

The Death/Life Antithesis In Fahad Alharthi's The Book Of Margins: An Existentialistic Approach

Sarah K. Aldossary, Wafaa A. Mostafa Hussein and Muneerah Badr Almahasheer

Abstract

*During the last few decades, Saudi Arabia has experienced tremendous political, economic, and social transformations that have profoundly impacted every facet of life in the Kingdom. The profound metamorphic developments have conspicuously inspired Saudi playwrights to investigate their consequences within the realm of theatre. As Saudi Arabia strives to occupy a prominent global position in the artistic and theatrical domain, insightful academic studies and critical investigations of Saudi drama, particularly in English, have become indispensable. Hence, the current study aims to contribute to the academic research on Saudi theatre by presenting a critical evaluation of Saudi drama and bringing forth the Saudi playwright Fahad Alharthi's distinctive interpretation of the interconnectedness between the death/life antithesis and the absurdity of human existence. The study traces the impact of Existentialism as the essential theoretical foundation of the Theatre of the Absurd. It investigates the philosophical framework to explore the dominant factors that contributed to the emergence of Absurd drama and shed light on the significant characteristics of this particular theatrical genre. Additionally, the study scrutinizes how Alharthi adeptly demonstrated the concepts of Existentialism and proficiently utilized the technical devices of the Absurd Theatre despite his adherence to the cultural context of the conservative Saudi society. The paper relates the topic of Absurdism to the current realities of diverse individuals. It explores how Fahad Alharthi has investigated the obsession with the inevitability of death and rebelled against the absurdity of human existence by demonstrating several philosophical questions from diverse perspectives. The research aspires to divulge the playwright's philosophical perspective and unique style in representing the interconnectedness between the concept of death and the absurdity of human existence as illustrated in his play *The Book of Margins* (2006). The study adopts an interdisciplinary analytical approach where philosophy and drama are dovetailed and merged in order to expand the scope of the analysis.*

Key Words: Absurd Theatre; Alharthi; Death/Life Antithesis; Existentialism and Saudi Theatre.

Introduction

I. Theoretical Framework:

Theatre mirrors the cultural context and the spirit of the age in a given society during a particular historical milieu. It has a transformational power to inspire, enlighten, educate, and entertain people. Over the years, the art of theatre has gone through various stages of developing into many new forms, and as time progressed, it continued to diversify. Theatre

encompasses a spectrum of quintessential historical, ethical, psychological, social, and philosophical values. It provides a window into the experiences of others and enhances a broader appreciation of the human condition in an increasingly problematical and convoluted world.

I. 1. Existentialism

Despite its emergence during the nineteenth century, it was only "[in] the mid of the twentieth century, [that] Existentialism was a predominant doctrine that significantly enriched and influenced the literary scene in Europe during the Post-War area" (Hussein 2021, p.1) and drastically manifested in different disciplines, such as psychology and theology. Many prominent Existentialist philosophers have devoted their writings to explore the fundamental role and meaning of human existence, actions, emotions, freedom, and responsibility. More Roasaheb argues that "Existentialism, in fact, begins as a voice raised in protest against the absurdity of pure thought, a logic which is not the logic of thinking but the immanent movement of Being" (2016, p.13). Thus, it is correlated with man's inner conflict and persistent pursuit to discover the meaning of life through experience. Nevertheless, Existentialism has constantly been a controversial issue that provoked contradictory points of view; while Paul Kurtz believes that Existentialism presents an accurate depiction of human existence in modern times, other intellectuals have regarded it as a philosophy of irrationalism and despair (1961, p.471).

There are two categories of Existentialist thinkers: the religiously oriented Existentialists, influenced by the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, the earliest Existentialist philosopher, and the atheistic Existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who goes by Nietzsche's notion that "God is dead." Despite their diverse orientations, both categories of Existentialist thinkers commonly agree that each individual is responsible for creating meaning and purpose in his life. Kierkegaard believes that meaning lies in faith; a strong relationship with God protects the individual from the frightening concept of self (Boyd, 2010). Therefore, he defends Christianity from reason by claiming that 'subjectivity is truth.' His claim of linking subjectivity with truth was a starting point for many contemporary Existentialists (Kurtz, 1961, p.477). The twentieth-century Existential philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, is one of the most influential French thinkers. He is aware of "the growing sense of isolation, alienation, despair, and estrangement that predominates the increasingly collective modern world" (Hussein 9), which "tends to destroy the individual's selfhood" (Corrigan xvi). Sartre argues that 'existence precedes essence.' He believes that everything in the universe is meaningless; it is only meaningful in our consciousness (Cagri, 2012, p.51). The dilemma of existence is justified in Sartre's notable work *Being and Nothingness* (1943), where he argues that humans are aware of their freedom to create meaning in their lives and the sense of responsibility that comes with it. However, they tend to hide or deny the truth (2003, p.28). Thus, most human beings are left with this feeling of anguish due to their knowledge of their freedom.

Sartre introduces this denial as the concept of "bad faith." Bad faith is "the attempt to deny the basic structure of human beings, that the way an individual sees the world is determined by that individual's character, which in turn can be changed by that individual" (Cagri, 2012, p. 51). Sartre argues that human beings limit themselves by being fixed and unchangeable. However, by doing so, they are restricting their freedom by not exploring and finding other possibilities in life. In other words, living in bad faith can mislead the human being of his freedom and compel him to reject his responsibilities. Accordingly, human beings should embrace their freedom and their capacity to choose.

