine in The Plague. Human beings live in a robotic manner not paying attention to death until it is too late.

Camus also greatly criticized the systems where people were numbers. He was sure that life is meaningless once the society turns into a machine. It is here we have an unexpected handshake with Tagore. Whereas Camus was producing essays and novels on this in France, Tagore was producing satires in Bengal which portrayed the precisely the same mechanical suffocation. These two men were observing the sleeping mankind walking into a trap.

6.1 The Absurdity of Knowledge: Parrot's Talk (Totakahini)

Totakahini was written by Tagore in 1916, and is a misleadingly uncomplicated satire that pierces through the core of institutional nonsensicality. It is a story of a king who purchases a parrot. He is not satisfied with the way the bird talks, and he gets scholars to train it.

The academics come along with books. They argue about pedagogy. They build a golden cage. Instead of grain they feed the parrot pages of textbooks. It is a strict, formalized, and totally unrealistic process. Before the king arrives to look into the progress, the parrot is killed. It is packed with pages of books. The scholars proclaim the mission to be successful: the bird is now educated, but it cannot talk, move, or live.



6.2 The Camusian Parallel

This is the ideal dramatization of the Absurd. The scholars are manifestations of the human desire to give order and meaning (education) to life (the parrot). They annihilate the life of the bird in their attempt to make the bird mean something to them.

Camus frequently produced works on the bureaucracy of death and empty ceremonies of society. In *The Stranger*, Meursault is not judged based on his crime, but on his inability to adhere to the societal scripts (crying on a funeral). Likewise, in *The Talk of the Parrot*, the parrot is not as valuable as its life, but rather as a member of the system. The system runs continuously when the bird dies and it announces victory. This is the indifference of the universe, as defined by Camus, here it is the indifference that is present in the institution. It is not necessarily the death of the bird, but the ridiculousness of the scholars who are unable to see that their meaning has murdered the life they were trying to enhance. It causes us to question: How many of us are stuffing pages into our very souls till we cannot sing any more?

6.3 The Mechanical Life: The Land of Cards (Tasher Desh)

In case the *Talk by Parrot* criticizes the system, *Tasher Desh* (1933) criticizes the humans within the system. This dance-drama is led in one kingdom, where the Queen of Cards is the ruler. The people are playing cards--Kings, Queens, Jacks literally. They do not walk; they shuffle. They talk not, and repeat regulations. They have their lives characterized by strict levels: "Move forward, " Move backward, " Do not turn."

Then, a Prince arrives. He sings. He dances. He introduces chaos. He informs the Cards that they are not a piece of paper but people. The Queen attempts to smother him, yet the spell is broken. The Cards start feeling, loving and violating their rules.

6.3.1 Rebellion Against the Rock

In this case, the relationship to Camus is impressive. The country of Cards is a community of Sisyphus characters. They roll their rocks (do their rules) day by day without question. They have normalized the ridiculousness of their life.

According to Camus, the time when a human man declares the no to the meaningless state of things is rebellion. This resistance is reflected in the Prince when he enters *Tasher Desh*. He does not believe in the mechanical order. Nonetheless, there is a difference in approach. The rebel of Camus tends to be a loner, and he derives the meaning of life in a man of solitude. The rebel of Tagore (the Prince) employs art, song-dance, to open the eyes of people.

In *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux battles the disease, despite the fact that he is not going to win. In *Tasher Desh*, the Prince engages in the battle against the rigidity because it will lead to chaos but in his view chaos is preferable to dead order. According to Tagore, resistance is not the only solution to the absurd machine but rather, creativity. The Cards not only break the rules, they learn to dance. Freedom does not only mean saying no to the nothingness but filling the nothingness with music; this is what Tagore meant.

6.4 The Cost of Causes: *Chapter Four* (*Char Adhyay*)

Char Adhyay is, maybe, the darkest novel of Tagore written in 1934, towards the end of his life. It is concerned with radical terrorism in Bengal. The main character, Ela, becomes in love with Atin, a revolutionary. The Party however requires Atin to cut off all personal contacts to continue to be committed to the cause. Later on, Ela is called upon to give up her love as well as her body to the revolution. She understands that the revolution has turned into a machine which feeds on human souls like colonial empire it struggles against.

The Absurdity of Political Violence

This echoes with the *The Just Assassins* and *The Plague* by Camus. The question that Camus did not cope with is: Is violence ever a greater good? He was able to come to a conclusion that there is always a moral load in the process of killing another human being that cannot be washed up by ideology.



Tagore questions the absurdity of giving up the present human being in favor of an ideal in the future in Char Adhyay. This is Camusian realization of Ela. Ela declares, I am not a weapon when she is alluding to Camus who thought that there is no cause greater than human life. The two writers caution us when we reduce individuals into a tool to an end, we get into the absurd world. The tragedy is in the fact that Ela discovers this truth too late, the same way how Camus characters frequently discover the truth before death.

