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Staging Politics in Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians* and Lenin al-Ramli's *Bal-‘Arabi al-Fasih*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

The present paper offers a comparative study of *Comedians* (١٩٧٩) by the British dramatist Trevor Griffiths (١٩٣٥-), and *Bal-‘Arabi al-Fasih* (١٩٩٢) by the prominent Egyptian playwright Lenin al-Ramli (١٩٤٥-). Both plays are examined in the light of Bakhtin's theory of carnival in order to show how Griffiths and al-Ramli incorporate this theory into their theatrical project with a view to creating a multitude of carnivalistic characters. These characters reflect contradictory attitudes that bring into prominence the classical function of comedy as a festive, reformatory, and satirical medium. Even though both writers never declare the impact of Bakhtin's theory on their dramaturgy, the paper contends that they utilize theatrical elements and festive forms included in Bakhtin's concept of carnival. This contention leads one to infer that Griffiths and al-Ramli are artistically gifted playwrights, who deploy Bakhtin's theory of carnival in order to invite the audiences to laugh at their sociopolitical realities and then castigate them for doing so.

Key Words:

Griffiths – al-Ramli – *Comedians* – In Plain Arabic – Bakhtin – Comedy – Laughter – Carnival – Serio-comedy

Introduction:

The present paper is a comparative study of the British journalist, screenwriter, director, and dramatist, Trevor Griffiths (١٩٣٥-), and the prominent Egyptian essayist, scriptwriter, director, and playwright, Lenin al-Ramli (١٩٤٥-). The very aim is to investigate how both writers use theatre as a platform to dramatize sociopolitical critiques in terms of Bakhtin's theory of carnival. The plays under study are Griffiths's *Comedians* (١٩٧٩), and al-Ramli's *Bal-'Arabi al-Fasih* (١٩٩٢ [translated into English by Esmat Allouba as *In Plain Arabic*]). Both plays are examined in the light of Bakhtin's theory of carnival in order to show how Griffiths and al-Ramli incorporate this theory into their theatrical project with a view to creating a multitude of carnivalistic characters. These characters reflect contradictory—not to say confronting—attitudes that bring into prominence the classical function of comedy as a festive, reformative, and satirical medium. Even though both writers never declare the impact of Bakhtin's theory on their dramaturgy, the paper shows that they utilize theatrical elements and festive forms included in Bakhtin's concept of carnival.

Carnival, as this paper elucidates, is a comic, festive spectacle performed by a group of authentic proletarian voices to resist the oppressions and hierarchical structures imposed by the ruling political systems. Such carnival festivities involve a sense of laughter that not only releases people from the stress of political dogmatism, but also produces a new order of things, or rather a new relationship to reality that helps to get rid of sociopolitical hierarchical inequality. In so doing, carnivalistic laughter brings forth an aesthetic *mélange* between comedy and seriousness called by Bakhtin "serio-comical genre" (*Problems* ١٠٨), a dramatic form that eliminates the borderlines between spectators and actors to reveal the living present. In order to fulfill this objective, the artist should set up a familiar festive contact "with the open-ended present" (*Problems* ١٠٨). This contact endows the spectators of Griffiths's and al-Ramli's theatre with a sensitive ear for the political implications of laughter.

While searching for a theatrical link between Griffiths and al-Ramli, one discovers that the aesthetic connection between them is grounded in exposing the open-ended present. To dramatize this present, the two playwrights adopt a serio-comical genre, a dramatic framework that drives them both to contend that everything that is truly political should include an element of laughter, otherwise the dramatic discourse will be no more than a set of nonsensical terrible flashes. This criterion is best translated in Griffiths's and al-Ramli's theatre—in the way each deploy a serio-comedy as a theatrical medium in the hope of politicizing the audience's aesthetic perception of sociopolitical issues. Both playwrights rely heavily on what Bakhtin names the "free invention" (*Problems* ١٠٨) created by the audience. It is no more than an aesthetic tool that enables the audience to comprehend

the political significance of laughter. This critical practice generates a comic depiction of reality, which has a two-edged function: first to liberate the aesthetic consciousness of the audience from the domination of the past and second to pave the way for them to theatricalize the social and political history of the present. In short, the dramatization of the living present emerges from the dialogic relationships between audience and performers. These relationships engender an aesthetic interaction, an "authentic sphere" (*Problems* ١٨٣) in terms of which both Griffiths and al-Ramli use laughter as a vehicle for breathing life into the dead bones of the sociopolitical history of the present.

