

The Element of the 'Absurd' in Rajiv Joseph's Post-9/11 Plays

The Element of the 'Absurd' in Rajiv Joseph's Post-9/11 Plays

By

Qurratulaen Liaqat

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



The Element of the 'Absurd' in Rajiv Joseph's Post-9/11 Plays

By Qurratulaen Liaqat

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by Qurratulaen Liaqat

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1894-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1894-0

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vi
List of Abbreviations	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	17
Absurdity, Historicity and Cruelty in <i>Guards at the Taj</i>	
Chapter 2	35
The Absurdity of Post 9/11 Human Condition in <i>Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo</i>	
Chapter 3	78
Ubiquitous Absurdum: Psycho-Social Dilemmas <i>Gruesome Playground Injuries</i> and <i>Animals Out of Paper</i>	
Chapter 4	98
Post 9/11 Tragi-Comedy: Linguistic and Para-linguistic Features of Joseph's Plays	
Chapter 5	125
Post 9/11 Absurdity: Reviving Ancient Myth through Modern Shock	
Chapter 6	147
Ecological Discourse of the Play <i>Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo</i>	
Conclusion.....	161
Towards the Poetics of 9/11 and the 'Absurd'	
Bibliography	170
Index	186

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to almighty Allah for blessing me with the courage to embark on this book-writing journey. It was not an easy task to complete this book as it gave me many waking nights. During these rough patches, my family and friends kept my morale high and I am very obliged to all my loved ones who kept me aloft through thick and thin. This monograph is an expanded version of my M Phil dissertation, so I would also like to thank my research supervisor Prof. Dr. Zakia Nasir's compassionate guidance. Ewing Memorial Library at FCCU has been one of my sturdiest academic supports during this expedition, so, a big vote of thanks also goes to the entire team of this library. Most important of all, this book would not have been possible without the critical insight and training in studying a literary text which I received at the English Department, Lahore College for Women University, Pakistan. Many teachers at my alma mater guided me, inspired me, and encouraged me in the pursuit of excellence in the field of English Literary Studies. Ms. Seema Sohail's training filled me with positive energy, Ms. Iffat Saeed made me fall in love with English literature, Ms. Noshaba Farooq introduced me to the exciting tradition of Theatre of the Absurd, Ms. Mariam Farooq inspired me to think out of the box, Ms. Mahrukh Bokhari showed me how to critically analyze the complex labyrinths of a text, Ms. Shabana Saif revealed the importance of studying critical commentaries along with a text to extrapolate its possible interpretations, and Dr. Amara Khan's intellectually stimulating lectures always challenged me to reflect upon the nuances of a text. I would especially like to thank Ms. Amtul Hafeez, who taught me Literary Theory in MA English, for her faith in my critical thinking abilities when I didn't even know how to think critically. I am very thankful to all the teachers at the Institute of English Studies, University of the Punjab, especially my PhD research supervisor Prof. Dr. Amra Raza, for further polishing my research skills. I am also very grateful to my workplace Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) for providing me with a conducive working environment for intellectual growth. This book is a tribute to all my loved ones, class fellows, colleagues, students, and teachers who inspired me morally, professionally, and academically.

Qurratulaen Liaquat

Associate Professor, English Department
Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) Lahore, Pakistan

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BTBZ</i>	<i>Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo</i>
<i>AOP</i>	<i>Animals out of Papers</i>
<i>GPI</i>	<i>Gruesome Playground Injuries</i>
<i>GAT</i>	<i>Guards at the Taj</i>

INTRODUCTION

Traumatic events have the capacity to alter the course of human history, culture, epistemology, ontology, art, and literature. The occurrence of 9/11 was one of those events that gave a new direction to political and creative discourses. Many literary and non-literary responses tried to capture the essence of the indescribable reality of the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan further changed the direction of global creative endeavours. American literary productions especially more emphatically manifested the impact of the trauma of 9/11 and its consequent wars. The post 9/11 American oeuvre manifests indelible marks of the prevailing global trauma and critically analyses the popular political rhetoric. The stylistics of American authors went through a paradigm shift in terms of the topics they discussed, the characters they created, the themes explored, and the innovative ways the texts were structured. Theatre was one of the many creative platforms which immediately stood up to provide a cathartic and healing space for the psychologically wounded American nation (Randall 2011; Gray 2011). Rajiv Joseph (1974-), an American playwright who was named as a finalist for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for his play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (2009), is one of the many writers whose works exhibit the anxiety, isolation, horror, violence, guilt, global political chaos, dehumanisation, and utter absurdity of post 9/11 milieu. Many theatre critics pointed out that Joseph's plays *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* and *Guards at the Taj* (2014) have affinities with the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd (Isherwood 2009& 2015; Jones 2018; Billington 2017). However, any formally written literary critique on Joseph's association with the Theatre of the Absurd is almost nonexistent.

This book is the first initiative to undertake a formal textual analysis of Joseph's plays whilst tracing the affinities between his play-scripts and Absurd literature. This book argues Joseph's dramas are not only a continuation of the Theatre of the Absurd, but they also expand the trajectory of the literature of the Absurd by adding some new socio-political connotations to this term in the post-9/11 milieu. This book will mainly focus on four selected plays, namely: *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (2009), *Guards at the Taj* (2015), *Gruesome Playground Injuries*

(2012), and *Animals out of Papers* (2008). I contend that two of his plays *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* and *Guards at the Taj*, are post-9/11 Absurd plays which reflect on the human, socio-political, racial, and environmental repercussions of the violence which proliferated in the post-9/11 era. However, his plays *Gruesome Playground Injuries* and *Animals Out of Paper* illustrate the element of existential absurdity in the characters' lives because of their placement within their historical, geographical, emotional, and spatio-temporal locations in which they have been placed. By citing relevant textual quotations from Joseph's selected plays, I demonstrate that his plays illustrate the 'Absurdity' of the post-9/11 human situation, and he takes forward the legacy of the Theatre of the Absurd.

