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The Universal Language of Bureaucratic Alienation in Wan Kharkrang's "The Adventures of Bah Ta En"

Dr. C Lalthangliana Junior[1] and Vanlalliani[2]

[1]Assistant Professor (Casual Faculty), Department of English, Government Saitual College, Saitual, Mizoram, India

[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government J. Buana College, Lunglei, Mizoram, India

Abstract— Wan Kharkrang's "The Adventures of Bah Ta En" translated by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, functions as a critique of bureaucratic modernity as experienced in the marginalized periphery of Northeast India. Through the journey of its protagonist, the story exposes the Kafkaesque absurdity and the banality of evil embedded within state mechanisms ostensibly designed for development. The narrative reveals bureaucracy not as a neutral system of governance but as a predatory apparatus that perpetuates alienation, exploitation, and systemic violence through mundane procedures and institutionalized corruption. Framed within theoretical discourses on state formation and literary traditions of social critique, the story illuminates the human cost of bureaucratic entanglements where hope is systematically dismantled and replaced by futility. Kharkrang's work transcends regional specificity to offer a universal meditation on the fragile interface between individual dignity and impersonal state power, ultimately portraying the state not as a benefactor but as a self-perpetuating system that systematically grinds down human resilience through the very mechanisms claiming to empower it.

Keywords— Absurdity, Alienation, Bureaucracy, Banality of evil , Kafkaesque.

I. BUREAUCRATIC ALIENATION AND PERIPHERY

"The Adventures of Bah Ta En" is a short story by Wan Kharkrang and is translated from Khasi by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. On its surface, the story narrates the simple, tragicomic tale of a farmer's futile attempt to secure an agricultural loan. A close reading, however, reveals a sophisticated critique of the modern bureaucratic apparatus as it imposes itself upon traditional societies. The story meticulously chronicles how bureaucracy, far from being a neutral system of governance, functions as a labyrinthine structure of power that engenders exploitation, reduces individuals to cogs in a machine, and ultimately perpetuates a cycle of disenfranchisement. This analysis argues that Kharkrang portrays bureaucracy not merely as inefficient but as a fundamentally alienating and predatory system. To illuminate this thematic core fully, the textual analysis will be supplemented by the theoretical frameworks of Franz Kafka on the absurdity of bureaucratic systems and Hannah Arendt on the banality of evil within them.

The story's central thematic concern is established immediately through its protagonist; Bah Ta En is introduced as "a simple farmer, a god fearing and conscientious man with a mind that was pure and innocent" who "could neither read nor write" (164). This characterization is crucial, for it establishes the stark contrast between his straightforward, honest worldview, a moral economy based on reciprocity and respect, and the convoluted, duplicitous world of the bureaucracy he is about to enter. His innocence and illiteracy render him uniquely vulnerable to the opaque and text-based realm of the modern state. His journey from his village to Shillong, a distance of one hundred and fifty kilometres, is not just a physical journy but a metaphorical crossing into a

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different realm of social organization, from a community-based traditional life to an impersonal, modern state machinery. His first act is to seek out a fellow villager, a peon, highlighting his initial reliance on kinship networks. This network, however, is immediately co-opted by the bureaucratic logic. The peon, though a friend, is already assimilated into the city's customs, introducing the story's leitmotif: "you'll have to give him a little tea money, for that is the custom. You know Bah Ta En, nowadays it is not enough to just say, Thank you very much" (164). The phrase "tea money," repeated throughout the story, becomes a euphemism for the institutionalized corruption that is the system's lifeblood. It is presented not as a deviation but as the custom - bascally an accepted and necessary ritual for navigating the bureaucratic pathway, systematically exploiting Bah Ta En's alternative moral framework.

II. KAFKAESQUE ABSURDITY AND THE BANALITY OF EVIL

Bah Ta En's 'adventure' is a Kafkaesque ordeal defined by deferred deadlines, absent officials, and ultimately, a nonsensical conclusion. Franz Kafka's works, most notably The Trial and The Castle, depict individuals trapped in nightmarish struggles with anonymous, labyrinthine bureaucracies that are governed by opaque rules and inaccessible authorities. Josef K. in The Trial is perpetually caught in a web of opaque rules (115), and K. in The Castle is caught in a cycle of inaccessible authorities, and endless delays (39-141). They are hopelessly trying to navigate a system that is not just corrupt but fundamentally irrational and unknowable. Ultimately, Kafka depicts bureaucracy as an incomprehensible, omnipotent, and absurd force that systematically destroys the individual's agency and quest for meaning. Bah Ta En is the Khasi cousin of Josef K. and K.