In comparing Griffiths's *Comedians* to al-Ramli's *In Plain Arabic*, one can find out that both works are not plays proper. Rather, they are serio-comical pieces that explore contemporary sociopolitical problems in terms of comedy. *Comedians* is a three-act play inspired by a real evening class that Griffiths had seen at a labour club in Manchester. The plot revolves around the attempt of Eddie Water, a retired English comedian, to teach a group of budding comedians, descending from different working classes, the ethics of performing a stand-up comedy. Bert Challenor, an agents' man from London, will judge the performance of the young stand-ups; he should select the successful comedians according to the reaction of the audience attending the audition. His views of comedy show that comedy should entertain the audience, not philosophize them. This makes Waters get into dispute with him over the function of comedy, mainly because Waters believes that comedy should confront people with their political problems, not amuse them. Such is the dramatic tension that forms the binary opposition in the play: it puts the would-be comedians into a real dilemma—whether to be loyal or disloyal to the teachings of Waters. Of all the young stand-ups, Challenor chooses Sammy Samuels and George McBrain to get contracts to work in London as "they indulge only in sexual and racial stereotyped jokes. He also underestimates the other comedians where he finds their performances as [sic] poor and not funny" (B, "Trevor" ١٩١), for they insist on inserting politics into their stand-up comedy. However, many critics contend that the play is "a drama of political ideas" (Mead ٦٠) in terms of which Griffiths "invited the audience to laugh, then punished them for doing so" (Rosenthal ١٨).

Similarly, *In Plain Arabic*, a two-act play, is a pure political satire of Arab people who refuse to acknowledge that their politics, "governments and mores" (Hedges ٤) are the root cause behind their sociopolitical setback. To highlight such a setback, the play tells the story of ١٤ Arab students coming from different Arab nations. It is set at a London hotel, where an Egyptian cast films a program about Arab unity. Unfortunately, this program is suspended with the disappearance of Fayez, a Palestinian

student, who stands for the Palestinian cause. Whereas the Arab students confirm that some English imperialists have kidnapped their colleague, the British police believe that "he is a terrorist who fled after setting fire to a bookstore" (al-Ramli, "Comedy" ١٧٤). This incident explains the view that the Arab solidarity and unity are no more than an illusion which al-Ramli ridicules throughout the play, by revealing the contradicting and opposing views of the Arab students. Rather than cooperating to solve the riddle of Fayz's disappearance, they are involved in a futile dispute with each other. They cannot consolidate their efforts to formulate one single strategy by which they may settle their arguments over Arab integrity, tested by the absence of Favez. This dramatic structure implies that al-Ramli, like Griffiths, composes a serio-comical piece in which the audience and the actors laugh, not only at themselves, but also at the political realities raised by the festive actions of the dramatic personae.

To help acquaint the reader with the significant impact of theory of carnival on Griffiths's *Comedians* and al-Ramli's *In Plain Arabic*, a brief outline of the aesthetic achievement of Bakhtin is indispensable here. Mikhail Bakhtin (١٨٩٥-١٩٧٥), a Russian literary theorist and formalist critic, is considered one of the forerunners in formulating a theory of comedy. His theory elucidates that comedy is an art form that "works more political than tragedy" (Kolk ١٥٤). To illustrate the political aspect of comedy, he introduces his theory of laughter in terms of the concept of a carnival in which people gather to celebrate a public festival. In *Rabelais and His World* (١٩٨٤), he argues that carnival is a comic festive performance acted by a group of authentic proletarian voices to resist the oppressions of the hegemonic systems during the Middle Ages. Such carnival festivities are replete with a sense of laughter that frees people from the strain of religious and political "dogmatism," mainly because those carnivals were staged away from the auspices of the church and authority. This implies that carnival offers creative moments that can be described as "certain artistic forms" of comic theatre, where the strict bonds of reality do not only vanish, but are also replaced with a carnivalistic portrait of reality. In it, the marginalized becomes a powerful character who can avenge the reasons and makers of his/her humiliation. However, Bakhtin insists that the spectacles portrayed by carnival culture do not belong to art. Rather, they represent "the borderline" separating art from reality, an artistic arena in which the sociopolitical conditions are depicted in terms of comedy:

The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are . . . forms [that] . . . often tended toward carnival folk culture, the culture of the marketplace, and to a certain extent became one of its components. But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle

and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play. (*Rabelais* √)

