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

By

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

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Abstract

This research presents a detailed comparative analysis between Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter* and ‘Isām 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 thesis argues that Both Sa’dūn 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. Structurally, the study explores the similarities and differences between the two playwrights' dramatic styles, their use of language, and their restructuring of a new form of dramatic irony.

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

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CHAPTER ONE

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, the British Nobel Prize winning playwright, screenwriter, short story writer, novelist, poet, actor, director, political activist and conscientious defender of human rights 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 'Isām Mahfūz, a Lebanese playwright, poet, literary writer and critic, director, journalist, political thinker and most essentially the leading pioneer of the modernist movement in the Arab Theater (Khalīdā al Sa'īd 474), that this sweeping transformation in the Arab theater was fully actualized. With Mahfūz's *Al*

Zanzalakht (The Chinaberry Tree) (1963), *The Arab Theater*, Muhammad Dakrūb affirms, ceased to be primitive and imitative (*Al A'māl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā* 587). His departure from the old linguistic and dramatic conventions has had revolutionary impact on the structure of the Arab drama. 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 Sharafiddīn) that, according to Shafīq al Bika'ī would perfectly befit the entire Arab World with all its contemporary moral, religious, social, national and most importantly political crises (591). Yet, his innovation is not locally restricted to the Arab World, for, Dakrūb believes, it crosses these confines to soar high in the realm of world literature (99).

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 of compromise, at any level. Their compositions, henceforth, are considered by many rebellious and outraging, their language is abortive as it intentionally defies any direct communicative attempt, the actions depicted are disruptive and irrational, and the worlds of their plays are almost always 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. Violence, tension, indeterminacy and equivocality permeate their dramatic world that the experience of their theaters is never cathartic, but haunting. 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. Yet, the farcical nature of their drama relieves their reader/viewer as he/she can always reassure him/herself by saying, “This is not real, it’s a farce”. They are momentarily comforted that the world outside this drama is a sensical, logical and linguistically coherent world. Ironically enough, they will 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 times. Pinter might appear apolitical in his early plays, but he certainly is not. His suffering as a Jew during the Second World War and his immense disgust from the amorality of the political system at that time have all marked his dramatic sensibility and production. Starting from his first plays *The Room*, *The Dumbwaiter* and *The Birthday Party* to his last plays *Mountain Language* and *In Remembrance of Things*

Past, 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 a 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 'Isām 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. His incomplete trilogy *The Chinaberry Tree*, *The Dictator & Sa'dūn*, *The King* absurdly depict the helplessness of the modern man in the 20th century Arab world as he incomprehensibly and hopelessly grapples against dictatorial entities that confiscate everything, including thoughts and ideas.

Even if the two playwrights are not straightforwardly direct in their depiction of the world around them as Ibsen or Osborne, Pinter and Mahfūz are ultimately considered true representatives of their age, the age of war, fear and oppression. In their plays, they express the current moments faithfully, mainly dramatizing the political contexts during which these plays have been written. In Pinter's second one-act play *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. Divide-and-rule is the dynamic principle of this political system that pits one partner against the other

until one of them is liquidated by the other. In Mahfūz's *The Dictator*, a paranoid revolution leader, the General, envisions himself as the savior of humanity, yet ironically appears to be no more than another usurper of power. His faithful servant Sa'dūn is an admirable character who in a Christ-like posture willfully sacrifices himself for humanity, but alas, the sacrifice cannot redeem man or the world in which he lives because it is a damned world infinitely ruled by inhumane dictators.

Though the two plays were written forty and fifty 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. In spite of the playwrights' focus on a particular individual experience, 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 thesis, 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. The analysis I propose will not be restricted to the two scripts. I will highlight the context during which the two plays were originally conceived and address different stagings of the plays in very specific contexts to detect how readings differ from one adaptation to the other.

The topic of the first chapter will be Harold Pinter's play *The Dumb Waiter*. This play, written during 1957, had to wait three years for its first performance at the Hampstead Theater Club in 1960. A comedy of menace, *The Dumb Waiter* was acclaimed by Kay Dick for its playwright's dreadful ability "to introduce menace into the farcical" (258), a feeling of menace and even terror that bewilders and upsets its viewers and readers; a dread from the outside world, from an unknown usurper, from the infinite and limitless possibilities that render its subjects/objects terrified, helpless and hopeless (Orley 125). In this chapter, I will present a short biography of Pinter, a synopsis of *The Dumb Waiter* followed by the critical reception of the play, and I will then dwell fully on the implications of *The Dumb Waiter* revealing its political underpinnings and its existential quality. In the last section, I will address two different adaptation of the play and present my own reading of them.

The topic of the second chapter will be 'Isām Mahfūz's play *The Dictator*, the second play in Mahfūz's incomplete trilogy. *The Dictator* was first staged in 1969 and further established Mahfūz as an innovator in dramatic language. His masterful manipulation of dialogue as a fully charged and intense vehicle not of communication

but of revelation of a higher order is noted by many critics, as Kamīl S'adé illustrates, "In his second play, *The Dictator*, Mahfūz formed a new combination in language and by this he recreated the language of the theater." (*Al A'māl al Kamilā* 175) In the first part of this chapter, I will present a biography of Mahfūz and a synopsis of his play *The Dictator* showing the varied critical views it has received. In the second part, I shall underscore the political and the existentialist quality of the play. In the third part, I will present my own analysis and reading of two different staging of *The Dictator*.

The comparative analysis of the two plays will not be comprehensive unless the cross-resonance between the two plays is fully explored. In the third—and last—chapter, I will highlight the commonalities between Pinter and Mahfūz. The two playwrights share certain dramatic likeness in the role they attribute to their theater, in their mixture of comedic and tragic elements, and finally in the quality of their dramatic irony. The quality of Pinter and Mahfūz's dramatic language will be also analyzed showing where the two playwrights meet and where they diverge.

With *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Dictator* modern readers and viewers stand at the threshold of what Longinus called the *sublime* moment. The topic is not grand, the diction is not magniloquent, the actions are not heroic, and the characters are not noble, yet the experience tackled in the two plays is forever durable and dignified in its attempt to reveal the naked reality with all its dinginess and ugliness. Pinter and Mahfūz's convoluted sentences, arcane allusions, multifaceted metaphors, chronological inconsistencies, unreliable characters, breakdowns in verisimilitude, and apparently pointless redundancies are not introduced randomly. There is certainly a purpose behind all of these technicalities—a sublime purpose that will be amply explored in my thesis.

CHAPTER TWO

PINTER'S *THE DUMB WAITER*

2.1. Brief Overview of Harold Pinter's Life and Theater

When a play by Harold Pinter is dissected, critical interpretations abound with irreducible diversity and contradictions. A Pinter-land is a wonderland where myriad questions are posed while answers are tantalizingly suspended. For almost six decades, Pinter's plays have continued to intrigue his critics and spectators alike with their tenacity against clear interpretations and their subversion to the familiar dramatic norms. In spite of this—or perhaps, because of this, Pinter is now an icon of modern English Drama with an adjective “Pinteresque” or “Pinterish” spawned after his name to refer to his idiosyncratic use of language. Dubbed by renowned drama critics, such as Wardle, Esslin, and Billington, as “The Master of Menace”, Pinter's drama reveals so little on the surface, but compulsorily invites its viewers to a mysterious world of ambiguous symbols and lost referents.

Michael Billington, in his book, *Pinter: His Life and Work*, presented an extensive study of Pinter's life and work in an attempt to place him in his proper position, which according to Billington, is no less than Britain's premier modern dramatist. On October 10, 1930 Harold Pinter was born in a section of Metropolitan London, called Hackney, just beyond the borders of the traditional East End. He was the son of Jack Pinter, a hard-working ladies' tailor, and Frances Moskowitz, a housewife. The Pinter family was one of the Jewish families that immigrated to the East End by the

end of the century. Being basically poor, they managed to live with very meager resources, like the other low-class families in Hackney. In his early life before World War II, he experienced many instances of anti-Semitism in London, which had a deep impact on his writing and his theatrical works. During the Blitz (The sustained strategic German bombing of Britain and Ireland between 7 September 1940 and 10 May 1941), Pinter was uprooted and evacuated from his Hackney home to Cornwall and Reading. Billington states that the “life-and-death intensity of daily experience” before and during the Blitz left Pinter with profound memories “of loneliness, bewilderment, separation and loss: themes that are in all his works” (6).

Between the years 1944 and 1947 Pinter attended the Hackney Downs Grammar School, where he began writing poetry and prose. He also took an interest in theater, taking roles as both Macbeth and Romeo in school productions of Shakespeare. In spring 1947, his poetry was first published in the *Hackney Downs School Magazine*. His education continued in 1948, when he obtained a grant to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, but, finding the academy frustrating, he stayed there for two terms only. In the same year, he tried to obtain legal status as a conscientious objector to war, which he was denied. He was, eventually, imprisoned, brought to trial twice and fined £ 50 & £ 75 when he refused to comply with the two enlistment calls for National Service in the British army (24). According to Billington, this is one form of the obstinate nonconformity that stamped Pinter’s soul for life (24).

In 1950, his poetry was first published outside of the school magazine in *Poetry London*, some of it under the pseudonym “Harold Pinta”; these early poems revealed much of his obsessive preoccupations with territorial displacement that stemmed

directly from the threat posed by the Fascist thugs in post-war Hackney (27). Between the years 1951 and 1952, he toured Ireland with the Anew McMaster repertory company, playing many roles. He also attended Central School of Speech and Drama and resumed formal and academic training. Then, under the stage name David Baron, he performed with Shakespearean and other repertory companies in both England and Ireland. On tour, he met and worked with the actress Vivien Merchant, whom he married on September 14, 1956. The couple struggled to make ends meet, and Pinter had to work as a waiter, a postman, a bouncer, a dishwasher, a salesman and a snow-clearer to supplement his income from acting. In these years, Pinter also played occasional roles in his own and others' works for radio, TV, and film, as he continued to do throughout his long career (38).

In 1957, Pinter wrote his first set of plays that were considered apolitical in nature. These plays dealt with domestic interiors and individual experience that had no direct or explicit political underpinnings. His first play for the theater, *The Room*, was written when a friend asked him to write a piece for production at Bristol University. This one-act play earned him the favorable notice of many critics and revealed Pinter's unique dramatic technique and talent. He also wrote *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party* that same year. In 1958, *The Birthday Party* was professionally produced but the performance floundered. It was severely attacked and rejected by critics to the extent that it was closed in less than a week. The play was considered delirious, obscure, enigmatic and puzzling and was consequently dismissed as a theatrical failure (Raby 213).

This failure did not discourage Pinter who continued to write more scripts for the stage, *A Slight Ache* and *The Hothouse*. In 1960 Pinter's first major stage and commercial success was achieved through *The Caretaker*, which, began a run in London's West End and won Pinter *The Evening Standard* Award. Along with *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming* (1965), *The Caretaker* established Pinter's reputation as a major playwright, as Britain's most important dramatist since George Bernard Shaw (Billington 39).

In 1967, Pinter reached Broadway and became a celebrity playwright. He further proved his diversity by producing a steady stream of stage and radio plays and cinema and television scripts. This had surely widened his creative involvement and focus. Between the years 1968 and 1982, Pinter wrote a different class of plays that Billington labeled “memory play” (388) which explored the ambiguities and the mysteries of man’s memory. While his early plays were called comedies of menace and explore the danger lurking beyond the walls of comfy and naturalistic room, this different set encompasses twelve plays, some of which are *Landscape*, *Betrayal*, *No Man’s Land*, and *Old Times*. In the memory plays, Pinter dramatized the precariousness, unreliability and contradictions of man’s memory. Pinter’s characters seemed to be recalling their past memories, speaking to one another about old events. Yet, the contradictions and inconsistencies detected create legitimate doubts and questions in the audience about whether these are memories of real events in those characters’ lives or some fantasies and dreams of their own creation.

From 1983 till 2000, Pinter’s theater became a medium of political activism against oppression, torture, and other human rights’ violations. In the plays written

during this period, Pinter became eager to present public discussions of political issues and involved his theater with more overtly political matters. This was surely different from the seemingly apolitical Pinter of the early and middle stages.

Pinter's last play *In Remembrance of Things Past* was written in 2000, but he continued to write film scripts and poems until his death in 2008 after a long and debilitating struggle against cancer. In 2005, Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for his major contributions to modern theater:

... Harold Pinter ... in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms... He is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century. That he occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: 'Pinteresque.'

Nobel Prize Swedish Academy 2005

There is almost a consensus among 20th century drama critic that Harold Pinter is a one of the most prominent and influential playwright in the English theater since the early 1960s. Even if some critics, like Esslin and Tinker, have deplored the diffusion of his creative energy in other directions, especially political activism, which weakened his stage power after the 1980s, Billington argues that such diversity added to the richness of his imaginative world and this "makes him one of the greatest dramatists not just of our day but of the century" (393).

Though many critics have labeled Pinter's early work apolitical, it will be revealed in this study that Pinter's political involvement has always been present—in

different degrees—in his dramatic works. In the entire body of his drama, he tries to reveal how the totalitarian government activities and global politics—masqueraded under the guise of democracy and freedom—affect the smallest societal unit, the individual. In his early plays, Pinter described private worlds permeated by power relations. In *The Room*, Rose, the old docile and garrulous wife is completely subdued by her violent and silent husband. Hints of racism and anti-Semitism pervade the play's language. In *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus is manipulated and finally eliminated by the higher authority upstairs. What Pinter wants to say here is that Low-class thugs are cannon-fodders used by the organization to perform the petty and dirty tasks. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley, an individual and creative artist, is hunted down, terrorized and reduced to a cipher by McCann and Goldberg, two members of a secret organization. Rose, Gus, and Stanley represent the victims that are stifled, suffocated and finally subdued to the authority, either through liquidation or brainwashing. These plays reveal Pinter's early preoccupation with politics and his postmodernist belief that both the private and the public lives are highly political and wholly dominated by power relationships. The world of the plays is predominantly political as it reveals the oppression and torture that the authority (husband, secret organization, etc.) practices to subdue its objects. It is a miniature vision of the world of war, genocide and the constant threat of nuclear bomb. What these early plays have in common, according to Martin Esslin, is this preoccupation with cruelty and the recurrent images of the torturer, the terrorist, the executioner (Theater of Cruelty 28). Pinter affirms that his early plays, through the characters of Bert, Wilson, and McCann and Goldberg represent the forces in society that want to extinguish any form of dissent, to silence the individual's voice, to smother

it, very much like the Nazis. *The Caretaker*, Pinter's first major theatrical success, alludes to the human rights abuses of totalitarian regimes. Aston's broken voice and his mental slowness are the effects of forced interrogations and electrifying and torturing practices by the authority. Most of his later work from *One for the Road* to *A Kind of Alaska*, *Moonlight* and *Ashes to Ashes* are overtly political in their themes addressing holocaust, physical and mental torture, and the suppression of free thought and speech. At no time in his life has Pinter been a politically undefined personality. He has always been politically conscious and committed to a variety of libertarian causes, and he translated this commitment in almost all his dramatic works.

Added to their political defiance, Pinter's twenty nine plays have also defied the traditional classifications of dramatic works. They have been called black comedies, comedies of menace, tragic farces, plays of cruelty, memory plays, tragicomedies, etc. His early plays *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Hot House* and his more mature and full-length play *The Caretaker* were called by the literary critic Irving Wardle "comedies of menace" (*Encore* Oct-Sept. 1958) since they all start with a seemingly innocent situation but proceed in a threatening way as Pinter's characters behave in a tantalizingly enigmatic and inexplicable manner. They produce this sinister kind of laughter that does not relieve the viewers, but rather incriminates them. It is no wonder then that the reception of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* was disheartening. Yet, despite the harsh and hostile reviews that the plays received when they were first staged in London, only Harold Hobson of the *Sunday Times* saw much promise in Pinter, for he, "possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London" (Qtd in Billington 112).

