Beckett's Women in Iraqi Dramaturgical Treatment

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Abstract

This article explores how Iraqi dramaturgy-particularly in the work of Ali Abdul Nabi Al-Zaidi-employs a carnivalesque mode to subvert Beckettian representations of women. I argue that this dramaturgical strategy functions as a form of resistance and innovation, offering alternative expressive possibilities within a local cultural context. It aims to uncover Beckett's influence on contemporary Iraqi theatre, while investigating the extent to which Al-Zaidi's dramaturgy operates within a Bakhtinian carnivalesque framework.

Introduction

Since there is no apparent carnivalesque dimension in Beckett's works, it is a significant challenge to do a carnivalesque reading to his oeuvre. However, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival-as a temporary liberation from established conventions-offers new lenses through which Beckett's theatre may be reinterpreted. As Bakhtin (1984) suggests, "in carnival … the new mode of man's relation to man is

elaborated" (p. x). In this context, carnivalesque moments can be seen as opportunities to evoke alternative expressions and relationships.

In this sense, Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque may be understood as a mode of subversion through which new expressions, meanings, and dramaturgical strategies emerge. Subversion, in this context, does not imply the outright rejection or erasure of the "old master" (e.g., Beckett), but rather a heteroglossic engagement-a dialogic interplay between the canonical work and its contemporary reinterpretation. This dynamic process allows for the reinterpretation of dominant narratives and the articulation of marginalized voices through parody, inversion, and theatrical disruption.

In alignment with this concept, my article explores how Iraqi dramaturgy-particularly in the work of Ali Abdul Nabi Al-Zaidi-employs a carnivalesque mode to subvert Beckettian representations of women. I argue that this dramaturgical strategy functions as a form of resistance and innovation, offering alternative expressive possibilities within a local cultural context. This study aims to uncover Beckett's influence on contemporary Iraqi theatre, while investigating the extent to which Al-Zaidi's dramaturgy operates within a Bakhtinian carnivalesque framework.

A short historical background of Iraqi theatre

The first emergence of Iraqi theatre has been rooted in Mosul, the north part of Iraq, where the theatre was found to widen the Christian churches' values. The earliest forms of these plays are *The Comedy of Adam and Eve*, *Yousif Al Hassan* and *The Comedy of Tobia*, which were written by the deacon Hana Habash to preach virtues (Shammari, 2016, p. 15). In the following years, the Iraqi theatrical concerns, with the publication of Naoum Fathallah Al Sahhar's play *Latif Khushaba* in 1893, which was an adapted text from French literature, has been shifted the theatrical focus to the socio-political aspects. As Al Azraki

and Al Shamma (2015) affirm that Al Shahhar "marks a shift in focus in Iraqi theatre from primarily religious concerns to sociopolitical ones" (p. 4). This means that Iraqi theatrical practices have been expanded to explore social and political facts.

Although Iraqi theatrical practitioners marked a shift in the focus of Iraqi theatre, the religious concerns were not entirely absent. These forms have been regenerated in new theatrical practices such as the practice of *Ta'ziyeh* (Condolences), which is usually performed in the first month of Arabic year, Muharram to echo the murder of Imam Hussein and his followers. This practice is defined as an action theatrically performed to evoke a sense of guilt for Iraqis, Shi'ites in particular on their abandonment of Imam Hussein to be killed by Umayyad Calipha . In an article entitled "Theatre in the Arab World: A Difficult Birth", Khalid Amin(2006) informs that the practice of Ta'ziyeh was enacted in the streets, where "the [memorable] events of Karbala are reconstituted and represented in elaborately staged performances throughout the Shi'ite world. Within the performance, the audience assumes the role of the passive Kufans who abandoned Hussein to death. They weep and ask forgiveness for their personal sins" (p. 149).

The richness of Iraqi theatre does not limit to the tragic performances, there are also unique practices featured by their comic sense. Some sources associated these practices with the Shadow Plays such as *Al Semajah* (The Lumpish), *Al Mukhanethon* (The Milksops), *Khayal Al Zill* (Theatre of Shadow), and *Al Ikhbari* (The Story Teller). All these practices were "performed with figures held by sticks against a back-lit canvas screen" (Amin, 2006, p.150).