‘Absurd’- The Term

Before I start delving into the multivalent nuances of the 'Absurd' in Joseph's works, discussing the meanings and connotations of the term in semiotic, pragmatic, aesthetic, and literary contexts is essential. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2015) defines 'absurd' as "completely ridiculous: not logical or sensible" (6). The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines 'absurd' as "ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous" and "having no rational or orderly relationship to human life", "the state or condition in which human beings exist in an irrational and meaningless universe and in which human life has no ultimate meaning"(n. pg.). According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the origin of this word 'absurd' comes from the Middle French word '*absurde*', from the Latin '*absurdus*' which means 'deaf, stupid' and signifies something illogical, "out of tune, discordant," figuratively "incongruous, foolish, silly, senseless," from *ab-* "off, away from," perhaps an intensive prefix, + *surdus* "dull, deaf, mute"(Online Etymology Dictionary). The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines 'Absurdism' as "a philosophy on the belief that the universe is irrational and meaningless and that search for order brings the individual into conflict with the universe" (n.pg.). The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines it as "the belief that humans exist in a world with no purpose or order" (6). Whilst discussing the primary philosophical school of thoughts and literary traditions which influenced the absurd literature, Neil Cornwell concludes, "The absurd, then, is born of nihilism, out of existentialism, fuelled by the certainty of death (anxiety, dread and death being the scourge of the existentialist)" (5). The most precise understanding of the term absurd emanates from *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, as the term used by existentialists to

describe that "which one might have thought to be amenable to reason, but which turns out to be beyond the limits of rationality", Sartre being cited as the prime example (Honderich 3). So, the word 'absurd' implies a chaotic universe which lacks any sense, coherence, and justification for everything happening around human beings. Albert Camus used the term 'absurd' to diagnose the situation of modern humanity – "strangers in an inhuman universe" (Stanton and Banham 379). In this book, I demonstrate that Joseph's plays illustrate Sartre and Camus' meanings of the term 'absurd' as the violence shown in his plays is incongruous, preposterous, and discordant. Moreover, human beings live in a world where social norms, racial binaries and political decision-making do not make sense. Joseph uses the genre of the absurd to depict the unique post 9/11 metaphysical anguish at absurdity of the human condition in a chaotic and illogical world.

The Historical, Philosophical and Literary Trajectory of the 'Absurd'

The tradition of Absurdism in the drama genre emerged after the Second World War as the authentic continuation of the famous Absurd existentialist Theatre which emerged in Paris. Both these wars were two chief catastrophic events in the course of human history. These wars inspired many literary works. The horrific slaughter during the war shook humanity's senses. Intelligentsia of those times utilised art as an ultimate expression of war's absurdity and the human condition's absurdity in post-war scenarios.

'The Theatre of the Absurd' was a term that Martin Esslin coined in 1960. He defines the word 'Absurd' as follows: "'Absurd' originally means 'out of harmony', in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical'. In common usage, absurd may mean 'ridiculous'" (23). Nevertheless, this word has a varied meaning in the context of the Theatre of the Absurd. The Theatre of the Absurd follows the meaning given by Camus to this word 'absurdity'. So, this kind of theatre was aimed at portraying humanity which is out of tune and illogical.

The most significant contribution of this form of theatre was the innovation that the Absurd playwrights employed to convey humanity's purposelessness. Esslin describes how Absurd plays rebelled against well-

structured plays in terms of structure techniques and language. He asserts that Absurd plays have:

...no story or plot to speak of...often without recognisable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets...often have neither a beginning nor an end...seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares...[and dialogues are replaced by]'incoherent babblings. (21-22)

Esslin also observes that the playwrights who fall under the category of Absurd Theatre need to follow a set pattern of stylistic choices, issues, and themes. Esslin asserts, "For each of the playwrights concerned seeks to express no more and no less than his own personal vision of the world...often contain hardly any recognisable human beings" who perform "completely unmotivated actions". Esslin further elaborates Absurd plays "often start at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily" (7). Since Esslin's seminal book, almost every non-realistic modern drama is identified as 'absurd'. Specific Absurdist techniques have also been established through which the idea of 'Theatre of the Absurd' has maintained its critical currency. Among these techniques are "the rejection of narrative continuity, of character coherence and of the rigidity of logic, leading to ridiculous conclusions' skepticism about the meaning of language; bizarre relationship of stage properties to dramatic situation" (Stanton and Banham 379). Hence, the Theatre of the Absurd was a revolutionary trend initiated in the aftermath of two World Wars, which not only revolutionised the notion of drama writing but also provided a paradigm shift in watching and analysing this genre.

I would like to discuss the various philosophies, artists, and literary traditions which provided the impetus for absurd literature. Neil Cornwell, in his excellent book *The Absurd in Literature* (2006), draws the trajectory of the Absurd from the Greek philosopher, Gorgias of Leontini (a contemporary of Socrates), whose treatise *On Nature* presented the triangulated reasoning, "that nothing is.... that even if it is, it cannot be comprehended...that even if it can be comprehended, it cannot be communicated" (4). Cornwell (2006), in his excellent monograph, gives references to Martin Heidegger, Leibniz, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Nietzsche, Derrida and many others while developing the trajectory of the philosophy of the Absurd (22-23). In his seminal book *The Cambridge Introduction to the Theatre and the Literature of the Absurd* (2015), Michael Bennet also discussed similar philosophers. The aesthetic and art movements usually associated with the emergence of Absurd literature are traditions of abstract painting, Expressionism,

Symbolism, Surrealism, and Dadaism (Esslin 1965; Cornwell 2006; Bennett 2015).