Linking Pinter to the absurdist dramatists, many critics opined that he floundered in obscurity and suffered from the negative impact of Samuel Beckett. But Pinter's theater is different from Beckett's and other avant-garde dramatists. His plays surely share major characteristics with the absurdist drama (parody of the concept of the well-made play, dismissal of motivation, linearity, and narrativity, meaningless actions, wordplay, and nonsense) but they are categorically different. Beckett, Genet and Ionesco's plays very remarkably depart from the Ibsenite fashion of realism, but Pinter's theater maintains this façade. Bernard Dukore, one of Pinter's prominent literary critics, believed that, despite the "similarity in texture" between Pinter and Beckett's theaters, "The theater of Harold Pinter is quite another matter" (43). Pinter's plays are frequently funny and frightening; their meaning is usually obscure, but they have something realistic about them. The characters behave in a believable manner even if they are shrouded with mystery. They are recognizable, not of the English theater, but of the English life. Their motives and backgrounds are vague or unknown, but we recognize—even if we are not sure of its essence—that there is motivation (44). They seem to be real people in the details of their daily lives and in their concerns, fears and dialogues, but there is something bizarre about the world of the play where they exist which is the grotesque and sinister world of Pinter's theater. Shockingly enough, this is a recognizable and familiar world that reflects the degraded English life beyond the stage doors (47). Unlike Beckett and Ionesco, Pinter is not overtly symbolic. If he employs symbols, we are never quite sure what that object or character stands for; the referents are always vague. Pinter's theater clearly, though, reflects many crises: a crisis in language, a crisis in politics, and a crisis in morality.

Nowhere are these crises more apparent than in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. Though less prominent than *The Caretaker* and *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* is considered one of Pinter's first and rudimentary manifestations of the helplessness and nonentity of the contemporary man who is reduced to a cipher, to a victim of the ruthless political system.

The focus on this chapter will be Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* due to the fact that it has not yet received the proper acclaim that this short piece deserves. Many critics would refer to *The Dumb Waiter* as a footnote in Pinter's repertoire, but what I see is not just a footnote. It is the preliminary seed of a masterful dramatic technique that enriched the English theater with a different and puzzling mode of drama.

2.2. Summary of *The Dumb Waiter*

The Dumb Waiter, the second of Pinter's one-act plays, was written in 1957, but was not professionally produced until 1959 in Frankfurt, Germany, and until 1960 at the Hampstead Theater Club in London due to its obscure and cryptic content.

The play is a genuine comedy of menace revealing Pinter's ability to produce a type of comedy built on the quicksands of threat and fear. Set in a dingy windowless basement room which contains two beds separated by a hatch—a dumbwaiter, and with two doors, one leading into the unknown and the other into a defective toilet, *The Dumb Waiter* proceeds to illustrate the same themes of helplessness, oppression, loneliness, menace, failure of communication and difficulty of verification as *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*.

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, tying and untying his shoe lace, or makes frequent visits to the faulty toilet. They exchange few incoherent conversations about trivial matters—the bloody items in the newspaper, the crockery they have been provided with, and the Saturday’s football match—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 inquiries and repeatedly tells him to shut up, and Gus seems extremely annoyed with the room’s condition. Gus, sick of waiting, wished there were a window so he could look outside and while away the arduous hours of sitting in this coffin. Ben, with his woodwork and model boats, advises Gus to have a hobby, though its usefulness in the present situation is highly questionable. Gus goes on asking more questions that remarkably irritate Ben and increase the tension between the two. These ordinary conversations serve to gradually build up a sense of something sinister behind the casual presence of two men waiting to do a job in Birmingham.

As they are waiting, someone thrusts an envelope under the door causing the two fellows to feel alarmed. Ben, the senior partner, orders Gus to examine the envelope and open it to find out that it contains twelve matches. 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”.

Following this event, Gus and Ben have a serious semantic argument over whether to use Ben’s “light the kettle” or Gus’s “put on the kettle”. Trivial as it may seem, this semantic quibble summarizes the relative positions of the two men that when Ben, wearily, forgets and says, “Put on the bloody kettle,” the inadequacy of his position as a senior partner is put to question. Gus resumes in his endless questioning adding to Ben’s exasperation. Then, 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. Orders continue to arrive, becoming more and more exotic. The two men have already sent everything up. Exasperatingly, Gus shouts up a speaking tube informing those who are dispatching the orders that they have nothing left, nothing more to offer. But this has no effect as orders keep on arriving making Ben and Gus more dismal. Finally, 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”.

After this tense episode of the hatch servings, Ben and Gus rehearse the killing act in a duologue that noticeably skips the order for Gus to take out his gun. Again, Gus starts posing questions about the people upstairs and about their next victim revealing his passionate indignation over the way they are being treated by the organization. After this, Gus exits 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. Such an open end is a device that Pinter has frequently used in his later plays.

The plot of *The Dumb Waiter* is straightforward almost to the point of simplicity. On the referential plane, almost all critics would agree that the play is about two hired killers, Ben and Gus, who arrive in Birmingham to do a job. When Gus leaves to go to the lavatory, Ben receives instructions from someone talking to him on a speaking-tube, and Gus returns to find Ben pointing a gun at him. Nevertheless, this deceptive clarity should not mislead readers into believing that this is all what the play is about. If this were the case, this would not be a Pinter play.

2.3. Interpretation by Different Critics (Literature Review)

Pinter, according to Billington, was known for his provocative writing style that promised clarity and naturalism in the first encounter, only to tantalize his viewers and readers with the intractable obscurity at the end (89).

While analyzing the play, critics tried to relate Pinter to other familiar and established theatrical forms. Influences were detected and underscored in order to familiarize the play and place it in a proper position. Many critics interpret *The Dumb Waiter* as an absurdist play as it perfectly observes some of the major characteristics of the theater of the absurd with its minimal script and action, limited and contrived setting, desultory conversations, fractured communication, mundane characters, mixture of hilarity and tragedy, and lack of motivation or purpose. Martin Esslin had even

grouped Pinter with other major absurdist playwrights like Beckett, Adamov, Genet and Ionesco. Indeed, Pinter never denied Beckett's influence on his dramaturgy, but he had also admitted to two other major influences, that of Franz Kafka and American gangster movies. These three influences combine to create the comedic and menacing world of *The Dumb Waiter* (Encyclopedia of World Drama, Qtd in Billington 88).

Being familiar with Kafka's vision, it is very accurate for me to claim that the play is infested with a Kafkaesque aura, as both Ben and Gus seem to be controlled by anonymous incomprehensible forces that are beyond their will or understanding. Locked in run-down shabby cellar—a setting typical of Kafka's fictional works—the two hitmen are metamorphosed into victims of the political system that abuses and then dispenses with them. From American gangster movies, Pinter clearly borrows the theme of an overpowering gang or terrorist organization—sometimes the CIA—that employs subjects and deploys them all over the country to perform dirty jobs of terrorizing, subduing or murdering their victims. With Beckett, Pinter shares a sharp focus on the absurdity of language and communication, but their linguistic styles are totally different. Beckett had given up the holy grail of realism altogether in his plays, so his characters' speech is never mimetic of familiar speech patterns. Pinter, however, used the stripped-down idiom of genuine speech faithfully to reveal the avoidance or the failure of communication.

Many have, erroneously, referred to Pinter as Beckett's disciple. In fact, the commonalities between the two dramatists' visions should not do Pinter this form of injustice. He is an innovator of a different dramatic language, and by this he is more a post-modernist than an absurdist. Pinter's characters are not theatrical beings with

unique contrived idioms, their actions are not symbolic, and their world is not the vast universe. In their individuality and locality, they are hardly the representatives of the entire human race. They, truly enough, represent a mysterious human condition that intrigues viewers and critics by its tenacious obscurity.

This is very true of *The Dumb Waiter* that triggered a number of critical evaluations that shortly addressed the play either favorably or unfavorably, and I say ‘short’ because those critics did not dedicate whole chapters for their analytic and critical study of the play; they have just referred to it briefly because their major focus was on Pinter’s more mature plays like *The Caretaker*, *The Birthday Party*, *No Man’s Land*, etc. Many of those critics, who will be subsequently mentioned, judged the play—and Pinter’s whole work—as highly symbolic. Refuting the accusation of symbolism in his plays, Pinter expressed, in a televised interview on B.B.C.’s “Monitor” program, his distaste for the word:

Categorically there is no direct symbolism in any of my work... one can’t possibly start off with abstractions... I write a play with a particular thing in mind, a particular set of characters, possibly two characters in a room, and the circumstances grow, and, of course, the characters grow. It’s a very particular business, and this play, for instance, this play is not an abstraction, it’s a very simple story about two characters who interact with one another in the course of action, and the situation is resolved at the end, there is a resolution. I think it’s rather conventional myself... I think there will be overtones in any work which has any kind of dimension at all... but there is no direct symbolic significance to anything at all that I’ve ever written, and I would like to say that it’s the

characters themselves who must grow... the author doesn't stand in the center of the stage and tell the audience what to think about his characters (Qtd in Kay Dick 60).

Pinter's subversive assumption certainly creates more obscurity for Pinter's readers, viewers and critics. Consequently, no clearly and unanimously formed attitude about any of Harold Pinter's plays or about their purposes can be possibly found in the entire corpus of literary criticism as referents are vague. Interpretations flourish, and with them contradictions and confusions.

Against such assumption, Ruby Cohen firmly asserts that "most crucial to an understanding of Pinter's theater is the symbolism of his characters" (57). She believes that—whether Pinter intended it or not—beneath their realistic and local appearance, they culminate to embrace the whole of humanity. To her, *The Dumb Waiter* concentrates on the plight of the victim, Gus. He is destroyed, because he has not been accepted his role as a "dumb waiter". His mutinous thoughts about Wilson and the organization and his persistent questioning have to be stopped before he exposes their bloody deeds.

Michael Billington considers the play a nearly perfect one in its portrayal of the testiness of a collapsing partnership and the divide-and-rule tactics of authority (92). Though it is described as a comedy of menace, it is also doing something political, revealing Pinter's inherent suspicion of any structured political authority that dehumanizes men (21). Billington believes that the play's punning title has multiple meanings. It clearly refers to the old serving-hatch that sends out more grotesque orders for food to these bickering hitmen. It can also be applicable to Gus, who, troubled by

the nature of the mission, waits to realize that he is the next target; or, indeed to Ben, the senior partner, who shows complete acquiescence to authority above that orders him to eliminate his comrade. While Gus unwittingly waits for his fate, he himself might be a submissive partner who is waiting for orders from Ben, the “senior partner”; however, Ben is also “dumbly” waiting, being submissive to the organization that manipulates the two men along with the mechanical dumbwaiter through its excessive and laughably untimely “orders” for highly exotic foods that only serve to intimidate both of them (89).

Denis Donoghue, in his brief analysis of the play, deplores the playwright’s wasting of his dramatic talent on portraying a negative vision of life that no intelligent adult can possibly relate to. Ben and Gus are two ambiguously connected figures who were supposed to attack a third party, but ended up with one attacking the other. Their actions and purposes are not representative of man or mimetic of real life. To him, the view of life presented in *The Dumb Waiter* is untrue as “Pinter [is making] a picture of the preponderant futilities and vulgarities and miseries of life without the impulse to exhibit as well ... some fine example of the reaction, the opposition or the escape” (95).

Martin Esslin has written three books on Pinter and published a number of scholarly articles to analyze his plays. According to Esslin *The Dumb Waiter* shows Pinter’s preoccupation with cruelty in all its varieties and possible manifestations, physical as well as verbal, with the recurrent figures of the executioners, torturers, gangsters and terrorists. By this, Esslin believes, Pinter is a true representative of his century, “The twentieth century world is one of organized cruelty on a large scale; and terrorist organizations are so intricately structured that the executive organs at the

bottom...have only a vague knowledge of the forces above them” (Harold Pinter’s Theater of Cruelty 30). Esslin’s interpretation, though very brief and terse, is very accurate as this obsession with violence is clear when Ben opted to read aloud to Gus only the bloody items in the newspaper:

Ben. Listen to this! A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn’t see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry. (86)

...

Ben. It’s a fact. What about that, eh? A kid of eleven killing a cat and blaming it on his little sister of eight! (88)

...

And when Gus discusses the mess created by their last victim:

Gus. I was just thinking about that girl, that’s all. She wasn’t much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn’t it? What a mess. Honest, I can’t remember a mess like that one. They don’t seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn’t she spread, eh? She didn’t half spread. Kaw! (102-103)

This, to Esslin, is Pinter’s least complicatedly comic play as it is the sum total of the random conversations and pauses with which the pair while away the time until the order of the job arrives. Comically enough, the orders sent down the dumb waiter are for meals rather than murder, yet the two assassins treat them with great seriousness and despair (*The Plays of Harold Pinter* 52).

It is clear that the play's menacing quality derives mainly from the tension and the loss of trust between Gus and Ben. Gus's developing sense of guilt and his obtrusive questionings irritate Ben who is satisfied with his role as a dumb waiter. With the descent of the serving lift, comedy is mixed with menace; we laugh at the characters' serious reactions when the orders are received, but we are also overwhelmed with a mysteriously sinister and threatening sensation at their despair to serve these orders.

More original, though, is Francesca Coppa's analysis of *The Dumb Waiter* as a tendentious joke. As Freud had put it, three people are required for the successful telling of a purposeful joke: the one who tells the joke, the one who is taken as the object of the joke, and the third is the one who listens and is pleased by the joke. They are, thus, the aggressor, the victim, and the audience (Raby 44). If the audience laughs, this means that he sides with the victimizer; if he doesn't laugh, he, then, sides with the victim. Even if we may not, in the final event, find the larger work funny, *The Dumb Waiter* is structured as a grave, solemn and sacred joke (46). If we fail to laugh, this indicates that we, the audience, have come to side with the victim, not the victimizer. The opening sections of the play will surely clarify this point:

Ben. Kaw! (*He picks up the paper*)

What about this? Listen to This! (*He refers to the paper*)

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

Gus: He what?

Ben. He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

Gus. No!

Ben. The lorry started and ran over him.

Gus. Go on!

Ben. That's what it says here.

Gus. Get away!

Ben. It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?

Gus. Who advised him to do a thing like that?

Ben. A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!

Gus. It's unbelievable.

Ben. It's down here in black and white.

Gus. Incredible. (86)

Ben is the joke-teller. The old man is the object of the joke. Gus is the audience. Obviously, Ben chooses to tell a story that reveals the stupidity of man and he is after a particular reaction from Gus, as for example, "What an idiot?" However, Gus replies, "Who advised him to do a thing like that?" As a hitman, Gus should have laughed and opted for the first answer. Yet, he decides to raise questions and to express a feeling of pity for the poor victim. He is not properly filling his role as an ally to the victimizer; he rather allies and sympathizes with the victim. He does the same with the next story Ben chooses to tell about a child of eight who killed a cat. Gus inquired about how the boy did it. Ben replied that it was a girl, not a boy who killed the cat, and that her eleven-year old brother was watching from the toolshed. Gus immediately assumed that it was the brother who killed the cat, not the girl. Again, he takes the wrong side, shows pity

and hesitancy to perform his assigned role and that is why he is on the wrong end of Ben's revolver when the play ends (47-49).

Pinter's comedy of menace is not constructed to produce easy laughter. The jokes it comprises are important and serious to the extent that they make the audience stop laughing to question their own alliances (55). If they readily laugh, it means that they side with the victimizer, the aggressor, and they very much resemble him, but if they opt to show sympathy and question the order of things, they are more or less siding with the victim and might be potential victims themselves just like Gus.

2.4. Political Reading of *The Dumb Waiter*

As it is clear from the above section, some modest references have already been made to the play's political implications. Yet, these implications are not fully and satisfactorily explored. In the section below, 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. Pinter admitted that *The Dumb Waiter* is subtextually 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 deceptively 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.

2.5. The Existentialist Analysis of *The Dumb Waiter*

Another reading of *The Dumb Waiter* that falls in line with its political stance is the existentialist reading. I chose this approach to prove that Pinter's second play did not only carry the seeds of his conscious political thoughts but also the sprouts of philosophical affiliations that permeate his work. Indeed, the existentialist reading of the play does not by any means negate its salient political overtones; it rather sustains and intensifies these implications.

