**תקציר**

**ייחודיותו של תיאטרון האבסורד הערבי וטכניקות התהוותו בשנות הששים של**

**המאה העשרים: סוריה, מצרים ועיראק כמקרי מבחן**

This study explores the conditions, mechanisms, and methodologies that led to the emergence of the Theater of the Absurd in Arabic theater in the 1960s, specifically in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. It begins with the premise that theater is a social phenomenon that cannot be isolated from the social space occupied by audiences, critics, theorists, and playwrights or from the reception of the Theater of the Absurd in the Arabic context. Two factors inform this definition of theater. The first is Homi Bhabha’s concept of the Cultural Hybrid, which in the light of his postcolonial theory is the outcome of multiculturalism and the migration of ideas from one geography to another. This migration leads to what Bhabha calls a “Third Space” where the the concept is reassembled and assumes new qualities different from the one it has in its original environment and from the one it takes in the new one where it is transplanted.

The second factor is the agents’ role in controlling the field and their conflict over the legitimacy of the new theatrical phenomenon. The place of this new phenomenon in theory and practice is strategized in the split between the old agents who reject it and the new agents who support it. The fate of the phenomenon depends on the new agents’ expertise and research skills.

Based on these two factors, this study poses one key question: What are the specific characteristics of the Theater of the Absurd in the work of its Arab pioneers? To what extent did they succeed through “marketing” and canonization strategies in creating a specific genre of the Absurd over the decade of the 1960s?

Due to its importance in postcolonial discourse, this study deploys Hybridity as its main theoretical framework. Hybridity grants a certain level of cultural advantage because of its in-betweenness, i.e. the way it shows how two cultures, one dominant and one dominated, interact. Regardless of its type, such interaction allows the migration of different concepts, theories, or canons into new contexts where they undergo major transformations. The arrival of the hybrid usually elicits different reactions: it may be either fully rejected or embraced; it may be partially or mostly integrated; but it is always modified because of its displacement. The fact that the Third Space is an in-between space with its own qualities undermines any culture’s claim to essentialism. Thus, postcolonial discourse dismisses the common notion of innate cultural originality and views cultural identity as contentious and constantly constructed.

If we examine the emergence of the Arabic Theater of the Absurd in the 1960s, we find that its pioneers tried through experimenting with and “fertilizing” the Arab theatrical soil to build an Arab theatrical identity or a new dramatic genre with modernist underpinnings. On the one hand, this was part of an effort to fill the theatrical void. On the other hand, instead of merely copying from the West through translation and Arabization, they hoped to create an Arab theatrical tradition as an expression of their resistance to Western cultural hegemony.

This study sheds light on the unique definition of the Theater of the Absurd in the work of the major Arab playwrights regarded here as pioneers. It evaluates their efforts to transplant this Western genre into Arab theatrical soil. It also examines their shared as well as distinctive characteristics. The significance of this Theater is emphasized by the theoretical and critical debates over the concepts of rooting traditional heritage and transplanting. This study, thus, examines the features this Theater acquired in the process of rooting an Arab cultural heritage, the fact that gave it a hybrid form with its own theoretical and practical implications.

In addition, this study focuses on the challenges of establishing a theoretical and critical discourse needed to legitimize the new dramatic text and its theatrical form. The playwrights of the 1960s had to theorize as well as generate a new trend in theater. They had to resolve multiple conflicts: first, there was the conflict with the guardians of the old critical field over “exporting” a new form of theater from the West at a time of great social and political upheaval. Second, there was an internal conflict over the theoretical and practical value of this “new” form. The third conflict took place among the theorists over the terminology used in this field. As a result, the playwrights discussed in this study had different definitions of the Absurd in theater. These playwrights are Tawfiq el-Hakim, Salah Abdel Sabour, Saadallah Wannous, Walid Ikhlassi, and Fouad el-Tikerli.

