



NABA BALLYGUNGE MAHAVIDYALAYA

(Formerly CHARUCHANDRA EVENING COLLEGE)

27E, Bosepukur Road, Kolkata - 700042

Email: nbmv2005@yahoo.co.in, Website: nbmahavidyalaya.in

Title of the seminar: Tracing the Arc of English Drama: From Medieval Plays to Contemporary Theatre

Resource Person: Dr Samipendra Banerjee, Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Gour Banga, Malda, West Bengal.

Type: One day state level seminar

Date: 28.01.2025

No. of participants: 28

Link to the seminar on institution's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5tHQizdV3w&t=497s>



The resource person Dr Samipendra Banerjee is being felicitated by the Principal Dr Ayantika Ghosh in the seminar on 28th January 2025

The seminar began with the welcome address delivered by the principal of the college Dr. Ayantika Ghosh who briefly dwelt upon the evolution of English drama and its mighty role in shaping the realm of theatre. Herself a scholarship of Bengali literature, theatre-researcher, performer and a noted playwright, she recalled her interest in the theatre by the British in Kolkata, especially Sans Souci, Chowringhee theatres and Mrs Bristow's theatre. She then went on to say that the history of English drama has been an interesting part of the M.A Bengali curriculum and therefore explained the significance of the day's seminar stating that a thorough knowledge of the trajectory of the development of English drama is necessary in order to know the nuances of drama, its theory, praxis and performance in any language. She congratulated the Department of English for the venture of conducting a seminar on such a riveting topic, focusing on the fact that the journey of English drama needs to be known by students and theatre-practitioners alike. Even in order to understand the religiosity in medieval Bengali theatre or the contemporaneity in modern Bengali drama, one needs to understand the parallelism with morality and miracle plays of medieval English drama or experiments in modern theatrics. She also spoke on the connection between English drama and world drama. She extended her gratitude to the resource person as well as expressed her joy on being able to have such an enriching talk at college and assured that this seminar was a much needed one and would definitely benefit the students as well as will be a pleasurable experience for the faculties and all theatre practitioners. Dr Ghosh also congratulated the resource person for the initiative of Drama Club at his University and expressed her expectations of collaborating with it and project performances by students of the college.

Principal

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Welcome address delivered by the Principal of Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya Dr Ayantika Ghoshin the one- day state level seminar on 28th January 2025

The first technical session began with an inciting lecture on the evolution of English drama from the medieval period to modern times by the resource person Dr Samipendra Banerjee. He began with the reference to Renaissance which lead to the awakening of consciousness. Renaissance ignited the spirit of questioning, the spirit of not accepting anything for granted without questioning; it is trading into the paths of unknown, seeking to learn, to know, to explore. Dr Banerjee's lecture also touched upon the politics of canon formation, mentioning that the curriculum that the students of the college are familiar with hardly include writings of women during the Renaissance, thus emphasising the fact that the inclusion and exclusion of texts in a university curriculum is also perceptibly gendered. The responses from the students that they are familiar with Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Earl of Surrey, Thomas Nash, and they not mentioning a single woman author, made the resource person re-emphasise the fact that although women amply used to write during the Renaissance, they have never come into the eyes of popularity. In a very interesting and interactive mode, the students were introduced to the only forms of entertainment during the Elizabethan era which were theatres and animal baiting. It was intriguing to hear as Doctor Banerjee shared his own experience of seeing the River Thames separating the city, the bustling urban London from a more rural Southwark. It became clear to the students as the speaker mentioned about the unruly class crowd that gathered as audience in the Elizabethan theatres who did not have the minimum controlled civility and they generally didn't dwell in the comparatively more civilized, cultured London; thus, he explained why the iconic Globe Theatre is separate from the rest of the busy London. From his illuminating lecture, the students were informed about the systematic documentation of the history of English drama that was in vogue among the people of England which was so lacking in India in spite of having nevertheless a richer culture and heritage in the realm of Bengali drama.