Although Sartre's philosophy provided a way of dealing with the absurd, in his notable essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", Albert Camus raised one of the essential Existentialistic questions of the twentieth century: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide" (1991, p.3). Of all the thinkers involved in Existentialism, Albert Camus

dedicated his work to the concept of suicide in a way that reached not only philosophers but also ordinary people. In his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus argues that life is meaningless and absurd, but having no purpose in life does not entail that there is no value in living. According to Camus, the absurd occurs when man realizes that the world is not rational: "At this point of his effort, man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (1991, p.10). Camus argues that there is a constant conflict between what man desires in life, such as reason, meaning, or order, and what life offers. Accordingly, when life does not align with man's expectations, despair, anxiety, and depression may arise.

Camus associated the condition of being stuck in a vicious circle of repetitive daily acts with the Greek myth of Sisyphus. According to the myth, Sisyphus was punished by the gods for eternity to roll an immense boulder up the mountain, only to roll down every time it is close to the top. This futile cycle points out the absurdity of human existence. Camus called human beings' yearning for unity and rationale for existing "Nostalgia" (1991, p.6). On the other hand, their awareness of being stuck in a cycle of meaningless life can lead to desperation and, subsequently, suicide. However, Camus claimed that such an explanation of human existence will always be beyond their comprehension (1991, p.9), hence, they should revolt by accepting the absurdity of life and live as though it has meaningful purpose. Camus illustrated human strength and resilience despite absurdity by presenting Sisyphus as an absurd hero.

I. 2. The Emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd

After the two devastating World Wars, people's view of life became blurry. The atrocious wars led to the dissimulation of society, shook people's religious faith, and resulted in a radical change in people's perception of their lives and the world around them. Hence, it became challenging for traditional forms of artistic expression to survive in a society that puts everything into question and rejects coherence (Koulandrou, 2019, p. 65). According to Balogun, people lost faith in themselves and their living conditions became even worse following the economic depression at that time (1984, p.42). Thus, the prevailing mood of the forties and onwards was characterized by pessimism, alienation, isolation, despair, and fragmentation. These dominating feelings of anxiety and umbrage led men of letters, particularly dramatists, to experiment with new forms of drama to convey the tragic conditions of the modern world and portray the trauma and absurdity of life as part of the daily experience of modern man. Accordingly, post-war dramatists endeavored to break away from the Aristotelian dramatic theory by adopting a new revolutionary stance towards dramaturgy capable of effectively expressing the strains of that time. One such response to the overwhelming contemporary experience is a dramatic tendency called by Martin Esslin 'The Theatre of the Absurd.'

The Theatre of the Absurd is a dramatic genre that emerged after the Second World War. Playwrights of this theatrical genre are preoccupied with the fundamental experience of the consciousness of human existence. As Martin Esslin points out, the Theatre of the Absurd reflects the 20th-century world that seems challenged and devoid of meaning. It aims to dramatize the struggle of human beings to exist in conditions that seem painfully futile. The Theatre of Absurd has its roots in the Existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. An aesthetic approach to Existentialist philosophy characterizes the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd, which amalgamated the artistry and philosophy of Sartre and Camus more than Sartre's and Camus's theatre, where philosophy was only being explored (Esslin, 1961, p. 20). Esslin asserts, "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence" (1961, p.20).

The Absurd theatre opened new horizons for modern drama. It is characterized by a distinct form that pushed theatre to the extreme allowing various playwrights to unleash their creativity and convey the human condition as they perceive it. Several playwrights have shared some dramatic techniques and displayed similar themes to illustrate the absurdity of human existence in the aftermath of World War II. Esslin argues that each writer was "...an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world" (1961, p.18). Although the Theatre of the Absurd originated in Paris, France, it became popularly known during the 1960s and 1970s in other countries worldwide (Zhu, 2013, p. 1462). Prominent playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd include Arthur Admov, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee. These playwrights portrayed the "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (Esslin,1961, p. 19). They strived to show their characters as "bewildered beings in an incomprehensible universe" (Holman, 1970, p.4). The pioneer playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd revolted against realism in drama because "They did not want to show life as it really was, but rather, the inner-life of man—what was going inside his head" (Vora 51).

According to Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd succeeded in being "the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our time's contribution" (18). Esslin argues that people started to substitute religious faith with faith in progress, nationalism, and totalitarian fallacies; however, all these things were "shattered by the war" (19). Consequently, people started to lose hope and purpose. Esslin turns to Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* to reflect the human condition at that time as he quotes from the passage: "... in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger... he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity" (19).

In a word, in order to illustrate the absurd conditions of human existence, the Theatre of the Absurd came to be in opposition to conventional drama. It is characterized by grotesque features and themes reflecting man's predicament in modern society. The Theatre of the Absurd embodies the dehumanizing circumstances of the modernist world and manifests the profound, haunting feelings of frustration, despair, futility, alienation, and isolation. The inability to cope with these dehumanizing conditions results in a deep feeling of the absurdity of human existence. Absurd Plays showcase the ludicrousness of human existence and the predicaments of living in a meaningless universe devoid of truth or inherent purpose.

II-Methodology:

The current study investigates the concept of absurdity and the death/life antithesis that as represented in Fahad Alharthi's *The Book of Margins*. The research method is analytical-qualitative, where the play is examined from an Existentialist critical approach.