To provide a comprehensive analysis, this study consists of an introduction, a forward, three main chapters, and a conclusion.

Chapter One discusses the historical aspects of “regionalizing” the Absurd as it migrated from its geographic home in Europe to other locations, such as the United States and the Middle East. There were several obstacles in the way of this migration, including the role played by intellectuals in preparing the soil for transplanting this new idea. This study analyzes the problematics of this migration to the Arab world in the work of playwrights who either lived in the West or had strong affiliations to Western culture, which led to the hybridity referred to in post-colonial discourse.

Chapter One also studies the political climate that began to question the notion of Arab national identity in the 1950s and to search for distinctive literary ways to combat Western hegemony. As it coincided with modernism in the late 50s and early 60s, the Theater of the Absurd called for investigating the relationship between society and cultural capital as well as between national identity and the rest of the world. This was why Salah Abdel Sabour, Saadallah Wannous, Walid Ikhlassi, and Fouad el-Tikerli called for founding an Arab Theater. In this theater, both form and content complemented the artistic vision, which created a Third Space.

Chapter Two addresses the sociological aspects of “marketing” the Theater of the Absurd and legitimizing its presence in the Arab world. Mediation is a stage any new literary form has to undergo before canonization. The critical discourse, discussed above, invented by the playwrights (who were both recognized experts in the field as well as innovators) established their role as agents or mediators. The discussion of the “field” in this chapter derives from Pierre Bourdieu’s work on cultural, social, and symbolic capital. The possession of such capital gave social agents the authority to reject or embrace the Theater of the Absurd vis-à-vis its capacity to disrupt the contemporary theatrical production. Tawfiq el-Hakim made major contributions to theorizing the Absurd in the context of the conflict he faced as an innovator within the literary establishment.

In this chapter, I also discuss the role of the creative writer as a cultural and social agent, the impact of social structures over subjective interpretations of theatrical production, and the effect of symbolic power and cultural capital on theoretical discourse. I trace these ideas in the following texts: Tawfiq el-Hakim’s Introduction to *The Tree Climber*; Salah Abdel Sabour’s epilogue to *Nocturnal Traveler*; Saadallah Wannous’s *Manifesto for a New Arab Theater*; Walid Ikhlassi’s *The Theatrical Text between Arabization and Experimentation*; and Fouad el-Tikerli’s introductions to *The Rock* and *Floating*.

Afterwards, I discuss how drama critics intervened in the dramatists’ artistic vision. To demonstrate this point, I use examples from American theater. I discuss how drama critic Brooks Atkinson influenced Arthur Miller’s work and how Harold Hobson influenced Harold Pinter’s work. I also discuss the case of Edward Albee and John Guare. I similarly analyze the role drama critics played in either distorting or canonizing the Theater of the Absurd in the Arab context. I analyze the impact of the following drama critics on Arab writers: Lewis Awad and Muhammad Mandour on Tawfiq el-Hakim; Nancy Salamah and Naeem Attiya on Salah Abdel Sabour; Muhammed Azzam and Hassan Attiya on Saadallah Wannous; Ryad Ismat and Ali el-Raee on Walid Ikhlassi; and Diya Khodyr on Fouad el-Tikerli.

The third and last chapter provides close readings of selected plays and identifies their specific patterns of hybridity within the Arabic Theater of the Absurd. It discusses the dramatic structure of each play and explains its unique representation of the Absurd in one of the following ways: Theater of the Absurd and realism; Theater of the Absurd between symbolism and philosophy; Theater of the Absurd and experimentalism; Theater of the Absurd using Western modes to depict reality; and Theater of the Absurd applying purely Western standards.

Given those complex dimensions, analyzing Theater of the Absurd as a trend transplanted into Arabic theater with its own theory and practice provides insight into the morphology and the content of theatrical discourse. The playwrights influenced this trend by adding realistic features and by developing literary styles and techniques unique to each playwright’s talent and to his vision of the Theater of the Absurd.