Political Tension and Existentialist Angst in the Drama of Harold Pinter and ʻIsām Mahfūz

التّوتر السّياسيّ والقلق الوجوديّ في مسرح هارولد بنتر وعصام محفوظ

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Abstract

This research presents a detailed comparative analysis between Harold Pinter's The Dumb Waiter and ʻIsām Mahfūz's The Dictator. It transcends linguistic, cultural and historical boundaries to explore the cross-resonance between these two plays and the sharp dramatic, political, and existential affiliations between their two playwrights.

In a significant manner, both plays distinctively reveal Pinter and Mahfūz's conscientious political stand against manipulation and totalitarianism. They represent the defeated and crushed victims of modern democratic systems as they expose the underlying hypocrisy and dinginess of their practices.

Through theories of existentialism, especially Jean Paul Sartre's main philosophical precepts of human freedom as a condemnation rather than a blessing and of man's free choice as burdening, and Albert Camus's notion of the absurdity of life and existence, this article argues that Both Saʿdūn and Gus are afflicted with angst being the quintessential representatives of existential heroes who are heavily caught in the absurdity of

existence and who tremendously suffer from the consequences of their free choices.

Different theater productions and adaptations of the two plays are also fully examined to dwell on their enduring influence on and reception by viewers at different times and places as they deliver an undying comment on man's inescapable sense of ennui and on the duplicity of modern politics.

The study analyzes the commonalities between Pinter and Mahfūz. The thematic analysis draws on the similarities between their representations of a debased human condition in an afflicted world where political, social, and moral corruption have become the norm.

Keywords: Pinter, Mahfūz, Theater, Absurdism, Political Tension, Existentialist Angst, Staging Performances, Dramatic Language, Reversed Dramatic Irony, Farce, and Tragicomedy.

ملخّص

يقدّم هذا البحث تحليلًا مقارنًا مفصلًا بين مسرحية «النادل الأخرس» لهارولد بنتر ومسرحية «الديكتاتور» لعصام محفوظ. يتخطّى هذا البحث الحدود اللّغويّة والثّقافيّة والتّاريخيّة لاستكشاف التّقاطع بين هاتين المسرحيتين والارتباطات الدّراميّة والسّياسيّة والوجوديّة الحادّة بين كاتبي المسرحيتين.

وتكشف المسرحيتان بشكل واضح عن موقف بنتر ومحفوظ السّياسيّ الواعي ضدّ التّلاعب والاستبداد. فهما يمثّلان الضّحايا المهزومين والمسحوقين للأنظمة الدّيمقراطيّة الحديثة بينما يفضحان النّفاق الكامن في ممارساتها وتفاهتها.

من خلال نظريّات الوجوديّة، خاصةً مقولات جان بول سارتر الفلسفيّة الرّئيسة عن الحريّة الإنسانيّة كونها إدانة لا نعمة، وعن حريّة الإنسان في الاختيار الحرّ كونها عبئًا

على الإنسان، ومفهوم ألبير كامو عن عبثيّة الحياة والوجود، يرى هذا المقال أنّ كلا من سعدون وجاس مصابان بالقلق كونهما الممثلين المثاليين للأبطال الوجوديين الواقعين بشدّة في عبثيّة الوجود ويعانون بشدّة من عواقب خياراتهم الحرّة.

كما يتم فحص الإنتاجات المسرحيّة المختلفة للمسرحيتين وتكييفهما بشكل كامل للتّطرّق إلى تأثيرهما الدائم في المشاهدين وتلقيهم لهما في أزمنة وأماكن مختلفة حيث يقدمان تعليقًا لا يموت على شعور الإنسان الذي لا مفرّ منه بالملل وعلى ازدواجيّة السّياسة الحديثة.

تحلّل الدّراسة القواسم المشتركة بين بنتر ومحفوظ. ويعتمد التّحليل الموضوعيّ على أوجه التّشابه بين تمثيلاتهما للحالة الإنسانيّة المنحطّة في عالم منكوب أصبح فيه الفساد السّياسيّ والاجتماعيّ والأخلاقيّ هو القاعدة.

كلمات مفتاحيّة: بنتر، ومحفوظ، والمسرح، والعبثيّة، والتّوتر السّياسيّ، والقلق الوجوديّ، والعروض المسرحيّة، واللّغة الدّراميّة، والسّخريّة الدّراميّة المعكوسة، والمهزلة، والكوميديا التّراجيديّة.

Introduction

The theater of the late twentieth century has marked a tremendous departure from the preceding dramatic tradition with its classical, realistic or naturalistic worlds. Its pioneers, whether in the West or the East, were after creating a different kind of theater that would have the power of presenting the complicated and unfathomable world of this historical era. Harold Pinter is considered one of the most influential architects of this new Western theater that dispensed with the concept of the well-made play as the traditional model of play construction and evolved anarchic plays where logical construction and argument have given way to irrational and illogical speech, and ultimately

to silence. Pinter's plays clearly reveal his faithful commitment to this new theatrical form and thus depict a comic world mixed with horrific or tragic images, characters caught in hopeless situations forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions, dialogue full of allusions, clichés, wordplay, and nonsense, and plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive (Esslin 8).

