

Absurdity Under Occupation: Contextualizing the Theatre of the Absurd in Iraq in Al Assadi's Baghdad Bath (2005)

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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that Jawad Al-Assadi's Baghdad Bath (2005) is a contextualisation of the European Theatre of the Absurd's techniques to articulate a distinctly Iraqi critique of the occupation. The Theatre of the Absurd is a genre pioneered by European playwrights and emerged from the existential crisis post-World War II. Unlike the European Theatre of the Absurd, absurdism in the play stems not from the abstract, metaphysical and existential despair but from the tangible, political upheaval and moral decay. Through a textual analysis of the play, this study examines the localisation of key absurdist conventions, including incomprehensible setting, cyclical structure, fractured dialogue, archetypal characters and denial of catharsis. This paper

has two primary objectives. First, it examines localisation of the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd in Baghdad Bath (2005). Second, it examines how this localised absurdity functions as a potent medium to critique the socio-political reality of post-2003 Iraq rather than a philosophical exercise.

The key results of the play show how the play's setting, which is a dysfunctional bathhouse, is a metaphor for the nation's sinking into turmoil. Furthermore, the brothers' Sisyphean actions and fragmented communications indicate the relentless trauma under sanction, dictatorship and occupation. This study is significant due to the scarcity of scholarship on how absurdist techniques have been adapted into the Iraqi context. While Western absurd theatre is extensively studied, little attention is given to the contextualisation of the theatre of the absurd in Iraq. Moreover, the play offers a human-scale account of the Iraqi experience that transcends simple political and historical accounts. Thus, Baghdad Bath is a significant work for understanding the human cost of conflict and the capability of the dramatic spectrum in showing the Iraqi's perspective about the occupation and its aftermaths.

Keywords: Baghdad Bath (2005), Iraq post-2003, Jawad Al-Assadi, Theatre of the Absurd

العبيثية في ظل الاحتلال: تكييف مسرح العبيث في العراق في مسرحية جواد الأسدي "حمام بغداد" (٢٠٠٥)
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المخلص

تروم هذه الدراسة تحليل توطين تقنيات مسرح العبيث في مسرحية "حمام بغداد" (٢٠٠٥) لجواد الأسدي والتي جسدت نقدا عراقيا خالصا للاحتلال. يُعدّ مسرح العبيث نوعاً أدبياً ابتكره كُتّاب أوروبيون وظهر نتيجةً للأزمة الوجودية التي أعقبت الحرب العالمية الثانية. غير أن العبيث في هذه المسرحية لا ينبع من اليأس الميتافيزيقي أو الوجودي المجرد كما في المسرح الأوروبي، بل من الاضطرابات السياسية الملموسة والتدهور الأخلاقي الناتج عن الاحتلال. ومن التحليل النصي للمسرحية، تبرز هذه الدراسة توطين أهم سمات مسرح العبيث، مثل المكان الغامض، والبنية الدائرية، والحوار المتشظي، والشخصيات النمطية، وغياب التطهير. وتهدف هذه الورقة إلى هدفين رئيسيين: أولاً، تحليل توطين تقنيات مسرح العبيث في "حمام بغداد"؛ وثانياً، بيان كيف أصبح العبيث الموطن أداة فاعلة لانتقاد الواقع الاجتماعي والسياسي في عراق ما بعد عام ٢٠٠٣، بدلاً من كونه تمريناً فلسفياً مجرداً.

وتُظهر النتائج الأساسية أن مكان الأحداث، وهو الحمام المليء بالفقارة، يجسد وضع البلد الغارق في الفوضى. كما أن أفعال الأخوين المتكررة وحوارتهما غير المنطقية تعكس الصدمة المستمرة تحت وطأة الحصار والدكتاتورية والاحتلال. وتكتسب هذه الدراسة أهميتها من ندرة الأبحاث التي تناولت كيفية تكييف تقنيات العبيث ضمن السياق العراقي. فبينما حظي المسرح العبيثي الغربي بدراسات واسعة، لم يُمنح الاهتمام الكافي لتأصيل هذا المسرح في العراق. علاوةً على ذلك، تقدم المسرحية منظوراً إنسانياً للتجربة العراقية يتجاوز السرديات السياسية والتاريخية البسيطة لما بعد ٢٠٠٣. ومن ثمّ تُعدّ "حمام بغداد" عملاً فنياً بارزاً لفهم التكلفة الإنسانية للصراع وقدرة الفن المسرحي على تجسيد الرؤية العراقية للاحتلال وتبعاته.

