

**Politics, Oppression and Violence in Harold Pinter's Plays through the Lens of Arabic  
Plays from Egypt and Syria**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of MASTER OF  
ARTS BY RESEARCH**

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**May 2018**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to examine how far the political plays of Harold Pinter reflect the Arabic political situation, particularly in Syria and Egypt, by comparing them to several plays that have been written in these two countries after 1967. During the research, the comparative study examined the similarities and differences on a theoretical basis, and how each playwright dramatised the topic of political violence and aggression against oppressed individuals. It also focussed on what dramatic techniques have been used in the plays. The thesis also tries to shed light on how Arab theatre practitioners managed to adapt Pinter's plays to overcome the cultural-specific elements and the foreignness of the text to bring the play closer to the understanding of the targeted audience.



## **Acknowledgments**

I would like first to thank my supervisors, Dr. Rose Whyman and Dr. Graham Saunders, for the infinite support and guidance I received from them during the writing process which was especially difficult for me. I will forever be in their debt. I would like also to thank CARA, Council for at Risk Academics, who funded this programme and made this accomplishment possible.



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## Introduction

Harold Pinter is hailed as one of the most important playwrights in the modern era, and he was the first British writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He started his theatre career as an actor while his subsequent career in playwriting faced a difficult start, himself describing his early work as ‘unpopular’.<sup>1</sup> Pinter was involved as a playwright and an activist with the politics of the time, which left its mark on his work throughout. He was born during the period of the Depression and in his youth, witnessed World War (WWII) and the Cold War. The influence of contemporary politics on Pinter’s work has been immense. Michael Billington suggests that had *The Hothouse* (1958), a play that is a critique of the authoritarian postures where a dictator-like character runs a prison for political prisoners, been published that year and not postponed till 1978, it could have established Pinter not as an exponent of the Comedy of Menace, or the master of the pause as he was deemed, but rather as ‘a dramatist with an active political conscience’.<sup>2</sup> Billington emphasises the idea of political conscience because, in fact, Pinter regarded himself a conscientious objector in his youth.<sup>3</sup> Witnessing WWII and the Cold War, and the USA taking aggression against Vietnam and interfering with Central American and Latin American politics had made the issue of politics central to many of his plays and much of his poetry. Examples of the influence of politics can be seen in the first play *The Room* (1958, first presented 1960), which brings haunting memories from the incidents of the WWII in Europe, mainly the Gestapo’s threat and brutality. Even more obviously, interest in political occurrences appear to influence the 1980’s plays *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988) and later plays, and in

many poems, particularly those he wrote in criticism of the NATO and The United States wars against Iraq, Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Notable is one of the poems, *American Football*, which Pinter wrote in response to the American Gulf War against Iraq in 1991.

Furthermore, Pinter's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 'Art, Truth and Politics' shed more light on how his political engagement had shaped his work. Pinter was also a political activist. His first political activism could be traced to PEN International, the organisation defending freedom of speech and documenting oppression against writers worldwide.<sup>5</sup> During the last thirty years of his life, he made scathing critiques of the governments of the United States, the UK and the NATO for being responsible for coups, political crises and wars in numerous countries. The domination of these major political powers over weaker states such as Chile, Nicaragua, Turkey, Iraq, and Serbia greatly concerned Pinter, and he expressed strong opinions in this regard in several speeches, newspapers, and more importantly in the plays and poetry that he wrote from the 1980's onwards.

It was Turkey, the Middle Eastern country that lies at the borders of Europe, that provided the inspiration for writing Pinter's *One for the Road* (1984). Following a coup in 1980 in that country, violations of human rights were practiced on a large scale, civil liberties were curtailed, and freedom of speech was restrained.<sup>6</sup> Pinter made a trip on behalf of PEN, alongside with Arthur Miller, to see what was happening in person. Pinter later wrote another play which was inspired by the events in Turkey, *Mountain Language* (1988), which depicts the suffering of an oppressed people, the mountain people, whose language is banned. The ban on Kurdish as a language in Turkey was harshly enforced, and the Kurds, a minority in that country, had to suffer this situation for over two decades. Pinter held the United States responsible for the coup and confronted the American ambassador in Ankara. He saw it responsible for the subsequent torture and human rights abuses committed by the junta in Turkey, as much as it was responsible for violations elsewhere in the world, such as in Chile,

Iraq or Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> Violence taking place in the world became a huge concern for Pinter, and has provided images that inspired many of his later plays, from the two aforementioned plays to *Party Time* (first performed by the Almeida Theatre Company at the Almeida, London 31 October), *New World Order* (first produced at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London on 19 July 1991, first published in *Granta* in Autumn 1991) and *Celebration* (1999, first produced at the Almeida Theatre, London on 16 March 2000), to mention a few. The result is that torture, oppression, and violence became pivotal to Pinter's political plays.

Not far from Turkey, the Arab Middle Eastern countries had their share of political violence. The two countries covered in this study, Egypt and Syria, have witnessed several coups and been involved in wars with the newly established state in Palestine, Israel. The military governments in the two countries were initially seen as ones which defeated the 'imperialistic' and corrupt governments that succeeded the Western colonialism of France and Britain in the region. However, as these governments' grip on politics grew stronger, more curtailments on civil liberties were imposed and those who challenged the authorities were persecuted, imprisoned, or even executed. Time has proven that promises of prosperity and the restoration of Palestine from Israel, which is a priority for the Arabs, were far from achievable by those governments. Particularly after the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel in the Six Day War, voices in Egypt and Syria, the two defeated countries, started to sound calls for reforms, censuring the political establishments and those who run it for the deteriorated circumstances, corruption, and human rights abuses.

Whereas these serious political circumstances were challenging for the peoples of the two countries, political drama in Egypt and Syria became synonymous with seriousness.<sup>8</sup> This was particularly true after the radical political changes in the Middle East, from the occupation of Palestine in 1948 to the coups and abuse of human rights by the governments there. Major Arab playwrights 'believed in the theatre as a moral and political force and

shared a determination to produce good theatre based on tradition'.<sup>9</sup> Major playwrights from Egypt, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Salah Abdel Sabur, Ali Salem and others, all wrote plays which addressed the political circumstances of their country and their implications. In Syria, all plays by the prominent writer Saadallah Wannous's were political, thematising the Arab-Israeli conflict, pan-Arabism and the freedom and oppression of the Arab citizen. Other playwrights whose dramas have also been regarded as political include Mohammad Al-Maghut, who was politically active as a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party during the 1950's and was arrested several times, in addition to Mamduh Udwan, Walid Ikhlas and Farhan Bulbul, and others. Playwrights sensed the precariousness of the situation around them and responded to it in their dramas. Their plays, like those of Pinter's, were violent, depicting oppression and torture, for the circumstances under which they lived were full of political turmoil.

There are many similarities between the works of the Arab dramatists and those written by Pinter. All addressed the subjugation, coercion, and mechanisms of torture in their plays after seeing the horridness of such practices and what they do to humanity. These dramatists have witnessed political violence, deemed it unacceptable and in their response to it, created dramas that mirrored torture and oppression and their consequences for human agency. There is much in common between these playwrights, mostly in relation to the source of imagery from which they sought their inspiration. This thesis compares plays from Egypt and Syria to those by Pinter's, analysing the techniques and approach used in the play in dramatising themes of politics, violence interrogation and torture.

The aim of this study is to form a framework that analyses how Pinter's plays can reflect the situation in the Arab world despite the linguistic and cultural barriers. There is a general preference for political theatre in the Arab world, and the aim here is to analyse how Pinter's work is similar and different to the tradition of political theatre known there. Almost every

time a 'Western' a play is presented to an Arab audience, adaptation is used to some extent to make a play suit the target culture of the audience. Pinter has been well known as a dramatist and his plays were performed in Egypt and Syria, but, initially, the political plays have not been seriously taken into consideration in comparison with the full-length plays like *The Homecoming*, *The Caretaker* or *The Dumb Waiter*. This could be attributed to two reasons. The first is purely practical, which is probably the fact that shorter plays that in the 1980's onwards can barely fill a night of performance to attract audiences and attention, as Bashar Murcus, the director of Khashabi Ensemble in Haifa, Israel, which produced *Mountain Language* as a TV play suggests.<sup>10</sup> The second is that the region has its own long tradition of political theatre, (regarded as serious theatre) which itself was not doing well since the seventies. As the reputation of Pinter as a political playwright grew, however, the Arab world has seen more productions of his political plays, particularly *Mountain Language*, thanks to its relevance to what happened in Palestine/Israel.

It has been argued that serious (political) theatre has been in recession as opposed to commercial theatre, particularly since the middle 1970's in Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Pinter's works and experience provide something unfamiliar and new to the Arab audiences. It must be stressed that despite being widely translated in the Arab world, mostly in the sixties in Egypt by Al-Shareef Khater, Nehad Selaiha, Mohammad Anani and others, the first ever performance of a Pinter play in Egypt had to wait until 1988, when *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) and *The Lover* (1963) were performed by Al-Warsha troupe at Al-Tali'a Theatre in the small hall of Salah Abdel Sabur. The shows were failures because 'the characters' manner of speaking clashed violently with their *Arabised* names and setting, making the dialogue ring false and the whole thing seem mechanically rigged and embarrassingly affected'.<sup>12</sup> The political plays, as in *Mountain Language* and later plays, however, are easier to relate to and understand thanks to their relevance to the Arab political reality, the lack of ambiguity and the shortness of the

texts.<sup>13</sup> This 'new' political theatre staged in the Arab world adds to the already existing heritage of political theatre. In fact, new material in political theatre is arguably welcomed in the Arab world, particularly after the death of the major playwrights who established this theatre, and under the recent social and political developments of the Arab Spring, wars in Syria and Yemen, and the aftermath of the coup in Egypt. Unfortunately, the situation in the region has not improved since the departure of colonialism and it still resides under dictatorships, where wars and coups are still common. It was the same political climate which is hovering today in the Middle East that inspired Pinter to address issues of coercion and oppression in his plays.

The focus of the first chapter will be on the issue of the influence of the absurd as a movement and how it intermingled with politics in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Sabur's *Night Traveller*. Critics, mainly Martin Esslin in his book *Theatre of the Absurd*, saw that Pinter's early drama has been much influenced by the absurd. Claude Schumacher also suggests Pinter's early plays, *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* were inspired mainly by the theatre of Samuel Beckett, who was Pinter's personal friend and a long-time admirer.<sup>14</sup> This appreciation of Beckett was crowned by Pinter himself playing the role of Krapp in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* in 2005.<sup>15</sup> It has also been suggested that Pinter's early dramas are part of the Comedy of Menace, which term Irving Wardle coined, including under it plays like *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*.<sup>16</sup> Pinter's philosophical influences in his early work include Franz Kafka, and he acknowledges that reading Kafka's works 'rang a bell in him'. Pinter's admiration of Kafka led him finally to write, in 1993, a screenplay for one of Kafka's most influential novels: *The Trial*, in which the Kafkaesque absurd is prominent.<sup>17</sup> *Night Traveller*, on the other hand, contains much traces of Ionesco, as Sabur himself states in the play's postscript.<sup>18</sup> The play also could be linked to Kafka's *Trial* in its depiction of a mock trial after which a character is killed. Sabur in his play dramatised an existential

problem, the futility of man's efforts before a more powerful force, but in the light of the political turmoil in Egypt, the play's representation of power struggle reminded of the coercion of the government against the people. Naturally, there are some differences which result from culture, as Sabur's play is written as a verse play, and the author himself states it is meant to be presented as a 'farce'. The Arabic play also contains much menace, but it is more overtly violent than that of Pinter, as an execution is staged before the audience. To engage the audience more in the play, a narrator breaks the fourth wall in speaking directly with the audience, asking them for advice on what to do against infinite brutality.

In the second chapter, the comparison is between Pinter's *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*, and two plays from Syria: Maghut's *Kasak Ya Watan* (*Cheers Homeland*, not translated, 1976) and Wannous's *Al-Ightisab* (*The Rape*, not translated, 1989). Al-Maghut's play was not published, but a video of the performance can be found online.<sup>19</sup> The chapter sheds light on how the case of political oppression is directed not only at an individual, but rather stretches to include that individual's family. In all the four plays, family members are tortured, subjugated and silenced because of their insurgency. Pinter talked once of how he noticed in Turkey that torture did not only ruin the tortured man, but also his whole family.<sup>20</sup> Family values and ties are quintessential in all societies, and the three playwrights followed almost similar techniques in depicting oppression against them with the aim of breaking down that social group. The four plays address the audience directly through the events taking place on stage. It is said that the three dramatists, through their political plays, have an aim of 'engaging the audiences' and motivating them or even shocking them into an act of resistance. The clearest example in this regard is Wannous, who defines his political theatre as 'theatre of politicisation', which aims at spreading awareness between the audiences through notifying them of the impending danger that surrounds them, and involving them into some sort of 'politicised' reaction as the title suggests.<sup>21</sup> In comparison, Al-Maghut's play

aimed at entertaining the audience, and motivating them into action by ridiculing and belittling the offenders' status and their authority. His theatre is termed '*tanaffus* theatre' which is from the Arabic verb *yatanaffas* which means 'to breathe'. This theatre was regarded as a safety valve for the audience, which helped them breathe out the accumulated pressure they had after years of defeats, torture, and oppression.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding Pinter, his relationship with the audience is more complicated. It has been stated that Pinter does not write for the audience, but for himself, and that he is always in a contest with the audience where there is only one winner; himself.<sup>23</sup> One can understand from reading these lines that Pinter wanted nothing to do with the audience, especially concerning offering them any information on his plays and characters. However, it may also be inferred that he wants the audience to draw their own conclusions apart from his vision of the plays and what inspired him to write them. The last point forms a type of invitation to the audience to interpret the play and react to it. It is safe to assume that theatre in general, the political one in particular, is not meant to be passively experienced by the audience but assumes an ongoing relationship between what is staged and the audience watching the performance. As far as the Arab political theatre is concerned, it has always passed a message to the audiences. In case of the Syrian playwrights, Wannous's message aims to politicise an audience through providing awareness, while Al-Maghut's *tanaffus* focused on making audience contemplate defying oppressive figures by undermining their characters through joke and comedy. In relation to this, Charles Grimes in his study of Pinter's politics claims that the latter's political plays deny 'solace for the audience' and that they function to 'shock the audience' to realise the 'violence done in their name'.<sup>24</sup> Pinter has a confusing attitude in this regard, for he stated that he does not write to shock, but on the other hand, concedes that obscenity in his work is meant to be 'offensive'.<sup>25</sup> The study will concentrate on finding the techniques Pinter uses in the two plays that are supposed to shock the audiences through offending them. The offence

is extended as he concentrates not only on the insurgents themselves but also stretches to include their family member, husbands, wives, mothers and even children.

The methodology used in this study is mostly qualitative. It involves researching the textual resources found in libraries which included the Pinter Archive at The British Library, in addition to studying video performances of the plays found online. Since the research is about how Pinter's work appears from an Arabic perspective, it includes an interview I conducted with Bashar Murcus from Haifa, Israel who directed a production of *Mountain Language* in 2012 in Arabic, in which he presented his point of view as an Arab who studied and directed Pinter's play. Many resources on the Arab playwrights were in Arabic, which included the original plays and their performances, and the only exception to this was Sabur's *Musafir Lel* (*Night Traveller*), which is translated into English and can be found in *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology*.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, some translation was required to incorporate the outcome of these resources in this study.

## Chapter I

### Politics and Oppression in *The Birthday Party* and *Night Traveller*

The chapter focuses on how Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Sabur's *Night Traveller* are closely related in their representation of oppression, linking it to the absurdity of life which creates illogical political practices incomprehensible to those who are under oppression. Both Pinter and Sabur, in many of their writings, were linked to the Theatre of the Absurd. In the case of Pinter, it was Esslin and others, as mentioned before, who dubbed his work as absurdist, for they saw some of the absurd characteristics in his early work. Sabur, on the other hand, has acknowledged that he is influenced by Theatre of the Absurd. However, Sabur's first play, *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* (or *Murder in Baghdad*, 1964) was not influenced by the absurdist tradition, yet the play is seen as a representation of oppression and political corruption since it depicts a famous trial and execution from Arabic history. In *Night Traveller*, Sabur states that he writes under the influence of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, while the play has also been regarded as political in its representation of torture and murder.<sup>27</sup> Pinter's play, on the other hand, relies on the threat of language or verbal violence in reducing the protagonist, Stanley, to total silence. That character is interrogated with a torrent of incomprehensible and illogical questions (rapid-fire) until he screams and collapses.

*Night Traveller* is like *The Birthday Party* in the way Stanley is dominated and silenced. The character named Passenger is interrogated, oppressed and killed by an authoritative character named Conductor. Absurdity here is represented in the way Conductor introduces himself as several characters, from Alexander the Great to a ticket-collector, a judge, God's deputy and a decide. Passenger is also questioned and tried. However, violence is even more extreme as

Passenger is executed by a dagger on stage. Both Stanley and Passenger are brought down to silence by their oppressors using techniques of language which dominated their minds and showed their frailty before the characters that sought to eliminate them. Sabur, however, takes the silencing process to a violent level by showing the murder of Passenger. The theme of identity is associated with silence in both plays where the characters' final silence, or inability to speak, signifies their elimination. Thus, the silence to which the two characters are led equals the elimination or cancellation of their identities. The aim of the study is to examine issues of depiction of oppression, the techniques with which the characters are victimised and the implications of the loss of identity.

### ***The Birthday Party as a Political Metaphor***

Pinter's first play, *The Birthday Party*, has a seemingly simple plot. The action revolves around a character in his late thirties called Stanley Webber. Webber is allegedly an ex-concert pianist who is a boarder in a house at the seaside owned by a husband and wife, Petey and Meg.<sup>28</sup> There are two characters, called Goldberg and McCann, who arrive to stay at the house. The information about their background is ambiguous since we are told nothing about who they are or what their job is. Webber immediately appears uncomfortable and suspicious when he is told about the two coming to stay, '*Stanley slowly raises his head, he speaks without turning: What two gentlemen?*'<sup>29</sup> His anxiety is later explained, Goldberg and McCann are there for him. The three share a past together which the audience is told nothing about. The pair interrogate Stanley until he breaks down. After two scenes of interrogation where Stanley is 'rapid-fired' with seemingly absurd questions, he loses his ability to speak. In the final scene, Goldberg and McCann lead the helpless and mute Stanley out of the house, telling Petey 'We're taking him to Monty', claiming he needs a 'special treatment' and

‘Monty is the best there is’, despite Petey’s protests.<sup>30</sup> There is no further indication of Stanley’s fate.

The character undergoes radical changes after the advent of Goldberg and McCann. The play was Pinter’s first play and can be interpreted in many ways; it was read as one of the Comedy of Menace plays, as Absurd and as meta-political play.<sup>31</sup> One reading interprets what happens in the play as ‘exposing how society coerces us all into a relentless mould of conformity’.<sup>32</sup> Jeanette Malkin argues that this interpretation of the play not only serves to ‘tie the diverse elements of the play together; but also ‘allows for a reading which explains not only the plot of the play but also Pinter’s central dramatic device: the extensive use of verbal violence’.<sup>33</sup> Stanley falls prey to the torrent of accusations aimed at him in the interrogation scene, which cause him to become unable to speak a single word. The inability to speak and the loss of one’s voice has the dramatic significance of defining and determining this character. The final interrogation in the play clarifies this:

GOLDBERG. What’s your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley?

*Stanley concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.*

STANLEY. Uh-gug...uh-gug...eeehhh-gag...(On the breath.)

Caahh...caaah.

GOLDBERG. Well, Stanny boy, what do you say, eh?

STANLEY. Ug-gughh...uh-gughhh...

MCCANN. What’s your opinion, sir?

STANLEY. Caaahhh...caaahhh...

MCCANN. Mr. Webber! What is your opinion?

GOLDBERG. What do you say, Stan? What do you think of the prospect?

MCCANN. What do you think of the prospect?

*Stanley's body shudders, relaxes, his head drops, he becomes still again, stooped.*

GOLDBERG. Still the same old Stan. Come with us. Come on, boy.<sup>34</sup>

Goldberg's final remark reveals why they came to the house for in first place; that is to deconstruct Stanley whom McCann calls 'Judas', accusing him of 'betraying the organisation'.<sup>35</sup> Stanley is like a child who needs to be taught how to speak in the school of Monty, a name that suggests a mental facility or the person who runs it, where Stanley is taken to be re-institutionalised. The old Stanley, Goldberg suggests, was as submissive as the new version of the character, who fell into utter silence after apparently the same techniques were applied to him. The dialogue here functions to define who the new Stanley will become. Martin Meisel stresses that the words a character speaks serve a dramatic purpose, since in a dialogue on the stage, 'its limitations foster... an assumption that language is constitutive, and what you speak (are able to speak) is what you are'.<sup>36</sup> As Stanley can no longer speak, he is reduced to a merely babbling 'boy' who needs to be taught to speak again according to the teachings of the organisation which he defected from. As speaking equals existence, Stanley's own existence outside the 'organisation' is also questioned, as Goldberg asks him at a certain stage what makes him think he exists.<sup>37</sup>

The state Stanley reached was the result of verbal torture in the first interrogation scene. While Stanley was not tortured physically on stage, the verbal torture or verbal violence was enough to deprive him of the ability to communicate as no more than his silence, which signifies that he has been prepared to be re-institutionalised, was needed. Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* writes that the aim of torture is not always to impose permanent silence through 'murder and mutilation', and that torturers 'mime the work of pain by breaking off the voice, making it their own, making it speak their words, making it cry out when they want it to cry,

be silent when they want its silence, turning it on and off'.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, in her analysis of the play, Jeanette Malkin states that the result of Stanley's torture was not death, but rather what she called an 'implied rebirth' and a 'conversion'.<sup>39</sup> In Malkin's reading, the birthday party turns out to be Stanley's 'rebirth party'. In a political reading of Stanley's situation, one could infer that he at one time in his past was a political dissident in some way and went to the Boles' to hide. The authorities he betrayed find him, charge him, declare him guilty, and ensure his conformity in the way decided for him. His freedom of speech and even speech itself is confiscated completely, so he loses his identity and voice, and becomes amenable to reprogramming or re-education in the interests of the 'organisation' which he betrayed.<sup>40</sup> In other words, his identity is to be redefined. McCann asks Stanley 'why did you change your name' during the interrogation and the line raises doubt about what Stanley's name is.<sup>41</sup> After all, Stanley will become what they want him to be as they are 'right and Webber is wrong, all along the line'.<sup>42</sup>

The first interrogation scene, after which Stanley falls in a state of catatonic silence, uses a technique which the United States military calls 'Rapid-Fire'. The United States Department of the Army defines this technique as used in their interrogations:

The approach is based upon the principles that— Everyone likes to be heard when he speaks. It is confusing to be interrupted in mid-sentence with an unrelated question....In employing this technique; the HUMINT [*Human Intelligence*] collectors ask a series of questions in such a manner that the source does not have time to answer a question completely before the next one is asked. This confuses the source, and he will tend to contradict himself as he has little time to formulate his answers...In many instances, the source will begin to talk freely in an attempt to explain himself and deny the HUMINT collector's claims of

inconsistencies. In this attempt, the source is likely to reveal more than he intends, thus creating additional leads for further exploitation.<sup>43</sup>

The torrent of questions to which Stanley is subjected until he screams and collapses follows this technique, a form of verbal torture in the form of rapid questions which Stanley is not given time to answer. Stanley is asked, for example, what salts he use for his headache, and after limiting him to two brands, Enos or Andrews, he answers hesitantly, 'En- An-', but the interrogators soon move on to ask if 'they fizz', not giving him time to answer the first question. He stumbles, divided between answering what question; McCann concludes that 'he doesn't know'.<sup>44</sup> On other occasions, Stanley answers, revealing where his mother is, what he does for a living, when he came to this place, or what his current name is. The questions are arbitrary and increasingly becoming absurd non-sequiturs; what the Albigensienist heresy is, whether he recognises an external force, the meaning of a certain number, etc. The topics that these interrogating lines address vary from religious to cliché to philosophical triviality (which came first, the chicken or egg). The language that blended many philosophical jargons confused Stanley and made him dumb. Yet the attack Pinter wages here is not through the messengers of the organisation on Stanley. It is meant to be an attack on language itself, the language of society which seeks to re-introduce Stanley to it through using its philosophical jargon and clichés which do not make sense. Malkin concludes that 'the aim of the attack is to re-immense Stanley in those values by realigning him with the language of those values'.<sup>45</sup> These are questions and statements that 'unmake' Stanley in order to introduce him to the 're-making process', and belittling his own existence arguably as an entity that poses a threat to the presence of the so-called organisation, as summarised by Goldberg:

GOLDBERG. You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love.  
You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're  
nothing but an odour.<sup>46</sup>

Stanley becomes confused by the 'rapid fire' interrogation and by the variety of questions he is asked. He in vain tries elude the questions, sometimes trying to fight back by maintaining his answers as in his insistence that the number '846' Goldberg is asking about is 'both' possible and necessary.<sup>47</sup> When asked about the name he is using now, he answers that it is 'Joe Soap'. This is a suggestive name for Stanley since it is a slang term for a scapegoat or a foolish person in his current manoeuvres to fight back. The last question Stanley tries to answer is the philosophically trivial one on why the chicken crossed the road. His inability to comprehend the seemingly simple philosophical question breaks him and declares the interrogators, or their logic, victorious. After a tough interrogation in which he has tried to defy his inquisitors, just on the brink of collapsing and battling his mental disorientation, his hesitation and stumbling prove Goldberg and McCann are accomplishing their task of breaking him. The symbolism of these rapid questions and Stanley's inability to understand them, let alone answer them, also refer to how we all encounter all sorts of simple but problematic questions in life to which we have no answer but to think in silence for a reply, an attempt that often ends up in failure. Indeed, questions like 'why we exist, what is reality, how did it all begin, why this is important' are all baffling questions that we have no answer to but to contemplate them in silence.