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The names of Philip Henslowe and Master of Revels invariably inspired the students to explore their diaries and know more about them. Another very informative and essential part of the resource person's lecture in the seminar was about the Elizabethan stage, its architectural construction and the surrounding gallery where the people from the upper class used to sit as the audience who could pay on the higher side, whereas the groundlings used to stand near the stage, albeit having a clear view, but not being able to pay as high as the gallery sitters did. The students were thus able to have a clear view about the class divisions that persistent in the Elizabethan era. He briefly mentioned about the reasons why Shakespearean plays generally used to begin with a sensational scene, like the witches scene in *Macbeth*, the Ghost scene in *Hamlet* or the storm scene in *The Tempest* in order to grasp the attention of the boisterous audience right from the very beginning.



Dr Samipendra Banerjee, Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Gour Banga, delivering his lecture as Resource Person in state-level seminar at Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya on 28th January 2025

Dr Banerjee's lecture then went on briefly focusing on the anti-theatrical tendencies that persisted in the mid 17th century, certain Cultural political conditions that opposed the thrive of theatre. A chief reason, as the speaker postulated, it was a perceptibly puritanical society in which theatre was considered as delving in pleasure, and thus a crime. It reminded the audience about the Platonic conception of poetry as something that feeds and waters the passions. He further added that the Puritanical society did not approve of the cross-dressing that was in vogue. It was considered as a transgression that the boys played the roles of women and dressed like girls. The students thus were taken aback to know how gendered the society was and how women were restricted from being stage performers. Another reason as the speaker mentioned was plague, and there was a syllogistic relationship between plague and theatre, because watching theatre was a crime which in turn caused plague and plague as an epidemic and as a contagious disease, used to spread in theatres.

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From the speaker, the students were also informed about the closing of the theatres, including the theatre halls being destroyed and remaining closed from 1642 till 1660, when Charles II restored the theatres with the comedy of manners. The brief mention about William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew, the exponents of Duke's Men and King's Men theatres and the Drury Lane theatre enriched the students' ideas about the evolution of English drama. The speaker then went straight to modernism and the tropes of modern drama in 20th century, especially the -isms that were associated with modern drama, like Realism, Socialism, Imagism, Naturalism, Expressionism and Cubism. He explained how the modern drama drastically different from the conventional Aristotelian tragedy, because unlike Aristotelian tragic heroes who hailed from the upper class, the protagonist of modern tragedy are common men like salesmen, tramps, prostitutes so on and so forth. He made a point that trajectories of experiment are always crucial to drama, adding that modern drama witnessed the avant-garde theatre which is opposed to naturalistic well-made plays. The resource person mentioned that modern dramatists are more pan-European than being restricted to British origin, Like Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen to mention a few. He touched upon epic theatre, non-illusionistic theatre and the alienation effect propounded by Brecht which was a tip on the iceberg, inspiring the students to research more on these two aspects of Brechtian theatre specifically and Modern drama in a more generalized form.



Flyer of the seminar *Tracing the Arc of English Drama: From Medieval Plays to Contemporary Theatre* held on 28.01.2025



Group photo with resource person

The second technical session began with paper presentations from the inhouse participants. The faculty of the Department of English, Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya, Shri Debojyoti Dan whose paper was titled "The Interplay of Culture and Politics in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*". Beginning his talk in a very student friendly way, mentioning about a magician drawing out a rabbit or a ribbon out of a hat, he went on saying that Beckett's play draws nothing out of nothing which itself is an intriguing perspective.

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It made the students wear their thinking caps on as Shri Dan mentioned Heidegger's "being and nothingness" and Lenin's, "What is to be Done?", which possibly amalgamated in making Beckett begin his iconic play *Waiting for Godot* with that nihilistic initial statement: "Nothing to be done." Since, his play was on the interplay of politics and culture in *Waiting for Godot*, Shri Dan mentioned how the revolutions in political economic and intellectual realms have been subverted by Beckett.



