

**TEWFIK AL-HAKIM'S FATE OF A COCKROACH AND OLA ROTIMI'S HOLDING
TALKS AS AN ABSURDIST PLAY**

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**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ART (HONS) IN THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY EDO STATE, NIGERIA**

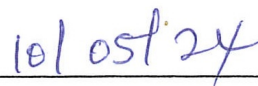
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CERTIFICATION

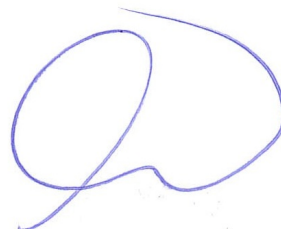
I certify that this study was carried out by Butidem Nseobong in the Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.



Dr. (Mrs) B.D. Okunrobo
Project Supervisor.



Date



10/05/2024

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the only true God who has been my backbone throughout my stay in the University of Benin.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my project supervisor, Dr. (Mrs) B.D. Okunrobo for her invaluable contributions to this project. Her support and dedication were instrumental in making this project a success.

I'm grateful to my parents; Mr. and Mrs. Nseobong for their unwavering support of my education which greatly enhanced my quality and success. I also thank my brothers; Samson, Solomon, and Edidiong.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of all my lecturers to whom I am greatly indebted.

Lastly, I extend my sincere gratitude to God because He has made all these things possible, and also to myself for never giving up and always striving in all ramifications of life.

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the Absurdist themes and dramatic techniques employed by Egyptian playwright Tewfiq Al-Hakim in his play *Fate of a Cockroach* and Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi in *Holding Talks*. Both writers depict the fundamental meaninglessness and absurdity of human existence through nonsensical dialogue, exaggerated unrealistic situations, and an overall sense that life has no purpose or overarching logical explanation. The protagonists in these plays grapple with the existential anguish of being thrown into an irrational universe without any rationale for their suffering. The study adopts a qualitative research method while employing the Absurdist theory. The findings reveal that Al-Hakim and Rotimi, through the use of language, characterization, and description of bizarre actions, successfully capture the philosophy of Absurdism and humanity's futile search for meaning. The study concludes that these two plays exemplify the core tenets of the Absurdist drama movement in their depictions of life as inherently meaningless and paradoxical.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of study

The purpose of this research is to examine Tewfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks* as absurdist dramas that make of nonsensical dialogue, nonlinear narratives, and irrational characters to satirize abuse of power and socio-political decadence pervading the African society. The study achieves this by analyzing the thematic elements and narrative structure of the plays, to reveal the literary prowess of absurdist drama in exposing social problems.

1.2 Scope of study

The boundaries of this research exist within the trends of absurdism in Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. The focus is specifically on how both playwrights harness the power of literary elements (characters, settings, dialogue, spectacle, etc) to convey the idea of absurdism, evoke meaningful questions about life, and challenge the traditional conventions of Africa. However, the study will only focus on the Egyptian and Nigerian Societies based on the cultural backgrounds of both playwrights.

1.3 Methodology

The methodological approach utilized in this study is the qualitative method. Data were obtained from aforementioned texts, articles, research papers, and journals which help to provide a comprehensive analysis of the thematic elements and narrative structure of both plays. Moreover,

to reach the desired goal of this study, we will employ a textual analysis that will help us identify and examine several absurdist features prevalent in drama texts.

1.4 Theoretical Background

The theoretical background on which this research is built is the philosophical theory of Absurdism. In this section, emphasis will be based on the historical context of Absurdism, its definitions by several critics, and its mode of operation in African literature. From the historical context, Absurdism, a profound movement or ideology, emerged within the English theatre during the turn of the 20th century, amidst the aftermath of World War and a pervasive sense of disillusionment. At that time, the devastating impact of the war left a profound mark on individuals and societies, leading to a prevailing sense of disillusionment and existential questioning. In response to this collective unease, it emerged as a distinct artistic and philosophical movement, challenging traditional notions of meaning, purpose, and rationality. This is why the theory was selected for this study to provide an insightful lens through which to examine the portrayal of life's inherent absurdities and human coping mechanisms in Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. Although playwrights and artists, such as Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard are said to have pioneered this movement by depicting the absurdity of human existence, the futility of communication, and the inherent contradictions of life itself through their works, the originator of this philosophy remains elusive, as no definitive figure can be attributed to its inception.

According to Wikipedia, "Absurdism is most closely associated with the philosophy of Albert Camus. However, important precursors and discussions of the absurd are also found in the works of Søren Kierkegaard." Albert Camus was a prominent figure in existentialism, a philosophical movement he published in 1942 in his book however with time, he delved into the notion of the

absurd. Camus indifferent and chaotic nature of the universe. The absurd, as he described it, arises from the inherent conflict between human expectations and the world's refusal to provide satisfying answers. Hence, he challenges individuals to embrace and confront this inherent absurdity, urging them to find their meaning and purpose in a world devoid of inherent significance.

Absurdism, simply put, is a philosophical theory that examines the universe as irrational and meaningless. It helps provide a powerful lens through which an individual can examine the human condition and the perplexing nature of the world. To elucidate further, the concept of Absurdism holds the stance that life and the universe are plagued with nothingness and ironically filled with pain, suffering, and death. Hence, it is illogical for a man to truly acquire meaning in life. According to Neil Cornwell's book the first book to offer a comprehensive survey of the phenomenon of the absurd in a full literary context - entitled, "The Absurd in Literature", Cornwell asserts that Absurdism rejects the pursuit of absolute truths or ultimate meanings, advocating instead for the embrace of uncertainty and the exploration of subjective truths in the face of an incomprehensible universe. He posits that this is vividly expressed in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where each character is trapped in a cyclical and meaningless existence, engaging in futile attempts to find purpose or meaning. No wonder, Beckett deliberately employs repetitive dialogue, absurd situations, and the characters' relentless anticipation of a figure who never arrives, to reflect the illogicality of human pursuit in the universe.

The concept of Absurdism over time has been associated with a broader range of characteristics that further define its scope. These additional features include existential crisis, rejection of absolute truths, an embrace of uncertainty, repetition and circular structures, subversion of traditional conventions, emphasis on individual freedom, among a host of others which this

research also uncovers as reflected in Tewfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. Regarding Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Rotimi's *Holding Talks*, we noticed how both playwrights employ literary techniques such as characterization, nonsensical dialogue, absurd actions, and conflict to criticize the meaningless behaviour in the universe particularly in Egypt and Nigeria that time. Hence, this makes the theory, a complete fit for this research Concerning the presence of Absurdism in African Literature, its existence has become a significant subject of discussion that is adeptly portrayed in numerous African texts. Over time, diverse African writers and researchers have approached absurdism in various manners, with some expressing the belief that it does not align with African Literature, while others assert its relevance.

In Paulin Hountondji's book, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, the central argument on Absurdism in African literature is the notion of its existence. Does Absurdism 'exist at all' or is 'there a separate discourse of its philosophical reasoning that is specifically African?' and 'If at all it exists, what are its procedures?' (55-70). Hence, such marks the arguments that drive its operation mode in African literature. Nevertheless, many now view Absurdism as a relevant philosophical perspective that mirrors the experiences of individuals in postcolonial African societies, where the legacy of colonialism and the challenges of modernization have created a sense of dislocation and alienation. A typical example of this is Tawfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach*, which unveils the sense of dislocation and alienation individuals endure within Nasser's regime. Thus, this exemplifies how the concept of Absurdism becomes a powerful tool for capturing and examining the complex realities of existence in such contexts

1.5 Review of Related Scholarship

In this literature review, concentration is placed on highlighting the focus of other scholars on Tewfiq Al-Hakim's and Ola Rotimi's work with the view of establishing the uniqueness of this thesis. Several scholars have over time unraveled various subject matter in these texts but regrettably, little or nothing has to do with the interrogation of comparative absurdism in them. Therefore, this research examines these comments and sees how they differ from the focus of this thesis.

