

THE ABSURD PERSISTS.
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE AMERICAN DREAM* AND TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM'S *THE TREE CLIMBER*

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Abstract. This article endeavours to delve into the existential profundities inherent in the Theatre of the Absurd, employing a meticulous comparative examination of Edward Albee's *The American Dream* (1961) and Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* (1966). Drawing upon the seminal study of Martin Esslin, this research aims to scrutinize the shared thematic as well as stylistic tapestry characterized by the bareness of the stage, the portrayal of matrimonial constructs, the eloquent utilization of silence, the stagnation of linguistic faculties, and the recursive nature of narrative structures. By navigating through these quintessential elements, this article seeks to illuminate the labyrinthine corridors of the human psyche and the intricate absurdities woven into the fabric of existence as elucidated by these two distinct yet thematically resonant theatrical oeuvres.

Keywords: theatre of the absurd, Edward Albee, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, existentialism, comparative literature

INTRODUCTION

The Theatre of the Absurd, a groundbreaking literary movement of the mid-20th century, burgeoned as a radical departure from established dramatic conventions, heralding a renaissance of existential inquiry into the human condition. Coined and elucidated by the erudite Martin Esslin, this epoch-defining genre congregated an eclectic ensemble of dramatists unified by their shared scepticism toward the teleology of life within a cosmos bereft of inherent meaning. Edward Albee's *The American Dream* and Tawfiq Al-

Hakim's *The Tree Climber* stand as epitomic exemplars of this audacious literary tradition, distilling existential angst into a potent elixir through their idiosyncratic narrative idioms and thematic poignancy. This discourse aspires to embark upon a discerning analysis of these seminal works, weaving together the strands of shared existential leitmotifs while unravelling the cultural and linguistic nuances that imbue them with unique resonance.

INTRODUCING THE ABSURD

Drama critic Martin Esslin first used the term Absurdist Theatre in his 1961 book *The Theatre of the Absurd*. The phrase describes a group of dramatists who emerged in the middle of the 20th century, particularly in the years between 1940 and 1960. Esslin lists the essential characteristics that all absurdist plays have in his book. The notions that man lives in a godless cosmos, that existence is pointless and without purpose, and—most importantly—that communication has broken down are all heavily emphasized by the Absurdist dramatists. This avant-garde style of dramatic writing challenges the idea of the "well-made play" and upends established play norms. Annette J. Saddik claims that mid-twentieth-century drama was characterized by “the increasing prominence of post-Second World War experimental plays that resisted traditional narrative plot and discursive language in favour of strikingly non-rational structures and a more minimalistic style of dialogue” (7). Therefore, the traditional confidence in the coherence of dialogue and the unity of narrative is rejected in absurdist plays, which first appeared in Europe following World War II.

Esslin explores the theatre of different writers, including Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, in *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin claims that the playwrights of the Absurd employed several avant-garde methods and literary styles that represented their idea of how alienated humans are from a world that is collapsing. According to him, those writers subverted the coherence, unity, and logical

continuity of the dramatic text to embody in their plays the issues and challenges that Man confronted during the post-World War II era. Esslin asserts that the absurdist works “are essentially concerned with conveying their author’s sense of mystery, bewilderment, and his despair at being unable to find a meaning in existence” (44). Therefore, by employing an unusual style, the Absurdist playwrights expressed their sentiments of alienation and loss as well as their disillusionment with the erosion of values in a disintegrating world.

STAGING THE ABSURD IN ALBEE’S AND AL-HAKIM’S PLAYS

Although Esslin did not consider any of the Arab writers in his book as Absurdist playwrights, a close reading of Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* would clarify that he employs in this work many thematic and linguistic aspects often associated with Absurd Drama. Al-Hakim is a prominent figure in Arabic literature, particularly known for his contributions to Egyptian theatre. While Tawfiq Al-Hakim's work centres on existential themes and experimentation with form, he is not typically categorized as a playwright of the Theatre of the Absurd in the same vein as Western authors like Samuel Beckett or Edward Albee. His play explores existential questions, human nature, and societal issues, and tends to reflect a blend of Absurdism, symbolism, and nonsensicality characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd. In *The Tree Climber* (1966), a detective, a lizard, a time-travelling dervish, and a magic tree all help to turn the quiet life of a married couple upside down. The retired Bahadair Effendi and his spouse, who have each immersed into a world they have constructed for themselves, are weird figures. The only creature entirely born of the East is the dervish, who stands for the unconscious forces, the understanding that the illogical and the "absurd" are inescapably a part of life.

