THE QUESTION OF EXISTENCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN SOME ARABIC AND EUROPEAN NOVELS

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Abstract

This article is a study of the themes of existentialism, nihilism and absurdity in four contemporary Arabic novels. Well-known writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Camus and Ionesco are main figures who represent the new literary movements in western literature.

The theme of death in Arabic and European novels is our main concern and focus in this study. Comparisons among different novels will be drawn in order to show similarities and differences between Arab and European attitudes and concepts regarding the question of existence.

Introduction

This article studies four modern Arabic novels written with considerable influence of the new literary and philosophical movements in the West (movements like Existentialism, Absurdity and Nihilism). Well-known writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Adamov, O’Nell, Camus and Ionesco are main figures who represent the new movement in modern literature.

Our focus in this study will be on the aspects and themes that Existentialism, Absurdity and Nihilism concentrate on and deal with. Such themes will be studied in the Arabic novels and compared with the above movements and perceptions. Comparisons between Arabic and European novels will be drawn through a central subject-the theme of death - that they both share and concentrate on.

The theme of death, moreover, is a complicated and central subject in most existential, absurdist and nihilistic writings.

The following Arabic novels will be discussed and compared with Western literary movements and individual specific western novels:

Existentialism and absurdity in Ismā’il F. Ismā’il’s al-Mustanqa‘āt al-Dū’iyah (Luminous Swamps).

Absurdity in Muḥammad Y. al-Qa‘id’s Ayyām al-Jafāf (Days of Dryness).

Absurdity and nihilism in Ismā’il F. Ismā’il’s Kānat al-Samā’ Zarqū‘ (The Sky was Blue).

Existentialism, absurdity and nihilism in Muḥsin Bin Mīḍyāl’s al-Taḥaddī (The Challenge).1

Existentialist and Absurdist Views in al-Mustanqa‘āt al-Dū’iyah2

The novels of Ismā’il F. Ismā’il focus on the trauma of intellectuals in a world without logic, order, or faith. Focusing on such an unstable and negative world, his educated characters generally collapse and retreat and ultimately become either

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absurdist or nihilistic. ""Ismā‘īl’s concern", says one critic, "is the critical present moment" of the human life. His views of man’s on-going intellectual deterioration and confusion are due not only to social and political ordeals, but also to philosophical and existential crises that no ""rational mind"" can avoid or ignore.

A reflection of Ismā‘īl’s existentialist and absurdist philosophy is portrayed in his novel al-Mustinqa‘at al-Dū‘īyyah. Death in the novel, through which the author conveys his philosophy, is caused by predestination, coincidence or chaotic disorder. The death scenes in this novel are limited in number but are depicted with great drama and pathos. Ḥumayda, the hero, while passing in the street, sees a crowd of people shouting and threatening to kill a woman who is crying for help. Ḥumayda realizes that two brothers are intent upon killing their sister, who has sinned, in order to:

Wash away the shame and disgrace she caused them and the rest of their family.5

Ḥumayda interferes to prevent the murder, but one brother has already stabbed his sister with a dagger and is shouting proudly, ""I have washed away my shame.""6 Ḥumayda tries desperately to protect the blood-covered woman, and pushes the brother away from her. The brother, angry at interference by a stranger, tries to stab him too, but Ḥumayda evades the blow, and the man kills himself instead. The other brother, maddened by the scene, attacks Ḥumayda, who manages to evade the knife, but in the melee the second brother is killed. ""It was self defence"" Ḥumayda insists. But he is arrested, nevertheless, and sentenced to life in prison.

Another death in the novel takes place in the prison during Ḥumayda’s seventh year there. An angry, despairing prisoner commits suicide to end his miserable and aimless life.8 Another incident, also while Ḥumayda is in jail, is the death in war of the prison governor’s son.