In an area of literary discourse, a publication by Ikechukwu Asika entitled "We All Are Cockroaches: Absurdist Deconstruction of Tawfik Al-Hakim's Fate of a Cockroach," Asika investigates the absurdist leanings in the play which is allegorically manifested in the intertwined connection between cockroaches and human beings. According to him, Tewfik, through the use of allegory and symbolic elements, juxtaposed human beings side by side with cockroaches in their different worlds and this however, is represented in the fate of Adil and the king of the cockroach which highlights the immense significance of embracing an absurdist view of life in our present-day society. Adil's characterization, Asika believes, personifies the relentless pursuit of progress and power which is driven by the desire to transcend human limitations and change their circumstances while the King Cockroach symbolizes resignation and acceptance of fate. King Cockroach embraces the notion that life is predetermined and that struggling against it is futile while Adil seeks to defy destiny. Whereas, they are both prey in their natural absurd environment. Hence, Asika concludes his research by stating thus;

The cockroaches in their world are prey and ironically, humans too are prey in their human world. They are prey to fate, disease, and many natural disasters... Humans, just like the cockroaches, are in constant fear and struggle against the several hidden dangers and uncertainties of their world" (45) Hence this is what Al-Hakim examines in Fate of a Cockroach.

In another peculiar study entitled "Literature and Social Reality: The Relevance of Tewfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi*," conducted by Echezona Ifejirika and Amechi Obumse, the researchers examine the concept of social reality and the symbolic representation of Egypt's political and social climate during the Gamal Nasser regime as reflected in the play. In this analysis, Ifejirika and Obumse shed light on the profound connections between literature and the societal context where they believe both playwrights employed satire to depict and criticize several uprisings affecting Egypt and Nigeria during that time. Al-Hakim's play, they assert, satirizes President Gamal Nasser's regime in 1954, specifically highlighting his authoritarian tendencies and the centralized power structure that curtailed political freedoms and silenced dissenting voices. It is a play that also examines the feminist uprising in Egypt at that time and emphasizes the need to challenge and dismantle societal norms and gender inequalities. Hence, this reflects the ideology that literature is connected to the prevailing social, political, and religious climate of a given society as reflected in the play.

Another peculiar comment on the concept of absurdism as reflected in Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* is that Stephen Solanke. In his research, Solanke argues that the play reveals the extent to which human limitations and issues stem from the fear of the unknown and Al-Hakim achieves this by contrasting two realms: the cockroach realm and the human realm. This demonstration reveals that to attain true freedom, "humans must strive for an egalitarian society free from absurdity, hollowness, and vulgar crystallization". Hence, Solanke's research presents a compelling analysis of how Al-Hakim's play delves into the depths of existential questions, prompting the audience to question the inherent meaninglessness and irrationality of human existence. For instance, he asserts that the juxtaposition of the cockroach realm represents

instinctual survival with the human realm, plagued by societal constructs. The need for humans to break free from the shackles of absurdity and embrace an egalitarian society based on genuine values and purpose is a must as Adil attempted in the play. Therefore, through Stephen Solanke's research, we gain valuable insights into the play's underlying messages how the contrasting realms of the cockroach and human serve as powerful symbols, exposing the dehumanization caused by societal absurdity and the fear of the unknown.

According to Pierra Cachia, another prominent scholar in the field of absurdist theatre, his analysis of Tewfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* reveals a reinforcement of the idea that the world is filled with absurdity, meaninglessness, and a sense of nothingness. Cachia's research entitled "Idealism and Ideology: The Case of Tewfik Al-Hakim" delves deep into the play's thematic exploration and its connection to the broader existentialist and absurdist movements. He asserts that Al-Hakim employs absurdist techniques to convey the futility of life and the inherent meaninglessness of human existence, drawing from the works of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Hence, the play's portrayal of the cockroach as the central protagonist serves as a metaphor for the human condition trapped within an indifferent and absurd world. Moreover, this is what makes Al-Hakim's play an absurdist play because the playwright's portrayal of the cockroach's struggle for survival, its constant confrontation with death, and its ultimate demise mirror the existential dilemmas faced by human beings.

Also, parallel to Pierra Cachia's comment on Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* is that of Wisdom Nwoga. In his paper, Nwoga compares and contrasts the play to Nigerian society, which is riddled with significant socio-political issues. Unfortunately, those responsible for finding solutions to these problems lack the ideas necessary to address them. Al-Hakim's play "Fate of a Cockroach" has often been associated with the socio-political realities in Egypt, as Nwoga

asserts. The play's utilization of language and metaphors surpasses narrow interpretations, yet we often overlook the fact that it can be considered a critique of the global society, including Nigeria. Hence, the play can be viewed as an interpretative 'deconstruction' that demonstrates the powerlessness of ready-made society, which places the events on the Nigeria canvas together with the idea of social reality. (29)

However parallel to Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* is Rotimi's *Holding Talks* which has also received some critical attention over time. According to Isaiah Ode's paper, Ode illustrates how Rotimi's play can be acknowledged to portray the absurd nature of corruption even during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. While corruption has long been an issue in Nigeria, Ode argues it reached new lows during the pandemic when people's lives were at stake. Resources that could be mobilized to address the economic and hunger crises caused by COVID-19 were shamelessly embezzled and misappropriated by government officials for personal gain. Hence the play, through its absurdist lens, serves as a haunting depiction of this illogical neglect. Moreover, Ode points out specific absurdist aesthetics present in *Holding Talks* that mirror the pandemic-era corruption in Nigeria. Absurdist aesthetics such as unnecessary delays in taking crucial action, obsession with meaningless quest for wealth, and utter disregard for human life which exemplify how Nigerian leaders neglected citizens during the COVID-19 crisis in favour of self-enrichment.

Another peculiar review of Rotimi's *Holding Talks* is that of Patrick Ebewo. In his research, Ebewo examines how Rotimi utilizes elements of the avant-garde Theatre of the Absurd style in crafting this experimental play. He contextualizes the Absurdist theatre movement as emerging in post-war Europe and America during the 1950s, with playwrights using non-realistic, unconventional imagery to express the incomprehensible complexities and futility of human

existence. Moreover, this is what is evident in Rotimi's *Holding Talks*, a play that fully embraces and immerses itself into the Absurdist theatre realm. According to Ebewo, the play embraces many of the stylistic hallmarks a seemingly plotless structure, characters who lack dimension, and dialogue that frequently devolves into apparent gibberish. And through this aspect, Rotimi expresses the absurdities inherent in African/Nigerian philosophical viewpoints on life. However, Ebewo's critique calls into question whether this Absurdist experiment truly connects with African theatrical traditions and audiences for there are intrinsic cultural gaps between the European origins of this avant-garde style and the perspectives of developing Nigerian audiences. Hence, Ebewo cautions that African dramatists must be judicious in such experimental pursuits, lest the theatre become inaccessible and irrelevant to its core purpose and constituents.

A further review of Rotimi's *Holding Talks* is that of Cecil Ozobeme's research entitled "Nigerian Socio-Economic and Political Experience as a Theatre of the Absurd: A Look at Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks*." In her research, Ozobeme evaluates the play as an allegory through which one can view the absurdities and incongruities pervading many facets of life in modern Nigeria. She posits that the quest for socio-political and economic progress in Nigeria has become an increasingly fantastical "pipe dream" filled with absurdist elements. To exemplify this perspective, Rotimi uses the play to satirize and indict the cyclical patterns of political folly, vacuous leadership, and outright "tomfoolery" that have come to characterize Nigerian governance and society. Therefore, the lack of logic, failure to take action, and utter disregard for human dignity by the characters in the play unfold the profound dysfunction and negligence permeating Nigerian institutions and leadership. Moreover, Ozobeme argues that the nonsensical

dialogue and seemingly meaningless endeavors depicted in Holding Talks capture the sheer inanity and absurdity that have become endemic in the nation's social and political realities.