Yet it should be noted that Stanley tries on many occasions to defend himself against his oppressors, and he remains defiant even when he is questioned in his room by McCann. Stanley refuses the order to sit down for interrogation.<sup>48</sup> He kicks Goldberg after the interrogation just before Meg arrives and maintains some of his answers despite the provocation and confusion.<sup>49</sup> The consequences are shown on Goldberg as he looks weary and exhausted at a certain stage and unleashes his frustration at McCann.<sup>50</sup> Even though Stanley is finally defeated and led away, he does not give up without resistance.

The torture in the play has a sexual, socio-political dimension. Pinter, during his visit to Turkey in 1985, saw for himself what happened with a trade union opposition leader whose wife has gone silent after seeing him following his torture.<sup>51</sup> Torture has a subversive domino effect which extends to those around the victims, and the greater the number of the victims, the greater the circle of the people suffering its consequences in a society. In Mohammad Al-Maghut's *Cheers Homeland* which is discussed in the next chapter, the hero is tortured, and when he comes back home, he beats his wife stating candidly that he beat her because he was beaten. During the birthday party, Stanley also tries to strangle Meg with his bare hands, which is another indication of his frustration. Near the end of Act Two, at the end of the birthday party scene, Stanley tries to rape Lulu. Stanley's action could have two explanations. First, Stanley has noticed Goldberg's flirtations with Lulu during the party. He, under cover of darkness when the light suddenly goes out, tries to exert power on the person whom Goldberg, the most powerful man in the play, sexually 'owns' during the party. Having failed to resist Goldberg in the interrogation, Stanley's resistance takes a physical form in his attempts to defy Goldberg's authority over Lulu's body, over which Goldberg is exerting authority. Second, the attempted rape of Lulu and her later silence once she faints could be related to Stanley being tortured, subdued, and silenced earlier. Being unable to fight back, a victim searches for those who have less power around them in a show of power and dominance. Dr. Zoe Stephenson from the School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham supports this claim, arguing that 'anger/aggression is also a risk factor for sex offending - so if *Stanley* felt anger and frustration about the interrogation then that could be a factor. Also, if he felt humiliated by the interrogation process, raping her may be a way to assert his authority and gain self-worth'.<sup>52</sup> Here in the play, this act was against Lulu, and to show the magnitude of what Stanley has suffered and kept within, his form of resistance, a natural reaction to violence becomes distorted and takes a form of ultimate aggression, that is

rape. Stanley ends Act Two with a loud crescendo of giggling laughter after being caught red-handed, which could be interpreted that he has succeeded in achieving some sort of victory over Goldberg, albeit in a sinister way.

### **The Analogy of *The Birthday Party* with Arab Political Situation**

Political theatre in the Arab world has become more prevalent following the 1967 defeat. Political literature, in general, still suffered the usual treatment of censorship, publishing restrictions or even total ban on books and performances in the case of dramas. Sometimes writers were persecuted, and a good example of this is a writer whom Pinter learned about thanks to his membership in PEN and Writers in Prison Committee.<sup>53</sup> Khalil Mustafa Brayez's memoirs *Suqut Al-Golan (The Fall of the Golan)*, (date unknown), led, according to the committee report sent to Pinter in 1981, to the abduction and imprisonment of Brayez 'for nine years without being ever tried'.<sup>54</sup> The book blames Hafez Assad, who was the Minister of Defence in 1967, for the loss of The Golan Heights to Israel. The report also mentions that in Egypt, poet Ahmed Fuad Negm was also arrested for poems in which he criticised the government of Anwar Sadat.

The situation of plays and playwrights was no better, as some plays tackled the 1967 defeats and the actions of the Arab governments then and consequently were censored. It is possible that theatre, being a public act that is meant to be performed rather than read, caused the censorship's eye to be fixed on it more firmly, leading, for example, to a ban on the publication and performance of Wannous's *Soirée for the 5<sup>th</sup> of June* by the Ministry of Culture from the date of writing, 1968 until 1970.<sup>55</sup> This is due to the fact that the play deals with the June defeat and its fallouts, censoring the Arabs and their governments, the Syrian government included. In its onslaughts against the military governments, political theatre

resorted to importing foreign dramatic heroes, creating allegories, making the critique more indirect. Such distancing of the heroes and of the setting enabled playwrights to include political critique in plays which either discussed political or religious events in past times. Examples of such plays are Sabur's *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* (1964) which tells the story of Al-Hallaj, a mystic figure from the Abbasid Era who was tried and executed for blasphemy, and Oedipus, the Greek figure in Ali Salem's *The Comedy of Oedipus: You're the One who Killed the Beast* (1968). Such manoeuvres guaranteed the plays were published, bypassing censorship and depending on audiences and critics to decipher the coded messages. In its trenchant criticism of Nasser's political performance during the war, Salem's *The Comedy of Oedipus* depended on the Greek myth as an allegory of what happened to Egypt. Oedipus comes to the Egyptian Thebes whose king is dead and a beast lurks threatening it. He promises the Thebans the death of the beast but asks to be king over them and to marry the queen. Nasser was known for his long, warm and passionate patriotic speeches in which he presented himself as an ordinary man of the Egyptians, serving Egypt, willing to sacrifice his life for it and protecting it from Israel (the beast in the play).<sup>56</sup> After defeating Israel in the Suez Crisis in 1956, Nasser was idolised in Egypt and the Arab world for defeating Israel or 'killing the beast' which was terrifying the Arabs. Oedipus announces the death of the beast to the Thebans:

OEDIPUS. Sons of Thebes, my sons! Today we celebrate the killing of the beast.

PEOPLE. (*Chanting*) You're the one who killed the beast!

OEDIPUS. I still remember that day as if it had happened yesterday.

When I went to the beast

PEOPLE. You're the one who killed the beast!<sup>57</sup>

The beast Oedipus killed appears again to the surprise of the People and those around Oedipus.<sup>58</sup> It is understood that their hero did not finish the beast entirely, while others claimed it is another one. Once it is confirmed the second coming is true, Oedipus delivers a patriotic speech and asks for the help of the Thebans to kill the beast. Israel returned in 1967 to defeat Egypt and Nasser, who decided to step down as a president.

For all the political changes in the Middle East, political theatre flourished. Following the consolidation of political theatre after 1967, Shakespeare's character *Hamlet* was also used for political purposes by Arab playwrights. Margaret Litvin mentions that the Egyptian adaptation of *Hamlet* by Mohammad Sobhi in 1971 took from both Laurence Olivier's psychological film adaptation of 1948 and the political film by Grigori Kozintsev in 1964. She believes that the 'broad appeal of the play was due in part to its comforting political resonance', this despite Sobhi's production not touching any familiar political figures but making the 'purest incarnation of the Arab Hero Hamlet'.<sup>59</sup> Other adaptations of *Hamlet*, however, included some censure of the current governments' political actions. Mamduh Udwan's *Hamlet Wakes up Late* (1976), according to Litvin, included 'implied critique of Syrian government brutality, but understood it to politically criticise the Egyptian regime rather than the Syrian. In her study of the play, she mentions that the play's premiere at the National Theatre in 1978 gave voice to the Syrian criticism of Sadat's peace agreement with Israel, regarded by the Arabs as a stab in the back of pan-Arabism which stipulates that Israel is the true enemy of the Arab unity'.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, following the model of *Hamlet*, *The Birthday Party*, with Stanley playing the role of a political resistance figure against a totalitarian regime also mirrors a political reality for an Arab audience if it were to be adapted in the same way as other Western plays. The treatment of prisoners or dissidents in the Arab world is arbitrary and does not follow any logic since there are no clear laws governing these acts due to the states of emergency and generally the

absence of human rights. In Syria, the state of emergency has been in effect since 1963, allowing the regime to abduct and arrest citizens without a charge, and the case of Brayez mentioned earlier is an example of this. Secret service agents hunting dissidents in the Arab world is not uncommon, and they are empowered by the state to interfere in all aspects of a citizen's life. The case of Stanley represents this well. Stanley is asked why he has killed his wife despite not having one, and then asked why he has not married as if this is a crime he has committed. The Syrian Ministry of Defence does not allow any male over eighteen who has not performed the obligatory military service to get married without a request for permission.<sup>61</sup> We can conclude there is much similarity between Stanley's situation and the average Arab citizens', who are afraid of the absurd laws that they do not understand simply because they were made to protect the state but not them. The states' cruel persecutors stalk them like their shadows. Sarah Abu Shaar, a Syrian-American senior orator student in her commencement speech at Harvard, tells a story of how her parents told her that her 'revolutionary ideas' as a child could be heard by the 'walls'; the secret service. She asserts that children in the West have the bogeyman to scare them, whereas the Arab children's equivalents were 'their governments'.<sup>62</sup>

Before presenting Western plays to an Arab audience, the plays have had to be adapted for, imbued with, or linked to the target audiences' culture and preferences. From the examples of *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*, we can conclude that their success could be attributed to their authors' ability to make the plays relevant to their intended audience, where *Hamlet* and *Oedipus* were adapted as political plays since political theatre was synonymous with 'serious theatre' after 1967.<sup>63</sup> Other examples of how this worked are other adaptations of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* in 1905 with the latter re-entitled *The Martyrs of Love* by Sheikh Salama Hijazi.<sup>64</sup> Both plays were transformed into melodramas to reflect the talents of Hijazi, the writer and hero of the two plays. The title bears the word 'martyr', which is highly appreciated in the Arabic and

Islamic cultures. This springs from the belief that martyrdom, death for a noble cause; especially religion, will grant the martyrs eternal life in the hereafter.<sup>65</sup> Adding this factor to the Arabs' love of singing, music and rhythm helped Hijazi bring the play closer to audiences with his amazing voice and vocal talent.<sup>66</sup> Even in his plays of political critique such as *Cheers Homeland* and many others, Al-Maghut added long sections of singing in order to entertain the general audience. The 2006 production of Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* has seen some adaptation by director Khalid Al Biqaii, who added music, used lighting to indicate the change of atmosphere, added a scene where famous Arab presidents appear, and changed the name of Gus to James because this name is more appealing to Arab ears.<sup>67</sup>

As far as *The Birthday Party* is concerned, there is no documentation available of any published translations or performances of it in Egypt or Syria. Like other Pinter plays, the play has apparently received little attention and no mention of a performance, old or new, is found on the web. However, some plays were translated, including *The Caretaker*, which was translated by Abdel Halim Al-Bashalwi as *Al-Haris* and published by Maktabet Masr, and later in 1988, *Al-Ayam Al-Khawali* (*Old Times* 1970) which was translated by Al-Shareef Khater and published in Kuwait. In Syria, there are records of post-2000 performances *Old Times* on Saadallah Wannous Theatre in 2014, directed by Ammar Ahmad, and of *The Homecoming* by the Mokhtabar Dimashq Al-Masrahi in 2013. In Egypt, some early plays were presented in the form of radio plays and included the only performance of *The Birthday Party*, available online on YouTube on the Egyptian Radio Second Programme channel. The programme includes also some of Pinter's early plays as radio plays such as *The Caretaker*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *Betrayal*. These radio plays also appear to receive little critical attention except in Nehad Selaiha's online article 'Pinter in Egypt'. No other reviews or studies of these plays could be found. In a recent effort to translate Pinter's plays, Mahammad Annani translated some of the short plays and *Ashes to Ashes* in 2009.

There is no apparent reason why some plays received more attention than others. There could be several reasons why Pinter's early works, including *The Birthday Party*, have not been published or performed in Arabic on a large scale. Pinter's early works, as previously mentioned, were not popular even in his home country, as he asserted,<sup>68</sup> and consequently his obscurity could have exacerbated his unpopularity in the Middle East. Moreover, his candid representations of sexual relationships in plays like *Betrayal* and *The Homecoming* will not be welcome, at least among the general populace, due to the radical cultural differences and the potential perception of such plays in contemporary Arabic society as obscene and therefore unacceptable. Indeed, some the commenters on the YouTube radio production of *Betrayal* criticised it and expressed anger over why such plays should even be introduced and translated into Arabic, describing this as 'deliberate pollution' and a 'repulsive *novel*' (also mistaking the genre).<sup>69</sup>

It is hard to tell how *The Birthday Party* will be received in Arabic, but presenting it to an Arab audience as a political critique inspiring a spirit of resistance is reasonable taking into consideration the political preferences and climate the region is experiencing. A political reading of *The Birthday Party* sees it in a positive light, not as a bleak and pessimistic play where the victim loses his voice forever. Stanley fights back in some instances, although his resistance at a certain stage becomes an over-reaction to the violence he suffered. Hope is the quintessential theme included in any play written for a world that has seen many wars and brutality. Saadallah Wannous once confirmed hope is a necessity for Arab audiences, and is quoted as once saying that 'we are doomed to hope'<sup>70</sup>, stressing the importance of theatre as the 'first step towards confronting the frustration that besets the world at the turn of this century'.<sup>71</sup> Confronting oppression is a powerful theme in *The Birthday Party*, as Petey addresses the silent Stanley as he is being taken away: 'Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!'<sup>72</sup> Pinter stated once that this line was one of the most important lines he had ever

written.<sup>73</sup> The image of Stanley who must break free and resist being told what to do could be regarded as an important message for the Arab audiences. In the police states of the Arab world, this scene can happen to any citizen, an audience member could find themselves in Stanley's shoes at any given moment for arbitrary arrests are not uncommon against those who dare to speak against the state. Taylor-Batty refers to how audiences could empathise with Stanley's predicament. At a certain point in the play, precisely after the Rapid-Fire interrogation scene, 'an uncomfortable alliance between us and Stanley is established' as the audience could possibly all become baffled and confused by the amount and the speed of the questions and because of their absurd nature.<sup>74</sup>

An Arab audience might also find echoes of the absurd questions in this interrogation in the way citizens in Syria are charged with wrongdoing. Edward Ziter in his book *Political Performance in Syria* mentions the charge of 'weakening the national sentiment', which is punished by several years in prison, and that charge is levelled to political opposition with the purpose of undermining it.<sup>75</sup> Other similar charges also include establishing an illegal political party or even speaking against the Baath party charter. The arrival of unknown people to arrest a Syrian citizen at their homes has not been a strange occurrence since the declaration of the State of Emergency in 1963.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the plot of *The Birthday Party* has echoes for a situation many Syrians have had to endure. Ziter asserts that the Syrian authorities have the power to 'arrest individuals without a charge and to hold them indefinitely' under emergency laws prompted by the 'state of exception.'<sup>77</sup> It is difficult to comprehend what is meant by speech that 'weakens the national sentiment' so it is understood it is a limitation on the freedom of speech. Ziter continues to ask 'what emergency prompts the stage of exception in Syria and to what effect? And who have we become as a nation as a result?' Even more incomprehensible is the fact that such laws have been in existence a very long time. Every Arab who has seen a war or a coup knows about them, but

there are no explanations, however, to why these laws are still imposed, and no one dares to challenge them. The figure of Stanley could inspire a kind of resistance in his choking attempts to speak in the second torture scene. Luckhurst comments on this that 'Stanley is on the edge of utterance and the very desire to speak out is what gives him his tragic dignity'.<sup>78</sup> She notes that having done their best to silence him, the inquisitors become frustrated and at times seem on the verge of breaking down, McCann refusing to go up to Stanley's room again and Goldberg losing grip on his belief system, and their status described by stage directions including 'vacant', 'desperate', and 'lost'.<sup>79</sup> The tragic dignity Luckhurst refers to indicates Stanley's status as the tragic hero of the play. However, not all critics support that reading of Stanley's agency, which is brought to ruin by his maleficent visitors, and this is mainly because of his abusive treatment of women in the play. Taylor-Batty supports this hypothesis, arguing that any 'empathetic alliance' between an audience and the character is going to be uncomfortable.<sup>80</sup> The grumpy and unpleasant attitude he has and the vilifying language he uses against Meg at the breakfast table is unlikely to engage an audience empathetically. During the birthday party, Stanley also tries to choke Meg, an act which suggests the reality of Stanley as a misogynist who 'contaminates womankind'<sup>81</sup> and 'cannot love'<sup>82</sup>, for after all, he verbally and physically attacks Meg (even though he is blindfolded and cannot see his victim), and later in the party he attacks Lulu as well. Stanley's dealings with Lulu further destabilise the idea of Stanley as a victim. The play's audience might even find Goldberg's question 'why do you treat that young lady like a leper' in the interrogation quite legitimate in the light of his cold rejection of her friendly attempts on their first meeting, in addition to Stanley's attempt to strangle her during the party.<sup>83</sup> Finally, the attempted rape during the birthday party starkly contradicts Stanley's image as a victim. In fact, Pinter himself in a letter to Esslin cautioned against reading Stanley as a heroic figure and an exemplar of revolt.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, with Pinter's statement in mind, Jane Chui rejects the

traditional reading of seeing McCann and Goldberg as aggressors or secret agents, claiming that by 'removing him from the house, Goldberg and McCann inadvertently liberate Meg from Stan's tyranny'.<sup>85</sup>

Chui's reading of the role of Stanley as an oppressor and Goldberg and McCann as liberators is valid in the light of Stanley's treatment of Meg and Lulu and his image as a misogynist. His behaviour raises doubts about his image as a victim particularly in the light of Pinter's warning words about seeing him as a victim. His sullen conversation with Meg when she offers him his breakfast, his sexual innuendos to her, and his physical violence to both women all invite us to think twice before offering sympathy to Stanley as a political victim. Yet in the light of Pinter's words through Petey, it is understandable one might still want to view Stanley as a victim. Pinter could also have endorsed such a reading taking into consideration his later attitude to Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghreib prisons where potential war criminals were tortured to death in what Pinter called 'modern-day concentration camps'.<sup>86</sup> Even if Stanley were an aggressor, the silencing rites he has been subjected to, the verbal torture, and what McCann did to him in his room are still regarded as abuse. They may have liberated Meg, but they also tortured Stanley, abused him, and punished him for betraying the 'organisation'. The double case of Stanley as victim and oppressor, Goldberg and McCann as oppressors and liberators is valid. 'A thing can be both true and false', Pinter once said and so could his characters, they are oppressors and victims, liberators and hitmen.<sup>87</sup>

There is also the question of what role Lulu has in the play in the first place. This topic confused critic Robert Cushman in *The Observer*, who commented that he never understood what Goldberg's seduction of Lulu, or her whole character are meant to add.<sup>88</sup> Ronald Knowles sees that Lulu is a 'dramatic foil', and she is there to demonstrate 'Stanley's sexual failing and Goldberg's sexual prowess'.<sup>89</sup> As argued earlier, because of Stanley's failing attempts to combat his interrogators, his aggression is diverted towards Lulu in a 'domino'

effect. Michael Bennett asserts that Stanley was ‘metaphorically raped’ before he raped Lulu, and that he and his desires are ‘effectually silenced’ while he is left powerless before his oppressors.<sup>90</sup> Thus, in the light of his despair, his reaction comes as desperate, violent and unjustified.

Nevertheless, the contradictions in Stanley’s status as a heroic figure can still be seen as expressive of the Arab resistance, in view of the darker aspects of such movements. A political play presented to an Arab audience should correspond to the culture of their politics, and Stanley represents the two sides of Arab resistance heroes or movements. If Stanley could be first perceived as a revolutionary who inspires a form of resistance against the silencing attempts by the local governments, his other face shows how Arab political resistance deviated from the legitimate goals, which resulted in losing the sympathy and support of the rest of the political audience, the international community.

There are many examples in Arab history regarding this issue. In 1972, and as a response to the 1967 war which resulted in Israel occupying the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a radical movement named Black September, an offshoot of Fatah, kidnapped and killed twelve Israeli sportspersons from the Olympic team in addition to one German police officer, a terrorist act which incurred a huge condemnation from the international community.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, during the Syrian revolution of 1979, the Muslim Brotherhood tried to revolt against Hafez Al-Assad’s regime. The extremist group fought fire with fire, falling into the trap of violence the regime set up for them by assassinating Alawite military officers and other civilians from the same sect. This has given an excuse for Al-Assad to annihilate the movement using excessive force. The regime destroyed the movement’s stronghold city of Hama and incarcerated thousands and followed this by the famous Palmyra Prison Massacre. History repeated itself in 2011 when Syrians marched in peaceful demonstrations demanding Bashar Al-Assad to step down were confronted by excessive firepower. The opposition resorted to

military resistance as well and supported radical Islamic groups in fighting the Assad army, Al-Nusra Front and later ISIS. These groups have breached human rights, provoking a condemnation from Human Rights Watch.<sup>92</sup> These right-wing tactics have led to a focus shift in the Syrian crisis, with the international community preferring to concentrate on fighting what they saw as a priority, the radical groups, rather than assisting the opposition in toppling Al-Assad and aiding a democratic transition. All that the defeated freedom fighters in Syria are left with is the ineffective sympathetic support that resembles the broken Petey's desperate and impotent cry: 'Stan. Don't let them tell you what to do'.<sup>93</sup>

The next section will examine Salah Abdel Sabur's *Night Traveller*, an absurd play that has political resonance, in the light of the earlier discussion of *The Birthday Party*. Sabur's play was written ten years after Pinter's play was published. Both plays depict oppression of individuals by authoritative figures and bear heavy influences of the Theatre of the Absurd. Sabur used certain techniques and mechanics in his depiction of oppression which led critical readings of the play calling it a censure of government oppression in Egypt.

### **Salah Abdel Sabur's *Night Traveller*: An Absurdist Play and a Political Metaphor**

Abdel Sabur belongs to the second generation of Egyptian playwrights who rose to prominence after the 1952 revolution, alongside other influential dramatists such as Nu'maan Aashur, Saadidine Whaba and Alfred Farag. Sabur is mostly known as a poet, and his reputation as a playwright is linked to his being one of the pioneers of verse drama in Egypt, mainly through his plays *Murder in Baghdad/ The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* (1964), *Night Traveller* (1968) and *The Princess Awaits* (1969). Sabur's approach to theatre was 'Western' in nature, as his plays have been seen as attempts at inter-culturalism.<sup>94</sup> He also insists that 'following the theatrical form prevalent in the west is a must since it has become international, and being the cultural heritage which the masses follow'.<sup>95</sup> Indebtedness to

Western drama is most apparent in *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, which was written under the direct influence of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and this is why Sabur's play can occasionally be found translated into English as *Murder in Baghdad*, thus echoing the play by which it was inspired.<sup>96</sup> *Night Traveller*, though a verse drama, reflects the influence of absurd drama on Sabur's theatre.<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, despite Pinter's rise to prominence from the 1960's onwards (even in Egypt), Sabur's source of inspiration did not come from Pinter, but from Ionesco, whom he met in Cairo in 1964 when the latter's *The Chairs* was being staged there. As mentioned in the introduction, Pinter was relatively known though in Egypt through the translations of Al-Sharif Khater and others, which enabled the presentations of several plays, *The Room*, *The Dwarfs*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*, in publications and as radio plays on the Second Programme on the Egyptian Radio.<sup>98</sup> Yet in regards to influence, very little evidence can be found as to whether Pinter, during his entire career, has influenced Sabur or any other Arab playwright despite being influential in the West.

Before embarking on his dramatic career in 1964, Sabur wrote several volumes of poetry. His early poems 'show his commitment and social realism'.<sup>99</sup> The early poems Sabur wrote were about poverty and the dilemmas of existence, the misery of the peasants (*fellaheen*) in the impoverished countryside. Sabur saw that poets 'must have a social role that is determined by their poetic vision'.<sup>100</sup> The early poems reflect how Sabur saw his social role as one who delivers the suffering of his fellow proletariat peasants and demonstrate the poet's interest in humans languishing under cruel conditions and challenging supreme powers. Poetry in Sabur's understanding is close to that of Wordsworth's; 'a man speaking to men'. Sabur states that poetry is 'the voice of a man speaking, aided by artistic values and instruments...which finally enable a poet to deliver the part of the human reality they personally feel to other people'.<sup>101</sup> He also sees that poetry is expressive of the human values,

honesty, freedom, and justice.<sup>102</sup> One may conclude from his article ‘Tajrubati fi Al-Shi’r’ ‘My Experience with Poetry’ that Sabur considered a commitment to social reality which expresses that the significance of certain values must be stressed through poetry.

Some critical readings perceive Sabur’s work to express Soren Kierkegaard’s existentialism: the nature and significance of choice, the individual and systems, and the anguish at the finite nature of human existence.<sup>103</sup> Points where Kierkegaard’s existentialism meets absurd drama, as seen in *Night Traveller*, deal with these three themes. In short, Passenger’s choice not to resist his oppressor influenced his fate, and his attempts to defend his existence and his senseless relationship with Conductor, who represents the system, constitute much of the action in the play. Regarding this link between Sabur’s theatre and Kierkegaard’s existentialism, Rueven Snir comments that:

Abdel Sabur’s writings, like many other writers of his generations, share outstanding concerns with individual human existence. The common thread is an existentialist doctrine derived from the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, in violent reaction against absolute Hegelian idealism, Kierkegaard insisted on the utter chasm that lay between human beings and on inexplicability, or even the absurdity, of their actions and relations between them.<sup>104</sup>

In addition to Kierkegaard’s influence, Sabur also shows another from Nietzsche’s ‘death of God’. In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche presents the concept of the death of God in the chapter entitled ‘The Madman’.<sup>105</sup> In that parable, a madman runs in a marketplace asking where God is. A group of bystanders, whom Nietzsche described as nonbelievers, sarcastically reply that they have killed God, therefore He is nowhere to exist. The scene is gory, and the focus is on a murder rather than the common belief that there is no God in the

first place. God once existed, but not anymore because we, humans, have killed Him. Sabur's version of the death of God in his play is a comic one since the whole play is subtitled 'a black comedy'. How God is killed in *Night Traveller* is explained by the character Conductor, who claims that Passenger did not really kill God, but that he stole his identity, and that amounts to the same thing and consequently, he must pay for his crime. The final scene shows that the one who killed God indeed is Conductor himself, thus showing an embodiment of the idea of the *Übermensch*, the man who succeeds God and fills the vacuum left by him. In *Night Traveller*, Conductor has killed God and he is acting as one on the train coach. The difference between the two concepts of the death of God is that while Nietzsche's offers a critique of established religion, Sabur's is more a criticism of the authorities who have, in a sense, taken the place of God in Arab societies and started acting in His name. After all, there is no indication that Sabur was an atheist in his life.