These deaths illustrate life’s lack of order and how little control people have in reality over their lives. The death of the brothers comes from Ḥumayda’s chance passing at a given moment. His presence there, moreover, compounds a tragic situation; instead of saving a human life, he causes two more deaths, and in the process, loses his own freedom. Death is seen here as predestined, inevitable and meaningless. It is true that Ḥumayda through the novel is symbolically in revolt against social traditions he views as sick, but death itself is ironic; its occurrence is incidental and painfully meaningless. Death in this novel results from, and is a proof of, the illogicality and absurdity of human life.

The killing of the sinful sister by her brothers reflects the traditional insular society in dealing with such matters. Obviously, the author condemns the brothers’ behavior and punishes them by death. The killing of the two brothers caused by Ḥumayda shows the author’s rejection of their sick belief and wrongdoing. It also shows metaphorically that man is not able to live in peace and security in a world governed by confusion, mistakes, and disorder.

The other two deaths in the novel – the prisoner who commits suicide and the boy who is killed in war – also allude to the chaotic nature of modern life and man’s misuse of his role and relationship, whether in warfare or in the suppression within and outside of prisons.

Ḥumayda, after all his tragic experience, is seen to be in utter confusion over the
chaos of life itself. He has, by the end of the novel, an opportunity to leave the jail when his jailor allows him to see a movie (Zorba the Greek) in town. But Ḥumayda returns to prison and his jailor astonishingly asks:

Why did you return? why, after you escaped from prison? Ḥumayda, why did you love? Why did you marry and then divorce? Why did you kill? Why? 'I don't know, I just don't know.' Ḥumayda replies.

Ismā'īl's concern and basic question in this novel is what is the purpose of life and what is the meaning of such deaths? He has no answer and neither does his criminal hero, who concludes:

I just don't know. It is all of no use, neither my existence, nor the others.

Death, viewed in this light, seems to express a perspective that human existence is absurd and lacking in order or meaning. Camus has expressed this view in The Stranger when Meursault ultimately becomes a victim of a crime he has no intention to commit. Noting the similar conditions in which both heroes live, one Arab critic observed:

The novel reflects an individual existentialist and absurdist objection similar to that of Meursault's in Camus' hero in The Stranger, where Meursault kills someone whom he does not know.

The similarity between al-Mustanqa'āt al-Dū'īyyah and The Stranger is obvious; and the death in both novels occurs in similar circumstances, in which each hero attempts to defend himself against somebody he does not know. Although the causes of death are different from each other in these novels, the metaphor of death in both novels is ultimately similar.

Although Ḥumayda originally is a revolutionary character and described as "an existentialist leftist", he becomes an absurdist after the Initial incident and his condemnation to life in prison. "It is an absurd world," Ḥumayda concludes, and man, the novel implies, is merely the victim of such absurdity. The hero finally feels indifferent to the universe, exactly as Meursault felt in The Stranger. They come to a conclusion that it is all the same; life or death, it makes no difference. Ḥumayda refuses to leave his prison even though he is given an opportunity to do so, and Meursault feels "happy" moments before his execution.

Absurdist Views in Ayyām al-Jafāf (Days of Dryness)

An absurdist, satiric depiction of the death-life dilemma and the crisis of the individual's alienation and dislocation in the modern world is presented in al-Qa'īd's novel Ayyām al-Jafāf. Although there are two physical deaths in the novel, the hero's "death in life" is the author's main concern and the overshadowing theme of the whole. Ayyām al-Jafāf, however, is one of the few novels in Arabic that succeeds in producing what is called "an absurdist novel" both in its form and content. "al-Qa'īd," says one critic, "is trying to create his own style and subjects and make them as coherent as possible."

Briefly, the novel tells the story of a school teacher assigned to teach in a rural community in an isolated one-room school. His students are of both sexes and the
children of local villagers. Instructor Khalaf al-lah, who is also the headmaster and custodian of the school, is promised a transfer to a better school as soon as possible. His need for employment overcomes his reluctance and he accepts the job. He has, however, to wait a month while the school is under construction and lives alone in a single room.