III. Discussion

III. 1. Stages of Development in Saudi Theatre

Despite its early existence since the beginning of the 20th century, the theatre remained neglected by Saudi society and official authorities for many decades. The practice of theatre in Saudi Arabia was regarded as a type of entertainment that did not align with the conservative values and religious beliefs of Saudi society. Saudi playwrights found it challenging to thrive and lead a creative literary field due to the audience's lack of support and the government's limited funding for theatre groups and productions. However, These hindering conditions did not stop the Saudi playwrights from achieving different accomplishments and winning prizes in theatre festivals usually held in Arab capitals. In recent years, there has been a significant transformation in how theatre is perceived in Saudi Arabia. A renewed interest in Saudi theatre

has finally bloomed, with the government taking steps to support and promote this art. With the recognition of the importance of art in fostering cultural and social development, Saudi Arabia has proposed different initiatives that support its new vision. Establishing the Saudi General Entertainment Authority in 2016 is one of the key initiatives that has allocated more funding and resources for theatre groups and productions. It has led to the emergence of new Saudi playwrights eager to push boundaries and explore new forms of artistic and theatrical expression.

Throughout the 1990s and beyond, Saudi playwrights began experimenting with new theatrical techniques in order to develop the Saudi theatre and create their own cultural identity. Since its establishment, Saudi theatre practiced four kinds of theatrical genres; each one addresses its own audience and communicates its distinctive message. The oldest form of Saudi theatre is school theatre, where plays are performed within the confines of the school and are always concerned with morality and ethics. The social Saudi theatre portrays a realistic image of life in the Arabic vernacular to discuss social problems in black humor. Saudi playwrights also contribute to another form of theatre, the commercial theatre, which seeks to entertain the audience by staging comedies without promoting social change or adding value. However, the Saudi playwrights' desire to introduce a new theatrical genre that could satisfy their creative needs led to the emergence of Experimental Theatre, which has a sophisticated audience. Thus, in Saudi Arabia, this type of theatre developed in the universities and some private theatrical groups and was seen as a step toward the success of Saudi theatre (Abdullah, 2014, p.10). It presents its plays in the standard Arabic language to discuss the complexities of modern life in a mythical or surrealistic setting (Madkhali, 2007, p.38).

Experimental theatre in Saudi Arabia aims to enhance the skills of Saudi playwrights to find new theatre forms and performances that best describe their cultural characteristics and highlight their national identity. Natheer Al-Azamah, an Arab critic who witnessed the inception of experimental theatre in Saudi Arabia since the 1980s, argues that "the Experimental theatre stems from the playwrights' need to search for a new creative identity which the Arab theatre has been longing for" (Al-Azamah, 1996: p.69). Naif Khalaf sees the Saudi Experimental Theatre as "not a goal or an end in itself, but rather attempts to transcend the traditional theatrical form and dive into the unknown in search for a form of expression and communication with the recipient, and it is in a constant pursuit of artistic truth" (qtd. in Alhayak, 2005). The playwright Fahad Riddah Alharthi defines it as a "state of continuous research in theatrical presentation techniques, and the attempt to uncover useful shortcuts in the case of this research" (qt. in Alhayak, 2005). In this way, some Saudi playwrights have experimented with the text and attempted to express it differently; some had experimented with the movement of the actors or the technical format, such as directing lighting images and sound effects. However, Milha Abdullah believes that the Experimental theatre should be based on a scientific and methodological foundation as she adds, "The theater did not earn its vitality and development except by breaking the rules and rebelling against the restrictions, but it is not broken except by those who know it" (Abdullah, 2014, p.23).

III. 2. The Emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd in Saudi Arabia

The Theatre of the Absurd is one of the various forms in which Saudi playwrights have experimented to unleash their creativity and expose their distinctive intellectual attributes. It is one of the most widespread avant-garde dramatic genres worldwide as it creates a unique bond with the audience, expands their perception of life, and encompasses artistic and ideological values. The Theatre of the Absurd has influenced Arab playwrights and motivated them to practice current or modern theatrical trends by translating French and English plays (Al-Rubaiee, 2021, p.1951). Major intellectual and dramatic constructive transformations influenced Arab playwrights during the 1960s and urged them to write in a different style and explore different themes. Twfiq Al-Hakeem is one of the most significant Arab playwrights

who contributed to the Theatre of the Absurd with his play *The Tree Climber* (1962). The Syrian playwright Saad Allah Wanos was one of its practitioners. Naif Alotaibi believes that the Saudi theatre was restricted for several years to the social and traditional plays due to the absence of cultural contact, which prevented it from benefiting from the development of theatre in other nations (Alotaibi, 2013, p.247). However, with the development of Saudi theatre, many playwrights started to try different theatrical tendencies and benefitted from other Arab playwrights.

The Theatre of the Absurd has occupied a controversial position in Saudi Arabia due to its affinity with Existentialist philosophy. Philosophy has been a target of institutional criticism in Saudi Arabia for many decades. The deficiency of philosophy is often scrutinized and debated when investigating issues related to religious faith (Al-Shaqiran, 2019). According to Rita Faraj, teaching philosophy as a discipline was forbidden at schools, assuming that philosophy represents a threat to Islam and faith. Besides, the political elites feared philosophy's capacity to enhance critical thinking and liberate the submissive mentality (Faraj, 2018). However, philosophical books are available in every public library, as one may find the books of Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bacon, and Descartes everywhere in the Kingdom. Philosophy is studied at university language departments, not as an independent academic discipline, but as the theoretical and intellectual framework for literature and criticism. Saudi Arabia is making fundamental changes in school curriculums that can foster critical thinking. In 2019, teaching philosophy was officially approved in every school as part of the 2030 vision. Philosophy is now an essential field in education that enables individuals to comprehend diverse intellectual topics and cultures. Hence, adopting the Existentialist philosophy as an intellectual rationale in the theatre of the Absurd is currently evident in several Saudi plays. The Theatre of the Absurd has offered Saudi playwrights an opportunity to investigate human existence and scrutinize modern man's anxieties utilizing innovative theatrical techniques that would allow them to evade official censorship and give them the freedom to discuss several issues and share their fear and anxiety as approaches to reality.