Assuming that the carnival belongs to the borderline between art and life, Bakhtin contends that it is "the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (*Rabelais* ^). His contention urges one to investigate the relationship between carnivalesque and politics. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1999), Bakhtin outlines how the characteristic features of carnival play a significant role in politicizing literature. He suggests that the carnival is a "syncretic pageantry" of diverse comic festivities where there are no "footlights" or divisions that isolate performers from spectators. In it, the performers and spectators are actively engaged in "the carnival act" to create a theatrical dialogue, which in turn brings forth a new order of things. This results from the efforts exerted by the performers to amuse the spectators, not to say to encourage them to live within the borders of "*a carnivalistic life*." Here Bakhtin endows the carnival with an opportunity to reflect a carnivalesque sense of life by which the spectators can narrow the gap between the carnivalistic spectacles and the hidden message of the carnival. This message is but an undercurrent of Bakhtin's view that the carnival novelizes the political aspect of human life as laughter that "turned inside out" to reveal "the reverse side of the world." In a sense, the interpretation of the carnivalesque performance does not flow from the carnival act. Rather, it arises from the social and political atmosphere predominating and still dominating during the comic performance. That is why the critic should consider the cultural context, as well as the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that surround the moments from which laughter arise. The consideration of such criteria enables the critic to level a political criticism at "hierarchical structure" that brings on sociopolitical-hierarchical "inequality" and injustice among people:

Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. . . . Because carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual* rut, it is to some extent 'life turned inside out,' 'the reverse side of the world'. . . . What is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it — that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people. (1999f)

The dramatization of socio-hierarchical inequality denotes that the very objective of carnival is to challenge political and social inequality. The

carnival produces laughter that turns the world upside down. This practice shows that comedy is "an expression of a communal life force that inverts the social order and offers short-term liberation from authoritarian pressure" (Stott ٣٧). By inverting the social order, carnival laughter creates a complicated amalgamation of comedy and seriousness in terms of which the audience can fully comprehend the political message of the laughter. The stress on the comic dimension of seriousness can be traced back to Bakhtin's belief that seriousness "burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and delivers us from them. Laughter does not encumber man, it liberates him" (*Speech Genres* ١٣٤).

Motivated by the positive power of laughter as a medium for releasing humanity from the hopeless situations caused by the authorities, Bakhtin's aesthetics draws the attention of critics to the birth of a new form of comedy, which he calls "serio-comical." He explains that serio-comical genre represents a new relationship to reality, a dramatic vision in which laughter colors "the living present" of the audience. To crystallize such a present, the carnival should distance the spectators from the past, enforcing an active contact between them and the "living contemporaries." In contemporizing the historical figures and settings, the laughter carnivalizes reality as well as politicizes literature by fictionalizing the political and social history of the present in terms of comedy. Such is the serio-comical genre:

The first characteristic of all genres of the serio-comical is their new relationship to reality: their subject, or—what is more important— their starting point for understanding, evaluating, and shaping reality, is the living *present*, often even the very day. For the first time in ancient literature the subject of *serious* . . . presented . . . in a zone of immediate and even crudely familiar contact with living contemporaries. In these genres, the heroes of myth and the historical figures of the past are deliberately and emphatically contemporized; they act and speak in a zone of familiar contact with the open-ended present. (Bakhtin, *Problems* ١٠٨)

Even though Griffiths and al-Ramli come from different cultural and social milieus, the same concept of carnival as a serio-comical act is traceable in both writers' dramatic art, particularly *Comedians* and *In Plain Arabic*. Both manipulate a theory to initiate a familiar contact between the dramatic action and the audience in the hope of slamming and satirizing the living present of their audiences. The close reading to *Comedians* denotes that Griffiths's theatre aims at dramatizing the sociopolitical hierarchical structures that befall those sectors of society which are "trapped, oppressed, cheated—and, most humiliating of all, undervalued" (Nightingale ٨١). In dramatizing such structures, Griffiths proves that he is a political dramatist who utilizes theatrical laughter as an "intellectual platform" to criticize and

vilify the capitalist establishments that wipe out the dreams of the working classes. The vilification of such an establishment implies that his "plays inspire, instruct and provoke the minds of audience by employing . . . the Marxist technique of dialectics where he systematically explores the contradicting and confronting views of the characters in an argumentative mode" (B, "Base" ١٢). The exploration of such views explains the reasons why he stands by the oppressed sections of the English society. His attitude is a consequence of his use of theater as a medium for reflecting the sociopolitical inequalities that hang over those sections of society. He relies heavily on the dialectics and stand-up comedy as techniques to compose a serio-comical text as well as "a direct contact between the audience and the actors" (B, "Trevor" ١٩١).