While presenting the idea of the futility of man's effort before a more powerful force, Sabur is offering his audiences a political representation as well. The play is an existential representation in terms of Kierkegaard's and Kafka's outlooks, but the *Übermensch* in the play, Conductor, is an allegory of how the corrupt governments have assumed infinite power and started practising this power against their peoples, and those among them who dare to question the governments' 'divine' authorities are to be made example to others. In other cases covering the corruption of these governments, a sacrifice is made where an innocent citizen is accused of crimes they did not commit. This is exactly what happens in the play, Conductor admits to Passenger after killing him that he is the one who has killed God and taken his identity. The play is both existential and political in this representation. It must be mentioned here that the concept of the nation's leader in the Muslim world has, indeed, to do with that leader being God's deputy or successor. The word *Khalifa* (Caliph) literally means a successor, who in every political body after the death of Prophet Mohammad was the

Muslims' chosen leader. This *Khalifa* is not to be dared or challenged, and there have been wars waged in the Omayyad and Abbasid eras against those who opposed the Caliph. Today, dictators still glorify and promote themselves to be blessed with intellect and wisdom consigned only to them by God, but not to any other individual from their people.

Sabur has tackled the topic of man and God in his early writings as a poet. Sabur shows interest the relationship between man and divinity, hinting at God's abandonment of humanity by censuring Him for his apathy and indifference towards the anguish of humankind. The division Sabur sees is one between a human and their existence, and between them and their creator. In his poetry, he makes bold complaints to God about his misery. Sabur offers such critique even though the conservative Islamic society where he lived find these ideas controversial. This kind of blame towards God is unusual in the Islamic world and even loathed by the conservative populace and critics. This also proves more problematic knowing that Egypt is the home of the largest institution in the Islamic world, Al-Azhar, which is the centre for issuing fatwas regarding controversial issues of Sunni Islam. Most of the Arab Muslims are sensitive towards anything that touches God, Prophet Mohammad and the Quran and will not tolerate any form of criticism pointing at them. There are some examples of intolerance towards sensitive materials that touch upon religion in Egypt. During Sabur's time, for example, the Egyptian writer Mohammad Mahmud, then an agnostic leftist physician, wrote in the mid-1950s a Marxist book, *God and Man*, which was banned by a state court in 1957.<sup>106</sup> In regards to *Night Traveller*, Mahmoud Shalaby comments on how God's killing as a theme was an issue of concern for Sabur who feared a probable violent response from the audience who could accuse him of blasphemy.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, Sabur's collection of poems *People in My Country* (1954) is on the 'harsh vision of life and death and fate in Egypt', and expresses, in one way or another his dissatisfaction with God's silence.<sup>108</sup> The poems are articulate in blaming God for the troubles of humanity and doubting His

presence and existence. In the poem, the villagers in Sabur's town 'bitterly and helplessly shake their fist at an indifferent God'<sup>109</sup>, asking:

What is the purpose of man's toiling, of life, oh God?

How harsh and desolate you are, oh God.<sup>110</sup>

In other poems and collections, Sabur described his personal experiences of suffering and deprivation. He writes:

Oh, great Lord, Oh my torturer

How often you have afflicted me.<sup>111</sup>

Sabur in these lines is writing something alien to the conservative society in which he lived, possibly infuriating the right-wing Muslims who view God as the Supreme Being who must not be questioned for what He does. Such an act creates much controversy in the conservative Islamic society in which he lived in view of the relative intolerance towards criticism of religion. Sabur, however, was not an unbeliever in God or anti-Islamic. Yet it appears that his dissatisfaction is with how powerful the religious institution is and how it is either unable to solve humanity's persistent existential problems or worse; how religion is abducted or (killed) for personal interests. For Sabur, several 'gods' exist in our world, such as 'religion, authority, and society itself' and hence anyone can kill this god and try to impose their own ideology in the vacuum left behind. There is no better example of this abduction in Sabur's writings than his first canonical play, *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*. This mystic man who lived in the Abbasid era was killed and crucified for blasphemy, but the real motivations are said to be political as he started to pose a threat for the caliphate of that time.<sup>112</sup> However, to make analogies with how the present 'gods' are kidnapped and killed, Sabur resorted to several devices to avoid the persecution of the authorities and the conservative society. In *Al-Hallaj*, he used a story from the Islamic heritage to relate to current abuses, while in *Night Traveller*,

the killing of God is presented in a comic and absurd way, thus drawing from Western philosophy to present to the audience what he wishes.

Sabur started later to write verse dramas, some of which are labelled as absurd, as he followed the footsteps of Ionesco in his playwriting, having met him when *The Chairs* was performed in Cairo in 1964.<sup>113</sup> *Night Traveller* bears similarities to Ionesco's works in several ways, particularly in its depiction of the theme of despair, isolation, difficulty of communication, submission to an internal and external pressures that led to disintegration of the individual as a result of the conflict between the two, in addition to types of anxiety resulting from the uncertainty of identity.<sup>114</sup> It is possible that this anxiety resulted from the political changes that hit the region, where the average citizen becomes divided between the political and the financial crises, no longer able to find definitions and answers in the light of oppressive, mouth gagging states and what their role is in a turbulent society plagued by corruption. Nancy Salama, an Egyptian critic, perceives that Sabur uses several comic devices, like those found in Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* (1950), in *Night Traveller*, such as losing the travel ticket because Conductor unexpectedly swallows it, repetition of words, phrases, and sentences throughout the play.<sup>115</sup>

Sabur made objections to the understanding of the Theatre of the Absurd that was prevalent in the Arab world in the mid-1960's. He attributed this to misconceptions resulting from the Arabic translation of the word 'absurd', which, regarding theatre, translates into 'messing' or 'fooling around' among many other translations. Sabur explained how he interpreted the absurd and criticised the Arabic perception of it, which depended on the translation of the word itself. In her study on Ionesco's influence on *Night Traveller*, Salama asserts that Sabur's dissatisfaction with how Arabic failed to find an equivalent to the word 'absurd' associates him with others absurdist who believe in the insufficiency and the 'falseness' of language.<sup>116</sup> Arabic translations of the 'absurd' as a term vary, and these have stigmatised

absurd drama in the Arab world with features that are not innate to definitions of the theatre, which led to anomalies in defining the absurd in relation to drama. The absurd is sometimes translated into Arabic as *abath*, which is, in general, a noun meaning ‘a mess’. Other meanings of the word, which could be more accurate in translating ‘absurd’, have the meaning of ‘vanity’ or ‘uselessness’. Therefore, Theatre of the Absurd could mean ‘theatre of messing’, ‘theatre of vanity’, or ‘theatre of uselessness’ in Arabic. Furthermore, there is another translation of the ‘absurd’, which is *al-la maaqool*, and in English, it means ‘the unreasonable’. Sabur objected to such translations, thus indicating that his absurd plays indeed offer something more than showing irrationality or the unreasonable in drama. He refuted the translation of ‘to mess’, asking ‘who, in such times, can mess around? Even if they possess messy inclinations?’<sup>117</sup> He also responded to the second translation, ‘the unreasonable’, by explaining that theatre of absurdity does not present itself as ‘theatre of irrationality’, but rather as theatre that dramatises events that do not follow the ‘rational logic’ of our intellect.<sup>118</sup>

Then, Sabur went on to write *Night Traveller* under the Western philosophical influences mentioned earlier. Discussing Western philosophical ideas in relation to plays on issues from the present and the past of the Arabs was regarded as experimental. Mahmoud Shitawi argues that the trend of experimentalism in drama in Egypt in the 1960s was influenced by Theatre of the Absurd but only to some extent by Existentialism:

Arab experimental playwrights are puzzled by the mystery of man’s existence and try to represent man’s dilemmas in different ways. But the playwright’s vision of man’s dilemma does not come, from the most part as a result of Western existentialism, though, of course, existentialism has influenced some playwrights, or as a result of the literary traditions of the absurd discussed in Esslin’s *Theatre of the Absurd*. Arab playwrights,

nevertheless, find the dramatic technique of absurd drama useful to represent their philosophical themes.<sup>119</sup>

In adapting the absurd in his plays, Sabur resorts to wedding the Western schools with his vision of them. Al-Shitawi sees that *Night Traveller* expresses the ‘helplessness of man’s existence; man lives in a mysterious hostile world over which he has no control. The only thing he can do is to wait for death’ being unable to change his circumstances or defend himself against the tyranny of an abusive power.<sup>120</sup> Sabur sees the absurd, put in this way, as ‘very logical and accurate in portraying the human condition, but that the manner in which it was presented is illogical and unconventional’.<sup>121</sup> This form of the absurd is depicted in the play in the bleak image of a helpless passenger who is trying to reason with the obdurate Conductor, God’s deputy, who with his irrational behaviour eats Passenger’s travel ticket, introduces himself with several names and claims he is several characters from history. With this type of dramatisation, Sabur creates a state of the absurd that can be compared to what Esslin suggested, which ‘strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought’.<sup>122</sup>

The age of anxiety that prevailed after the military defeats and the loss of hope in reviving what is regarded as the glorious past of the Arabs have led to an atmosphere of frustration, particularly in the aftermath of 1967. Sabur and other experimentalists may have seen in the Western philosophical ideas and concepts, as in plays by Beckett and Ionesco which correlate to their present reality, the politics of this exact situation. These plays sometimes made use of Arab historical incidents like that of Al-Hallaj’s in the case of Sabur, or Oedipus as in Ali Salem’s *The Comedy of Oedipus*. In such adaptations, controversial historical incidents were revived to criticise contemporary events in religion and politics. With Arab dramatists, such as Wannous and Al-Hakim and others, all their plays could stand political interpretations.

Nehad Selaiha comments on the direction Sabur took as he interwove Western drama, heritage, and politics:

Paradoxically, in spite of such palpable western influence, Abdel-Sabur's theatre has an unmistakable national flavour and is deeply steeped in Arabic history, myth and folklore. Moreover, it is, in one respect, an eminently political, topical theatre, the authentic product of a particular historical moment in the life of a nation, projecting its conflicts, dilemmas and urgent concerns. Indeed, the key to Abdel-Sabur's dramatic durability lies in his ability to personalise public issues and political conflicts and politicise personal dilemmas.<sup>123</sup>

While imbued with foreign influence, Sabur's drama is a response to local affairs in Egypt, especially political ones after the defeat of 1967 against Israel, as Al-Shitawi and others have noted. The play's manifest political resonance suggests he aimed at some form of censure of the government of the time led by Nasser. The blend of the use of absurd drama together with Nietzsche's concept of the death of God allowed Sabur to criticise the political body's practices indirectly which suggest dealing with philosophical topics rather than the government's actions.<sup>124</sup> In addition, the characters symbolise not specific characters, but humanity in general, which makes it easier to serve his dramatic purpose, that is, his desire for the Egyptian audience to associate themselves with the characters. These have no names, but descriptions in the case of Passenger and job titles, Conductor, for example, assumes many names. He is first Alexander the Great, then Zahwan (Arabic for one taking pride), then Sultan, a sheriff, an executioner, and one who has killed God. The use of such anonymity is to enable an underlying critique of certain figures, Nasser or any other dictator. The Conductor character in this play raises a complicated series of doubts about who he is. Egyptian critic Adel Ibrahim Mansour questions whether this tyrant symbolises one from ancient history

such as Alexander, Tamerlane, Hannibal, or if it represents a dictator who ruled Egypt in a previous era.<sup>125</sup> He concludes that he is representative of every autocratic military political government, and that Traveller represents the oppressed in every society throughout history.

Nasser was the subject of much criticism after his inability to fulfil his promises of defeating Israel and restoring the Arabs' dignity. Rueven Snir sees that *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* was perceived by the regime's opponents as having 'allegorical references' to the Nasser's government.<sup>126</sup> However, unlike Ali Salem who offered an 'Egyptianised version of Oedipus as a Pharaoh surrounded by corruption which represented Nasser' in his *The Comedy of Oedipus*, Sabur seemed to be troubled only by the practices of the government, as he did not refer to Nasser as a person in his plays.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, in his elegiac poem *The Dream and the Song* which he wrote in 1970 following Nasser's death, he praised the late president's patriotism and lamented his unexpected death. Sabur's apparently saw, unlike Salem, that political corruption came from the tight circle that surrounded Nasser, and not from the heroic character himself. Many in the Arab world believe that Field Marshall Abdel Hakim Aamer, Nasser's political rival, for example, was the one who is corrupt and to blame for the 1967 defeat.<sup>128</sup> There are also claims that Nasser was assassinated by poison through a conspiracy by those who are around him because of his patriotism and defiance, a theory that Sabur, through his writings, probably endorsed.<sup>129</sup>

The next section will examine the elements of absurdity and political allegory in *Night Traveller*. In addition to influences from Ionesco, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Dennis Kennedy asserts that the play 'evolves into a Kafkaesque absurdism'.<sup>130</sup> The focus here is on analysing how Sabur utilises the elements borrowed from Ionesco and Kennedy's suggestion that the absurdism in the play is Kafkaesque. Furthermore, Michael Bennett's reading of the Theatre of the Absurd is also significant here since Sabur's attempts, as he mentioned, deal with serious practices of political oppression and its implications for human agency. Bennett

argues that 'Theatre of the Absurd is not about absurdity, but about making life meaningful given our absurd situation'.<sup>131</sup> Sabur and Bennett meet at some point in this definition of the absurd, and in this play, where a man is put to trial, sentenced and executed while another man is watching, Sabur is not only dramatising an incident but also forcing the audience into contemplation through the Narrator's final words. In this, Sabur supports Bennett's interpretation of the absurd, where the latter sees absurdist plays as 'ethical parables that force the audience to make life meaningful'.<sup>132</sup>

### ***Night Traveller: A Synopsis***

There are three characters in the play, Narrator, Passenger and Conductor. Narrator, according to Sabur, plays the role of the chorus in classical Greek drama, often addressing the audience, while not involved in the dialogue between Passenger and Conductor.<sup>133</sup> The play is subtitled a 'Black Comedy', which prepares the audience for what is going to happen. The setting is a coach on a train travelling past midnight, and there is only one traveller on this coach, while Narrator stands in its corner. Passenger sits quietly and tries to amuse himself by counting the lamps and playing with his rosary. He searches his pocket and gets a paper from his wallet, on which 'history was written in ten lines'.<sup>134</sup> He starts reading names from the paper: Alexander, Hannibal, Tamerlane, Hitler and Johnson. Passenger stops, repeats the name Alexander loudly several times, and at this point, Conductor awakens, angry and yelling.

The first confrontation between the two characters starts by Conductor introducing himself as Alexander, to the surprise of Passenger. He asks Conductor whether he has been drinking. This infuriates the latter, and in the first scene of violence, Conductor takes out from his pockets a whip, a dagger, a pistol, poison, and a rope. He shyly, in one of his many contradictions, speaks about how he has killed his minister, who asked him for a piece of land, and how he has given his minister all the earth 'to rest in'. The story is suggestive of

how he treats those who dare to ask greedily from him, making a dark and comic link between the Minister's asking for a piece of land and Conductor's giving him a grave to rest in. Passenger becomes submissive, and he speaks to himself, trying to convince himself that some great characters of history may come back to life because of their greatness. The intimidation the Conductor forces on his victim leads to the latter imagining things that do not happen, which leads Passenger to try to deceive himself by admitting that Conductor may have been resurrected indeed. Passenger speaks in humiliation to Conductor, who stretches his hands to reach for the Passenger. Passenger begs for his life, but Conductor speaks to him rationally, saying that he only wants to do his job, which is to collect his ticket.

Conductor re-introduces himself with the name *Zahwan*, which means an 'arrogant' or 'proud' person in Arabic, and as the ticket collector and asks to see the ticket. Passenger hands him the ticket, and after examining it, Conductor praises Passenger for the goodness and piety which, he says, possession of the ticket indicates about him as a law abiding-citizen. However, he then swallows the ticket, explaining this as because 'he was hungry when he slept', and to the surprise of Passenger, he demands the ticket again. Passenger tries to tell Conductor he handed him the ticket and that he ate it, but that enrages Conductor, yet he calms himself down and tries to reason with Passenger by first asking his name. Passenger answers that his name is *Abdoh* and at this point Conductor tells Passenger he will take off his uniform to speak as friends.<sup>135</sup> Yet under his uniform, he is wearing another one. Conductor now re-introduces himself as *Sultan*, not *Zahwan*.

The game of names continues, and Conductor asks Passenger for his name again. When Passenger reminds him of his name, Conductor accuses him of being a liar and asks for his identity card. Passenger gives him his card, and the same ticket scene is repeated mentioning hunger and sleep while Conductor brings the card closer to his mouth. Passenger panics and begs for his card, but Conductor dismisses his anxiety as idiocy and accuses Passenger of

going mad. Conductor re-assumes his official status and begins recalling violent quotes from history such as Hanns Johst's 'Whenever I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun'<sup>136</sup>, and that of Al-Hajjaj, who was notoriously cruel during his governance of Iraq 'I see heads that have ripened and it is high time they were harvested'. These quotes introduce the final scene of interrogation and trial.

The next problem begins when Conductor accuses Passenger of possessing a blank, white identity card. Passenger tries in vain to show Conductor that he is wrong. Conductor assumes the role of an investigator by hanging an American Sheriff's star on his chest and presses the charge against Passenger. Passenger is accused of killing God and assuming his identity. Passenger begs and praises Conductor for his justice and mercy. Conductor is flattered and asks for more appraisal. Conductor softens and starts to narrate a story to Passenger, that it has been rumoured a person of this valley has killed God and stolen his identity. Conductor explains that Passenger, of course, did not kill God literally, but by losing his identity, he stole that of God's and that these two things have the same meaning. Conductor explains that he failed to arrest the criminal, and this has caused God to be wrathful with the people of the valley, and therefore, someone must be given as a sacrifice.

Passenger offers to help Conductor in his search as a gesture of kindness on his whose behalf. Conductor, however, has other ideas. He asks Passenger whether he is kind enough to offer an ultimate sacrifice. Conductor wants to kill Passenger and show his body to the coroner and the people. He offers Passenger a choice of methods for his execution, the tools which he has shown before. After a short conversation, in which Passenger rejects all the first three methods, Conductor chooses the method for Passenger, praises death by a dagger, and stabs Passenger. Passenger's last words were about not being able to argue and defend himself. Conductor replies that he knows who has killed God and stolen his identity card, but he will not reveal his name. However, just before Passenger dies he shows him the white identity

card that he takes out of his pocket. Conductor speaks to Narrator, who until this point has only been addressing the audience, asking him to help him carry the body. The play ends with Narrator addressing the audience, asking them for advice and wondering what to do 'since he's unarmed, just like them, having nothing but his comments'.

### ***Night Traveller* and the Notion of the Absurd**

As mentioned earlier, Sabur acknowledged his indebtedness to Ionesco in his appendices on *Night Traveller*. In her 1981 essay entitled 'Ionesco's Influence on Sabur's *Night Traveller*', Nancy Salama examines the aspects of that influence and its manifestations in the play.<sup>137</sup> In addition to the influence of Ionesco which led to its subtitling as 'a black comedy' through its lack of communication and other aspects of the early absurd, there is a clearer influence of Kafkaesque absurdism in the play as Dennis Kennedy has noted.<sup>138</sup> Since the play depicts a trial when Conductor assumes the role of an American sheriff and presses the charges of deicide against Passenger, it is easy to draw an analogy between *Night Traveller* and Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) in terms of the interpretation of the absurdity and irrationality in both works, and the tragic ending of their protagonists who are stabbed to death. Both *The Birthday Party* and this play are absurdly Kafkaesque in their abrupt shifts from dialogue to interrogation. Malkin observes that *The Birthday Party*'s world is that of the Kafkaesque, full of 'secret, incomprehensible mental torture'.<sup>139</sup> Sabur's play also functions in this manner, when a trial is held for the irrational charge of killing God and stealing his identity, which is followed by an execution on stage.

As far as the influence is concerned, Pinter stated that he read Kafka when he was eighteen, and that 'his work has left an incredible impression on him', seeing the nightmarish world of Kafka as 'precisely in its ordinariness', which makes it both frightening and strong.<sup>140</sup> This explains why a significant number of Pinter's early plays portray such nightmarish settings

where incomprehensible occurrences whose past is unexplained take place such as in *The Birthday Party*. Sabur, on the other hand, does not mention any influence from Kafka, but his play is full of incidents that Pinter's earlier description applies to. The play describes a seemingly 'ordinary journey where a commissioner asks to check a passenger's ticket, only to kill him at the end of the play. As will be explained later, the whole setting is suggestive of a dream-like setting in which one of the characters is asleep, wakes up angry, and afterwards absurd and incomprehensible dialogue, threats, accusations and a trial all take place.

Salama stresses that Sabur's dissatisfaction with the inability of language to fully express ideas in words demonstrates that he is someone who subscribes to the ideas of the Theatre of the Absurd.<sup>141</sup> In this regard, Salama comments on how Sabur was unhappy with how Arabic rendered the word 'absurd' as 'frivolous' and 'irrational', as previously stated. Yet Sabur made a choice that created controversy, that is to write an absurdist play in poetry, according to the Syrian critic Riyad Ismat. Still, poetry could perhaps express the absurd in the play since, as Esslin commented, Theatre of the Absurd 'tends towards poetry'.<sup>142</sup>

While it is relatively easy to understand how Sabur was interested in creating a verse play from the suffering and loss of a man before a powerful system represented by Conductor because of his start as a poet, Ismat's criticism is hardly invalid. The tragedy of a man who is oppressed and executed cannot be poetically romanticised in rhymes to the audience in the way Sabur saw them, particularly under the influence of the absurd which suggests the failure and futility of language. Sabur tries to justify his choice of poetry to write the play by claiming that 'drama has always been written in verse except during the past century'.<sup>143</sup> The other two reasons Sabur offers are that he wishes to create an image of the people speaking in poetry on stage under their current circumstances and to create a 'poetic case' in the play itself rather than merely make characters speak in poetry.<sup>144</sup> Ismat, in an essay in 1972 on Sabur's theatre, criticises this choice because he saw 'the play as non-poetic and does not

require poetry to express its themes'.<sup>145</sup> Ismat goes on to argue that Ionesco's aim of using bombastic and pompous language is to mock it and its powers, which means that poetry does not serve the purpose of *Night Traveller* as a black comedy, which, without the comic language or a stand-up comedy, is doomed to turn into a charade in action. The issue Ismat is addressing has probably to do with how Arabic poetry romanticises the topic it discusses as this genre is deeply associated with feelings and emotions since the days of Jahiliya (Pre-Islam), the era that saw the most eloquent and vigorous Arabic poetry. It is understood from Ismat's discussion that, a black comedy which ends with an execution scene and dramatises how tyranny defeats a human cannot and must not be romanticised through the device of poetry.

Salama sees that hopelessness and despair, two of the characteristics of the Ionesco's theatre, are also themes present in *Night Traveller*.<sup>146</sup> The tragic end that Passenger meets at the hands of his executioner/Conductor, despite his frail efforts to resist, does not inspire hope as it suggests the inevitability of death and persecution. Salama sees that despair, which constitutes the essence the absurdist and their ideas on the human condition, in some views, can be attributed to a loss in the power of the moral code inspired by religious belief.<sup>147</sup> In *Night Traveller*, Sabur uses the idea of Nietzsche's 'death of God' to create this desperate space which lacks ethical and rational legislation, and as if this not enough, the void which is created by the absence of God is filled with the violent, tyrannical and power-hungry Conductor.