Various authors have also tried to draw the trajectory of Absurd literature (Cornwell 2006; Bennett 2015). Both Cornwell (2006) and Bennet (2015) argue that the feeling of absurdity has its roots in Greek Theatre and Elizabethan Drama, German, English and Russian fiction, and nonsense poetry which reached its peak in the 'Theatre of the Absurd' tradition. Cornwell (2015) discusses the works of Daniil Kharms as a minimalist absurdist (158-183), Franz Kafka regarding the otherness in the labyrinth of absurdity (184-214), Samuel Beckett's vessels, voices, and shapes of absurdity (215-250), and Flann O'Brien's purloined absurdity (251-264). Bennett provides a broader vision of contemporary literature's origin, development and current form of absurdity. Many authors have propounded that there is no fixed meaning of the term absurd in literary studies. For instance, Joanna Gavins, in her work, *Reading the Absurd* (2013), asserts that "the absurd has been identified in texts as diverse as Greek tragedy and multimodal science fiction, and in the works of authors from Amis to Voltaire" (1). Bennett (2015) also declares:

Absurd literature is elusive, complex, and nuanced: it refuses to be pinned down. Moreover, this is precisely why these texts associated with the absurd can be studied over and over, reinterpreted over and over, and have spoken for so long (and continue to speak) so powerfully to so many different generations, cultures, creeds, and types of people. (1)

Hence, there is no clear-cut definition of the word absurd or what can be qualified as absurd, which makes it all the more valuable as a topic of study because of the margin this term leaves for extrapolation. Moreover, the term 'absurd' is not only a praxis to analyse literary productions, but it is also used in the field of psychoanalysis (Haber 2019), economics as in "Absurd Austerity Policies in Europe" (Arestis and Pelagidis 2010; Boland 2012), statecraft as Muhammad Ali Nisar explores in his fascinating article 'Logic of the Absurd-Reading Kafka in a Kafkaesque World' (2012), disability studies (Cameron 2021) and politics (Kenesson 2012). If we think that the trend of writing absurd literature is only associated with the Euro-American literary traditions, it would be a myopic observation because the element of the absurd has transcended as a global phenomenon in Iranian films (Tabarraee 2018), animated cartoons and cinema (Bofa and Elliott 2016), Bulgarian theatre (Hashamova 2015), and African poetry (Abebe 2020; Nwahunanya 1994; Balogun 1984). Chinese Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian's seminal play *The Bus Stop* (1981) and African writer Femi Osofisan's *The Oriki of the Grasshopper* (1995) are

perhaps the best examples of the trickledown effect of the *Waiting for Godot* (1953) which transcended geographical and spatio-temporal locations and provided the impetus to reflect on politics, society, culture, and the absurdity of the human condition in different parts of the world.

Rajiv Joseph and Post 9/11 Theatre of the Absurd

Theatre has always been called an 'imitation' of life and proved to be one of the best commentaries on society, culture, human emotions, human feelings, and history. From ancient Greek theatre to the times of Miracle and Morality plays of medieval times till the modern era, theatre is a place where humanity and life are shown in conflict. September 9th, 2001 marked a colossal turning point in human history and ignited writers to imitate the after 9/11 reality for the theatre. The Theatre of the Absurd is an old tradition which erupted in the aftermath of WWII, and Joseph is also from a generation that has been through many wars. It is believed that "Not surprisingly, absurdism in drama tends to emerge when pointless carnage and the constant possibility of complete annihilation is in recent memory" (Myatt 45). The carnage witnessed in the aftermath of 9/11 led Joseph to choose the Theatre of the Absurd as his expression.

Before the research moves on to the details about the old literary trend of the Theatre of the Absurd, it is necessary to discuss the contemporary political scenario and its psycho-social implications so that later, they can be connected to the tradition of the Absurd playwriting as well as analysis of Joseph's amalgamation of political and literary in his plays.

Joseph's plays are written in the 9/11 milieu, which left a deep imprint on the minds of humanity. Humanity witnessed an event of great horror which led to further bloodshed and affliction on humanity. Elizabeth A. Zahnd quotes Derrida, who debates 9/11 in the light of "individual thought processes". Derrida believed "that the day's greatest impact was not the terrible loss of life, nor the fall of the towers, but the disastrous effect on the mind" (227). On 9th September 2001, some significant buildings in America got hit by passenger aeroplanes. "A plane... crashed into the World Trade Centre, New York... at 8:48 a.m. Half an hour later came the news... that another plane had hit the second of the twin towers.... Almost exactly an hour later came news of a third strike, this time on the Pentagon.... the final attack never came" (Burke 24). The final attack was aimed at Washington's Capitol Hill. However, it was reported that it crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The "final death toll" of these attacks was estimated at 3,000 people (Burke 24).

Walter Benjamin makes a striking observation about the capacity of certain dramatic events to act like a flash bulb and imprint architectural environments on the "photosensitive" plate of our minds. It is as though buildings sink into the recesses of our consciousness as a form of background landscape almost unnoticeable because of their very familiarity unless some event happens there that leaves them indelibly imprinted on our minds, such as a tragic accident or a death in the family. Anyone can observe the duration we are exposed to impressions (Leach 75). The 9/11 attack was such an event which left indelible marks on the human psyche.

Many social scientists believe that 9/11 was a momentous incident in the history of humanity which changed the whole course of the history of the planet Earth's inhabitants. Roland Bleiker, in his article *Art after 9/11* claims that the "9/11 event displays all the ... key elements of major turning points: moments in history when certain events defy "human capacities for understanding" and trigger a "collapse of the most basic trust in the world" (80). Roland Bleiker believes that 9/11 was actually "a different type of threat... one that cannot even be precisely defined or located... took place in surprise ..." (79). This occurrence of 9/11 gave rise to an 'astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity', which was like a storm or an erupting volcano (Bleiker 80).

Every war has its unique repercussions and after-effects. Post 9/11 America's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq were such incidents which gave rise to political scientists such as Michael Scheuer (2009) to call America's war on terror "hydra-like warfare" (116), which has psychological as well as physical effects on not only the American Iraqi and Afghani citizens but the entirety of humanity present on the globe. Joseph's plays illustrate this abysmal post 9/11 human condition, where humanity is distraught by tragedies and bomb blasts. These tragedies make them lose their rationality and reasoning powers. They are confused, baffled characters whose very essence is human but do not know which way to go. How to communicate? What to communicate? How to get their message across to the people around them?

Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo by Joseph is another depiction of post-9/11 humanity's milieu. Where plays like *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* talk about the Iraq invasion, *Animals out of Paper* uses the American writer's memory to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The depiction of the absurdity of human relationships and emotions in *Gruesome Playground Injuries* makes one peep into the post 9/11 human relationships on the go.

His four plays portray incongruous geographical, emotional, and psychological landscapes of humanity's collective unconscious in the post-9/11 milieu.