However, it is certainly that the earliest forms of theatrical practices uncovered in Mosul, but these practices had its refinement from the western world, where the most of Iraqi dramatists such as Hakki Al

Shbili received his education. After his return, Al Shbili established the first formal Institute of Fine Arts during the 1940s, from where some greatest Iraqi artists graduated such as Ibraheem Jelal, Jaffer Al Saidi, Yosif Al Ani, Khalil Shawki, Sami Abdulhameed, Salah Al Qassab, Fadhil Khalil, and Bedri Hasoon Faried. Furthermore, there are also some theatrical practices attributed to what is known as commercial and serious theatre (Al Shammari, 2016, p. 20) .

Since this article explores the role of Beckettian concepts in inspiring Iraqi dramaturgs, it is necessary to see how the Western theatre influenced the Iraqi theatrical practices. As argued earlier, the refinement of Iraqi theatrical practices resulted from the translation and adaptation of some western texts, which enhance the Iraqi dramaturgs with many theatrical techniques. Moreover, the Iraqi formal institutions of Fine Arts have offered a great space to study the works of some western figures such as Chekhov, Ibsen, Brecht, Beckett, Artaud, Brook and Piscator, who played an important role in developing the Iraqi theatrical practices.

As this article focuses on the oeuvre of Ali Abdul Nabi Al-Zaidi, it prioritizes his work without devoting extensive space to other Iraqi theatrical figures. Al-Zaidi, an Iraqi playwright and director, is widely regarded as one of Iraq's leading contemporary theatre practitioners. His theatrical output is often aligned with the Theatre of the Absurd due to its existential themes, fragmented narratives, and abstract staging. Because he engages in both playwriting and directing, the term "dramaturg" is fitting in describing his role.

Al-Zaidi's significance lies in his theatrical engagement with Iraq's traumatic history, particularly the Iraqi-Iranian War and its lingering aftermath. In a personal WhatsApp interview, Al-Zaidi stated that war and Iraq's volatile social conditions are the primary catalysts for his

theatrical imagination. Accordingly, his plays aim to dramatize the collective pain and disillusionment of the Iraqi people.

Among his body of work, *A Romantic Rendezvous* stands out for its thematic resonance with the horrors endured by Yazidi women during the ISIS occupation in 2014. Dramaturgically and thematically, this play invites comparison to Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, particularly in its portrayal of female suffering and endurance. Like Beckett, Al-Zaidi employs absurdist techniques-abstraction, fragmentation, and existential despair-but re-contextualizes them within an Iraqi socio-political framework. In doing so, he reshapes the absurd to reflect localized trauma and gendered resistance.

Beckettian Concepts in Iraqi Dramaturgical Treatment

Although the Iraqi theatrical practices inspired by the western ones, this does not mean that Iraqi practices are merely a reflection of what Western theatres have. In his book, *Arabic Theatre from Borrowing to Imitation*, Ahmed Al Sharji (2013) confirms that as Iraqi plays have been written in Arabic language, there is no necessary to think on the influence of the others. As he explained in the following lines,

Whatever we present is theatre that is not different from what others in other parts of the world present, the difference lies only in the language, and I repeat 'only', therefore, it is important to strive to establish this idea, perhaps we will be able to rid ourselves of thinking of the other. Whatever we present is: theatre in Arabic. (as cited in Al Shammari, 2016, p. 25)

This sounds on the opposed of what Sami Abdulahmeed (2010) concludes. In his book *Lights on the Theatrical Life in Iraq*, he approves that Arabic theatrical movement is an adaptation of the Western one (as cited in Al Shammari, 2016, p. 25). Such as, I agree with Ahmed Al Sharji's opinion in which he stresses on the role of

language in distinguishing Arabic theatrical practices from other ones. This also concords with Samuel Beckett's perspective when he affirmed that "… [writing] the book again in another language — that is to say, write a new book" (as cited in Verhulst, 2008, p. 278). This helps to argue that the originality of any theatrical experience depends on its language through which the dramaturg shapes their own social and cultural signifiers. From this fact, Ali Abdul Nabi Al-Zaidi's theatrical practice seem original in spite of its affiliations with Beckett's. For example, in his play *A Romantic Rendezvous*, Al-Zaidi reconfigures Beckettian concepts an Iraqi fashion, through subverting Beckett's hierarchical representation of female characters.