In conclusion, it is pertinent to say, that most of the critical comments have little or nothing to do with the interrogation of a comparative study of absurdism in both plays. Hence, this research will examine these aspects and concepts in Al-Hakim's Fate of a Cockroach and Rotimi's Holding Talks

1.6 Thesis Statement

This study investigates the absurdist features that encompass the meaninglessness of life, nonsensical and illogical dialogues, and exaggerated and unrealistic situations as portrayed in Tewfik Al-Hakim's Fate of a Cockroach and Ola Rotimi's Holding Talks.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF LIFE

As humans, we often seek to uncover the underlying meaning and purpose of our existence, striving to make sense of the world around us. However, within the realm of absurdist drama, such a quest for significance is met with a stark realization that there might be no inherent meaning or purpose at all. This is what is reflected in Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Rotimi's *Holding Talks*, where both playwrights inherently meaningless and purposeless the human nature, and that humans sometimes find themselves trapped in a cycle of futile actions and absurdity, whereas, the unsettling truth is that their existence may ultimately lack meaning. Hence, this is what this chapter examines. This chapter will focus on an exploration of the central theme of meaninglessness in both plays and how through an in-depth analysis of the characters, settings, dialogues and symbolic elements, Al-Hakim and Rotimi portrays the human condition as one fraught with absurdity and devoid of inherent purpose. Several aspects of life's meaninglessness will include; how human's search for meaning is ultimately futile because the universe is indifferent, how humans are prey in the human world, and how every individual should embrace the absurdist of their existence which will be discussed subsequently.

From the opening scene of the play *Fate of a Cockroach*, there is a reflection that the human search for meaning is futile because the universe is indifferent and devoid of meaning. Al-Hakim demonstrates this through his juxtaposition of two realms the insect realm and the human realm to show that the existential struggle for meaning is a part of human nature and, moreover ultimately filled with sense of desolation and despair. The allegorical character King Cockroach and his human contrast Adil unveils how humans have an innate desire to seek meaning and purpose. Humans they reflect, have countless dreams and aspirations and pursue happiness, but

the truth is the world is much as absurd as it seems. Hence, their pursuits ultimately led to disillusionment and despair, and even worse, death. Just like King Cockroach in Adil's bathroom, whom trying to find meaning to his existence meet his fate by falling on his back. Thus his character, embodies the inherent futility of human endeavours and the representative of the insect world.

He symbolizes the insignificance of individual lives within the vastness of the universe and confronts the indifferent nature of existence. Also, through King Cockroach actions, Al-Hakim captures the existential dilemma faced by human beings and explores the notion of hardship, struggle and fear that befalls them even when they attempt to attain growth in life. For instance, despite King Cockroach's regal title, he exists within the confines of a small and insignificant world, a decrepit toilet in which he scurries about in search of sustenance and survival. He can't feed his wife, Queen Cockroach, which she rebuffed at the very beginning, cannot rule or control his subordinate, and does not even know the essence of true leadership, so why is he, King? (3). This, therefore, is a typical example of dark humour Al-Hakim explores to criticize human's search for meaning as a futile pursuit because the universe is indifferent and devoid of one. Al-Hakim demonstrated this when Queen Cockroach condemns King Cockroach's meaningless quest for purpose by saying:

QUEEN: To you rather. It is your sickly imagination that always makes it appear to you that there is a difference between us.

KING: Please no sarcasm! I have an ever-growing feeling that you're always trying to belittle my true worth.

QUEEN: Your worth?

KING: Yes, and my authority. You are always trying to diminish my authority.

QUEEN: (even more sarcastically) Your authority? Your authority over whom?

Not over me at any rate -you are in no way better than me. You don't provide me with food or drink. Have you ever fed me? I feed myself just as you feed yourself.

Do you deny it?

KING: In the whole cockroach Kingdom there is no one who feeds another. Every cockroach strives for his own daily bread.

QUEEN: Let me be then. It is I who will decide when I shall work and when the lazy, when to sleep and when to get up. (3).

The above excerpt paint a picture of how King Cockroach's struggles mirror humans who, like him, navigate a vast and seemingly uncaring universe- people who attempt to find food and evade danger, but often end in frustration and disillusionment. And likewise, people who despite their best efforts, are confronted with the stark reality that the universe remains indifferent to their struggles and aspirations. Thus, this juxtaposition underscores the inherent futility of human endeavours, as King Cockroach's actions ultimately become a poignant reminder of the transitory nature of life and the absence of any predetermined meaning. Consequently, this fact lay bare in Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. In *Holding Talks*,

Rotimi also uncovers the concept of life's meaninglessness through the senseless "talks" between the Barber, his Apprentice, and Man. These characters, consumed by futile discussions, neglect the essential aspects of existence in the play. They engage in aimless banter, discussing trivial

matters from shop appliances to "hand shaking" to beggars, which ultimately leads to the Barber's demise. Moreover, the Barber's death serves as a reminder of the absurdity of human existence, as the character called Man, who professes knowledge and generosity, callously abandons the dying Barber to engage in trivial conversation. And worse, even in the face of the Barber's death, Man remains indifferent, dehumanizing the Barber by referring to him as a mere "pumpkin" and callously scavenging from his lifeless body. This stark portrayal, therefore, underscores the inherent futility of human endeavors and highlights death as the only certainty amidst the chaos of existence. An example of discussion that reflects the meaningless of life in the play is the conversation between the Apprentice and Man about London Bridge, despite Barber's corpse lying on the floor, which serves as a portrayal of humans' trivial pursuits amidst the existential crisis. They assert thus;

APPRENTICE: But we can't... just leave him like this, sir, maybe the doctor can still... do something

MAN: D'you want to bet?... 'Doctor' says he, 'doctor can still do something for this man.' (start jog-trotting about the room.) Rescue is just around the corner, come along folks... London Bridge is falling down falling down, falling...

London, my boy, is the only city in the entire universe where they bridges fall. Ha, yes... Run, Harry, Parry, run: how many R's are there in that... (importantly, as he advances toward the body of the Barber) And you want to know a secret?

APPRENTICE: (also approaching the body, ready to carry it) What Sir?

MAN: (Bends over body lifting a leg) Not one. Not a single pupil liked him. (Drops the leg and continues his narration, more urgently.) Now, at the other end, listen to this. (18)

The above excerpt, therefore, highlights the meaninglessness of life pervading the human world. As these characters engage in trivial banter and neglect the urgent situation at hand, they epitomize the absurdity and indifference inherent in human existence.

Another aspect that adds to the meaninglessness of life in the play is the portrayal of humans as prey in the human world. Humans are inevitably affected by disease, weather, natural disasters, and ultimately, death in a world devoid of meaning.