The second work is a one-act play, entitled *The American Dream*, which was published in 1960 and debuted in the United States at the

York Playhouse in January 1961. Mommy and Daddy are shown in the play's opening moments waiting for a plumber to fix the toilet. Mama begins narrating a tale about purchasing a hat. Then, Grandma shows up with a few boxes and begins to gripe about how poorly elderly folks are treated. A while later, Daddy and Mommy are having a talk with Mrs. Barker, the fourth character. Grandma shares with Mrs. Barker a story of her parents' adopted child that occurred twenty years ago. She says they killed the infant after disfiguring it. Mrs. Barker, Mommy, and Daddy return after a while. Mommy notices that Grandma is missing and Mrs. Barker tells her that the van man carried her. Another character, Young Man, enters the stage as Mrs. Barker leaves. He claims that he is looking for a job and is ready to do anything for money. Grandma labels him the American Dream and realizes that he is the twin of Mommy and Daddy's first child. He is described as a superficial human who has been drained of feelings and constructive energy, standing for “the satiric embodiment of the American Dream” (Roudané, *Understanding Edward Albee* 57). The curtain closes after Grandma entered the stage and addressed the audience.

Numerous commonalities align the two plays within the paradigm of the Theatre of the Absurd, and one such hallmark is the stark minimalism of the stage setting. Albee's deliberate portrayal of a sparsely furnished stage in *The American Dream* exemplifies this characteristic. From the play's outset, the audience is confronted with a scene devoid of ostentation, where the playwright meticulously delineates the setting:

A living room. Two armchairs, one stands toward either side of the stage, facing each other diagonally out toward the audience. Against the rear wall, a sofa. A door, leading out from the apartment, in the rear wall, far stage-right.
(8)

The bare stage setting in Edward Albee's *The American Dream* serves as a potent symbol of existential emptiness and isolation. With only two armchairs and a sofa occupying the space, the audience is immediately immersed in a world stripped of extraneous

distractions. Every action and interaction unfolds within the confines of this barren environment, heightening the sense of confinement and claustrophobia inherent in the absurd human condition. Moreover, Albee's deliberate omission of any specific temporal markers further accentuates the existential ambiguity of the setting, blurring the distinction between past, present, and future.

Similarly, Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* embraces the ethos of the Theatre of the Absurd through its stark portrayal of a bare stage. Al-Hakim's sparse setting, devoid of any furnishings, mirrors the desolation and existential barrenness that pervade the narrative. The absence of fixed temporal references plunges the audience into a timeless and abstract realm, where events unfold in a liminal space beyond the constraints of conventional reality. Through these shared stylistic choices, both playwrights imbue their works with a palpable sense of existential unease and disorientation, inviting audiences to confront the fundamental absurdity of human existence. Al-Hakim states that:

There are no scenes in this play and no distinctions between times and places. Sometimes, the past, the present and the future all are found at the same time...

Everything is mixed in everything... and there is no fixed furniture. (45)

The minimalist stage design is a hallmark of the Theatre of the Absurd, reflecting the barrenness and emptiness of the human condition. In both *The American Dream* and *The Tree Climber*, the stage is stripped of extraneous details, leaving only essential props and furnishings. This deliberate choice serves to underscore the characters' isolation and existential alienation, emphasizing their futile attempts to find meaning and purpose in a world devoid of inherent significance.

Beyond the minimalist stage design, both *The American Dream* and *The Tree Climber* prominently feature married couples as central figures, underscoring the universal themes of existential angst and interpersonal conflict. In Albee's narrative, the characters

"Mommy" and "Daddy" emerge as the linchpins of the drama, initiating and steering the discourse within the play. Their omnipresence underscores their pivotal role in driving the narrative forward, as they navigate the absurdities of familial dynamics and societal expectations. Similarly, Al-Hakim's protagonists, the husband and wife, assume a similar centrality within the dramatic framework of *The Tree Climber*, with their actions and dialogue serving as the fulcrum upon which the plot pivots.

