

Man's Politics Towards God: A Study in American and Iraqi Theatre Represented by Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*; Perestroika and Ali Abdul Nabi Azzaidi's *Ya Rab/Oh!God*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Theater is greatly influenced by the changes happening politically and socially all over the world. Man no longer looks for being part of a society or defining himself according to certain standards of tradition; he/she no longer search for their identity or feel suffocated by the new technology, his main concern in contemporary age is to redefine the identity away from politics and the judgmental eye of the society he is living in. Man is calling for resurrections of the god he admitted killing during the past millennium. A new perception of that god has been defined and this seems to be interesting in a world ruled by fighting sectors of extremists who are classified into two categories those who are against the rule of that god and those who are with. This paper examines the perception of that god in two different societies by two authors through studying their plays to explain how this theme is pictured by the two. The first is the American controversial playwright Tony Kushner who's *Angels In America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*; Perestroika raised epic questions in this matter, the other playwright is the Iraqi dramatist Ali Abdul Nabi Azzaidi who's play *Ya Rab/Oh!God* introduced a new trend in the Iraqi theater. The paper adopts a socio-political school of criticism to achieve its goals.

INTRODUCTION

لا نريد الجنة تحت أقدامنا. لكن أينما تكون ، فقط. اتركوا أولادنا يعيشون
الحياة مع امهاتهم ، هم ورونا ، أسمعنا بجنة بلا ورود
(يارب⁶)

We do not wish a heaven under our feet, let it be
anywhere., just let our children live peacefully with their
mothers, they are the roses of our life, have you ever heard
of a heaven without roses.¹

[*Ya Rab/Oh! God*, 6]

Since the beginning of creation, the argument about God's existence, His absolute power, His image, the way He runs everything, and the possibility of His death has been valid, crucial to man's everyday life, and problematic. Every society has its own interpretation and story that led into the framing of rules, traditions, and religions. Each generation looked at God in a different way, giving its own perspective about the legacy it has inherited from its ancestor; sometimes God is fierce, cruel, and horrible, at other times He is most merciful and gracious.

During the last two centuries certain theories about the death of this 'God' started to influence writers all over the world. F.W. Nietzsche (1844-1900) announced this death in his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-85). Nietzsche declares that God, superman and the will to power disappeared. He uses the phrase "God is Dead" to show that for modern man God is in fact unreal. Such an argument is a result of the increasing pessimism due to the social and political scene. Other writers like Michael Bukhanin (1814-1876) argued that God surely does not exist. In his book *God and the State* (1883), he says if God does exist then man must be deprived of his freedom. Yet, man is free and has the power to win his freedom, then "God does not exist" (Bukhanin 25). The 1950s and 1960s were the decades when books like *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (1961) by Gabriel Vahanian (1927-2012) was published to discuss the death of God theology. In his book, Vahanian did not argue in favor of the idea of the death of god, but he concluded that there is a form of Christianity that will accept the contemporary loss of God and will strongly influence the other forms

of Christianity. Vahanian argues that at a certain moment of modern history Man started to merge the identity of God and Man and the possibility of the existence of heaven on earth.

For other writers like Thomas J J Altizer (1927-), who wrote two articles that were published in *Time Magazine* in the October 1965 and April 1966 issues discussing this problem. It was the 1966 article which is entitled "Is God Dead?" that attracted major attention. He claimed that it is good that God finally decided to stop interfering with the life of man. He believed that the church kept God alive for centuries, but now is the right time to declare his death once and for all. Twentieth Century literature is signified by its growing realization that God is dead. This notion brought about a transformation in values, sensibility and consciousness. Charles I. Glicksberg (1900-1998) argues that this was an age which acknowledged the death of God and the end of the hope in 'Incarnation' and 'Redemption'. He adds that without the existence of a divine entity to belong to the world is changed. "It is changed", Glicksberg says, "into a bare, alien, desolate universe of sense data and quantum mechanics. By eliminating the realm of the Supernatural, science intensified the perception of the absurd" (Glicksberg 1,4).