Fedderson and Richardson call the 9/11 Wars "weird" (167). They also quote famous Hollywood star Tom Cruise, who believed that 9/11 had "kind of ripped off the social veneer" (164). Zahnd talks about an almost similar idea when she calls 9/11 having an "unnameable nature", which "points to a phenomenon of confusion following the terror attacks" (227). Zahnd also related the "notion of confusion and silence" with 9/11 and the 9/11 Wars (Zahnd 228). Jason Burke called the 9/11 Wars "asymmetric" (79), which had "no obvious starting point and no obvious end, with no sense of what might constitute victory and defeat, their chronological span is impossible to determine" (Burke xix). A war which is asymmetric and which has no definite ending or beginning, no winner or loser; in short, a weird war which is unnameable and confusing can only be described as absurd, so what could be better than the absurd form of expression to narrate the social milieu in the aftermath of such a war.

Jason Burke asserts that in a few years, the 9/11 Wars "span the globe geographically- from Indonesia in the east to the Atlantic-Mediterranean coastline in the west, from south-west China to south-west Spain, from small town America to small-town Pakistan- as well as culturally, politically and ideologically" (xix). The post 9/11 world was described by Jason Burke as a "fragmented planet, where conflicts over scarce resources is on the rise, poorly contained by 'ramshackle' international institutions" (Burke 502) and a "chaotic matrix of multivalent, confused but always lethal wars" (Burke 502).

American dramatist, Joseph, took charge of narrating the absurdity of war as well as of the human condition through his plays. Joseph proved himself the most suitable heir to the tradition of the Absurd Theatre, who inherited the tradition in the context of another significant era of wars in the history of humanity. His four plays *Gruesome Playground Injuries*, *Animals Out of Paper*, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, and *Guards at the Taj* portray the general meaninglessness of the absurd human condition in the post-9/11 milieu.

In the aftermath of 9/11, many creative writers expressed their perceptions about the trauma and horror of this event. There was an outpour of fiction and poetry by prominent American and Non-American writers, such as Ian McEwan, Don DeLillo, John Updike, Philip Roth, Frank Bidart, Louise

Glück, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, and Robert Pinsky, who all contributed significantly to the ongoing discourse development of the meaning and implications of 9/11 for contemporary history, culture, and politics. Many prominent literary critiques were also penned down to identify the stylistics of post-9/11 literary productions (Keniston and Quinn 2008; Versluys 2009; Gray 2011; Randall 2011; Duval and Robert 2012; Keeble 2014; Miller 2014; Pope and Bryan 2016; Wilhite 2016; Langah 2019; Jain 2022). All these volumes tried to capture the dynamics of the global literature written in the aftermath of 9/11.

Literature After 9/11 (2008) by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn is divided into three parts: how trauma is witnessed, the politics of representation, and the evolution of post-9/11 literary tradition. Their objective is to "define a new body of literature – literature after 9/11 – that reveals the instability of 9/11 as an event and the ways literature contests 9/11's co-option for narrowly political ends" (3). Their book configures the literary perspective of 9/11 "as well as on the relationship between politics and aesthetics, and between history and narrative" (Keniston and Quinn 2). They believe:

literary works reframe and focus the meaning of 9/11 by employing representational strategies that emphasise the desire for (and construction of) meaning, and that dramatise the continuing resonance of 9/11 in the collective life of the United States and beyond. (2)

The *Modern Fiction Studies* (post 9/11 special issue) edited by Duval and Robert (2012) partially responds to Keniston and Quinn's edited volume. Most of these literary analyses are critical of the inclination of contemporary American literature to focus on post-9/11 domestic concerns and have thus raised concerns about the need to globally expand the reflection on the relationship between post-9/11 aesthetic and political discourses (Versluys 2008; Gray 2011; Randall 2011). Especially, Richard Gray's *After the Fall*, Martin Randall's *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* argue that post-9/11 literature is "a failure" (Gray 16) because it neglects the transcultural issues emanating from the domestic tragedy of the USA. He further asserts that it is "a failure that is not just a formal but also a political one" (16), and he emphasises the need for scholars to pay more attention to the art engaged in "deterritorialising America" and "imagining the transnational" (17). Randall criticizes the overwhelmingly "local" concerns of the post-9/11 literature and claims that post-9/11 fiction has failed to express the global nature of the trauma (135). After this criticism of the myopic vision of post-9/11 literary endeavours, some writers delved

into global (Langah 2019), transcultural (Jain 2022), and transatlantic (Miller 2014) dimensions of post-9/11 literature and literary criticism.

Most of the literary critiques of post-9/11 literature have focused on trauma and poststructuralist studies (Miller 4). Moreover, almost all of them focus on the novel genre because the mode of fiction was most widely used to express the trauma of 9/11 (Keeble 2014; Jain 2022). Many critics have emphasised the need to look out for transnational fiction (DeRosa 614), "more hybrid forms" of Art, such as "discursive non-fiction, film/poems, graphic novels, operas and fine art" (Randall 3, 15) and the kind of works where "writers do meet the challenge, of allowing their work to be a site of struggle between cultures – and a free play of idioms and genres" (Gray 19).

A word which recurs throughout the description and explication of the challenges to express "the complexity of the post 9/11 discourse" (Langah 15) is the use of the word "absurd". Another significant issue related to the post-9/11 literature has been discussed is its "failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd" (Gray 1). For instance, Rebecca Carpenter (Keniston and Quinn 2008), in her critical analysis of David Hare's *Stuff Happens* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, uses the word "absurd" to describe the "absurdity" (146) of the American-British relationship in a post 9/11 scenario and "absurd maschismo" (Rebecca 149) of the American president in *Stuff Happens*. Brian Chappell, in his book chapter in the volume edited by Pope and Bryan (2016), "Terror and the Limit(ation)s of Narrative: Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* argues that the language used to describe death and violence in this novel "is so absurd that it takes on an air of truth" (42). Paul Giaimo, in his monograph, *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work* (2011), also contends that the figures who reflect theoretical positions in DeLillo's post 9/11 novels are "generally presented in an unflattering light ... satirised as absurd and portrayed as leading to negative moral and personal consequences" for the characters who listen to them, however briefly (Giaimo 8). George Potter, in his book chapter (Pope and Bryan 2016) "Home Before History: American Domestic Drama in a Post-9/11 World", argues that Theresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros's play *Omnium Gatherum* (2004) "replace[s] the psychological suffering with absurdist probing" (269). Gray (2011) discusses *Language Rooms* (2008) as full of dialogue and debate that slips between the surreal and the political, absurd pantomime and verbal sleight-of-hand, black comedy and bleak tragedy, the little slights, and

squabbles of everyday life in the office and the tactics of surveillance and counter-surveillance embedded in global conflict (Gray 152).