They are prey in the face of unpredictable circumstances and the relentless march of time. This, therefore, raises the profound question of the purpose behind our struggles and the search for meaning in life. According to Al-Hakim's view on death in the play, death is an inevitable fate that questions the significance of our efforts and endeavours. It is the definitive end, leading to a state of nothingness and oblivion. Hence, his exploration of the human condition in the face of mortality adds to the overall sense of meaninglessness in the play, which thereby prompts contemplation about the ultimate purpose and value of our existence in the light of our inevitable demise. In the play, Adil and Queen Cockroach serve as characters that raise questions about the inherent fate of mankind. They illuminate the limitations placed upon human aspirations and dreams by both known and mysterious forces that may ultimately bring man to his end. Queen Cockroach, driven by a desperate search for a solution, strives to avoid the fate that befell the minister's son, who tragically succumbed to the ants after falling on his back. Meanwhile, her husband indulges in the unnecessary glorification of his authority, oblivious to the fact that he himself will eventually face the same fate. Adil, on the other hand, compels his wife Samia and the doctor to recognize the absurdity of killing King Cockroach, who is merely trying to survive the fate that has befallen him through a twist of circumstance. He emphasizes the inhumanity of

such an act, challenging them to consider their own attachment to the cockroach if they claim he has become overly fond of it. Hence, this highlights the fragility of human existence and the inherent vulnerability that exists despite our attempts to assert control and authority. Moreover, this dialogue is demonstrated in act one and consequently act two where the group of cockroaches assert the following:

King: What reminded you of the ants?

Queen: Their being a continual threat to us. A queen like me, in my position and with my beauty, elegance and pimp can't take a step without trembling for fear that I might skip and fall on my back and woe to me should I fall on my back, for I would become a prey to the armies of the ants.

King: Be careful, therefore, that you do not talk on your back!

Queen: Is that the only solution you have? ... (4)

Minister: But it must do, because we can't go on like this forever, having the ants attacking us and not being able to drive them off.

Queen: The Minister is right, we must think seriously about this danger.

Minister: And who will do so?

Savant: You and His Majesty the King-that's your job.

King: Our job! (11)

Savant: These are all questions which cannot be answered scientifically (13).

This above exert of the play thus underscores the vulnerability and insignificance of human existence, highlighting the inherent challenges and struggles that contribute to the overall sense of futility and lack of purpose in life. Little wonder Adil reveals the profound despair and existential anguish that arises from contemplating the inevitability of death, suggesting that man must accept such a fate as it encapsulates the ultimate meaninglessness inherent in our mortal condition. That a man will only find freedom and liberation by embracing the inherent chaos and unpredictability of life, allowing themselves to live authentically and fully in the face of the existential void. Therefore, through the portrayal of characters like Adil, Samia, and the symbolic representation of King Cockroach, the play invites individuals to question their own notions of meaning and purpose, encouraging a more introspective and independent exploration of the absurdity that permeates human existence. For instance, it is ironic that Adil refuses to help or save King Cockroach, instead choosing to witness his struggle.

He expresses his admiration for the cockroach, recognizing that despite their fatigue as humans from observing King Cockroach, the insect persists in its relentless pursuit of survival. This, therefore, implies that individuals should not burden themselves with striving for a specific purpose, but rather accept the inevitable fate of destruction and embrace the inherent meaninglessness of life. No wonder he asserts thus when interrogated by the doctor;

Doctor: What hope has it of escaping?

Adil: No hope of course.

Doctor: Unless you were to intervene and save it.

Doctor: Why not, seeing you admire it?

Adil: I must leave it to its fate (68).

Rotimi's *Holding Talks* also illustrates the harsh reality that humans are vulnerable prey in this world, subject to the meaninglessness and absurdity of life. In the play, Barber's sudden and untimely death while simply going about his daily routine underscores how fragile and transient human life can be. His demise reduces all his efforts and struggles to utter meaninglessness, as evidenced by the callous way the character Man desecrates his body, stealing his meager possessions and even allowing a journalist to sensationalize the tragedy. This crass violation of human dignity in death serves as a metaphor for the existential emptiness that can render life itself pointless and devoid of significance. An example of this is when Man asserts:

MAN: (addressing dead man vaguely) So you don't know Gabriel? Chock-full-of-ants! (Dogs further into the dead man's pocket emptying it inside out)

Well, brother, you won't be needing these now. (Rifles the other pocket, finds some money in it) Hmm... The five pence he was saving for lunch (Looks at the body) Well, brother, you won't be needing these now (Puts it in his pocket, searches other pocket, undoes the trouser, dips two fingers into the pocket of the drawer. Finds another coin)

Ah-ah! A threepence! A three whole live pence. I thought you said had only ten pence and five pence with you" (32)

The above excerpt, therefore, demonstrates how swiftly the trappings of life can be stripped away, leaving only a corpse to be exploited and mocked, bereft of the respect and sanctity it once held as a living, breathing human being. It shows how humans are prey to traumatic circumstances in a world devoid of meaning and purpose.

Also, *Fate of a Cockroach* and *Holding Talks* highlights religion as an aspect that underscores the inherent meaninglessness of life. It portrays how humans often view religion as a desperate attempt to find purpose and meaning in a universe that appears devoid of inherent structure and significance. For instance, through each character's interactions and dialogue in *Fate of a Cockroach*, Al-Hakim portrays the way religion is often used as a coping mechanism, providing a sense of comfort and structure in the face of life's apparent emptiness. Therefore, one can say the text raises questions about the authenticity of these religious beliefs and whether they truly offer a substantial foundation for a meaningful existence. In the play, Al-Hakim presents the character of the priest (a member of the King Cockroach cabinet) as a representation of religious authority and influence. The priest's role serves as a critique of the institutionalised nature of religion, highlighting the potential for manipulation and hypocrisy within organized faith systems. When asked for a solution to the problem of the ant, for instance, the priest offered only prayer as a possible remedy, citing the existence of a supreme being. And even went ahead to illustrate a story of a near-death encounter with the ants, where his prayers resulted in water falling from the sky, subsequently eliminating them.

However, unbeknownst to him, the readers are aware that this event is a metaphorical reflection of the irony and criticism surrounding religion, as it parallels the use of insecticides by humans to eradicate pests. This assertion is evident in his statement where he declares;

PRIEST: Once, I was lying ill in the corner when I saw the armies of ants approaching. I was certain that I was done for. I called upon the gods with a prayer that came from the depths of my heart. Suddenly I saw that something looking like a large dark cloud full of water had descended from the skies and swooped down upon the armies of ants and swept them quite away, clearing them off the face of the earth. (16).

In the above excerpt, Al-Hakim skillfully critiques the absurd mentality prevalent among many humans who place their entire purpose in a potentially non-existent supreme being, consequently rendering the universe itself devoid of meaning. Instead of these humans seeking practical solutions to their problems, they tend to resort to prayer, even though the outcomes of their prayers may have been mere coincidences, as Savant Cockroach points out in the play. Moreover, this meaningless display is also demonstrated in Holding Talks. In Rotimi's Holding Talks, the character, Man does not believe in God or religion. He thinks religion is just used to control people and make them afraid. The Man does not think religion makes people want to be good or work hard. Instead, he believes religion makes people lazy and okay with not doing their best. This leads to a meaningless life. Little wonder the Man mocks and questions God all the time. He wonders why, if God exists, bad things like the Barber suddenly dying would happen. If religion gave true purpose, tragedies like this would not occur. Hence, by showing the Man's disbelief in religion, the play highlights how religion fails to provide real meaning and allows for a meaningless existence. No wonder in Fate of a Cockroach, Al-Hakim utilizes Adil as a portrayal of how humanity has been forsaken by God, or even worse, how God has ceased to care about our very existence. Hence, Adil steps in as the saviour of King Cockroach when Samia demands its demise. He willingly allows himself to appear insane and unwell in the eyes of both the doctor and Samia, all for the sake of protecting the cockroach. However, in a twist of events, he renounces and rejects the cockroach, symbolizing a profound shift in his belief system and reflecting the idea that God has abandoned or ceased to care about humanity. A typical example is when the Doctor and Samia interrogate Adil, while he makes the following claims:

SAMIA: I have a question, Adil? May I?