حمام بغداد (٢٠٠٥)، العراق بعد ٢٠٠٣، مسرح العبيث، جواد الأسدي، النقد الاجتماعي والسياسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

1-1- Introduction:

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In times of profound national crises, theatre becomes a vital conduit through which people can reflect upon their collective trauma and political quandaries. In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, Iraqi playwrights, whether in exile or at home, dramatised the repercussions of the occupation. Among them was Jawad Al Assadi, who sought to shed light on the pervasive violence of the era. Many plays, such as *Ishtar in Baghdad*, *Barbed Wires*, and *The Lust of the Ends*, directly attributed this violence solely to the Americans (Al-Azraki, 2017). These plays laid the groundwork for more complex interrogation. It is from this fertile ground that Jawad Al Assadi's *Baghdadi Bath* (2005) spawned. Al-Assadi is an Iraqi playwright born in 1947 in Karbala. He lost two brothers and a nephew to the decades of violence that have crippled the country: one brother was murdered by Baathists during the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, and the other was killed with his teenage son by terrorists post-2003. Thus, Al-Assadi is not a distant observer of the reality of the country but a personal casualty of Iraq's long tragedy. He returned from the 25 years of exile in 2005 but left again after only a few weeks and wrote *Baghdadi Bath* as a response to the occupation (Hampton, 2009).

Scholarship has long acknowledged the potency of absurdist literature in addressing the disorientation and despair of the occupied people. To stage such concerns, theatre of the absurd employs techniques like cyclical structures, fractured dialogues, and futile actions, to name some features. In so doing, the human insight about war is brought into the fore after being sidelined in historical or political accounts (Neziri et al., 2024, p. 522). Bearing in mind that absurdist drama critiques the futility of war and its ramifications and it promotes social awareness and change (Khalighi & Ghaemmaghami, 2016). However, a significant gap does exist in understanding how the techniques are adapted in non-Western contexts. Western absurdism questions the very meaning of existence itself. However, the absurdity in *Baghdadi Bath* has social and political dimensions. It is a direct consequence of tangible violence and the failure of liberation. Thus, the absurd stems from the daily, brutal reality which characterises the nation.

1-3- Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative approach, centred on the textual analysis of Jawad Al-Assadi's *Baghdadi Bath*. The primary objective of this study is to examine how the theatre of the absurd's conventions are recalibrated into the Iraqi context and how these conventions are employed to critique the aftermath of the 2003 occupation. To achieve this, the paper builds upon the taxonomy of Martin Esslin articulated in "The Theatre of the Absurd" (1960). The study examines how the techniques are stripped of their primarily metaphysical preoccupations and how they re-grounded in the tangible socio-political reality of post-2003 Iraq.

Close reading of the play is conducted to identify, categorise, and analyse the employment of absurdist dramatic conventions like setting, dialogue, plot structure, characterisation, and resolution. It also helps in understanding how meaning is constructed through these dramatic elements. The study frames the bathhouse (hammam) as a cultural symbol of desecrated purity. It frames the fragmented dialogue as a direct manifestation of trauma which engulfs the country and its people. Additionally, the employment of the cyclical structure and Sisyphean actions is to critique the endless conflict and the failure of political progress. The brothers, Majid and Hamid, are archetypes of the impossible choices (collaboration vs. resistance) faced by Iraqis. The denial of catharsis is employed to indicate the stillborn state. The play, thus, represents the specific historical moment of the 2003 invasion and its chaotic aftermath.

2- Theatre of the Absurd: From European Origins to Arab Adaptations

Absurdism draws from the existential philosophy of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who stipulated that "as the reality is beyond human comprehension, it is absurd for humans to have faith in God" (cited in BBC Ideas, 2018). In the same context, the French novelist and philosopher Albert Camus describes absurdism in his magnum opus *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955): "In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and of light, man feels an alien, a stranger. . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (p.6). Though

absurdism draws from existential philosophy, notably Albert Camus' examination of life's essential futility, the Theatre of the Absurd emerged post-WWII with Beckett and Ionesco, who dramatised Camus' philosophy. European playwrights who had witnessed the carnage of World War II coloured their literary productions with Camus's existentialist philosophy about the futility of human existence, inaugurating what is later called the Theatre of the Absurd by Martin Esslin. The Theatre of the Absurd was sparked not only by Camus and World War II but also by the plays of Aristophanes and Euripides and the Italian theatrical tradition of *commedia dell'arte*. Theatre of the Absurd was also sparked by modern influences like surrealism, Dadaism, and early film comedians, particularly the Marx Brothers, and French playwright Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896) (Mambrol, 2021).