The inevitable death by murder suggests the further influence of Ionesco. Passenger's death, Salama notes, is similar to that of Berenger in Ionesco's *The Killer* (1958). Both characters surrender to the murderer's knife in the end, thus representing an acknowledgement of the inevitability of death. Sabur wanted to depict the life of Passenger/victim throughout his long

dark road through the night of life like Ionesco, who used his characters in *The Killer* to show what the presence of death means as an experience.<sup>148</sup>

It has been suggested that the source of absurdity in the play is not only the influence of Ionesco, but also of Kafka as stated earlier. The relationship between Passenger and Conductor lacks logic, while the trial of the play is reminiscent of *The Trial*. Ismat in his essay on Sabur claims that this ‘unrealistic’ relationship between two people transforms to one between two symbols, the game of a Kafkaesque nightmare, and the court that convicts before it tries.<sup>149</sup> Here, it is useful to mention a definition of the Kafkaesque relationship as one that is ‘impenetrably oppressive, nightmarish, in a manner characteristic of the fictional world of Franz Kafka’.<sup>150</sup> The oppression and the intimidation of Conductor persist throughout the play and culminate in the death of the Passenger, while the whole setting suggests a dream-like experience and some aspects of the dramatisation that suggest what is happening in the play is a dream. The time is night, Passenger is all alone on a train with nobody around, while Conductor is sleeping in the same coach unseen. Similarly, the theme of dreams can be related to Kafka’s *Trial*, the end section of which was once entitled ‘*Ein Traum*’, which is German for ‘a dream’.<sup>151</sup> It has been argued that ‘this novel, to be understood, must be read as if we are listening to a dream’.<sup>152</sup> Ismat’s reference to the play as a nightmare or a dream is totally justified and could be, like Kafka’s novel, one of the ways of reading of the unexplained incidents of the play. The occurrences are reflections of what has happened in real life, to which the brain responds during a dream and creates arbitrarily distorted, incomprehensible and unrealistic images. Here, it must be noted that the theme of dreams, sleep, beds and bedrooms, as the sleeping Conductor behind them suggests, is not only limited to *Night Traveller*. It can be found as a recurrent theme in Sabur’s poetry and also in *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* where, for example, Al Hallaj is depicted as if asleep on the crucifix. A character called Preacher indeed states that ‘He looks as if he’s in deep sleep’.<sup>153</sup>

Another aspect of the Kafkaesque that appears in the play is concerning the bureaucracy of the system. Kafka's *Trial* is seen as one that focuses on the theme of the bureaucracy of the modern age, even though this theme, Patrick Bridgewater notes, is not more than 'the outer skins of the onion of meaning' of the novel as the work stands many readings and interpretations.<sup>154</sup> The other absurdist/bureaucratic theme in a work by Kafka can be found in *Metamorphosis*. Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find out he has become a cockroach, yet he still thinks he should be at his work on time. Therefore, Joseph K. and Gregor could be seen as depictions of victims of modern life's bureaucracy. Notable here is that Kafka was himself subjected to office life and routine as he worked as a clerk in Prague, and it is possible that the theme of stale bureaucracy in his works is the influence of this experience. In *Night Traveller*, there are many interactions between the two characters that could be also seen as bureaucratic that are as absurd as those of Kafka's:

CONDUCTOR. Your ticket, please!

PASSENGER. I gave it to you!

CONDUCTOR. And where may I ask is it now?

PASSENGER. In your stomach!

CONDUCTOR. Ceremony is waived only between friends.

Now! Know your limits!

You're being sarcastic, I'm sure,

But sarcasm will do you no good...

Duty will always be a duty.<sup>155</sup>

Conductor asks Passenger for his train ticket as part of his routine check, but he eats it and demands it again. It is likely that Conductor here only wanted to break the routine of his work, and instead of checking the ticket, he tries to satisfy his hunger with it as he 'was hungry when he slept'. The scene could also be seen as a depiction of a lazy office worker

who has lost one official paper and demands it again to be given to him, a bureaucratic procedure to hold him non-responsible for the loss of a document. In addition to this scene, there are many others, particularly those of the demand of identity card for random checks and of course, the ones that involve the occurrences of Passenger's trial itself, in which he tries to defend himself to no avail. It is suggested here that it is the bureaucracy that killed Passenger and caused his misery when trapped in a situation he neither understands nor comprehends. Sabur's dramatisation expresses the fact that citizens rely on unfathomable systems and administrative hierarchies that have a real impact on every aspect of our lives, and that people we do not know, legislators and lawmakers, issue laws that judge our actions and defy logic and understanding. States of emergency, dictatorial systems, and corruption created an environment in the Arab world in which the laws governing life there appear unjust, cruel and arbitrary for citizens, and Sabur appears to emphasise that a change is needed against such bureaucracy and oppression.

Finally, there is the question of what Sabur intended to express overall through the play's absurdity. Sabur's words in the appendices of the play indicate that he wants the audiences to make associations with the characters:

If I were to direct this play...I would have represented it as a 'farce'. I want a spectator to fear Conductor in laughter, to sympathise with Passenger in laughter and to love and despise Narrator in laughter as well.....I wish not in this play, to depict certain individuals in their exact forms, but I wish to create examples of not the people, but of humanity.<sup>156</sup>

Sabur's desire for the audiences to look upon the characters as representatives of humanity in general could be understood as seeing the fate of Passenger, the passivism of Narrator and the torturous Conductor as occurrences that happen in the real world. The audiences need to

respond to them by censuring the passivity and cruelty and sympathising with the victims. Michael Bennett adopts this kind of reading of absurdist plays in his reassessment of absurd drama, by seeing them as texts that ‘force the audience’ into a sort of reaction.<sup>157</sup> The play is a representation of a political dilemma in which Passenger, representing humanity under oppression, falls a victim of a dictator, Conductor. Narrator as a helpless and passive character is one of the interpretations of the play that Riyad Ismat supports:

The play is a political metaphor indeed, even though it can normally be read and interpreted in many other ways....This play is expressive of what is beyond the borders of the Arab world. It represents the human who fights in Vietnam against the most brutal of ‘civilised’ attacks, and the crushed human of the third world under the shadow of a man wearing a smiling mask yet wielding the knife...It represents the victimised humanity, born to be exiled, extradited and killed without any guilt of its making.<sup>158</sup>

Ismat’s parabolic interpretation of absurd drama, which Bennett will endorse almost fifty years later, is expressed in a politicised reading of the Theatre of the Absurd. It is often thought that Theatre of the Absurd is one that is apolitical. Ionesco argued once, against Tynan’s insistence on the author to show political commitment, in favour of ‘the independence from all external obligations, specifically to fixed political viewpoints’.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, *The Birthday Party* and *Night Traveller* contain many elements of the absurd, yet the utilization of the absurd aims at an indirect political end. The plays portray how politics adds to the original elements of the absurd which Esslin mentioned in his book, such as vanity of existence and lack of communication. The political gain becomes another factor that contributes to the destitution and futility of humanity that resides under such abusive political powers. When reading the absurd, Ismat argues, the hopeless sharp critique of the powers of

evil and exploitation must be avoided in favour of a possession of an artistic and political insight in reading these works.<sup>160</sup> Political reading of other Arabic works similar to those under discussion is justified, for the Arab world has always been plagued with political turmoil during the time the absurd was in influence in the sixties, which would affect the nature of the writing there. In the time of the writing of *Night Traveller* there was a military government in Egypt, whose actions incurred reactions from many literary figures in their works. Therefore, reading the play as a criticism of the government is valid, and the violence in it can be seen as an analogy of what was happening in Egypt of that time.

### **Violence and Oppression in *Night Traveller***

Several Egyptian literary works written between the mid-fifties and the mid-seventies read as a critique of Nasser and the practices of his government. It is difficult to read *Night Traveller* without a political context, as Ismat suggested, for almost all literature of the period dealt with the politics of the time. The next section is an overview of some of the political incidents in Egypt in the age of Nasser and a few of the works which have criticised the political system because of the practices of the government.

Nasser's dealings with his political archenemies, the Muslim Brothers, is a good example of how he oppressed the opposition. Since his early days as a president in 1954, Nasser attempted to suppress the radical Islamic movement after a failed assassination attempt. This is more likely because they evolved as prominent figures on the political scene, thus posing a potential existential threat to his ideology. Therefore, Nasser 'officially banned and dissolved the Brotherhood in 1954', persecuting and imprisoning its members under the 'worst conditions for years' and subjecting them to 'systematic torture'.<sup>161</sup> Later in 1966, many figures of the movement and in particular one of the key figures, Sayyid Qutb, were put on trial and executed under accusations of plotting against the state and assassinating the

president. Consequently, those loyal to the group regard Nasser as a terrorist and a murderer who framed them and charge his government with tyranny, oppression and demonolatry. It is worth mentioning that the enmity between the army and the Brothers still persists today. The elected president who succeeded Hosni Mubarak after the latter stepped down, Muhammad Morsi who is a member of the Brotherhood, was overthrown in a coup by the army leader and the current president General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Morsi was arrested and sentenced to death in 2016.

Tawfiq Al-Hakim, who is regarded among the elite of the Arab dramatists, documents how Nasser and his image have changed over the time of his presidency. In *The Return of Consciousness* (1974), he focuses on how the people of Egypt succumbed to the absolute rule of Nasser and how they never questioned his politics. The book caused an uproar in Egypt and earned Al-Hakim many enemies from Leftists who supported Nasser. He notes how Nasser was viewed as a faultless idol whose reign paralysed people's minds until they saw nothing of his shortcomings, and that people in general 'were not allowed to have different opinions'.<sup>162</sup> He also asserts how two of his plays, *The Sultan's Dilemma* (1960) and *Anxiety Bank* (1967) were meant to influence Nasser in order to warn him not to curtail liberties and to address the Egyptians' concerns which were escalating before 1967. The incidents Al-Hakim was referring to are those regarding the persecution and trials of members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Hakim states that Nasser has indeed read and understood these plays, but that 'he did not act accordingly'.<sup>163</sup> Finally and concerning international politics, Al-Hakim questions the actions of the president and his government during the 1967 war which led to defeat. He considers that this defeat was hard for the people of Egypt to understand, since the Egyptian army, according to the lengthy speeches of Nasser, was invincible.

During the 1970's, some cinema productions focussed on the abuse of power that took place during Nasser's days. The first film is *Al-Karnak* (1975), which is about arbitrary arrest and false charges, reflecting the political corruption of police officers. The story is based on *Al-Karnak* (1971), a novel by the Nobel Prize winner Najeeb Mahfouz in which the author protested against the oppression of Nasser's regime.<sup>164</sup> In the prisons of Nasser, a group of university students is tortured and made to confess crimes they did not do. The scenes were brutal and included flogging, electrocution, beating and attacks by dogs. The girlfriend of one of the students is raped and threatened with rape again in front of her boyfriend who has been hung up. The film ends at the time of the reform made by President Anwar Al-Sadat, who ordered all the prisoners to be released and their torturer to be arrested.

The other film is *Ihna Btooh El-Autobis* (*We are the Bus Passengers*, 1979). The two main characters are arrested for not paying the bus fare. In the prison where they were sent, a group of prisoners belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood arrives. The two characters were tortured by mistake since they were jailed with the right-wing Muslims in the same cell. They try in vain to convince the officers that their charge is not a serious one. In the prison, Nasser's patriotic speeches before and during the 1967 war are broadcast. The irony is made clear when the prisoners, who are severely tortured, are told what the warden thinks is 'the happy news of the victory in the 1967 war'. The film ends after the prisoners are shot dead, and in a bleak comic scene, the two main characters in their final words as they are dying, promise each other not to go on a bus again. These films, then, are very similar in function and inspiration to Pinter's plays, *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*, *Party Time*, which are depictions of political violence and aggression. Like *Al-Karnak*, *Ihna Btooh El-Autobis* is also based on a novel, and this time it is Jalal El-Din Al-Hamamsi's *Hiwar Waraa' Al-Aswar* (*A Dialogue behind Walls*, 1975), which is about real stories of torture in Egyptian prisons

during Nasser's time. In the introduction to his novel, Al-Hamamsi writes what he thinks of Nasser's revolution and reign:

The points I focussed on in this book, in general, are the transparency of the government, the freedom of speech and their role in the success or the failure of a certain regime...I believe that the trial of perpetrators and opportunists is one essential component in the survival of a state. All military revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and those before, started to fight corruption, bribe, and deviations, only to succumb later to the same mistakes, thus inciting other revolutions.<sup>165</sup>

*Night Traveller* is a play that blended Sabur's poetry, the absurd and foreign influences and reads as a protest against abusive practices so that it stands many readings and interpretations. Like in its predecessor, *Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, Sabur deals in this play with questions such as the abuse of power and aggression against individuals in a more articulated manner since the 'cover' of historical allegory has been removed. As it has been noted, the political reading of the play was dominant due to the time in which it was written, even though there is no evidence that Sabur is critical of Nasser as a leader despite Snir's reading of *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* as one that is critical of the regime. The play starts with a bleak scene, suggestive of solitary confinement as the coach is occupied by Narrator, who does not intervene in the course of the action, and Passenger who appears all alone on this coach. The choice of the time, night, is also suggestive of the prison environment. The inmates in their cells do not distinguish night from day, probably since these prisons are more likely underground. Najeeb Al-Rayyes, a notable Syrian poet who was imprisoned in a dark dungeon by the French, expresses how dark his cell was in a famous poem that starts with 'oh, prison's darkness, engulf us, we're so fond of darkness' supports such reading.<sup>166</sup> The train coach, Midhat Al-

Jayyar observes, is suggestive of a prison.<sup>167</sup> Conductor's sombre choice of words describes the bleak space reminiscent of a cell:

Sometimes there are only a handful of passengers  
Scattered about the carriage like cotton sacks in deserted warehouses;  
Sometimes only a man or two,  
And the carriage is dark, cold and airless,  
Like the inside of a dead whale.<sup>168</sup>

Within the prison buildings, the inmates start to suffer the routine, the domination and the authority of their incarcerators. In Pinter's *Mountain Language*, the prisoners along with their visiting wives and mothers have to endure the domination of the guards. The Young Woman and Elderly Woman are humiliated and once they are inside, the latter is prohibited from speaking her language. Young Woman is insulted and mocked when trying to defy the guards, as they focus on her 'intellectual arse' rather than the intellectual mind or character. This is seen as a form of dominating identity, where the old life of the character with all its associations becomes under the control of the guards and their prison, who prepare them for their 'rehabilitation'. Following this, this character is made to conform to a certain set of codes and legislations. In *Night Traveller*, Passenger is presented as nameless, and is described as an anonymous man who has no features: '*The Passenger ...is a nondimensional man, a man who can be described only from the outside, as fat or thin, tall or squat, dark or fair*'.<sup>169</sup> In the very first sentences, Narrator affirms this description:

NARRATOR. The hero, the clown of our play is a man called....

Well, he's called what he's called.

'What's in a name? A rose

By any other name would smell as sweet'

And a hedgehog by any other name

Would roll itself up.<sup>170</sup>

The issue of the uncertainty of identity persists throughout the play, and the very first line gives an issue to ponder on, for the hero and the clown who gives no laughter, is eventually executed in front of the audience. Oppression and violence against Passenger in the play take two forms, one that is verbal using language and creating the delusion of who he is, and a physical aggression that is demonstrated by execution, which is enacted on stage. Salma Zohdi focuses on aspects of oppression that affect both the oppressor and the oppressed in the play.<sup>171</sup> The victim/Passenger is suffering, according to her study, from double oppression, that is one of Conductor and the one that he inflicts on himself. Victims, Zohdi maintains, ‘dehumanise themselves just as their oppressors did to them, which takes us to study closely the perspective of the oppressed’.<sup>172</sup> In the play, Passenger willingly submits once he is subjected to a show of power from Conductor, since the latter takes the instrument of torture out of his pocket before Passenger. Narrator tells how Passenger instantly becomes ‘feverish with fear, the expression on his face changes like traffic lights, Alexander moved his army’, and responds to threats by giving up without resistance ‘Give me your orders, and I’ll be quicker than your shadow’.<sup>173</sup> The fall of Passenger and his submission is his inner crisis that causes his downfall.

The play reads as if influenced by the Kafkaesque as well. The Artist in Kafka’s *A Hunger Artist* (1922), is one who offers a public show of fasting, or rather a show of starvation. The show is a challenge, where the artist is expected not to eat or drink for a period of forty days. Eventually, the artist dies because of starvation. His last words reveal the truth behind his art. He is not an artist, but a con. His fasting did not come from honouring his work, but simply because he did not find anything to eat that he likes, or else he would not have made a spectacle of himself. Passenger and Artist share the point that suggests their suffering and their later death result from within. It is Passenger’s passive and submissive subservience to

his executioner and Artist's choice not to feed himself simply because he cannot like any food that caused their demise. Sabur creates a political existential crisis for his audience. Conductor successfully shifts the threat from extrinsic to intrinsic; creating a police officer inside Passenger's head, one who belittles Passenger and ensures he is a slave to the system.

The fear Passenger suffers is the fear of a lesser individual before a more powerful one that 'moved its army' by showing their weapons in a show of power. This quick surrender to an abuser has some psychological aspects as Zohdi notes. She supports her reading with observations from two psychologists, Prilleltensky and Gonick, on political oppression.<sup>174</sup> In this research, the authors assert that 'as a result of oppression, victims of domination tend to lack self-determination, as oppression leads to misery, inequality, exploitation, marginalisation, and social injustices'.<sup>175</sup> Reading this quotation, Passenger in his attitude towards his oppression shows his lack of determination to stand up against his oppressor, as is quick to surrender to Commissioner, showing his subservience and fragility. This decision to surrender rather than standing up is one taken in order to ensure safety since the aggressor is more powerful and domineering. Narrator reveals to the audience what Passenger is thinking of:

NARRATOR. Who knows, the passenger thought,

The man may indeed be Alexander the Great!

Great men, though dead,

May still be alive!

These are funny days, anyway,

And it is wiser to be cautious.

Perhaps if I give way he'll leave me alone,

The passenger said to himself,

Let me humble myself to him.<sup>176</sup>

The first part of the passage is one that is possibly related to Nasser's Egypt more than the parts dealing with actual and physical oppression that Sabur is trying to critique in the play. Al-Hakim in his *The Return of Consciousness* notes how Nasser turned into a great man whose policies became unquestionable, and how the Egyptians then were not entitled to freedom of expressing their opinions.<sup>177</sup> In part, that was true, not only for the Egyptians but for all the Arabs, who saw in the Egyptian president all the knowledge, wisdom and character to lead the Arab nation.<sup>178</sup> They possibly saw in him what Passenger saw in Conductor, an Alexander who has returned to conquer Israel. This is in part true because Nasser indeed rose to prominence as a revolutionist hero and led to a victory against Israel, but as bureaucracy and the lust for power crept, many like Al-Hakim, returned to their 'consciousness' and started to question Nasser's actions.

The violence Sabur represents is that of the absurd, the absurdly political and the absurdly existential in a world devoid of God, where the ruthless Commissioner imposes his own law and even his logic, where stealing God's identity amounts to the crime of deicide.<sup>179</sup> Passenger's life becomes devoid of meaning and purpose, and its elimination permissible, for the one who makes the law is the one who executes. Sabur, since writing under the influence of Ionesco in this 'black comedy', wanted what Ionesco wanted too, that is 'to create a theatre of violence, violently comic, violently dramatic'.<sup>180</sup> This vision has been presented in a play showing coercion and violence against an individual, which led the play to be read politically more often as a political black comedy that ends with ultimate violence as in Sabur's interpretation of Ionesco's vision.

If Sabur wants his audience to feel for Passenger and his murder, he would then agree with the comment that 'therapeutic cruelty of making people face up to their existential situation',<sup>181</sup> a point with which Bennett would also agree, which makes the murder scene more of a parable for the audience to work out. The other parabolic point which could be left

for the audience to ponder is how Passenger's tragedy was initiated by his passivity, and how his fallacy of submission caused his downfall. Sabur develops an imagery that suggests that all humans are victims of tyrants regardless of what they do.

As a final note, there is the question of how theatre of the absurd serves in dramatising the political vigour of a given situation. Both writers, as have been argued, were influenced by absurdist writers and their works show traces of Beckett in the case of Pinter and Ionesco in the case of Sabur. However, it has been suggested that theatre of the absurd is not associated with politics. Charles Grimes writes that the theatre of the absurd was indeed perceived as apolitical, and that it distanced itself from politically committed drama, and even accused it of indifference towards social issues.<sup>182</sup> It is true that early absurdist plays, such as *Waiting for Godot*, *The Chairs* and others, were not directly associated with social realities or socialism as in the works of Brecht, and did not seem to offer any political views at least for the critics of the time, to link them with politically committed theatre. This is epitomised by what Esslin documented in *Theatre of the Absurd* in the exchange between Kenneth Tynan, the theatre critic from *The Observer* and Ionesco. Tynan was not impressed by the Kafkaesque approach of the absurdist Ionesco, 'the messiah of enemies of realism' as Esslin puts it, and his apparently apolitical approach to theatre in *The Chairs* and *The Lesson*.<sup>183</sup> Beckett, another pillar of the early absurd, was also thought of as an apolitical writer, at least in his early plays.<sup>184</sup>

But if the absurd has seemingly no affinity with politics, then why were some writers, along with their works, later looked upon and studied within a political context? The answer to this question needs a close study of the history of the absurd along with its principles and the writers associated with it. However, one needs to remember that the absurd is not one body, and that it is Esslin who classified a group of writers who share many characteristics but also many differences between them under that term. The period in which this classification and

labelling were made also matters. Despite being seen initially as apolitical playwrights, Beckett and Pinter were regarded as political writers later, and most recently a book entitled *Beckett's Political Imagination* was published, discussing the writer's affiliation with politics.<sup>185</sup> Also, there is the issue of rejecting politics wholeheartedly, which is in itself a political stance. Pinter was a conscientious objector during the fifties, refusing to serve in the military, an attitude which amounts to taking an oppositional political stance. Similarly, Esslin mentions that Tynan and John Berger, a Marxist art critic, both agree that 'repudiation of politics in itself amounted to a political ideology' in Ionesco's case.<sup>186</sup> An Arab writer who agrees to such point is Saadallah Wannous, who will be studied in the next chapter, in his argument that the 'apolitical literature' does not exist, and that the 'apolitical' literature is written, it aims at diverting the masses from their cause and consequently it serves a political purpose. Thus, it is safe to say that the claim about the absurd and its writers detached from politics is not necessarily accurate.

In addition to the earlier discussion, there is also the issue of the plays' content. The themes that have been associated of the absurd: the lack of communication and the failure of it, the inexpressibility of words, the vanity of existence, the human condition under incomprehensible circumstances etc, have been presented within a bizarre, outlandish or dreamlike and Kafkaesque nightmarish setting like in *Night Traveller*. It is these associations with 'unreality' and other labels which were used to describe the absurd that generated criticism and accusations against it as theatre which has no commitment to realism and politics events. Nevertheless, as has been discussed earlier in the chapter, the contextualisation of events let an absurdist play expresses a political content. For instance, few have failed to see that *Night Traveller*, written under the influence from the 'apolitical' Ionesco and *The Chairs*, is a play that has no political critique since it was written in the age of escalating turmoil and corruption in Egypt. The same applies to *The Birthday Party*, for as

mentioned before, the play has a representation that is reminiscent of the threat of the Gestapo and the secret service. The two plays, influenced by the 'apolitical' absurd, can offer criticism of political systems and their violence after all. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Godot can be linked to an Arab dictator if presented to an Arab audience, since they give promises they cannot or will not keep, endlessly procrastinating and prolonging the suffering of their people who depend on their help for salvation. Even a play by Ionesco can be interpreted within a political context today. In an online brief analysis of a production of *Rhinoceros*, it is suggested that it attacks 'political conformity'.<sup>187</sup> The writer have not delved deep into details, but the piece suggests the play is capable of a political critique today.

Contextualising Pinter's plays according to the political reality of the Middle East then seems relevant if these plays are to serve a political purpose. The plays are both full of parallel dramatic violence and easy to produce since they can bypass Arab censorship. The abstraction of Pinter's plays with adaptation to fit in the audiences' preference and culture helps them bring analogy between what they experience on stage and what is happening in real life. The modern parabolic vision of the absurd matches to a significant extent the political plays presented to the audience and the politicisation process. Such plays with rendition aim to propel the audiences into some form of a reaction, a contemplation of their surrounding and how devastating their passivity is in the light of the abuse and violence their governments perform.

## Chapter II

### **Families under Political Oppression: *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*, *Cheers*, *Homeland* and *The Rape***

If oppressing an individual signifies the power relationship between two characters in the two plays discussed earlier, coercion by the representative of a state, a collective power, against a social institution, the family, is what predominates in the four plays discussed in this chapter. Pinter's *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* are political plays that were written under the direct influence of engagement in politics through Pinter's activism for freedom of free speech and his visit to Turkey to check the restrictions of liberties, a trip he made with Arthur Miller in 1985. Similarly, the two plays from Syria, Mohammad Al-Maghut's *Cheers* *Homeland* (1978) and Saadallah Wannous's *The Rape* (1989) censure systematic political violence by two governments; the first is aimed towards Arab regimes in general, and the second is aimed at that of the Israeli government. In all four plays, subjugation and the threat of violence, and actual violence as retribution are practised by an authority as an act of control over the family members' ideology. The authority demands loyalty, and if dissidence is apparently about to pose a threat, a re-programming operation needs to be implemented to ensure loyal behaviour, no matter how brutal this operation will be. The victims are families, targeted down to the youngest child, and the goal is to make sure an authority's political ideology is preserved and maintained, where children are brought up in a social institution, the family, that promotes the same concepts as the state. All ideas that appear to differ from those of the state are considered as treason, misleading and even 'sinful' as in the case of Young Woman in *Mountain Language*, which will be discussed later.

The chapter seeks to examine how Pinter's political concerns which he depicted in his plays are related to and expressive of the same issues that plagued Arab countries. The two plays discussed were inspired by events in a country in the Middle East, that is, Turkey. However, they are not limited to Turkey and could be expressive of the conditions that were and still are prevalent in that country. Moreover, the study analyses the techniques each playwright used in conveying to the audience the topic of the family under oppression in their plays, and how those of Pinter are different from what the Arab audience is used to.

The political significance of Pinter's 1980's plays cannot be understood without exploring his political activism and attitude at the time of their writing. As mentioned earlier, the plays written were influenced by a specific political dilemma, the 1980 coup in Turkey and the confiscation of liberties that took place afterwards, and the restrictions imposed by the government on the Kurds and their language. After the coup, the Turkish constitution restricted the media and martial law was declared.<sup>188</sup> Pinter's plays could serve as a warning not to surrender and not to get used to whatever political restrictions governments impose. This notion in Pinter's writings was perceived early by Irving Wardle, who claims that Pinter's plays warn 'that people, the lower-middle classes in particular, get used to anything, and that this is dangerous'.<sup>189</sup> Taylor-Batty, in his discussion of the concept of the family under pressure, argues that family structures under threat are implied by Pinter in *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*, and *Party Time*. He sees that Pinter's ambition in *One for the Road*, for example, was not purely political.<sup>190</sup> However, the plays' political weight is hard to ignore, and domination over the families involved in the name of the patriotism is, in fact, the driving force behind this play and the others written after it. In other words, the force the family is facing is a political one, which is trying to impose a certain political agenda. This argument is especially true for the *One for the Road*, since the incident that compelled writing the plays is the aforementioned encounter with the two Turkish girls Pinter met before

travelling to Turkey and the excess of emotions he expressed after the visit.<sup>191</sup> The plays focus on the concept of the family under the threat of a major power, and this threat encapsulates their political resonance, for the ultimate purpose of the threat and subjugation is to make the family wear the mask the authorities want them to, or to face retribution for their declared disloyalty.