Ultimately school opens and he spends his time teaching a variety of subjects, acting as janitor and walking the countryside. Failing to establish a friendship with the villagers, Khalaf keeps to his home; his journey into alienation, depression, and loneliness starts.

On the very first day, realizing how hard and grim his life will be, Khalaf begs the head of the education department to find another place for him as he was promised before, but his request is declined. Months of waiting for a transfer become years, but nothing changes. In fear of loss of employment and constantly reassured that transfer will come, he spends five unhappy "dry" years waiting for salvation and relief. Finally his despair overwhelsm him, and he lives on alone in alienation and frustration that draw him ultimately to insanity.

The meaningless, empty life of Khalaf is, he feels, a sort of death or slow suicide that he is compelled to live. Not knowing whether he is dead or alive and fearing death at any moment, Khalaf whispers to himself each night: "Although everything dies inside myself every night, I hope I don't die this night." These dead, dry five years, devoid of friendship and utterly idle, are seen to be the consequences of his own foolishness.

During this period in isolation from civilization and loneliness, Khalaf does strange things to kill time and amuse himself. He creates a Utopian world in his single room. He pretends that many people come and go and that he establishes relationships with them in the crowded little Utopia. He starts mailing letters to himself, and when he receives them a few days later, reads them as if seeing them for the first time. On the envelopes he writes both: From "Mr. Khalaf al-lah," "To Mr. Khalaf al-lah." Finally bored with that, he changes the names of the senders. He now signs the letters he writes both on the envelopes and inside, with women's names. His joy is extreme when he receives them, having a love affair with one imaginary girl, sympathizing with another, offering advice to a third.

Eventually boredom and absurdity dominate Khalaf's life, and loneliness threatens his sanity. But, having no other choice, Khalaf continues his dreams and devises other means to overcome his depression, boredom, and home-sickness—his "death in life." Khalaf decides to marry, and chooses an imaginary bride. He names her 'Atiyât (gifts), and they live a life of luxury together in a fine villa. Khalaf knows a new joy in this "relationship"; he thoroughly enjoys talking with her, her presence in his bed, and having her at his table for dinner. Imaginary conversations are reported:

She sat at the other side of the dining table;
We ate and I asked her:
'Would you like some beer?'
'Oh, no!'
'No cigarettes; smoking is bad for your health.'

Developing these fantasies, Khalaf imagines that his wife is unfaithful and so kills her in a dramatic scene which recalls that of the murder in Sālih's novel, Season.
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of Migration to the North, which is itself reminiscent of the death of Desdemona in Othello.

Ultimately, Khalaf realizes that he is losing his mind and sees the likelihood that: "I will not live to see the next spring." And shortly after that insight he does lose his mind and begins wandering abominably in the streets, where his students pursue him with cries of "the crazy teacher".

On a symbolic level, Ayyām al-Jaflāf implies the alienation and estrangement of modern man. Of course, Khalaf, in the novel, could seek his own survival by leaving the hell he is experiencing, whatever the price might be. But, in terms of the novel, Khalaf symbolizes the helpless, living dead, those bound by space and time and destined to alienation and nihilism in modern society. The sense of dryness, breakdown, and death, the novel shows, overshadow human life. Man in this age, al-Qa‘id seems to suggest, lives merely on a ray of hope, by which he may be somewhat satisfied with his life. This alone enables him to survive the ghost of death which haunts him during his lonely and purposeless existence.

The hero of this novel is basically a victim of mislocation and disassociation. Man, represented by Khalaf in this novel, is seen to be alone, psychologically depressed, and inwardly dead; this reality constitutes the tragedy of contemporary man, the state of madness expressed in the person of Khalaf.

Ayyām Al-Jaflāf is an absurdist approach as the term is known and used in the West. What is interesting or perhaps unique in al-Qa‘id’s novel is that it ironically shows man’s attempt to avoid the absurdity of the world by engaging in absurd acts which inevitably prove disastrous. Through the hero’s gradual depression and constant retreat and failure to reach his "right place" or to be "a mature" human being, the author presents a negative, sad image of modern man, his alienation and loneliness.