The absurdists grappled with the question of existence in a post-Hiroshima world through an ironic depiction of humans' role in a world devoid of meaning. Their tragicomic plays depicted the helplessness of the humans in a world bereft of meaning. Simultaneously, they challenged the conventions of the Aristotelian theatre by depending on circular plots, abstract characters, metatheatrical references, and dialogue steeped in wordplay (Mambrol, 2021). The critic Martin Esslin coined the term in his 1960 essay "The Theatre of the Absurd", analysing works by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugène Ionesco. Esslin (1960) proclaims that their plays share a common cachet, which is that they are all "absurd"; absurd in the sense that they have "no purpose, or goal, or objective" (p. 4). The absurd in these plays takes the form of man's response to a world apparently without meaning, or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by fate, providence, or external forces. These plays address existential paradoxes, reject easy solutions, and invite critical deliberation instead of emotional identification (Esslin, 1960). In the introduction to his seminal text *Absurd Drama* (1965), Esslin states that:

The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face-to-face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But

the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly, precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation (p. 23).

Esslin identifies several features of absurdist drama in his essay "The Theatre of the Absurd" (1960). To start with, the illogical structure of the absurd plays, which are labelled as "anti-plays in which neither time nor place is clearly stated" (Esslin, 1960, p. 3). The absence of linear plots mirrors the turmoil and futility of human existence. Plots in traditional drama have a certain topos; their actions progress cogently and end with a sound solution. However, the plot in the theatre of the absurd "does not recognise the logical sequence adopted by traditional drama. Absurdism at its most extreme abandons conventional notions of plot almost entirely" (Galens, 2009, p. 10). The characters too engage in various actions; however, their actions are not connected meaningfully, nor does the plot develop any logical narrative (Galens, 2009, p. 10).

Character is a key component in the dramatic structure, since the writer can deliver his message through the words of his characters. The playwright in the theatre of the absurd depicts a character suffering from a state of seclusion and loss after losing all of his traditional features. He also isolates the character from the society to which he belongs and severs the ties between him and others. The characters speak just for the sake of talking and to utter just words without any coherent meaning (Galens, 2009). The theatre of the absurd frequently forsakes conventional character growth to offer a figure who has no palpable identity or distinctive features. They might even be exchangeable, with one character taking the role of another character for some part of the play; these exchanges exist throughout the play, which denies spectators any constant "sense of character identity" (Galens, 2009, p. 9).

As for the dialogue, it is often degenerated into clichés, repetitions, or gibberish, e.g., Lucky's incoherent monologue in *Waiting for Godot*. According to Esslin (1960), "the dialogue in these plays consists of meaningless clichés and the mechanical circular repetition of stereotyped phrases" (p. 5). Esslin (1960) associates this with the disparagement of language in modern philosophy and psychology, where words veneer profound existential voids. Psychological commotion is projected through surreal imagery. The symbols in the theatre of the absurd crystallise subconscious fears and societal deterioration, or, to put it in Esslin's own words, "the Theatre of the Absurd—with its exuberant mingling of the real and the nightmarish, its wild fantasies and externalisations of subconscious yearnings and fear," has exercised a potent influence (1960, p. 10). The ability of language to convey meaning is called into question in the theatre of the absurd. Moreover, there is a contradiction between speech and action (Galens, 2009, p. 10).

The theatre of the absurd's main interest lies in showing the existential futility. The audience's confusion reflects their confrontation with life's inherent absurdity. Esslin expounds on that the meeting of the spectators with "characters and happenings which they are not quite able to comprehend makes it impossible for them to share the aspirations and emotions in the depicted play. Emotional identification with the characters is replaced by puzzled, critical attention" (Esslin, 1960, p. 5). Esslin (1965) affirms how the genre's vagueness requires miscellaneous interpretations, resisting final answers, thus leaving audiences to cope with existential paradoxes. In the conventional theatre, the action always proceeds towards a definable end. In the Theatre of the Absurd, the spectators do not know how to reach the objective of the play. They are not, consequently, so much in suspense as to what will happen as they are in suspense of what the meaning of what happens is. The final question is never wholly answered. Likewise, each of the audience will probably find his own, personal meaning of the play, which might be different from the conclusion reached by others (Esslin, 1960, p. 14).