Pinter also suggests through the anonymity of locations in his political plays that the threat of subjugation of political leaders is not only limited to countries of the third world, but this can also stretch anywhere, including Britain. His fears proved true; for he later protested against the ban imposed on the media in the late eighties, in specific the ban on broadcasting speeches of Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams and other Irish parties in the late 1980s. His protest in the two plays, however, is not only limited to arguing in favour of freedom of speech. Pinter met during his visit to Turkey with certain individuals who were imprisoned and tortured for their political opinion, he noticed that their families were also affected.<sup>192</sup> Pinter mentioned that he met a trade union leader in Turkey, whose hands were 'quite shaky because of the torture he was subjected to, and that his wife who visited him in prison became mute afterwards because of her shock'.<sup>193</sup> The devastating impact of violence practised on the insurgent individuals is not limited to them in his perception, but it also extends to affect the ones close to them; their families, even if they are not 'culprits' in this opposition. Therefore, bringing attention to other members who fall in the circle of oppression in the plays was inevitable. In addition, the presence of more than one individual during interrogation adds to the dynamics of coercion in the play and deserves more critical analysis. The ties between the family members in *One for the Road*, for example, work in favour of the interrogator, and consequently change his technique and language, making it easier for him to threaten each member with inflicting pain not only on themselves but on those whom they care for as well.

Families targeted by oppression is also a theme found in Syrian theatre. Police states in the Middle East: Turkey in 1980's, Syria, Israel and Egypt suffered from systematic practices against opposition individuals. The governments there target also the families of those oppositional figures, unchecked and unchallenged, to make examples of them to others and suppress any future insurgency, in addition to guaranteeing that these families and their posterity adhere to the laws and legislations in that state, which are obviously in the interests of the government and not its people. Pinter saw this in Turkey, as mentioned before, and this inspired him to dramatise families under political oppression in his plays. In the other Middle Eastern countries, playwrights' political concerns and experiences were also similar to those of Pinter's.

In Syria, almost all Mohammad Al-Maghut's plays could be labelled as political and deal with systematic violence; from his first, *The Hunchback Sparrow* (1967) to his final *Out of the Flock* (1999), all tackle issues that include political aggression, patriotism and pan-Arabism, and the rights of the proletariat. This interest is unsurprising in view of Al-Maghut's political background, his membership of the Syrian Socialist National Party and his imprisonment because of his activism. Al-Maghut's is mostly known as a poet and his play discussed here, *Cheers Homeland* (1978), was never published, but it is very well known as a television play.<sup>194</sup> The play tackles the journey of a Syrian harlequin, the simpleton and buffoonish Ghawar, whose sarcastic approach and witty dialogue served to voice criticism against the government. Ghawar, after the death of his daughter due to medical negligence, becomes more vocal about the corrupt politics of his country. As a result, he faces the wrath of the oppressors and fights back with a sense of patriotism, nationalism and pan-Arabism, which incurs a great deal of applause from the recorded audience watching the play. The audience all wear the traditional Arabic clothes headdress, the *Keffiyeh*, which suggests that

the Arabs are watching, and they all clap and cheer Ghawar every time he emerges as victorious against his oppressors.

As mentioned before, Al-Maghut's *tanaffus* theatre aims to engage of the audience through presenting politics within a comic frame that seeks to release the pressure which accumulates in the oppressed audiences. Al-Maghut also attempts in his witty undermining of abusive political figures to portray a different image than the one which already exists in the minds of the audience which suggests that these figures are dominant, untouchable and unbreakable. Commenting on the relationship between the audience and the political theatre, Charles Grimes argues that 'the distinction between what political theatre presents and what its audience receives has troubled political playwrights'.<sup>195</sup> Al-Maghut, an outspoken political playwright, apparently did not want to be troubled by such distinctions. He wanted his theatre to make the audience 'breathe out' the pressure that accumulated through years of oppression and suppression of liberties and to breathe it out in a constructive way by removing the fear and the shroud of holiness which corrupt political figures earned through years of practising oppression. Miriam Cooke writes that *tanaffus* is a safety valve mechanism, a moment for sharing unbelief and awareness of injustice, providing a pleasurable release of pent-up pressure.<sup>196</sup> The dialogue that follows from Al-Maghut's television play *Ghorbeh* (1976, also not published), explains how the political *tanaffus* works. The Bey, the village's ruler, played by Dorayd Lahham, who played Ghawar in *Cheers Homeland*, is arguing with the village's teacher, representing the intellectuals who try to free the impoverished citizens from the grip of authority:

TEACHER: Who made you the leader of these wretched people?

BEY: The constitution, idiot!

TEACHER: What constitution?!

BEY: Oh God! The village's constitution. Show it to him!

GUARD: But it's on the donkey, and the donkey is arrested because it ate the constitution! (*Audience here cheers and laughs*)

BEY (*shocked and angry*): He ate the constitution? How could he assimilate such a constitution! (*The audience laughs and claps*).<sup>197</sup>

The reference to the constitution here makes sense considering the date of the play. After Assad seized power in 1970, he amended the constitution to allow himself more freedom at the cost of civil liberties. The village's constitution allowed the Bey to govern poor people. The parody represents the Bey as Assad, the village is Syria and the poor villagers are those whose liberties are curtailed. The intellectuals are teachers and authors, like Al-Maghut, who are trying to defy the authorities. The incident of eating the constitution, and the whole scene in general, is an example of how *tanaffus* theatre works. Even a donkey is unable to assimilate such a document, and neither could the Syrians, who could not 'mentally assimilate' the components of their new constitution. As the play can publicly criticise the government, it gave the impression that there is some democracy and that the country is 'fine'. In fact, such comic critique only worked, as Cooke called it, as a safety valve that allowed a small amount of pressure to be breathed out, keeping the more important dissent limited to screens (as it is a television play), avoiding potential disobedience in the streets.

In *Cheers Homeland*, the hero, Ghawar, suffers pain and torture yet he cracks jokes and makes fun of his torturers and leads them on occasions to doubt themselves. The sarcasm with which Ghawar, his protagonist, deals with the death of his little daughter, and the will of his dead grandfather (with whom he has a surreal conversation in the play), provides a sort of witty 'cathartic' experience for the audiences. The element of satire has been part and parcel of Arabic literature when it concerns certain crises.<sup>198</sup> These crises are political, social or economic in nature, but not religious, though, since sarcasm against the religious authorities is a taboo no one has dared to break, as mentioned earlier in the discussion of Sabur's *Night*

*Traveller*. In this play Al-Maghut is following a tradition, using jokes and sarcasm regarding the political and economic problems.

Another family under threat appears in Saadallah Wannous's *The Rape*. Wannous is perhaps the best-known playwright in the Arab world and probably the one who has been most discussed in English.<sup>199</sup> His theatre is generally labelled as political in view of his extensive discussions of politics, patriotism, anti-Israelism and critique of the Arab governments. He even argues that 'there is no apolitical literature'.<sup>200</sup> Wannous stresses that the oppressive regimes encourage what they see as 'apolitical' literature:

The bourgeois regimes...promote thinking that depends on separating literature from politics. They want by this to thwart people from thinking of their situations and consequently embracing their fate. Both art and literature can play a significant and crucial role in putting the human condition under the spotlight and encouraging a reaction to change the status quo.<sup>201</sup>

The idea which Wannous wants to sustain is that his plays aim at creating emotions in the audiences that result in the act of revolting against oppression, tyranny, poverty, etc. Apolitical literature, for Wannous, is non-existent. Oppressive regimes, which he calls bourgeois, encourage literature which is not political, that discusses topics not relevant to the political systems and does not address political concerns. As a result, this 'apolitical' literature becomes a political one in the sense that even when it claims to be apolitical, it has the function of creating a diversion for the masses, becoming an instrument which deludes them and prevents them from revolting against their miserable conditions. Consequently, his approach to theatre, he argues, is to create a 'theatre of politicisation' which stimulates the masses and encourages them to take part and denounce their passivity.<sup>202</sup> An example of such

an attempt to involve the audiences is found in *Soirée for the Fifth of June* (1968), where several actors are already seated among the audience, perhaps as an attempt to remind them that what they see on stage involves them as well, and is not merely actions they should just watch and applaud. Thus, Wannous attempted something unfamiliar in this play. Actors sitting among the audience raise their voices in protest because a play within the play is late to start. This is deliberate, however, as Wannous planned in the text in his original play. The director comes on stage to address the protestors and speaks to the actors/audience. More actors appear to be sitting among the audience, one of them is the writer of a play within the play, who becomes involved in an argument with the director. At the end of *Soirée*, some officials and their guards who were watching the play, actors obviously, arrest other actors who are sitting among the audience.

*The Rape* tells the story of a Palestinian family which suffers the oppression and brutalisation of Shabak (or the Shin Bet), Israel's intelligence service. The victims are the Palestinian husband and wife. The wife is raped, and the man is castrated by the Shin Bet. The Israeli officer who rapes the Palestinian wife later rapes his fellow officer's wife as well. The Israeli husband becomes impotent, due to psychological reasons. The psychology of the oppressors and the oppressed appears more complicated and associated with historical and religious backgrounds, while violence shown hits back at the one who started it. Eventually, the brutalised Palestinian couple are destined to be physically separated through rape, castration, and murder. Rape, which is the title of the play, signifies how important it was in the coercive process not only against the wife but also against the husband, through taking his 'honour', as will be discussed later. This theme can be compared to what Pinter presented in *One for the Road*. Luckhurst explains how the 'dismantling of Gila has been effected through repeated rape and sexual humiliation, and her screaming externalises her mental and emotional agony'.<sup>203</sup> Gila's rape dismantles not only her but also her husband once he's told what

happened to his wife until at a certain point he pleads to be executed. In *Mountain Language*, physically groping Young Woman's behind aims to inflict the same pain Gila has faced. Even though it does not aspire to full rape, it is still considered as sexual violence, which aims at breaking this intellectual and dignified woman's spirit of resistance and her self-esteem as well. Sexual violence becomes a systematic practice by corrupt figures in authority, and it also becomes a fast-spreading phenomenon since it proves successful most of the times. Such representation of violence, Edward Ziter asserts, indicates that it 'cannot be compartmentalised: a state that employs violence against occupied peoples will inevitably see that violence permeates into all reaches of society. One cannot dally in violence'.<sup>204</sup>

Violence spreads so fast like a contagious disease which can also affect those who suffered, practised or witnessed it like in what happened with the officers in *The Rape*. In Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Stanley is another example of the influence of this aspect of violence in his attempted rape of Lulu which resulted probably from his own metaphorical rape as Bennett has noted.<sup>205</sup> This act suggests that aggressive physical violence cannot be compartmentalised, and it will eventually hit either back or forward. On the other hand, violence practised against the group of individuals in the smallest social institution, the family, has other psychological, socio-political dimensions, as the four plays discussed in this chapter suggest. It is practised in a systematic manner with the aim of terrorising and dominating, and possibly more importantly, taking over the ideology of the younger generation that is raised by this family. The three playwrights under discussion, in their depictions of the influence of political violence against a family, depend on several techniques to help establish a connection between their audiences and what they staged before them, from Al-Maghut's *tanaffus* to the politicisation of Wannous. On the other hand, Pinter's political theatre is one that shocks because the verbal violence and the flagrant obscenity in the political plays are undeniable.

Pinter's political plays tend to expose the shocking and violent side of character when it is empowered. Despite stating that 'he does not write to shock and that he does not write in these terms', it is normal for an audience to be shocked by verbal violence and obscenity in Pinter's plays.<sup>206</sup> Pinter himself, one can argue, was shocked into writing *One for the Road*. In fact, Pinter said he wrote the play in one night directly following the meeting, angry as he was, which had a cathartic effect on him.<sup>207</sup> As a result, intentionally or not, the play came out different from what he used to write before, as a play that is overtly political and shocking. Pinter's political theatre and its relationship with the audience can be summarised as follows:

Morality is a keynote in Pinter's speeches about his political plays and his political messages as a public citizen. He emphasised in 1985 the necessity of putting the political actions of one's own country to critical moral scrutiny. Pinter's plays have at least an implicit moral appeal. The goal of the later plays is to shock the audience into altered awareness of their true moral condition by exposing the violence done 'in their name'.<sup>208</sup>

The last phrase was used by Pinter himself, who was objecting to the USA and the UK's involvement in the Gulf and Balkan wars, committing what he saw as war crimes outside the umbrella of the United Nations in the name of the British and American people.<sup>209</sup> If one is to agree that Pinter's play shocks an audience into some sort of awakening, then an Arab audience would quickly grasp such a message. The Arab audiences, the Syrian in particular, are used to involving them in messages similar to what the political theatre of Wannous and Al-Maghut sent them whether through *tanaffus* or 'politicisation'. The quote above explains why Pinter's political plays are important and relevant to an Arab audience. Much violence has been practised against them by their dictatorships, and since political drama in the Arab world has slightly declined with the death of the major playwrights, the Pinter experience, one might argue, is needed in that spot to continue and complete what has been offered to

these audiences. In addressing the morality of these audiences, the plays need to alert them to the abuse, torture and violence committed in their names in their dictatorial states, reminding them of their ethical commitments and encouraging them to end their negative silence against the regime's atrocities. In the aftermath of Arab Spring which is an uprising against oppression, Pinter's plays resonate and reflect well what the masses are going through in their search for freedom of speech, a new identity, morality and democracy.

### **Pinter's *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language***

The two short plays have simple plots and simple settings, while their characters are less developed, especially on the psychological level, as will be discussed later. *One for the Road* is about a detective, Nicholas, who is interrogating a couple, Gila and Victor, and their seven-year-old son, Nicky. The couple have bruises and their clothes are torn, indicating that they have been tortured. Nicholas is a sadistic character who enjoys the verbal torture of Victor, speaking about Gila in a sexual manner before him. He also enjoys verbally torturing Gila herself, reminding her through questioning her about how many times she has been raped by the soldiers in the building. The interrogation's goal is to bring the couple, who apparently dared to act against the state, to a breaking point from which there is no return, and to achieve this, the couple have been physically and emotionally tortured. In *Mountain Language*, another family is destroyed. A woman is visiting her husband while another old woman is there to see her son. The two women are abused at the gates of the prison and physically and sexually molested and attacked. Their language, the mountain language has been banned, and they are not allowed to speak it. The source of this idea is banning the Kurdish language in Turkey during the eighties. The old woman tries to speak to her son in the mountain language, but she is denied this right. The young woman shows her defiance to the guards and exposes how they work, by offering to sleep with a character called Joseph Dokes, a person who can make sure 'everything is alright'. The play ends with the old woman falling into

catatonic silence without telling how this happened, and her son falling on the ground in a seizure.

After becoming directly involved in activism through PEN International, the organisation that defends the freedom of writers worldwide, Pinter's interest in politics became more influential on his 1980 plays discussed here. One might argue that *The Hothouse*, the play written in 1958 but not released until 1978, is the one that ushers the beginning of Pinter's 'overtly' political plays as it dramatises events taking place in a detention centre of political prisoners.<sup>210</sup> With his growing interest in human rights and freedom of speech, Pinter became more critical of the major international political powers, criticising the USA and also the UK for the former's intervention in supporting dictatorships in Chile and Nicaragua. Pinter also became concerned regarding the freedom of speech in the UK after the restrictions imposed on the media through the Broadcasting Ban from 1988 to 1994. The ban was regarding the direct statements of Irish political parties, which included the Sinn Féin, following acts of terrorism in the UK which the IRA was accused of committing. This motivated him, along with other left-wing writers such as Margaret Drabble and Salman Rushdie, to found the 20<sup>th</sup> of June Group, whose aim was 'to do something about the lack of opposition in British politics'.<sup>211</sup>

In the later plays, Pinter actively sought to dramatisise the sinister dominance of major political power embodied in interrogators, officers and soldiers over victim citizens of an indefinite state. The human agency residing under oppression and torture, which was also a theme in early plays, is now presented to the audience straightforwardly. As discussed before, Stanley falls victim to an oppressive authority in *The Birthday Party*, Davies in *The Caretaker* is also molested and harassed by Mick, and the assassin Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* is eliminated by the same organisation he is working for since he started asking questions. These characters, however, become victimised by an unknown figure in an indefinite setting. The plays written

post-1984 are more straightforward in their depiction of political oppression, for they take place in prisons and offices and coercion in them is motivated by political agendas. While in the earlier plays one may speculate who Goldberg and McCann are and who they are working for, *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* are inspired by political events and clearly depict oppressive soldiers and officials subjugating individuals.

The two plays by Pinter under discussion here, *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*, can be regarded as an examination of collective political oppression. The point Pinter wanted to dramatise is the extent to which oppression is being practised against innocent individuals in the name of the state and laws, and how far that oppression reaches. He shows how oppression manipulates emotions and hijacks stories of patriotism and loyalty. An example of this is the woman's father in *One for the Road*, who is depicted as one who is loyal to the state. The purpose of the oppressors here is to create a moral code which the daughter cannot, or rather should not deviate from according to the authorities. In *Mountain Language*, the citizens are reduced to silent figures as in the case of Elderly Woman, not being able to speak their own words after their language was suppressed by their oppressors. It should be noted that the image of the Elderly Woman becoming mute, was more likely inspired by a family Pinter met in Turkey. He there met a couple; a trade union leader who was arrested and tortured in prison by the coup authorities after the 1980 coup, while his wife, after visiting and seeing what happened to him, became permanently mute afterwards owing to the shock she had experienced.<sup>212</sup> In the two plays, families suffer under systematic state violence that is meant to consolidate its supremacy over the family members, redefining for them what should and should not be through retribution and torture.

In *Mountain Language*, a group of women from the mountains are waiting to see their imprisoned male relatives. Two women, a young woman named Sarah Johnson and an old woman, are visiting Sarah's husband and the mother is there to see her son. The guards harass

the young woman and learn later her husband is not from the mountains, yet they continue to be rude to her and sexually abuse her both verbally and physically. The old woman sees her son but she is stopped from speaking the only language she knows, the mountain language, with her son. Young Woman manages to see Charley, her husband, only while the guards are moving him taking him away. He is hooded and clearly suffers from torture. The guard suggest that she speaks to a man called Joseph Dokes, an English name suggesting any man, if she wants everything to be okay. She asks the guard whether sleeping with Joseph would solve all the problems, and the guards confirms. In the final scene, the old woman is told she can speak the mountain language after a change in the laws but it was too late as she appears in catatonic silence. Her son tries to speak to her in vain and falls on the ground in a delirious fit after losing hope of speaking to his mother again.

Sexual violence is one of the most important aspects of violence Pinter focuses on in his dramatisation of the subjugation of dissidents in his political plays. Since we are dealing with a whole family, the female members, in addition to children as well, are arguably the most vulnerable, suffer most of the violence by the officers. Sexual abuse has a subversive effect on the female who was forced to endure the loss of her dignity to an abusive power that seeks to invade and control her body and thinking. Rape as a means of subjugation is a powerful device. The psychological post-traumatic effects add to the physical ones and ruin the victims and those around them. The use of rape as a political method of subjugation is effective:

Rape.....is an effective political device. It is not an arbitrary act of violence by one individual or another, it is a political act of oppression exercised by members of a powerful class on members of a powerless class. Rape is supported by a consensus in the male class. It is preached by male-controlled and all-pervasive media with only a minimum of disguise

and restraint. It is communicated to the male population as an act of freedom and strength and a male right never to be denied.<sup>213</sup>

Political rape is then not primarily an act that is meant to bring sexual gratification for its doers but rather is an act of punishment or even an act of vengeance. This act, according to the quotation above, does not spring from the will of a certain individual, but rather it is the choice of the 'powerful class' who perform such an act simply because they can, and because no one can stand up to this breach of human rights. Moreover, the act of political rape is not a single case where rape happens as an individual occurrence where a male simply wants to demonstrate his dominance. It is rather an act of violation, where this male represents the stronger political body of the system whose 'right cannot be denied', while the female victim represents the weaker and abused part of society.

The consequences of the act of rape stretch beyond the physical and psychological damage that is done to the victim as well. As the purpose of rape is to subjugate both physically and mentally, the fact that the female victim is one of the members of the family and of society in general invites us to contemplate to how this violation will affect those around her, the husband in particular. Studies on how damaging rape proves to the marriage institution vary. In general, the male counterparts respond negatively to the rape of their wives or partners. They 'react more to the sexual aspects of the rape than to the violent nature of the act' and such reaction is 'inevitably linked with feelings of resentment and anger towards the victim' thus 'damaging covert or mixed communication between the spouses'. Furthermore, after the rape, a husband may view his wife as 'damaged or tainted property' thus leading to having adverse 'effects upon their sexual and marital relations'.<sup>214</sup> Such psychological and emotional effects are known to oppressive authorities, and in *One for the Road*, Nicolas, the interrogator, asks Victor:

NICOLAS: Talking about sexual intercourse.....

*He laughs wildly, stops.*

Does she ....fuck? Or does she ...? Or does she....like...you know...what?

What does she like? I am talking about your wife. Your *wife*.

You know the old joke? Does she fuck?

*Heavily, in another voice:*

Does she fuck!

*He laughs.*<sup>215</sup>

The menacing words that are conveyed in a sarcastic tone to Victor about what has happened to his wife have a damaging psychological effect on him. We as the audience learn later that the woman has been raped many times. In addition, the use of language such as the Anglo-Saxon word 'fuck' is meant to be offensive, as Pinter himself stressed.<sup>216</sup> In highly conservative societies like the Middle East, these offensive words are considered unacceptable and humiliating, a situation Wannous referred to directly in his play *The Rape* as will be discussed later. The point to be made here is that this offence is not only directed towards Victor, but also to the audience who watch this scene. Not only Gila, Victor's wife, has been abused but Victor has also been rendered powerless. The scene could raise two issues here: one is how a man's 'honour' will be forfeit should he become an opposition under dictatorships, and two is the possible shock to the audience to this kind of reality. Such representations push into the realm of psychological conflict what should be done and what the consequences will be. The husband and wife are abused and disempowered for standing up for their beliefs, and this kind of reality is one of which audiences are oblivious, and Pinter seeks to bring before them as a political message. It is hard to tell exactly what Pinter wanted from mentioning rape as one form of torture. However, Austin Quigley has suggested what interests Pinter in such a dramatisation is as follows:

To try to persuade a theatre audience that it should in general be against physical torture, murder and rape seem somewhat gratuitous in spite of the prevalence of all three in the modern world. What interests Pinter... is exploring the modes of presupposition and self-justification that enable such things to be done in the name of or on behalf of citizens and governments who might publicly and even sincerely condemn them. What is dramatised is not the physical torture, murder and rape so frequently referred to in the critical discussion, but the processes of self-justification they promote and the differing consequences for the oppressors and the oppressed of their limited persuasiveness.<sup>217</sup>

Quigley's comment supports the previous point whether it is worth working against the system and risking such of retribution. The belief that it is worth resisting is shaken and a process of justification begins which results in the passivity of the populace through fear of the consequences of standing up against brutalities such as rape and torture.

In addition to the serious effect that violation by rape has on the apparently dissident family, other issues arise depending on the culture of the country in which such an incident takes place. Since the two plays are inspired by events in Turkey, it might be useful to know what happens to raped women in that society. Dorothy Thomas and Regan Ralph from the Women's Rights Project of Human Rights Watch discuss rape in wars as a political device:

In fact, soldiers do rape women precisely because the violation of their 'protected' status has the effect of shaming them and their communities. Seventeen-year-old S., a Kurdish woman from south-eastern Turkey, was detained by village guards and Anti-Terror police during a night raid on her village, accused of harbouring members of the Kurdish Workers' Party

(PKK), raped during her interrogation, and taunted by her captors: 'Now you're engaged, but after we rape you, no one will marry you'. S.'s story suggests that rapists may also be motivated by the likelihood that their victims will not report the assault. By being a rape victim, a woman becomes the perceived agent of her community's shame. In a bizarre twist, she changes from a victim into a guilty party, responsible for bringing dishonour upon her family or community.<sup>218</sup>

The point to be stressed here is how the social status of women changes in a situation over which they have no control, a change from being a victim to becoming perceived as responsible, blamed for what happened. Passivity towards their situation is even encouraged in several places in the world since such women are perceived as bringing disgrace to their families. Therefore, the female victim becomes the one responsible for maintaining the integrity and honour of her family and is encouraged to remain silent for fear of being ostracised by her husband and community. Rape has the effect of planting the seed of disagreement in a family, turning the couple against each other. Quigley argues that 'part of the torture to which the victims are subjected consists of turning the psychological and emotional bonds of a family group into weapons to be used against each of them'.<sup>219</sup> The argument to be sustained here is that the whole family is going to be affected by the malpractice, threatening the bonds that tie them together as an institution. The woman is the wife whose husband will be emotionally hurt by her rape, and the mother whose children going to be negatively influenced by her abuse.

