

## Eliot's Thematic and Stylistic Influence on Salah Abdel-Saboor

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### Abstract

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The study aims at tracing the influence of T.S. Eliot on the Egyptian dramatist Mohammad Saladin Abdel-Saboor (1931-1981) with regard to the style and themes. The study takes Abdel-Saboor's "**Night Traveller**" as a sample to trace how far Abdel-Saboor was influenced by Eliot. The study aims at discussing the stylistic and thematic aspects that Abdel-Saboor had adopted such as poetic drama and symbolism in addition to Eliot's view of the modern individual and the notion of authority and freedom. The study proves that Eliot had a direct influence with regard to his stylistic and philosophical ideologies which enhance the freedom of the individuals and the refusal of any form of authority which enslaves man and kills his hopes and ambitions.

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### 1. Introduction

T.S. Eliot is considered one of the most important literary figures in the first half of the twentieth century. His importance extends English literature to include international dimension. His importance is due to his influence on other writers in both the stylistic and thematic aspects. His works were translated to many different languages all over the world. He wrote in many genres; such a talent gave him a wide universality as a poet, a dramatist, and a critic. Many writers were influenced by him all over the world. His importance extends Europe and became a worldwide known literary figure. Of the writers who were influenced by him is Mohammad Salah Abdel-Saboor (1931-1981), the Arab Egyptian dramatist. He is famous for his experimental drama and his adoption of free verse leaving behind him the traditional techniques. This influence is seen in his play "**Night Traveller**" which echoes Eliot's works. He employed Eliot's poetic drama in writing his plays in addition to his philosophical ideologies. In this light, because of Abdel-Saboor's adoption of Eliot's style and philosophy, he is seen as a pioneer in the Arabic theatre in general and Egyptian theatre in particular.

### 2. Eliot's Thematic Influence on Abdel-Saboor

#### 2.1 Absurd reality

One influence that could be seen in Abdel-Saboor's plays is his adoption of Eliot's absurd world. Eliot criticizes the meaningless values of modern human life. A way from spiritual values, man's life is turned into Hell; and therefore, man suffers in the increasing material world.

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Abdel-Saboor's characters reveal a resemblance to Eliot's: They live in a world that seems irrational; full of contradictions; likewise Abdel-Saboor implies a satirical criticism to the political, authoritative forces in the Arabic societies. The modern Arab citizen feels a great sense of depression. This is represented in "**Night Traveller**" through the use of the night itself. Night is associated with the darkness of the Arabic societies. It also hints a state of invisibility, lack of vision, mystery and confusion. Abdel-Saboor is really very successful in expressing the increasing angry mood of the hero who symbolizes the dark absurd life of the modern Arabic man who stands helpless in front of the dictators of the political and social forces in the Egyptian society; in particular, and the Arabic societies in general. The relationship between the modern Arab individuals and the political regimes is based on injustice and oppression. Indeed, it is a master/slave relationship where the individual has no freedom, in other words, they are slaves disguised in free men dress. In his play "**Night Traveller**", Abdel-Saboor high lights the master/slave dilemma when the passenger addresses the conductor (who symbolizes all forms of authority) saying:

What do you want from me my **lord**? (My emphasis), I beg your pardon;  
 people like you can't want anything from people like me!  
 What I mean is: Which way is your kindness inclined?  
 How would you honor me?

(Abdel-Saboor, **Night Traveller**:15)

## 2.2 political Oppression

Another point of resemblance between Eliot and Abdel-Saboor is their rejection of political oppression; both of them highlight the important function of theatre; they believe that the main goal is to "empower the oppressed against oppressive regimes, acts and norms". (Zohdi, 2012:5)

Eliot's drama aims at criticizing modern European world by rejection the oppression of the modern man and calling for justice and freedom. Similarly, like Eliot Abdel-Saboor in his play "**Night Traveller**" protests against oppression especially against people's identity. The play takes place in a train whose destination is unknown. The action is presented through the dialogue that takes place between two characters: the passenger and the conductor in addition to the commentaries presented by the narrator himself. The conductor is manifested as a symbolic presentation of the oppressor who uses all his authority to enslave the passenger by using many methods and forms of oppression to steal the passenger's identity. In other words, the conductor is seen as an "agent" of oppression who as Fanon, in **The Wretched of the Earth**, states that he practices oppression, but he "doesn't alleviate oppression as a mask of domination. He displays and demonstrates them with the clear conscience of the law enforcer." (Fanon, 2004:4). "**Night Traveller**" Could be seen as a "resistant to the traditional, normative and imperatively resistant to any oppressive thought process". (Zuhdi, 10) Comparatively, Abdel-Saboor resembles Eliot in his refusal of the anti-hero of the modern world. Though people are civilized, yet they are defeated spiritually. Perhaps the best description of the modern man is the lost generation who lives in a Waste Land. For instance Barter explains this feature saying:

Man is defeated in advance: he wants unity, yet meets diversity everywhere,  
 he longs for happiness and for reason, but confronts the unreasonable silence  
 of the world; he wants to know, but he cannot know; he yearns to communicate,  
 but there are no avenues of communication. (Barter 1974:197)

In both Eliot and Abdel-Saboor's works, characters had to expose harsh reality; they struggle in a continuous conflict, and thus they are pathetically fated to suffer in this hostile material world.

Moreover, politics is another feature in common between Eliot and Abdel-Saboor since both of them have their own ideologies that deny the oppression imposed on their character. This rejection of the material European culture is sharpened and introduced in a dramatic form. This is due to the fact that Eliot saw in the Modern European drama of his days many "possibilities", because "When he turned to composing for the theatre, he did not jettison the various sorts of commercial entertainment which held the stage. As occasion allowed, he transformed them." (Grove, 1998: 158)

Eliot was troubled by the political and social ideologies because they are free from any ethical or moral values. He strongly denies the force of political and social theories because in *Essays Ancient and Modern*, he himself states that the "modern world separates the intellect and the emotions", the result would be a "limited technical material" world. (Eliot, 1936:117) in other words; he felt the responsibility of reforming the society, because, "there is no real way of saving or understanding ourselves without understanding and improving society; nor any way of bettering the latter without improving ourselves." (Shausterman,1998:46)

Likewise, Abdel-Saboor portrays his political ideologies represented in his rejection of any form of political oppression ; to do so, he uses theatre to describe the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor .With regard to this point, Pillelensky and Gonic comment on the oppressor/oppressed relation; for them the passivity of the oppressed people and their lack of initiative and ignorance are considered as source of energy that can support the oppressor and offer him a point of strength simply because of their "learned helplessness"( Pillelensky and Gonic,1996:127).

Accordingly, Abdel-Saboor hints that the helplessness of the people is what makes the political agendas impose their power with confidence that the other will not resist or even question their legality ! However; in case any one of the characters goes against the trend, he will be faced with all forms of terrorism; whether physical or psychological .The strength of the degree of the terrorist's measures is to ensure the impossibility of having any sense of hope in any way of political reform; and consequently the individual succumbs to despair. With regard to the psychological terrorism, Abdel-Saboor succeeds in revealing the inner suffering of oppressed as presented by the passenger who suffers a great psychological dilemma because of the conductor. The conductor uses the psychological stress as a weapon to harm the moral situation of the passenger. Actually; he tortures him by hinting all forms of fear. For instance, he coldly tells him how he kills people who refused to obey him. This was intended to destroy the passenger's personality and break his moral spirits and turning him to a slave, a victim, or even more to be a toy in his hands. Actually there are many instances in the play emphasize this fact, for example, when he introduced himself to the passenger, he uses historic figures who are known of their power and strength such as; Alexander the Great!( Abdel-Saboor:21). Also, he manipulated history to serve his goals:

History ,as a paper usually divorced, or usurped by such despots represented by the conductor, is a process in which both moral law and human identity are lost...it[history] becomes in Salah Abdel-Saboor's play a tool in the hand of the conductor dictator to dehumanize the common run of people.(Sarhan,1980:9)

Furthermore, the psychological suffering is described in depth because the passenger reaches the point when he accepts the image drawn by the dictator of him as inferior to him; and consequently believes the political dictator has the right to do anything because he knows better than him .Once the passenger develops this moral complication and surrenders to the oppressor, the dictator's psychological terrorism achieves its goals. This dimension of suffering is achieved when the weak ,colonized people, who are oppressed by their political regimes, view themselves worthless, negative and not deserving any help ;and therefore accept all forms of the oppressor's use of "affective, behavioral, cognitive, linguistic and cultural mechanisms which are "designed to solidify political domination."(Prillelensky and Gonic: 130).