The Theatre of the Absurd has been adapted into different contexts, showing the genre's flexibility as an adroit literary spectrum to articulate issues in non-Western contexts. Tawfiq al-Hakim, who is a versatile intellectual in Arabic literature, introduced the Theatre of the Absurd to the Arab stage, particularly in his play *The Tree Climber* (1962). One should bear in mind that the absurdist view of the world contrasts sharply with the Islamic view of the world as logical and meaningful. That is why some critics posited that absurdism is irrelevant in the Arab world. However, Al-Hakim's plays included Eastern symbols alongside existential themes, creating a distinctive mixture that resonated with Arab audiences and shaped later generations of Arab playwrights (Staub, 2023). Absurd Arab theatre blends Western techniques and local socio-political realities. Arab absurdism diverges from Western models by embedding cultural specificity, such as Islamic heritage and postcolonial struggles, into its narratives (Alrubaie, 2021).

In the same spirit, the Syrian playwright Saadallah Wanos localised absurdism into the Syrian context. Because of the influence of existentialism during his study in France, he incorporated absurdist features into his plays to critique the socio-political issues of Syria. In his play *The Tragedy of the Poor Molasses Seller* (1963), he employs incoherent scenes, monotonous dialogues, and archetypal characters to portray the oppression of dictatorial regimes (Alrubaie, 2021). In addition to the employment of the techniques of the theatre of the absurd, Wanos blends Arab folklore with absurdist fragmentation. For instance, the protagonist Khadour in *The Poor Molasses Seller* suffers from existential despair and recurring suffering. Such representation is crafted to critique the political dilemmas (Alrubaie, 2021).

Regarding Iraqi theatre, it was influenced immensely in the sixties by the philosophical trends and ideas found in Europe. Among these philosophies is existentialism, which was augmented by several factors, including the Nakba of Palestine, the events of the national revolutions, and the changes that accompanied them in the social and economic structures and the political climate. Thus, Iraqi playwrights have adapted the theatre's techniques to grapple with the profound disillusionment,

trauma and political violence that have characterised much of the nation's modern history (Al-Mamouri et al., 2024, p.1329). Hadeel Abdelhameed, in her unpublished thesis *Imaging Women in Wartime: A Comparative Study in Selected Australian and Iraqi War Theatre*, states that:

While the first and second generations from the 1940s to the late 1960s established the praxis of Aristotelian drama, the third generation from the 1970s to the 1990s were influenced by Brechtian dialectical theatre, Beckettian Absurdist drama, and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. They worked to introduce experimental drama not only to the Iraqi academia but also to the public.(cited in Ali and Midhin, 2025, p.)

Among the Iraqi writers who were influenced by these trends was the playwright Taha Salem, who tackled the Iraqi social issues using the theatre of the absurd. Other important Iraqi playwrights who were influenced by the theatre of the absurd are Mahdi Al-Samawi in his play *A Man Who Pawned Himself*, Qasim Hawal in his play *The Clown*, and Youssef Al-Ani in his play *A Man Defying Fate* (Al-Mamouri et al., 2024, p.1329). Arab absurdism diverges by incorporating regional socio-political realities into its framework. This propensity sets the stage for understanding how Al Assadi localises these techniques to critique the occupation of Iraq. Emerging from this tradition, Al Assadi's *Baghdadi Bath* juxtaposes European absurdist tropes with Iraq's specific traumas.

3- Presentation of Results:

Baghdadi Bath (2005) is not a mere facsimile of the Theatre of the Absurd. The play forges the theatre's conventions to critique the moral and existential vacuum created by the 2003 occupation. The meticulous localisation of universal techniques of absurdism is a direct manifestation of a national trauma. The following outlines the key techniques employed in the play.