The hero’s real imaginary worlds are ultimately seen as absurd and hopeless. His attempts to evade the exterior absurdity that he creates complicate his crisis and consequently confirm the entire absurdity of his existence. Both worlds-reality and imagination, however, fail to save the hero from insanity, and in each he ultimately loses.

The state of waiting in Ayyām al-Jaflāf is similar to Beckett’s futile waiting depicted in his play Waiting for Godot. In both the novel and the play, waiting for something to happen and to give a meaning for the characters’ lives is a metaphoric reflection of man’s absurdity and futility. Both works imply that such a “wait” may go on forever without any change of the situation, and this state of waiting, therefore, becomes one’s whole life, which is, in this sense, absurd and worthless. It is a matter of wasting one’s own time, both authors suggest, and the characters’ senseless and absurd acts are but excuses and inappropriate justifications for man’s compulsion to go on in a world of absurdity and irrationality.

Absurdity is everywhere and it is real. Beckett’s works imply. Man, therefore, should realize that fact and adjust himself to live with full knowledge of this reality as an absurdist. Al-Qa‘id, however, shares with Beckett and other absurdist the idea of the absurd universe that we inevitably live in, but the terms of his novel depend on the conditions of the individual and of the humanity around him. And this is the difference between the two authors; al-Qa‘id has a ray of hope while Beckett
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has none. Al-Qa‘id’s hope is apparent through Khalaf’s belief in a possible solution for his crisis, which lies in the change of his current place and work. In Beckett’s terms, however, this solution solves nothing.22

Absurdist and Nihilistic Views in Kānat al-Samā‘
Zarqā’ (The Sky was Blue)23

This novel is basically political; the hero’s state of nihilism, reflected all through the novel, is mainly caused by stresses that rent his country, Iraq.24 Also falling to keep his troubled marriage from collapse, the nameless hero leaves his country for Iran. On the border he meets with another police officer. The whole novel tells the story of these two characters, their present and past lives in a flashback technique.

Both the hero and the police officer, the story reveals, are in disagreement with the regime. Dialogue between the two characters, shows that the alienation they have experienced is the causal element for their current nullity.

The novel focuses on the present moments in the hero’s life which are depressing and hopeless. It also alludes to the hero’s past conditions, which are seen as the causes of his present, nihilistic perception of his existence. The hero repeatedly states: "I just want to leave this world without return."25 He has a strong desire for death; there is nothing left for him to live for, he feels. On one occasion, having brushed his teeth, he states: "Perhaps brushing my teeth has been my way to affirm my existence."26

The police officer, whose view of life seems as negative as the hero’s, is also in a state of nullity. He tells the latter that he once decided upon suicide, but when he could not find enough ink to write his will, he became angry, changed his mind, and went to the movies instead!27

The author, thus, deals with heavy irony, with issues involving death and life, to show the lack of true distinction between the two in his characters’ situations. Life is worthless, the novel implies; death, therefore, is not the tragic end that it is commonly viewed to be. "Do you think I’ll die tonight?" the police officer asks,

‘I think so.’
‘And does it hurt?’
‘I don’t think so.',28

the hero replies. This perception of indifference towards life and death permeates the thinking of the characters of this novel. Their comments, nonchalant and ironic, closely parallel the spirit of Beckett’s absurdist dialogues in Waiting for Godot and in other works.