The theater in the Arab World did not witness this radical change simultaneously. It was only with ʿIsām Mahfūz, a Lebanese playwright and the leading pioneer of the modernist movement in the Arab Theater (Khalīdā al Saʿīd 474), that this sweeping transformation in the Arab theater was fully actualized. His plays are absurdist on the surface—with their incoherent structures, incomprehensible worlds, lack of causality, and confounding language—but they surely have their elements of originality. Mahfūz did not import the Western theatrical forms and contents and simply reproduced or translated them to Arabic; he innovated a new form of theater and an alternative language (Māhir Sharaffiddīn) that, according to Shafiq al Bikaʿī, would perfectly befit the entire Arab World with all its contemporary moral, religious, social, national and most importantly political crises (591).

Pinter and Mahfūz are overtly and conscientiously critical of the tradition, the literary, political, and social. Theater, for them, is necessarily a peculiar world where concessions—as presenting satisfactory background information about their characters and their motives—should not be made, where norms—especially

the literary norms of exposition, comprehensive plot, characters' motivations, etc.—are upset and expectations unmet. It is not to be subject to any form or compromise, at any level. Their compositions, henceforth, are considered by many rebellious and outraging, their language is abortive and uncommunicative, their actions disruptive and irrational, and the worlds of their plays desperate and violent.

Within these unconventional theatrical tools, their drama flourishes as a new aesthetic form to faithfully represent the dilemmas of their age. They never promise their readers any sort of satisfactory answers; they render their audiences unhappily quizzical about any kind of meaning in this vast incomprehensible world. The immediate response of a casual spectator would be one of terror and hilarity as both playwrights had relentlessly endeavored to merge these two aspects in order to create a different kind of dramatic experience, charged with anxiety and tension—the kind that makes their viewers wriggle poignantly in their seats. Reassuring themselves that is a mere farce, the audiences will ironically get to realize that this is real, more real than reality itself. The starkly negative view about life portrayed in Pinter and Mahfūz's plays cannot be easily dismissed as untrue. Beyond the absurdist structure of their plays, there lies a sharp realization of the oppression and repression that plagues modern man in this so-called democratic historical era.

Both playwrights have been actively and overtly involved in the political context of their time. Pinter might appear apolitical in

his early plays, but he certainly is not. Pinter's political views were either domesticated or overtly exhibited the politics of sex and marriage, of racism, of disintegrating partnership, of victim and victimizer—mostly the politics of torture and oppression. To Pinter, everything can be interpreted politically, "everything is matter of politics," (Qtd in Raby 8), and he has been able to successfully enact this ideology in all his dramaturgy where personal and local issues have the power to reveal the larger political and social contexts. With ʿIsām Mahfūz, the political concerns are more explicit. They are not disguised or transformed into domestic or local issues. Mahfūz has, for almost 40 years, launched a relentless attack on the oppressive political systems that were wreaking havoc in the Arab World. His plays reveal his dread from the cruel and repressive Arab regimes that demolish all hope of a free, just, and equal world.

Pinter and Mahfūz express the current moments faithfully, mainly dramatizing the political contexts during which these plays have been written. In Pinter's second one-act The Dumb Waiter, political overtones abound. Beneath the seemingly restricted plot and limited connotations, the analytic eye can detect the oppressive master/system that sadistically tortures its servants and playfully watches their destruction.

Though the two plays were written 40 and 50 years ago, they surely strike us with their contemporaneity. It is true that they represent their age faithfully, but they also transcend the confines of time and space to communicate essential truths

about life that cannot be outdated. The plays transcend the restricted locality to encompass a collective human experience of alienation, oppression, and desperation as the byproduct of man's demoralization in the politically amoral world of the 20th century. Gus and Ben are perpetrators of crime, gangsters, hired killers but their plight in the existential sense is everyman's plight. Similarly, Sa'dūn and the General seem vulnerable, insecure and menaced, though the revolution—they have presumably brewed—as the dialogue reveals, is a successful one (The Dictator 124). They are confronted by fears, the subsequent creation of their own 'game', and fated to perish because in this game the oppressed members of the 'organization' become the oppressors, the hunters become the hunted. Thus, as Gus has finally become his senior comrade's 'job', Sa'dūn has turned to be the king and is eventually doomed to be eliminated by his companion in struggle (Stokes 41).

In this article, I will attempt to reveal through my comprehensive analysis of Pinter's The Dumb Waiter and Mahfūz's The Dictator the reality and the depth of the vision of the two artists who prophetically and ominously predicted more degeneration into the existing political and social systems. I will dwell fully on the implications of The Dumb Waiter revealing its political underpinnings and its existential quality, and I shall underscore the political and the existentialist quality of The Dictator. The comprehensive analysis of the two plays will not be comprehensive unless the cross-resonance between the two plays is fully explored.

Discussion

Some modest references have already been made to the plays' political implications. Yet, these implications are not fully and satisfactorily explored.

In the following sections, I will explore in depth the political aspects of the play to reveal that in The Dumb Waiter, Pinter is very much a dramatist with an active political conscience. I will also present a thorough analysis of The Dictator's political nature, something that Mahfūz has never denied.

The Dumb Waiter **by Harold Pinter**

Summary of The Dumb Waiter

The Dumb Waiter is a genuine comedy of menace revealing Pinter's ability to produce a type of comedy built on the quicksand of threat and fear.