The Theatre of the Absurd in Saudi Arabia shares many characteristics with the Western Absurd theatre. The play's plot is circular; there is an absence of narrative continuity or rigidity of logic; nothing is achieved as the beginning and the end are the same. The characters seem to be lost and are portrayed as isolated and alienated. There is no realistic setting in the traditional sense nor the actual existence of time. The language is full of clichés and repetitive utterances and seems to have lost its essential function as a means of communication. Moreover, the characters' attempts to find a meaning and purpose for their existence and control their fate are futile. Feelings of despair, emptiness, helplessness, anxiety, bewilderment, and obsession with death are often portrayed as the fate of humankind.

Even though they share the fundamental features of Western Absurd Theatre, Saudi playwrights presented it with a distinctive Arab essence that distinguished it from the Western style. The Theatre of the Absurd in the Western world emerged as a reaction against the Second World War. In Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, it stemmed from the Saudi playwright's interest in trying diverse and innovative theatrical forms and dramatic techniques. In the Western world, the Theatre of the Absurd often challenges the complacent certainties of religious or political conformity. In Saudi theatre, it promotes the Islamic religion as a response to the absurdity of life. While the Western Absurd theatre portrays the existentialist crisis, the Saudi one represents a response to the rapid social and political changes in Saudi Arabia, such as modernization and religious conservatism. In brief, the Saudi Absurd Theatre borrowed the form and the manner of the Theatre of the Absurd without violating its Arab and Islamic heritage.

IV. Fahad Alharthi's *The Book of Margins*

Fahad Raddah Alharthi is one of the most philosophical playwrights in Saudi Arabia who strives to revolutionize Saudi Theatre. He was born in Makkah Al-Mukarammah in 1962 and has been one of the founding members of the Culture and Arts Society in Taif since 1981. His plays won numerous awards across the Arab world. Between 1999 and 2020, Alharthi gained popularity and was honored in Tunis, Cairo, and Kuwait. Alharthi is known for his innovative and radical plays. He challenges his audience with philosophical and critical topics using various theatrical techniques from different dramatic schools, such as Absurd Theatre, Epic Theatre and Experimental Theatre. His play, *The Book of Margins* (2006), won three awards for its text, stage directing, and distinguished acting performance at the National Festival for Heritage and Culture in Morocco. The play was also nominated to participate in the International Theatre Festival in Spain 2007.

IV . 1. The Absurdity of Human Existence in The Book of Margins

The Book of Margins (2006) is a one-act play pivoting around six characters –Actor 1, Actor 2, Actor 3, Actor 4, Actor 5, and Actor 6 – who moved to the margin of a page hoping to discover themselves there. However, the page becomes overcrowded with words, forming either meaningful or meaningless sentences. A red line separates the page from the margin on the left side of the page. The margin remains empty and vacant until the six characters decide to move to it. Hoping to find a purpose and meaning in life, the margin, instead, becomes a hostile environment for the six characters. It is filled with boredom and nothingness, which clash with their expectation and lead them to question their existence. The play opens with existential angst, predicament, and dread. From the beginning of the play, the audience is prepared to witness man's alienation, loneliness, despair, anguish, and helplessness through Actor 1's monologue:

Actor 1: The place looks dreary, pale, and lifeless, but it seems spacious and suitable. I hope I haven't cast myself into a place too spacious for me to control. [He begins to unpack his tools.] When I left my former place, my dreams left me too, and the times had room for everything. [He gets busy preparing his tent.] Talking was strange to me. I quickly left. I had long been waiting for this. You know what waiting does to a man; it leaves him so dark he is almost black... things here wither and die. But I have to live with my new situation. (Alharthi, 13).

The playwright chose the margin as the setting of the play to showcase the characters' isolation and marginalization in modern society. The margin is known to be a place for people who do not belong anywhere, do not fit into a single group of people, and live in between worlds (Retting, 2017). Generally, being on the margin is considered a deviation from the norm. The margin signifies a place where people cannot draw on various societal power resources; accordingly, they become excluded or marginalized (Nejat and Yaghoobi, 2014, p.568). To be on the margin means to be unrecognized or of minor importance. It is a place where people lose their identity and become alienated. Alharthi tries to distinguish between people who found meaning in their lives, the page, and people who are still stuck trying to find purpose, the margin. Thus, the margin can be seen as a place for lost souls futilely striving to discover the meaning of life and explore the relevance of existence. Alharthi portrays his characters as alienated to highlight the isolation of people from their surroundings and their lack of communication. In this play, Alharthi equates the world with the page and equated its people with the margin. According to Sartre, man had abandoned himself to create his life and to appreciate his choices:

I am abandoned in the world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water,

but rather, in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from the responsibility for an instant."

(Existentialism and Human Emotions, 1957, p. 57).

In this respect, Alharthi's characters are doomed to suffer from discontinuity and alienation from themselves and others. However, they never experience security and peace of mind in their alienation. When Actor 1 moved to the margin, no one was beside him as he asserts, "Here I came alone – as I have always been" (14). Coming alone to the margin enhances his loneliness and alienation on the page. His escape cultivates feelings of worthlessness, feelings that leave him to wonder if he is a human being. The sense of anxiety increases with the unexpected arrival or intrusion of the other characters, Actor 4, Actor 5, and Actor 6. Actor 3 expresses his dissatisfaction saying: "I was very happy when the place was empty, and here it's turning like any other noisy place" (Alharthi 19). Actor 3 worries that the margin will be densely populated, impersonal, and confusing, like the page. His concern reflects a world becoming increasingly mechanized and dehumanized, intensifying his alienation.