Before I embark into the existentialist reading of the play, I will present a brief overview of existentialism. As a vast cultural and philosophical movement, the existentialist philosophy emerged in the mid nineteenth century with Søren Kierkegaard, but became immensely popular in the 1940s and 1950s with the existentialist tenets and themes permeating almost all forms of expressive and representational arts. Reversing the abstract platonic order of 'essence precedes existence', existentialist philosophers jettisoned the notion of an original archetype that precedes the actual presence and being of the individual man and sought for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of human existence in itself as isolated from the outer world. To the existentialists, the world, being meaningless and absurd, cannot offer any clues about how people should live their lives because each and every man has a different experience. With the deconstruction of all previous references and experiences, uncertainty and precariousness reign. Man, being a reflective observer, is alone in void, grappling with the help of his consciousness to discover oneself and to find reasons that compel him to continue to exist. Following this central proposition, the proponents of existentialism laid great importance on the notions of individual freedom

and responsibility. To them, each individual man should give meaning to his existence through an exercise of free will and choice. Man is free to choose the life he wants to live, to make it meaningful, to avoid nothingness or nonexistence, but he is hold responsible and accountable for his choices. This kind of freedom is burdensome, and man, according to Jean Paul Sartre, a leading French existentialist philosopher, playwright and novelist, is condemned to be free. Another major concept of the existentialist philosophy is that of angst, a feeling of dread, also known as anguish or anxiety, as the result of experiencing one's own freedom. The feeling of angst is different from fear because fear has an object that can be eliminated, but angst is felt before nothingness, this driving lack that forces man to choose himself and make his own decisions. It is a feeling of dread that ensues from the inherent insecurity about the consequences of man's actions. With the existentialists, we also encounter the salient notion of the absurdity of the world and the tediousness of daily life. If man does not impose his own meaning on the world, the world will be meaningless and chaotic and values like fairness and morality will cease to exist. To combat this absurdity, man has to authenticate his own values, to create his own purpose and to establish relationships that guard him against despair and eventually quietism or nihilism. Thus, existentialism is not equal to pessimism. It is more life-affirming as it celebrates life in its highest possibility which is the fullest attainment of one's being. Unlike other philosophies, it places the destiny of man within himself, telling him that meaning is something he gives to his existence, and affirming that hope exists in his own action that permits him to have life.

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).

I find that 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. How this is applicable to *The Dumb Waiter* is to be subsequently explored.

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. apparently, they have been sent there to do a killing. They do not know, however, who is to be killed. Neither do they seem to know who, exactly, has hired them. This is simply the situation in which they find themselves: it is without an explicit beginning, it looks forward to no explicit end. After they have waited a while, sometimes quarreling over football matches and tea, an overlooked dumb-waiter into the wall gives off a sudden clatter. Opening the hatch, the two men find out that an order for food has been sent down. Though the order is clear, “two braised steaks and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar,” there is no telling who sent it down, or why. The two men 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. As a hitman, it is very unlikely that he possesses any sense of personal integrity. Even if he is sickened with what he is doing, he is still doing it. And the only personal relationship he has established is with Ben, a relation that lacks the qualities of trust, love and honesty. Ben is constantly irritated by Gus’s actions and words, and most, he probably will not hesitate to shoot him dead at the end of the play.

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—this non-reflective being—is thinking about or questioning the status quo. Consequently, he is always trying not to think, to suspend or negate the intellectual faculty in him because it adds to his conscious awareness of his own volatile existence. 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 nonentity, as a puppet of no importance employed by higher forces and is then casually dispensed with. Yet, man is an accomplice in his victimization. He could have opted out of the game anytime. Gus could have chosen a different path, a different way of life and celebrated his existence, however, he has chosen to ignore the element of free play and stay in the game. He is, consequently, held accountable and has to face the dreadful consequences of his own choices.

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; we see him petrified, trembling in front of the unknown; we see him on the verge of despair. 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. We see him standing on the edge of the abyss shuddering and living a life of dread. 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 readings I proposed 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. Man has to be reflective and responsible to use this freedom properly and not to bring about his own nothingness. 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.

2.6. Two Different Stagings of *The Dumb Waiter*

Moving from the political and the existentialist interpretations of *The Dumb Waiter*, it is a dramatic requirement to address different staging performances of the

play. The play is being frequently staged in different parts of the world due to its contemporaneity and relevance to our modern times. Modern theatergoers find it appealing as it speaks to current political, social and philosophical concerns.

Each staging is actually a different reading and adaptation of the play that offers us a different insight into the changing dynamics of this written script. With each staging, the context, whether political or social, shifts and the play will, consequently, be interpreted differently by the director, actors and audience.

According to Billington, Pinter wrote *The Dumb Waiter* at the start of his career back in 1957. When the play's script was sent by Donald McWhinnie (assistant head of drama, sound at BBC) in August 1959 to Michael Barry (assistant head of drama, television at BBC) with a note saying, "This is a one-act stage play by the provocative Harold Pinter. It seems to me to have strong visual possessions for stage and television but I think you might feel it too obscure for your audience. If you feel by any chance that you could accommodate it, it would interest me very much as a production job." However, the reply from Barry was dismal, "Yes, too obscure, I feel" (Billington 111). In this very same year, however, *The Dumb Waiter* had its World Premiere Production in Germany at Frankfurt Municipal Theatre on 28 February 1959 under the title *Der Stumme Diener* in a production adapted by Willy H Thiem and directed by Anton Krilla. Despite its obscurity, it was viewed as "doing something which can be described as political" (92). On January 21st, 1960, *The Dumb Waiter* was premiered in London in the Hampstead Theater Club in a double bill with *The Room* and received a heap of positive reviews by critics. Since that time, the play has been frequently restaged in different countries like America, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, France, Syria, Bahrain,

Iraq and Egypt (112). The reception of the play by the critics and the audience was mixed. Some considered it meaninglessly absurd or ridiculous; others praised its playwright's theatrical talent and masterful use of dialogue.

Two particular performances will be addressed in the last section of this chapter: the first is the 50th anniversary revival of the play in 2007 by Harry Burton at the Trafalgar Studios in London, and the second is the Arabic adaptation of *The Dumb Waiter* by Zūhāir al Bika'ī in 2006 in the Amateur Theater Festival on the Qabanī Theater in Damascus.

On the 50th anniversary of *The Dumb Waiter*, the Trafalgar Studios in London hosted the play from February 2nd to March 24th 2007. It was directed by Harry Burton, a professional theater actor and director, starring Lee Evans as Gus and Jason Isaacs as Ben, two highly acclaimed stage and cinema actors. This recent production of *The Dumb Waiter* was received warmly by several theater reviewers, who praised the direction, acting, design, set, lighting, and sound effects.

From the play's onset, I can say that the curtain rises on a realistic and domestic situation, but the foreboding atmosphere will gradually pervade the stage. Burton's staging is claustrophobically bleak and suitably oppressive. From the beginning of the performance till the end, the viewer is made to feel that the room is a virtual coffin and that the two killers are on the lowest ladder of the organization. Evans and Isaacs are darkly hilarious and funny. Evan's Gus seems dim-witted and simple-minded, but successfully betrays a deep sense of wonder about the world. He is genuinely pleased by the pattern on the saucers, "He's laid on some nice crockery this time, I'll say that. It's sort of striped. There's a white stripe. It's very nice. I'll say that" (87), and by the

prospect of watching a soccer game, “Eh, it’s Friday today, isn’t it? It’ll be Saturday tomorrow. We could go and watch the Villa” (93), while feels terribly indignant by the deteriorating room conditions, “I wouldn’t like to sleep in this dump. I wouldn’t mind if you had a window, you could see what it looked like outside” (89), the long and arduous waiting, “I feel like I’ve been here for years” (109), and the empty gas, “After all, it’s his place, he could have seen there was enough gas for a cup of tea” (101). Evans is successful in taking the audience along on this journey with his faultless performance. His brilliant use of details, like the facial tic and bodily movement (very reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin especially in the obsessive way he ties and unties his shoe laces), his vocal work, and precise timing convince viewers of the character’s reality and convince them of the existential and darkly funny aspects of the play. His passionate outrage is masterfully enacted upon receiving the exotic orders from the serving hatch, “What he’s doing it for? ... We’ve always done our job? ... What’s he playing these games for?” (118). His desire for knowledge and his dissatisfaction successfully get on the nerves of Ben. Isaac’s Ben is grumpy, taciturn using stillness, silence, and abrupt wicked violence to create the impulsive edge of menace that permeates Pinter’s drama. The audience is shocked as Ben is roused to great anger over silly and banal details like the semantics of ‘putting the kettle on’ or ‘lighting the kettle’. But he is not outraged of the situation like his partner; he seems at peace until the orders started descending. He apparently suffers a thrill of dread and anxiety, and then tries hard to please the people upstairs and speaks diffidently via the speaking tube almost apologizing for their inability to supply the orders, “Good evening. I’m sorry to—bother you, but we thought we’d better let you know that we haven’t got anything

left. We sent up all we had. There is no more food down here” (111). Yet, Ben seems to know his way and nowhere in the play does he experience a serious crisis. Eying Gus with suspicion most of the time, and tensely reading the bloody items in the newspaper, Ben is waiting for the orders and cannot care less about the room conditions, “We’re not staying long. Make the tea, will you? We’ll be on the job in a minute” (91).

The performance, according to Charles Spencer, *The Daily Telegraph* reviewer, was entirely convincing as a Pinter play. Burton clearly adhered to the original text and was able to give an accomplished portrayal of the confusion and dread that Pinter’s script demands. To him, “*The Dumb Waiter* may be short, but there is no mistaking its status as a groundbreaking modern classic.” The setting is superb, a grotty and seedy airless basement room, “with grubbiness seeping from every crevice” (*The Observer*). The soundscape is terrific, “with an unpredictable lavatory cistern growling away at one side of the stage and the dumb waiter of the title slamming down into the center of the action” (*The Times*). To Michael Billington, this 2007 revival of *The Dumb Waiter* is superbly orchestrated, as Burton, “instead of imposing the comedy on Pinter, [his staging] allows it to emerge through the interstices of a gripping study of the mechanics of fear.” With Burton, Pinter’s hitmen are shown as nervously quarrelsome, insecure figures in awe of larger, destructive forces. The director has been able to reinforce the play’s political overtones through the utmost dinginess of the room that, according to Billington, reveals the fact that the two killers are situated at the lowest level of this organization, and through the dumb waiter which, “is [not a] mere comic device, but a lift that descends from a vast height with the resonance of a guillotine. When it falls for the last time, we know a murder is about to take place.” The metaphor of the

institutionalized terror was faithfully conveyed though Burton's production has given full rein to Pinter's comedy. The audience is made to laugh at several points: Gus's too short trousers, his skinny frame and hunching shoulders, Ben's fury over the semantic quibble, the serving hatch's exotic orders, etc. Billington adds, "This new revival reminds us that Pinter knows exactly how to balance comedy and fear to imply that we are all in the grip of invisible, higher powers" (*The Guardian*).

To Nicholas de Jongh, Burton's production is a beautifully nuanced production that sustains "the play's abiding strangeness and capacity to induce mystified laughter." Evans and Isaacs successfully intertwined comedy and pathos creating a sense of inescapable menace and suspense intertwined with absurdist comedy (*Evening Standard*).

Though *The Dumb Waiter* is one of the playwright's earliest plays where his political and philosophical views were still shrouded with opacity, I find that it reveals Pinter's distinctive talent at producing a sense of edgy unease and menace into the dullest exchanges. His spare precision of language and his ominously measured silences serve to uncover the true natures and motivations of his characters, their dread and fear from the authority above and their insurmountable limitations. Burton's staging of the play has indeed shown Pinter at his very best: provocative, terse, elusive, mysterious, yet startlingly fresh and sharp.

Another prominent staging of the play was produced in Syria in 2006. The director Zūhāir al Bika'ī reworked the play with a different vision adding background music and lights, and inserting new scenes with the characters dancing or imitating some bloody political figures and murderers. The production was staged on Al Qabanī

Theater in Damascus during the first Amateur Theater Festival in July 2006. This Arab adaptation of *The Dumb Waiter* won the best performance award at the festival and was praised by reviewers for the aspects of lighting, costumes, music, acting and directing (*Syria News*).

Bika'ī's *The Dumb Waiter* apparently adhered to Pinter's plot with the same two hired assassins Ben and Gus (but he changed Gus's name to James because it's more appealing to the Arabic ear) awaiting—in windowless basement room, literally strewn with garbage (an addition here to highlight the low status of the two assassins in the organization)—orders from Wilson to perform a specific unnamed 'task'. The setting underscores the unrealistic nature of the play as it is clear that Bika'ī downplayed the political aspects of the play due to the unpleasant interference and omissions practiced by the censorship in the Arab theater. The set includes two metallic beds, a small blue elevator in the middle area between them, and other pieces like the pistols, a blue barrel, a tape-recorder, and a letter. The deficient toilet is dispensed with in this stage production.

The two characters while away the time through singing, dancing and role-playing. In Bika'ī's adaptation, the two hit men seem to me openly distrustful of one another as they easily raise their pistols in each other's face upon any suspicious move. The atmosphere is full of menace and Bika'ī's James, actor Qūsay Qūdsiyā, reveals this aspect in his constant questionings about the job, about their career, about the boss, in a shivering voice and with a permanent feeling of fear and uncertainty. While Bika'ī's Ben, actor Mūstafā Sawāf, is more self-poised and confident. He is the decision-maker,

the senior partner who reads about different crimes in a newspaper to his mate and tries to alleviate the latter's obsessive anxiety.

An important addition in Bika'ī's adaptation is the introduction of light effects that he used to reflect the various emotional and psychological states of the characters: the bright light is used to mirror their pleasant and funny moods, the blue light to reveal their fear and worry, while the red light is used to reflect danger which is associated with the mechanical dumb-waiter. With the descent of the food orders, James feels disheartened while Ben tries to maintain his poise. Both men decide to send up the few morsels of food that James has brought with him, but people upstairs do not seem satisfied. James breaks down in a passionate tantrum as Ben helplessly tries to appease him. When Ben finally receives his orders through the speaking tube, the audience is implicitly made aware of the identity of the next victim, and is quite sure that Ben will not hesitate to perform the task.

Bika'ī, in a telephone interview I conducted with him, states that he was fully aware of the different kind of audience his version of the play is appealing to, and for this reason, he adapted the play to reach this new group of viewers. His version adopted the original political stance of Pinter's play but he attenuated it to divert censorship's attention away, and he believed that he was successful to a certain degree. On the surface, he adds that the play depicts the one-day wait of two assassins in an underground dump and their different modes of entertainment, speaking, singing, and thinking. But beneath this surface, the political message cannot be missed, it is sharp and daring. Bika'ī's adaptation offers its perceptive viewers subtle insights into the realities of authority in the Arab world, into the modern corrupted political system that

is still using assassins to silence his opponents. In Bika'ī's *The Dumb Waiter*, the two assassins are not despised, and with him Gus/James is even elevated to the rank of a pitiful victim that summons our sympathy and compassion because he is purposefully presented as a helpless and smashed entity. Ben, too, is not despicable as he is mostly driven by fear to satisfy the organization's orders lest he meets a tragic end. Upon the first encounter, the world of Bika'ī's *The Dumb Waiter* looks absurd and delirious and sounds noisy and boisterous, but he affirms that he has used all of these elements as a façade to introduce a more serious and politically-oriented content via the vehicle of absurdity (personal communication July 10, 2012).

Bika'ī's additions reveal a deep political consciousness that he aspires to promulgate to his audience. The introduction of the musical element and of various light effects has a lot of implications that serve to clarify the overall meaning of his adaptation. Being fully aware of his audience, Bika'ī chooses to add appealing background music to his adaptation as he is certainly conscious that the connection between dramatic performances and music has remained a major feature of much modern Arabic drama and that the Arabic audience savors this musical element. When it comes to the lights, one can notice that Bika'ī has interfered immensely with this element; he skillfully manipulated the lights in order to elicit a certain response from his audience and to direct their reception of the play by attaching a particular feeling to each of the colors used. When James and Ben are dancing, a cheerful atmosphere is created through the introduction of bright lights; with the two men's imitation of some political figures that resemble to a great extent the real Arab authority figures, such as Sadām Hūysein and Mū'ammār al Qadāffī, blue lights emerge as the two characters

face one another raising their pistols, looking suspiciously for any tapping device in the corners of the room; they seem to dread the possibility of being seen or heard by anyone who might betray them. Bika'i here portrays the average Arab citizen in his utmost aversion and dread of tyrannical rulers who have denied man all forms of freedom and rendered him a fearful, dumb and silent waiter. The red light denotes danger and is associated with the dumbwaiter. The prominence of this light in the second half of the play moves the audience to a new form of awareness. If the two assassins have at an earlier point in the play suspected that they might have been watched by a mysterious entity up there, now they are quite certain of it. They tremble and shudder with the descent of each order. Ben tried helplessly to meet their demands, but he could not. James seems reluctant to give away his chocolate bar, juice bottle and biscuits to those people up there who are most probably eating a fancy meal and playing a dirty game with them. When the last letter is delivered, Ben reads it silently with extreme amazement. James stares at him and detects the sinister nature of its content. He inquires about it, but Ben tersely tells him to prepare himself for the job. James sits on his bed and looks under the pillow, but he cannot find his pistol. When he raised his head, Ben was pointing the gun at him. The curtain falls with the sound of a gunshot, so the audience is not left to wonder whether Ben is going to shoot James or not, for he certainly will.