MAN VS GOD: EXAMINING KUSHNER'S 'POLITICAL THEATER'

The last two decades of the Twentieth Century witnessed the rise of a controversial playwright who puts God on stage to be judged for what he did. Tony Kushner (1956-), the American playwright finds it necessary that man takes God to court for what He did against humanity. He argues that God exists but He abandoned His creatures like a father who abandons his children. In his play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia On National Themes; Perestroika (1991)* Kushner draws a picture of a hectic era in the history of modern America and the world; he comments on the political scene with an attempt to change it.

Kushner started writing drama in the 1980s when the most obvious and dangerous fact in the life of the American nation in specific and humanity in general was AIDS. Looking at the AIDS epidemic as a powerful reality enabled the audience to acknowledge the fact that politicians failed to realize the anger and disappointment caused by it.

Kushner joins the struggling human and spiritual issues of the Reagan era with the epic theatre: a technique he adopted from the theatre of Brecht and O'Neill. Kushner locates a model for merging tragic and absurdly comic elements, the complexity of larger – than - life characters, besides a strong emphasis on gender and sexuality. He believes that the task of the playwright in an age of crisis is to produce a cry of help that comes from the knowledge of what is happening around. It is to echo the agony, the helplessness and the desperate hope in the future which he sees in the eyes of the people around him. And finally, he expresses an ideology believing in its ability to reform the damage caused by politics or any other man-made power.

Angels in America depicts the life of Walter Prior, a New Yorker drag queen, and an HIV positive. The plot moves to draw a picture of the life of people linked to Prior,

whether directly or indirectly, and reveal the agony of a nation facing the AIDS epidemic with fear and deliberate governmental negligence. It develops in a form of fantasy in which Prior is chosen by the Board of the Angels in heaven to be the prophet of modern age, ironically his message is nothing but a decree of death towards humanity in an attempt to bring back the God who deserted the celestial world for an unknown direction and time.

All the characters in the play feel angry, afraid and helpless. Even the angels are suffering because God has abandoned the world. Man is left on his own to decide and find a way to survive. For Kushner, God does exist but is hiding Himself from his creatures. In the play, Kushner pictures the celestial world as a chaotic world that used to have a divine ruler, but now it is neglected by this divine entity. According to the Angels, termination of the human race is the only way to stop the horrors man is causing. The Angel introduces himself as "the Bird of America, the Bald Eagle, and Continental Principality" (AiA. II. 2.2.170). The Angel then starts to tell Prior how and why God created human beings. The Angel says that God has created the Angels first, and that He made them in a special way because they are made for "His Pleasure" (AiA. II. 2.2.175). Then, God split the world in two because he wanted something new, thus he created human beings;

ANGEL: In creating You, Our Father-Lover unleashed
Sleeping Creation's Potential for Change.

In YOU the Virus of TIME began!
(AiA. II. 2.2.175)

According to Kushner, God designed man with the potentiality of unpredicted change; he is designed for moving forward. Man can think and imagine. He can use his talent in goodness and evil depending on his wishes and desires. Thus, progress does not come alone; it comes with risk and agony. Man, in his journey towards progress, risks his own innocence since he does not realize what the next step would bring. He also faces pain and fear because any change is not easily accepted by his social milieu. Change needs sacrifice, and this brings pain and fear along with it. The Angel tells Prior that this was the "Fault Lines of Creation!" (AiA. II. 2.2.176). Man's progress, his scientific research, and his forward movement brought ruin and fear to both earth and heaven;

ANGEL: Paradise itself Shivers and Splits,
Each day when You awake, as though WE Are only
The Dream of YOU.

PROGRESS!MOVEMENT!
Shaking HIM.(AiA. II. 2.2.176)

Man started to use the power of progress in a wrong way. He started to cause fear not only to earthly creatures, but to God himself. God first started to imitate man, his least creation, and this led to His absence, and loss of control over the universe. Then, on April 18, 1906², the date of the great San Francisco earthquake, God left heaven. He abandoned everybody. The Angels are left alone in heaven observing life on earth and wishing that one day God will come back. But they have recently realized that Man is the reason of their dilemma. The Angel declares that the human race

have been causing a lot of troubles; he tells Prior, "YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY! YOU MUST STOP MOVING!" (AiA. II. 2.2.178). Prior's mission is to inform humanity that the end is coming, that they have to stop moving. The Angels hope that by making man stopping the progress project, they offer God a chance to come back. The Angels decide that Man caused the problem, thus he must fix it by turning back and stop progressing; in other words stop living. Prior then shouts:

I.WANT.You go away. I'm tired to death of being done to, walked out on, infected, fucked over and now tortured by some mixed-up, reactionary angel, some... (AiA. II. 2.2.179).