3-1- The Bathhouse as a Metaphorical Void

The most striking localisation of absurdism is the play's setting, which transforms a place of purification into a metaphor for national defilement. The play starts with describing the setting, which is "a public Baghdadi bath, with small windows and big

and small bathing tubs...and other smaller tables, a misty atmosphere, thrown orange peels, wet rags, and articles left by the customers thrown here and there" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 112). The play's setting is a place of filth (blood, orange peels, and a gold tooth). This portrayal is a clear representation of the moral and physical pollution of the outside world. Traditionally, the hammam is a sacrosanct place of purification, community, and even spiritual renewal. However, Al-Assadi systematically desecrates this traditional perception. The setting is described in the play as a "misty atmosphere"; such a description demonstrates how clarity and truth are obscured in a country emaciated by violence and conflicts. In so doing, the play's setting aligns perfectly with Esslin's (1965) description of the absurdist world as "an incomprehensible place" (p. 5). Much like the filthy bathhouse, Iraq's physical and institutional state is totally ruined. The Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) Order No. 2 dissolved the Iraqi military and civil bureaucracy. Thus, this move engineered a vacuum that led to the collapse of public order, security, and essential services (CPA, 2003). Thus, the promise of cleansing and renewal is literally buried under the "orange peels" and "blood" of societal breakdown. As Majid and Hamid try to scrub each other in the bathhouse, their futile ritual allegorises the impossible task of achieving purity in a nation whose infrastructure and social contract had been wilfully shattered.

Al-Assadi once noted that he came from a poor family; thus, he and his five siblings were offered a trip to the public baths as a kind of entertainment. In the play, the two brothers meet each other "in an abandoned public bath in Baghdad shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and recall their visits to this same bath with their now deceased father when they were children" (Myers & Saab, 2019, p. 299). In the bathhouse, they recall how they meet a world indifferent to their misery: Majid buries corpses in shallow desert graves, and Hamid pukes blood after seeing state-sanctioned exterminations. Robert Myers and Nada Saab (2019) note that "The two brothers clearly suggest an Iraqi Vladimir and Estragon picking through the rubble of post-invasion Iraq, trying to salvage anything they can from the desolate, apocalyptic landscape" (p. 25).

3-2- Fractured Dialogue and the Collapse of Meaning

A hallmark of absurdism is the fragmented dialogue to convey the absence of coherent communication. Dialogue in the theatre of the absurd is typically "meaningless clichés and mechanical circular repetitions" (Esslin, 1960, p. 5). This orientation of rendering language fragmented reveals how even language, which is supposed to be the very vehicle of transmitting knowledge and information, fails to express meaning in a world replete with turmoil. However, Al-Assadi gives it a distinct political aetiology. The speech of the characters imbued with cyclical repetitions reflects the socio-political turmoil of Baghdad post-2003. The U.S.-created Iraqi Governing Council institutionalised a sectarian quota system, *muhasasa*, actively promoting a sectarian political identity. This political engineering shattered a shared national narrative, turning neighbours into sectarian suspects and making coherent communal dialogue impossible (Campos, 2024). Thus, the brothers' fragmented monologues dramatise the lived consequence of this policy, where there exists a collapse of social trust and the corruption of language itself becomes a tool for survival and division, rather than connection. For instance, Majid reflects on his life's failures, stating:

If I'd followed my teacher's advice, I'd have become a famous singer... But my misfortune led me to drive buses... All I gained from it was cursing, drinking, and hashish... I always scream, 'Good morning, Majid... Fuck your fate... your filthy misfortune.' (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 113)

The trajectory of the life of Majid is derailed by perpetual conflict that is embodied in this fragmented speech. The psyche of Iraqi people was influenced by the brutal consequences of the war. Myers and Saab (2019) affirm that the storyline of the play is "disjointed" (p. 308). This is a deliberate use of plotline to reflect the ill psyche of the Iraqis. In this sense, Al-Assadi's dramaturgy transforms fragmentation into both a narrative and symbolic device; it is impossible to realise coherent expression amid chaos. Language itself has failed as a tool for genuine communication or solace and instead become a "veneer for existential voids" (Esslin, 1960, p. 56). Language is used not to connect but to express endurance and deflect trauma. It is like a mantra that

encapsulates the terror in the country. Even terror is normalised as a daily routine due to the omnipresent violence. Majid labels the violence which engulfs Iraq as "normal" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 112). In many other situations, including Hamid's bitter greeting, the unruly world surrounding the brothers is made clear: "Good morning, explosions. Good morning, booby traps" (Al-Asadi, 2008, p. 325).