The characters are tormented by excruciating feelings of loneliness that separate them from the external world and alienate them from their inner selves. This alienation compels them to question the value of their existence and wonder if they are humans. Dehumanization begins with stripping the characters of their names; removing this essential human element transforms them into hollow objects. Actor 1 suggests:

Actor 1: I'm morphing into a desk, chair, window, and tent into a long vacuum.

My feelings are frozen, but my passions are still.

Actor 6: A bit of wind will turn your silence into motion.

Actor 4: Let him be. I might benefit from his morphing into a lifeless object and sell him (24).

The characters moved to the margin to stumble on the meaning of their existence and attain their humanity. However, these desires are echoed in a universe that remains indifferent to man's suffering. Life becomes a heavy burden, "consuming in its pains and overwhelming in its futility that the desire to return to nothingness before life looms as a hunting specter" (Sobosan, 1976, p. 181). Nothingness becomes an inevitable condition for Actor 1. Due to the overwhelming feeling of emptiness and hopelessness, he compares himself to an inanimate object, such as a desk, a chair, a window, a tent, and a long vacuum. Actor 6 offered an optimistic view by suggesting that the wind would make him alive. Alharthi uses the weather as a symbol to set the mood of his characters. In general, the wind is an invisible brutal power of nature. In this context, the wind symbolizes a change that the characters long for. The characters expect some change to take place and help them escape their situation. Instead of showing sympathy and concern for his friend's helplessness, Actor 4 is willing to take advantage of his morphing and sells him as if he were an object. This exploitation and lack of human empathy reflect modern man's situation, which seems saturated with void and despair.

Alharthi's characters are deeply affected by the capitalist mindset in which the human spirit is disintegrated, and everything seems to have lost its essence (Al-Bogumi, 2013, p.841). This bleak spirit dates back to The Saudi Stock Market Crash in 2006, which left people devastated and hopeless. On February 25, 2006, the Kingdom experienced one of the highest economic crises that resulted from the crash of the Saudi Stock Market. Bader Alkhalidi said the Saudi Stock Market "continued to fall until it reached 7,933.29 points at the end of 2006, losing 52.53% compared to the previous year" (2015, p.139). The 2006 crash had a negative psychological and social impact on Saudi society. It has left people ailing due to stress, which resulted from losing their possessions. Many citizens started begging, and bankrupted retail traders committed suicide (Lerner et al., 2017, p.7). The Stock market crash left a deep emotional scar that destroyed people and left them in a constant state of anxiety and uncertainty

about the future. Alharthi foresaw the socio-economic and psychological impacts of the 2006 Saudi Stock Market Crash and the resulting capitalist mindset that lead to the collapse of individuals and disintegration of society. In the play, the characters lose everything in the margin.; they are willing to sell "Broken hearts," "Words," "Tears," "Worries," and "Conscience" (23) because this is all they have. The human identity has become fractured; people have lost their sense of integrity, and all that is left is exhaustion and deterioration. Their refusal to buy each other's pains stresses that it is a matter of survival, which they struggle to maintain.

Although the characters move to the margin out of their free will, their failure to attain what they are looking for emphasizes the absurdity of their existence. Actor 1's first reaction to living on the margin – "This feeling of freedom scares me. I feel I might fly without wings high into a distant sky" (Alharthi 13) reveals the idea of freedom as a terrifying burden. Existentialists regard society and community as repressive forces that prevent individuals from choosing freely (Hongfen and Yongchun, 2022, p. 69). According to Sartre, man is responsible for forming an essence to his existence as he argues, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Existentialism and Human Emotions, 1957, p. 15). Man is free to choose; he alone is responsible for his choices. Sartre claims that one's decision becomes limitless: "This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself" (Being and Nothingness 439). Actor 1 chooses to live in a new environment based on his realization of personal choice and to elevate or change his circumstances for the better. His choice may give him the meaning and purpose he is looking for. His escape to the margin to change his circumstances is the defining element of consciousness. However, freedom of choice leads to a sense of commitment and responsibility. Actor 1 is frightened by the commitment and the consequences of his choice. Sartre asserts that this responsibility of actions that shape our existence leads to anxiety and despair (Existentialism and Human Emotions, 1957, p. 18). This sense of anxiety results from the fact that man is "responsible for the world and himself as a way of being" (Being and Nothingness, 1943, p. 707). In this respect, the characters find themselves in an existential tragedy that questions man's commitment to his choices.

Actor 1 showed strength and resilience to adapt to his new environment. He says: "I suggest that we should sit together to organize our relations and outline our rights and duties in order to adapt to our new situation" (20). Alharthi emphasizes that humans are not entirely free, and external factors might sometimes influence their decision-making. As the other characters slowly realize that freedom is associated with responsibility and that responsibility causes anguish, they start to convince themselves that external conditions have restricted their freedom on the page. "Human beings are not entirely free; they are not *causa sui*. On the contrary, they are prisoners in their social constraints and psychological motivations, which prevent them from achieving deliverance and intensify their feelings of despair and spiritual exile". (Hussein, 2021, p.14) Actor 4 recalls his childhood and the controlling teacher that still affects him as he says, "And whenever I wanted to wash my clothes, I remembered how he used to reprimand me for my dirty clothes" (21). Actor 5, Actor 3, and Actor 2 have always been defeated in the past, and this defeat has left them scared to try to indulge in a new journey of freedom in the margin.