In this confined surrounding, two men of no particular age, called Ben and Gus, are waiting. Ben has a newspaper from which he occasionally reads out random passages and from behind which he watches crossly as Gus moves restlessly about the room. They exchange few incoherent conversations about trivial matters, interrupted by Gus's frequent questioning about the length of the job they are on and about what time "he" is likely to get in touch with them. Ben resents his partner's constant inquires and repeatedly tells him to shut up, and Gus seems extremely annoyed with the room's condition.

As they are waiting, someone thrusts an envelope under the door causing the two fellows to feel alarmed. When Ben snatches his revolver from under a pillow and opens the door to check who pushes the envelope, viewers become aware that these cannot be ordinary working men, and that the “job” they are hired to perform is not an ordinary everyday job. They are certain now that these are hired assassins, professional killers awaiting instructions from a large and mysterious organization for their “next job.”

A sudden clatter from the back of the room, produced by a serving hatch, stops Gus’s disquiet irritation about the nature of this job. This dumb waiter suddenly starts to descend to the basement with orders for food. Anxious not to be discovered, the two hired assassins try to fulfill these orders with whatever food Gus has in his bag. However, when their stocks run dry, they decide to send a written note. At this point, the speaking tube works and Ben, who speaks into it with great awe, is told something, and most probably is given the instruction concerning the “job.”

Their banter resumes afterwards. Gus exists to drink a cup of water and Ben gets his order through the speaking tube to shoot the next person to come in. Unexpectedly, Gus appears on stage stripped of his waistcoat, tie, jacket, holster and revolver, and Ben is seen facing him with a gun in his hand. There is a long silence, and then the play ends with Gus and Ben staring at one another.

Political Reading of The Dumb Waiter

Pinter admitted that The Dumb Waiter is sub-textually political. To start with, The Dumb Waiter is essentially concerned with low-class English man in post-war London. Gus and Ben are two derelicts hired by an organization to liquidate its enemies. Ben is apparently satisfied with his role, but Gus voices man's discontent for being an infernal tool, an executioner who has to implement, and never question, the orders. On a larger scale, they represent the beaten modern man, who has become an accomplice in a world pervaded with criminality, in his struggle against a totalitarian authority that finds amusement in mentally torturing even its loyal subjects. When the orders for food started descending in the serving hatch, Ben and Gus were in despair; Ben wanted to send something up, Gus was suspicious of this game or test. He lost his temper:

Gus. (passionately, advancing). What's he doing it for? We've been through our tests, haven't we? We got right through our tests, years ago, didn't we? We took them together, don't you remember, didn't we? We've proved ourselves before now, haven't we? We've always done our job. What's he doing all this for? What's the idea? What's he playing these games for? (118)

Gus apparently reached a heightened sense of awareness of the game the higher authority is playing with them. Wilson, the boss, sends them matches, though he knows there is no gas to put on the kettle and prepare the tea; he sends exotic food

orders via The Dumb Waiter though he is quite sure they have nothing to help them serve these orders. The rooms where they have to stay to do the job are deteriorating in quality; they are windowless, damp, and dingy; the sheets are unclean, the bathroom is dysfunctional, and the waiting process is long, boring and arduous. The junior partner is revolted from the way the organization is treating them after they have been its faithful servants for years. The senior partner finds excuses and adheres loyally to his superior masters, "Things have tightened up, mate. They've tightened up" (93). In response to Gus's constant questionings and wonderings, Ben automatically replies, "Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up?" (99). But Gus could not just shut up and for this he is his partner's next job. This is very reminiscent of terrorist organizations and, ironically enough, of some of the secret intelligence units hired by governments to eliminate all dissenting voices that jeopardize their authority. What takes place in The Dumb Waiter is not only absurd and funny; it is also tragic and poignant in its depiction of the so-called free and democratic post-war world as it is still pervaded with terror and torture.

Gus and Ben, thus, are mere puppets utilized by a higher power. When Gus starts questioning the validity and the morality of their 'jobs', when he becomes fed up, Ben has to eliminate him to prove his loyalty to the organization. This higher power or organization is not the fascist or the Nazi regimes that

flourished in the 1930's, but the modern democratic European and American governments that deceivingly champion freedom and independence while their secret police and intelligence units still adhere to the same revolting and inhumane fascist and Nazi practices.

The Dumb Waiter, thus, reveals the organized cruelty of the twentieth century. To Esslin, "The governments' brand of terrorism and terrorist organization are so intricately and cunningly structured that the executive organs at the bottom (Gus and Ben) have only a vague knowledge of the forces above them, of the policies that govern their orders" ("Theater of Cruelty" 30).

This political interpretation that I find very authentic to the play, presents Gus as the helpless victim of a totalitarian organization designed to produce a programmed, zombie-like ideal subject of any conformist society conditioned to follow the strictly preordained pattern (30). When dissenting voices rise against this organization, whether from within the organization (Gus) or from without the organization (Stanley of The Birthday Party), they should be properly and terminally hushed.

For Pinter, the essence of democracy is freedom and independence. When these are denied, modern man will be either a Gus or a Stanley. He will be either liquidated or adjusted and brainwashed.

Existentialist Analysis of The Dumb Waiter

Another reading of The Dumb Waiter that falls in line with its political stance is the existential reading. The existential reading of the play does not by any means negate its salient political overtones; it rather sustains and intensifies these implications.