### 2.3 Lack of Individuality

Eliot as a critic highlights the importance of having an individual freedom. Individuality is one of the main goals that he hopes his characters could have. He refuses all forms of authority that erase the individuality of the modern man. He rejects all forms of slavery, oppression, and terrorism. In his article, "Religion without Humanism", Eliot comments on the crisis of the individuals in the Modern Societies, he says: The problem of the unification of the world and the problem of the unification of the individual are, in the end is one and the same problem; and the solution of one is the solution of the other. Analytical psychology...can do little except produce monsters; for it is attempting to produce unified individuals in a world without unity."(Eliot, Religion without Humanism: 112)

Likewise, Abdel-Saboor adopts this positive vision of the individuals and urges his characters to fight for having their own individuality and freedom. Abdel-Saboor criticizes the attempts of dictatorial political Arabic regimes that aim at enslaving their own people. He urges them to refuse all forms of unquestionable authorities, because this will kill human action and sense of hope. No doubt then, the stealing of the identity card is the turning point of the play. Actually it is what this will kill human spirit; and thus kills any possible human development.

In this light, Abdel-Saboor is similar to Eliot because in "*Night Traveller*", Abdel-Saboor symbolizes oppression in the Egyptian society by using many symbols. Injustice and suppression are presented by the use of symbolic characters. Therefore, "*Night Traveller*" is a play about a train journey of a passenger who found himself in a journey of self-discovery. The process of self-discovery is presented in a trial like situation.

As mentioned earlier, Abdel-Saboor seems similar to Eliot in his criticism of all forms of authority that kill the spirituality and the freedom of individuals. However, though Eliot criticizes the political authority in Europe after the end of the World War; Abdel-Saboor takes us to the Arabic world, to the Middle East represented by Egypt in particular. Choosing Egypt as the major setting of the play is important, because it is one of the biggest Arabic countries; and so it symbolizes the entire Arabic world. However, Abdel-Saboor sheds light on the Arabic World in general, and Egypt in particular against the "totalitarian governments" that controlled their countries and "hindered their progress toward democracy, freedom and social justice". (Heba Hosni, 2016:1)

Consequently, the result of such measures will be the lost generation of the Modern Age. This horrifying vision of modern man in the Arabic societies especially the Egyptian society is represented in the attempts of the train conductor to steal the identity card of and ticket from the passenger. He wants to have a complete control on the passenger by killing any sense of hope in him. He kills him with fear; this fact makes the passenger weak and passive in front of this conductor, "who is a symbol of the ruler". Still; he fights for having his identity card because it is the only thing left for him. His identity card is very important for him because it can tell us about his individuality which includes his religion, his ethnicity, language and sex.

Realizing the importance of this card, the conductor attempted many times to steal it to have a complete control over this man so that he could be able to enslave his well. Unfortunately, though the passenger is aware of the dangers of losing his identity card and his attempts to hide it from the conductor, the conductor was successful in stealing the passenger's identity card. This symbolic action results in the erasing of the individuality of the passenger and transforming him into a passive person without any will. In other words he becomes "a slave" who is full of fear and no motive for action or making revolution to restore his own freedom. Having lost his identity card, the passenger felt himself unarmed in this modern world. This fact is expressed by the narrator saying:

What should I do?  
 What can I do?  
 He holds a dagger;  
 I have nothing but my commentary  
 What should I do?  
 What can I do? (Abdel-Saboor, *Night Traveller*:25)

### 3. Eliot Stylistic Influence on Abdel-Saboor

#### 3.1 Poetic Drama

Eliot appreciates the employment of poetry in writing drama; he considers it as a basic element of dramatic construction, not a mere rhythmic expressions. For him, he believes poetry is easier to be understood, on the one hand; and stimulates a vivid interaction among the audience on the other hand. Poetic drama is defined as writing dramatic plot not in prose, but in verse T.S. Eliot insists on leaving the traditional way of writing drama by calling for poetic drama that offers "some quite new selection or structure or distortion", a "reduction of detail...a stripping". (Moody, 1998:161)

Many critics high light Eliot's poetic drama; for example A.D Moody, in "**Four Quarts: Music ,word, meaning and value** ", sheds light on the fact that Eliot's language is more poetic than prose. He chooses poetry to write his plays because of the expressive power of poetry; a fact which gives poetry a privilege over prose. (1998,142) Eliot's style depends on the characters that speak "for themselves" in denaturalized situations, a pattern which is repeated ...advocating that poetry should be brought "into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre". (Moody: 162)

In **Selected Essays**, Eliot appreciates poetic drama than prose as a way of writing because he believes that "what distinguishes poetic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action" (Eliot,1951:232) ; as if it " took place on two planes at once." . He even states that even in "emptiness and irrelevance, in the very "shadow –show "of rhetoric and gestures (Ibid: 225)", we may glimpse, "a pattern behind the pattern into which we perceive in our own lives only rare moments of inattention and detachment, drowsing in sunlight"(Ibid: 232). For Eliot, the poetic drama is a new beginning, a revival of drama and a shift to a new age. He aims to reach "an end and making a new beginning." (Grove, 163) Eliot's poetic drama is another impact on Abdel-Saboour who employs poetry as a method of writing his plays. Abdel-Saboour shows a fantastic skill in writing poetic drama as seen in most of his plays which are written in poetic language .He abandons the traditional narrative techniques and writes in a new way which qualifies him to be a pioneer in reviving the Arabic and Egyptian theatre.