The situation of the 1980's is in away similar to the San Francisco Earthquake in 1906. Kushner refers to this incident in the American history drawing an analogy between the AIDS which was killing people nationally and the earthquake and fires that killed people in San Francisco. The Earthquake and fires are only immediate reasons of destructions and death. The real cause was the gas mines that caused the fires and movement of tectonic earth layers. Thus, Man was the reason behind his own destruction. His progress blinded him to the consequences that might cause total destruction. Kushner is implying that since the starting point of scientific progress, man has been abusing it through wars and arms race.

Progress gave man power, and this made him look at any difference through the eyes of enmity and hate. He never accepted difference or change that does not suit his purposes. Kushner refers to certain historical events that caused destruction to humanity like the explosion of Chernobyl to show the ill use of science by politicians who put power before humanity in the list of their priorities. In *Perestroika*, Kushner gives his audience a glimpse of heaven. It is a city that is "Much like San Francisco" (AiA. II. 5.5.259). There is a radio that broadcasts in a British accent the news about the explosion of Chernobyl in Belarus, Russia. The Angels are listening with attention and they feel tense because of all the people who are suffering from the influences of radiation. They discuss the problems of fire and pollution that would put the life of more than thirty-five million Russians in danger. In the Council Room of the Continental Principalities the audience meet seven angels each one represents a continent. All of them agree that this age brought death with it, Africanii says that "This Age is the threnody chant of a Poet, A dark-devising Poet whose only theme is Death" (AiA. II. 5.5.261). Man has brought death and misery to himself. According to the Angels who have been observing life on earth for centuries, Man's only hope is in total death. Life must cease to exist so that it can start again. The Angels have lost hope in the race of Man; they see in him nothing but destruction and selfishness;

ANTARTETICA (Overlapping): I I I I do not weep for them. I I I I weep for the vexation of the Blank Spaces, I weep for the Dancing Light, for the irremediable wastage of Fossil Fuels, Old Blood of the Globe spilled wantonly or burned and jettisoned onto the Crystal Air... (AiA. II. 5.5.262).

Through the conversation between the Angels in heaven, Kushner discusses the problems of the universe. Man did use technological progress cleverly, but he did not think of the consequences.

RADIO:(In a British accent):...one week following the explosion at the number four reactor, the fires are still burning...releasing into the atmosphere fifty million curies of radioactive iodine, six million curies of caesium and strontium rising in a plume over five miles high,...

....

ASIATICA: Where is this place? This (With great loathing)reactor?

EUROPA: Chernobyl. In Belarus.

....

OCEANIA: It is unholy.

....

EUROPA: Hundreds, thousands will die.

....

ANTARTICA: Let them. Uncountable multitudes. Horrible. It is by their own hands. I I I will rejoice to see it. (AiA. II. 5.5.260-1)

Kushner declares that politicians used the treasures of the planet only to increase power and have control without paying attention to the fact that they are exhausting the planet. This fact is one of the reasons that made the Angels decide that progress on earth must stop. Prior gives back the gift of prophecy and asks for more life, even if it means to stay sick. The Angels are surprised; asking him about the reason of this strong desire for life even with the horrors Man is experiencing everywhere.

ANGEL: Look up,look up,
It is Not-to-Be Time.

Oh who asks of the Orders Blessing
With Apocalypse Descending?

Who demands: More Life?

When Death like a Protector

Blind our eyes, shielding from tender nerve
More horror than can be borne.

Let any Being on whom Fortune smiles

Creep away to Death

Before that last dreadful daybreak

When all your ravaging returns to you

With the rising, scorching, unrelenting Sun:

When morning blisters crimson

And bears all life away,

A tidal wave of Protean Fire

That curls around the planet

And bears the Earth clean as bone.