ADIL: Of course, Samia- ask it.

SAMIA: Have you not thought of rescuing it from its predicament?

ADIL: Rescuing it?

SAMIA: Yes, why don't you rescue it?

ADIL: it's rescuing itself.

SAMIA: How can it rescue itself? It will never be able to. All the time its attempts are in vain because the bath is empty and slippery; there is nothing for it to climb up but the slippery sides on which it loses its foothold.

ADIL: That's up to it.

SAMIA: At least help it. Give it a little help, Adil. For example, let the end of the towel hang over inside the bath, or bring a piece of string and dangle it over the side or anything that'll help it to get out.

ADIL: And why should we do that?

SAMIA: To get it out, to get it out alive. Don't to want it to be saved?

ADIL: Who said I wanted it to be saved?

The above excerpt, therefore, reflects the notion that God abandons humanity in the face of their trials, which contrasts with what the priest claims about seeking help from him, particularly in critical moments such as the one with the ants. Moreover, Al-Hakim explores this to suggest that not only does God appear absent or indifferent, but he also may not exist at all, leaving humanity

to navigate their own fate without divine intervention. This is reflected in subsequent scenes where

Adil emphatically asserts:

DOCTOR: What hope has it of escaping?

ADIL: No hope of course.

DOCTOR: Unless you were to intervene and save it?

ADIL: And I shall not intervene

DOCTOR: Why not, seeing that you admire it?

ADIL: I must leave it its fate. (68).

In conclusion, Al-Hakim's "Fate of a Cockroach" delves into the profound themes of meaninglessness and the human struggle to find purpose in an indifferent world to show that life, with all its complexities and inherent absurdities, defies rational explanations and predetermined meanings. Hence by accepting the inevitability of destruction and recognizing the inherent meaninglessness of life, individuals can potentially find freedom in living authentically and on their own terms.

CHAPTER THREE

NONSENSICAL AND ILLOGICAL DIALOGUES

Dialogue is one important feature of drama that serves as the vessel through which characters express their thoughts, emotions, and intentions. It is employed by playwrights to propel their narrative forward and facilitate character development. However, in Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach*, and Rotimi's *Holding Talks* dialogue takes on a remarkably different role. Rather than functioning as a straightforward means of communication, the dialogue within these plays embraces the absurd, the nonsensical, and the illogical. Hence, this deliberate departure from conventional norms invites one to delve into the branch of absurdist theatre, where dialogue (language) transcends its traditional purpose and becomes a reflection of the chaotic, perplexing nature of human existence. In both plays, the dialogue employed by characters can be categorized as illogical and nonsensical due to how every character employs unnecessary clichés, repetitions, conversations lacking clear context, and responses that fail to logically follow the preceding statements. They meander aimlessly and even contradict themselves at times. However, one of the most striking examples is the excessive reliance on clichés.

Within Al-Hakim's play, the excessive reliance on clichés and the needless repetition of conversations among characters renders the use of dialogue both illogical and absurd. These characters, both humans and cockroaches, reiterate previously expressed thoughts and engage in a circular pattern, and although it advances the play's plot, it simultaneously mirrors the absurdity inherent in the human world. It can be asserted that a substantial portion of the dialogue lacks inherent meaning and fails to align with external reality. Nonetheless, Al-Hakim harnesses this peculiarity to scrutinize commonplace conversations, where repetitive statements are made ceaselessly, yielding no solutions or earnest attempts at implementation in society. For

instance, the dialogues between the King Cockroach and his subjects regarding the Ants' predicament culminate in a state of futility. And even with repeated conversations, one begins to observe how certain societal groups talk about solving problems affecting society but do not follow through with actions. Hence, this excessive repetition of dialogue in the play makes it illogical. A typical example is the phone call conversation with Adil on page 32 and the subsequent exchange involving Samia on page 39. The dialogue used is not only repetitive but also entirely unnecessary within the text. They speak to one unknown Mr Raafat on the phone. Ironically, it is the same conversational pattern on these two different occasions. Adil asserts thus;

ADIL: (He goes to the telephone on the table, lifts the receiver and dials a number.) Hulloo. Hulloo. Raafat? Good morning, Raafat. Listen. Listen. No, no, I'm not upset. Do you think I sound upset? No, no, not at all. I... I'm only... tell me: are you awake? Ah, of course you're awake seeing that you're talking to me. No, no. . . I meant . . . have you had your bath? Oh yes . . .good. no, I haven't done anything yet. I got up early. That's the root of the problem. Tell me, talking about baths... yes, baths . . . has nothing. I only wanted to talk to you, merely to. . . merely alarmed. I'm only . . . actually, I feel that I'm. . . yes, I'm not completely all right. No, it's not all that bad. Of course, I'll go out. Yes, we'll meet at the factory as usual. . . I'm fine. . .fine, Raafat. 'Bye. Bye'. (32)

The above excerpt reflects the Intentional manipulation of dialogue and how it serves as a distinctive feature of unnecessary repetition and cliché which present a distorted reflection of human communication within the play. The characters' tendency to resort to clichés and repetitious exchanges portrays their struggle to convey realistic meaning. Hence, the overuse of clichés in the play contributes to the play's exploration of the hollowness within societal

conventions. Moreover, by employing these trite phrases, Al-Hakim uses his characters to expose the emptiness that often lies beneath the surface of everyday interactions. Therefore, the technique underscores Al-Hakim's critique of the conventional modes of conversation that people adhere to without questioning. He prompts the audience to reconsider the true significance of the words they use and the messages they convey. The use of clichés and repeated dialogue not only highlights the absurdity of human existence but also brings forth a distinct array of drawbacks within the play. For instance, one of the foremost disadvantages of repetitive dialogue lies in the dilution of meaning. When these characters engage in repeated conversations, the significance of their words diminishes. What might have held weight and importance during the initial exchange gradually loses its impact. Therefore, the repetition creates an ironic dissonance where crucial discussions become trivial through redundancy. An example is Adil and Samia conversation when they encounter King Cockroach in the toilet.

SAMIA: We've got to put an end to it.

ADIL: And how do we put an end to it? This is something which is not in our hands.

SAMIA: In whose hands, then?

ADIL: (pointing to the cockroach) In its hands. It's still climbing.

SAMIA: And also still falling

ADIL: Yes, it climbs, then it rolls over, then it falls. Note the procedure: climbs, then slips, then rolls over, then falls to the bottom of the bathtub.

SAMIA: It climbs, then slips, then rolls over, then falls to the bottom of the bath-tub

ADIL: Exactly. Then it starts again, without resting, without respite. It climbs...

SAMIA: Then it slips...

ADIL: Then it rolls over...

SAMIA: Then it falls

ADIL: Then it climbs

SAMIA: Then it slips...