Moreover, the brothers constantly talk past each other. Their arguments about the past, money, and their family go in circles, never resolving. They talk past each other; thus, genuine communication is unattainable. The brothers are operating in completely different psychological and moral universes. Majid's speech is about survival and profit. It is filled with schemes, promises of money, and a defiant, often grotesque, embrace of the Americans. Hamid, on the other hand, is haunted by the past, consumed by fear, guilt, and a sense of moral outrage. His speech is focused on how he was traumatised by his past experiences, on their family history, on his children's suffering, and on the humiliation of the occupation. When one brings up a practical concern like a business opportunity, the other responds with an emotional or moral accusation like betrayal or neglect of their mother. Their conversations are a series of missed connections. One brother's line rarely serves as a direct answer to the other's: "MAJID: I prayed to God that He would get us to Baghdad safely, but unfortunately my plan failed./ HAMID: Why did you lie to me?" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 119). When Majid reflects on their failed mission, Hamid immediately reframes it as a personal betrayal instead of engaging with the event itself. Often, their exchanges are simply alternating monologues. Each brother is so absorbed in his own narrative that he uses the other only as a trigger to launch into his own set-piece speech. Majid's monologue about his failed life, his wives, and his daughters is prompted by Hamid's simple question about the empty bath. Instead of really answering the question, he's using it as a springboard for his own despair.

Similarly, Hamid's long confession about transporting and executing prisoners is a traumatic eruption. Majid listens, but his response is not one of shared horror or comfort; it's a pragmatic "Forget the past" and an immediate pivot to a new money-making scheme. This failure to communicate is a microcosm of the larger societal

collapse in Baghdad. The play is set against a backdrop of explosions, headless bodies, and fear. In such a misty and virulent environment, where truth is relative and survival is paramount, coherent, shared meaning becomes impossible. Language itself is corrupted. When Majid asks what "thank you" means, Hamid replies, "It means... 'fuck you'." (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 114). Thus, words have lost their stable meaning. The brothers cannot agree on a shared reality. They have no common ground from which to build a conversation. Their final scene back in the bath, with Majid recounting his ultimate failure and humiliation and Hamid silently bathing him, is perhaps the only moment of quiet, non-verbal connection. But even then, they are not speaking. The words have finally failed entirely. In the midst of this utter desolation, only the bleak, ritualistic act of care and scrubbing operates. Their failure to communicate is not a philosophical stance but a dramatisation of a society whose social fabric has been torn; that shared understanding is no longer possible. Language, here, has become a tool for bare survival rather than genuine human connection.

What is more, the dialogic structure of *Baghdadi Bath* is defined by its oscillation among fervent outbursts, gallows humour, and fragmented monologues, a triad that formally enacts the psychological disintegration of its characters. Majid depicts his wife hyperbolically as someone who has "grown a moustache" and his daughters as hunchbacks "destined to marry a gravedigger" (Al Assadi, 2008, p. 113). This dark humour lays bare the distortion of the domestic sphere under duress. The play localises the absurdist breakdown of language by presenting fractured dialogue as the direct symptom of a collective trauma that has shattered the very possibility of coherent communication.

3-3- Cyclical Futility and Sisyphean Rituals

In a powerful localisation of absurdist futility, the brothers' cyclical rituals and failed journeys indicate the maddening cycle of promised liberation and actual destruction that characterised the post-2003 Iraqi experience. The plot of *Baghdadi Bath* rejects Aristotelian linearity. Instead, it embraces a cyclical structure that reinforces the inescapable nature of the characters' predicament. The play begins and

ends in the same bathhouse. This circularity represents the political and social stagnation that the brothers try to escape, but they cannot. The stage directions note that the light is now "dingier" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 122). Meaning that there is an escalation of violence and complicity. Moreover, the brothers' actions are a series of futile and Sisyphean rituals. Majid and Hamid scrub each other's bodies, scavenge for a bloodied gold tooth, and transmit a candidate across borders. They cyclically scrub each other's bodies: "I'll scrape your body as Father scraped mine until all your filth goes down the drain" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 103). As Myers and Saab (2008) observe, they are "like lost souls... obsessively and unsuccessfully trying to scrub one another's—and our own—guilt away" (p. 111). Yet, this cleansing is perpetually unfinished, just as the reconstruction of Iraq promised by the occupiers remained a hollow hoax.