In an interview with Sabby Sagall, Griffiths introduces his dramatic vision, showing that he creates a pure political theatre whose very objective is not to dramatize the conflict between Marxism and Socialism, but to reflect a political subjective vision that finds an echo in the audience. This vision reveals such a conflict and sublimates the interpretation of the play, as it theatricalizes "what hurts, what scares and terrifies, what warms and inspires" both the playwright and the spectator. Such a practice is justifiable since a writer should dramatize his/her experience in order to engender a theatrical act that fits in with the audience's consciousness. To dramatize this experience, the artist should avoid joining any political parties so that he/she can produce an independent unbiased political portrait of reality, a living sense of the world characterized with a "relative autonomy". This autonomy provides Griffiths with an aesthetic framework through which he probes too deeply into the inner thoughts of his characters to explore the etiology of sociopolitical ills. His effort indicates that theatre is nothing but "a solitary activity" that flows from the inner ideology of the dramatist. In brief, Griffiths's vision endows him with an artistic space by which he theatricalizes politics in his dramas, particularly *Comedians*. The dramatization of politics implants into him the motif that literature can change the hierarchical structures of injustice that surround the audience:

I'm just . . . a social writer. . . . All I can do as a socialist and a playwright is look at what hurts, what scares and terrifies, what warms and inspires me. And sometimes there'll be enough that resonates with other people. Playwrights try to articulate something in themselves that might also be lodged inside other people. . . . Writing plays is a solitary activity . . . that depends on large numbers of people making a decision that they're going to write the play that matters, that changes the situation. ("Plays for Today" ٢)

Unlike Griffiths who insists that he is a socialist writer, al-Ramli deprives himself of such an epithet. It is his belief that socialism is no longer suitable for application in the present time, simply because it is dead: "Even though socialism is a big illusion that stops existing, I do believe that the downtrodden has a legal right for good housing, clothing, and education. Such is the essence of socialism, but I am involved in a theoretical dispute with it—the tools and methodology for achieving this essence" ^١ (al-Ramli, "Yulu Inqlab" ^٩ [trans. mine]). To find an alternate methodology for settling such a dispute, al-Ramli highlights the contradicting and confronting views of the dramatic characters. This convinces one to elicit that al-Ramli lays heavy emphasis on deploying the dramatic technique of dialects to sharpen his comic representation of political reality. The assessment stems from the critical view that al-Ramli, as Walid Yusuf observes, adopts "aesthetic technical devices" which enable him to comprise various levels of signification. These levels are codes decoded by members of the audience who utilize their political consciousness to grasp the sociopolitical meaning of laughter. In so doing, al-Ramli establishes "a dialogic relationship between the audience and dramatic action, a dialectical relationship that forces the audience to rethink and reconsider the aesthetic interaction between politics and theatre. This practice helps al-Ramli to couple the space of the stage with the audience's space of the brain, as well as staging politics in terms of a cynical comical exposé" ^٢ (Yusuf ^٨ [trans. mine]).

In a recent interview with Hanan Aqil, al-Ramli states that the Arab theatre needs an aesthetic *mélange* of rational and popular elements, which enables the playwright to mix the popular theatre with the rational one, as well as depicting truth as it is by motivating the audience to ponder how theatre unfolds politics. The playwright should portray real characters into whom the audience runs every day, not political instances as they are. That is why al-Ramli's plays are, as far as I see them, serio-comedies that call upon spectators to pose questions regarding their political conditions, in the hope of understanding the open-ended present. This signifies that dramatic art should encourage the audience to take part in the process of interpreting the text by comicalizing the political critiques of the present. The dramatist enriches his/her pieces with comical characters that use laughter as a vehicle for reproving the sociopolitical hierarchical structures. Such is the dramatic technique in terms of which al-Ramli engages the audience in the process of making meaning. Al-Ramli puts forward this idea as follows:

Since I do believe that the very aim of theatre is to urge people to ponder over their sociopolitical affairs, my plays invite the spectators to reconsider their thoughts and attitudes. In order to fulfill such an aim, I hinge on dramatizing ideas, not political events. The dramatization of ideas forces the dramatist to draw greatly not only on comic prototypes of the audience, but also on comical language – for comedy works

more political than any other literary genre. In spite of the comic aspect of my theatre, I still hold that if theatre is not rational, it is a nonsensical institution. ↑ ("*Lias Matluban Min al-Masrah*" ١٢ [trans. mine]).