Though Pinter is not an existentialist playwright, his plays, and especially The Dumb Waiter, can be interpreted existentially. To start with, Pinter believes that in order for characters to be alive, they have to be free, to take over at times and control the page and the stage. Along this vein, Sartre, condemns playwrights for tightening their control over their characters and for determining their action. These characters seem stale and lifeless to him. He champions dramatic freedom and daringly states to playwrights and novelists, "Do you want your characters to live? See to it that they are free" (Qtd in Raby 40). Stokes describes this case as the "existential ideal" where characters remain independent of authorial design, "The modern writer has no spokesman—he observes like any other spectator, watches, wonders and judges" (41).

Pinter in The Dumb Waiter adheres to this existential ideal and, consequently, invests his characters with freedom of choice that makes them condemned and burdened rather than liberated. Man, in the existential sense is born undefined, his essence is not predefined and his nature is not determined. So, there are no boundaries set for him, no essence to conform to; he just exists and moves precariously with some vertigo into a

mysterious world open to every possibility.

To start with, Pinter believes that, “A character on stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behavior or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives, is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things” (Qtd in Rickert 256). This Pinteresque technique of withholding information and preventing verification is highly existential. Pinter’s world is a stage with nothing in the wings, a form of void borrowed from the existentialist concept of the world. It has no previous life, no outside influences, no foreseeable future and his characters have to grapple with this existentialist uncertainty.

In The Dumb Waiter two thugs in suits are uneasily whiling away the time in a basement room when they start receiving incomprehensible food orders. They become tense on the instant because the position in which they find themselves is, to them as to us, unintelligible and inexplicable. As they cannot give meaning to this incident, the two men find themselves in a close encounter with the absurd. This is the absurdity, meaninglessness, and arbitrariness of the existentialist ideal. The anguish or angst that overwhelms Gus is not the byproduct of his past crimes; it is this diffused sensation of spiritual and psychological unease that has its roots in his precarious existence. Ben tries to supply the orders desperately without hesitancy and by evading the thought of danger, does not permit the fear to control him. But

Gus—more reflective and conscious, seems to existentially comprehend that life is somewhat a game in which everything happens arbitrarily—cannot stop questioning and asking. It is this persistent urge for knowledge that causes the catastrophe at the end. Though a villain, Gus represents modern man driven by angst, expecting evil or danger as the result of his experience of freedom. His fate is not predetermined; he is free to choose either to follow the orders received or to opt out of the game. However, this freedom is not a kind of blessing, it is rather a condemnation as Gus is strictly limited by his existence, and this façade of free choice is but a sham because he is doomed to exist in a boring, meaningless and arbitrary world reeling in his desperation and helplessness.

Just like existentialist philosophers and writers, Pinter tries to show how meaningless and cheap existence is. According to Charles Glicksberg, if man is given freedom and infinite possibilities, "his range of freedom is limited by his vision of nothingness and the dread that this vision calls forth" (73). Death might be an escape, but the existentialists' fear of death only adds to the bitterness of the situation. Then, how is it that man can escape from this void? Bamber Gascoigne provides two outlets from this haunting state; to him, "personal integrity and personal relationships are the only protection from the void" (53). Gus, unfortunately, cannot benefit from these means of escape.

All in all, The Dumb Waiter reflects the image of man entrapped in this ambivalent existence. Ben and Gus are faced by the unpredictable and the unforeseeable, by the threat of non-being, lacking the values that can substantiate their own being. Their purpose is constantly reiterated as the endless waiting for 'orders'. More repugnant than anything else to Ben is thinking about or questioning the status quo. He is revolted by Gus's endless questions and constantly orders him to shut up. In the existentialist sense, Ben lacks 'being'; he denies himself the freedom of choice and fails to experience angst. This experience is the result of freedom, and thus Ben is enslaved; he exists, but he does not fully, freely and responsibly live. He, unlike Gus, is silently chained to the process of waiting, tied to the orders and satisfied with his subservience.

In The Dumb Waiter, the existentialist paradigm is achieved. In it, Pinter analyzed the nature of the man-to-man connection. Though the two characters seem undeveloped and limited, they provide an insightful way of examining a wider and much deeper range of human existence where man is viewed as a puppet of no importance employed by higher forces and is then casually dispensed with. Yet, man is an accomplice in his victimization as they could have opted out of the game anytime.

Pinter's Gus is thrown in the void deprived of any satisfactory knowledge. Within the confines of the play, we see him having a permanent experience with bewilderment and confusion. As all existentialist characters, he has been tragically stripped of

knowledge, of moral values, and of human relationships and instead of imposing meaning to the world, he accepted its absurdity. He tries to appease himself that everything will be alright when "it's over tonight" (109), ignorant of the fact that it is his life that will be over on that particular night. If he had consented to remain a dumbwaiter, like Ben, he would not have perished from existence, yet he would have lacked 'being' and existed only as a servant, a follower, a cipher.

What is very similar between the two proposed readings for The Dumb Waiter is the vision of man as a victim. The existentialist philosophy grants man infinite freedom but necessitates that he is conscious of his own being and of the world around him to be able to choose what is meaningful for him. The modern political system, too, champions freedom and democracy, but ironically enough controls man and manipulates his thoughts and actions to the extent that he is rendered to nothing. In both readings, Gus, the more conscious being of the two, has to face nothingness whether in the existentialist or the political sense because he voices his dissatisfaction and dares to question the status quo. This existential freedom in The Dumb Waiter is thus curtailed by the totalitarian political system that advocates conformity and subservience.