Kafka shows that the terror of bureaucracy lies not in its overt brutality but in its mundane, procedural indifference. Similarly, Kharkrang demonstrates that the violence inflicted upon Bah Ta En is structural rather than overt; it is administered not through malice, rather his application is perpetually deferred by the elusive "dealing assistant whose arbitrary presence or absence holds absolute power over the protagonist's fate. This low-level gatekeeper is first on leave, then extends his leave, and when finally present, declares himself "too busy" (165), offering no explanation or transparency and condemning Bah Ta En to a perpetual state of waiting.

He is sent away, forced to travel hundreds of kilometers and be financially drained by manufactured requirements. The bureaucracy functions as a castle whose gates remain closed not by definitive refusal but by an interminable procedure. The ultimate Kafkaesque verdict is delivered not by a person but by the system's own incoherent logic: the loan is terminated for reasons that are "unclear" (168). This arbitrary cancellation confirms that the bureaucracy is an end in itself, a self-perpetuating system whose purpose is not to deliver service but to enforce a ritual of supplication and failure. Bah Ta En's journey was never truly about securing a loan; it was an initiation into the absurd, where the only certainty is the consumption of one's resources and time.

The characters Bah Ta En encounters, the BA, the dealing assistant, the inspector, are not depicted as stereotypical villains but as mundane functionaries whose actions demonstrate how evil becomes institutionalized through ordinary compliance. The BA's corruption is presented not as malice but as casual advice: "of course, I have a friend who could get them for you. Only thing is you'll have to give him a little tea money, for that is the custom. But then, it's up to you" (164). This rhetoric of detached helpfulness obscures the extortion at its core, reflecting a system

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where moral disengagement is routine. The dealing assistant's transformation underscores this further. Initially "grumpy" and "peremptory," he undergoes a "cataclysmic change" upon receiving thirty rupees: "It lit up and all at once assumed a benign expression" (166). His feigned surprise, "Oh, why do you have to do this foolish thing?" (166) exemplifies the hypocrisy that sustains bureaucratic exploitation. He is not an exception but a product of the system, embodying what Hannah Arendt identified as the "banality of evil": a thoughtless adherence to institutional norms where individuals prioritize procedural compliance over moral responsibility (276).

Like Arendt's Eichmann, he is not motivated by ideology but by a mundane desire for minor gain within an accepted framework of corruption. His evil is not in his malevolence but in his utterly mundane corruption. He does not hate Bah Ta En; he simply does not see him as a human being worthy of service without a cash incentive. His actions are a routine part of his job, a custom. His actions, and those of the other officials, reveal how bureaucratic evil operates not through dramatic acts of cruelty but through the unreflective repetition of "custom", transforming ordinary people into agents of systemic violence without requiring them to ever confront the consequences of their actions. Each official, in their own way, performs a small, thoughtless act that collectively constitutes a system of profound oppression. They are cogs in a machine that systematically grinds down the Bah Ta Ens of the world, and they do so without a second thought, illustrating Arendt's chilling thesis that the most devastating evils are often administrative and utterly routine(275-277).

The inspector represents the most grotesque embodiment of this bureaucratic corruption. His demand for a deer is absurd and predatory, moving beyond financial extortion to a direct exploitation of Bah Ta En's physical labor and knowledge of the jungle. His drunken proclamation that "the granting of your loan depends entirely upon my report" (167) lays bare the absolute power wielded by the lowest rungs of the bureaucratic ladder over the citizens they are meant to serve. Bah Ta En's subsequent three-day hunt is a physical manifestation of the brutal lengths to which individuals are pushed to appease the caprices of the system. His triumphant smile upon fulfilling this absurd demand is a tragic indicator of how thoroughly he has internalized the system's corrupt logic. He believes he has finally learned the rules of the game: "His brain was getting sharper and he was slowly but surely getting the hang of this loan seeking business" (166). This moment of perceived agency is deeply ironic, for his "education" is merely in how to be a more effective victim of exploitation.

The bureaucratic machinery that ensnares Bah Ta En represents a modern iteration of the state-making projects described by the anthropologist James C. Scott, whose concept of "Zomia" illuminates the historical resistance of highland Southeast Asian societies to valley-based state incorporation (3-12). While Northeast India falls beyond Scott's precise geographic focus, the region shares characteristics of these peripheral zones where state power has traditionally been negotiated rather than absolute. Kharkrang's narrative, however, provides a crucial update to Scott's framework by illustrating how in the modern postcolonial context in Northeast India, the state's project operates not only through overt force but through the bureaucratic apparatus itself, the primary contemporary mechanism for extending power into traditionally autonomous social spheres. Shillong functions as an administrative center projecting power through development schemes and loan programs that, while presented as benevolent empowerment, operate as tools of legibility and control.