Shri Debojyoti Dan, Faculty, Department of English, Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya presenting on "The Interplay of Culture and Politics in *Waiting for Godot*" in the State-Level seminar on 28th January 2025

As political revolution, especially the contemporary Bolshevik revolution demands the subversion of political positions, that is, interchange of authorities in power, i.e the power being taken from the person on the throne and given to the powerless, has been subverted by Beckett in the symbolic manifestation of Estragon failing to open his shoes, thereby Beckett implying that the opening of the shoes is equivalent to putting off the crown. As Estragon's action of putting off his shoes was pointless because he would again have to wear it, similarly shifting power is also pointless because whoever will wear the crown will be tyrannical. He added that economic revolution being pointless is manifested by tickets in making the protagonists Vladimir and Estragon as tramps/ beggars. Lucky's action of leading the blind Pozzo in Act II perhaps points out at the massive failure of revolution. Shri Dan implicated that Beckett perhaps showed that intellectualism is foolishness, and those who considered themselves intellectuals are the greatest fools in presenting the two tramps as his mouthpieces. He ended his inciting talk with a note on secularism and its manifestation in *Waiting for Godot*, with the mention of dog which is the anagrammed presentation as God showing that God has become a dog in an alienated world.

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Shri Debojyoti Dan's presentation was followed by the students' paper presentations. The first presenter was Trisha Sarkar, 1st semester student of English Major whose well-researched paper was titled "The tragic hero in *Macbeth*: Strength and Flaws." Trisha traced the rise and fall of Macbeth from a loyal subject and a loyal husband. She mentioned that it was after murdering Duncan that Macbeth descended too tyranny. She ended with the conclusion that Macbeth's downfall is a cautionary tale on the drastic consequences of overweening ambition.

The next presenter was Priyanka Sahu,,1st semester student with English Minor, whose paper was titled "Reflections of Elizabethan Society in Shakespearean Comedies". She basically discussed *Merchant of Venice*. She brought out the conflict between tradition and individual desire in *Merchant of Venice* and the reflection of mercantile expansion in Antonio's cargoes. The play, as Priyanka said, portrays how social standing influences relationships, with characters like Shylock being treated as outsiders due to his Jewish identity and business practices.

The third presenter was Arindam Mondal, third semester student of English Major whose paper was titled "Themes of Love, Mercy and Revenge in *Merchant of Venice*". Arindam spoke about the romantic love in the play which is typically portrayed by the heroine Portia. He argued that the theme of mercy is central to the conflict between Shylock and the Christian characters. This represents a rigid, vengeful interpretation of justice. Portia's speech on justice is on compassion and an all-embracing forgiveness. The paper argued that Shylock is the epitome of revenge and the revenge is more communal than personal.



Trisha Sarkar's presentation



Priyanka Sahu's presentation



Arindam Mondal's presentation

The fourth presenter was Nilanjana Das third semester student with English Major, whose paper was titled "Shylock and Launcelot Gobbo: Comparative study". She touched upon the masters slave dialectic in Shylock-Launcelot relationship. She stated that the main difference between the two is that Shylock is a wealthy money-lender who hates Christians while Launcelot is more secular, a comic character with minimum to no money. She added that Shylock was serious and revengeful while Launcelot was witty, who was close to Shakespeare's Fool, reminding us of Feste in *Twelfth Night*.

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The fifth presentation was a joint one delivered by three students-Neha Bar, Sahadhat Shanwas Malick and Aditya Kumar Das, third semester Major students on *Arms and the Man* as anti-romantic comedy. They argued that in presenting the hollowness of Victorian conception regarding love and war, Shaw made the play anti-romantic in romantic setting.

The last student presentation was delivered by two students from third semester Esharun Mallick and Pritikana Mandal. The title of the paper was JM Synge's *Riders to the Sea* as a modern tragedy. They explored how *Riders* deviate from the mores of traditional Aristotelian tragedies. Modern tragedies often explore the limits of human agency and the persistence of fate.



Nilanjana Das's presentation



Presentation by Neha Bar, Aditya Das and Sahadhat Mallick



Esharun Mallick and Pritikana Mandal's presentation

Outcomes of the seminar:

The students were able to

- ✓ Know the difference between drama and theatre
- ✓ Get scope to research and write papers
- ✓ Speak on a stage and address audience
- ✓ Have a thorough preparation for their examination

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