Bika'i's adaptation of *The Dumb Waiter* is not a mere slavish copy of Pinter's script. He took certain liberties and made changes in the action, setting, and effects to make sure that the audience never misses the point behind his play.

This Arabic production of the play was performed in different theater festivals and was considered by many critics a serious theatrical experience rich with social, philosophical and political overtones that meets the need of the modern stage and of the new generation (*Tishreen*). According to Yarā Badr, the two actors succeeded in reflecting the director's vision of the impossibility of any direct and transparent communicative process between the two characters as symbolized by the disrupted and disconnected communication via the dumb-waiter and its accompanying speaking tube (*Al Qūds al 'Arābī*).

To Najmeddīn Sammān, the play is mainly about two professional assassins who live to kill and kill to live, but it is imbued with some political ideas about the helplessness of man in front a superior power that gives higher orders that should be implemented. In this world of crime, the hunter becomes the hunted and the torturer becomes the tortured. Hamdī al Mūsīlī described the performance as unmistakably absurd presenting two murderous derelicts in a room. Ben is completely bloody and inhumane while James is struggling to retain some of his lost humanity (*Tishreen*).

All in all, what the two productions have in common is this daring socio-political satire which implies that some murderers still have more human feelings in their hearts than those higher and superior powers that send orders and expect absolute compliance. This is the serious meaning that Pinter always disguises under a thick layer of absurdity and mundane exchanges. I can affirm that Both Burton and Bika'ī's adaptations have skillfully succeeded in removing this guise and in making the audience see the serious nature of the play.

CHAPTER THREE

‘ISĀM MAHFŪZ’S *THE DICTATOR*

3.1. Brief overview of ‘Isām Mahfūz’s Life and Theater

There is an almost unanimous consensus among modern Arab dramatists and literary critics that ‘‘Isām Mahfūz is one of the most prominent figures of the Arabic avant-garde theater. His plays established a new form of theater that dispensed with the well-made plot and the highly articulate language of his predecessors. His was the spirit of a revolutionary artist that was able to transform the Arabic theater into a new form and mode of expression and representation that bewildered and deeply moved his audiences.

‘‘Isām Mahfūz was born in 1939 in Jdeīdit Marje’yūn, South Lebanon. His father, Abdūl-Massīh Mahfūz was a renowned poet and the founder of Cinema Harāmūn. From his early years, Mahfūz was fond of poetry and drama; he watched with admiration the different performances of his uncle’s theater troupe. He even composed few poems that were published in the school magazine. He formed his own amateur theater troupe, and in 1949 he wrote many scripts which were performed by this troupe on the school theater in Marje’yūn (*Al A’māl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā* 542). These rudimentary plays depicted his aversion to dictatorial rulers, his love and compassion for the common and ordinary people, and his unshakable belief in the importance of freedom and social justice. The heroes of his juvenile plays are common people who revolt against the tyrant kings and win freedom and justice for their nation. These were

the romantic dreams of the 10-year-old Mahfūz who believed in the power of people to overthrow dictatorial regimes and achieve social equality and justice. He continued to compose poetry and to write for the theater in his adolescent years. These early attempts have definitely carried the seeds of his mature poetic and dramatic vision ten years later. Mahfūz's theater troupe continued to produce and present performances of a number of scripts composed by him and of other world renowned pieces (543). He himself wrote, adapted, acted and directed most of its productions. When he finished high school, Mahfūz traveled to Paris in 1956 to study French Literature. In 1959, he graduated with a diploma from the Institute of Graduate Studies in Paris. During his stay in Paris, Mahfūz composed a volume of poems called "Ashyā' Mayta" (Dead Things) and upon his return to Lebanon, he went to *Al Shi'r Magazine (The Poetry Magazine)* and delivered the poems to the editor, the renowned Lebanese poet Yūsūf al-Khāl. When al-Khāl read Mahfūz's poems, he announced to Adūnīs, Ūnsī al-Hāj, Shawqī Abī Shakrā and other prominent Lebanese poets, the birth of a new, young and promising poetic talent in Lebanon. His first poems, "Al 'Ūyūn al Barīdā" (The Cold Eyes), "Al Mūsīqā al Ka'tbā" (The Melancholic Music) and "Al Miq'adā" (The Seat) revealed the prevalent feelings of sadness and loneliness that accompanied the poet throughout his entire life (Abī Sa'b).

In the years 1961 and 1963, *Al Shi'r Magazine* published two poetry volumes for Mahfūz entitled "A'Shāb al Şeif" (Summer Herbs) and "Al-Seif w Būrj al 'Azrā' " (The Sword and the Virgin Tower). His connection to al-Khāl and al-Hāj and his frequent participation in the "Thursday Dialogue" a weekly gathering where many prominent Lebanese poets, dramatists, journalists and literary critics met to discuss

literary issues, gave him the opportunity to become a writer and a literary critic for *An-Nahār* daily newspaper. In 1970, he also became a professor of drama in The Lebanese University (Abi Sa'b).

Yet, Mahfūz's talent did not only encompass poetry, journalism, academic teaching and literary criticism. He wrote his first play, *Al Zanzalakht (The Chinaberry Tree)* in 1963 as an application to his own new vision or theory of the modern Arabic theater as revealed in his Theater Manifesto Number 1 where he announced the rebellious nature of his drama. In this manifesto which was directly written after *The Chinaberry Tree*, Mahfūz presented an avant-gardist vision of the theater that should defy all old traditions in language, content, form and direction, and he further called for the birth of a new theater that addresses all men all over the world. He has also drawn a sharp distinction between what he called the "literary text" and the "dramatic text" and insisted that the latter should be totally free from all imposed kinds of poetry, of intellectual pedantry, and of theatrical rhetoric (79-80). To him, great literature is that which can transcend the local frame to speak to humanity altogether by addressing the basic problems of man which, to him, are man's complicated relationship with the internal or the external system and his need for justice and freedom. It is this hard, tense and broken relationship between man and his world that the great dramatist should attempt to portray, and to do so, he should search for a new form that can faithfully render this experience. In *The Chinaberry Tree*, Mahfūz, just like Peter Weiss, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and Fernando Arrabal, used the theme of lunacy because he believes that the mad man's actions and reflections are the best mirror to his world (82). In the manifesto, too, Mahfūz has demonstrated a great historical and political awareness of

the world around him and expressed his belief that men, all over the world, share the same cultural and literary heritage as Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, Beckett, Miller, and Pinter have addressed men everywhere and anywhere. All these great dramatists had one major concern which was to shock man and to instigate him to rebel against all forms of injustice (81). For Mahfūz, theater should lead all other genres of arts because of its direct interaction and confrontation with the audience that makes its influence much stronger. In order to achieve this strong influence on the audience, Mahfūz insists, modern theater should be violent, provocative, agitating and even stabbing in its portrayal of the world; modern theater should divorce all the old techniques even if it takes the risk of becoming dirty, rude, and immoral (82). Mahfūz concludes his manifesto by affirming that his new theater should portray the real world and speak the language of the real world which is “the vernacular language that is spoken in the street, in the house and during fights” (83).

It is clear, then, that *The Chinaberry Tree* was written in alignment to Mahfūz’s manifesto and due to its unfamiliar nature, language and content, the play was not performed until 1968. Directed by Berg Fazelian with a very minimal budget, the play proved to be an immense success. It received many favorable reviews and was considered by most playwrights and literary critics, such as Khalīda al Sa’īd, Muhammad Dakrūb, Roger Allen and ‘Alī al-Ra’ī, one of the first avant-garde plays that launched the modern era of Arabic drama. Written in the Lebanese vernacular, *The Chinaberry Tree*, the first of Mahfūz’s incomplete trilogy that includes *The Dictator* and *Sa’dūn the King*, was considered the most important Arabic play in the 1960s following the absurdist mode of Beckett and Ionesco and depicting Sa’dūn’s trial by the

General and other jury members situated in a lunatic asylum. All these characters are inmates of this mental institution, but their language, deeds and cruelty represent the reality of the outside world that is controlled with wild authority, arbitrariness, inconsistency, nonsense, and immorality.

Throughout his life and career, Mahfūz's political involvement was paramount. He was a comprehensive political thinker who constantly observed and criticized the deteriorating political, social and cultural conditions in the Arab world whether in his plays, journal articles, critical works or books. He was a diehard nationalist who was deeply influenced by the June 1967 debacle—the demoralizing loss of Arab national forces when the Egyptian and Syrian armies were disgracefully and completely defeated and crushed by the Israeli forces, an event that led to the decline of Arab nationalism—that added to his sense of disillusionment, disappointment and bitterness, themes that constantly haunted his plays.

Between the years 1968 and 1976, Mahfūz wrote many plays for the theater: *Al Diktātōr* (*The Dictator*) the second play of the trilogy (the third *Sa'dūn Malīkan*, *Sa'dūn*, the king, was not completed), *Al Qatl* (*The Killing*), *Carte Blanche*, *Limadhā* (*Why?*), *11 Kadiyyā Dudd al-Hurriyyā* (*11 Cases against Freedom*) and *Tab'ā Khassā* (*A Special Edition*), all of which are explicitly political. With the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, Mahfūz traveled to France and stayed there till 1981. This period was very depressing, psychologically and financially, to Mahfūz, and it certainly added to his sense of estrangement and injustice. Back in Beirut, he wrote his last piece for the theater: *Masrahiyyāt Kasirā* (*Short Plays*) including *Murder in a Hospital* (*Jarīmā fī al Mūstashfā*), *The Chairs* (*Al Karāsī*), *Zaynab and the Person* (*Zaynab w al Shakhs*),

President Abdūllah (Al Ra'īs Abdūllah), *Hasan and the Bey (Hasan w al Bey)*, and *January 1992 (Kanūn al Thanī 1992)*. He also translated, adapted, and directed many absurdist plays such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Sławomir Mrożek's *Striptease (Al Ta'arri)*. Mahfūz's theater was distinctively political with multiple political themes pervading his plays, like dictatorship, tyranny, freedom, justice, repression and oppression, etc. And this was the reason why his scripts suffered a lot of modifications and omissions by censorship authorities.

After 1984, Mahfūz stopped writing for the theater because he had lost faith in its transformative role following the demoralizing experience of the Lebanese civil war and its abhorrent consequences, but he never abandoned the stage. He wrote profusely about drama and participated in many theater festivals and seminars presenting lectures about the function of theater, the crises of the Arabic theater, and the relationship between theater and politics in addition to many other topics. He also continued to write critical studies, short stories and series of imaginary dialogues with rebellious Arab philosophers and thinkers like Ibn 'Arābī, Tahtāwī, Jabir Bin Hayyān, and many others who daringly questioned and even rebelled against the Islamic religious heritage at their times. He further published a series of books introducing to Arab readers the prominent western novelists, dramatists and poets of the twentieth century.

In November 2005, Mahfūz suffered a stroke and a resulting hemiplegia which led to his death on the 4th of February 2006. He died destitute and lonely in an isolated ICU room in a governmental hospital in Beirut. Such an end was tragic for this great Arabic thinker who possessed the most authentically modern and progressive

intellectual vision in his forty five diverse publications. He is, indeed, a leading Lebanese dramatist who has laid the foundation of the new theater in the Arab world.

With Mahfūz, the Lebanese theater has witnessed a complete and total revamp. His drama posed a sharp contrast to the classical concept of dramatic compositions that was adopted and accepted by most Lebanese and Arab dramatists during the early 20th century. While most of the Arabic plays were written in the standard Arabic language and were mostly poetic, Mahfūz sacrificed the literary and poetic language of Ahmad Shawqi and Tawfiq al Hakim and used spoken language bringing drama to a realistic level of engagement with the world and the human condition. Like Sa'dallah Wannous, Mahfūz revived the Arabic theater and freed it from the old techniques of the well-made play and the heightened diction. In his revolutionary manifesto, he declared that political engagement and realism are the two basic conditions of modern theater which, to him, should function as a mirror that reflects reality, not in the classical, but in the socialist sense (540). Using the absurd and the realistic dramatic styles in his plays, Mahfūz revealed a strong political involvement through the dramatic construction of his plot and characters that represented his own political views and convictions.

In his progressive theatrical vision, ‘‘Isām Mahfūz attributes a great importance to the role of theater in the society. To him, the mission of the theater is to transform this chaotic world into a prosperously civilized, just and free milieu where man can enjoy freedom (of speech, of conviction, of choice, of action, etc.) and where he is treated with justice and equality. This can be achieved by creating a heightened sense of awareness in people about the decadence of their present state and by instilling in them this rebellious spirit of change for the better. His theater is a conscientiously and

actively political and social theater that parodies the practices of dictatorial authorities that dehumanize man and dispense with all moral values to insure their prominence and permanence. Mahfūz believes that the theater, being the most wide-ranging and public of all arts, is the most effective medium as it offers its audiences an immediacy of experience that is capable of reaching them and of transforming their convictions and beliefs. The theater he is promoting must take a clear stand against intellectual pedantry; it must play a significant role in transforming this world to a better place for humanity. It has to do so by speaking to man directly without any barriers, and if the 'literary/classical' Arabic language is a barrier, it should be sacrificed for this noble cause (*Al A'māl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā* 82-83). In his theater manifesto, published after the staging of *The Chinaberry Tree* (August 16, 1968), Mahfūz declares that he wants to revolutionize the Arabic theater that has antiquated itself by preserving all the clichés and by adhering to pompous rhetoric and elocution that sickens the new generation which is in need of a completely fresh approach in order to feel more engaged in the dramatic scene (83).

Mahfūz presents in his manifesto the new structural and linguistic paradigms of the theater that he faithfully adheres to in *The Chinaberry Tree*, his first masterpiece. There, he declares his utmost rejection of all forms of drama that duplicate and imitate the classical dramatic concepts of the well-made play and of the highly poetic and rhetorical language of traditional Arabic dramatists and poets. Our present world, Mahfūz believes, is different from theirs and our problems, too. An authentic rendering of this new content requires a new structure that is shocking, provocative and moving (82), the very characteristics of the Theater of the Absurd. Like the absurdist dramatists,

Mahfūz, in his theater, is not after narrating a story; he is rather after depicting an individual human condition that can transcend its local frame to encompass the entire humanity (80).

His plays and adaptations skillfully mix absurdity with comedy and tragedy, thus, creating a unique kind of theater that was not common to the Lebanese and the Arab audiences at that time—yet, some viewers have had an encounter with it in many translated dramatic pieces from the repertoire of world drama. The comedy in his plays has a tragic dimension that expresses man's despair (262). It seems that Mahfūz believes that realism in drama provides a very narrow perspective to reality, and for this reason, he resorted, especially in his first plays (the trilogy), to absurdist techniques and themes which, he believes, are effectively capable of providing a more interesting, shocking and true reflection of the real world. In *The Chinaberry Tree*, we encounter an absurd trial that is completely divorced from reality. We are presented with a number of inmates in a mental institution playing a game starring Sa'dūn as the weak, hesitant and shuddering defendant and the General who is both the prosecutor and the judge. Sa'dūn is being tried for a crime, may be a murder, but we are not quite sure of its nature or verity. There are some witnesses, beggars, Sa'dūn's mother, the court clerk, and some other spectators that appear in the twelve disconnected scenes of the play. The dialogue between the characters attests to the nonsensical and illogical nature of the game played, but it is very seriously played. The world of the play, despite its absurdity, is very much similar to our world as it produces the same form of cruel authority and indifference that characterizes the modern Arabic political systems. According to Khalidā al Sa'īd, Mahfūz uses lunacy as a mirror to reflect what lies beyond the social consciousness and

the acceptable terminology, and he was able to reveal a miniature version of the real world when logic collapses and arbitrariness reigns (477).