New narratives of 9/11 tend toward framing the historicity of 9/11 as continuous and reframing the contemporary nature of time itself. In suggesting time as nonlinear, American identity is not only fractured by 9/11 but also by a world order that began before the 2001 attacks on America; this world order reaches a moment closest to total exposure on 9/11 but does not begin on 9/11. (Pope and Bryan 14)

American theatre endeavoured to capture the unintelligible horror of post-9/11 trauma (Gray 2011), and then it continued to criticise the absurdity of post-9/11 wars. For instance, Anne Nelson's "The Guys" (2001) dramatises the New York firefighters' efforts to inscribe eulogies for the people who died in the attacks on the World Trade Centre, and David Hare's play, *Stuff Happens* (2004), satirises Bush administration's appropriation of 9/11 as reason for invading Iraq. Life would not be very easy for the post 9/11 generation in the backdrop of multi-faceted wars going on in the whole world. Life of humanity will undoubtedly be different after 9/11. In the post-9/11 milieu, Joseph, an American playwright, has undertaken the responsibility to imitate life in the wake of 9/11. Americans were the people who got directly influenced by the terror of the 9/11 event and the wars that followed this momentous event. Joseph has tried to create a spectacle of the post 9/11 generation in his plays. He does not only portray American life. His concerns are global. He might be called a humanitarian. In order to express and write about a post-war era, Joseph has again reverted to the Theatre of the Absurd tradition, which was in full swing during post Second World War.

Joseph gained a good reputation as a playwright in a very brief period. His plays such as *Animals out of Paper* (2008), *The Leopard and the Fox* (2007), *Gruesome Playground Injuries* (2009), *The Monster at the Door* (2011), *The North Pool* (2012), *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (2009) and *Guards at Taj* (2015) narrate very pertinent global issues like racism, wars, and world politics. His play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* narrates the American invasion's impact on general societal life in Iraq. The play was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for its relevance to the contemporary era's pertinent issues, and it received its due praise for its original and thought-provoking content from many critics (Rooney 2011; Isherwood 2011; Marks 2012; Lowry 2013; Howey 2015; Hobson 2016; Neutz 2017) while some harshly criticised the play for being ambiguous and over- ambitious (McCall 2010; Lahr 2011; Jones 2013; Osborne 2017).

Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo (2009) is about Iraq war where the ghost of a Bengal Tiger is asking questions regarding the prevailing cruelty and role of religion in contemporary scenario. The play received its share of due praise from various critics. Bob Verini in the newspaper *Variety* said about the play that "though set amid the throes of the US incursion, it's less an Iraq War play than a heavily metaphorical musing on life's purpose in a godless universe" (n.pg.). Peter Marks states that Joseph "takes the chaos of Iraq circa 2003 and, Ionesco-style, spins it into an anthropomorphic fable" (n.pg.). Many critics called the play a fable, parable, black comedy, and farce. However, the most exciting thing was the absurd finesse of the play.

Joseph chose the influential genre of theatre in order to send his message across to the shattered humanity in the aftermath of 9/11. Peter Sellars and Bonnie Marranca believe that Theatre has a vital role in contemporary milieu after the tragedy of 9/11. Since ancient times, Theatre has been one of the instruments used to paint the picture of the world as it is. Peter Sellars and Bonnie Marranca claim that there are "two-time frames" in theatre. First is the "frame of generations, of centuries, of voices of ancestors," and the second frame is "the time frame of this instant" (50). They argued that theatre "in a time of political and social paralysis... is a dynamic space where things are moving, things are happening, things are in play, human beings are meeting each other with amazing consequences" (52). They further assert:

Trying to search for something that reaches across generations and across time is what Theatre does. That is moral, and that moral energy is handed on from generation to generation. It isn't just this week's headlines. It's what people keep forgetting about, because they're rushing from issue to issue, moment to moment, and they're not getting the original meaning of life work. Across our life span we have something to accomplish. It will be the work of our generation: how our generation is measured and what we have to hand on. (51)

In *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, Joseph shows a post 9/11 world divided into two groups-Americans and Muslims/terrorists. Jason Burke, in his book *The 9/11 Wars*, states that "before the third plane had even hit the Pentagon", the Bush Administration was informed by Richard Clarke, who was counter-terrorism coordinator at that time, "that America had been attacked by al-Qaeda" (Burke 25). There were rumours that the "US would be under enormous pressure to respond quickly and that Iran, Iraq and Libya were potential targets as well as Afghanistan" (Burke 25). These assaults on USA buildings were later termed the "9/11 attacks", and

people like Jason Burke called them "individually striking", which were "inevitably magnified by their sheer unexpectedness" (26). It was concluded that Muslim terrorists were behind those attacks. These attacks were considered attacks on the sovereignty of the USA and provided pretexts for what Jason Burke calls *The 9/11 Wars*. The USA began a new war era and named it the War on Terrorism. The play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, by Joseph, explores one such war on Iraq.

Karen D' Souza quotes Joseph's words that he wants "to illuminate the issues of the day". Karen further uses Joseph's views about the ideology of his work. Joseph says, "I have a macabre sensibility, and I think violence impacts us much more deeply and viscerally in the theatre than in movies or television, where we are desensitised by it" (n.pg.). The stories of his plays are 'elusive', which "segue from the blood-spattered and the hard-hitting to the absurd with characters as delicate and complex as pieces of origami, an art form he muses on in *Animals Out of Paper*" (n.pg.). Robert Kelly believes that Joseph's 'vision' of playwriting "moves rapidly from the closely observed detail of everyday events and conversations to a world of metaphor and universal truths" (n.pg.). Theatre critic Kelly is of the view that Joseph is "no ordinary playwright" because he is an "engaging" and "provocative new voice in the American theatre" as his plays move in "fresh and unexpected directions" and "capture the essence of life in our times" (qtd. in Karen n. pg.). Amy Glazer, the director of his play *Animals Out of Paper*, proclaimed that what sets Joseph apart is his "instinctive sense of structure" and "his ability to create worlds and pieces that can be experienced both on a metaphoric and poetic level but also in a very naturalistic, realistic, authentic and recognisable world" (n.pg.). San Jose Rep artistic director Rick Lombardo says Joseph has a broad vision of what Theatre can do, such as "the symbols, the metaphors, the language" (n. pg.). Glazer, professor of Theatre and Film at San Jose State University, observes that Joseph "explores the complexities of grief and loss as only an old soul can" (n.pg.). Glazer calls Joseph "the next big thing" and "one of the truest chroniclers of contemporary culture we have" (n.pg.).