The characters gradually became helpless to survive in the margin. The margin becomes a constantly hostile environment that does not change; nothing seems to happen, the same people, the same waiting, and the same place. Nevertheless, this aligns differently with what the characters were expecting. They have moved to the margin, longing for fulfilling their dreams and attaining a better life. Instead, they have found themselves stuck on the margin of time and waiting. Time is as impotent as the characters' attempt to fix their situation and find meaning. In *Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus explains man's absurd situation in life:

A world that can be explained even with wrong reasons is familiar. Nevertheless, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man

feels like an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the Actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus, 1942, p. 2).

The characters attempted various actions to pass the time, such as reading, dancing, and singing. However, it all appeared to be meaningless. In this way, time represents a tormenting tool and a primary source of hardship that dominates the characters' situation. Actor 3 explains the impact of time: "My friend, frustration is accumulating inside me, turning into pieces of rock, and these pieces are assembling to form a mountain perched on my chest. I have had enough of this stifling atmosphere" (25). Actor 3 realizes that no matter what they do, their actions are purposeless and lead them to nowhere. He acknowledges the fact that waiting is slowly turning him into a lifeless object.

Although the characters are exhausted and disappointed, they still have this ray of hope to return to where they came from, the page. The characters have realized that the return to the page is their last hope to justify their existence, as Actor 5 asserts:

Actor 5: We left the page and came to the margin because of particular circumstances. So, why shouldn't we return? Did our houses lock their doors and refuse our return? I remember my father telling me that ancient cities were walled inside high walls, and they refused to receive anyone who came to them at night, so he had to stay outside the city walls until the morning (27).

They left the page at night and promised to return in the morning. Alharthi chooses the morning to symbolize new optimistic beginnings. It can also be seen as an awakening for the characters in which everything becomes clear and enlightened. However, the characters still doubt whether they will regain their names:

Actor 4: Time melts like a candle, departs like the sun, and the defeated question is: Will we be able to return with our names?

Actor 1: Oh, had names known themselves, they wouldn't have bloomed... Had names known their own value, they wouldn't have borne fruit... had names known their shape, they wouldn't have caroused in revelry.

Actor 5: Don't despair. At the end of the tunnel, there always comes a dim of light. (28)

Their names gave them a sense of individuality and identity, which was stripped from them in the margin. Actor 1's dialogue shows that even if they had their names, nothing would change even on the page. According to William Muller and Josephine Jacobsen, when a man "becomes aware of time's destructiveness and nature's indifference, a man may turn with some hope to himself, only to find no solace there, either" (1967, p. 226). However, Alharthi still shows hope in the face of the absurdity of human existence, as Actor 2 states, "Who knows, perhaps we will be more effective and powerful" (29). In this way, the margin made the characters accept that life is, indeed, absurd. However, this does not mean that it is not worth living; on the contrary, it is a call to revolt against the absurd by thinking of the afterlife. Alharthi suggests that eternal happiness exists by embracing the absurd, as Actor 3 implies, "Set your eyes ablaze like a memory gulping down all that meets. Think of the return path. Change yourselves into a big folder full of hundreds of words and pictures so that we can take the red margin by surprise and jump over it back into the page" (29).

IV. 2. The Death/ Life Antithesis in The Book of Margins:

The mystery of death has enthralled many absurd playwrights and tempted them to tackle it in their works. Death is a central point around which the absurdity of life revolves. It has always remained a profound subject that stimulated writers to utilize it in their writings. It has always exceeded man's comprehension, whether one may envision it as an absolute nothingness, a transition to a diverse state, or a prelude to the subsequent incarnation. The curiosity to know

what is beyond death triggers human beings to pursue answers to many excruciating questions, such as: What will happen after one is dead? If our final destination is death, then why are we born in the first place? Is it a transference from one place to another, or is it the final destination? These and several other questions strike rational and thoughtful human beings at some point. Death is a universal concept and phenomenon that encounters all living creatures. However, paradoxically, the wisest creature has been unable to investigate and disclose the reality of death since once a human being has experienced it, he is no longer present to reveal its mysteries to others.

Being inevitable, irresistible, and unpredictable, death remains, either physically or metaphorically, one of the obsessive concepts that dominated most of the texts of the Theater of the Absurd. Some of the characters in absurd plays try to have control over their own death, but it is not subject to their choice or their willpower. Therefore, the characters in the Theater of the Absurd appear as if they were clueless about why they live and die; accordingly, they either resort to a state of waiting or commit suicide without attaining their desired salvation. In *The Book of Margins*, the dramatist presents a distinctive interpretation of death. He endeavors to investigate the meaning of human existence by considering the inevitability of death, which represents the ultimate paradox of an irrational existence.

Death is one of the most significant concepts that provide meaning to life. In his play, *The Book of Margins*, Fahad Alharthi depicts the interconnectedness between time and death, which denotes that death is the ultimate reality of human existence and time is the great force behind it. The characters in the play move to the margin, in search for satisfaction, but caught up on the margin of time and action. From the beginning of the play, the motif of static time and death defines the overall mood of the drama. This motif is visually imparted through the unappealing setting. Darkness is used frequently throughout the play; Actor 1 enters the stage amid darkness, carrying his belongings as he describes it: "The place looks dreary, pale, and lifeless" (13). The absence of light implies the absence of life itself. As a result, the darkness suggests that the margin is a place of fear, death, and destruction as Actor 1 says, "I have long been waiting for this hour in which we leave and depart from ourselves... Things here wither and die" (13). The characters have little expectation and hope of life under the shade of death. The margin, then, symbolically signifies death and is rendered through the metaphor of time, departure, and loneliness.