Towards the end of the play, the brothers travel to the Iraqi-Jordanian border, transporting a candidate. However, the candidate is killed *en route* when his head "explodes" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 121). The killing of the candidate, who is a symbol of the new democratic Iraq, is a stark visual metaphor for the failure of the political process from its inception. At the messy border checkpoint, the brothers meet aggressive U.S. soldiers, wandering dogs, and explosions. Majid tries to bribe a female soldier to allow them to cross the border, but Hamid, dreading and disgusted, deserts Majid, taking his passport, and escapes back. Majid's pointless effort to deliver the corpse is articulated when he says, "I gathered up the pieces... covered them with dust... I wished for a moment I was dead" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 123). Majid, left alone with the rotting corpse, is forced by soldiers to bury the body in the desert. He endures humiliation and near-burial alive. As such, the "new Iraq" is literally stillborn, and its citizens are tasked with burying the evidence in unmarked graves.

3-4- Character as Archetypes of Anti-hero

True to the characterisation of the theatre of the absurd, the play forgoes conventional psychological character development. Majid and Hamid are not fully realised individuals but allegorical figures representing the two impossible choices of occupation: collaboration or resistance, both of which lead to ruin. Majid and Hamid

are much like the characters in the drama of the absurd who are "usually only a duo, a pair of individuals living together or otherwise coexisting. They have trouble living together but cannot imagine" (Hornby, 2015, p. 642). Majid represents the pragmatic collaborator who has embraced the occupiers for profit: "I would deal with the devil to earn my livelihood" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 116). However, he loses his soul and his connection to his family in the process. Survival under occupation necessitates complicity with the very forces which wreak chaos on their country. Majid has "thrown his conscience in the toilet" to survive (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 116). Thus, he works as a bus driver for U.S. forces and bribes soldiers. Majid's pro-American rants are a form of absurdity. He describes the U.S. president's smile making him tremble and "have an urge to pee"; a grotesque parody of political admiration (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 120). His language is a mix of genuine survivalism and internalised propaganda that sounds insane to his brother.

In stark contrast to his brother Majid, Hamid is patriotic and morally conscious and is haunted by trauma, from his past work under Saddam's regime to his present disgust with the occupation: "I was ashamed to work for them" (Al-Assadi, 2008, p. 116). However, he is ultimately powerless, forced back into smuggling to provide for his family. In effect, traditional notions of right and wrong have been rendered obsolete by the need to feed one's family. The brothers are two examples of how Iraqis were forced to make choices they may have never wanted during the times of turmoil and conflicts. They had to choose either to collaborate and lose one's soul or resist and risk annihilation. Together, they illustrate how occupation systematically dismantles the very possibility of heroic or righteous action.

3-5- Denial of Catharsis

The play's final, masterful denial of catharsis is its ultimate political statement, localising the absurdist rejection of easy answers into a direct refutation of the occupier's narrative of redemption and liberation. It is a definitive gesture of the Theatre of the Absurd. At the end of the play, the brothers return to the dingy bathhouse. However, the brothers' reconciliation is deliberately disrupted by the intrusion of off-

stage explosions and the sound of howling dogs. The playwright purposefully intends these aural elements to remind the audience and the brothers that the turmoil is ongoing. Consequently, the denouement systematically denies the audience the conventional emotional release of Aristotelian drama. Instead, the audience are situated in a state of "puzzled, critical attention" (Esslin, 1960, p. 5). This is to orient the spectators that it is virtually impossible to attain a resolution in a country that is drenched in anarchy. This portrayal of absurdity mounts a critique against the myths of liberation, a comfortable certainty that the theatre of the absurd adroitly "attacks" (p. 23). Thus, Al Assadi substantiates Esslin's axiom that absurdism provokes "liberating laughter" by refusing to sanitise Iraq's wounds. Instead, he forces the audiences to confront the occupation's dehumanising algebra, where cleansing rituals are rendered powerless in the face of ubiquitous filth.

4- Discussion of Results:

The results demonstrate how the play is more than just an imitation of the absurd techniques, but it is a localisation of these very conventions into the Iraqi soil for the sake of critiquing the horrendous repercussions of the 2003 invasion. The results espouse that the absurdity in the play is engineered by the chaos of post-2003 Iraq. Central to this espousal is the setting of the play: the bathhouse (hammam). The bathhouse is replete with filth and mist, which are direct representations of the moral corruption and obscured truth under occupation. In setting the play in an Iraqi bathhouse, the playwright grounds the play's absurdity in a recognisable Iraqi cultural reality.