In the above excerpt, a fine thread of repetitive dialogue comes into play. Initially, encountering the first instance of this dialogue held significance; however, upon its second occurrence, it transforms into something absurd and redundant. Likewise, the persistent recycling of dialogue can result in stagnant characterization. Characters fail to evolve, as they find themselves trapped in an endless loop of the same phrases and responses. Hence, this limitation stifles their growth and depth, leaving them mere vessels for repeated speech rather than individuals who develop throughout the narrative. Characters like Minister Cockroach, Priest, and Savant Cockroach for instance can be observed to have undergone limited development due to the recycling of their dialogue throughout the play. After delving into their portrayal, it becomes challenging to articulate meaningful insights about these characters due to this act. Hence, the lack of progression renders these characters one-dimensional and devoid of the complexity that enriches the themes of the play. Consequently, this fact lay bare in Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. In *Holding Talks*, the characters also engage in excessive use of cliches and unnecessary repetitions which makes their dialogue nonsensical and illogical. Consequently, this fact lay bare in Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. In *Holding Talks*, the characters also engage in excessive use of cliches and unnecessary repetitions which makes their dialogue nonsensical and illogical. Rather than driving the plot forward, the characters meander aimlessly and it makes the conversations

redundant and meaningless. They are involved in conversations lacking clear context and repetition. However, Rotimi uses this feature to illustrate that life is devoid of meaning and the conversations humans engage in at times are pointless and absurd. Particularly, those in barbing shops, bus stops, newspaper stands, salons etc. These conversations are majorly meaningless and illogical. After a series of "Talks" the two individuals may have derived nothing from the conversation and their dialogues simply highlight the futility and absurdity of human communication at times. The lack of coherence, logic, and substance in their exchanges mirrors the randomness and senselessness that pervades the human condition. Rotimi's employment of this nonsensical dialogue, therefore, serves as a commentary on the inherent contradictions that underlie our attempts to make sense of existence through language and interpersonal interactions. An example of unnecessary use of cliches and repetition in the play is when Man and Barber converse thus;

MAN: Pick it up

BARBER: What?

MAN: That

BARBER: Comb?

MAN: Comb

BARBER: Comb

MAN: Comb. Pick it up

MAN: Raise it up... down... up... down... up... down... hep... hap... hep hap... hep... hap... hep...
hap... stop (7)

Another aspect that makes the use of dialogue illogical and nonsensical in the plays is how characters' conversations lack clear context and how they passionately discuss trivial matters. This deliberate choice by Al-Hakim and Rotimi serves to amplify the absurdist nature of their play, drawing attention to the inherent chaos and meaninglessness that can permeate human communication. In Al-Hakim's play, the absence of clear context within dialogues adds to the perplexity of interactions among characters. Characters often engage in exchanges where the subject matter is ambiguous or completely detached from the situation at hand. This absence of context not only confounds the audience but also underscores the challenge of establishing genuine understanding in a world characterized by its nonsensical nature. Thus, the characters seem to exist in a place where communication lacks a solid foundation, perpetuating their struggle to connect meaningfully. For instance, the dialogue of Adil is particularly striking in its lack of meaning and context in the play. At times, his conversation appears rational; at other times, his words take on an almost irrational quality. Thus, this lack of structure and direction in his conversation leaves listeners puzzled and questioning the coherence of his thoughts. Adil's dialogue therefore becomes a reflection of the absurdity that permeates the play. It highlights the unpredictability and inconsistency of human expression. Hence, this disorganized manner of communication adds to the overall atmosphere of confusion and underscores the broader themes of the play. An example is when Adil and Samia confuse themselves between tap and radio.

SAMIA: I haven't yet read the morning papers.

ADIL: What are you talking about?

SAMIA: I'm telling you to occupy yourself usefully until I've finished having my bath

ADIL: Occupy myself?

SAMIA: Yes, with anything, because I want quiet —quiet

ADIL: Quiet? You tell me to be quiet?

SAMIA: Listen, Adil, turn on the radio.

ADIL: Turn on what?

SAMIA: Turn the tap on

ADIL: The tap? You want me to turn the tap on for you as well? But the tap's where you are.

SAMIA: I told you to turn on the radio

ADIL: The radio?

SAMIA: Yes, the radio.

ADIL: You said the tap.

SAMIA: The tap? Would I be so crazy to day such a thing. .

The above excerpt demonstrates one of the evident illogical and nonsensical dialogue utilized in the play and how it lacks context or adds meaning to the plot other than absurdity. Moreover, this is also common with *Man in Holding Talks*. In the play, Man's conversation lacks clear context. It is disjointed and many times got Apprentice confused. He does not stick to one stream of thoughts. One minute Apprentice is with him, the next minute, he is lost in oblivion, attempting to grasp what has been said. However, Rotimi uses this to reflect the fragmented and incoherent nature of human thoughts and experiences. Hence, Man's conversation lacking clear context serves as a metaphor for the disjointed and nonsensical aspects of reality that we often struggle to make sense of. His rapidly shifting trains of thought and abrupt subject changes mirror the

chaotic lifestyle and flow of consciousness itself, laying bare the challenges we face in imposing order and logic upon our lived experiences as demonstrated in the play. Likewise, the passionate discussion of trivial matters further exemplifies the absurdity that Al-Hakim aims to convey in his play. Characters invest fervent energy into debates about insignificant topics, highlighting the paradox of their intense emotional investment in matters of little consequence. This facet mirrors the futile pursuits that individuals often engage in, attaching great significance to trivialities while ignoring more profound concerns. Hence, the passionate discourse on the trivial serves as a reflection of the playwright's critique of the misplaced priorities of society. An illustrative example of this occurs during a discussion involving King Cockroach, Queen Cockroach, Minister, Priest, and Savant.

SAVANT: This has today become confirmed from a scientific point of view. If a number of cockroaches gather together in one place, and there is a bright, dazzling light, mountains that neither pinnacles nor peaks move and trample upon our trop, utterly squashing them. At other times there teems down a choking rain that destroys everyone of us.

QUEEN: And what is the reason for this, O Savant?

SAVANT: Natural phenomena

KING: And why do these natural phenomena only occur when several cockroaches are assembled?

SAVANT: Science has not yet arrived at an explanation

KING: And what is the true nature of these moving mountains and this annihilating, choking rain?

QUEEN: These moving mountains and this choking rain, are they intended to destroy us?

SAVANT: These are all questions which cannot be answered scientifically.

QUEEN: Then why do this catastrophe only occur when we are assembled together?

SAVANT: I do not know, Your Majesty. All that science can do is to record these phenomena...

In essence, the lack of clear context and the passionate discussion of trivial matters within character dialogues in the play contribute to the illogical and nonsensical nature of the play's communication landscape. And by emphasizing these aspects, Al-Hakim and Rotimi expose the inherent challenges of meaningful conversation and unveil the absurdity that underlies human interaction in a world where logic often takes a backseat to irrationality

Another facet contributing to the illogical use of dialogue in the play is the occurrence of conversations in which characters engage in dialogues where responses fail to logically follow the preceding statements. For instance, what one character asks is not always what another character responds to. This interference in various forms tends to make the conversation dull for readers. However, Al-Hakim and Rotimi employ these tactics to amplify the absurdist atmosphere of the plays. In Al-Hakim's play, characters often seem to exist in a state of discordant communication. Their exchanges take unexpected turns, diverging from the logical path set by the initial dialogue. This serves to highlight the absurdity of communication breakdown, where the intended message gets lost or distorted in the process of interaction. And the resultant illogical dialogues mirror the chaotic nature of existence, where individuals grapple to convey their thoughts accurately, only to find themselves lost in a maze of disjointed responses. For instance, this occurs in the conversation between Adil and Samia, as illustrated below;

ADIL: By what right do you go in before me?

SAMIA: I came in and there's an end to it

ADIL: But it's a matter of principle

SAMIA: A matter of what?

ADIL: Of principle— of principles. Don't you know what principles are?

SAMIA: I haven't read the morning papers.

ADIL: what are you talking about? (29)

The provided excerpt represents just a fraction of instances where responses fail to logically align with the preceding statements made by other characters. Hence, the cumulative effect of such instances underscores the pervasive nature of illogical communication within the play. Moreso, it is evident in Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. In the play, Man is an example of a character who deviates a lot from what is being said. His conversation is not coherent and he does not answer the questions that he is asked or respond appropriately to the Apprentice's statements. This interference in various forms tends to make the conversation dull and frustrating for readers. However, Rotimi employs this tactic to amplify the absurdist atmosphere of the play and reflect the disconnected, irrational nature of human communication and the inability to attain true understanding through language. Man's nonsensical responses and abrupt subject changes highlight the fundamental limitations of dialogue to convey deeper truths or facilitate genuine connections between individuals. Hence, Rotimi not only engages the audience's attention with this dialogue but also prompts them to question the nature of language and communication itself.