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What distinguishes Kharkrang's portrayal is its focus on the specific mechanism of bureaucracy as the vehicle for these state-making processes. Where Scott's analysis often examines pre-modern (even upto mid 20th century) techniques of domination, Kharkrang reveals the bureaucratic apparatus as the modern instrument for achieving the state's enduring goals of integration and control. The loan process demonstrates how bureaucracy serves as the primary mechanism through which modern states attempt to overcome what Scott identifies as the "friction of terrain" (43), both geographical and social, by creating dependencies and establishing administrative dominance.

Furthermore, Kharkrang shifts the focus from Scott's macro-historical patterns to the micro-level, ethnographic experience of state-making. Bah Ta En's village embodies the subsistence-based social organization that state initiatives seek to transform, while his repeated journeys to Shillong physically enact the fraught encounter between traditional society and modern state power. This system operates through what Scott identifies as the state's attempt to make societies legible (2-24), here manifested as the relentless demand for documentation, certificates, and compliance with opaque protocols. For traditional agrarian subjects like Bah Ta En, this bureaucratic maze represents a form of governance fundamentally alien to local norms of reciprocity and transparency. The institutionalised corruption, normalised as "tea money", becomes the unstated tax on citizenship, a shadow system operating alongside official protocols that further alienates those unfamiliar with its rituals. This shadow system does not merely facilitate corruption; it actively dismantles and replaces the existing moral economy with one where access to the state is contingent on participation in its corrupt rituals.

Through this refined lens, Kharkrang's story exposes the fundamental failure of the modern state's project: what is presented as developmental benevolence reveals itself as a mechanism of control that binds citizens in webs of endless procedures and manufactured requirements. Rather than facilitating development, the bureaucracy functions as an instrument of disenfranchisement, replacing autonomy with dependency and transforming the state's promise of empowerment into a process of systematic subjugation. Through Bah Ta En's journey, Kharkrang demonstrates how modern state power extends its reach not through dramatic acts of domination but through the mundane, everyday violence of administrative procedures that consume time, resources, and ultimately, human dignity.

This bureaucratic machinery creates a melting pot where Arendt's banality of evil converges with Kafkaesque absurdity to produce profound disorientation for the common citizen. The officials' mundane corruption, their casual demands for "tea money" and performative helpfulness, exemplifies what Hannah Arendt identified as the normalization of wrongdoing through thoughtless adherence to institutional customs (275-277). These functionaries are not consciously evil but have simply accepted corruption as part of their professional routine, making bureaucratic extortion as ordinary as filing paperwork. This banal administrative evil then feeds directly into the Kafkaesque nature of the system: the endless delays, unexplained rejections, and arbitrary requirements that transform logical processes into absurdist rituals. For Bah Ta En, this convergence produces utter confusion; he understands neither the rules nor the hidden codes, recognizing only that compliance requires both money and infinite patience without any guarantee of success. His frustration stems from encountering a system that operates on two parallel levels: the visible bureaucracy of forms and procedures, and the invisible economy of bribes and

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connections, neither of which follows predictable logic nor acknowledges his humanity. This combination of mundane evil and administrative absurdity ultimately reveals the modern state's most damaging failure: its ability to make decent, hardworking people feel like fools in their own country, trapped in mechanisms they cannot comprehend yet cannot escape.

This systemic failure depicted by Kharkrang finds its precise political articulation in the work of Sanjib Baruah, whose analysis of Northeast India operationalises James Scott's broader thesis within a specific postcolonial context. Baruah's concept of the region being administered as a "frontier" through a "license-permit raj" (India Against Itself 207) manifests literarily in Bah Ta En's ordeal, where the promise of development becomes a mechanism of control. The 150-kilometer journey to Shillong embodies not merely geographic distance but the chasm between the state's institutional power and the citizen it purportedly serves. Kharkrang's narrative dramatizes how the bureaucratic apparatus, theoretically designed for empowerment, functions instead as what Baruah identifies as a distant, predatory authority (In the Name of the Nation 10-15). The loan scheme's ultimate cancellation due to an "unprecedented financial crunch" (168) exemplifies this dynamic: the state initiates programs that create dependency while retaining the arbitrary power to withdraw them without explanation. Bah Ta En's wasted resources and arduous travel become the tangible cost of engaging with a system that operates on a security-centric logic, where development schemes function as instruments of governance rather than genuine empowerment. This historical grounding reveals how Kafkaesque absurdity and Arendtian banality are not abstract philosophical concepts but concrete experiences for those at the peripheries of state power, where bureaucracy becomes the primary interface for a relationship characterized by extraction rather than reciprocity.