Moreover, the conspicuous absence of children within both couples serves as a poignant motif, emblematic of the barrenness and futility that pervade their respective existential landscapes. In *The American Dream*, the titular characters, "Mommy" and "Daddy," despite their appellations hinting at familial roles, remain childless - a fact underscored by Grandma's poignant revelation:

The woman, who was very much like Mommy, said that she and the man who was very much like Daddy had never been blessed with anything very much like a bumble of joy [a baby]. (48)

We can infer from Grandma's talk that the couple does not have babies. "These names," contends Ramandeep Mahal, "are short of any personal intensity because they are plain caricatures of a black comedy, which is a usual characteristic of the Absurd Theatre" (160). This absence of progeny serves as a metaphor for the characters' existential void, their lives devoid of the traditional markers of fulfilment and purpose. Similarly, in *The Tree Climber*, the husband and wife navigate their existential crises in the absence of children, their union marked by a profound sense of incompleteness and desolation. This facet becomes evident in the play through a dialogue exchange between the detective and the maid:

The Detective. Do she and her present husband have children?

The Maid. No, she got married when she was fifty... since nine years, she could not bear any child. (48)

The characters in both plays manifest as mature couples, having embarked on their matrimonial journey later in life. Thus, the shared

motif of childlessness underscores the existential isolation and disillusionment experienced by both couples, epitomizing the overarching themes of existential malaise and societal alienation within the Theatre of the Absurd.

In brief, central to both plays are married couples who serve as archetypal representations of the human condition. In *The American Dream*, Albee presents the characters of "Mommy" and "Daddy," whose mundane existence revolves around superficial desires and societal expectations. Similarly, Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* features a husband and wife trapped in a cycle of existential despair and marital discord. Through these characters, both playwrights explore the inherent absurdity of human relationships and the futile quest for fulfilment in an indifferent universe.

The quintessential hallmark of the absurd pervading both Albee's *The American Dream* and Tawfiq Al-Hakim's work lies in the deliberate and recurrent utilization of silence. In *The American Dream*, this silence manifests in multifarious forms, subtly punctuating the dialogue with pregnant pauses and explicit stage directions invoking the absence of sound. Notably, the playwright employs ellipses as a poignant symbol of silence, effectively conveying the palpable weight of unspoken tension and existential disquietude within the narrative fabric. For instance, consider the following excerpt:

Daddy. And if you need help... why, I should think you'd apply for a Fulbright Scholarship...

Mommy. And if not that...why, then a Guggenheim Fellowship... (42)

Here, the judicious placement of ellipses imbues the dialogue with an eerie sense of suspended animation, evoking the profound existential void that permeates the characters' interactions. Similarly, in *The Tree Climber*, silence becomes a recurrent pattern throughout the whole play, taking the forms of pauses and silence such as in the stage direction "A deep silence between the couple" (60). Silence emerges as a central motif, weaving its enigmatic tendrils throughout the narrative tapestry. Through meticulous stage directions and

strategic pauses, Al-Hakim orchestrates a symphony of silence that reverberates with existential significance. This is exemplified in the following exchange:

The Maid. There is no one except for police...they are extracting the corpse from the garden...
The Milkman. ?...
The Servant. Yes, in the prison...
The Milkman. ?... (48)

Here, the pregnant pause and the ellipsis serve as powerful conduits of silence, accentuating the ineffable nature of human experience and the insurmountable chasm of existential isolation. In essence, the recurrent use of silence in both plays serves as a potent device for evoking the existential abyss that lies at the heart of the human condition, inviting audiences to confront the profound mysteries and absurdities inherent in the human experience.

Silence emerges as a powerful motif in both plays, symbolizing the breakdown of communication and the inability to connect with others on a meaningful level. Albee and Al-Hakim employ pauses, ellipses, and stage directions to convey the weight of unspoken words and the existential angst that permeates their characters' lives. This pervasive silence serves to highlight the absurdity of human existence, wherein language fails to bridge the gap between individuals and the world around them.

The incorporation of silence within the narrative fabric of both Albee's and Al-Hakim's works engenders a palpable stagnation in the linguistic discourse, compounding the existing deformity and incoherence endemic to the characters' interactions. Indeed, language in these plays emerges as a fractured and unreliable conduit of communication, beset by fragmentation, disjointed speech patterns, and a conspicuous absence of grammatical coherence. This linguistic disarray underscores the profound existential disconnection between the characters, accentuating the futility of linguistic expression in elucidating the complexities of human experience.