Therefore, this use further offers a layer of symbolic meaning beneath the surface of absurdity. An example illustrating this occurs when Man and Apprentice converse thus;

APPRENTICE: Are you sure he is dead? Sir?

MAN: Aren't you?

APPRENTICE: How do you know, Sir?

MAN: Does his heart beat?

APPRENTICE: Isn't his body still warm Sir?

MAN: What about the eyes?

APPRENTICE: What is wrong with the eyes Sir?

MAN: What normally happens to the eyes?

The excerpt above illustrates how Rotimi employs nonsensical and illogical dialogue to create an absurdist atmosphere. Instead of directly answering the Apprentice's straightforward question about whether the Barber is dead, Man responds with a series of rhetorical questions that do not logically follow from or address the Apprentice's initial inquiry. This purposeful subversion of conventional dialogue norms encourages a deeper contemplation of the role language plays in shaping our perception of reality and the inherent barriers we face in attaining genuine mutual understanding.

Another aspect of the use of illogical and nonsensical dialogue in these plays is that they mirror the absurdity and irrationality of human existence, emphasizing man's struggles and futile attempts to find meaning. Al-Hakim and Rotimi employ absurd dialogue to depict a world where human existence seems inherently meaningless and devoid of rationality. Their characters

engage in nonsensical conversations, often talking past each other, using disjointed language, and failing to understand one another. This breakdown in communication highlights the absurdity of human interactions, where genuine understanding and connection are elusive. Moreover, this dialogue reflects existential themes of alienation, isolation, and the search for purpose in an indifferent universe. For instance, King Cockroach experiences the human world from Adil and Samia's conversations which underscores the absurdity of human behaviour. As he observes their irrational actions, it becomes clear to him that humans are detached like the insect species, which thereby represent a lens through which to view the absurdity of human existence. Hence, these actions and conversations highlight the human condition's inherent absurdity, where individuals often find themselves entangled in mundane and meaningless pursuits. And by presenting characters who engage in irrational behaviour and meaningless conversations, Al-Hakim exposes the absurdity of certain social constructs and the expectations placed on individuals. Correspondingly, this is evident in Rotimi's *Holding Talks* where the conversations between Man and Apprentice frequently descend into utter nonsense and illogical tangents. Their dialogue is rife with paradoxical statements, and responses that seem to willfully misinterpret or ignore what the other has said. Through this maddening interplay of nonsensical dialogue, Rotimi seems to suggest that human communication itself is an inherently flawed and futile effort to impose order and logic on an essentially chaotic, irrational existence. The audience is left to ponder whether the characters' inability to follow coherent trains of thought reflects a deeper existential inability to find true meaning in life itself.

In conclusion, the use of absurdist dialogue in *Fate of a Cockroach* and *Holding Talks* disrupts traditional patterns of communication and social norms, leading to a breakdown of meaningful interaction and societal order. Through disjointed and nonsensical conversations, Al-Hakim and

Rotimi challenge the notion of language as a reliable tool for understanding, question the legitimacy of established power structures, and satirize the hollowness of social conventions. By doing so, the plays serve as a reflection of the chaotic and irrational nature of human existence and highlight the absurdity of attempting to find meaning and order in a world that lacks coherence.

CHAPTER FOUR

EXAGGERATED AND UNREALISTIC SITUATIONS

In an absurdist play, the line between reality and unreality is always complicated, giving rise to unconventional theatrical experiences. Many a time, absurdist writers utilize exaggerated or implausible scenarios to explore the meaninglessness of human pursuit and human predicaments in their plays. They challenge traditional narrative structures and prompt audiences to question the nature of existence and societal norms. Hence, this style is also what is evident in Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. In both plays, the conventional ideas of what is real and what is rational are complicated, inviting readers to grapple with unrealistic, absurd situations that defy normal logic and reason. Al-Hakim and Rotimi employ absurd characters, settings, situations and dialogue to question the ordinary pursuit of human existence and claim that the world itself is full of absurdity. Moreover, they accomplish this by exploring exaggerated and unrealistic situations. Hence this chapter focuses on those unrealistic themes and style, and how it contributes to the plot development. One of the most prominent instances of exaggeration in Al-Hakim's play is the metamorphosis of the cockroach and its subsequent perspective on human behaviour and actions. Al-Hakim delves into the realm of insect cockroach and imbues it with human attributes. These cockroaches can speak, feel, be emotional, pursue life's goals, and even experience suffering which thereby creates an atmosphere that is both unrealistic and absurd.

Hence, this fosters the absurdist qualities of the play. Moreover, by depicting this metamorphosis, Al-Hakim creates a symbolic clue on the absurdity of identity and human suffering. For instance, the cockroach's newfound human consciousness and language highlight the contrast between its altered form and the expectations placed upon it by the human world.

Al-Hakim employs this portrayal to expose the idea that human life inherently lacks meaning, and in some way or another, its ultimate conclusion is death as evident in King Cockroach's situation and that of the Minister's son. However, this theme of exaggerated and unrealistic situations undergoes a different approach in Rotimi's *Holding Talks*. In the play, the death of the character Barber serves as a satirical clue on society's irrational obsession with viral posts and info about human welfare. When the journalists come to the barbershop, the character Man acts very excited to help them take inappropriate pictures of Barber's dead body from weird angles showing his private parts, armpits and buttocks areas. Instead of feeling bad for Barber or trying to help him, Man is just happy that his name might be in the newspaper. This weird scenario is an exaggerated example of how selfishness and wanting to be famous can make people forget about being a good human being. Most people would not position a dead person's body just to get scandalous photos. But Rotimi makes the behaviour so over-the-top to make a point.

Another manifestation of exaggerated and unrealistic situations within Al-Hakim's play is the interactions between humans and cockroaches. These interactions create a clear juxtaposition between the ordinary and the extraordinary, as the human characters attempt to navigate conversations and engagements with creatures that, in the play's universe, possess human-like qualities. A notable instance emerges as Adil engages in conversation with King Cockroach atop the bathtub, imploring it to climb higher or meet his potential end by Samia. Adil admonishes King Cockroach for its perceived hesitance, berates it for its lack of effort, and goes as far as drawing a parallel between both of them, suggesting they share the same perspective of defiance against the world. This situation further leads to the point where both Doctor and Samia begin to perceive Adil as mentally disturbed. And although, while this does contribute to the portrayal of absurdity within the play, it lacks realism in the real world. It is highly unlikely for a rational

individual to engage in conversation with a cockroach or any other insect and expend their energy attempting to rescue it. A typical example is the excerpt below;

ADIL: (pointing at the cockroach) Up you go...up... up. Another step. Go on.. go on...

SAMIA: (rapping at the door) Adil, open it!

ADIL: (to the cockroach) Stick to it! Stick to it! Struggle got your life!

SAMIA: (knocking vigorously) I told you to open up, Adil. Open it! Can't you hear me?

ADIL: (to the cockroach) They want to kill you with insecticide. Don't be afraid I'll not open the door. Stick to it! Stick to it!

SAMIA: (rapping at the door) Open the door, Adil! Open up, I tell you!

ADIL: (to the cockroach) What a shame! You skipped, you rolled over fell down as you do each time.

SAMIA: (rapping at the door) Can't you hear all this knocking?

ADIL: (to the cockroach) You want to have another go. Once again you're starting to climb. Why don't you rest for a while? Rest for a moment brother! Give yourself a breather. But what's the point? (Shouting) There is no point.