The Dictator **by ʿIsām Mahfūz**

Summary of ʿIsām Mahfūz's The Dictator

In Mahfūz's The Dictator, the curtain rises on the General as he is wearily calling Saʿdūn who is nowhere to be found on

the stage. As the door opens, Saʿdūn appears carrying a pair of jackboots. The General reprimands Saʿdūn for being late and orders him to shine the boots. Once done, the General remarks that Saʿdūn can use it as a mirror. Saʿdūn, seeing his face through the shine, complains that he looks so pale from hunger and tells the General that they should have bought some bread or paid the rent with the little money the General's mother has sent instead of buying the boots. The General replies that "Freedom is more important than bread" since he is leading a revolution from inside this room.

The General asks Saʿdūn about the position of his military forces. He replies that four of the major states have been seized and that with the fall of the capital, the victory will be certain. The General asks Saʿdūn is some money is left to buy him a hat. Saʿdūn answers that he has bought chocolate with the remaining lira; this infuriates the General who takes all the chocolate as a punishment for Saʿdūn who is always late when he is sent on errands and who always sleeps in the afternoon to dream of the king's young daughter.

The next section reveals the General's paranoia as he asks Saʿdūn if he has inspected the room and checked if the door is firmly locked. The General then speaks about the king who has deceived everyone, proclaiming that he has come to rescue the people. The General dismisses Saʿdūn more than once for reasons fueled by either his paranoia or arrogance, but Saʿdūn is always forgiven for the sake of the revolution.

The general now prepares for his first manifesto where he addresses the nation as “the wretched people of the new world” (124). Masrūr, a militiaman, calls to inform them that the king has escaped. The General firmly orders the removal of the king’s photos “from all the walls, public places, houses, and public and private institutions” (126), yet the photos keep resurfacing again and again.

His first decree is to unify the color and the style of men and women’s clothes. He continues to issue decrees ordering the execution of the former government members, the imprisonment of all parliament members, the dissolution of all political parties, the confiscation of all their thoughts, and the execution of their leaders. The General also orders the liquidation of the traders and the adoption of bartering, exchanging the necessary with the necessary (133). He cancels the press and orders his militia to arrest journalists, literary men, writers and all artists because they are no longer needed (134). With each phone call, the General orders the killing, the execution, or the capture or confiscation of more and more people of different professions or convictions. Even some of his militiamen are executed due to grievous errors committed against the revolution. The first act ends with all the revolution board members executed, with the General’s military forces out of control, and with the king still uncaptured.

The second act starts with the General expressing his distress that the king is still loose. The General feels burdened and has

no appetite for food; he orders Saʿdūn to think about the reason of his agony. But Saʿdūn does not want to think about because thinking causes torture (144). He then recalls moments of his life when he used to think, when he was a member in a party.

As the two men were talking, a knocking is heard at the door, but when Saʿdūn opens, he does not find anyone. An existentialist palaver then follows with the General affirming that if he himself heard the knocking, it necessarily means that someone must have knocked at the door, but if this person does not exist, then Saʿdūn does not exist. When Saʿdūn insists that he exists whether this person has knocked at the door or not, the General asks for evidence for his existence. Saʿdūn's existence is only asserted when he tells the General, "But I exist my General; I am your servant…" (147). Since the General's existence is certainly beyond any doubt, so—as a logical corollary—Saʿdūn's existence is tangible.

With more knocking at the door and ringing of the phone, the General seems to become more paranoid about the king. He becomes suspicious of Saʿdūn and interrogates him about his true identity, thinking that he is the king. Following a convoluted way of thinking and reasoning, the General now firmly believes that Saʿdūn is the king who was watching and tracking him ever since he knew that he was preparing for a coup d'état. Saʿdūn tries to convince the General that he is not the king, but the General collapses, cries and urges him to admit, so he does.

As the king now, Saʿdūn is accused of treason and the verdict is

execution by hanging. He does not approve of the sentence and prefers to be shot to death. The General explains that he has no gun, but there is a knife, and he orders Saʿdūn to go fetch it. Saʿdūn objects since he is the King now and he must be treated as a king (160), to which the General complies.

Standing on the ladder, the General delivers his speech where he promises his comrades that the old illusion will die.

Saʿdūn now acts as if he were king and orders the General to untie his hands and even to shine his shoes, and the General complies as the dying man's last wish is sacred (164). He then brings the knife to kill him, but feels scared, only to have Saʿdūn encourage him to stab him. The general stabs Saʿdūn, throws the knife, ascends the ladder, and triumphantly shouts, "I killed the king" three times (167). He then approaches Saʿdūn who tells him, "Let the world know." The General rushes to open the door, but it is locked. He tries and retries but nobody opens. He tries to use the telephone, but it does not work.

In the final scene, the General addresses himself while looking at the mirror, "You saved the world my General, but the world does not love salvation" (168). As the General strikes the mirror with his fist, the curtain falls leaving viewers (and readers) in a state of amazement.