With *The Chinaberry Tree*, Mahfūz's theater has established its relative uniqueness; it has marked its departure from the former Arabic dramatic forms and language, and affirmed its relevance and connectedness to a larger and more universal dramatic mode that thrived in Europe in the 1950s and the 1960s, namely The Theater of the Absurd. Influenced by Beckett and Ionesco, some of Mahfūz's pieces for the theater are absurdist in their dramatic form, but the content and the language are Mahfūz's most significant contributions to the modernization of the Lebanese and Arabic Theater. He is absurdist in his choice of a shocking topic, in his minimal script, in the symbolic and contrived setting he creates for his plays, in the vast symbolism of his characters, and in infesting his type of comedy with a bitter and tragic dimension. He is, however, an innovator in the field of dramatic language; he created a distinctive language for the theater, somewhere between classical and vernacular Arabic, and by this he rescued the theater from the language of literature, and uses instead the language of life, of the street, of ordinary people (*Al A'māl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā* 83) as this dialogue from *The Dictator* clearly reveals:

سعدون	- (الى الجنرال) هذا مسرور يا جنرال... قال الحصار طَوَّل والثوار ملّوا...
الجنرال	- ملّوا؟ ... أولاد الحرام... الخونة... عيون العالم كلها عليهم. شو الثورة لعبة؟ قل له يطمّعون بالويسكي... قصور الملك مليانة ويسكي وكافيار وسيكار...
سعدون	- ودولار...
الجنرال	- لا تزايد. بلّغ.

Mahfūz's later theater is highly political and ideological voicing Mahfūz's own leftist political thoughts and his belief in the importance of a radical social change that can create a more egalitarian society (593). Many of his plays have direct and explicit political themes like *Carte Blanche*, *Why?*, *Murder in a Hospital*, *The Chairs*, *Zaynab and the Person*, and *President Abdullah* where he severely criticized the Arab political regimes for their repressive and manipulative practices. In these pieces, Mahfūz does not stand aloof from his characters and their ideological positions. He assumes a very clear political stand and expresses his own ideology unequivocally, mostly championing freedom, calling for democracy, condemning repression and exploitation, and forever defending the blue-collar class which is always subject to these forms of injustice (597). These plays mix the real with the unreal, present historical and political references, and parody the sociopolitical system for its sham democracy and totalitarianism. Characters in some of his plays are portrayed in a shocking way, raving on the verge of insanity and paranoia, engaging in long charged monologues and dialogues full of references and multilayered meanings, expressing Mahfūz's aversion to the pervading moral, social and political corruption.

Such themes also pervade *The Dictator*, one of Mahfūz's masterpieces and the second in the incomplete trilogy following *The Chinaberry Tree*. Though Mahfūz himself does not label *The Dictator* as a direct political play because, to him, such a classification will narrow the play's wider scope, as he believes that it necessarily communicates political themes that portray the conditions of the third world in general (610). The focus of the coming section of this chapter will be *The Dictator*. With the play's farcical and absurdist nature, its genuine presentation of a daring political theme,

its new language and dialogue, and its deeply shocking relevance to our modern life, *The Dictator* has established its prominent position not only in the Lebanese and Arabic Theater, but also in the heritage of World Drama.

3.2. Summary of *The Dictator*

Originally entitled *The General*, Mahfūz's *The Dictator* was written in 1968, and was first performed on Oct. 14, 1969 on Masrah Beirūt (Beirut Theater). The play is of two acts depicting two men Sa'dūn and the General in a minimalist setting of one windowless room with a broken mirror, a table, some broken pieces of furniture, a disconnected telephone, and an old ladder. The curtain rises on the General as he is wearily calling Sa'dūn who is nowhere to be found on the stage. As the door opens, Sa'dūn appears carrying a pair of jackboots. The General reprimands Sa'dūn for being late but then tells him that by bringing him the boots, he has "brought salvation to the world" (*Al A'māl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā* 112). The General orders Sa'dūn to shine the boots, and the latter bends on the floor and shines it using his shirt sleeves; the boots became so shiny, and the General remarks that Sa'dūn can use it as a mirror. Sa'dūn, seeing his face through the shiny, 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 replied that "Freedom is more important than bread" (112), for he believes that with the boots, he will be able to open the door of freedom. It is then revealed that the General is leading a revolution from inside this room, and Sa'dūn is his loyal servant.

Hearing the sound of cannon shots, the General asks Sa'dūn to hang the map on the wall and inquires about the position of his military forces and about the number of the states that have been seized so far. Sa'dūn 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 then contemplates himself in the mirror and asks Sa'dūn if some money is left to buy him a hat (casquette). Sa'dūn tells him that only one lira is left and that he gets chocolate with it; this infuriates the General who takes all the chocolate as a punishment for Sa'dūn who is always late when he is sent on errands and who always sleeps in the afternoons—habits that annoy his master. But Sa'dūn is fond of sleeping because in his dreams he sees the king's palace and his young daughter that he romanticizes about (114-115).

The next section reveals the General's paranoia as he asks Sa'dūn if he has inspected the room and checked if the door is firmly locked. He suspects that Sa'dūn's shirt buttons have been replaced with microphones in the laundry, but Sa'dūn replies that he has not changed his shirt since two months. The General then speaks about the king who has deceived everyone; Just like Marie Antoinette, he gave people biscuits when hungry, and offered them radios, televisions, refrigerators, and cars when bored, but meanwhile he was binding them with certificates of indebtedness, "These dogs thought that they were free. Sure they were; they were free to bark; they were free to eat the leftovers. I came here to rescue them..." (116). When Sa'dūn compares the General to the magician in *Thousand and One Nights*, the latter was enraged and dismisses Sa'dūn from his service. Sa'dūn apologizes from his master and begs him for forgiveness, "Do not leave me my General. You are my savior... if you leave me, they

will eat me” (116). Sa’dūn stays and the two men play the game of names until Masrūr, one of the revolutionaries, calls to inform the king that the siege has lasted for long and the men are feeling tired and bored. The General knows how to appease his men, “The king’s palace is full of whiskey, caviar and cigar,” (118). Again the General is angry with Sa’dūn and dismisses him. Sa’dūn asks for forgiveness, and tells his General, “I am your only servant!” The General replies, “My only servant? 99.99% of people in the world are servants,” (118) Yet Sa’dūn is forgiven because he has to answer the phone and to shine the boots. When he bends and kisses the General’s hand, the General extends the other hand and Sa’dūn kisses it, though the General affirms that he is kind-hearted and modest. Sa’dūn compares the General to the king, whom, he believes, is also kind-hearted and modest, as the king appears in a photograph Sa’dūn has seen for him with his wife and daughters. The king has even got dimples just like the General. The General replies, “God bless her (the General’s wife), she used to love my dimples” (119).

The General dismisses Sa’dūn for a third time because he spits on the jackboots while trying to shine them, but he is once more forgiven for the sake of the revolution. The General then expressed his concern, “My men are late, very late” (120). He fears that they might have been bought by the king. Soon after, Masrūr calls to announce the success of the revolution with the fall of the capital and the king’s palace in the hands of the General’s military forces. The General is genuinely happy and gives Sa’dūn a piece of chocolate, but again he loses his temper and dismisses Sa’dūn when he mentions that Masrūr has the same name as King Shahriār’s executioner in *Thousand and a One Nights* (122). Nevertheless, Sa’dūn stays and brings the General the marshal’s staff; the

General holds it and looks into the mirror. Another conversation ensues about the overthrown king and a second photo of the king and his youngest daughter as she pokes her tongue to the world or maybe to the photographer, and Sa'dūn remarks that she is a thoughtless child and that he is not in love with her because he is "Against the king. He is the General's servant. Long live the General..." (123). He then assures the General that he is taller, greater and more intelligent than the king.

The General now prepares for his first manifesto, a hilarious episode of wordplay where he addresses the nation as "the wretched people of the new world" (124). Masrūr calls to inform them that the king has escaped. The General firmly ordered, "remove the king's photos from all the walls, public places, houses, and public and private institutions" (126). The photos were removed but they reappeared again and again. The General orders his militia to inspect homes, to fight the photos, and to pursue the king (126). His first decree is to unify the color and the style of men and women's clothes. Sa'dūn suggests purple, the color of the king's daughter's dress. Another conversation begins about women who, along with money, are seen by the General as the source of evil in the world. To him, love is the root cause of man's misery, and for this reason he ordered the confiscation of all feelings and emotions. He continues to issue decrees ordering the execution of the former government members, the imprisonment of all parliament members (even if only one member is not supportive of the revolution), the dissolution of all political parties, the confiscation of all their thoughts, and the execution of their leaders. When Sa'dūn compassionately asks the General, "But what if they were not wrong?" the General replies, "The loser is always wrong" (132).

When Masrūr calls again to inform the General that the traders renounce the revolution, he orders the liquidation of the traders and the adoption of bartering, exchanging the necessary with the necessary (133). He also cancels the press and orders his militia to arrest journalists, literary men, writers and all artists because they are no longer needed (134). He even calls for the capture of all people because he believes that they are untrustworthy and fickle (137). 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. Then Masrūr, Mansūr, Mašhūr, and Mandūr, some of the General's 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 two men cannot identify which day of the week it is, and Sa'dūn is bored of counting days as all days look just the same (143). The General feels burdened and has no appetite for food; he orders Sa'dūn to think about the reason of his agony. But Sa'dūn does not want to think because thinking causes torture (144); he gets used to the General thinking for him. He then recalls moments of his life (before he meets the General) when he used to think, when he was a member in a party. He discovered horrible things about the world, weird things that he could not understand (146).

As the two men were talking, a knocking is heard at the door, but when Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn does not exist.

When Sa'dūn insists that he exists whether this person has knocked at the door or not, the General asks for an evidence for his existence. Words and writings are not enough evidence for the General. Sa'dūn'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—Sa'dūn'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 Sa'dūn and interrogates him about his true identity. He orders him to take off his shirt, and when Sa'dūn does so, the General sniffs it to make sure that this is the king's smell. As the General further questions Sa'dūn about his identity, the latter recalls his imprisonment and the torture he has been subjected to in order to confess of doing something he did not do and to admit that he was someone else. As he said "No" to his torturers, he was beaten, soaked in urine, and his nails were extracted (150). It was the General who advised him to say "yes" so the torturers would stop. Then, there is a mention of a trial where the General saved Sa'dūn from an unjust verdict. Following a convoluted way of thinking and reasoning, the General now firmly believes that Sa'dūn is the king who was watching and tracking him ever since he knew that he was preparing for a coup d'états. Sa'dūn takes this to be a joke, but the General is serious. He contemplates himself in the mirror and thinks about how deceptive and malicious Sa'dūn/king is. The General then asks Sa'dūn to bring him a rope which he uses to tie the latter's hands.

While Sa'dūn believes that this is another game they are about to play, the General orders Sa'dūn to tell the truth, to confess his true identity. Sa'dūn 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, Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn to go fetch it. Sa'dūn objects since he is the King now and he must be treated as a king (160). The General addresses Sa'dūn as "Your majesty" and lapses into an old memory, recalling his wife who was the first to call him 'general'. She lived all her life dreaming about the king's visit, but she finally realized that it was a lie, an illusion. The General now looks at himself in the mirror and says, "He is in front of you. He is going to die... in front of you... are you relieved now? Are the people relieved? Is the world relieved?" (161).

Standing on the ladder, the General delivers his speech where he promises his comrades that the old illusion will die, "My comrades, the old history is perishing in front of you. This old illusion, this old hope. I will eliminate any future hope, and emotion. I will eliminate the illusion. I will eliminate the king... every man will become a king..." (162).

Sa'dūn 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). The General shines the shoes and sings for the king. He then brings the knife to kill him, but feels scared. Sa'dūn encourages the General to stab him, telling him, "Remember that I am the one who ruined the world. I am the fort of the old world. Remember the detained people... Don't you want to set them free? Remember yourself.

Remember all those years you have lived waiting for this moment. Remember her eyes... Remember the torture, the misery, the disappointments. Remember the world..." (166). The general stabs Sa'dūn, throws the knife, ascends the ladder, and triumphantly shouts, "I killed the king" three times (167). He then approaches Sa'dūn who tells him, "Let the world know." The General heads towards the door, but returns to ask Sa'dūn if he has anything else to say. Sa'dūn replies, "I loved you my General. I loved the world. I loved this girl who poked her tongue to the world," (167), closes his eyes, and lies still. The General rushes to open the door, but it is locked. He tries and retries; he knock at the door and shouts nervously, "Who locked the door? Open for me. I killed the king. I killed the king... I saved the world" (167), but nobody opens. He tries to use the telephone, but it does not work. During this time, Sa'dūn raises his head as if smiling, but when the General looks at him, he closes his eyes and resumes his previous posture. The General approaches him, shakes him, but Sa'dūn remains motionless. 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.

3.3. Interpretation and Critical Reception of *The Dictator* (Literature Review)

This is indeed typical of Mahfūz's dramaturgy. He always repeats that theater is not an end in itself; it is a means towards an end which is to shock and provoke viewers

in order to expand their awareness of the decadence of the world around them, “Theater is a direct tool of cultural struggle” (548). The mission of the theater, believes Mahfūz, is to confront people with the horrors (social, political, religious, etc.) that they are trying to evade. This confrontation will transform their vision of the world and will prepare them to vanquish their worst nightmares through adopting a serious, responsible and conscientious stand against injustice, oppression and suppression. He further believes that his choice of the absurdist mode of dramatic expression was a necessity to achieve this end as no technique can better capture the absurdity and the madness of the real world and shock the audience out of their lethargy (556). With Mahfūz’s absurdist trilogy, *The Chinaberry*, *The Dictator*, and *Sa’dūn the King*, viewers are constantly faced with shocking and provocative scenes and dialogues or monologues. The plot in these plays mixes hilarity and tragedy, the setting is almost always a sealed Kafkaesque room or basement, the actions are minimal, and the conversations are disconnected and confusing. His characters are caught in a relentless absurdist game/battle; they struggle and fight, each in his own way, to win the battle, but they never do. Their loss at the end is another absurdist scheme used by Mahfūz to provoke his viewers to fight the absurdity of life. Like the absurdist dramatists, Mahfūz presents a desperate human condition, a tragic state of hopeless waiting, of unfulfilled desires and dreams; however, his final message is not one of desperation and futility; it is one of struggle and confrontation. His protagonist might choose to become a chinaberry tree in *The Chinaberry Tree* or a scapegoat in *The Dictator*, or he might lose his sight in *Sa’dūn, The King*, but he ultimately gains more insight that makes him shed his past romantic

dreams and approach life with much deeper and wider understanding that will eventually compel him to revolt against the decadence of his conditions (181).

Given the play's complex and unfamiliar nature, its critical reception was itself a battle. When it was first produced in 1969, a critical clash ensued about the interpretation and implications of the play. For Mahfūz, this is a healthy sign about the progressive quality of his text that invites multiple and diverse reviews (587). He insists that the play should be interpreted with reference to the two other plays in the trilogy, *The Chinaberry* and *Sa'dūn the King*. In the first play, *The Chinaberry*, Sa'dūn, the protagonist, confronts the General and other characters in a nonsensical trial in a mental institution, and the confrontation ends with his surrender. As he could not ward off the murder charge against himself, Sa'dūn chooses to become a chinaberry tree for three reasons. First, its bitter taste and toxicity that protects it from locust invasions. Second, its position among people's houses which will give Sa'dūn the opportunity of watching and laughing at their misfortunes. Third, by being a chinaberry, Sa'dūn will be able to live a loveless, and thus a painless, life (62-63). In *The Dictator*, we encounter Sa'dūn and the General not as opponents this time, but as a team playing the game of saving the world. Even if the play ends with antagonism, it is not between Sa'dūn and the General, but between the General and the imaginary character (king) that the General has projected on Sa'dūn (180). In this second play, Sa'dūn abandons his passive posture and decides to sacrifice himself to save the world—just like Jesus who sacrificed himself for the salvation of man. Sa'dūn here accepted to be the king, not the dictatorial and despotic king, but the sacrificing king who is ready to give up his life for his people. In the third play, which was never completed, *Sa'dūn the King*, Sa'dūn is alone on the

stage trapped between two firmly locked doors: the right door is locked from inside by Sa'dūn himself to prevent some unidentified men from breaking inside the room; the left door is locked from outside with the presence of someone out there trying to open it for Sa'dūn. The play ends with neither of the two doors opened. It is very easy, Mahfūz asserts, to understand the symbolism of the play and the state of Sa'dūn's suspension between the "right and the left" (183). To Mahfūz, Sa'dūn represents every victimized man in the Arab societies (184). The General is a symbol of paranoid authority that promises love, salvation, justice and freedom for people, but, when it accedes power, it proves to be just the opposite; it destroys hope and ruins any small possibility for salvation. And this is again typical of many military coup d'états that took place in the Arab world in the late 1950s and the early 1960s where kings were ousted to be succeeded by military dictators (614).