In *The American Dream*, Albee astutely portrays language as a flawed means of communication, fraught with ambiguity and misinterpretation. “The language of Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream*, like the functional claims of their names, denied action, is evacuated of meaning, conventionalized to the point at which it becomes self-annihilating” (Bigsby, *American Drama* 130). Through the use of fragmented dialogue and disjointed syntax, Albee elucidates the characters' struggle to articulate their thoughts coherently, as exemplified by Grandma's poignant lamentation: “I don't know if that's what I meant or not. It is certainly not what I thought I meant” (32). Here, the dissonance between intention and expression underscores the inherent inadequacy of language in conveying the nuances of subjective experience, amplifying the characters' sense of existential alienation. The stagnation of language, which is characterized by incoherence and fragmentation, may also be detected in Mrs. Barker's conversation with Grandma when she says:

I can't tell, yet. I'll have to... what is the word I meant?... I'll have to relate it... that's it...I'll have to relate it to certain things I know, and...draw... conclusions. (55)

As this short exchange shows, the unproductive repetitions and focus on the same matter make the speech itself fragmented and language overused. The play as a whole “is riddled with clichés, advertising slogans, non-sequiturs, the dead language of consumerism. In the upside-down world of Albee's America, language is dangerously empty, unreliable, and contradictory” (Kolin 30).

Likewise, in Al-Hakim's work, language assumes a similarly disjointed and fragmented form, reflecting the characters' profound estrangement from one another and themselves. Through the absence of grammatical rules and the prevalence of incoherent speech patterns, Al-Hakim underscores the limitations of language as a vehicle for genuine communication; thus, language becomes

meaningless like in this conversation between the husband and his wife:

The Husband. Of course, you were somewhere...because you cannot be in non-place...but what is this place?... your kinsman's house?...

The Wife. No...

The Husband. Your friends' house?...

The Wife. No...

The Husband. It is a house anyway?...

The Wife. No... (167)

The resulting linguistic chaos serves as a poignant metaphor for the characters' existential predicament, as they grapple with the ineffability of human experience in a world devoid of inherent meaning or coherence. In essence, the use of silence in conjunction with linguistic deformity and incoherence serves to underscore the fundamental absurdity of human existence, highlighting the insurmountable barriers to genuine communication and connection within the absurd universe depicted in the play.

The recurrent use of fragmented and incoherent language in both plays serves as a potent reflection of the characters' profound struggle to communicate effectively with one another. Within the Theatre of the Absurd, language itself becomes a fractured and disjointed entity, mirroring the existential dissonance and alienation experienced by the characters. In *The American Dream*, Albee deftly employs repetitive and clichéd dialogue to underscore the characters' superficiality and their inability to engage in authentic communication. Through this linguistic stagnation, Albee unveils the hollowness of human interaction, revealing the characters' futile attempts to forge meaningful connections in a world devoid of inherent meaning or purpose.

In *The Tree Climber* too, Al-Hakim employs fragmented language and banal exchanges to highlight the absurdity of verbal communication and the inherent limitations of linguistic expression. The characters' dialogue becomes a cacophony of disjointed utterances, devoid of genuine emotional resonance or existential

significance. Through this deliberate linguistic fragmentation, Al-Hakim underscores the characters' existential alienation and the inherent absurdity of their attempts to navigate the complexities of human existence.

Ultimately, the use of fragmented and incoherent language in both plays serves to illuminate the profound meaninglessness of human existence within the absurd universe depicted by Albee and Al-Hakim. Language, once a tool for communication and connection, becomes a barrier to understanding, highlighting the characters' inherent inability to grasp the true essence of their own existence. In this way, the Theatre of the Absurd interrogates the very nature of language and its role in shaping human consciousness, inviting audiences to confront the profound absurdity of the human condition.

Lastly, it is essential to note that both *The American Dream* and *The Tree Climber* eschew conventional plot development, opting instead for a narrative structure that revolves around a few central events and themes. In Albee's play, this is exemplified by the pervasive use of clichéd language and the repetition of trivial issues, which imbue the plot with a circularity that reinforces the characters' existential stagnation. *The American Dream* clarifies Françoise Grellet, is perceived as “a harsh satire of the vacuity of family life with a surrealistic plot” (282). A prime illustration of this circular structure can be found in the following exchange between "Mommy" and "Daddy":

Mommy. I said I went to buy a new hat yesterday.

Daddy. Oh! Yes...Yes.

Mommy. Pay attention.

Daddy. I am paying attention, Mommy.