III. LITERARY FORM AS POLITICAL CRITIQUE

Kharkrang's literary strategy must be understood within the broader contours of Northeastern Indian writing, where creative writing forms frequently serves as a vehicle for social documentation and critique. This tradition, emerging from societies with strong oral cultures and complex relationships with the state, often grapples with the erosion of communal ethics by impersonal systems. Kharkrang employs a simple, direct prose style, a conscious aesthetic choice that enhances the story's allegorical power. His protagonist, "Bah Ta En," is strategically named: "Bah" functions as a term of respect for an elder, while "Ta En" suggests an everyman figure. He is, in effect, 'Respected Elder Everyman', representing not an individual but an entire class of traditional agrarian citizens being systematically failed by the new bureaucratic order.

The story's structure is fundamentally picaresque, a series of episodic encounters that mirror the repetitive and circular nature of bureaucratic entrapment. Each episode reinforces the same pattern: an obstacle is presented, the demand for "tea money" is made, a payment is extracted, and a false promise is given. This cyclical progression does not advance the plot toward resolution but instead spirals downward, accumulating financial and psychological losses until the loan scheme is abruptly terminated. Narratologically, this form embodies the Kafkaesque absurdity and systemic indifference previously discussed; the bureaucracy is portrayed as a maze with no exit, designed to consume effort and resources without producing any positive outcome. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's translation sharpens this critique for a wider audience. By rendering the story in English while retaining culturally specific terms like "Bah" and "Babu", he creates a hybrid text that is both locally anchored and

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globally legible. This act of translation universalises the predicament, the "custom" of "tea money" is framed not as regional peculiarity but as a universal symptom of bureaucratic decay.

Thus, Kharkrang's work operates on two mutually reinforcing levels: it is both a specific indictment of the bureaucratic experience in the Khasi Hills and a broader allegory of the state's failure at its peripheries. The story gives narrative form to Sanjib Baruah's thesis of a "license-permit raj," illustrating how state mechanisms designed for development become instruments of alienation. The protagonist's journey physically enacts the fraught negotiation between traditional society and modern administration, while the narrative's structure formalizes the repetitive, futile, and ultimately absurd nature of that engagement. In doing so, Kharkrang moves beyond abstract critique, offering a literarily sophisticated and culturally grounded portrayal of how ordinary individuals are caught in systems of power that are at once banal, incomprehensible, and devastating.

IV. CONCLUSION

The story's devastating conclusion resides in its understatement. Bah Ta En's final departure from Shillong is not a return but a retreat, bearing the full weight of his traumatic education in the state's ways. Having learned of the loan scheme's termination, he is left "frustrated and helpless," exiting the office with "tears streaming down his face" (168). The material cost is quantified, nearly a thousand rupees and over "one thousand and five hundred kilometers altogether" travelled for a "wild goose chase" (168), but the true loss is existential. His final interaction, with the peon who first introduced him to the city's "customs," underscores a profound isolation. Recognizing this fellow villager as his "only true friend" yet acknowledging he is "only a peon" (168), Bah Ta En concedes the intractability of a system that neutralises even those within it who possess goodwill. The bus ride home does not represent a return to his previous world; it is a journey back carrying the knowledge that the state's machinery is designed not to serve but to subordinate.

Thus, Wan Kharkrang's "The Adventures of Bah Ta En" is a masterful work of social critique whose power derives from its synthesis of form and theme. The picaresque structure and ethnographic specificity coalesce into a profound exploration of bureaucracy as an instrument of alienation, revealing how the state's machinery operates through what might be termed a dialectic of absurdity and banality. The Kafkaesque nightmare of endless deferral and opaque logic converges with the Arendtian reality of ordinary functionaries thoughtlessly perpetuating systemic corruption, creating a bureaucratic apparatus that is both irrational and ruthlessly efficient in its capacity to disenfranchise. This apparatus functions as what James Scott would identify as a tool of state legibility and control, actualizing Sanjib Baruah's thesis of a distant, predatory authority in the periphery. The story demonstrates with devastating clarity how these systems of power transform moral individuals into unthinking functionaries and hopeful citizens into exhausted, defeated subjects. It moves beyond abstract indictment to offer a literarily sophisticated and culturally grounded portrayal of the human cost exacted when the promise of development becomes a labyrinth of exploitation. Bah Ta En's tragedy is not his alone; it is an allegory for the experience of modernity at the margins, where the state's offer of empowerment is too often a prelude to subjugation. His adventure is a testament to the resilience required to face a world where the rules are unwritten, the doors are never truly open, and the only certainties are effort expended and dignity lost.

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