Actually, in "**Night Traveller**", Abdel-Saboour succeeds in introducing the suffering of the hero in a poetic form. He was able to present an accurate presentation of the suffering of the Arabic and Egyptian people in the modern world .Though prose is used as a dominant style in the Arabic theatre, Abdel-Saboour imitates Eliot in making his character employ poetic conversational drama as the "third voice [that of a dramatic character].

Poetry gives the speech a further power and makes the audience sympathize with the traveller's simple lyrical speech:

I'm afraid of my friends rather!  
 Their hearts are gnawed by envy  
 They may smile in my face  
 But black spite will remain in their hearts.  
 I am lonely;  
 It's a lonely life  
 I am lonely (Abdel-Saboour, **Night Traveller:29**)

### 3.2 Symbolism

Another aspect that is similar between Eliot and Abdel-Saboour is their reintroduction of reality in a very critical manner. The characters merge from imagination to reality in a symbolic manner. Many critics analyses Eliot's world; for instance in **The making of T.S. Eliot's plays**, E. Martin Browne discusses Eliot's concern for making his drama original and distinct from other dramatists of his age. Perhaps one of the best motifs in his plays is the quest of love and freedom, but in variant degrees. (Browne, 1969)Symbolism is presented by the major characters, the passenger who symbolizes the ordinary Egyptian man in the modern world and stands for the Arabic character, however, the train conductor stands for the oppressor, the authority and the ruling military regimes. The play portrays an atmosphere full of helplessness and suppression.

There is a very wide gap between the individuals and their government; the lack of democracy leads to corruption and injustice. The play presents the Arabic/ Egyptian society as a boiling pot, a volcano which is about to erupt any time.Abdel-Saboour portrays the political conflict between the people and the ruling classes symbolically. A sense of fear dominates the play from the beginning to the end .The passenger is afraid from the person in authority, "the conductor", this fact explains the character's hopeless situation because of the conductor's killing his "spirit of action, freedom and rebellion and replace them by passivity and fear" (Heba Hosni:1).

Both of Eliot and Abdel-Saboor introduce symbolism in various ways; this could be seen in Eliot's use of ghosts, haunted houses and nightmarish settings. This symbolic world enhances suspicion and mysterious atmosphere. For example in *The Family Reunion*, the nightmarish world strongly imposes itself as a dominant symbol of the helpless modern man in this weird world. Likewise, Abdel-Saboor's "*Night Traveller*" is a journey through history, full of fear and oppression from the times of Alexander the Great to the Vietnam war". (ibid) Another symbol is the journey itself; the passenger travels through history in the past that is reflected in his present :

The action of *Night Traveller* unfolds in a night train, a simple symbol of a barren and sense less journey into the darkness of a meaningless existence. The narrator introduces the passenger as everyman, who poses no special marks of individuality like every modern man. The emptiness of the passenger's life is suddenly filled with depots; Alexander, Hannibal, Timberline, Hitler and Lyndon Johnson, who can be summoned from the memory of history to impose their greatness ". (Hossni, 2008:2) In other words, the play summons many symbolic historic figures such as; Alexander, Hannibal, Timberline, Hitler and Lyndon Johnson, who all share one thing that is they are dictators.

#### 4. Conclusion

In light of this study, there are many points of common between T. S. Eliot and Mohammad Salah Abdel-Saboor. Both of them refuse oppression and terrorism and the dehumanizing of the individuals; or destroying their spiritual morals and ambitions in favour of tyrannical, material, political or philosophical agendas. Both of Eliot and Abdel-Saboor reject injustice and all forms of oppressions which aim at victimizing the spirits of the modern man .This is presented by the symbolic helpless characters and the manifestations of the mysterious, terrifying nightmarish atmosphere. Both of them criticize the nihilistic and the absurd modern life. To conclude, the study proves that T.S .Eliot is considered a direct influence on Abdel-Saboor thematically and stylistically. To sum up, Abdel-Saboor's "*Night Traveller*" proved to be an evidence of Eliot's influence on Abdel-Saboor; it presents a cry against the material culture since it portrays the suffering of the modern man with the political dictators; in which man pathetically resists all the attempts that aim at enslaving or dehumanizing him.

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