"The hero of Kānat al-Samā‘ Zarqā’ a critic comments: "is a rebellious existentialist who rejects everything around including politics and revolution."29 The hero’s total rejection and disbelief in "everything around him," is an attitude typical of nihilists.30 The hero explains:

All one knows is that he was born accidentally and without purpose to be cast into this ocean (life) with no feeling except uselessness and nausea. Yes,
only, the horrible feeling of nausea.\textsuperscript{31}

This is similar to Sartre’s “nausea” and is also similar to Beckett’s absurdity and nullity. “Beckett is the literary nihilist par excellence,” Charles Glicksberg argues, and:

Through the meditation of literature, he seeks to capture the truth about the elusive, indefinable self, to discover, if possible, the meaning of and the reason for existence, to be delivered at last from the vanity of his creative calling and the misery of being.\textsuperscript{32}

It should be noticed, however, that Beckett’s nihilism is different from Ismā‘īl’s particularly in the causes which drive a character to be a nihilist. Beckett and other nihilists, as Glicksberg argues, are not only against a life without meaning, but also against death which has no meaning either. In nihilistic terms, neither life nor death is preferable. It is all nothing, the nihilist believes, and he accepts this “nothingness” as it is, believing that such reality is unchangeable.

Nihilism in ḳānat al-ṣamā‘ zārgā‘, unlike that in Waiting for Godot or in Malone Dies, is caused by the hero’s falling experience in the past and his bitter disappointment and unrest that characterized his previous days. Beckett’s nihilism is of a different type; his characters are seen as aware of their situation and conscious of the uselessness of their lives. They, therefore, go on living, although senselessly and negatively. They do not believe that suicide is a solution to their crisis, considering it as absurd as life itself. That is why Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot express their desire to commit suicide but ultimately fail to do so.\textsuperscript{14}

Ismā‘īl’s characters implicitly allude to the reasons for their nihilistic feelings in the novel. These reasons are both “knowable” and comprehensive, and include the political, the psychological, the emotional, and the philosophical. In Beckett’s terms, such reasons are not “knowable” not “definable” and not conceivable.\textsuperscript{14} “Godot,” for example, Robinson comments, “is the creation of man’s profound need for meaning.”\textsuperscript{13} The situation is different in ḳānat al-ṣamā‘ zārgā‘ the hero there has become a nihilist because of “wrong” values and conditions which are imposed over him. Beckett, on the contrary, believes that “nihilism” is the outcome of inconceivable, absurd existence and even the presence of man in this universe is absurd and meaningless, which is not the case in Ismā‘īl’s philosophy of the absurdity and nullity of his characters.

\textbf{Existentialist, Absurdist and Nihilistic Views in al-ḥahaddī (The Challenge)}\textsuperscript{16}

Many Arabic novels of the present day, like others from the West,\textsuperscript{17} express a variety of philosophical views of the human condition in one work. It is frequently notable that some novels in Arabic reflect--through different characters or through one character during the changes in his life, various viewpoints and contrasting attitudes towards the hero’s reality.

An intellectual view of death is presented, though chaotically, in Muhsin Bin Mīdylā‘s novel al-ḥahaddī (The Challenge). The novel introduces the deaths of many characters both major and minor. The reasons for these are varied. Some are social and political, others are intellectual and philosophical, while still others are
indefinable though apparently caused by coincidence and a chaotic disorder the author sees as characteristic of the human condition.

We will focus on three deaths in al-Tahaddi: the first, caused by lack of communication between the individual and the universe, leads to the character’s dissatisfaction and, finally, to committing suicide. The second death is caused by self-alienation and self-destruction where an artist under prosecution asks the court to execute him by hanging in order to rescue him from “a life without meaning.” The third death is the hero’s execution, carried out for many reasons, the principal being a crime he commits.

Sâmiyâ, a young woman and the hero’s cousin, is a depiction of a death resulting from despair. She is broadly dissatisfied with her life. Neither her own society nor the world at large offers her satisfactory justification for her existence. Sâmiyâ agonizes between the world of her ideals and imagination and the real world she lives in. It appears to her impossible that her two worlds could ever be united and attained. She lacks communication and harmony with her own family, society, and the rest of the world she finds intolerable. Finally in a total depression of isolation and alienation Sâmiyâ swallows poison and puts an end to her suffering.

In the second death, the hero, Hasan, as a lawyer, defends the artist who has confessed and demanded the death penalty as his punishment. Hasan cannot agree with his client and justifies his crime as being without premeditation. He agrees that:

Things were mixed up in the artist’s mind. Form and meaning are mingled in his world so that he cannot differentiate between them. He therefore seeks his own death in order to escape the absurdity of human life. He is not guilty.