In *Mountain Language*, another female character suffers sexual abuse at the hands of army officers. Grimes argues that Officer and Sergeant in *Mountain Language*, are less 'psychologically developed' than characters of early plays, because 'Pinter does not want to exert psychological fascination upon the audience'.<sup>220</sup> The comparison he makes here is

between the play's characters and those in previous full-length plays like Lenny, Goldberg or Gus, and explains that Pinter's approach in building these characters come from the Brechtian 'gestus', 'in which a character is nothing more than an expression of historical location and power status through action'.<sup>221</sup> It is a fact that the plays which can be dubbed as 'overtly' political, those of the eighties, are shorter than Pinter's previous plays. One reading of why the plays are less dramatically developed than the earlier plays is because they are closer to being a 'political stance or attitude' which Pinter wanted to announce to the world in response to politics of the time. Therefore, the characters are reduced to their essentials just like the plays they are in and they become abstract characters whose function is merely to replicate the deeds and words of oppressive officials or spokespersons of a dictatorship, but not to stand at their own as fully developed dramatic characters whose depths cannot be fathomed. The purpose is then, one might surmise, that these merciless figures function as instruments used by a totalitarian force. Consequently, one might also conclude that the 'oppression *Mountain Language* dramatises is a matter of government policy, not the cruel whims of one individual'.<sup>222</sup> In both plays, aggression is institutional and not personal, as the entity involved, a family, attacks another institution: the state. It is perceived as a corrupt cell that needs to be reprogrammed or even neutralised in the hope of disintegrating this unified body attempting to overthrow that political regime.

Sarah Johnson, or Young Woman, is another victim of sexual violence as she is trying to see her jailed husband. Although she is not raped like Gila, she still has to endure sexual harassment from the guards when one of them gropes her bottom and keeps this going for a certain period of time. This act was performed on stage before the audience. In contrast, in *One for the Road*, the threatening and menacing language was used which described and anticipated the act. It is an attack on a dignified woman whose sole aim is humiliation. The move tells the woman that what she possesses, her body, does not belong to her, and can be

taken over by the officers any time. Pinter also makes more use of this violation. In their sexist sarcasm about the woman's 'wobbly bottom' and her 'intellectual' background, they state that 'intellectual arses wobble the best'.<sup>223</sup> It is a similar case to the family in *One for the Road*, where 'lots of books' were found' in the family's house.<sup>224</sup> Attacking the intellectuals in oppressive states, limiting their freedom of speech, persecuting them and even assassinating them are common tactics. Dictatorships fear those intellectuals the most because they in their ideology are seen to be capable of exposing these systems and educating the masses, which will lead to a revolution against them. Pinter stresses the fact that politicians want people to live in ignorance and remain ignorant of truths to maintain political power.<sup>225</sup> An intellectual's burden is to reveal the truth to their people enlightening their way of standing up against political oppression. Haitham Hussein, a Syrian novelist living in London, believes that it is intellectuals' duty to achieve change, and to rescue their societies from the marshes of tyranny and oppression and to lead them to the isthmus of dreams and hopes of a country which respects and honours its citizens.<sup>226</sup>

The situation becomes even more complicated for oppressive regimes that depend on maintaining ignorance in society, a policy endangered once these intellectuals multiply. The union of intellectuals in a family is one threat such regimes would pay attention to, for it is not only a union of two, but would produce a posterity of more intellectuals as well. The attack on the intellectual body becomes more of an existential battle for survival, in addition to its importance as a device that creates a chasm in the family's unity or between the woman and her society. The principle of 'divide and conquer' is, too, a strategy of totalitarian systems in defending themselves against potential revolutionists.

The inspiration for the play, as suggested earlier, was banning the Kurds from speaking their language in Turkey. Pinter uses the dramatic device of a language that is full of violence and obscenity as a counter-attack against the oppressors wielding their own weapon: the foul and

obscene language. Pinter here suggests that silencing by force and verbal abuse must be encountered by an equal force: an equally powerful and even obscene language. Again, the word 'fuck' re-appears in the play, but contrary to *One for the Road*, this word is used by Sarah, the Young Woman, in response to knowing that a certain individual named Joseph Dokes, can solve her problems:

YOUNG WOMAN: Can I fuck him? If I can fuck him, will everything be all right?

SERGEANT: Sure. No problem.

YOUNG WOMAN: Thank you.<sup>227</sup>

It is possible to imagine what Pinter intended by this confrontation, as Dokes is another representative of that power, whom Sarah defies, and through this defiance, she exposes how ugly and degenerate the system is. Pinter himself has once said that this is an act of defiance and contempt on behalf of the woman.<sup>228</sup> In this situation, Sarah declares herself as the doer of the action rather than being the receiver of that act. Other observations, however, may note that it is a desperate act, or a last resort, in fighting the vicious battle against brutalising the family, in a situation where the woman is willing to give up her honour to get her husband out of prison. Pinter, however, does not agree, as he stressed that Sarah, a dignified woman, is not seriously going to sacrifice her honour for the release of her husband.<sup>229</sup>

Rape and sexual violence, in general, have been recurrent themes in a significant number of Pinter's plays, especially those written after 1980. In the assertion of their significance in political oppression, the notable Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman represented rape under these terms in one of his most famous plays: *Death and the Maiden* (1990), which he actually dedicated to Pinter.<sup>230</sup> The play revolves around the rape of a female political insurgent at the hands of the prison doctor. Dorfman, a long-term friend of Pinter, reflects in his play how rape is ruinous for female political prisoners. Mary Luckhurst notes that the focus on

silencing and oppressing women in Pinter's work is present in particularly the later works.<sup>231</sup> She also notes how the cover of *Plays: 4* which includes the two plays under discussion, has the photo of a gagged female on it. It must be mentioned, however, that rape itself is a means to an end and is not for sexual gratification, which is the ultimate control over what oppressors see as the smallest component of a society and their ideas in particular.

The images that Pinter uses in his two plays are matters of binary opposition, mainly in the juxtaposition of victim/oppressor and language/silence. Peter Raby endorses that Pinter weighs such dualities and 'ranges language against silence.....lies against the truth; power against apparent weakness; the state against family'.<sup>232</sup> In the discussion of state versus family here, there are further points to consider. The point Raby raises about juxtaposing lies against truth deserves some examination. Oppressive states promote their propaganda as the only version for what is right, or what should be and what should not be. All other narratives that contradict those of the government will aspire to political heresy and will lead to the persecution of those who oppose it. When this kind of political rhetoric involves topics such as patriotism or martyrdom, the speech falls into the realm of political opportunism. This power becomes Machiavellian, aiming to achieve political gains and goals and willing to utilise noble values in their stratagem, to support their legitimacy as an honest and patriotic power. A good example of such deployment in the Arab world comes from Syria, where the 'Baath government has consciously framed a history that mobilised the idea of martyrdom to support the party and Assad leadership'.<sup>233</sup>

Reminding of the father's sacrifice as political extortion to achieve a political gain in *One for the Road* translates well how the Baath Party has used and abused this concept. The father made ultimate sacrifices for the country which Nicolas now represents, but not for the one Gila and Victor are fighting for. Now, Nicholas controls how the memory of the father is used. It is now brought up to shame the daughter and break her down:

Are you prepared to defame, to debase, the memory of your father? Your father fought for this country. I knew him. I revered him. Everyone did. He believed in God. He didn't think, like you shitbags. He lived. He was iron and gold. He would die, he would die, he would die, for his country. For his God. And he did die, he died, he dies, for his God. You turd. To spawn such a daughter. What a fate. Oh poor, perturbed spirit. To be haunted forever by such scum and spittle. How do you dare speak of your father to me? I loved him, as if he were my own father.<sup>234</sup>

It is the state in this case which decides to award the label of patriotism in such scenarios, and such manifestoes cannot be questioned. It is presumed from Nicolas's speech that Gila's father is a patriot and a martyr who 'died' for his country. Therefore, the 'patriotic family chain' is now in danger of being broken through her treason of the state. Gila's treason is twice as serious because of the history of her family on her father's side. In fact, there is less argument on what constitutes martyrdom, but one may contemplate how the 'martyr' card is played in totalitarian regimes. Edward Ziter in his study of the Syrian theatre, while stressing that Syria is one oppressive regime, argues that the martyr's theme in the Syrian theatre is also hijacked by the authorities. He asserts that 'the Syrian regime has systematically invoked ideas of martyrdom to legitimise its rule, and that when Syrian playwrights and activists depict martyrs they support, undermine, or co-opt the imagery of the state'.<sup>235</sup>

The other notable treatment of how oppressors target parents is in *Mountain Language*. There is a reason why the people waiting outside the prison are all women. Pinter chose deliberately to copy the image he had in mind when he met the shaking prisoner in Turkey, which resulted in a trauma to his wife. The mothers and the wives suffer the most, Pinter suggests, and this suffering is a punishment for them for being relatives to the enemies of the state. The

detainee's mothers, wives and daughters are insulted for producing disobedient children, in addition to being the daughters and wives of insurgents:

SERGEANT: Your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are shithouses. They are enemies of the state. They are shithouses.<sup>236</sup>

The guards vent their anger against these women in many ways. The serious and symbolic act of the dog's attack on the weaker mother biting her finger out is no less brutal than the later attempt to stop her from speaking her language. Whenever Elderly Woman tries to speak the mountain language with her son, she is silenced by Guard. The language of the mountain is forbidden because it is the language of the 'enemies of the state'. Therefore, the mother cannot establish a dialogue with her son in that language because it is the language by which the enemies communicate, and any other language than that of the state aspires to a treason. Instead, Guard commands that she 'speaks in the language of the capital' the language of the state that stands for patriotism and allegiance.<sup>237</sup> The mother is silenced, and the catatonic silent state she reaches in the last scene is very expressive. The final scene where Elderly Woman is mute, the trembling son on the floor, represents the destruction of the dissident family under the victory of the state which allowed the language to be spoken, deeming it one of its controlled properties.

Children in the dissident family are also targeted by state oppression. A dictatorial state seeks to maintain its authority and disseminate its ideology against reforming ideas and consequently, as seen before, law enforcers seek to take control and gag the mouths of the dissident family. Raising children in what totalitarian governments probably see as an 'unhealthy' or unpatriotic family is a threat to the future of the state, and consequently, such regimes will seek to control the ideology of the future generation, or even worse, eliminate

them should they pose a serious threat. Nicolas in *One for the Road* exchanges words with Nicky, the couple's son, as he interrogates him:

NICOLAS: You don't like mummy and daddy?

NICKY: Yes I do.<sup>238</sup>

Pinter uses threatening language even when the exchange involves the little child. Nicolas's question is suggestive through using the negative instead of the normal affirmative. It is taken for granted that a child loves their parents, but it is not Nicolas, who wants the child to give up on his parents. The tone of hatred of the child in Nicolas's words intensifies as he declares to the child that the soldiers whom the boy detested, also did not like him in return. Such cross-examination leads Nicolas to the conclusion that the child has indeed embraced his parents' revolutionary ideas, and this makes him a legitimate target. In the final scene, when the defeated Victor wants to know what became of his son, Nicolas gives the ghastly answer: 'Your son? Oh don't worry about him. He was a little' prick'.<sup>239</sup> Grimes notes the choice of the tense by Pinter to suggest the murder of the child, asserting that 'the play uses language to index murder' concerning Nicolas's use of the past verb 'was'.<sup>240</sup>

Children can easily become victims under dictatorships, and the incident dramatised in *One for the Road* happened in a real-life situation. After the spark of the Syrian revolution ignited in Daraa, southern Syria in 2011, thousands went to the streets to demand that Bashar Al-Assad step down. On the April 29<sup>th</sup>, a thirteen-year-old Hamza Al-Khatib was kidnapped by Syrian security forces who were confronting the demonstrators. His corpse was returned to his family with signs of immolation and torture, and a video that leaked to the Internet showed that the boy was also castrated.<sup>241</sup> In protest, several social media pages appeared to make the death and brutalisation of the child as public as possible, and several oppositional works of drama were made to depict the incident as a reminder of the brutality of the Syrian regime against children. Other works also depicted the death of children at the hands of the

corrupt regime there. In the play that will be discussed later, Al-Maghut's *Cheers Homeland*, the hero's new-born girl, named Ahlam (Arabic for 'Dreams') was denied urgent medical care just to die soon afterwards, thus also the 'dreams' of the hero die too.

In *Mountain Language*, a reference to children is also made. This time, during a conversation in which Guard seeks to humiliate Prisoner, he mentions that he has 'a wife and three children', and that 'you're all a pile of shit'.<sup>242</sup> The demeaning remark is composed of two parts, the first one is the more important one and is designed to remind Prisoner that Guard has a superior status over him. When Prisoner replies that he also has 'a wife and three kids', Guard becomes infuriated. He is either agitated because he is worried how three children will follow their father's steps in becoming insurgents, or more likely because prisoner declared himself an equal entity to that of Guard. Shortly afterwards during the Voice Over when Guard cannot hear this dialogue, Elderly Woman mentions to Prisoner that 'the baby is waiting for you'.<sup>243</sup> This telepathic remark through the voice-over between the mother and son could imply the new hope for the family and the new hope for the revolution against tyranny.

The scene that involves the angry Guard is also important. Authority figures deem their victims lesser than them and that is probably why they associate themselves with supreme powers like that of God and divinity that are able to dictate what is right and what is wrong. This notion is also present in the dialogue between Sergeant and Officer as the former states that these women are full of sins, and that Young Woman's behind bounces with sin. These officers decide who committed sin and who did not, where obviously the dissidents are all 'sinners'. Pinter also refers to such ideas in his torturer in *One for the Road*, when Nick claims that he is religious, that God speaks through him, and praises Gila's father for believing in God.

Pinter's refusal to locate the two plays at a certain place and time is justified. He states that even though the plays were written under the inspiration of the events in Turkey, the events of *Mountain Language* in particular, could happen anywhere since many languages were banned throughout history.<sup>244</sup> In the Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2005, he stresses the point that the play despite being short can go on without an end. Pinter was probably lamenting that what he theatricalised in *Mountain Language* is happening and being repeated worldwide in the light of details leaking on Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons. The aggression and oppression the two plays dramatise are omnipresent. The events of this play, arguably a continuation of its predecessor, could happen anywhere and could happen again. They are bleakly ominous but realistic. As the focus and perhaps the inspiration behind the incidents of the plays are families in Turkey, they indicate how family ties and social integrity are endangered by oppressive regimes. The parabolic political plays, as Drew Milne describes *Mountain Language*, also serve as a reminder to audiences that even in the Western world, they and their families are not safe from the aggression of politics and its opportunists.<sup>245</sup> Pinter was indeed concerned about the freedom of expression in the UK as mentioned earlier.<sup>246</sup>

### ***Mountain Language* in Arabic, Two Productions in Israel and the UAE**

The case of oppression found in *Mountain Language* could perhaps be most relevant to the Arab audiences now the Arab Spring is in the spotlight. Officers in authority in the play oppressed a minority and through banning their language they were led to silence. The play's source of inspiration obviously is of less relevance here since Arabic obviously is not banned in the Arab world. The play's significance, as it will be discussed later, stems from its depiction of state oppression against weakened individuals. Nehad Selaiha, the notable Egyptian critic, asserts that *Mountain Language* is the 'most accessible and easier to do than other plays, appealing to 'an Egyptian audience and have immediate relevance' thanks to the

lack of ambiguity in the dialogue and the political situation in Egypt.<sup>247</sup> Arab dictatorships sat for too long giving promises using their own ‘language’ to their peoples. Despite being a majority in Israel, the Arabs have been not represented in Israeli governments and consequently, they have no voice, while those in what Israel call ‘Judea and Samaria’, the West Bank, have been under the Israeli occupation and their voices calling for freedom and declaration of a Palestinian state were silenced.

In addition, the fact that Pinter has left the play open to interpretations, acknowledging the fact it was inspired by the Kurdish crisis in Turkey but not limited to expressing it, helps to adapt the play to express the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In fact, one may argue that Pinter would have been happy with his play depicting the brutalisation of the Palestinians at the hands of Israeli soldiers taking into consideration the attitude he took against Israel. Pinter ‘was a committed activist for the rights of the Palestinian people’ despite his Jewishness.<sup>248</sup> As a member of the Jews for the Justice for Palestinians group, he condemned Israel’s actions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He was also a member of the Independent Jewish Voices group, which presented its report on Palestine to the UN in 2012.<sup>249</sup> Therefore, presenting Pinter to Arab audiences as an exponent of one of the most important causes is crucial, leading to a wider appreciation of his plays, for this will rank him among the friends of the Arabs and of no less importance than their own playwrights.

Several productions of the play could be found in the Middle East particularly among Kurdish theatre groups since the play is popular as it was written after the Kurdish language ban. In Egypt, the play was first staged by Liqaa troupe and directed by Khalid Galal at the Opera House Theatre in 1990.<sup>250</sup> The two productions discussed here will be those in Sharjah, UAE directed by Abeer Jalal (2012) and in Haifa, Israel directed by Bashar Murkus (television play, 2009). The two productions were presented within larger projects to stage short plays. In Sharjah, the play was staged during the Sharjah Festival of Short Plays in 2012. In the case of

the Haifa production, the project involved producing several short plays by Khashabi Ensemble as video plays but not for the stage. In this discussion, the focus will be on how the directors prepared the text for Arab audiences and what elements they added or removed to adapt the play to Arabic theatre.

The newspaper *Emirates Today* interviewed Jalal regarding her vision, directing the play in Sharjah and adapting Pinter's text to Arabic.<sup>251</sup> The article's title translates to 'Anger and Oppression in *Mountain Language*'. The interviewer comments that Jalal has managed to mould the foreign text by Pinter to suit the Arabic community in general and the local one in particular. Moreover, she has managed to imbue the production with her own vision, leaving a significant impression. Her work found the proper environment that suits the nature of the festival and the peculiarity of the shows, yet maintaining the text's originality and the author's general idea.<sup>252</sup> The comment supports the idea that productions of Western plays in Arabic are still in need of the touch of adaptation, thus following the aforementioned tradition of early Arab theatre practitioners who sought to bring these plays closer to the Arabic environment. It is obvious that adaptation is still an essential component in performing a foreign play before an Arab audience. It is useful to remind ourselves of another adaptation of a Pinter's play, which is the 2006 production of *The Dumb Waiter* directed by Zoheir Al-Biqaii. The name Gus was changed to James because it was more appealing to Arab ears, singing and dancing shows were added to the performance, Arab dictators, al-Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein and others, appeared in the play, and lighting was used to help the audience understand the change of moods in the play.<sup>253</sup>

Jalal suggests that her choice of the play came as a result of the nature of Pinter's texts, which are considered to belong to the human heritage, especially now under the current circumstances around us. She claims that people are now only half-alive because of their indifference, and the fact that they are content with it. This indifference resulted in suffering,

oppression, aggression and the brutality of governments. Consequently, revolutions took place to confront the injustice after pain and suffering became too much. Jalal's reason for choosing the play makes it fall within the definition of Wannous's 'theatre of politicisation', discussed later in the chapter. The play expresses, as could be understood from her comment, the need to involve the audience in an action against the oppression imposed on them. Pinter's discontent with the two girls' indifference to what was happening in Turkey could be a proof that the strong and obscene language and representations in *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* are forms of politicisation Wannous would have been happy with. Wannous has been trying through his theatre to involve the Arab audiences in a revolution against Israel and their own governments, while Pinter's affirmation that the plays are meant to be offensive to the audiences could be also understood to form another type of politicisation. Jalal also asserts in the same interview that the play was produced in an atmosphere of Surrealism and blurriness as this atmosphere, in her opinion, is like the one in which authorities dominate the people through oppression and aggression.

The Arab Israeli conflict and the situation of the Arabs in Israel and the Occupied Territories also influenced Khasahbi Ensemble to include *Mountain Language* in the chosen group of plays for television. The ensemble aims to preserve the Arabic identity of Haifa, and their website states that the city is suffering from 'systematised Judaification'. More importantly, they see that 'Arabic is under constant threat because the Arabs have to use Hebrew more frequently in education, life, cultural and entertainment programmes', and that their group regards their work as an opportunity for the new generations to involve and deal with Arabic.<sup>254</sup> The English version of their website states that their 2016 theme was called 'The Identity: Palestinians of 1948', thus stressing how important is maintaining the Arabic identity of Arabs under the Israeli occupation as a message of the group.<sup>255</sup>

During a Skype call I made with the play's director, he stressed several times that the production was customised to be a screenplay, mentioning also some sort of adaptation.<sup>256</sup> The play opens with music that is reminiscent of a circus, the cast, and the setting are minimalistic and only three women and two soldiers are on stage.<sup>257</sup> The soldiers are not wearing their uniforms, and their boots are pink Wellingtons. Murkus said that the aim of this clownish music and making the soldiers dress informally, not in uniforms, was to create an environment that does not suggest a real-life location but a place that is surreal and mysterious, enforcing the more illogical and the absurd aspects of the play. In this regard, Jalal and Murkus agree on the alienation of the place, making it less specific and referential without any hint of the play happening in an Arabic country, for example. However, Murkus believes that the play, 'while seen as an international protest against oppression, it sounds also as if Pinter addresses our cause in Palestine through this text'. Pinter indeed was supportive of the Palestinians as evident in several examples such as his support for the Palestine Solidarity Campaign.<sup>258</sup> He also showed support for the one-woman show *My Name is Rachel Corrie* depicting the murder of Rachel Corrie,<sup>259</sup> an American activist killed by an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza.<sup>260</sup> This has incurred some extremist reactions to the news of Pinter's death by the hard-line Israelis, as an Israeli article entitled 'Pinter, One Less Uncomfortable Jew' suggests.<sup>261</sup>

Murkus also made slight changes to the language used in the play. The play is meant to be as offensive as it can be through its obscene language and imagery. The flagrant bawdy language used was 'too much for a play that would enter every house in Palestine', he maintains. Murkus states that he had to practise some sort of self-censorship in order not to receive much criticism from the populace who will see the play. Despite translating some of the obscene phrases with their Arabic 'pile of shit, her arse wobbles', phrases such as 'can I fuck him' proved a little more challenging, consequently resorting to translating it in its

euphemism 'can I sleep with him'. In addition, the stage direction when Sergeant grabs the Young Woman's bottom was also edited as the actress quickly escapes the situation. Murkus also states the same justification, self-censorship, for this edit.

Despite adhering to much of the original text of the play, the director sees that a re-production of the play is needed, but this time with staging it for theatre. He feels that the production of the play in Arabic in the first place is wrong, and that the soldiers should have spoken in Hebrew and that the forbidden language should be in Arabic. This would, in his opinion, much better serve Pinter's aim from the play in showing how the Arabic identity is oppressed and how the Arab's existence in Israel is under threat. Another reason for 'localising' the play is the treatment of the Palestinian prisoners in Israel and how difficult for their families, their wives, and mothers, to visit them without being harassed or oppressed. The image of Prisoner found in the current production is more derived from the leaked photos of the Guantanamo prisoners, he continues, while the re-production should more concentrate on depicting a Palestinian prisoner. In that future production, Murkus sees that the presence of vulgarity in the play is a must since this is how actually prisoners and their families are treated and spoken to in Israeli prisons and on checkpoints. The originality of the play lies in how ugly it is because it nears their ugly reality in Palestine, he adds.

It is precisely how *Mountain Language* can touch the political realities in the Middle East that signifies the reason behind the interest in staging it. The banned language takes another dimension as it is not the spoken language that is banned in that geographical area. The banned language is any language except that is of the governments, any 'oppositional' language lead its speakers to be oppressed, silenced or eliminated. In Palestine, the focus is more on identity, on how those who speak Arabic in Israel are threatened alongside with their existence and history. Therefore, staging the play will prove problematic in authoritarian countries where governments feel they are targeted with such a play. Even in the UK, staging

the play proved once to be a problem. Michael Billington refers to an incident when a Kurdish theatre group was performing rehearsals of the play in a private facility in London, where actors wearing military suits with plastic guns were seen entering a Kurdish community centre. A witness informed the police, and a major force was dispatched including a helicopter, all this despite informing the police earlier.<sup>262</sup> The mere referral to military personnel in a play will raise an alarm in the Middle East since the governments themselves are the outcome of military coups, silencing those who speak against their oppression.

*Mountain Language* is thus perhaps the most known play by Pinter in the region and the play's popularity indicates that the play has been well received in the region due to the analogies with the political situation there. Where the play has been best welcome is, unsurprisingly, Kurdistan, the northern autonomy of Iraq. The play is discussed in a master's dissertation at Al-Sulaymaniyya University by the Kurdish researcher Bakhtyar Saber Hammeh in 2005.<sup>263</sup> The viva record documents how the researcher has been criticised for the excessive praise of Pinter in the thesis which has marred his objectivity. These feelings which the writer has expressed apparently stem from his appreciation of Pinter because of his attitude and support of the Kurdish cause. The play also appears in a staging in Mosul in Kurdistan, also in 2005, directed by Ali Awad. The play's title was altered into *Snow Language* to avoid stirring of negative emotions.<sup>264</sup> It must be mentioned here that at that time, the American invasion of Iraq had just taken place and the country was in a deep political crisis, and by that time, Kurdistan was not yet acknowledged as autonomous, which explains why those in charge of the performance avoided the presentation of the play in its original title. Still, 'changing the title was not enough and after performing the play, the director was criticized and was about to be liable to questioning because of the play's political indications'.<sup>265</sup> The play's reception in Arabic also includes several amateur productions and many online articles and discussions, which assert its popularity among theatre enthusiasts

and critics. Ali Kamel offered an online translation to Arabic and a short study of the play, also excessively praising in it Pinter and his works.<sup>266</sup> One can conclude from such a reception how significant Pinter proved in the region with this play thanks to the interest in political plays and the unstable political situation in the Middle East.