Similarly, the fractured dialogue in the play refers to the breakdown in communication that results directly from trauma and the impossibility of articulating coherent experiences in a world of violence. This world of violence where even language, the very means of communication, breaks down and is no longer able to express reality under the heavy weight of occupation. This localises Esslin's 'degenerated language' by showing it as a direct symptom of political trauma, where words like 'thank you' are redefined by the brutal logic of occupation, unlike the more

inherently nonsensical wordplay of Ionesco. Moreover, the return to the "dingier" bathhouse and the futile acts of scrubbing and burying are but techniques indicative of the ceaseless, fruitless cycle of violence and promised reconstruction. However, the futility experienced by Majid and Hamid is man-made, a direct consequence of political failure, not divine punishment. It is a stark metaphor for a political process stillborn in an environment of pervasive violence. This violence had a staggering human scale. Rigorous studies estimate approximately half a million Iraqi deaths from 2003 to 2011 (Hagopian et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the deliberate characterisation of Majid and Hamid as absurdist archetypes rather than psychologically rounded individuals is used to illustrate the impossible choices imposed by occupation. Iraqis under occupation are doomed either to collaborate with invaders to earn their living and lose their souls or to stand on moral ground, and this leaves them in a financially lost position. This very predicament is embodied by these two brothers whose baths were doomed to ruin and moral compromise. This dichotomy reflects the failure of the occupiers to perceive Iraqis as complex historical agents. U.S. policy was often guided by a deeply naive view, where citizens were forced into reductive roles of collaborator or insurgent (Ricks, 2006). The brothers are products of this political failure. Their tragedy results from the necessity to collaborate with the occupiers to earn their living. Moreover, a final absurdist gesture in the play is the denial of catharsis to sledgehammer the false narratives of liberation and successful nation-building. Thus, the play stands as a definitive work of political absurdism which documents the very mechanisms that render life meaningless under occupation.

The playwright Al Assadi grounds the play *Baghdadi Bath* (2005) in the socio-political context of post-invasion Iraq. This contextualisation, in effect, anchors the play in the concrete violence wrought by the very existence of the military perpetrators. Thus, it diverges from the seminal works of playwrights like Beckett or Ionesco that often address philosophically abstract despair. Therefore, Al Assadi anatomises "reasonable topics in the absurd form" to critique the "unreasonable silence" (cited in

Alrubaie, 2021, p. 1951). This is the silence of the international community about the aftermath of the occupation and the failed promises of liberation. The play, in effect, is a valid testimony of the adaptability and enduring power of absurdist techniques when transposed into non-Western and war-torn contexts. This is a distinct strand of Arab absurdism that synthesises Western dramaturgical methods with local cultural heritage and regional political immediacy.

Conclusion :

Baghdadi Bath is a recalibration of the Theatre of the Absurd in the Iraqi literary landscape. This recalibration articulated the critique of the socio-political turmoil post-2003. Absurdity in the play is not predicated on the absence of God or meaning, which is a universal condition of the post-Hiroshima world. Absurdity in the play, as shown in the paper, stems from the collapse of a coherent social and political fabric post-2003. To dramatise such fabric, Al-Assadi crafted a reality-like world in absurdist fashion to bear witness to the overwhelming trauma. The study marks the violence, conflicts, chaos and broken communication to be the very fabric of living in Iraq in that period of time. Thus, the play is a mirror held up to reflect reality. All in all, the playwright succeeds in dexterously grounding the genre in the Iraqi landscape. For this end, he sets the play in a traditional Iraqi bathhouse and anchors the play in the social and political turmoil of post-2003 Iraq. Importantly, *Baghdadi Bath* reclaims the absurd from abstract philosophy and weaponises it as a form of historical testimony from within the ruins. Unlike the official discourses, Al-Assadi's play centres the raw, human perspective that these discourses rarely capture. The play's very structure asserts that the authentic Iraqi experience of that period was one of traumatic absurdity.

The study recommends examining the contextualisation of the absurd techniques in other plays to grapple with the nation's ongoing struggles, such as the rise of sectarianism and the fight against radicalism. Additionally, a comparative study between Al-Assadi's work and that of other Arab playwrights would further illuminate the development of a distinct "Arab Absurdism". Interestingly, staging plays like *Baghdadi Bath* that offer non-Western perspectives on conflicts should be sponsored to

foster a global understanding of war that centres human experience over political rhetoric.

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