Mommy. Well, be sure you do.

Daddy. Oh, I am.

Mommy. All right, now. I went to buy a new hat yesterday and I said “I’d like a new hat, please ... (100)

The recurring narrative motif of the hat within the dialogue between

"Mommy" and "Daddy" in Albee's play contributes to a pervasive sense of monotony, reflecting the characters' futile attempts to find meaning in the mundane. Similarly, in Al-Hakim's work, the repetitive discourse surrounding the absence of the wife serves to cement the plot in a state of immutability. This fixation on repetitive themes and motifs underscores the characters' inability to transcend the confines of their existential predicament, resulting in a narrative that remains fixed and unyielding. This phenomenon is exemplified in the following conversation:

The Husband. Yes you, where have you been all this time?

The Wife. I went as you know...to buy a thread...

The Husband. For half an hour?...

The Wife. True...

The Husband. But you did not come after half an hour... you came after three days...

The Wife. Three days?... are you sure?...

The Husband. Absolutely. (161)

In the discourse between the husband and wife in Al-Hakim's play, the recurrent theme of the wife's absence engenders a palpable sense of stagnation within the dialogue. What begins as a trivial issue gradually assumes a disproportionate significance, becoming the focal point of their interactions. Moreover, the pervasive use of clichéd language further exacerbates this sense of stagnation, as the characters rely on familiar phrases and expressions to navigate their existential quandaries.

This reliance on clichés and the repetition of the wife's absence serve to perpetuate a circularity within the plot, rendering it impervious to change or evolution. In this dramatic work, Albee "uses the techniques of the Theatre of The Absurd such as corrupted language, fragmented dialogues, degenerated speeches, clichés and so on" (Yasar 768). Much like the repetitive narrative surrounding the hat in Albee's play, the fixation on the wife's absence in Al-Hakim's work solidifies the plot in a state of inertia. Consequently, both plays become ensnared in a self-perpetuating

cycle, wherein the characters' attempts to grapple with existential concerns are repeatedly thwarted by the constraints of their own circumstances.

Thus, the repetition of these thematic motifs in both plays not only underscores the characters' existential entrapment but also contributes to a broader sense of circularity within the narrative framework. In this way, both Albee and Al-Hakim employ repetitive narrative devices to explore the inherent absurdity of human existence and the cyclical nature of life's trials and tribulations.

In a word, both plays eschew traditional narrative structures in favour of circular, repetitive motifs that emphasize the cyclical nature of human existence. In *The American Dream*, Albee employs the recurring theme of buying a hat to underscore the characters' fixation on trivialities and their inability to break free from societal norms. The repeated reference to the same topic throughout the first pages of the dramatic text creates a circular movement within the plot. Actually, "though much happens," argues Anne Paolucci, "the action is static" (*From Tension to Tonic* 37). Similarly, Al-Hakim's *The Tree Features* a repetitive narrative thread centred on the wife's absence, highlighting the characters' sense of ennui and existential despair. Through these circular narratives, both playwrights explore the futile nature of human endeavour and the inescapable repetition of life's absurdities.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, Edward Albee's *The American Dream* and Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* serve as poignant reflections of the existential quandaries inherent in the human condition. Through shared thematic elements such as the stark bareness of the stage, the portrayal of married couples, the pervasive use of silence, the stagnation of language, and the circularity of the plot, both plays delve deep into the heart of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Despite their disparate cultural and linguistic origins, both Albee and Al-Hakim masterfully capture the essence of existential angst, inviting audiences to grapple with the fundamental absurdity of human existence. The minimalist stage design in both plays serves as a metaphor for the barrenness of the human soul, while the portrayal of married couples underscores the universal struggle for connection and meaning amidst the chaos of modern life.

Moreover, the recurrent use of silence and the stagnation of language within the dialogue further accentuate the characters' existential alienation, highlighting the inherent limitations of communication in conveying the complexities of human experience. This linguistic dissonance is mirrored in the circularity of the plot, wherein the characters find themselves trapped in an endless cycle of existential despair.

Ultimately, both *The American Dream* and *The Tree Climber* compel audiences to confront the unsettling truths of the human condition, challenging preconceived notions of reality and inviting introspection into the nature of existence itself. Through their shared exploration of the Theatre of the Absurd, Albee and Al-Hakim beckon us to embrace the absurdity of life and find solace in the search for meaning amidst the void.

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