### **Two Plays from Syria: Mohammad Al-Maghut's *Cheers Homeland* and Saadallah Wannous's *The Rape***

Syrian playwrights have written political plays like their peers in other Arab countries, particularly in the aftermath of the 1967 setback. The focus of these plays was mainly the Arab-Israeli conflict and pan-Arabism, in addition to criticising the Arab governments. Censuring Arab governments is a theme which is present in a significant number of Syrian plays. Political critique, pan-Arabism and Israel, and oppression and tyranny appear in several works by notable playwright Saadallah Wannous, Mohammad Al-Maghut's poetry and plays, Walid Ikhlas, Mamduh Udwan, Ali Uqlah Ursan and many others. Drama, in general, dealt with the politics imposed by the status quo in Syria under the military governments, the defeat of 1967, and the victory of 1973. Al-Maghut is perhaps the most popular of political writers in Syria thanks to his comedic televised plays that provided entertainment through laughter and mild critique of the government. His play *Cheers Homeland* (1978) is about the Syrian everyman and the hero of many of his plays, Ghawar, who suffers along with his family under the oppression and corruption of the government, and because of the burden of the Arab patriotism. Wannous, on the other hand, earned worldwide fame thanks to his nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1997 and perhaps he is the best-known Arab playwright today. He wrote *The Rape* in 1989, a play that deals with the violence and oppression by the Israelis and struggle of a Palestinian family, after almost a decade of hiatus following his suicide attempt as a response to the Egypt-Israel peace agreement in Camp David.

The selected plays deal with the concept of the family under oppression in a manner that is like what the families encounter in Pinter's plays. Political oppression against families in total targets three points: it undermines the families' ethics, creates an ideological division between the couple and between them and their children if possible, and aims at metaphorically placing the children under the government's custody to secure that government's presence. Attempting to put this into effect, the family members are subjugated through verbal and physical violence that seeks to eradicate their dissidence. Women suffer sexual violence whereas men are tortured. The language used against the victims is mostly obscene, demeaning, and authoritative. The plays, also in a similar fashion to that of Pinter, depict targeting children in this circle of violence. Children become a battlefield through which the oppressors are trying to win in order to dominate the future of their state. A child who does not absorb the ideology of the state poses a threat to its existence and future, and consequently, an indoctrination process is needed. In the case of failing to indoctrinate, a child must and can be eliminated or neutralised as happens with Nick and as happened in real life with Hamzeh Al-Khatib as mentioned earlier, and as happens with Ghawar's child. In *Cheers Homeland*, children become synonymous with hope, like the child in *Mountain Language*, and their death equals the loss of it. The motif of children in the play even takes another dimension. Ghawar's loss of his child motivates him to stand up against his oppressors.

Mohammad Al-Maghut (1934-2006) is one of the most influential Syrian playwrights mainly because of his fame as a writer who offers political critique in the form of comedy and entertainment. He is also known for his political and patriotic writings, mainly poetry, and his political plays that almost every Syrian citizen has seen on television. Al-Maghut's political views did not go unnoticed by the autocracies that ruled Syria and consequently, he was persecuted. Al-Maghut was a member of the SSNP (Syrian Socialist National Party) in the

1950's, and because of this, he was imprisoned twice.<sup>267</sup> Also in 1960, Gamal Abdul Nasser, the president of the United Arab Republic (Syria and Egypt between 1958 and 1961), ordered the arrest of Al-Maghut for his views.<sup>268</sup> Edward Ziter argues that the topic of political torture has been transformed in the Syrian theatre into acts of national belonging and that the one who is most successful in doing so is Al-Maghut.<sup>269</sup>

Al-Maghut's theatre offering criticism of Arab governments in general, including the Syrian, represents a type of drama that allowed the audience to 'breathe out the accumulated pressure'. The Arabic noun *tanaffus*, as previously discussed means 'breathing', therefore, it could be inferred that Maghut's theatre allowed a breathing space for the oppressed populace. Dictatorships, political failure and defeat, cronyism and failing economies left a significant pressuring effect on the Arabs. Denying freedom of speech added more restrictions on the audiences and made them feel ostracised in their own communities. Al-Maghut's television plays, particularly *Ghorbeh* (1976) and the play discussed here, *Cheers Homeland*, were seen as examples of freedom of expression during the early days of Hafez Al-Assad. These works received some criticism though, as they were regarded as part of the state agenda to 'placate dissent and divert any voices from the street', and that these plays were 'sanctioned criticism, fixed by the regime to keep criticism away from the streets and mosques'.<sup>270</sup> Moreover, this type of theatre earned some significant opposition. Wannous adopted a different style from Al-Maghut's *tanaffus* theatre, one that is called 'theatre of politicisation', which comprises stimulating and involving the audience as discussed later. Wannous's objections came out during the 1970's, 'warning against the drugging effect of *tanaffus* in the dramatic arts because it invites spectators to deposit their burdens on their chairs before leaving the theatre, and make the intolerable tolerable'.<sup>271</sup> Nevertheless, and as Ziter mentioned, Al-Maghut's theatre should not be underrated since it presents voicing criticism against oppression and corruption in Syria and the Arab world.

*Cheers Homeland* is one of several plays that were never published yet they are well known to the Syrians and Arabs in general.<sup>272</sup> It is about Ghawar, an average lower-class Arab Syrian, facing life problems because of poverty and his outspoken words against oppression. In the play, a radio station, Radio Arab Carlo, (RAC), which is named after the famous Radio Monte Carlo, very popular in Syria, airs a series called *Ahlam*, several songs, and talk shows that put citizens in contact through phone calls with the officials from the government. The series is named after Ghawar's daughter, who is born in the second episode and dies shortly afterwards because of medical negligence. The doctor in the hospital is not interested in the baby patient, but in treating an official who is travelling soon on a 'diplomatic mission' yet he cannot travel as he suffers from sexual impotency, which will jeopardise the mission and will 'shame the homeland'. Al-Maghut here is criticising the corruption of the Arab diplomats, who fall into debauchery abroad. Ghawar, who prides himself as the 'son of a martyr', becomes vexed and starts complaining to other officials in vain. He writes to an international human rights organisation to complain about the death of his daughter. He is arrested, beaten and tortured in a scene which became the most famous from the play.

In that comedic scene which takes place inside one of the security service buildings, Ghawar is reading a newspaper he smuggled in his loose trousers. The interrogator threatens him that he will use violence against him. Ghawar seems careless, reading aloud that there have been 'hundreds of thousands arrested in Nicaragua and Chile', then protesting that his government has imprisoned only him. The interrogator assures him they imprisoned a lot. Ghawar is then tortured by electrocution. Ghawar finds it funny that in a country which lacks power in its villages, electricity reached his bottom (where wires appear to be connected) before it reaches his village. The recorded audience bursts in clapping and laughter to this phrase. He is further tortured, and finally, he is told he will be subjected to a *bastinado*, a torture technique in which the victim is forced to lie on their back and their feet are held higher up and whipped.

He refuses to assume the position, angrily protesting that a citizen is created to 'hold his head high, not his feet'. The scene ends with two interrogators dragging him out.

Ghawar exits from prison broken, returning to his wife who finds him changed as he becomes violent to her, starts drinking, sells her belongings to buy alcohol, and he starts selling his other children as well. The final scene is another famous scene when the inebriated Ghawar receives a phone call from his father, who is a martyr, in heaven. The father wants to make sure his legacy is in safe hands and that his sacrifice did not go in vain. Ghawar lies in response to every question the father asks; he says the Arabs have united and there are no borders left, Palestine is restored, and prisons only incarcerate criminals. The father is made happy by this, except that he wants to be reunited with the family. Ghawar rejects the idea, stating that 'the homeland is better than even heaven'. The father again asks happily 'then you need nothing there?' At this question, Ghawar breaks down, tells his father 'we only need some dignity'. The father hears his son confessing that all he has said is lies, to which the Father responds, 'May God fail you, you have now killed me'. Ghawar, still drunk, in a soliloquy, vows before the audience to speak the truth no matter what, starts a rebellion, and drinks to the health of his homeland for peace. The play ends with a famous patriotic song Ghawar and the cast sing, 'I shall write your name, my homeland, on the never-setting sun'. The song sounds like an irony in the light of what happens in such a homeland, but the song may also serve as a motivational patriotic one, since it is the only homeland the Arabs have, and they must fight to regain its glory and prosperity.

Like *Ghorbeh* and his other plays, Al-Maghut's *Cheers Homeland* introduces 'a direct attack on the political, cultural, and social conditions within the Arab world'.<sup>273</sup> These plays have been exploited by the state in Syria to promote the idea that the country allows some free speech, which is not the case: the censorship has only allowed some work that is critical of the state to come out in a controlled way, provided it does not escalate and turn into

demonstrations in the streets. As evidence of this, the same year in which *Ghorbeh* came out, The Muslim Brotherhood, went on the streets in protest, and the result was a bloody carnage for over five years. Anwar Al-Sadat, the Egyptian president then, criticised Hafez Assad for his brutality, stating that he ‘has signed a mutual defence agreement with the USSR, only to use it against 98% of the Syrians, to save him, his brother (Rifaat), and the Alawites to which he belongs’.<sup>274</sup> After crushing the rebellion, the government adopted the more violent strategy of oppression and coercion against those who speak against it.

The theme to be discussed here is how oppression against a family is a tactic of authoritative governments. In *Cheers Homeland*, the most important aspect is perhaps how children represent a family’s hopes, but for the authorities, they represent the soldiers who will defend their existence. In Syria, children at the age of six enter school, and the same time, they automatically enlist in the first sub-Baathist organisation, The Baath Vanguard (Talaa’eh Al-Baath). As they grow up, automatically as well, they enlist in another organisation called the Revolution’s Youth (Shabibet Al-Thawrah), and as they enter the higher education, they must become members of the Baath Party. The aim of such an organisation is to nurture the government’s ideology at an early age, to maintain the Baathist creed of creating soldiers for defending the regime. It should be noted too, that prior to 2004, the school system for both genders acted as paramilitary one where military education was included in the curricula, and the school uniforms resemble that of soldiers’.

In *Cheers Homeland*, Ghawar’s new-born girl, Ahlam, represents his dreams for the future. However, Ghawar is old school, proud of the sacrifice of his martyr father, an unimportant figure for the government which is shown as he visits the corrupt government hospital to check it is ready to receive his wife. In the first episode of the series, he notes the following:

*'A patient is heard screaming: May God curse you'. Two nurses silence him and take him off-stage.*

GHAWAR: Why are they silencing him?

NURSE: For his well-being. He's just had a surgery.

GHAWAR: But look. They are beating him and gagging him again. Do the Secret Service run this place? (*Audience laughs and claps*).<sup>275</sup>

Ghawar's line signifies how the country is run. Everything must be under the surveillance of the government, no risk can be taken for anything to go unnoticed for fear of an 'anti-government' activity, and that includes schools and even hospitals. The sick baby Ahlam has her turn crossed by a very important official suffering from impotency. The official is more important than the insignificant citizen Ghawar, as the play suggests in one of the scenes where Ghawar calls for a pass to stop the traffic for the ambulance that will carry his wife to hospital:

GHAWAR (*on the phone to a traffic officer*): Can you stop the traffic for the ambulance car, please? What, who am I? Just a citizen, sir. What? To hell with me?

Please, just treat me like Idi Amin for one day.

It is understood from juxtaposing a citizen with the name of a dictator how insignificant the life of a lowly citizen is under oppressive regimes in comparison to state figures. This is what happens also in *Mountain Language*, an incident that infuriated the Guard, as mentioned before. Names help to understand how the play takes course. They are also important in the play itself, as the series is named after Ahlam despite the fact she lives for less than an episode. She represents not only her father's hope but stands for the hope of every parent. Ghawar demonstrates this in a conversation with the chief interrogator in the torture scenes:

CHIEF INTERROGATOR: And she died, so what? Thousands of children die every day in Chile and elsewhere.

GHAWAR: I know, it's written in the paper. And she was *killed*.

CHIEF INTERROGATOR: Died or killed, it does not matter. Is she Joan of Arc?

GHAWAR: We'll never know. She could have become a minister of culture. Is... what's her name...ah... Thatcher better than her? Or even Indira Gandhi?

Ghawar wants to sound sophisticated, his desire to become more educated is suggested when he tells the interrogator how reading newspapers became 'an addiction'. Reading newspapers is a trait that belongs to the intellectuals in the Arab world, and even when he is arrested and taken to prison, he could not resist the temptation of smuggling a newspaper to read during the interrogation scene. His desire for himself to appear sophisticated resonates in how he views the future of his deceased daughter, wanting her to become a minister of culture, powerful and influential like the women he reads about in newspapers. The point suggested here is that authoritative governments fear the intellectuals and free-thinkers, and that is why they have a planned future for children. This point has been shared by Pinter as noted earlier in the sarcasm and demeaning comments of the soldiers against the Young Woman in *Mountain Language* and the suggestion that the dissidents in *One for the Road* have a house full of books.

In the play, Al-Maghut reminds us strongly of how children are raised in authoritarian countries, Syria and the Arab states among them. Contrary to Ghawar's 'dreams', an official speaking to RAC expresses a vision for the country's children:

HOST: What is the secret behind the interest in the future of children, and wanting more children in the homeland?

OFFICIAL: Children are the foundations of the homeland's future. If these children are not happy in their childhood, they won't become soldiers in the future.

The Official's comment made here reiterates what was mentioned earlier about how the government tries to create loyal soldiers in the service of their countries. The military school system in Syria is an indicator of this. The governments that rose to power following colonialism in the Middle East were run by militants: in the case of Syria, Hafez Assad was the Syrian Minister of Defence in the 1967 war, and the seizure of power in 1970 was secured through a military coup as well. Assad made 'ideological' changes to the role of the army in the country he was going to rule, enhancing its role and creating soldiers who believe in the state's ideology, which is the Assad's ideology. The 'ideological army' is a term that has been around after the coups in the region. Patrick Seale writes on how this army was of Assad's making even before becoming a president and what its goals are:

Assad's comrades had entrusted him with the most important security job of the regime. The officers realised that the only way to protect the army from factionalism which had been its bane since independence was to make it a Baath monopoly. This was the prerequisite for establishing durable rule in an inherently unstable country. As Assad saw it, the aim was to create an 'ideological army' in stark contrast with the 'army in politics' of the past. He, therefore, set about building inside the armed services and on the model of the civilian organisation a hierarchal structure or party cells, divisions, sections and branches.<sup>276</sup>

The military institution in democratic countries is not a tool in the hand of the leader(s) to be used against their people, and it does not intervene in the political processes, the elections for example, in these countries. Military coups are examples of how the army as an institution

refuses to accept the result of elections in a certain state and intervenes to impose the militants' will against that of the people. In Egypt and Syria, the two countries in discussion in this study, the armies purport to owe allegiance to the people, but since their governments are the result of coups d'états, their actual mission is to protect the presidents they brought to power. For instance, in Egypt, the current president was the head of the army who led a coup against the previous president. Bashar Al-Assad is both the president of Syria and the 'head of the armed forces', the same title his father held, and in Libya, Colonel Gaddafi also became a president through the power of the army. The ideology of the president and the military institution become one mainly to make sure the army will not turn against the president in the future, and therefore, the army must embrace the supreme leader's ideology. The image of a soldier in such an army that Al-Maghut presents to us is alarming, for this soldier is willing to sacrifice everything, including his family, to protect the state's ideology. An interview with a soldier from Assad's 'ideological army' in the seventies explains this:

INTERVIEWER: Let's say you find out your family is against the regime. You love them of course. But you were ordered to fight them.

What would you do?

SOLDIER: I'd tell them that I must follow orders.

INTERVIEWER: What if they did not respond?

SOLDIER: I can't say no. I must comply with orders. I would tell them, if you don't follow orders, I'll come and do this or that. I'd tell them if you don't comply with the state's orders, you'll all die.<sup>277</sup>

*Cheers Homeland* presents to us an idea of an oppressive regime's plan for children who must be obedient to the state, growing up only in a family that embraces the state's ideology. The image anticipates that one of Nick, Victor and Gila's son created in *One for the Road*, who is found to 'love mummy and daddy' who are dissidents and consequently becomes a target of

Nicolas who insinuates the boy was eliminated in ‘he was a prick’. Ahlam, Ghawar’s daughter dies because she would have become ‘another Thatcher’. Al-Maghut’s use of the British Prime Minister’s name suggests the baby would have grown up to become a leader, a powerful woman, who poses a threat to the system. Ahlam’s father is a patriot yet does not abide by the ‘new’ laws of the state they live in; his child is simply expendable, and her life is unimportant to the officials who run the country.

Ghawar’s torture scene during the interrogation is arguably the most well-known scene in all Al-Maghut’s dramas. This could be attributed to the popularity of the televised plays, which could be found on DVDs almost anywhere in Syria. The other reason for this popularity is because of the comedy element. It could be argued that the torture scene is presented as a comedy because the play will be shown in a family-friendly environment. The light atmosphere in which the play, in general, is presented had both a positive and a negative side. The sarcastic attitude that Ghawar takes to his inquisitors constitutes a new approach by Al-Maghut in contrast to earlier plays. Ziter argues that Al-Maghut adopts a new strategy in creating Ghawar, the wily Harlequin and the buffoonish character who triumphs over the security agents.<sup>278</sup> Ghawar, at his electrocution, is smiling:

CHIEF INTERROGATOR (*surprised*): Is the power down??

GHAWAR: No no. Look at my ‘lightened’ face!

CHIEF INTERROGATOR: Yet you laugh instead of screaming?!

GHAWAR: How can’t I?! Electricity has reached my bottom before it reaches our village!

Such jokes pile up as a critique of the government’s mismanagement, and the torture scene which is presumed to be a bleak one, functions now as a witty entertainment for the audience, creating a diversion from the pains resulting from state oppression. The security apparatuses have kidnapped and tortured thousands, and surely none of them took their torture lightly as

Ghawar did. Mas'ud Hamdan argues that the actor who played Ghawar, Dorayd Lahham who also co-authored the play, was responsible for adding the comic element to the play. The issue that the play addresses is how bleak torture is and how presenting this topic comically is in effect a moral victory over the torturers. He argues that the usage of jokes in this way in the face of serious torture by a clownish character has two sources. The first derives from Freud, who argues that 'by making our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him'.<sup>279</sup> The second source for such dramatisation is Nietzsche, who talks about the play of the fool and how he thereby floats superior over a morality that is official and false'.<sup>280</sup> The scene itself falls into the category 'controlled criticism' which censorship allowed, as it shifts the focus from physical abuse to merely criticising the government's performance. It is not strange, therefore, that this kind of *tanaffus* which offers comedy to the masses has been criticised by Wannous as quoted earlier. Torture, the intolerable, is made tolerable through this light-weight representation to shift the focus from the act of torture itself to the more important idea, what torture does to the tortured.

Despite the lack of seriousness that the scene suggests, the effect of torture on Ghawar is obvious. Once the influence of comedy subsides, one can note how the tortured hero changes after the interrogation and abuse. Ghawar starts to drink and becomes vulnerable. He enters the torture scene with a defiant voice, daring to challenge the authority of the oppressors, and even before he is dragged out, he screams that 'a citizen must hold their heads high, not their legs'. However, what has happened offstage has had a clear effect on Ghawar who succumbs to drinking afterwards. As he is poor, he starts selling his wife's belongings to buy alcohol. The seventh episode of the radio series depicts the demise of Ghawar's dreams. Ghawar becomes a wandering salesman selling his children, '20 UK pounds a kilo'. He is selling them hoping they see a better future, 'eating cakes, riding bicycles'. However, he later tells his

interlocutor, a potential buyer, that he must not believe this, and that he is 'selling them because he is afraid one day they die of coercion, of compulsion'. It could be that he is afraid they meet the same fate as his. Since the play is in progression, it is unknown whether he is referring to the state's coercion, or whether he fears for them from himself, now he has changed.

This change is evident in Ghawar's treatment of his wife after torture as he turns violent. He brings to her shredded newspapers on a plate for dinner and she turns angry. Since the only newspapers available are those issued by the government, it could be inferred from this comedy scene that he wants to feed his family what the government says through their newspapers, which obviously will not satisfy the family's hunger. When Radiyye, the wife, objects, he beats her. Realising his mistake, he remorsefully addresses his crying wife:

RADIYYE: You never beat me before.

GHAWAR: Forgive me, Radiyye, it was not me who beat you. It is poverty. Poverty in the homeland is an exile. They beat me, I beat you, you beat the children, and our children beat other children and we all end up in battle. You must understand me, I need to breathe out the coercion building inside or else I will explode. Who am I supposed to beat? Our neighbour's wife? So you accuse me of having an affair with her?

The scene is reminiscent of how Stanley in *The Birthday Party* responded to his 'metaphorical rape' by trying to rape Lulu. The two scenes suggest the pressure inside the oppressed cannot stay within, and it will eventually result in oppressing others in a sequence of violence or that it will result in an 'explosion' as Ghawar notes in the previous lines. A counter-argument is that it is not the government's brutality that changed Ghawar, but poverty, as he said. The government's corruption is the reason why Ghawar is impoverished, which brings back the government as the main perpetrator in that family's torment. The result

is the same in that torture has successfully affected the family, creating a division between the couple, threatening their marriage. The episode ends with another fight between the couple, now with the neighbours intervening to stop the fight, which started because the wife insulted 'Nicaragua', while Ghawar demands respect for the country. Ghawar now searches for a distraction which makes him forget about the problems he is facing yet cannot resolve. The absurd bond that arises between him and the news in papers, symbolised in Nicaragua, is insulted by the wife and a trivial quarrel occurs between the two. Later, Ghawar searches for more distractions, and he becomes an alcoholic.

*Cheers Homeland* is not only about Ghawar's dilemma; the play clearly demonstrates that the hero's family is under the fallout of political oppression. As stated earlier, the infant Ahlam who lives only for short time after birth, has her name is mentioned several times in the play in the pivotal series named after her, signifying the importance of her death, but not her life. The play is a political censure on many levels, but the comedy element detracts from its seriousness and diverts from the ongoing practices of the government, resulting in a division in Ghawar's family. Like what the families in Pinter's two plays encounter, the family in *Cheers Homeland* is another family under political oppression whose goal is to disintegrate the dissident family and takes away their 'Ahlam'; their dreams.

### **Saadallah Wannous's *The Rape* (A Play in Three Acts)<sup>281</sup>**

Wannous's attempt at theatre sprang from his awareness of the decadent political situation of the Arabs. For Wannous, there is 'no apolitical literature' and as a consequence, every single play he wrote is a political one that deals with the Arabs' political dilemmas, mainly the Israeli-Arab conflict and its effects on the Arab societies.<sup>282</sup> He states in an interview that even when a literature does not tackle politics, it serves a political target, which is to create a

diversion from the current challenges facing the masses.<sup>283</sup> He is also notable for another type of theatre, one that is termed 'theatre of politicisation', whose aim

was to encourage people to engage freely in a discussion of important social and political matters and to learn how to differentiate lies they had been fed by the government and media from the self-evident truth, which was in Wannous's eyes, the very first step to change the grim reality.<sup>284</sup>

This type of theatre includes the plays that followed the 1967 defeat to Israel, mainly his *Soirée for the 5th of June* in which actors sit among the audiences, a gesture that suggests the audience must be active players, not mere spectators. As Wannous was practising his politicisation in the seventies at the same time Al-Maghut was notable for his *tanaffus* theatre, Wannous criticised Al-Maghut's attempt as mentioned before. Despite seeing that all theatre is political, he emphasises that 'theatre of politicisation' is specific about pressuring the audiences to contemplate their reality profoundly and to face the possibility of changing this reality in the same way. He also explains that in this theatre, it is not enough to satisfy the audience with a witty joke about an official or his ilk; but rather, this dramatisation must be presented within the historical context that made such an official reach where they are, doing what they do. This theatre brings before the audience the serious question of political fate or the status quo that is imposed on them by the political powers controlling them and becomes an attempt to awake the self-awareness in this audiences to ask questions and to find answers.<sup>285</sup>

Wannous was very sensitive regarding the history of the Arabs, particularly the defeats against Israel. This sensitivity culminated in his suicide attempt in 1978 after the signing the Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel and Anwar Al-Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. After the attempt, Wannous took a long break from writing until the time he wrote

*The Rape*. The play ended the sequence of plays before it which belonged to ‘theatre of politicisation’, and it was adapted from Antonio Buero Vallejo’s *La Doble Historia del Doctor Yalmy* (*The Double Life of Dr Valmy*). However, the difference between this play’s aim and the goals of the plays before it is subtle. In this play, it has been suggested that Wannous does not wish to inspire revolutionary acts but only to ‘shake his audience out of their complacency and induce them to re-evaluate their circumstances in the light of a historical understanding that does not seek to relegate the individual to insignificance, or to dehumanise the enemy’.<sup>286</sup>

Wannous mentioned that his initial plan was to prepare the play itself as it is for theatre, but he soon changed his mind to write a new play on the Arabs’ main cause, which is the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>287</sup> For the first time and in a move that incurred a lot of criticism, Wannous depicted a sympathetic Israeli character, Dr. Menuhin, who is critical of the brutality of Israel and its occupation of Palestine. Wannous’s intentions were straightforward in the play. In a final dialogue, Menuhin demands on stage he speaks with Wannous, who responds to Menuhin’s request. A notable statement is made when the playwright concedes that the Arab states are no better than Israel:

WANNOUS: Listen, I have been, for a long time, very reluctant to write this work. The reason for this hesitation came from the bitter feeling that this play would look hypocritical. Yes sir, honesty should be mutual. I must admit that prisons on our side are no more humane, no less brutal than on yours...Our case is a double case, Zionism has now infiltrated the current Arab system. They are those who surrendered to Meir’s Israel and those who are getting ready to surrender, those who oppress their people and tread on them, who steal these countries’ wealth and waste it. They are the extension of Israel in the Arab body.<sup>288</sup>

Wannous's play suggests that the beastly Israeli figures could also have their counterparts in the Arab world after dictatorships wore out the Arab countries with their oppression and corruption. He has already stated in the play's prelude that this play is an open text, modifiable and open to additions propelled by historical changes.<sup>289</sup> Therefore, in the light of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Uprising as historical changes, there is a possibility of replacing the Zionist Israeli characters with personnel representing oppressive Arab governments, since Wannous already licensed and endorsed such a representation.