(AiA. II. 5.5.266)

This dialogue between the Angels and Prior suggests that even the Angels believe in 'Identity politics'. The Council of Principalities see Man as an 'Other' whose termination is necessary to keep the system alive. They look at Man as a minority defined by his politics not by his reality. Thus, the decision of termination comes as a logical thing to do with no consideration to the fact that innocent human beings are being punished. Politics, Kushner implies, influenced the celestial world and the angels started following the rules man invented.

The Council of the Angels, in Kushner's play, as well as God in Azzaidi's play are a group of Bureaucrats who do not think of the greater welfare of humanity. They only think of how to keep their position in heaven the longest period possible. The power of politics is what makes the Angels believe that man must stop living, and it is the reason behind the deliberate negligence of the AIDS epidemic during the 1980's and the events of Iraq's Genocide after the 2003 invasion.

God has abandoned the People who are in need of help. He has followed the policy of negligence towards man. This policy was controlled by 'identity politics'. In the name of religion and the greater good, minorities were suffering and dying because they were not put in the Presidential list of priorities. This was done simply because they were considered an 'Other'. Death by a gun, a sword or AIDS is believed to be God's will to urge man to realize that he is living as a sinner and must purify himself through religion. Thus, during his eight years in the White House, Reagan, who represents God's power according to Kushner in *Angels in America*, did not address the issue of AIDS in public and did not give it the needed attention. When he finally did talk about it, it was too late and people were already losing faith in the help of their governmental system. Kushner says that this negligence was deliberate because the majority of those who suffered from AIDS were homosexuals and Reagan's administration was interested only in people who lived according to the Bible.

Ya Rab/Oh!God, and *Angels in America* depict Man's struggle for social change through starting a campaign against 'Otherness', 'Identity Politics', and 'political tyranny'. The characters announce the need for individual and collective action. They appeal for giving more space to the minorities and shedding light on the important role of the government to reach this goal. They also stress the importance of these minorities to develop a social harmony that appreciates cultural diversity. Both writers imply that cross-culturalism and ethnic inclusiveness will bring back peace to the human race.

REVOLT AND JUDGE; AZZAIDI'S CRY AGAINST GOD

This sense of being classified according to a certain agenda into a believer/disbeliever, with/against is what qualifies Iraq to reach the finale in the genocide agenda after 2003 which brought radical change to Iraq. The American invasion caused problems on different levels; the Iraqi layman no longer looks at life the same way he used to before the 9th of April 2003. Interior politics which used to be controlled by one strong party is now shaken and weak causing corruption on every level of the life of man. Death captures the life of the Iraqi people in a violent tornado controlled by terrorism represented by Al Qa'eda and ISIS. Deterioration of economy and social bondages are but direct results of the absence of security and political stability. Such facts were expressed in theatre in an attempt to achieve positive change. Ali Abdul Nabi Azzaidi (1965-) is one of those Iraqi playwrights who sought change and preached reform through offering expressive pictures of the shocking reality of life in Iraq. He does this through raising the ultimate question; what is the role of

the celestial world and how does it respond to the disasters happening in Iraq?

In *Ya Rab/Oh! God* (2013), the playwright draws a picture of a mother who has been elected by every single woman in Iraq to be their representative in front of God and to negotiate with Him for the life of their children. The Mother resembles Prior, the prophet in Kushner's *Angels in America* in that both were chosen to give a message. This mother has come to the sacred valley Tuwa to negotiate with God; either stop praying and fasting or God will spare their children from the violent life Iraqis are living.

The Mother:... my prayers are made of stone, my fasting is made of stone, and my words are made of stone (shouting) I am a mother whose blood and soul turned into stone.(she raises her head as if looking to the heart of heaven) I have come to you God with a heart filled with tears and blame, I blame you as if blaming my own soul, I wonder how could my soul refuse my prayers?!. Answer this mother who has lost all her sons one after the other, heart after the other and one laugh after the other. I have one son spared waiting for his fate in one of these deadly streets. [*Ya Rab/Oh! God*, 1]

Azzaidi is describing the difficulties of life surrounded and suffocated by terrorism. Such a life resulted in the strong feelings of oppression everybody is experiencing especially after the horrible events of 2006-2008 and the later development of events that resulted in the control of Mosul by ISIS. He gives a cruel picture of this suffering through the Mother's description of everyday causalities of terrorism;