Many critics praised the play's linguistic, thematic and stylistic originality. Endré Shdīd states that with Mahfūz's *The Dictator*, the Lebanese theater became an international theater (Qtd in *Masrhiyyāt Qasīrā* 83). For Nazīh Khatir, "The play poetically relates the events of two wretched beings playing the farce of saving the world". Filled with ominous silences and hilarious dialogues, *The Dictator*, presents a nightmare that fills the hearts of its viewers with despair as the world that Sa'dūn and the General want to save, does not want to save itself (173). According to Sa'īd 'Akl, though the play is only about two characters, it has filled the stage. He admired Sa'dūn for his ability to play with the viewers' minds and instill his own thoughts in them (173). For Samir Nasrī, "In *The Dictator* Mahfūz has written two acts that are considered a turning point in the Lebanese theatrical modes of expression" (174). To

Antoine Ma'lūf, "The Dictator is an important discovery in the course of our new theater as it reveals Mahfūz's ability to produce a rich and passionate dialogue". Fares Yowakim maintains that the *Dictator*, as a political play, ridicules both the dictator and the people (174). Kamīl Sa'dé, too, believes that Mahfūz, in his second play *The Dictator*, has put into full practice the new technical concept of theater in its language and dialogue. To him, *The Dictator* presents the longest charged dialogue—in form and content—that the Lebanese theater has ever witnessed (175). Samīr Sa'd sees in *The Dictator* a new form of national Lebanese resistance, an intellectual form of resistance that presents dictatorship in an authentic and contemporary light. Ghassan Salemé in his book, *The Political Theater in Lebanon*, asserts that in *The Dictator* Mahfūz was faithfully depicting the political conditions in the Arab World where "every military officer in every Arab country was dreaming about making a coup d'états" (Qtd in *Al A'māl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā* 177). In his turn, Shafiq al Bika'ī believes that Mahfūz, following the absurd technique and shifting between black comedy in the first act and tragedy in the second, has been able to portray the most beautiful caricature of military coup d'états in the Third World, which is doomed to failure because all these rebellious military leaders will end up as dictators (589).

It is clear that the abovementioned critics are highly aware of the avant-gardist quality of the play. They do not dismiss it as incomprehensible or nihilistic due to its non-conformist dramatic mode. For them, Mahfūz is an innovator in the realm of Lebanese and Arab Theater and *The Dictator* is a real success.

However, George al Rassī, in his critique of *The Dictator*, believes that it is a dark and innervating play with only one bright aspect, that of the acting. Mahfūz, Rassī

adds, tries to portray in the two acts of the play the existential struggle between good and evil, love and hatred, justice and injustice, freedom and slavery, but the play ends with complete intellectual obscurity that destroys with it the notions of goodness, justice, freedom and love, “when these values collapse, all possibilities of salvation collapse, too.” In *The Dictator*, Rassī states, Mahfūz chooses an old and boring way to dramatize military coup d’états. To him, Mahfūz adds nothing new and never probes into the depth of the problem of dictatorship with its pressing reverberations on the social and political levels (184). Rassī might be right in deploring the final despair that the play communicates and with which Mahfūz himself does not consent, “I am against Sa’dūn’s final despair” (540), but Rassī’s criticism has failed to assess the play dispassionately. There is absolutely nothing boring or old about the technique Mahfūz uses to present his material. On the contrary, there is originality and insight in Mahfūz’s treatment of the topic that might prove complex for those who are not receptive of unfamiliar modes of dramatic expression. What the play portrays and communicates is the condition of modern man in the Arab World: he is forever clinging to hope and ready to sacrifice, but he is constantly deceived by the paranoid authority that has taken full charge over his life and dreams, too. Sa’dūn is not nihilistic as Rassī affirms; he is a dreamer, but he evolves in the course of the play to become an ironic realist as his cynic smile at the General in the last scene reveals. Mahfūz has chosen the absurdist vehicle, of which Rassī has no artistic appreciation, to communicate his vision of the human condition because he believes that this is the only dramatic mode that can faithfully and realistically capture the absurdity of existence.

3.4. Political Reading of *The Dictator*

As the above section reveals, *The Dictator* has received a modest share of criticism that does not reflect the play's intrinsic importance in the realm of Arabic drama. The brief sections written by critics to assess the play cannot be considered sufficient to encompass the wide-ranging and multitudinous implications of the play. In the section below, I will present a thorough analysis of the play's political nature, something that Mahfūz has never denied, but it has not been fully explored yet. 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 Sa'dūn, 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":

General. Sa'dūn! Where have you been?

Sa'dūn. I bought you the jackboots.

General. You were late!

Sa'dūn. Just look at it... a kingly jackboot.

...

General. Bravo Sa'dūn. You brought salvation to the world. You brought the jackboots.

(*Al A'māl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā* 111-112)

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. Written in 1968, *The Dictator* is a sociopolitical parody of military coup d'états that proliferated in the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s and promised freedom, equality and social justice, but ended up being more dictatorial and oppressive than the overthrown regimes. 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 Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn. He punishes Sa'dūn 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:

General. Put the parliament members in cages...

Dissolve all parties. Arrest all parties' members. Destroy their houses.

Confiscate their ideas.

Hang all parties' leaders ...

Arrest the merchants. Cancel trading...

Stop newspapers. Arrest journalists.

Arrest writers and artists.

Put all people under strict surveillance until the king is seized. (130-136)

The list of orders starts with capturing the king and ends with arresting all the people and with the elimination of all the revolution board members—very realistic rendering of military coup d'états with every officer dreaming of becoming the new ruler. 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.

Can anyone now tell the difference between the King who deceived people and enslaved them and the General? 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 Sa'dūn, 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.

3.5. The Existentialist Interpretation 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 Sa'dūn with an existential aura that adds a philosophical dimension to his plays. In the section below, I will present an existential analysis of *The Dictator*, a reading that enriches the play with intellectual depth and that further sustains its political implications.

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. Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn 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. Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn might be the king. Sa'dūn, 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 Sa'dūn 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, Sa'dūn chooses to stay with the General, and he even accepts the new identity projected upon him. In this way, Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn 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, Sa'dūn 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 Sa'dūn lose the game: as Sa'dūn 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. In the first act of the play, Sa'dūn objects to the General's words that "Losers are always wrong," by responding:

Sa'dūn. True, but...

General. But what?

Sa'dūn. The Nazareth...

General. What Nazareth?

Sa'dūn. The one who was crucified.

General. Crucified.

Sa'dūn. And he didn't lose.

General. If he returns, he will certainly lose... (132)

Sa'dūn here invoked the image of Jesus who was crucified by his enemies but has never lost. 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, Sa'dūn 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 Sa’dūn always repeat that Masrūr’s name is the same as that of King Shahriār’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 Shahriār, a comparison that enraged the General and made him reprimand and dismiss Sa’dūn more than once, “Again you mention the *One and Thousand Nights*. You are dismissed Sa’dūn. Pack your baggage and leave. I can no longer tolerate you” (122).

3.6. Two Different Stagings of *The Dictator*

The richness of Mahfūz’s text is quite incontestable given all the multilayered implications and themes expounded above. *The Dictator* is a play that does not only criticize the political mentality; it also parodies the masses for their insensitivity to history and cultural heritage, for their willful choice to never learn from the lessons of the past. Any staging of Mahfūz’s play must necessarily face a real challenge to be able to enact all of these implications and themes within the confines of a very minimalistic directorial vision as that of Mahfūz’s. As a stage production and a living performance,

The Dictator has a greater potentiality of engaging its audience in its rich dramatic realm.

When a play is not performed on stage, it is, I believe, only half a play, since a dramatic text is not a mere literary text written to be published and read; it is primarily and ultimately conceived for the stage for the purpose of actively engaging a particular audience in one way or another. With this in mind, Mahfūz's *The Dictator* is surely a remarkable literary text, but it is only when performed on stage, that the play's great dramatic capacities can be fully explored. Mahfūz's *The Dictator* was first staged on October 14th, 1969 on Beirut Theater, and since then it has been frequently staged in many Arab countries and by different professional and amateur theater troupes due to its living appeal and continuous bearing on our contemporary history. The most recent professional staging of the play took place on February 2nd, 2012, more than forty years from its first staging. This clearly attests to the play's dynamic quality and its ceaselessly relevant social, moral, and political themes that are still capable of reaching and speaking to modern theatergoers.

In the section below, two different staging performances of the play will be thoroughly addressed. The first production is the initial staging of the play implemented and directed by Mahfūz himself in 1969 on Beirut Theater. The second staging is the most recent adaptation of the play by Lina Abyad on Masrah Al Madīnā.

Mahfūz wrote the play in 1968 with the initial title *The General*, but censorship authorities at that time had its reservations concerning the title, and there was an insistence by the controller in the General Security to change the title and to remove certain sections from the first act, to which Mahfūz had to respond promptly if he

wanted the play to be performed without any further delay. Consequently, the title was changed to *The Dictator* and the disputed sections were reluctantly deleted from the original script that was sadly lost by Mahfūz. He further explained that only in its first act is *The Dictator* a caricature of military coup d'états in the Third World, but the second act communicates a much deeper and symbolic meaning. He criticizes censorship for the limited scope it has adopted on approaching the play by mistaking the General to be the Lebanese president Fū'ād Shhāb and Sa'dūn to be Antoun S'adé, the leader of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party that attempted a failed coup d'état against General Shhāb who was the first military leader to be elected as a President in Lebanon (*Al A'māl al Masrahiyyā al Kamilā* 171).

Mahfūz has moreover elaborated that the structure of the play follows the Theater of the Absurd mode and that the play communicates a universal theme that cannot and should not be limited to the way censorship interpreted it. The trilogy, of which *The Dictator* is a second episode, rotates around the central character of Sa'dūn and his evolving dramatic consciousness of the world around him (171).

Mahfūz believes that the playwright is the first actual director of his plays, as he is the one who puts his own staging vision for the dramatic piece while composing it (546). To reflect his vision in *The Dictator*, Mahfūz chose for the acting two highly accomplished theater actors, Antoine Kerbage as the General and Michel Nab'ā as Sa'dūn. The play was staged with very modest resources; the setting was minimalistic: a room with some broken pieces of furniture and few kitchen pots on the table, an old ladder, a broken mirror, and a disconnected telephone. Mahfūz had also dispensed with décor, background music and light effects; yet despite the simplicity of this staging, the

performance was received warmly by most theater reviewers who praised the depth and the clarity of Mahfūz's vision as reflected in his exact and simple directorial vision of *The Dictator* (172).

With the rise of the curtain, the viewer is made certain that the situation is unreal; the room with its oppressive aura and its dim lights promotes some sort of surrealist and nightmarish atmosphere. When the General starts shouting, the viewer realizes that he is in the grip of the inexplicable. Kerbage and Nab'ā are attractively serious and comic. At one time, we are captivated by their heroic feat to save the world, and at the other we find ourselves wondering about the absurdity of their game:

General. (*Contemplating the jackboots*) Sa'dūn, shine them.

You can use them as a mirror now?

Sa'dūn. Sure my General. My face looks pale from hunger. It's been two days since we have eaten anything, and instead of buying bread, we bought the jackboots.

General. Freedom is more important than bread.

Sa'dūn. Where is this freedom? If one of us leaves the room, the other stays in as a hostage until the first returns. We haven't paid the rent for two months, and instead of buying our freedom with the little money your mother has sent, we bought the jackboots...

General. Oh Sa'dūn, the door of freedom will not be knocked without the jackboots...

Sa'dūn. I understand my friend!

General. Your friend?

Sa'dūn. My master!

General. Your master?

...

Sa'dūn. My General!

General. Shine the jackboots. (113)

Nab'ā's Sa'dūn may look simple-minded, but he is violently able to move the General, and along with him the viewers, from his grand delusions to face the real world. He is seen as a dutiful servant, obeying the General's orders though he finds them faulty most of the time. He questions the goodness of the General's commands upon the success of the revolution, "Do you think our deeds are good deeds my General?" to which the General responds, "If we are good people, then our deeds are always good," (131). He realizes that a revolution that is made to save the world cannot eliminate, incarcerate, or terrorize everyone in the world. Yet, he again surrenders to the General's will and complies with his orders though he finds most of them confusing. He is further mystified by the General's desire to kill the king who has lost all his might:

Sa'dūn. ... Things have always remained mysterious to me.

General. And now?

Sa'dūn. Now they are even more mysterious.

General. Like what?

Sa'dūn. Like your desire to kill a completely powerless king.

General. You will know when the revolution ends.

Sa'dūn. And when will that be?

General. When the king dies.

Sa'dūn. And when will he die?

General. When he comes to me.

.....

Sa'dūn. What if he didn't come to you?

General. I will go to him.

Sa'dūn. You cannot get out of this door. If you dare get out, you would have heard.

General. Heard what?

Sa'dūn. People's curses.

General. For the General?

Sa'dūn. And for the General's soldiers.

You see Sa'dūn mischievously tantalizing the General, outwitting him, infuriating him, and then trying to appease him. Even at the end of the play when the General decides to kill him, but he is not able to summon enough courage to perform the act, we hear Sa'dūn's manipulative words, "Strike. Remember I am the one who ruined the world..." (166). With Nab'ā, we see a charming Sa'dūn; his faultless performance has the power to successfully impersonate Sa'dūn's character with all its complexity and contradictions. The shift in his performance from the servile Sa'dūn to the king is superb. Suddenly, you see Sa'dūn ordering the General to kneel down and shine his shoes. Nab'ā's masterful use of voice and his meticulous sense of details, like the facial and bodily movements, are able to create a true character and to portray the absurdist and existentialist nature of the play (175).

Kerbage, in an interview I conducted with him, expressed his pride to be part of this superb Mahfūzian project. To him, the Lebanese theater was exceedingly in need of Mahfūz's contribution to step out of its stagnation and imitation (personal communication July 14, 2012). Kerbage's General is swollen with arrogance, obsession and paranoia. The audience is traumatized by the exaggerating caricature he draws of military generals and of their infatuation with power. His idealistic slogans, according to Kerbage, like "salvation of the world" and "freedom is more important than bread" are sham slogans used to legitimize his military coup and the bloody deeds carried out by his militia. Kerbage recalls that playing the General's part was an arduous, yet unmatched dramatic experience. He had to exert a tremendous effort to present an authentic rendering of this peculiar Mahfūzian character who is constantly seen anxious and worried, and heard shouting and threatening. His anxiety does not subside with the success of the revolution; it exacerbated into an obsession with the "king" who is still loose. Kerbage is masterfully able to portray the General's precarious soul that shakes with every phone call and shudders with every knock at the door. He is another tyrant elevating himself to the rank of a tortured prophet who sacrificed everything to fulfill his holy mission of saving the world from the king and saving people from themselves, "All prophets have complained from people. This is the world!" (135). In the second act, we see Kerbage's General raving into madness, sniffing the room for the king, speaking to himself in a broken mirror, questioning Sa'dūn's identity, suspecting this poor servant for the king and finally pronouncing his cruel verdict, "Death by hanging" (159). It is only then, he believes, that the world will be saved. Sa'dūn complies, accepts to be hanged if this will save the world and offers himself as a scapegoat. However, the

General is again outmaneuvered but Sa'dūn who smiles mischievously while he attempts to open the firmly sealed door. Kerbage's General is a very complex character, we see him as an admirably loving man while addressing the king/Sa'dūn, telling him about his late wife's dream of seeing him, about his feeling of guilt for having deceived her (161), and as a paranoid entity projecting his sick delusions on his most loyal servant.