Hence, the above excerpt illustrates unrealistic situations employed in the play as well as criticizes human pursuit and suffering. Similarly, this aspect of unrealistic and exaggerated situations is evident in *Holding Talks*. In the play, it is not only strange that the character Man steals Barber's money after he dies, but he also has an imaginary conversation with Barber's dead body. This is very unrealistic because people do not normally talk to dead people, let alone accuse or question them. But the situation gets even more bizarre when Man asks the dead

Barber questions like "I thought you said you only have five pence? Well, you won't be needing this one brother." Although this abnormal behaviour shows how meaningless life can be when people lose empathy for others, it is presented in an extremely exaggerated and unrealistic way in the play. Hence, Rotimi uses this over-the-top scene to expose how selfish and uncaring humans can become. By depicting the character Man shamelessly robbing and interrogating a deceased person, it highlights the irrational and unethical extremes people may go to when basic morals and compassion have been abandoned. Most rational people would be horrified at such disrespectful conduct towards the dead. But Rotimi amplifies it to an absurd degree to criticize the increasingly unempathetic state of society.

Also, the depiction of characters embroiled in meaningless quests and pursuits within Al-Hakim's play underscores yet another example of unrealistic and exaggerated situations that is evident. Naturally, no reasonable individual would prioritize observing a cockroach over going to work. No sensible person would opt to speak to a cockroach over having a conversation with friends and family. Hence, this situation as demonstrated by Adil is quite unrealistic and absurd. The character's quest is often devoid of logical purpose and achievable goals and underlines the futile nature of human endeavours in a chaotic and unpredictable universe. For instance, what is the essence of all those conversations ADIL had without results? What is the essence that the day King Cockroach went sightseeing is the day he met his loom? This, therefore, reflects the meaningless quest of each character. However, that of King Cockroach is paradoxical because it exposes the conclusion of the absurdity of human pursuit, which is death. Thus, this makes the situation unrealistic and exaggerated by Al-Hakim. However, this use of unrealistic and exaggerated situations is also evident in *Holding Talks*. In the play, no reasonable person would prioritize watching and stealing from a beggar like the character Man does. When the beggar and

his son arrive at the shop, Man decides to give them money, even though he had refused to help the dying Barber earlier. This act makes Man seem like a good, charitable person. Even the Apprentice character praises him for it. But then, in an unexpected twist, Man calls the beggar's son back right before they leave. He reaches into their bag, finds a banana, yanks it out and sends them away. This thereby proves that Man had simply taken back the same money he gave them, by secretly swapping it for the banana. This whole scenario of faking charity only to sneakily steal it back from helpless beggars is extremely unrealistic and over-the-top. Hence, Rotimi uses this scene to expose the depths of human greed, deception and lack of empathy towards the less fortunate. By depicting Man going through such an absurd process just to cruelly take advantage of beggars, it highlights how selfish motivations can corrupt moral behaviour to an irrational extent in some people. No decent human would realistically treat beggars this way for mere pocket change. But Rotimi amplifies it to an extreme degree to criticize this unethical mindset.

Another aspect of unrealistic situations in both plays is the unconventional treatment of time and space which contributes to the sense of absurdity and disorientation in them. In the plays, Al-Hakim and Rotimi blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, as well as between past, present, and future, thereby creating a disorienting atmosphere that mirrors the absurdity of the human condition. This blurring of temporal and spatial dimensions reflects the characters' inability to make sense of their existence and their futile attempts to control their destinies. Hence, the absurdity is heightened by the characters' inability to perceive a consistent and logical progression of time and space which adds to the overall feeling of confusion and meaninglessness. For instance, in *Fate of a Cockroach*, Queen Cockroach, Samia and Adil cannot differentiate between day and night, just like Man and Apprentice on *Holding Talks*. These characters are completely oblivious that time exists and they tend to lose track of it in their

meaningless quest. Therefore, this lack of awareness regarding time's passage adds a surreal and dreamlike reality to their actions in the play. Little wonder, Adil and Samia's complete obliviousness to the existence of time in the play is portrayed through their actions, dialogue, and interactions. This forgetting of time's presence is emphasized to underscore the surreal and detached nature of their life pursuit. And as characters, they appear to be so engrossed in their meaningless quest that they are unable to differentiate between day and night, which suggests a departure from the conventional perception of time. Hence, this intentional disregard for time's passage serves to create a unique atmosphere and allows the play to explore themes of existentialism, absurdity, and the distortion of reality.

In conclusion, while Al-Hakim and Rotimi utilize absurd characters, settings, and dialogue to illustrate the inherent meaninglessness of human pursuits and the chaotic nature of the world, they achieve this through a plethora of exaggerated and unrealistic situations. By embracing these unrealistic situations, the play navigates a landscape where logic is distorted and highlights the collision of the improbable in today's world. Thus, the exploration of such literary tools enriches the plot and invites readers to contemplate the futility of human endeavours within an absurd world.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

That Tewfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks* adopt the tenets of absurdism and the characters exhibit its philosophical ideologies is the standpoint from which this research unfolds. The primary focus, as mentioned earlier, is to explore how the absurdist elements encompass the meaninglessness of existence, the use of nonsensical and irrational dialogue, and the portrayal of exaggerated and unrealistic situations in the play. Thus, through textual analysis, this study concurs that Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Rotimi's *Holding Talks* is a satirical and allegorical work that explores themes of human nature and society through the interactions of cockroaches and absurd human characters.

The first chapter outlined the purpose of the study, boundaries of the research, procedures for data collection, theoretical framework, literature review and thesis. The data used was collected from the primary play. Moreover, scholarly materials, articles and journals were also utilized in the study. Absurdism in all its ramifications served as the foundation on which the study is built, after which the need for the study was justified.

Chapter Two examines the portrayal of the meaninglessness of life within the plays. How Al-Hakim and Rotimi adeptly utilized characters, their actions, interactions, and the carefully crafted setting to underscore the inherent futility in the pursuit of happiness. This exploration thereby resonates deeply with the absurdist philosophy and serves as a compelling means to view the connections between human aspirations and the inherent absurdity of their endeavours.

Chapter Three examined the effects of nonsensical and illogical dialogue, a quintessential absurdist trait. How Al-Hakim and Rotimi's stylistic incorporation of such dialogue not only

serves as a tool for humour but also as a reflection of the chaotic and irrational nature of the human experience. By immersing the audience in conversations that defy conventional logic, the playwright effectively underscores the absurdity that underpins human communication and interaction.

In chapter four, the study explored the usage of unrealistic and exaggerated situations within the play. From characters' quests to their actions, the metamorphosis of the cockroach and how Al-Hakim skilfully weaved scenarios that defy the boundaries of reality. These exaggerated elements further highlight the play's connection to the absurdist genre and amplify the paradoxes present in human aspirations and actions.

Thus, this research suggests that Tewfiq Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* and Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks* serve as a compelling example of how the absurdist genre can reveal the complex nature of human existence, employing elements such as meaninglessness, nonsensical dialogue, and exaggerated situations to prompt contemplation on nature of life, while simultaneously showcasing the playwright's adeptness in conveying profound philosophical ideas within a captivating narrative framework.

In summary, the play *Fate of a Cockroach* and *Holding Talks* not only portrays the destiny of a mere insect and humans on the surface but delves deeper into human fate within an absurd world. This idea resonates as an enduring lesson in today's society, where our relentless pursuit of fame, wealth, and trivialities parallels the themes of the play. Therefore, these existential absurdities challenge us to grasp the essence of our limitations and destinies as mortal beings and urge us to live with dignity, integrity, love, and togetherness amidst the struggles of life.

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