The Mother: This way of dog execution-like death cannot continue. It has to stop, they are our souls you see not dogs, we wish them to grow old not to be chopped, I speak to you God as one of the Mothers who buried all her children without arms or legs, I buried them by kilo, one kilo, two kilos, three! Their eldest I couldn't find any of his bones so instead I buried the bones of a lamb, I started to visit those bones instead. Oh God! "What should I do?! What should I do?!" I am left with only one son and I need him to live, love, grow old, and buried with all his bones.... God! God! Do you hear me, God, You creator of heaven and earth, where are you? God...?

[*Ya Rab/Oh! God*, 1]

Like *Angels in America* the celestial world is present through Moses the prophet. He advises the Mother to go back and leave this lunatic idea of defying God and then a feverish discussion starts through which the Mother explains the reasons according to which every mother in Iraq decides that it is time God has another look at this cursed land. They founded out that death is unreasonable and unjust. Disasters are happening for no clear reason except maybe to amuse the celestial world. AIDS in *Angels in America* and terrorism in *Ya Rab/Oh God* are equal; they are but reasons or forms of death. They represent Gods manipulation and unjustified ways of torturing his creatures. According to both, Kushner and Azzaidi, God has been watching his subjects tortured and suffering with no response whatsoever.

The Mother: God created the terrorists!

Moses: and created you too.

The Mother: He should not have created those monsters and make them live and mingle with innocent souls.

Moses: In creation there has to be certain contradictions...there must be hunger and glut, criminal and victim.

The Mother: We have been the only preys of slaughter for decades!

Moses: (Shouts at her) I told you death is an important fact of life.

The Mother:(Shouts at him) Death is a fact not termination, not slaughter, not burning alive, death is a fact but not chopping heads.

[Ya Rab/Oh! God, 8]

Moses, the prophet, as did the Angels in Kushner's play, expresses his rejection of the Mother's protest against God. He assumes that this is absurd since death is an inevitable fact that cannot be ignored or escaped. Yet, he starts to sympathize with her after a very interesting discussion.

The Mother: I will not go away until God gives me his word that there will be no slaughter to our children anymore!

Moses: I am here to negotiate with you.

The Mother: Our conditions are firm and clear.

Moses: (Raises her head and shouts) Oh God. I have no power to endure the words of the people of earth, oh God, I have no power to endure all these fiery words that this woman speak, oh God. it cannot be that you created life to become a hell that eats this universe.

[Ya Rab/Oh! God, 8]

Like the Angels in Kushner's play, Moses in Ya Rab/Oh God cannot see God's fallacies. Both do not realize the grave injustice God is committing against Man except when man starts defending himself. Prior and The Mother are revolting against God they are able to deliver a clear powerful message; God has abandoned his creatures, He no longer bothers to look with mercy towards them. Prior, who witnessed the AIDS epidemic because of which death controlled the world for decades, believes that God must be taken to court and the Mother who suffers the loss of her children and witnesses everyday mass death calls for protest and revolt. Both playwrights offer a picture of what this policy did to humanity and how the politics of the individual's identity lead into torment and agony. Walter Prior, the chosen man whose mission is to make man stop living, does not agree to the idea of being passive and accepting things as they are. He urges the celestial world to be more active through being progressive and doing something instead of waiting for God to come back. This rebellious attitude is also seen in Ya Rab Oh!God through the strike announced by all mothers and through the discussion with Moses, the Prophet, to convince him of the injustice they are facing. The Mother declares general strike, there will be no more prayers or fasting, there will be no more worshipping of this cruel God unless slaughter stops once and for all.

Prior speaks to the Angels and starts questioning their aims and methods. This argument between the Angels and

Prior takes place in heaven where Prior is able to see that heaven suffers the same problems the earth is suffering from. He goes to heaven to refuse the prophecy and to ask for the gift of more life, and when he discovers that God has abandoned the world, he advises the Angels to sue Him, and that He has no right to do so since the world is His responsibility.

PRIOR: He isn't coming back.