According to Nazīh Khatir, *An-Nahār* reviewer, the performance was superbly ominous. "With anxious silence disrupted sometimes with a smile or a laugh, the viewers followed for two hours the events of two wretched beings playing the poetic farce of saving the world." Mahfūz, being the writer and the director, was exceptionally dexterous with his text and thus the production came to portray the true soul with which it has been written. To Khatir, the play is able to move its audience to a tragic height being a superb production capable of questioning and even shifting our established beliefs (173). For Abdul 'Aziz Makhyūn, an accomplished Egyptian actor, the performance conveys to us the suffering of people and their hope of salvation as embodied in the character of the stooge Sa'dūn, the Dictator's servant (175). Hūdā Zakkā, *Al Anwar* reviewer, praised the deafening dialogue of the play that fills the stage and gives the two characters a complete sense of existence (174).

With its simplicity and nakedness, Mahfūz's staging of *The Dictator* reveals the playwright's dramatic sensibility that enables him to control the viewers and fill the stage with anxiety, menace and suspense. It is not an overstatement to assert that this first staging of *The Dictator*—with the claustrophobic setting, the long fitful dialogue,

the absurd ambience, and the actors' witty and genuine skill—has been able to convey the playwright's major political, social and existential concerns.

The second staging of the play that I will review in the last section of this chapter is the most recent adaptation of *The Dictator* directed by Lina Abyad. This revival of the play was organized by the new theater troupe Beirut 8.30 on the sixth anniversary of the playwright's death and was hosted on Beirut Theater in February 2012.

After more than forty years of the play's first production, Abyad has resurrected the text, updated and rearranged it for two female, not male, actresses, Julia Qassār and 'Aīda Sabrā—two highly acclaimed actresses with an exceptionally rare and spontaneous theatrical talent. She has also introduced a relatively altered set for the play that is even more minimalistic than Mahfūz's original setting: almost a bare-stage with black backdrop, six white cubes, four tall mirrors, a disconnected telephone and a knife. The sound effects are totally absent, with only the voices of the two actresses and the clack of the single boot filling the stage; the lights are dim, and they are even made dimmer with the actresses black dresses. In her adaptation of Mahfūz's text, Abyad adhered as closely as possible to the original script, but made certain cuts and some minor changes to adjust the text to the characters' new gender and to present a relevant piece to the modern audience. The performance was highly estimated by almost all theater reviewers and critics who were especially fascinated by the daring adaptation of gender change, and by the directing and the acting.

As the play opens, we realize that there is a new take on the original script. With the rise of the curtain, Julia Kassār, Abyad's General, and 'Aīda Sabrā, Abyad's Sa'dūn

present monologues that are placed in the second act of Mahfūz's original text. They slip respectively into the skin of the General and Sa'dūn. The General's monologue reveals that she is a woman who wants to avenge her husband who has died waiting for the king's visit. The king never responded to her numerous letters and her husband realized prior to his death that he has been deceived. Sa'dūn's monologue uncovers the torture that this woman has been subjected to in prison; she was mistaken of being someone else and was harshly beaten and tortured in order to confess. These two women then decide to play a surreal power game with Qassār brewing a revolution to overthrow the tyrant king and with Sabrā acting as her acolyte.

Abyad's feminine General is magnificent to watch. She is violent and oppressive, filled with self-aggrandizing delusions, demanding illogical and disturbing things of the subservient Sa'dūn, and is heard constantly hurling revolutionary slogans as "Freedom is more important than bread," that shows her/his insanity. Instead of the pair of boots, Abyad opted for only one spike-heel women's boot throughout the performance to portray the dictator as an unstable and unbalanced character physically and mentally, literally and metaphorically. Kassār's performance is riveting with the integration of some flamenco elements in her performance—a bright addition to the original script. We see her at one moment dancing over the happy news of the revolution success, and at other moments assuming a highly militaristic posture that mixes pride with cruelty. We see Abyad's General moving with a pompously manly gait drunk with power, looking menacingly, pointing her fingers, and ordering massacres against the very same people she pretends that she wants to save. She raves and rants about the dignified revolution that will save the world and insists on killing

the king whose life poses a serious threat to the major accomplishments of the revolution. Pursuing her delusions to the utmost height, Abyad's General will not have it that the king escapes and disappears. She awaits the king to come so that she can act out her fantasy of revenge, but when he does not, she is satisfied to transform Sa'dūn into the king, thus treating him/her in the very same way the torturers do. Qassār gracefully and masterfully presents a grotesque caricature of a mad and megalomaniac despot—mentally fragile and unbalanced—who after the success of his coup d'état is heard giving bloody orders to behead, kill and hang all the dissidents of his revolution, a revolution that eliminates human race on behalf of human race and for the salvation of human race.

Abyad's Sa'dūn, actress 'Aīdā Sabrā in her turn, presents an exquisite performance as the downtrodden sidekick of the General. She fully understands her function and tries to fulfill it. She understands that the General only lives and survives through the illusion he has created, and her mission is to help maintain its continuity. She, like the General, needs this illusion and though we see her at times reluctant to pursue her part, she does not opt out of the game. As she moves bare-footed on the stage repeating the General's orders and answering the phone that is tied to her waist, Abyad's Sa'dūn is both pitiable and laughable. When she opens her mouth for the imaginary chocolate pieces, she looks very much similar to a pet waiting for a treat from its master; as she shines the boot, she stoops too low in her servile subjugation to the General. She is constantly kicked, beaten, threatened and pushed on the stage presenting by that man who is an accomplice in the process of his victimization. Her slavish attitude feeds the beast in the General who would not hesitate to sacrifice her at

the end. Sabrā's Sa'dūn is without any doubt an ideal clown that employs mime and frantic gestures and alternates between nervous laughter and hysterical tears. She is moved by love, faith and hope to fulfill her role in the game of saving the world even if this means that she will be offered as a scapegoat on the altar of salvation. Towards the end of the play, Sa'dūn will accept to take on the character of the long-awaited king and presents himself before the General who can now consummate her revenge and kill him. In this scene, Sabrā's Sa'dūn is completely transformed: she looms with a straight back, a royal attitude, planned and poised gestures, and a general-like style. We witness a reversal of roles with Sa'dūn becoming domineering, while the General becomes obedient and submissive. Sabrā's voice thunders on the stage as she orders the General to shine her shoes and as she forces him to strike the tyrant king to save the world. 'Aīdā Sabrā offers a superb performance of a versatile Sa'dūn, shy, submissive and rebellious. She brings life and depth to her character with her flexible techniques of mime and mimicry.

Abyad's staging has daringly ventured into a new territory. With a female cast, the play, on the first encounter, does not look as menacing and antagonistic as Mahfūz's original script. With the changes in the first monologues, Abyad has presented her viewers with a brief hint about the past of these two characters and has justified their departure from reality to play in the realm of delusions and fantasies. Yet, the set design is exceedingly claustrophobic with its dim lights and the almost-bare stage. Their absurd game becomes a surreal power struggle, an exploration of despotism, power abuse, manipulation and hypocrisy. The simplicity of the staging is tinged with the bitterness of the dramatic sensibilities of Abyad, Qassār and Sabrā. The only visible

props used are the mirrors (which are not broken here because the reality is already distorted), the disconnected telephone, the white cubes (which serve multiple purposes of being seats, the bed or the throne, and which enhance the minimalistic vision of the director) and the knife, the rest are imagined, allowing Qassār and Sabrā to embark in a magnificent mimetic performance, and reinforcing the mirror-like world of the play whose reflections are distorted and ugly.

Returning to the beautiful and simple staging from its beginnings, Abyad's adaptation of *The Dictator* shows that the play has not aged, that history is repeating itself and that the lust for power is not restricted to one particular epoch in history. Abyad believes that if the play in the sixties was a mirror reflecting the coups of military generals, now it is a mirror reflecting modern leaders who, just like their militaristic predecessors, play on the chords of humanity, salvation, justice, equality and freedom but are only obsessed with power. And if the play suffered from the unpleasant interference of censorship forty years ago because of its title and of its burlesque representation of military leaders, now, too it has not escaped this suppressive mechanism that objects to specific words as "Jesus of Nazareth" and "general" and requests changes and omissions without understanding the essence of the words and their meaning. Abyad deplores the censorship interference with cultural issues like the theater since this only serves to culturally drag the country backwards (*Al Afkār*).

Abyad's recent staging of Mahfūz's *The Dictator* stunned viewers and critics alike. For India Stoughton, *The Daily Star* reviewer, the play ventures in the same existential territory of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where "two characters live out a fantasy, trapped in a world in which only their delusions are real." She praises the new

approach towards staging and the two actresses' mesmeric performances that give this recent version of *The Dictator* a darker side imbued with bitterness. She also admired Abyad's manipulation of the lighting, "In one particularly effective tableau, the characters' shadows become the focus," with the General's shadow towering as a monstrous giant while Sa'dūn's shadow flails ineffectually behind. Stoughton further believes that with this revival of the play, it is clear that "Mahfūz's play has not aged badly," as connections can be instantaneously drawn between the events it recounts and the current political climate in the Arab World where revolution and coups are proliferating (*Daily Star*).

Marūn al Sālīhānī in his review of Abyad's adaptation is highly impressed by the play's contemporaneity, "as if it has been written yesterday," and of the director's choice of Mahfūz's text since the theme it explores is not anachronistic given the rise of the Arabic Spring movement that is successfully dethroning all militaristic dictatorships that usurped people's past, present and future. Sālīhānī particularly praises the unfamiliar and stunning performances of Qassār and Sabrā that were able to successfully cross and tamper with gender boundaries, so Qassār has revealed a masterful command on her masculine General, showing only few instances of feminine weakness especially when she begs Sa'dūn to confess that he is the king. Sabrā too has moved freely between the two genders displaying feminine and masculine qualities: as Sa'dūn, she has to be a weak effeminate man who is totally castrated by the fascist system, but as the king she displays a strong masculine posture (*Lebanon Live News*).

According to Basim al Hakīm, the new adaptation of Mahfūz's *The Dictator* gives a rare opportunity to the young generations who are not familiar with Mahfūz's

theater to witness the playwright's dramatic farsightedness and insightfulness into the power struggle in the Arab World where generals overthrow dictatorial kings to eventually become dictators themselves (*Al Khalīj*).

Hūysein Mahdī admired the realistic staging of Abyad's production. Despite the black absurdist atmosphere, the script speaks to our modern time and the two actresses' performances are beautifully convincing. He adds that Abyad's feminine cast has added a unique dimension to Mahfūz's play showing on one level that women too suffer tremendously from dictatorship being the mothers, the wives, and the daughters, and revealing on another level that in our modern history dictatorship is no longer restricted to men as women too can fit into the dictator's boots (*Lebanon Live News*).

As it is clear from the play's different staging productions, *The Dictator* has always appealed to different audiences at different historical moments. With Mahfūz's punchy and rambling speech, with his mixture of absurdity and parody, of fantasy and delusion, of caricature and burlesque, the play remains topical and universal. It speaks to us now as it has spoken to successive audiences delivering an undying comment on the politics of power: with the fall of dictatorial monarchy, the lust of power never dies; it disguises itself under the pompous terminology of democracy, of love and the welfare of people. Sa'dūn, being the quintessential representative of human race, will always be manipulated. Even when he is offered freedom, this freedom remains relative and limited, forever fettered in bondage and ignorance.

CHAPTER FOUR

PINTER AND MAHFŪZ: A SHARP DRAMATIC AFFINITY

Between the British English Harold Pinter and the Lebanese Arabic 'Isām Mahfūz exists an interesting dramatic affinity. Though the two playwrights lived in two completely different cultures and wrote their plays at different times and described different human conditions, they still share a common worldview as manifested in their two plays *The Dictator* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Though they structure and employ their dramatic language and dialogues in a remarkably different way, the cross-resonance between Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* and Mahfūz's *The Dictator* can be measured in three key areas: first, in the function they attribute to their theater; second, in their mixture of tragedy and hilarious farce; and finally, in the quality of their dramatic irony.

4.1. The Function of Their Theater

Is it possible to say that theater is a means of expressing visceral aversion against the social and political conditions prevailing at a particular time? Is the term social and political theater valid? Are dramatists consciously and conscientiously striving to ameliorate the pervading corruption through the act of exposing its ills on the stage? Is it plausible to argue for a socially and politically reformatory function of the theater? With Pinter and Mahfūz, I believe, such an argument earns some plausibility.

Both the English Pinter and the Lebanese Mahfūz are dramatists with heightened social and political sensibilities. To them, theater is a necessary medium to expose the amorality-immorality of the modern social and political values. Their heroes/antiheroes suffer and struggle to end up crushed and hopeless as they tragically realize that their fantasy of a better world is never achievable. But is despair and absurdity their final message to their audiences? It is certainly not. Their final message is one of freedom and revolt against all the tyrannical fetters of society and politics.

In *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Dictator*, Pinter and Mahfūz were able to convey this message through their description of an individual human condition. The two men in each play are imprisoned in a Kafkaesque basement waiting for something to happen or for someone to come. In Pinter's play, two hitmen, Ben and Gus, are waiting in a basement for orders to perform their next job from their superior comrade, Wilson; In Mahfūz's play, the General and Sa'dūn are anxiously waiting for news about the results of their imaginary revolution. This state of *waiting* is very reminiscent of Beckett and is highly tantamount to the Theater of the Absurd techniques. Yet unlike Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Pinter and Mahfūz's plays are not solely concerned with highly metaphysical and existential dilemmas. The two playwrights employ the absurdist technique because they share the vision that the world, as they see and understand it, is absurd and chaotic, and that the individual man is always living a conflict between his desire to find some sort of meaning and logic and the world's provocative silence and indifference to man's pursuit. In *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus is frequently trying to make sense of the absurd situation he is trapped into; he asks questions and inquires about the time of the job, about who cleans the mess, and about the reasons why they kill, only to

be faced with Ben's uneasy silence or "Shut up. Stop asking so many questions". Similarly, in *The Dictator*, Sa'dūn is constantly confused and asks questions to help him understand, but the General obfuscates and blurs his understanding through his use of pompous rhetoric. However, such a state of intellectual obscurity is not the plays' final words. Beyond it, Pinter and Mahfūz express their dissatisfaction with the social and political decadence that overwhelmed modern man and modern society: condemning dictatorship and sham democracy, exposing modern man's plight and his hopeless quest for meaning and sense in a senseless world, the two playwrights seem to be fighting the same kind of evil. From very local and individualized cases, the viewer is able to comprehend the playwrights' peculiar worldview that despite being highly contrived is authentically relevant.

Pinter and Mahfūz's stage duplicate life not in its superficial outward appearance, but in its complex and profound reality. They depict ordinary men—mostly derelicts, debased and dehumanized in their futile struggle against a powerful entity that crushes them. Their Gus and Sa'dūn are defeated at the end, and so are Ben and the General, for what guarantees Ben that he is not going to be the next victim? And what prospects does the General have as he is locked inside his cell shouting for somebody to open the door and free him in a world that has turned deaf and mute? By depicting such a negative vision, they instigate viewers to question, to react and to revolt against it. Their message is not nihilistic or pessimistic; it is revolutionary and reformative as it lays naked in front of us the absurdity and depravity of the human condition in an attempt to awaken us to heroically confront and alter it. Theater for them, then, is a

medium where they exert their ideological activism against the injustices inflicted on man by the oppressive political system and the repressive social structure.