As Joseph is from the twenty-first century, he talks about the popular habits, customs, and gadgets of the contemporary era in his plays. His characters can be seen with cell phones, laptops and all the electronic gadgets popular in youth and old age. Karen asserts that Joseph amalgamates the "irreverent perspective of youth" with a classicist's appreciation for well-crafted plots". According to Karen, the "hallmark" of Joseph's plays is "unexpected juxtapositions". Karen talks about "Texting,

sex videos and pop culture" in *The North Pool*. Karen further asserts that *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* was influenced both by "movie iconography" as well as *Hamlet* by Shakespeare. Karen believes that glimpses of movies like *Terminator* and *Pulp Fiction* can be seen in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (n.pg.).

Drama critics highly acclaimed his plays. *Kristoffer Diaz* endorses him: "Playwright Rajiv Joseph is no stranger to works that tackle volatile, large-scale issues" (n.pg.). Chester Theatre Organization acclaims the play, *Animals out of Paper* as a "wise and richly layered comedy set in the fascinating world of origami folders" (n. pg.). Anita Gates commends this play in *The New York Times* in these words "observant, pitch-perfect script seems modest at first but is quite ambitious, dealing ruthlessly (except in the semi-upbeat ending) with the fragility of happiness, the tragedy of impulsiveness and the tenuousness of hope".

Gruesome Playground Injuries (2010), story of two star-crossed lovers just like Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play, was commended in *Washington City Paper* by Chris Klimek "there's something paradoxically life-affirming about the sensitivity with which playwright and players perform this haunting ode to self-destruction". Gwendolyn Purdom writes in *Washington Times*, "Injuries is layered with quirky humour and poignant intensity—a crash course in growing up, getting hurt, and the healing power of love" (n.pg.). Olivia Flores Alvarez, a drama critic, tags it as "A provocative dark comedy" (n.pg.). Another theatre critic, George Perry, says, "It is also like a walk through one's memory. It's a bit like taking a step back from one's self and peeking inside our foggy memory... (talks of) eternal questions about love, mortality and the nature of being" (n.pg.).

This monograph aims to find answers to specific questions such as: What are Absurd elements in Joseph's plays? Can his plays be qualified as Absurd plays? How and why? Has Joseph maintained the tradition of the Absurd? How has he contributed to take the legacy of the Absurd theatre forward? What is new about these plays? What have these plays contributed to the tradition of the Absurd? How has post-9/11 milieu contributed to the Theatre of the Absurd in terms of new themes, issues, and symbols? How does post 9/11 scenario relate to the Theatre of the Absurd? What is allegorical significance of Joseph's plays for our contemporary world? This monograph develops its argument about Joseph's contribution to this rich playwriting tradition by seeking answers to all these questions.

One of the main objectives of this book is to explore the connection of Joseph's plays with the dramatic tradition of the Absurd. A detailed examination of Joseph's selected plays will be conducted to establish his literary stature in the post 9/11 milieu. This study illustrates the valuable additions Joseph's plays have made to the Theatre of the Absurd tradition in terms of new themes, dramatic techniques and new types of characters and symbolism. One of my many aims is to assess the impact of the post-9/11 milieu on the Theatre of the Absurd. I intend to explore concerns and issues raised in these plays and examine the selected texts to unpack the impact of the post 9/11 scenario on humanity's behaviour, psyche, morals and history.

The plays will be analysed under the political and aesthetic framework of the post 9/11 era. Martin Esslin's theory about the Theatre of the Absurd would be employed to analyse Joseph's dramatic creations' stylistics critically. The selected plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee will be taken as touchstones from the dramatic tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd, which will be compared with Joseph's plays. The 'absurdity' would be the keyword. The implied meaning of this word would be as Eugene Ionesco defines it: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Esslin 23).

Drama critics have already identified the literary genius of Joseph and drawn a comparison between him and the Absurd playwrights. The left gaps are the innovations Joseph inculcates into the already-established tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd. The close textual analysis of Joseph's plays has never been done extensively in order to identify his method of shaping the course of the dramatic tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd in the post 9/11 milieu. This book not only analyses Joseph's old absurd drama techniques but also unravels his innovations in 9/11.

Many researchers or writers might have undertaken the topic of the 9/11 or 9/11 wars, but they have yet to touch upon the area of Absurd literature in the aftermath of 9/11. The study will highlight the connections between the post 9/11 milieu and the Theatre of the Absurd. Humanity, which is torn between East and West clash, needs to be given some peeps into each other's psyche so that they can get along well in the coming days. From the human perspective, one of the study's aims is to help all the communities understand each other in a post-9/11 global drama of existence.

This book is divided into six chapters which compare Joseph's selected plays with the seminal Absurd plays and conclude that Joseph has not only continued the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd in post 9/11 milieu, but the audience also feels an addition of post 9/11 sense of the absurdity of human condition, metaphysical and spatio-temporal anguish, and geo-political realities. In the first three chapters *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, *Guards at the Taj*, *Animals Out of Paper*, and *Gruesome Playground Injuries* will be discussed within the praxis of the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd as well as the absurd instances, happenings, and situations in these plays. The fourth chapter will analyse the language of Joseph's plays. The fifth chapter will apply the theoretical framework of myth criticism to Joseph's selected text and argues that Joseph has used carefully selected Biblical, Greco-Roman, Popular myths, Movies (the myths of our times), and literary texts and has followed the footsteps of his predecessors such as Beckett and Ionesco. Nevertheless, he adds to the mythological materials used in Absurd plays. The sixth chapter demonstrates the eco-critical concerns in Joseph's plays. His writing style follows absurdist playwrights in terms of his discussion of ecological concerns in his plays. The final chapter will conclude the entire discussion.