...If He ever did come back, ...if after all this destruction, if after all the terrible days of this terrible century He returned to see... how much suffering His abandonment had created, if all He has to offer is death, you should sue the bastard. That's my only contribution to all this Theology. Sue the Bastard for walking out, how dare He (AiA. II.5.5.263-264).

Prior descends from heaven after seeing Roy Cohn, the corrupted advocate of the devil, becomes the defender of the Supreme, talking to somebody on the phone, we then realize that the Angels decided to sue God and that He had chosen Cohn to represent Him in the Court;

ROY: Paternity suit? Abandonment? Family court is my particular....It is a done deal, are we on? Good, then I gotta start by telling you you ain't got a case here, you're guilty as hell, no question, you have nothing to plead but not to worry, darling, I will make something up (AiA. II.5.9.274).

Kushner makes very good use of Cohn's death. He gives a hint about how things go on even in the celestial world as corruption is everywhere. This final attempt offered by Kushner is just a way to buy more time to humanity. The Angels question this procedure first but they are convinced when Prior explains that Man's motivation is his "addiction to being alive" (AiA,II:267). The Mother seeks life too when she begs for the life of the children "We do not wish a heaven under our feet, let it be anywhere..., just let our children live peacefully with their mothers, they are the roses of our life, have you ever heard of a heaven without roses." (Ya Rab/Oh! God, 6). Man lives past hopes and that is the pleasure of being alive. Kushner tells his audience that there is still hope for man, even though death is what heaven offers to humanity as a solution for the horrors they see every day. It is clear that both Azzaidi's "Mother" and Kushner's "Prior" are begging for Man's life.

Kushner is discussing the Age of AIDS, at a time when America is considered to be a Utopia; an image which is destroyed by Kushner in Angels in America by showing its weaknesses. He suggests that the nation must not stay passive towards what is going on in America; people must do something instead of accepting whatever the system is offering. In his notes to the actors and directors, Kushner says that he created characters who face the hard questions of modern life; he says that they must understand "how to let go of the past, how to change and lose with grace, how to keep going in the face of overwhelming suffering. It shouldn't be easy" (AiA. II.introduction.142). Being a 'human being' and dealing with issues that are crucial to other 'human beings' is not an easy work to do. In Kushner's Angels in America, life is put under the light. Kushner keeps in mind that the future has to be related to the tragedies of the past, thus he mainly

offers an insight into the workings of history and gives his audience clues of how man might survive the tragedy.

CONCLUSION

Both Kushner and Ali Abdulnabi Azzaidi argue that hope is not impossible but not in God, it is the hope in the will to change. Azzaidi preaches his ideas through both Moses and the Mother who finally shout protesting against this policy of negligence and death. They shout in the face of God to stop his unjustified silence;

Moses and the Mother (together shouting and throwing the cloaks everywhere) God stop this death, stop this fire, stop sadness, there must be a solution, we beg you, stop chopping our children, God we have hope in your mercy, you created us and you are responsible for our protection, oh God oh God oh God... (they keep shouting loudly, then they leave the valley yet their voices turns into the voice of thousands as a reference to a tremendous massive demonstration in the streets.)

[Ya Rab/Oh! God, 15]

The way man is addicted to life is what bothers the celestial world. Azzaidi and Kushner invite man to revolt because they see that political and social conditions are negatively turning against him. The growing danger of terrorism represented by extremists who kill in the name of God and the different types of death whether by diseases or through bombs need effective and crucial moves. Protest is necessary to achieve change which is needed at this point of the life of humanity, even if it would be a protest against God himself. This God who claims to be the protector and guardian of the welfare of humanity is shown by the two writers as a potential reason behind everyday tragedy of man. Symbolically God is like any other politician who fails to keep his election promises. Finally, it is the will of man that decides whether to keep living under the heavy burden of death or survive the tornado and progress. Thus, change that starts with protest and rejection is the message of both writers to reach the ultimate aim which is being alive in a world that cares for being human.

ENDNOTES

1. The translation of the Arabic text of Ya Rab which is used here as a reference is mine.
2. On Wednesday, April 18, 1906 a major earthquake struck San Francisco and the Coast of Northern California. It reached 7.9 on the Richter scale and was followed by fires that broke out in the city and continued for several days. This natural disaster killed almost 3,000 people and destroyed more than 80% of the city.

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