The artist’s crime and death wish and Hasan’s analysis demonstrate the complexity of human condition:

If we just understand why we live, then . . . I know we live for nothing.

Hasan states. An absurdist disbelief dominates and confuses the characters’ minds, making them desperate and indifferent and unwilling to pursue normal lives. Hasan’s defense, however, does not rescue the artist from the death penalty, because his crime, although in psychological terms it has some justifications, has to be punished, under the law, by death.

The third death is Hasan’s own. He finally commits a crime and, therefore, is imprisoned and executed. Contemplating his past life, his fall at the end of the novel illustrates the tragic confrontation between the world of innocence and the world of evil. During his childhood, Hasan was an innocent, dreamy child. He knew nothing about the violence and ugliness of the adult world. Having become an adult and recognizing how cruel and violent life can be at all levels and in all civilizations, Hasan becomes disillusioned and ultimately participates in the battle which must end in his killing or being killed.

Hasan’s “challenge” of both the inner and the outer worlds, as the novel’s title suggests, has never succeeded in giving him security, comfort, or satisfaction. His stress comes from never being convinced or successful in whatever he undertakes. The innocence of his life as a child has gone. Moreover, he loses both his mother and the woman he loves, receives two shots in his chest, has an arm amputated, and
witnesses large-scale killings and the deaths of young and old by war or by natural causes:

I walk in crowded streets but feel alone; the surrounding world is completely empty, he reflects.

Hasan concludes that he must compromise with this world as best he can. Rejecting the idea of suicide as a solution to his situation, Hasan joins the adult, violent world and acts as others do. And that means he should, like them, believe, marry, kill, lie, fight, and so on. To be part of this world which is characterized by violence, bloodshed, wars, and death, Hasan carries out his plan. He marries as people do, and fights and kills someone. But unlike others who engage in the same violence who remain free, he is caught and punished.

Hasan's marriage to a woman named Hell (Hawayah), a symbol of evil, and the crime he commits are seen symbolically in the novel as the required qualifications for a child to become an adult, an active member in contemporary society. Man in our time, the novel implies, is not bothered by the fact of daily violence and bloody death throughout the world; his reaction is similar to that of one character in the novel who witnesses two men shot to death: "What superb confusion." Hasan ultimately concludes:

What... who are we... and why? Even after the challenge, there should be only nothingness beyond that.

The comment reveals Hasan's view of what constitutes the main intellectual cause of death, and that is the lack of belief and of meaning for life that the characters feel.

Al-Ta'addādi presents a hero who is an adult active member in this new world and who as like many others--guilty or innocent--loves and hates, fights and is fought, then devotes his life to a world of crime in which he has to kill or be killed. Consequently, he exchanges "the challenge" with everybody whether he knows him or not. He therefore shoots at people, is also shot at, and finally he is executed.

Hasan's reaction to natural death is one of hopelessness and deep sorrow. The death he witnesses of a little child "devoid of guilt" is intolerable and utterly inexplicable:

You were, my little child, as a beautiful flower in spring, and here I am now, holding you in my arms like a piece of furniture, completely lifeless.

Such death is both painful and incomprehensible; Hasan knows that he cannot prevent death by any means, but he cannot avoid feeling sorry and painful about it either. "Although," he reflects, "it is the very nature of life that ultimately brings you to that tunnel (grave) which nobody can escape, it is, at the same time "the evidence that we live for nothingness." Hasan's life, influenced by riddles of death and an existence he cannot comprehend, becomes ever more complicated and shattered. In his mental and spiritual chaos, he views the tragedy of being and nothingness as a central cause for the individual's loss, despair, and nullity. He explains:

We fear nothingness because we are aware of our being. Being and nothingness, although they seem contradictory, are closely related to each
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other. I have never seen any person without imagining that nothingness pursues him. I opened my eyes at birth to discover that I was destined for death and would never live again. People usually think about their being before their nothingness, but I realized that I existed only after I had been destined for death. And after my mother’s death, I realized that I was alone, and this world confirmed my nothingness. My being is tied to my nothingness. 48

In the above soliloquy, the author gives clear expression to an existentialist philosophy of life and death. 49 Obviously, he suggests that human existence on the whole is tragic and senseless and therefore unsatisfactory. He, typical in adopting an existentialist and in another sense an absurdist viewpoint, believes that human life is valueless, and that it starts and ends with nothingness.

The philosophy of the hero of al-Tahaddi concerning man’s life and death is seen as both existentialism and absurdity. Hasan’s attitudes throughout the novel shift from one philosophy into another. Although he is seen most frequently as an absurdist, he is clearly seen at other points as an existentialist. On one occasion, he changes his total pessimism into a so-called existentialist optimism. He states:

I was born accidentally, but freedom is the most beautiful grace in this world. And more beautiful than that is to live free, and bear the great responsibility of freedom, 50 as most existentia itists believe. 51

Moreover, Hasan, at the end of the novel, while facing his execution, becomes more and more uncertain of his past philosophical beliefs. He begins wondering whether human life can be viewed in a manner different from, or more simple than, he has understood it. There must be, he realizes, something else beyond our life and death, that is perhaps the secret of the human existence, which: “our child (the next generations) may come to comprehend in the future.” 52

Hasan, in the final scene of his execution, understands that when he dies, his life will truly be ended, and he realizes that he has gone too far in his nihilistic views of both his individual and universal existence. He is seen as a man who cannot handle something precisely because he is too aware of it. And so, moments before his death, Hasan concludes:

that he would ask just one more year to live in this world, because he wants to achieve something, he had been trying to prove for more than ten years. . . If I were not executed, I would start preaching on this earth, not through religion, but preaching about man, peace and life. 53

But it is too late; Hasan is not granted his final wish, but is shot and killed.

In the tragic conclusion of the hero’s life, Bin Miṣyaf finalizes his perspective about the dilemmas of life and death. The author, although he focuses on the absurdist view of the hero, comes to support his existential concept at the end, but with considerable reservation. For his conclusion is not compatible with some existentialist thought in general terms. The existentialist in Sartre’s terms believes that he is condemned to death, and this death may occur at any moment. 54 He, therefore, would not wish to have his life extended precisely because of his certainty that that would be impossible. Camus’ hero, Meursault, for example, unlike Bin Miṣyaf’s, faces his final death with “happy” feelings and with a wish that many

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people will come and see his execution.

Emphasizing two subjects in *al-Taḥaddī*, death and freedom, the author ultimately expresses a realistic yet reasonable perspective in which a man can "challenge" the inevitable death. Living free, caring less about death and, yet, challenging death, *al-Taḥaddī* suggests, is the appropriate response to "defeat" death and "is the great success of the modern man." This is similar to Sartre's famous statement that "death is free man's condemnation" and to Camus' indication in *The Myth of Sisyphus*; "... and I reject suicide." All the above views agree on the impossibility of avoiding death or defeating it realistically, in the meantime, and having rejected the idea of self-destruction, they suggest that life, after all, is worth living and man has to realize these facts and live free no matter what the consequences may be.

*Al-Taḥaddī* offers long, deep discussions on death. It concludes that man has no control over his birth nor over his death:

I only know that I was obliged to come to this world and to be born without my choice. I also know that I will die. My existence is bound to my nothingness.

Hasan reflects.

Hasan realizes the actuality of these obligatory facts about his being and nothingness, but concludes that life remains his final choice, if he can get it, regardless of the fact that "we live for nothing." He, however, is not offered life and is shot to death by the end of the novel. Again, Bin Midyāl's conclusion in *al-Taḥaddī* is similar to Camus' views indicated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that life does not have "to have a meaning to be lived... it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning." But neither Bin Midyāl's hero, nor Camus' (Meursault in *The Stranger*) has the opportunity, in the final analysis, to evade the condemnation of death, and to survive.