Since its evolution in the 6th century BC, Theatre has played a significant role in imitating an era's socio-political and cultural realities. Be it Greeks, Elizabethan, Modernist, Postmodernist, Postcolonial, or Post 9/11 dramatists, Theatre has always provided a space to reflect on the ongoing paradigm shift and give directions to comprehend the complex onto-epistemological realities around us. By drawing on drama's crucial role in human history, society, and civilisation, this book establishes that drama continues to hold significance in the public domain and will continue to do so till eternity. Theatre of the Absurd is one of the many traditions which established itself as one of the most widely appreciated and relevant dramatic movements to express the disillusionment of the post-War generation. Joseph's plays make it evident that there is a continued relevance and currency of Absurd dramatic techniques in contemporary American Theatre to express the complex global political realities of the post-9/11 milieu.

CHAPTER 1

ABSURDITY, HISTORICITY AND CRUELTY IN *GUARDS AT THE TAJ*

Martin Esslin (1965) proclaimed that Theatre of the Absurd was a return to the old, archaic, and ancient tradition of writing in allegory, metaphor, and symbolism, which was in line with the tradition of miracle and morality plays. Characters were personifications of virtues and vices of evil and good. The situations in which the characters found themselves were also allegorical, which implied a more profound meaning embedded in the surface meaning (17). *Guards at the Taj* belongs to that genre of writing in which the absurdity of the post 9/11 human condition has been embedded in the story of two guards who are keeping vigil in front of the Taj Mahal, the symbol of one of the most powerful empires, the Mughals.

Joseph's play *Guards at the Taj* (2015) is another thought-provoking take on the absurdity of post 9/11 socio-political realities. This play has been called an "audacious black comedy" (Jones 2018 *Chicago Tribune*). *Guards at the Taj* has been compared to the Absurd masterpieces such as *Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) written by Tom Stoppard (Jones 2018, *Chicago Tribune*; Billington 2017 *The Guardian*) and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett (Jones 2018, *Chicago Tribune*). Just like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Babur and Humayun (Characters of Joseph's play) have been depicted as "two people on the margin of momentous events in which they become fatally involved" (Billington 2017 *The Guardian*). Theatre critics have also tried to find the implications of this play's historical atrocities to the current era. For instance, Billington (2017) believes that "the play has resonances for today" (n. p.) regarding the exploitation of "immigrant labour to achieve grandiose projects" (Billington 2017 *The Guardian*).

Similarly, one of the most prominent American Theatre critics, Charles Isherwood, asserts that *Guards at the Taj* "raises potent questions about the human price paid throughout history for the caprices of the mighty, even when they result in architectural wonders that ultimately give pleasure to the masses" (Isherwood 2015, *The New York Times*). Theatre

critic, Li (2018), argues that “*Guards at the Taj* cleverly subverts conventional notions of power. It is no accident that Babur and Humayun, who offer a worm's eye view of the Taj Mahal, are the namesakes of the first two emperors of the Mughal Empire” (*The Strait Times*). So, the critics hint that this play has resonance for the contemporary era.

I am going to take this argument further and contend here that *Guards at the Taj* is a post 9/11 Absurdist allegory written in the tradition of Absurd playwrighting to demonstrate the incomprehensibility of the violence and atrocities which are inflicted upon human beings by their fellow species to preserve and continue the legacy and grandeur of the empire. Babur and Humayun, who are ordered to cut the hands which built the Taj Mahal, are akin to Tom and Kev in Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, who are keeping guard at the Zoo in Baghdad. They are killing people in Baghdad to safeguard their nation, America's greatness and magnificence. Similarly, Babur and Humayun do what their empire told them to do. The Taj is a static building in this play and a multi-dimensional symbol of an empire's grandeur, beauty, and splendour. Its spatio-temporal location and context impinge upon the resonance of this play's symbolic structure for the contemporary era. The Taj Mahal was ordered to be built by Shah Jahan in order to assuage the grief of his beloved wife Mumtaz's demise, and *the Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* emphasises that Iraq's invasion was one of the ways to fight back the traumatic wound of attacks on the World Trade Centre (WTC). In this sense, the Taj Mahal and American Post-9/11 empire are analogous; the wars fought in the post-9/11 scenario endeavoured to maintain the superpower status of the empire but violently. The myth that Shah Jahan ordered the cutting of the hands of the builders is similar to the violence the American empire unleashed in the aftermath of the attacks on WTC.

While you're laughing at the guards, Joseph is also putting you in mind of the centuries long tradition of despotic violence, the human costs of tyrants and egomaniacs achieving positions of great power. You also keep thinking about the historic role of the implementer: the shadowy figures carrying out the abuse, the tyranny, the torture, all the while self-justifying with the mantra that they merely are doing their jobs. Every oppressive regime, Joseph is saying, needs its henchmen. (Jones 2018 *Chicago Tribune*)

The play is set in 1648, Agra, where two imperial guards, Babur and Humayun (best friends), keep guard of one of the most monumental constructions in human history. Shah Jahan prohibits everyone from looking at the Taj Mahal before it is completed, so both guards try not to

see it. However, Babur, who is more imaginative and humane than the two, dares to look at the Taj as the sun rises and asks Humayun to look at it too. Both look at it in awe. Soon they came to know that Shah Jahan had decreed that the hands of the 20,000 labourers who worked on the construction of the Taj would be cut so that they could not build anything like this in future. Unfortunately, Babur and Humayun must carry out this horrible task. This section of the plot has been taken from the famous Indian legends and myths surrounding the construction of the Taj, which Joseph came across in his childhood which is the most 'absurd' or illogical part of the entire play. The entire play revolves around the repercussions of this bizarre decree on the lives of Humayun and Babur which is the main element of the Absurd in the play. Babur has to cut the hands, and Humayun cauterises.