Time plays a fundamental role in the play. It confronts the characters with their mortality and the terminable nature of their lives, creating in them a sense of anxiety and despair and compelling them to wait for something that will change or fix their condition. The characters are stuck in a constant state where time statically stands still, and there is no progress in their situation. They try to speed up the process by recalling memories and stories from their past lives. The memories shared are filled with past traumas and pains. Actor 3 has had his heart broken by the betrayal of his lover, a painful experience that left him seeking solitude in the margin. Actor 4 recalls his impoverished childhood and his dirty clothes that have left him judged by his teacher. Actor 1 tells the story of the sudden death of his friend on the sidewalk and how everyone passed over him for an hour without realizing a corpse was lying on the ground. The painful stories they have shared portray the world as unfair and immoral. Thus, the characters came to the margin full of negativity and hopelessness. Time appears intolerable, and sharing their stories was the only salvation from the unjustified waiting. Despite distracting themselves with singing, dancing, and reading, the passing of time is inevitable, and the characters gradually lose their patience.

Moreover, Alharthi makes his audience aware of the passing time through the changing weather – "It'll rain soon" (20), "How's the weather now? It's cold, isn't?" (21), "It's difficult to forecast the weather today. It might be humid." (22), "It's cold today and the atmospheric pressure is high" (24) which can be seen as a symbol of the cyclical nature of life. This atmosphere, however, becomes a source of suffering for the characters as days go by without

any change. Waiting, then, is equated with death as Actor 1 says: "My feelings are frozen, my passions still" (24), just like a dead person where he no longer feels and reacts to life. Alharthi seems to link the margin with the window of clarity before death. According to Mohammed Eid (2014), in Islam, after we pass away, the body's sensory functions and breathing stops, but the mind and the subtle energies that support it continue to reside in the body for a while. During this time, a person can experience the radiant clarity inherent to the mind ("Sharp-sightedness in the Holy Quran," 2014). Hence, waiting makes the characters gradually realize the truth about themselves and the world.

When the margin starts to be filled with other newcomers, Actor 3 shows his resentment by saying, "I had hoped to have the margin for myself. I was very happy when the place was empty; and here it's turning like any noisy place." (19). He then moves again to a newer place when waiting becomes unbearable. Actor 3 realizes he cannot achieve his desired life regardless of where he goes. His action of moving to another new place other than the margin suggests that he only wants to move because new places seem alluring in the sense of their newness and mystery. On the other hand, Actor 1 is the only character who seems resilient in the face of emptiness and the harsh reality he is experiencing. He urges the other characters to stay and fight through to discover the meaning and purpose of their existence, even though he surrenders at the end of the play. Actor 2 is a blind man who moves to the margin, hoping to find a good neighbor. Although he knows where his tent is, as if he is ultimately sighted, he controls Actor 1 by asking him to fix his dwelling. This contradiction appears more obvious when Actor 4 confronts him when reading the newspaper:

Actor 4: How can you read a newspaper when you are blind?

Actor 2: I'm blind of sight, not insight. Plus, I'm blind whenever I feel like it.

Actor 4 goes back to reading *Gone with the Wind* (24)

Alharthi utilizes blindness as a symbol of the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Human beings are blind to confront life, their problems, their own nature, and their destiny. The shifting nature of his vision represents his choice to stay ignorant or, rather, his refusal to seek out a passion or a deeper meaning in life. As shown in the stage direction, Actor 4 goes back to reading his book *Gone with the Wind*, a novel by Margret Mitchell written in 1936, which follows the lives of several characters during and after the Civil War. One of the main themes this novel portrays is that of survival. Actor 4 can be seen as a figure who is struggling to find purpose or meaning to survive.

In this respect, the margin is a space for the dead and lost souls where every character reflects on himself and discovers who he is. Being caught up by the unbearable waiting, boredom, and emptiness, the characters decide to return to the page to gain their names and souls back:

Actor 1: Let's be ready. Soon, the sun will rise. Our souls, ideas, and dreams will return. And then, we will return to the page.

Actor 4: Time melts like a candle, departs like the sun, and the defeated question is: Will we be able to return with our names with us? (28).

Alharthi presents two contrasting views; one is optimistic, and the other is doubtful or rather pessimistic. The concept of the sun rising and "our souls" returning can be interpreted as a metaphor for the cycle of life and death, where even though the physical bodies may die, our ideas and legacy can continue to survive and have an impact. This concept represents a hopeful perspective on death, where one's influence can live beyond one's physical existence. Alharthi links time with a melting candle, which implies that life seems to be a continuous cycle of ending and dying, and we may not have control over when our time comes to an end. Actor 4 fears being forgotten or losing his identity after death, as implied by his question: "Will we be able to return with our names with us?" (28).

The characters have come to the margin during the night and choose to return to the page in the cold morning: "Actor 6: In the morning, it's cold." (28). Alharthi chooses the cold

morning to symbolize new beginnings and rebirth. The cold morning can represent a period of stillness and hibernation when life is dormant and waiting to be awakened. The characters have not attained anything from waiting or fulfilled their expectations. Their life was put on hold, a death-in-life cycle or hibernation. Even though one life may come to an end, there is a possibility for new life and growth emerging from it. The end of one life can be seen as the beginning of another, just as spring's warmth replaces winter's cold. It can also be viewed as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of life and death, where one phase is followed by another in an ongoing process of renewal and transformation. Alharthi views death as a life-long process as life gets emptier in time and, consequently, bleaker.