Political Reading of The Dictator

To Mahfūz, politics and theater are inseparable. He insists that there is no work of drama that does not impart a political

stand, whether directly or indirectly (599). The political stand that The Dictator imparts is very direct in the first act. To begin with, The Dictator is mainly concerned with the fantasies of two derelicts sickened or maddened by the real world around them to the extent that they decided to play the very serious game of saving the world. This game itself is a form of indictment of the decadence and corruption that overwhelmed the Arab political systems. From their windowless den, the General, along with his loyal servant Saʿdūn, is leading a revolution to overthrow the tyrant king and make the world a better place. The first indispensable tool for this revolution and for the attainment of freedom according to the General is "the jackboots": "Bravo Saʿdūn. You brought salvation to the world. You brought the jackboots" (Al Aʿmāl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā 112).

It is ironic that the jackboots which have for long been used as a symbol of totalitarianism, oppression and military aggression, are regarded here as the bringer of salvation. No matter how clean and shiny the jackboots are, they still represent the cruel military authority that crushes people. It is clear, then, from the very beginning that the revolution will not lead to a better world. Mahfūz's dialogue successfully employs the rhetoric of the dictator, but it is thoroughly infiltrated with satirical humor that displays its hollowness. The General represents the new authority that deceives passionate people like Saʿdūn into believing its lies and thus enslaves and ironically sacrifices them in its heroic struggle not against tyranny and oppression, but

against humanity itself.

The new authority that Mahfūz parodies is more paranoid, bloody and repressive than its predecessor. The General suspects everything around him: the shirt buttons, his own men, and even Saʿdūn. He punishes Saʿdūn because he dares to dream, to think, to interpret things differently, "Follow my commands! Mean what I mean. Think what I think. Is this clear?" (124). When his revolution succeeds, he does not order the liquidation of the king and the prime minister only; he also ordered the execution of all ministers, the detainment of all parliament members, the dissolution of all political parties, the confiscation of thoughts, ideas, emotions, media, and all forms of arts and literature in addition to putting all people under close surveillance (130–136).

The General wants to secure his victory from any possible threat, and for this reason, he orders the elimination of all potential sources of sedition. The General—regarding people in a purely Machiavellian light—believes that the populace is "a colorless and shapeless crowd that takes the shape and the color of its leader and authority" (137), and being fickle, they are unpredictable and untrustworthy. Thus, they should be stifled and contained by an autocratic regime that they should fear, not love. It is obvious then that the General views people in the same negative light as the overthrown king, so he does not start his revolution in order to save humanity from the fascist king; he makes a coup d'état to gain and usurp power. It seems that both of them are the two

sides of the same coin. The old and the new form of authority (King/General) according to Mahfūz employ the same bloody practices: the first persecutes by its crown and scepter while the other utilizes its shiny jackboots and its marshal's staff to subdue people; and Saʿdūn, the representative of modern Arab man, is a worthless nonentity suspended between the two with very little hope of a better future.

The Dictator can be further considered a treatise on the characteristics of authority figures in the Arab world. The General—believing the game and acting as a real authority figure—reveals a megalomaniac and a neurotic personality: he is gripped by delusions of his greatness, obsessed with his own image, suspicious of everything and everyone around him, and constantly accompanied by a pervasive sense of anxiety. Isn't it the case of most Arab dictatorial rulers in our contemporary history? Don't they accede to power promising people salvation and democracy, and while in power they forget their promises and prosecute people and terrorize them? Don't they utilize people as slavish puppets and determine their destiny? Don't they use false evidence and fake charges to incriminate and destroy anyone that jeopardizes their authority? Don't they project their own interpretations and evoke the conspiracy theory all the time and use these as a pretext to liquidate their political opponents? Don't they use the lofty concepts of love, democracy, morality, freedom, equality, justice and goodness to manipulate the populace while they are amoral/immoral beings

who only care for their own narcissistic interests?

It is through this set of rhetorical questions that the picture of political decadence is framed in The Dictator. Mahfūz chooses a provocative and shocking style to convey this message and to awaken his audiences from their stupor. Maybe then they will start to condemn and refuse the mentality that welcomes military rule because, he believes, it is not any closer to democracy than the royal hereditary rule.

In the limited and restricted plot of The Dictator, Mahfūz succeeds to inculcate a political moral and to dramatize an enduring theme that the abuse of power is not a local and temporary affliction that restricts its relevance to a specific geographical area or a particular historical period. It is rather a universal theme that transcends the limitations of geography and history and reaches man wherever and whenever he exists.

Existentialist Analysis of The Dictator

As Mahfūz was highly involved in the political context of his time and shaped most of his plays to impart a particular stance in a direct or indirect way, he was also ideologically oriented to certain philosophical thoughts that permeated his works. In his trilogy, Mahfūz infests his protagonist Saʿdūn with an existential aura that adds a philosophical dimension to his plays.

It is important first to delineate the aspects of existentialism that permeate The Dictator. In this play, Mahfūz shares with the existentialist philosophy some basic tenets and themes. The first

of which is that Mahfūz believes that the modern dramatist should create characters that are free and unpredictable and in this way they will not be abiding by predefined essential parameters that limit characterization. Saʿdūn and the General in The Dictator enjoy an independent existence on the stage. They seem to pop on the stage out of nowhere, lacking any definable essence and without any satisfactory background information about them. This makes Mahfūz's stage a mysterious and ambivalent world open to myriad possibilities where his characters move freely uninhibited by the fetters of reasonable justifications, commonsense or logic. Mahfūz's dramatic techniques of withholding information and denying access into the characters' minds and pasts are formidably existential. We are never quite sure of the true identities of Saʿdūn and the General, of how they come to meet or of their real purpose.