4.2. Dramatic Language and Dialogue

If their worldview is to a great extent similar, the language with which they portray and dramatize it is not quite similar. The two playwrights share few commonalities about their dramatic language. With Mahfūz, we move from the standard/literary Arabic language to the vernacular, the spoken Arabic that imitates real life and that brings the theater to a very close vicinity with the world it describes and represents. Similarly, with Pinter, language is bare, debased, and vernacular. It emanates faithfully from those downtrodden characters he represents, and it reflects their world with all its dinginess. In regard to their dialogue, both playwrights departed from mathematical regularity by making their dialogue wander irregularly and unpredictably. They both employ silence as powerful means to show the emptiness of verbal communication and to reveal the eloquence of silence in portraying a different kind of warfare on the stage. Their language has the power to conjure up a world on its own: with Pinter, it is the debased and cruel underworld of assassins and terrorist organizations with their bloody deeds, mundane conversations to while away the time while waiting to perform their next job, or their rehearsing of the instructions:

Ben. Let me give you your instructions. When we get the call, you go over and stand behind the door.

Gus. Stand behind the door.

Ben. If there's a knock on the door you don't answer it.

..... When the bloke comes in—shut the door behind him.

Gus. When the bloke comes in—shut the door behind him.

Ben. Without divulging your presence.

Gus. Without divulging my presence.

.....

Ben. He won't know you're there.

Gus. He won't know I'm there.

Ben. I take out my gun.

.....

Gus. We won't say a word.

Ben. He'll look at us.

Gus. And we'll look at him.

Ben. Nobody says a word.

Gus. What do we do if it's a girl?

Ben. We do the same.

Gus. Exactly the same?

Ben. Exactly.

Gus. We don't do anything different?

Ben. Exactly the same.

Gus. Oh.

(Gus rises, and shivers) (115-116)

In its simplicity and repetitions, every phrase in the above excerpt is drawn straight from life and serves to shape the callous and cruel world of the two assassins as

they rehearse the instructions for their next job. Their process is a mechanical one used repeatedly in their previous numerous jobs whose purpose is to liquidate human beings. Yet, it also reveals that Gus is a more sensitive fellow than Ben as he feels that there should be a different way of murdering girls.

With Mahfūz, it is the (imaginary) world of military coup d'état that is successfully invoked through the faithful employment of the rhetoric of the dictator, "Arrest all parliament members," "Arrest all party members," "Confiscate their ideas," "Stop all newspapers," "Arrest the journalists," "Arrest writers and artists," (130-133). With this long list of marshal commands that have to be fulfilled without any questionings (just like the commands given to Gus and Ben), Mahfūz depicts the language of the dictator, not that of a revolutionary and egalitarian leader.

Without resorting to heightened prose, Pinter's and Mahfūz's dramatic language sound highly naturalistic. Mostly judged as absurd and trivial, their dialogues are highly charged and fitful. We see the characters vehemently argue over trivial issues such as the marshal jackboots or the semantics of "light the gas" or "light the cattle" as if they were discussing cosmic issues that might plunge the world into some instant and unavoidable calamity:

Ben. Go and light it.

Gus. Light what?

Ben. The kettle.

Gus. You mean the gas.

Ben. Who does?

Gus. You do.

Ben. (*His eyes narrowing*): What do you mean, I mean the gas?

Gus. Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.

Ben. (*Powerfully*): If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.

Gus. How can you light a kettle?

Ben. It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech! (91)

And a similar example from *The Dictator*:

General. You spat on the boots?

Sa'dūn. I spat to shine it.

...

General. You are fired. Carry your things and leave.

Sa'dūn. I am your only servant!

General. My only servant? 99.99% of people in the world are servants.

Sa'dūn. I served you with loyalty.

General. Discipline before loyalty. (118)

In the two examples above, we can detect the contradiction between the serious tone of the characters and the triviality of the topics discussed. As they grapple over spitting on the boots and over whether you say light the kettle or the gas, we realize that the dramatists are using a language that is saturated with “idioms” to show up their idiocy.

One more quality that Pinter and Mahfūz's dialogues share is the doubt they cast upon their characters' statements by matching each clear and unequivocal statement with an equally clear and unequivocal statement to contradict it. The dialogue below

between Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* reveals this Pinteresque quality of lack of verification and the deliberate evasion of communication:

Gus. I saw the Villa get beat in a cup tie once... Their opponents won by a penalty... You were there yourself.

Ben. Not me.

Gus. Yes, you were there. Don't you remember that disputed penalty?

Ben. No.

Gus. He went down just inside the area. Then they said he was just acting. I didn't think the other bloke touched him myself. But the referee had the ball on the spot.

Ben. Didn't touch him! What are you talking about? He laid him out flat! (93)

Ben denied being there watching the game with Gus twice, firmly saying, "Not me" and "No" to finally contradict himself and defend the validity of the disputed penalty. The audience at this particular moment—and at many others—is left quizzical about what and who to believe.

Mahfūz, too, employs this technique masterfully:

General. Who's there?

Sa'dūn. Nobody.

General. Was there a knocking on the door, or not?

Sa'dūn. I think there wasn't any knocking?

General. What? Have you heard the knocking or not?

Sa'dūn. I've heard it my friend. (146)

In the second act of *The Dictator*, the audience is never certain of the validity of any statement, and suspicion even culminates to wrap the identity of Sa'dūn and the nature of his liaison with the General:

General. Strange. You told me your name is Sa'dūn?

Sa'dūn. ...

General. Why have you followed me all the time?

Sa'dūn. ...

General. Where are you from?

Sa'dūn. ...

General. Speak up.

Sa'dūn. From Hūnīn.

General. The last time I asked you, you said from Nisrīn.

Sa'dūn. I said from Nisreen? Maybe.

General. How maybe?

Sa'dūn. My memory got weak in the prison.

General. Who saved you from prison?

Sa'dūn. You.

General. Who stood by your side in the court? (149-150)

This technique served Pinter and Mahfūz in three different ways. It has first demonstrated the difficulty one has with communication; second, it has provided a realistic cast to the dialogue; and finally it has created the atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty for which both of them are famous.

It is clear then that both Pinter and Mahfūz are innovators in the field of dramatic language. What is original about Pinter's dialogue is the fusion of the minimal language used by the naturalists and the aesthetic expressiveness that is characteristic of the symbolists. Out of this mixture, his language gains a poetic dimension as it is handled with a sure command of pause and repetition that evokes simultaneously the laughter of contemptuous recognition and a shiver of dread. Pinter seems to carry no literary burden of the past as he has created his dialogues out of the failure of language, as English is spoken, by frightened or evasive or sadistically playful characters. With Pinter, language is turned into an instrument of torture, a medium through which power is exerted between individuals that the fierce discussions over linguistic minutiae reveal who is the superior/senior (Ben) and who is the inferior/junior partner (Gus). Mahfūz's language, however, is more rhetorical and rich. Though in his manifesto, he attacked theatrical rhetoric and intellectual pedantry, Mahfūz in *The Dictator*, used many of these as a parody. His dialogue is highly poetic for he deliberately used chain verse in which the last word or phrase of one line is used to as the first word or phrase of the next line:

الجنرال	- البلاغ رقم واحد. اكتب...
سعدون	- (يكتب) البلاغ رقم واحد.
الجنرال	- أيها الأخوة المواطنون يا صعاليك العالم الجديد.
سعدون	- يا صعاليك العالم الجديد.
الجنرال	- أيها الطالبون الخلاص...
سعدون	- أيها المطلوبون للخلاص.
الجنرال	- يا من تفكرون بالحياة.

سعدون	- يا من لا تفكرون.
الجنرال	- يا من تفعلون ما لا تقولون.
سعدون	- يا من تقولون ما لا تفعلون.
الجنرال	- يا من تشقون وتتعبون من أجل لا شيء.
سعدون	- لا شيء. (124)

Or he might use enjambment where the General starts a certain sentence or thought which is completed in the next line by Sa'dūn:

الجنرال	- يا من تحصدون خطايا آبائكم.
سعدون	- يا من تحصدون.
الجنرال	- تأكلون قناعة آبائكم...
سعدون	- وتضرسون.
الجنرال	- تشربون أو هام آبائكم.
سعدون	- وتغصون.
الجنرال	- يا من تموتون من أجل الملك.
سعدون	- تموتون. (125)

Language with Mahfūz shifts from being debased and vernacular at times to being highly rhetorical and poetic at other times revealing Mahfūz's belief that dramatic language should be properly manipulated to authentically convey the dramatic moment. The General employs the dictator's rhetoric, a grand language that seems to even replicate Qūr'anic verses because he believes himself to be a god-like hero sent to redeem the world and to save humanity.

4.3. Mixture of Tragedy and Comedy

With Mahfūz and Pinter, dramatic language becomes a tool manipulated with extreme craftsmanship and expertise that reflect the two dramatists' love of words and their excellence in creating new and shocking combinations. The two playwrights' skillful command over their language has also been able to portray to us an idiosyncratic world that is characteristically Pinteresque and Mahfūzian in its mixture of tragedy and comedy, in its black humor, and in its hilariously inexplicable menace. In Pinter's world, the safety of a sealed room is menaced by some form of intrusion. In *The Dumb Waiter*, the intrusion is that of a mechanical elevator that upsets the quasi calmness and complacency of the two irritable characters. The audience abruptly shifts from a comic exposure of Ben and Gus's bickering over trivial matters with all the laughter it breeds to find itself incomprehensibly facing a hilarious condition with the descent of the elevator with food orders that gains a very serious import due to the way these are handled by the two characters. When Gus explodes with his most memorable lines from the play, "What's he doing it for? We've been through our tests, haven't we?" (118), the audience realizes that he is in the presence of something tragic and that Gus, who is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, is just anticipating his tragic end.

In this play, the audience is being intentionally startled with the introduction of the serving hatch and within moments, it is heard laughing hysterically at the food order, "Two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar" (103), having been impatiently waiting, just like Ben and Gus, for the killing order. Such a technique is used repeatedly by Pinter (as for example in the last scene with the

rehearsal of the instructions and Gus's comic repetition of Ben's lines, to end up with Gus being the next victim) to deflate tension and to create this mixture of the simultaneously tragic and comic which bewilders the audience as it shifts from laughter to anxiety within the confines of one theatrical moment.

In the Mahfūzian world, too, this mixture is superbly achieved. Sa'dūn and the General are at first seen as two comic figures playing an act and eliciting the laughter of the audience through the episodes of the boots or the General's pompously powerful retorts about freedom and justice. This is followed by the success of the revolution and Sa'dūn's tragic recognition that he has been duped by another tyrannical figure, much more despotic than the king himself. However funny and comedic they may sound, the orders decreed by the General that dictate the elimination of all potential seeds of sedition struck the audience and Sa'dūn as very real and tragic because instead of eliminating dictatorship in this revolution/coup d'état, a similar form of repressive entity has been duplicated. We laugh at the General's megalomaniac dialect and paranoid logic but we tragically realize that this is the mentality of most of those so-called democratic leaders in our modern Arab World. From the comedic atmosphere of the first act, the audience finds itself under a different kind of spell in the second act. The game the two are playing has turned dangerously and inescapably serious; they are both entangled in their fantasy that is no longer relieving but rather nightmarish. The General wants the king who is still loose, and with no one else inside the room except for Sa'dūn, he must be the king. Tragically enough, the General projected on the poor Sa'dūn this new identity, and he, desiring to please his General and to save the world, accepted his new character and volunteered to sacrifice himself for the world. When the

General finally stabbed Sa'dūn/the king, the audience has heavily fallen under a tragic spell, but not until Sa'dūn, who is presumably dead, raises his head with a faint smile as the General shouts to himself in the dysfunctional mirror, "You saved the world my General, but the world doesn't want salvation" (168). With this move, the tragedy is deflated, the audience is again reminded that this is a game, and thus they are temporarily relieved from the gravity of the incident. However, the overall impact of the play is never comedic or relieving, it is this mixture of the comic and the tragic, this alternation of the serious and the hilarious in a very delicate equilibrium that the audience leaves the stage totally bewitched.

4.4. Reversed Dramatic Irony

One more dramatic affinity between Pinter and Mahfūz is their use of a reversed form of dramatic irony "that depends for its effectiveness on the fact that the audience does not readily understand the true meaning of words or events while the characters do" (Morrison 388). In traditional dramatic irony, the protagonist is, in one way or another, the unwitting victim of himself (Oedipus, Othello, etc.), while with Pinter and Mahfūz, the spectator comes to fear that he himself may be an unwitting victim. In *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Dictator*, the audience wriggles in uneasiness as it finds itself in a state of ignorance more than the characters themselves. The spectators' ignorance is not the result of information withheld as a kind of cheating on the part of the author, but it is the byproduct of their inability to perceive and interpret the relationship among events that the characters seem to have no trouble discerning (388-389).

In *The Dictator*, when Sa'dūn stays to serve the General and accepts humiliation, suspicion and even the new identity projected on him by the General, the audience watches with utter confusion and wonders "why?" At the end of the play, when the General stabs Sa'dūn and triumphantly declares his victory, the audience is again left with a sense of puzzlement asking "what happened?" while the characters seem all along to have understood: Sa'dūn with his faint smile and the General with his final words, "The world doesn't want salvation" (168) seem to encompass a wider range of knowledge than that of the audience about the hidden meanings of the play's events.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, the audience seems clueless about the reasons of the disintegrating partnership between Ben and Gus. As Ben expresses his exasperation towards Gus's questionings and complaints, spectators are totally ignorant of his motives and wonder why the relation between the two hitmen is so tense. We can understand Gus's irritation about the deteriorating conditions of the room and the nature of their job especially that in this particular last job he is about to perform, he has turned soft and for this reason, his partner is ordered to eliminate him. Ben and Gus seem to be aware of this finale, but the spectators aren't. With the descent of the food orders, spectators laugh uncontrollably listening to Gus reading them aloud, "Macaroni Pastitsio. Ormitha Macarounada", "One Bamboo Shoots, Water Chestnuts and Chicken. One Char Siu and Beansprouts," (108-110) while Ben and Gus fret with fear and anxiety, and instead of ignoring the orders, they desperately try to meet them by sending whatever food they have. This undoubtedly proves that they can discern something that the audience cannot: Ben realizes that the food orders are just a prelude to the real order of murder while Gus realizes that he is being tested again, simply because he—more

than anyone else—knows that his loyalty to and faith in the organization is badly shaken.

By this, Pinter and Mahfūz have contributed to what Kristin Morrison believes is “the formation of a new kind of irony, a reversal of audience-expectation, a surprisingly consequent contrast between what the audience knows and what the characters know” (392). This modern form of reversed dramatic irony targets the audience and sharply casts its menace on its members who experience fear not because they have witnessed the fall of an Othello or an Oedipus due to their own unwitting collaboration with fate and their blindness that leads to their destruction, but because they have experienced their own blindness and thus expect to be disastrously pulled by the workings of fate. With this new dramatic irony, the effect on the spectators is not cathartic but poignant and haunting as it confronts them with their own limitations and sightlessness, the very same fatal flaws (*hamartia*) that lead to the downfall of the victimized hero at the end.

The two playwrights, thus, have much in common. Their plays are a shocking depiction of an afflicted world whether socially, morally, or politically. Their dramaturgy is funny on the surface, but diabolical underneath. Their dialogues are duels in which they display infinite and comic variations of psychological torture. The unanswered question, the smile that faints and dies, the shocking shift from camaraderie to menace, the false security that ends in fear, the purposefully irrational behavior, the lurking threat of physical violence that plagues characters, and the easy game that ends in pain are all dramatically experienced in *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Dictator*. In these

two plays Pinter and Mahfūz share a righteous political ardor and a persistent existentialist angst that pervade the two plays and determine their permanent relevance. Their theater is a rebellious one that defies, exposes and upsets. Their language is that of the street (the vernacular), yet highly dramatic and poetic in its authentic representation of the characters and their world. Their reversed dramatic irony is a threat to the audience members that should always remain farsighted and discerning if they wish to escape the tragic fate that awaits the characters. With all of these elements combined, the two playwrights created their own Pinteresque and Mahfūzian worlds that hypnotized their audiences with their prophetic and realistic visions.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Bringing Pinter and Mahfūz together in this thesis is not a mere mechanical comparison that aims to show the similarities and differences between a British and a Lebanese dramatist. 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 thesis, I subjected the two plays to a thorough and rigorous analysis that served to highlight their rich and deep significance to contemporary life. 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 subtextually 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'états. 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. The

directors of the frequent staging performances and adaptations of Mahfūz's play have been highly sensitive to its peculiar nature; whether in 1968 or in 2012, the staging of *The Dictator* has always been an elusive mixture of reality and absurdity and of hilarity and tragedy.

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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