In *Happy Days*, Winnie-Beckett's central female character-performs a markedly feminine role while trapped in a profoundly critical and surreal condition. Buried to her waist in a mound of earth, she nevertheless maintains an acute concern with her physical appearance and rituals of femininity. As Beckett himself describes:

> Well I thought that the most dreadful thing that could happen to anybody, would be not to be allowed to sleep so that just as you're dropping off there'd be a "Dong" and you'd have to keep awake; you're sinking into the ground alive and it's full of ants; and the sun is shining endlessly day and night and there is not a tree … there's no shade, nothing, and that bell wakes you up all the time and all you've got is a little parcel of things to see you through life […] And I thought who would cope with that and go down singing, only a woman. (as cited in Knowlson, 1996, p. 501)

This comment reflects Beckett's recognition of what he perceived as the extraordinary resilience of women. Winnie is presented as a hopeful, almost dreamlike character who maintains politeness, routine, and optimism in the face of a desolate and dehumanizing reality. She resists neither her husband, who is largely silent and passive, nor the

physical condition of her entrapment. Instead, her resistance manifests in ritualistic repetition and symbolic femininity. Although such representation may seem alien or exaggerated to contemporary audiences, it resonates with mid-20th-century gender expectations and cultural norms. As Billie Whitelaw-Beckett's favored performer-observed: "Whenever I've read anything of Beckett's that I've been asked to do, the first thing that I've always wondered is how it is that everything he writes seems to be about my life" (Ben-Zvi, 1992, P.3). Beckett's dramatization of women, therefore, emerges not from a direct feminist critique, but rather from an engagement with the stereotypical image of womanhood, shaped by cultural expectations. Winnie's character embodies the quiet endurance and conformity expected of women, even as her environment erodes all stability. Through this paradox, Beckett critiques the societal structures that frame women's lives as performance-even in crisis.

In a similar vein, Al-Zaidi's play *A Romantic Rendezvous* addresses the representation of women on stage, but through a distinct dramaturgical mode. The play engages directly with Iraqi sociopolitical realities, such as the domination of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), the erosion of women's identity, and the false religiosity underpinning extremist ideologies. To subvert Beckettian representations of women-especially the image of passive endurance-Al-Zaidi introduces carnivalesque moments that temporarily invert gender hierarchies, granting his female protagonist both dominance and agency.

At the beginning of the play, the male character Hamad-representing the ghost of extremist discourse-appears dominant, while Warda, the female character, is clearly oppressed. As in the following description "Warda enters instantly, dressed in fully white clothes. Her hands are tied with a rope to her back; there is an adhesive tape on her mouth, with a black scarf on her eyes" (Hameed, 2019, p. 156). In contrast to

Beckett's Winnie, who despite her physical entrapment maintains verbal agency, Warda is introduced in complete silence, her voice literally and symbolically suppressed.

However, as the play progresses, Al-Zaidi creates a reversal. Through a series of carnivalesque moments, Warda's silence offers way to resistance. She refuses Hamad's coercive offer of marriage and challenges his violent, ideological worldview-a worldview that sanctions murder, torture, and rape in the name of religion. Consider the following dialogue:

Hamed: It won't end at all! I've sentenced that you get married to me first, then the rires of slaughter!

Warda: I won't consent to your marriage proposal!

Hamad: I'm not asking your consent or refuse!

Warda: I won't consent!

These dialogues clearly illustrate Hamad's position as a dominant character attempting to impose his will on Warda. The fact underscores a hegemonic relationship in which women are expected to submit to male authority. However, Al-Zaidi disrupts this stereotypical image by portraying Hamad's efforts to control Warda as ultimately unsuccessful, thereby challenging traditional gender hierarchies and asserting female resistance. As Al-Zaidi mentions:

Hamad: I'm your *Emir*; your obedience is must!

Warda: they laughed at you and drowned you with sweet words: you're nothing but a man of knife that soon gets rusty and thrown to the nearest trash can. You, loser, be sure I won't be yours. I utterly reject you with all my heart and mind…

Here, Warda's voice emerges as a force of defiance. While the power dynamic oscillates between domination and resistance, Al-Zaidi

ultimately stages a shocking carnivalesque climax: Warda commits suicide by stabbing herself, an act of ultimate resistance and self-liberation. Her death is not a surrender but a subversive rejection of a world where love has become illusion, and agency is denied. This moment marks a radical departure from Beckett's passive female figures, positioning Warda as an icon of active dissent.

In short, it appears that Al-Zaidi successfully subverts Beckett's hegemonic representation of women by transforming Winnie's passive endurance into Warda's radical resistance. Through the creation of carnivalesque moments, Al-Zaidi reimagines the female voice not as silent submission but as active defiance. This reconfiguration of female subjectivity functions as both a theatrical strategy and a cultural critique-particularly of gender norms and personal status laws in Iraq. In this context, Bakhtin's notion of carnival as a form of "new birth" becomes a powerful lens for generating alternative modes of representation- that challenge patriarchal narratives and reclaim agency for marginalized female characters.

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