The characters strive for spiritual, physical, and emotional freedom and expansiveness. However, their souls are somehow trapped and constrained within their physical form. Human beings are restrained by mortality and the finite nature of their existence. Death is deemed to be the ultimate constraint of human life, a boundary that cannot be surmounted. The relationship between the physical and the spiritual aspects is reflected as the soul is trapped within the body, and death is the only separation between the two. This view implies that the characters long to transcend to an expansive, spiritual realm that is not subjected to the restriction of morality and the limitations of the physical world. Human beings struggle to come to terms with the complexities of life. Man feels lost in the pathways and the expectations of life. The characters strive to attain freedom from the constraints that prevent them from finding new pathways and leading more fulfilling and energetic lives. Human beings strive to control every aspect of their lives, but their attempts are ultimately futile. The dramatist demonstrates the importance of seeking balance by embracing the unpredictability of life instead of dwelling on things beyond our control.

Death surrounds human beings every day, yet life continues. Hence, while death is inevitable, it should not overshadow the value and the importance of life. It should not dominate human thoughts and prevent them from appreciating the fullness of life. Death should be viewed as a natural part of the life cycle, something that should be accepted rather than resisted or feared. Death may be experienced metaphorically during life through failed hopes, dreams, loss, or changing circumstances. Even if human beings are alive and seeking to live fully, they still may encounter periods of metaphorical death; death is a continuous and recurring process. It is an irresistible unique experience that human beings go through. It cannot be understood nor defined in concrete terms. Surrendering to death serves as a reminder of the inadequacy of an anticipated vibrant existence and the futility of life: death is the ultimate fate.

In Fahad Raddah Alharthi's *The Book of Margins*, life and death represent two sides of the same coin, illustrating two aspects of the same fundamental reality. The characters are portrayed as transient passengers incapable of achieving a permanent status in the journey of life. They, sometimes, struggle to come to terms with their bitter reality, while at other times, they welcome death as an escape from the absurdity, futility, and meaninglessness of life. The play transitioned from realistically depicting death to portraying death in a symbolic, dreamlike, and surreal way. Death seems to have a life-affirming function that inspires people to appreciate the present moment and accept death, with its unavailability, irresistibility, and inevitability, as a natural phase of the life cycle.

In his play, Alharthi employs several theatrical techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd to serve thematic purposes. The setting of the play tends to be minimalist and surreal. The audience is presented with an empty environment with nothing but a red line that splits the stage. This dreamlike or surreal setting contributes to the overall sense of disorientation and detachment from reality. Alharthi creates a symbolic representation of the emptiness or barrenness of the world. This void and lack of meaning mirror his characters' condition and the absurdity of their existence. The play also adopts a circular structure following a linear progression. Nothing happens in the play as it keeps looping back to the beginning, which creates a sense of futility and eternal recurrence. Alharthi's characters exhibit fragmented

identities that lack a cohesive sense of self. In the margin, the characters are stripped from their names. This lack of self-knowledge highlights the existential crisis and the inherent difficulty of grasping one's identity in an irrational world. Alharthi invites his audience to question the nature of identity, the search for self-understanding, and the limitations of rationality in an unpredictable world. Alharthi uses poetic language that adds richness and depth to the dialogue between the characters. The language, filled with powerful metaphors, vivid imagery, and symbolism, evokes a sense of wonder, contemplation, and emotional impact, which leaves a lasting effect on the audience.

V. Conclusion

The absurdity of human existence is evident in Fahad Alharthi's *The Book of Margins* where the dramatist explores the concept of life/death antithesis in his plays, providing divergent approaches to the two opposing forces to unravel the layers of the meaning of the human struggle against the absurdity of life. The radical changes in the context of Saudi Arabia led to the spark of the Theatre of the Absurd and its prominent pioneers who rebelled against conventional theatre to illustrate the struggle of human beings to define themselves and achieve fulfillment in an inexplicable world. The Theatre of the Absurd aims to provoke its audience by confronting them with the fundamental questions about life, truth, and the nature of existence. It has offered playwrights worldwide a theatrical lens to discuss the absurdity of the human condition and the futile search for meaning. The Theatre of the Absurd has opened new horizons for Saudi playwrights to experiment with innovative theatrical techniques and empowered them to discuss various topics, allowing for a more authentic and unfiltered portrayal of the collective fears and anxieties that shape their realities. It has also enabled them to circumvent censorship and address social issues with greater freedom, offering a unique and thought-provoking experience for both the playwrights and the audience.

The research traced the portrayal of death in Fahad Alharthi's *The Book of Margins* as an existential concept. It investigated how Alharthi has utilized the concept of death to inspire the audience to embrace their present, confront their fears, and seek meaning amid absurdity despite the weight of the existential dilemmas associated with mortality. Through his artistic vision, the Saudi playwright explored the transient nature of life and how the awareness of death can affect the individual's choices and perception of life. The playwright employed different theatrical techniques to deliver man's predicament in the modern world in unique artistic style.

The fundamental goal of the present study is to provide a renewed perspective and resource of the Saudi theatre, as Absurdism has yet to be investigated in Saudi drama. It highlighted the Saudi playwright's contribution to the Theatre of the Absurd and his role in enhancing the Saudi literary and theatrical heritage. The research is intended to contribute to the 2030 vision of Saudi Arabia by developing an environment that supports and nurtures creativity and unlocking the potential of new forms of expression and artistic exploration. The researchers would suggest conducting further research on the contribution of female playwrights to the Theatre of the Absurd in Saudi Arabia and how they can utilize this particular theatrical genre to address gender dynamics, feminist themes, and women's experiences within the Saudi Arabian cultural context.

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