The second point of convergence between Mahfūz and the existentialists in The Dictator is that he seems to purposefully throw his characters in a state of uncertainty and void where they experience doubt, pain, frustration, malaise and even death. In The Dictator, the General and his servant Saʿdūn await—with mounting anxiety—in a dark windowless room some crucial information about the revolution they have launched against the tyrannical king. As they wait, they while away the time discussing the importance of the jackboots in attaining freedom and talking about the progress of the General's armed forces towards the capital. Every time Saʿdūn mentions the king, the General's

doubts rise and he is aroused to anger. Then follows a series of phone calls informing the General that the revolution has succeeded, but the king is still loose. This makes him frustrated and uncertain about the success of the revolution. Saʿdūn tries to appease him, but the General remains restless and anxious, feeling that his achievement is absurd and meaningless if the king is not captured and hanged. He then starts to suspect that Saʿdūn might be the king. Saʿdūn, under persistent urgings, admitted to being the king and is then killed by the General. The General apparently could not enjoy the newly earned freedom; he was overwhelmed with a sense of dread, sensing danger and evil everywhere around him.

The third common tenet between Mahfūz and existentialism is his belief in the concept of free will/choice where the character is held responsible and accountable for his/her decisions and struggles to achieve self-definition. Mahfūz further concurs with the existentialists that the experience of freedom will necessarily breed angst. This is very applicable to Saʿdūn who has freely chosen to follow the General and to be his servant. The General dismisses him from his service many times, but he begs him to stay. Even when the game becomes very dangerous and the General decides to kill him, instead of taking his baggage and opt out of the game, Saʿdūn chooses to stay with the General, and he even accepts the new identity projected upon him. In this way, Saʿdūn is an existential character who encounters an inexplicable situation but decides to impose his own meaning

on it. He freely makes his decision and is ready to accept the negative consequences of his messianic choice. He experiences angst and dread from the threat of death and nothingness, but he is able to give his death a meaning. He considers it a form of Christ-like lofty sacrifice in order to give this absurd world a meaning (165).

What further links Mahfūz to existentialism is his vision of the meaninglessness of the world and the absurdity and helplessness of the human condition. Both Saʿdūn and the General seem aware of the absurdity of the world and hence their game comes to substantiate this awareness. Sickened by the ambivalent and absurd existence that entraps them, Saʿdūn and the General decide to give their existence a lofty meaning by playing the game of saving the world. The game turns to be more absurd and ambivalent than the world itself. When the General becomes conscious of this reality, he turns violent; he believes that by killing the king, absurdity will be outdone and meaning will be imposed. When the king is not caught, the General tries to avoid a sense of overwhelming defeat and thus creates his own king and kills him only to discover that absurdity is eternal and that there is no possibility of changing a world that does not want to be saved (168). At the end, both the General and Saʿdūn lose the game: as Saʿdūn lies motionlessly on the ground, he realizes the futility of their attempt and casts a wicked smile on the broken General who stands at the verge of insanity, unable to believe that the world has rejected his precious offering of

salvation, of freedom and justice.

The Dictator, thus, communicates some of the major themes of existentialism, namely the absurdity of the world, man's persistent sense of angst, a pervading feeling of nothingness, and the experience of alienation, as it communicates some major political themes of arbitrary authority, dictatorship, oppression, and military aggression. The two readings of the play, the existentialist and the political, surely converge to portray Mahfūz's nightmarish vision of a world devoid of meaning, of freedom and of justice.

Another implication of The Dictator which is salient in certain sections of the play is the religious implication with Mahfūz's use of the messianic theme. Saʿdūn here invoked the image of Jesus who was crucified by his enemies but has never lost (132). The General insisted that the world has changed now and if Jesus returns, he is destined to lose because people no longer respect or believe in prophets or in salvation. However, Saʿdūn believes that the world can be redeemed and for this reason, he decides to accept the identity of the king, the good and benevolent king who is ready to sacrifice himself and face death to save the world. He is captured in April, the month of resurrection and rebirth, and then stabbed to death by the General to be revived again, not with a sublime hope of revival and rectitude, but with utmost despair and disillusionment. Mahfūz certainly employs the messianic theme to express his conviction that the world as it is now is beyond salvation, that

even Jesus Himself will not be able to save a world that does not want to save itself.

In The Dictator, Mahfūz reveals a great sensitivity not only to the political, existential and religious debates of his time, but also to history and to the literary and cultural heritage. He makes references to historical events like the King's deception of his people by throwing biscuits to them, an act that evokes Marie Antoinette's famous words, "Let them have biscuits", and by repeatedly mentioning the king's daughter who was negligent of people's suffering and constantly "pokes her tongue to the world". This brief and indirect allusion to queen Marie Antoinette serves to create a clearer image of the king and his family who extravagantly squandered fortunes while the masses suffered from hunger and poverty. He also refers to One and Thousand Nights through making Saʿdūn always repeat that Masrūr's name is the same as that of King Shahriāar's executioner. Mahfūz, through these simple and funny references, was able to conjure the tyrannical world of the One and Thousand Nights indirectly comparing the General to the whimsical king Shahriāar, a comparison that enraged the General and made him reprimand and dismiss Saʿdūn more than once, "Again you mention the One and Thousand Nights. You are dismissed Saʿdūn. Pack your baggage and leave. I can no longer tolerate you" (122).