The previous novels present negative observations and images of the human condition in today's world. The authors view death as a despairing and critical factor in the human existence, which constantly and in a variety of ways causes the unrest, the fear, and the psychological crises of the contemporary man. The characters in these novels, both in the Arabic novels and in the Western ones, primarily suffer social alienation, intellectual dissatisfaction, and disbelief and loss of identity and meaning for their lives. This ultimately leads into a tragic situation in which these characters, if they are not totally destroyed and annihilated, live on in pain as strangers, nihilists, or as "the living dead".
Footnotes

1 It is common for Arabic novels today to express more than one view or philosophy of human life. This is also true for Western novels.

2 Ismā'īl Fadl Ismā'īl, al-Mustanqa'āt al-Dā'īyyah (Luminous Swamps), Beirut, 1971.

3 See for examples his novels: Kānat al-Samā' Zarqā' (The Sky was Blue), al-Jabal (The Mountain) and Khutwah fi al-Hulūm (A Step in the Dream).


5 Ismā'īl F. Ismā'īl, al-Mustanqa'āt al-Dā'īyyah, p. 67.

6 Ibid., p. 67.

7 Ibid., p. 69.

8 Ibid., p. 13.

9 Ibid., pp. 77-78.

10 Ibid., p. 78.


12 See discussion about The Stranger, p. 144 in this study.

13 Muhammad Yusuf al-Qa'id, Ayyūm al-Ja'afī (Days of Dryness), Cairo, 1979.

14 The school-keeper and a worker are killed when the school wall falls on them, p. 20 (the novel).

15 Sayyid Hāmid al-Nassāji, Banurāma al-Riwa'īyāt al-'arabiyyah, p. 81.

16 Muhammad Y. al-Qa'id, Ayyūm al-Ja'afī, p. 60.

17 Ibid., p. 108.

18 Ibid., p. 107. See also al-Ṭayyib Sālih's novel Seasons of Migration to the North, p. 101 in this study.

19 Ibid., p. 108.


21 For examples, Waiting for Godot (a play), Murphy (a novel), and Malone Dies (a short novel).


23 Ismā'īl Fadl Ismā'īl Kānat al-Samā' Zarqā' (The Sky was Blue), Beirut, 1970.

24 The hero is seen as a leftist who is not in harmony with his country's regime.

25 Ismā'īl F. Ismā'īl, Kānat al-Samā' Zarqā', p. 54.

26 Ibid., p. 31.

27 Ibid., p. 76.

28 Ibid., p. 75.


31 Ismā'īl F. Ismā'īl, Kānat al-Samā' Zarqā', p. 87.


34 Charles Glicksberg, The Literature of Nihilism p. 235


37 For examples, John Barth: The End of the Road, Günter Grass: The Tin Drum, Kafka: The Trial, and Thomas Pynchon: The Gravity's Rainbow. These novels express various philosophical viewpoints of the human conditions.
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18 Muhsin Bin Mīḍyāf, al-Tahaddī, p. 95.
19 Ibid., p. 34.
20 Ibid., p. 88.
21 Ibid., p. 194.
22 Ibid., p. 143.
23 Ibid., p. 112.
24 Ibid., p. 206.
25 Ibid., p. 143.
26 Ibid., p. 37.
27 Ibid., p. 127.
28 Ibid., p. 127-128.
49 See Walter Kaufmann, Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre, N.Y., Meridian Books, 1957. See also Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 689 and after.

20 Muhsin Bin Mīḍyāf, al-Tahaddī p. 131.
51 See W. Kaufmann, Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre.
52 Muhsin Bin Mīḍyāf, al-Tahaddī, p. 223.
55 Ibid., pp. 186, 224.
53 Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, (my death), p. 689.
55 Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 47.
57 Muhsin Bin Mīḍyāf, al-Tahaddī, p. 127.