After carrying out this horrible task, Babur becomes disoriented, and Humayun goes blind suddenly. They both try to get out of this trauma. The next day they are rewarded with one of the most coveted duties: guarding the Harem of the Emperor, where many beautiful women are present. However, Babur cannot get over the trauma of the atrocious act he commits (cutting off hands), no matter how many times Humayun tries to console him that they were carrying out an order and they have got nothing to do with the guilt because it was a royal command. However, Babur will not listen, and he shares his plan with Humayun, who wants to kill the king. Humayun (a second-generation civil servant), who is less imaginative of the two and is obsessed with proving his worth to his father, a high official in Shah Jahan's court (a *Mansabdar*), decides to arrest Babur on the charges of blasphemy which will make him sit-out in prison for three days and calm down his mind, so, Humayun arrests Babur.

In the next scene, when they both meet in prison, Humayun is ridden with guilt and crying. He tells Babur that he confessed in front of his father that Babur wanted to kill the king and has begged his father to let Babur live on. However, Humayun's father has given one condition to be met for Babur to live, his hands must be cut. Humayun cuts the hands of Babur, and when both of them meet for the last time again in front of the Taj, where Humayun is still guarding this monument, Babur is without hands and in an awful state. Humayun experiences a surreal flashback at the end of the play, the memory of a significant moment that he spent with Babur in his youth is played on the stage. In this memory, Babur and Humayun are both younger and are lost in the jungle. They witness the most exotic and beautiful sights of natural beauty in a point in time which lives on. Babur and Humayun keep referring to this important event in their life

throughout the play, but this is the first time it is enacted on the stage with its entire sensory and spiritual appeal. At this point, the play ends. This out-of-the-ordinary supernatural/surreal flashback is another Absurd element in the play written in the tradition of Expressionism, Surrealism, and Symbolism.

The play's structure is circular, like most Absurd plays. The play is divided into five scenes. Scene 1 introduces Humayun and Babur, two best friends, who have been posted at the guard. This scene mainly describes the character orientation of the two central characters, Babur and Humayun. These two characters have been named after two Mughal kings, Babur, who established the Mughal Empire and Humayun, who was the first king in the long line of the Mughal Dynasty. Babur and Humayun, named after two great kings, have been assigned to guard the Taj (a symbol of the Mughal era's architectural beauty and the grandeur of the empire). So, symbolically, they stand as both founders and guardians of the Mughal Empire. These two characters have already been compared to Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. I agree with this comparison, and I would like to add other pairs of characters who provide a vantage point to analyse these characters. These characters also have similarities with Pozzo and Lucky from *Waiting for Godot* again, with Nell and Nagg from *Endgame* by Beckett, Ben and Gus from Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, and finally, Peter and Jerry from Albee's *The Zoo Story*. Thus, this play can yield rich interpretations for the continuation of the Theatre of the Absurd in the current era,

Affinities between Guards at the Taj and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Guildenstern: We're more of the love, blood, and rhetoric school. Well, we can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and we can do you blood and rhetoric without the love, and we can do you all three concurrent or consecutive. But we can't give you love and rhetoric without the blood. Blood is compulsory. They're all blood, you see. (Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* 33)

The quote shared above is as accurate about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as it is relevant to the tragic predicament of Babur and Humayun in Rajiv Joseph's *Guards at the Taj*, which has most often been compared with Tom Stoppard's absurdist masterpiece *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967). The two plays are similar in their thematic concerns,

language games and characterisations. In both these plays, characters discuss the working of destiny, continuing to play language games. Guil: "Words, words. They're all we have to go on." (41) Player: "We are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style." (77) They involve in word games:

HUMAYUN: Would you be quiet!?

BABUR: I'm just saying...

HUMAYUN: "Imperial Guards of the Great Walled City of Agra, Sworn to the Eternal Dominion of His Most Supreme Benevolence Emperor Shah Jahan.... Do Not Speak."

BABUR: You just spoke.

HUMAYUN: "Among the Sacred Oaths of the Mughal Imperial Guard is to Never Speak."

BABUR: You keep talking about not talking.

HUMAYUN: Just shut up.

BABUR: Swearing an Oath to Not Speak: *Contradiction!* (Joseph, *GAT*, 2)

Both pairs of characters keep on talking about fantastic objects such as "unicorns" (Stoppard 21), "magic carpets", and "transportable holes" (Joseph, *GAT*, 20). Babur and Humayun are imaginative, Babur more than Humayun. They both discuss the possibility of the scientific invention of "aeroplant" and "transportable holes". Babur is associated with birds and the motif of flying because he stays in his imagination more, and Humayun imagines a transportable hole associated with Earth because Humayun is more firmly grounded in reality than Babur. Talking of 'aeroplant' in an era when aeroplanes were not invented would sound absurd, unbelievable and fantastical, like a "magic carpet" (Joseph, *GAT*, 20) from *The Arabian Nights*, and magic fantasies are always considered beyond the possibilities of realities so they can also be called absurd.

However, the invention of a 'transportable hole' seems more like an idea straight out of the most representative absurd tale of all times *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Alice falls through the hole to experience bizarre but fantastic experiences. Similarly, Humayun dreams of escaping from reality and going into a fantasy world. While Babur wants to explore the skies, Humayun wants to go inside a hole and discover the secrets underneath the ground. Both seem like two different

responses to the metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human situation, but they are similar in their motivation because they want to escape. Babur and Humayun keep talking about their magical inventions, which border on the critique of the absurdity of socio-political violence. They both talk about a transportable hole and a magic sack:

HUMAYUN: What?

BABUR: Say I am in the sack.

HUMAYUN: You wouldn't fit inside the sack, as I've said, it's a small sack.

BABUR: But say I was very small.

HUMAYUN: Suddenly you are very small.

BABUR: Yes.

HUMAYUN: Small enough to fit inside the sack.

BABUR: Yes. I'm trapped, see, inside the sack.

HUMAYUN: How did you shrink?

BABUR: There was a potion, from some witch.

HUMAYUN: Black Magic!

BABUR: Yeah. And so now I'm very small, and someone has gone and put me in the sack.

HUMAYUN: With the transportable hole?

BABUR: No, the transportable hole isn't there yet. It's out of the sack.

HUMAYUN: You took it out of the sack? (Joseph, *GAT*, 37)

BABUR: Oh yeah, because I've shrunken to a very small size.

HUMAYUN: How small, like a child?

BABUR: No, like a doll a child plays with.

HUMAYUN: That's very small. So you're in the sack.

BABUR" Trapped inside, because the boss man, probably the Emperor, captured me and put me in there.

HUMAYUN: Punished for being too small.