Conclusion

The major objective behind this study is to prove that the human condition described by these two playwrights in two different worlds and at two different times is approximately the same and that the social, political and moral corruption is omnipresent, be it in the democratic west or the autocratic east. The game-like atmosphere the two dramatists have chosen as a vehicle to convey this pessimistic vision of the modern world in The Dumb Waiter and The Dictator serves to alleviate the tragic weight of the two plays and to infest them with comedic elements that contribute to their farcical nature.

Most of the analytic studies attempted at the two plays fall short to encompass the originality and the depth of these dramatic pieces. With The Dumb Waiter, the critical judgment, when positive, has acknowledged the play's serious nature but failed to fully interpret its underlying political significance and its existential quality that reveal Pinter's acute political and philosophical affiliations. With The Dictator, the case is different. Many drama reviewers and critics have briefly attested to the play's daring treatment of a very serious political issue, that of dictatorship—which might be dangerous in the Arab world—yet a bulk of academically critical and analytic repertoire of Mahfūz's work is still unfortunately absent, though it is very much needed.

In this article, the two play's political nature—whether implicit or explicit—has been meticulously examined and proved to be an essential starting point to any analytic approach towards the

two plays. I have also revealed the existential bearing of the two plays with the overwhelming angst of their characters and their absurd worlds—whether such a philosophical position is a conscious or an unconscious attitude adopted by their authors.

It is undeniable that the 'apolitical' Pinter who wrote The Dumb Waiter in 1957 was not any different from the later Pinter of 2005 who in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech has overtly and ferociously condemned the atrocities of the American and British foreign policy that in the recent past used to prefer indirect political intervention and employed "low intensity conflict" to subdue states and peoples to their own system by pitting the people of one country against each other. It is this low intensity conflict that is superbly described in The Dumb Waiter with Gus and Ben's initially tense partnership. We do not see them violently fighting, but we are quite conscious of a malignant growth infecting their relation and throughout the play we are able to see the gangrene bloom. This divide-and-rule stratagem that is being cleverly employed all over the globe is masterfully dramatized in the very local and confined events of Pinter's second one-act play where two hitmen waited in a windowless basement for orders to perform their next job. It is in this particular sense that The Dumb Waiter is sub-textually political. Most staging performances and adaptations of the play dwelt on this aspect revealing the fact that The Dumb Waiter is not just a footnote in Pinter's large and prolific dramatic corpus; it is a subtle preliminary statement of Pinter's political convictions

and an early manifestation of his latent dissatisfaction with the debased conditions of man in an age of immorality.

With Mahfūz, there is a different pattern. The Dictator is overtly, explicitly and directly political. Mahfūz's political engagement has been a very salient quality throughout almost all his compositions, literary, dramatic, and journalistic. His Theater Manifesto Number 1 is written in a revolutionary manner and language that evoke the manifestos of revolution leaders because he genuinely believed in the political and social role of the theater as a vehicle to expose, criticize, and ameliorate the afflicted human condition. In The Dictator, Mahfūz daringly dealt with the malignant case of military dictatorship in the Arab World and more importantly with man's illusions of a better world achieved through military coup d'etats. His General and Sa'dūn play the game of saving the world to realize at the end that the world as it is now is beyond salvation. This tragic realization does not only reflect the author's pessimistic attitude towards the political scene at that time, it also reveals his despair from any attempt towards a better future for a world that has collaborated in the process of crucifying itself and for a kind of man who accepted injustice and slavery and finally sacrificed himself for the wrong cause. For Mahfūz, the leftist thinker, dictators are the source of evil in our world, and man's submission to those tyrants serves as a fertile soil for the growth of these malignant entities that choke the fading hope of an egalitarian world where freedom and democracy reign. It is quite clear, then, that The Dictator

despite its absurdist structure and game-like atmosphere is a harshly serious play that presents reality and shocks viewers and readers with its penetrating revelation of the political, social and moral decadence that has forever been plaguing the Arab World.

When judging the success or the failure of any play, it is undeniable that the authentic evaluation of any dramatic work is constantly connected with its actual staging and its reception by theatergoers and theater reviewers. Both Pinter and Mahfūz were highly aware of this fact and would not even publish a play if the prospect of staging it was not strongly viable. They both believed that theater is the most influential form of art and literature due to the immediacy of experience viewers are given and due to its transformative power whether socially or politically. Both playwrights have written their scripts not only to achieve aesthetic pleasure, but also to inculcate—implicitly though—a distinctive moral lesson to their viewers at all times: man's subservience to a higher political entity is not an inevitable fate, it is a willful choice wrongly and unthoughtfully made by weak or idealistic men. To them, it is a moral obligation to resist, to be proactive and to even fight ferociously for the attainment of an authentically just, free and democratic life. It is this liberating and revolutionary message that Mahfūz's The Dictator and Pinter's The Dumb Waiter genuinely communicate beyond their absurdist structures.

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