It is possible that there was more to the ban placed on the play in Syria than the official story. Wannous in an interview mentions that the Syrian authorities have banned the play.<sup>290</sup> The Syrian government had only recently finished crushing the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in 1982. The death toll was high and human rights violations against civilians in the infamous Palmyra Prison were outrageous.<sup>291</sup> Pro-Baath playwrights supported such censorship from the viewpoint of the regime. Ali Al Enezi notes that 'Ali Uqlah Ersan is a notable case in point. Ersan, a Baath party loyalist, argued that theatre must not be free because it causes disorder and threatens the state's security and higher interest'.<sup>292</sup>

As far as the text is concerned, the play is a staunch attack on Zionism. Despite the inclusion of a sympathetic character who rejects the Israeli aggression against the Palestinians, the play's other Israeli characters were draconian in their torment, filled with hatred, racism and bigotry against the Palestinian family in the play, and eventually, violence hits back at them as well. These characters are also named after real Israelis who served as members of the Israeli cabinet. In the play, the head of the Shin Bet unit is Meir, named after the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir. Wannous even goes to make Meir, the character, speak Golda Meir's words in her statement to *The Sunday Times* regarding the Palestinians, stating 'that they didn't exist'.<sup>293</sup> The other characters are named Moshe (after Moshe Dayan, the Defence

Minister), David (after David Ben-Gurion, the founder of Israel and its first prime minister) and Gideon (probably after Gideon Hausner, an Israeli jurist and politician).

The play has two narratives: one of a Palestinian family, in which a woman named Dalal, her Husband Ismael, and older woman Al-Faria are the main characters. The couple have just got married, but the Shin Bet arrested Ismael before the narrative begins. Several Israeli officers arrive at the family's house to arrest Dalal, despite being innocent. The charge against Ismael is resisting the Israeli authorities. Ismael refuses to sign papers in Hebrew presented to him by the officers. It appears later that Dalal's arrest is merely a pressure tactic to make Ismael confess and sign. Dalal is raped in front of Ismael and he is castrated in the same scene. Dalal is released, broken and desperate and rejects Al-Faria's encouragements. Ismael's dies under torture and Dalal retrieves her strength, participating in the resistance against the Israeli's.

In the Israeli narrative, the characters are Meir, who is the head of the Shin Bet unit and two officers Gideon, and Isaac Benhas. The female characters are Rachel, who is Isaac's wife and Isaac's Mother. Dr. Menuhin is a psychiatrist who treated Rachel in the past and treats Isaac for impotence that he suffered from because of the psychological problem resulting from raping Dalal. Gideon, who also participates in rape 'parties', later rapes Rachel two times, and during the rape scene, he tells her what he, her husband and the others did to Dalal and other Arab women how they mutilated her by cutting one of her nipples. Rachel confronts the antagonistic Mother and Isaac about the deeds of Meir's unit. At some stage, it is revealed that Meir became the Mother's lover long ago and enjoys full support from her. She accuses Rachel of adultery, rejecting that the incident is rape. Isaac becomes furious, goes to confront Meir and Gideon in the office, but Meir had already received the blessings of the Mother to eliminate him, and as Isaac arrives, an argument breaks; Meir shoots Isaac dead and breaks the news to the Mother. She shows no remorse, believing in what Meir says about him; 'a rotten fruit' that he needed to throw away.

The two narratives, which are complex and overlapping, are believed to be the influence of Brecht.<sup>294</sup> They also have two more influential yet silent characters. These characters are the two infants on two sides, Waad, Al-Faira's nephew and Isaac and Rachel's son. Since the discussion here is regarding two families, the two boys represent, as in Al-Maghut's play, the dreams of the two families. The Palestinian oppressed family in the play, however, cannot have their children because of the Zionist/ Israeli destruction of their marriage.

Speaking of Brecht, it should be noted that his influence on Wannous and the Arab political theatre in general has been significant. Several writers confirm that Brecht's influence on Arab theatre changed the way this theatre was written, directed and presented, especially in the light of the political circumstances; the independence of Arab countries, the establishment of Israel, and the defeat of 1967. The influence was studied in detail by an Algerian scholar called Al-Rashid Boush'er in 1983 in a PhD thesis at Damascus University entitled 'The Influence of Brecht on the Theatre of the Orient.'<sup>295</sup> There are few other journal articles which are entitled roughly the same and all explain how the modern Arabic theatre and its critics are largely influenced Brecht in its detachment from the classical Aristotelian theatre and in shaping the political theatre of the sixties and seventies. For example, plays influenced by Brecht's epic theatre do not follow the Aristotelian divisions of acts and scenes. One of these plays is Sabur's *Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, which is divided not into acts but into two parts: The Word and Death.<sup>296</sup> The writers also stress the point that the Arab playwrights admired Brecht not only because of his influential works but also because of his Marxist and socialist attitudes in his writings. One must not forget that Western politics in the region, mainly colonialism and the support of Israel, created a tendency among the literary elite to side with socialism and communism like their governments. Thus, the motivation to seek influence from a playwright who endorses socialism is reasonably justified.

In addition, the freedom of the so-called epic theatre has offered an inspiration to the production of plays. Previously, I have mentioned that experimentalists wanted to renew Arab theatre during the period that followed the independence from colonialism. The Brechtian theatre has given Arab theatre practitioners more freedom in their experimentalism and adaptation of Western schools of philosophy to the Arab culture. Ismail Bin Asfia in an article on Brecht's influence on shaping the modern Arab theatre suggests that the fall of the fourth wall and the use of the narrator and jesters has made communication with the audiences much easier than it was in the classic Aristotelian approach. He also adds that theatre in general contributed to making the individuals aware of their social and political surrounding and motivating them towards taking an attitude from what they see on stage, leaving the theatre to practise their role in creating social and political change.<sup>297</sup> The last point is crucial to understanding how Wannous's 'theatre of politicisation' works, since he is considered among those who were heavily influenced by Brecht to the extent that he was once accused of plagiarising a play, *The King is the King* (1977) from Brecht's *Man Equals Man* (1926). Wannous refuted this allegation in an essay he wrote, and in his thesis, Boush'er supports Wannous's innocence in his analysis of the two plays. The play adapts a story found in *The Arabian Nights* and presents it within a Brechtian frame. Tami Dgheileb notes that the play benefits from a 'Brechtian' narrator whose role is to detach the audience emotionally through telling them that the play's action takes place a time in an ancient past. Dgheileb adds that another Brechtian element appears in the play, that is the use of signs 'which serve as a summary to keep the audience from guessing and speculations'.<sup>298</sup> In his plays then, Wannous joins tradition along with his influences to present his political theatre to his audience, a theatre that breaks the fourth wall, a theatre aims at engaging the audience in a political reform they should establish.

So engaging the audiences in a form of politicisation is what Wannous's *The Rape* is about, and for this purpose, he adapted a foreign play to draw attention to a local political concern. One should bear in mind that the target of oppressing the dissident family is to neutralise any kind of resistance they have in ideology or in action. In the three plays discussed earlier, there are certain mechanisms to target these families since they form a cell that aims at destabilising the oppressor's present and future existence. *The Rape* is a play that bears some similarity to those of Pinter, in the use of this mechanism: verbal violence, obscene language and torture against the oppressed. Wannous even takes torture and violence one-step further than Pinter does as he willing to show some torture on stage. Isaac brings Ismael to Meir's office to make him sign his confessions with his 'healthy right hand', as the other is totally de-nailed and burnt. Meir tortures the damaged left hand until Ismael starts to groan in pain. Ismael, however, resists though and refuses to sign. At his refusal, his wife is brought in for a 'family party' made by the officers:

*(David and Moshe drag Ismael. Gideon grabs Dalal's bottom and pushes her. All head into an inner room).*

GIDEON: Come now, you voluptuous. *(She spits on him)* Ah...that's how I like them; wild. I want my bride, my friends. I am hard like the Mount Gilead.

ISMAEL: Dogs...dogs.

*(The word echoes in different rhythms, till it sounds like a rattle, they disappear into the room)*

MEIR: You'll see how he will confess. Nothing shakes the pride of a man as much as his manhood. And these animals lay their dignity in their women's vaginas.<sup>299</sup>

The rape of Arab women by Israeli militants is known through stories that Wannous must have heard about. Many incidents are told about the rape of Arab women by the Israeli soldiers during the wars fought between Arab states and Israel. There are also allegations on how the rape of 'non-Jewish' women by the soldiers is condoned by extremist Zionists even during the present time, an issue that created a controversy, embarrassing Israel and led to a public interrogation to alleviate criticism. This recent incident involved an extremist Chief Rabbi Colonel Eyal Karim from IDF, the Israeli Defence Army, who made statements in 2006 commending rape against non-Jewish women.<sup>300</sup>

Whether in 'theatre of politicisation' or in this play, Wannous seeks to involve the audience in his dramas. Any man will find Meir's last remark insulting, and the effects and shock are extreme for a conservative and sensitive Arab audience. Wannous could arguably have shared Pinter's view on how to dramatise oppression to the audience, as the latter stressed in his BBC interview mentioned before, that *Mountain Language* is meant to be offensive through obscene language and gestures. In *The Rape*, physical violence also affects Ismael after his wife is raped before him, the act which constitutes psychological torture for him. The apparent aim of this violence is to physically eliminate his manhood after the psychological part is done through the rape process. As Isaac and the doctor continue their conversation, Menuhin insists on knowing what happened later:

MENUHIN: Have you participated in the rape?

ISAAC: No.

MENUHIN: Why?

ISAAC: Those Arab women, who knows. I was afraid I contract some infection.

MENUHIN: What did you do then?

ISAAC: (*reluctantly*) We had to break his testicles completely. I put my foot between his thighs, and I started to press in a way Papa taught us.<sup>301</sup>

Gideon was frenzied.<sup>302</sup>

The metaphorical suggestion of the emasculation is clear; the process of making a eunuch of Ismael had to be done to affirm the officer's dominance over his body in a similar manner to what happened to his wife. Moreover, removing Ismael's manhood will practically mean the marriage bond between a 'man' and a 'woman' is now broken. The issue is metaphorical since a man without genitalia is generally seen not only as sexually impotent but also inferior to other men in terms of strength and determination. Both points, one can argue, were the goals of the Israeli officers. Dalal, on the other hand, recovers later after her rape and the death of her husband and participates in resistance against the Israeli army. Her rape, though physically violent and emotionally catastrophic, has cost her no actual physical loss as she is still identifies as a woman. Her husband, however, has lost his manhood as a result of the attack, and thus his predicament is doubled and it is impossible to recover from. In addition, there is no social stigma that associates womanhood with potency and strength, and consequently, she has grounds to recover, unlike her man. She retains her strong-will despite the atrocity she suffered and makes rape work in her favour as a motivation for retaliation. However, the marriage bond is beyond saving obviously. The fact that Ismael dies under torture later ends the relationship. It is unclear through the play whether Ismael was meant to be killed in the first place or if he died accidentally. Whatever the method that was used though, the outcome is the same; the Palestinian family is in ruins.

Another aspect that is related to breaking the dissident family also has to do with Ismael's castration. This act could be an attempt to stop the production of children who will, like their father, fight against and risk the existence of Israel. Earlier in the play, Al-Faria refers to this point. The Palestinian baby is told that 'a rabbit has a house called a burrow, and the bird has

a house, it is called a nest, but I, a Palestinian, have none because the Palestinians' enemies live in their houses. Who is the Palestinians' enemy?'<sup>303</sup> The baby will obviously not understand what is said, but these lines are directed at the audience as if in a soliloquy. Such resistance rhetoric is taught to Palestinian children in real life though, one that created a generation of what is known as 'Atfal Al-Hijara' (Children of the Stones), who fight the Israeli bullets with catapults, a generation who is prepared to continue the legacy of resistance for a free Palestinian state.<sup>304</sup> The oppressor's main move aims at eliminating present time resistance in the form of breaking the family that teaches such rhetoric, but also by using pre-emptive procedures to stop bringing up fighters-to-be as Isaac says 'the Arabs whom we crushed in wars, turned into terrorists and saboteurs. Our history taught us that the best method to fight evil is to eradicate it before it spreads'.<sup>305</sup> Again, seeing the Palestinian children as enemies of the state of Israel is not the production of Wannous's imagination, though. Ayelet Shaked, the current Israeli Cabinet Minister of Justice, has once called the Palestinian children 'little snakes', and that the mothers of Palestinian martyrs 'should follow their sons to hell'.<sup>306</sup> Regarding the Israelis targeting entire Palestinian families, it is also worth mentioning that the government has a collective punishment policy. The law in Israel punishes the family of a Palestinian 'terrorist' by demolishing their home as one of their counter-terrorism policies; arguably another method to physically disintegrate the resisting family that lives in this house.<sup>307</sup>

Oppression does not involve individual characters in the four plays tackled in this chapter but targets the social institution around them. Pinter, Al-Maghut and Wannous created a concept; a whole family that suffers under oppression. These playwrights were aware of the significance of targeting the family as a social unit. A family represents a smaller version of the society which these governments strive to dominate, and no government can control this society without political mottos, a political propaganda that creates an ideology of the state

which governs the climate in which this society lives. This family poses a threat because of its ability to work as a small insurgent cell that counters the state's propaganda by uniting the husband and wife's dissident thinking, and worse for the state, creating a new generation that does not believe in the state's 'patriotic' thoughts. In the plays, the tactics used to break the families were similar; controlling their past and legacy by creating a government's version of martyrdom and sacrifice in *One for the Road* to creating their own version of history in *The Rape* by denying the existence of Palestinians. Sexual violence and torture aim at breaking an individual's spirit and targeting the marriage bond are all used in the four plays. The theme that the plays stress most strongly is how oppression targets the future of insurgency represented by the families' children. The three steps combined controlled the past, present, and future of the family, preventing it and consequently a whole society from revolting against their governments.

## Conclusion

The study has examined a theoretical framework of how Pinter's political plays compare to the tradition of political theatre in the Middle East, namely in Egypt and Syria. Politics has been the driving force which led the modern Arab theatre following the independence of Arab countries. I have discussed the political upheavals that stormed the region since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and their impact on the Arab world. These political events include the world wars, colonialism and coups, and also dictatorships which are still exist today. Playwrights in the two main countries which had both political and dramatic significance, Egypt and Syria, have addressed similar issues to those that Pinter has addressed. These countries were the major states in the Middle East, and the birth of modern Arabic drama happened to be there. Egyptian and Syrian dramatists, like Pinter, were concerned about the decadence of the political systems in their countries, the rise and prosperity of Israel on the account of their countries, and the abuse of human rights and the iron fists with which their governments held their peoples.

Information on how many of Pinter's plays have been staged in Egypt and Syria is scarce, and studies and published material on how, when and where the plays have been staged and received was even harder to find, which is one of the limitations of this study. Moreover, even though Pinter was fairly well known and translated in Egypt particularly since the early 1960s, no major playwrights acknowledge or mention his name as an influence or a source of inspiration in comparison to that of other notable playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco or Brecht. A further study in this regard is needed to examine the reason for the lack of acknowledged influence of one of the most influential dramatists in England on Arab

playwrights. Pinter's influence reached as far as Ariel Dorfman in Chile but not to the Arabic world, despite the finding that many of Pinter's political plays can be seen as analogous with the oppression and brutalisation taking place there. Finally, a study on the problems of translating Pinter's plays to Arabic is also required because his use of language is one of the most important characteristics of his writing. In rendering the plays in Arabic, one should be aware how translations will affect their productions, bearing in mind that many culture specific-elements are present and these need to be translated with an effort to preserve the originality of Pinter while adapting the text and performance to suit the target language and audience.

The contributions that Pinter has made to modern drama, his style, and his influence have earned him worldwide admiration. While he had difficult start in his early days, his style, mixing menace with the absurd, language and dialogue with pauses and silences have earned him success in the theatre's world. It was his struggle for a world free of oppression that earned him more accolades, but also enemies. For example, there were those who were offended that a Jew criticised Israel for its aggression against the Palestinians, but clearly Pinter, the human being and the citizen, felt he had a duty in this regard and others. In his Nobel Prize speech, he declared that his duty as a citizen was to ask 'what is true, and what is false'.<sup>308</sup> Through these words, he proved he valued the human above all other regards, political or religious, and he vehemently reprimanded the Western governments for their international law violations and their indifference to human rights and life. Pinter saw that the world is wearied by the misuse of power and that it suffers the plight of control-hungry countries whose sole aim is simply to control and dominate at any cost.

The influence of both politics and the absurd, the verbal and the physical violence through trials and interrogations was discussed in the first chapter. Sabur's *Night Traveller* is a good example of the plays that tackled such themes since it bears many Western influences from

Ionesco and the absurd to Kafka and Nietzsche. Similarly, Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is also considered to be an absurdist play. The comparison focussed on how the two playwrights have implemented the absurd and what techniques they utilised to portray oppression and coercion. In the second chapter, the plays from Syria and those of Pinter were discussed in the light of the collective coercion against not only an individual, but against families as a social group, asserting the desire of the authoritative powers to dominate and divide the societies through targeting a dissident family that opposed and challenges the authorities. *Cheers Homeland* and *The Rape* from Syria were meant to be represented as plays that inspire and encourage resistance. On the other hand, one may argue that one way of reading Pinter's *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* and is through their socio-political context, serving to shock the audiences, as Charles Grimes has perceived, to realise there is violence committed in their names whose aim is to gag, silence, and divide oppositional individuals through imprisonment and torture.

The comparison between Sabur and Pinter has revealed that these playwrights have much in common. In fact, both were heavily influenced by the elements of the absurd. However, there were some differences through which the two playwrights brought their victims to silence. These differences were mostly culture-specific. Sabur was more willing to show violence on stage than Pinter was, and in a play that involves only two characters, he made the aggressor identifiable from the very beginning. Silencing the opposition is often associated with the political assassination in the Arab world, thus Sabur offered a scene where a tyrant enslaves and executes his victim. While it is true that Stanley hits Goldberg and tries to suffocate Meg, Sabur showed the audience the execution of Passenger on stage, a bloody scene in which a dagger was used. In his first and previous play, *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, Sabur also tackled a political element that is innate to the Islamic culture, which is the trial and death of a mystic character named Al-Hallaj. Al-Hallaj is understood from a historical context in which he

stood against religion and the Caliph himself, stating 'I am the truth', a sentence which led him to be executed on a crucifix. Sabur also depicted the death of Al-Hallaj on stage in that play. He was not afraid to depict gory scenes for the issues he is trying to depict; political violence is part and parcel of the Arab and Islamic political history. In reading *The Birthday Party* as a political play, Pinter followed a different approach to silencing the victim. Stanley's silence was brought upon him because he does not know the basics of the political organisation he allegedly betrayed. 'He doesn't know', McCann tells Goldberg referring to Stanley, he does not know the language and the trivial philosophical details that govern the world of that organisation. Stanley needs to learn to speak a certain language and adhere to laws he does not know nor understand, or else he would not be allowed to exist, and he will be silenced by those powers that control the world he lives in.

The plays discussed in the second chapter also showed similar approach to portraying oppression and violence between Pinter and the Syrian playwrights. Pinter, while in Turkey, saw how a family union was ruined by torture. He saw a woman who went silent because of the torture of her husband, and this image in Pinter's head arguably became the Elderly Woman in *Mountain Language* who became mute after meeting her son in prison. Pinter's activism and the Turkey experience taught him that oppression does not only affect certain individuals but their families as well. Similarly, Al-Maghut portrayed an insignificant family's suffering at the hands of an Arab government. The poverty and oppression imposed on that family and the loss of their hopes and 'dreams', which is the name of their daughter, led to misery and a chasm in that family, which consequently led to serious effects on their other children and on the relationship between the couple. Wannous in his turn shared another aspect of how Pinter viewed and presented oppression to audiences. Sexual violence in the two dramatists' plays is a significant factor in breaking down the families involved and served as to shock the audiences as well. The plays interpreted this way become probably a

reminder that no one is immune to this violence. The difference in depictions is arguably the same one found in the Sabur/Pinter comparison. Al-Maghut and Wannous showed violence on stage. Al-Maghut portrayed a comedic scene of torture to pass his vision as to how to undermine the torturer's character by belittling their ideologies before the patriotic victim who is seen as an everyman, one who belongs to the general populace and bears the homeland in his heart and mind. On the other hand, Wannous's portrayal was grim, narrating stories on how victims were brutalised, raped and castrated, in addition to the scene where a man's burned hand is tortured.

Rarely has Pinter been compared to playwrights who shaped the form of modern theatre in the Arab world. The theoretical principles, which all these playwrights embarked from, are similar since they all share the same concerns about political issues of oppression and torture, power abuse and even execution in case of the Arabic playwrights, and their fallouts on their people and humanity. However, there is always the issue of what the audiences prefer to see in drama in the case of the Arab world, and that brings the issue of the cultural differences in case Pinter's political plays are to be staged before an Arab audience. For example, it is music and dancing that Al-Maghut brought to his plays to entertain the audience, in addition to other elements such as jokes and laughter, while Sabur presented his plays in the Arab's most preferred genre, that is poetry.

The difficulties that may face staging Pinter in the Arab world are numerous. The audience's appreciation of straightforwardness in presenting the play is one of these difficulties. Sabur's play ended up by declaring who the real murderer is, while the Syrian plays progressed towards a logical end and with sufficient information in the background on the characters and the political events. Pinter, on the other hand, does not provide the audiences with answers nor information, and his plays depend on 'the deliberate omission of an explanation or a motivation for the action'.<sup>309</sup> That is why Al-Biqaii, in his version of *The Dumb Waiter*,

opted for bringing on stage characters who played the role of famous Arab leaders, thus stressing the political aspect of the play and making it easier for the audiences to make analogies. This adaptation reveals that, even when a Pinter play is not overtly political, the audiences' preferences dictate focussing on the political aspects to ensure the success of the play. Another reason why Pinter's shorter political plays would succeed in the Arab world is the absence of the culture difference in terms of political violence because the Arab world is full of it. Also, what Selaiha calls the 'cryptic, hedging quality of the dialogue, its teasing rambling and faltering, stops and pauses' are less apparent in these plays than Pinter's full-length plays, an issue which would help obtain a positive feedback from the audiences.<sup>310</sup>

One of the aims of this study was to determine how Pinter is different in this regard because his plays come from an alien culture. Western plays have been popular in the Arab world as literature but more as adaptations, taking into consideration that drama, in general, is relatively a new genre in the Arab world in comparison to poetry, whose tradition dates to the pre-Islamic era. Egypt and Syria were the first countries in the Arab world which saw any form of drama coming to their stages during the mid-1800s. Pinter's plays have been in fact adapted on two occasions discussed here. It was mentioned in the study how Al-Biqaii changed some aspects from *The Dumb Waiter* and added lighting and music to bring the play closer to the understanding of the audience. In comparison, Murcus's production of *Mountain Language* was conservative in many regards because of the fear of negative reception to the plays obscenity, an issue which contradicts Pinter's aim of the play which he said is meant to be offensive. According to Bashar Murcus, the director of the Haifa production of *Mountain Language*, a re-production of the play should state directly that the plays incidents take place in Palestine benefitting from the fact that the play's location is left anonymous and that the occurrences in the play may happen anywhere in the world. In that production, more violence and obscenity should take place to reflect the situation In Palestine. He does not want the

audience to draw their own conclusions, Pinter's play must express the Arab's situation under oppression, maintains Murcus.

But if Pinter's plays might require adaptation to suit the Arabic audience, the foreignness of culture could work in their favour as well. The Arab playwrights were concerned with torture and oppression and focused more on what it does to individuals because it was happening around them. Pinter's concern in his political plays was also about the freedom of speech, one may conclude. From the very first of 'political metaphors' he wrote in the late fifties, there was a focus on silencing those who object to a status quo, be it Stanley in *The Birthday Party* or Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, who would face Ben's gun in the last scene because he dared to question the authorities that employed him. This becomes more prominent in *Mountain Language*. Pinter sees that the play could also be about England after the 1988 restrictions on the media.<sup>311</sup> While the Arabic plays dramatise incidents inspired by the locality of oppression and coercion and present them in the context of pan-Arabism, Pinter used the example of Turkey to portray an issue, which according to his conviction, is also present in England and may be present as well in any other country in the world. With such an approach, he made his plays universal; where his plays could represent aggression practised anywhere globally, be it in Turkey, England or Arab countries. The Arabic representations are perceived to be localised and limited to incidents taking place in Arabic states. Consequently, adapting a Pinter political play to Arabic would be easier than presenting a political Arabic play from Syria or Egypt to a foreign audience without appendices explaining the source of inspiration behind it or the specifics determining its action.

As a final note, adaptation obviously is not limited to Pinter. Wannous's adaptation of Vallejo's play to represent the Arab-Israeli conflict says much about the locality of these plays in comparison to the anonymity of location Pinter would resort to in his plays. Moreover, there is the element of focussing on how authorities confiscate language and

impose silence, forcibly gagging the mouths of insurgents which are among the most important aspects of Pinter's political plays. This significance of this kind of portrayal to the Arab audiences is of great importance taking into consideration the non-existence of freedom of speech, and consequently, the lack of it as a theme in plays in their own countries. Pinter's political work would add then to the history of Arab dramatic tradition if his plays are presented with a focus on freedom of speech as a part of 'theatre for human rights'. Pinter writes about what torture does, not what it is, he notes the importance of freedom of speech, not only the brutalisation.

## Notes

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- <sup>10</sup> "An Interview with Khashabi Ensemble's Director Bahsar Murucs." 23 June 2017.
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- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp.42-46
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- <sup>38</sup> Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford: Oxford. University Press, 1988, p.54
- <sup>39</sup> Malkin, op. cit., p. 53
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- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.44
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