6.5 The Domestic Revolt: The Wife's Letter (Strir Patra)

In the short story Strir Patra (1914), Mrinal, a wife trapped in a oppressive joint family, writes a letter to her husband while leaving him forever. She refuses to return after her sister-in-law dies due to the family's neglect. She rejects the role of the dutiful wife, the daughter-in-law, and the mother who must suffer in silence.

6.5.2 Rejecting the Social Script

This mirrors Meursault in *The Stranger*. Meursault is condemned because he refuses to cry at his mother's funeral; he refuses to play the game of grief. Mrinal is condemned because she refuses to play the game of domestic sacrifice. She exposes the absurdity of social norms that demand a woman destroy herself for the sake of "family honour."

When Mrinal walks out the door, she is not walking toward a specific destination; she is walking toward freedom. It is an act of rebellion against a universe that says her life belongs to others. Camus would recognize this walk. It is the walk of a person who decides that the silence of the world will not dictate their actions. However, while Meursault walks toward execution, Mrinal walks toward life. Tagore gives her a future; Camus gives his character only the present.

VII. Divergence: Where the Paths Split

It is important not to confuse these two philosophers entirely. They are on the same crossroads yet lead another path.

7.1 Camus: The Honest Silence

Camus is requesting us to live without expectation of a greater meaning. He wants us to see the dead parrot and tell us that this is meaningless, and I still have to live. The man who is aware of the silence is his hero. The struggle itself is dignified to him. It is a bitter frozen comfort, as touching a stone in a snowy day.

7.2 Tagore: The Creative Bridge

Tagore gazes at the dead parrot and he grieves but he is also sure that the tragedy occurred because the humans have lost the connection to the spirit of life. The liberation in *Tasher Desh* and *Char Adhyay* is in relationship and expression. Tagore is not of the opinion that the universe is silent; he feels that we have ceased to listen.

Tagore in *Gitanjali* talks of seeing the divine in the mundane. He demonstrates that the commonplace has been ensnared in regulations in *Tasher Desh*. So, when Camus is taking the silence, Tagore attempts to sing it out. This renders the approach of Tagore less existential but maybe more optimistic. He does not refute the absurdity of the card game, yet, he knows we can get out of the table.

VIII. The Human Element: Suffering and Hope

The only thing that enables the two authors to survive is their humanity. They never write on ivory towers. Camus wrote *The Plague* when he had to hide in the country of the Nazis; Tagore wrote *Tasher Desh* seeing how fascism was growing and humanism disintegrating in India.

But deeper still into their inner suffering. Camus lost his father in the World War 1 and experienced poverty; he understood the feeling of being dumped by the world. Tagore lost father, children and even his wife one after another; he experienced what it was to be left by love. In describing the silence of the universe, Camus is addressing the loss of a son



with whom he had no acquaintance. Tagore is referring to the broken cage through the pain of a father who interred his children.

The common sadness is the connection. They are not mere philosophers, they are grievors.

It is modern when we read the Talk of Parrot today. We read the self-education systems, our workplace escalators, our computer programs that serve us information till we are crammed like the parrot. When we watch Tasher Desh we realize that we are no exception and we have witnessed the political polarizations in which people are interchangeable, they move in a particular way only when it is prescribed. Reading Char Adhyay, we know how dangerous it can be to sacrifice people in the name of politics. Reading Strir Patra we can feel the daring to abandon the home that does not become the home any longer.

The absurd is thus humanized by Tagore who makes it laughable and then heart breaking. Camus renders it tragic and dignified thus humanizing it. The combination of these two gives a complete image of the human condition. We require Camus to inform us the reality about the silence. We should have Tagore to awaken the fact that we have a voice to snap it.

IX. Conclusion: The Lamp and The Stone

Ultimately, the quest after Camus in Tagore is not related to imposing a label upon the Bengali poet. It is regarding the understanding that the sense of estrangement, the fact that the world does not make sense at times, is not unique.

The Talk with Parrot gives us the picture of the absurdity of foisting meaning where none exists. Tasher Desh demonstrates to us the revolt against living on the autopilot. Char Adhyay cautions us not to give our souls away to a cause. Strir Patra demonstrates the strength of walking away. Tagore concurs with Camus that the mechanical life is some form of death. But where Camus leaves us to the picture of Sisyphus content with his battle, Tagore leaves us to the picture of the Prince dancing the cards and Nandini planting flowers in the mine.

Both men ask us to wake up. Camus says: Wake up, the world is silent. Carry your stone with pride." Tagore writes: Get up the world is waiting to listen to your song. Plant your flower anyway." We, in a contemporary world which seems often silent and mechanical, may well require both voices. The truth of the stone is needed to hold us down, and the promise in the lamp to get us on. Not only must we know that there is a vacuum, but we must also know that we are not the only ones to fill in the vacuum.

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