In line with this vision, one can elicit that the presentation of the contradicting and confronting views of the characters helps both Griffiths and al-Ramli to engender a vision of theatre as a source of festive laughter. This brings into prominence Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque as a realistic portrait of life represented in terms of a play. In establishing a dialectical relationship between audience and actors, both Griffiths and al-Ramli not only comicalize the contradicting views of the characters but also create a new dramatic art, which lays an emphasis on maintaining a carnivalistic dialogical relationship. In it, they, to quote Patterson, look into "issues from opposing viewpoints, often by embodying them in two people from the same background" (٧١). This dramatic achievement is best illustrated in Griffiths's *Comedians* and al-Ramli's *In Plain Arabic*.

A close reading of *Comedians* implies that Griffiths is a Marxist playwright. However, he declares more than once that his plays "are never about the battle between socialism and capitalism" ("*Transforming the Husk of Capitalism*" ١٦). Rather, they show how the husk of capitalist meaning can be transformed into "the reality of socialist enterprise" ("*Transforming the Husk of Capitalism*" ١٦). This dramatic motif forces Griffiths to deploy contrasting festive characters in order to highlight the impact of Capitalism on the socialist enterprise. That is why the characters of *Comedians* unfold their own inner contradictions to produce an aesthetic mélange of laughter and politics from Marxist perspectives, which "takes up an apolitical subject like comedy and brings out the various political ambiguities behind it" (B, "Trevor" ١٩٢). To unfold such a conglomeration, Griffiths dramatizes the opposing viewpoints of Eddie Waters, Bert Challenor, and the six would-be comedians throughout the play.

Thereupon, the opening scene of *Comedians* deals with Eddie Waters, a veteran retired English comedian, who schools the six working-class would-be comedians in the ethics of comedy. This is the fundamental argument in the play by which he "attempts to inculcate in his students a progressive, nearly therapeutic view of comedy" (Baker-White ٢٠٥). His progressive view arises from the notion that laughter is a means, not an end. He warns the budding comedians of raising laughter without a clear political agenda, otherwise their performance will be no more than a shapeless meaningless stand-up comedy because "the real comedian" is bound to reveal the rationale behind his/her jokes. In addition, this comedian should have the will to reflect what the audience conceals. What he/she unfolds is not laughter, but "a sort of truth," a representation of reality that

demonstrates the sociopolitical problems befalling the spectators. In this regard, a joke is not a nonsensical discourse; rather, the joke is a set of words that has a political significance in terms of which the audience can reduce the tensions caused by hierarchal inequality. This inequality imposes restrictions on the aesthetic reception of the audience. The principal duty of the comedian is not only to efface such restrictions, but also to implant into the audience that they can change the political realities around them. When the joke distorts reality to win the attention of the spectators away from the reasons behind their sociopolitical ills, comic art loses its fundamental function as a medium for resisting and challenging oppression – for it becomes an art of entertainment. Such is the socialist concept of comedy as defined by Waters:

Waters (*driving home*): If I've told you once I've told you a thousand times. We work *through* laughter, not *for* it. . . . It's not the jokes. It's not the jokes. It's what lies behind 'em. It's the attitude. A real comedian—that's a daring man. He *dares* to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth, about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they *want*. A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to *liberate* the will and the desire, it has to change the situation. (٢٠)

Waters's socialist philosophy of comedy is strongly repudiated by Bert Challenor, a Londoner agent who attends the audition to evaluate the level of Waters's pupils. His repudiation results from the fact that he represents the capitalist aesthetic standards that urge him to hold that comedy is merely an art of entertainment. That is why he "has employed working class comedians only to exploit them, which reveals the capitalist world" (B, "Trevor" ١٩٤). Before the audition, he gives the young stand-ups instructions on the ethics of comedy. Not only do such instructions contradict with those of Water, but they also show the widening gap between capitalist agenda and the socialist enterprise. His conception of comedy relies on the theory of "demand" and "supply." In it, he advises the would-be comedians to keep their performance simple and avoid being deep because he does not search for philosophers, but comedians. He looks for a comedian who considers what the audience needs, for the audience are the people who pay money for the sake of laughter, not philosophy, or politics. In this regard, the relationship between audience and comedians goes like that the audience demands laughter and the actor ought to supply such a demand. By supplying this demand, the comedian can easily gain the admiration and greetings of the audience in case he/she satisfies their desire

for laughter. This implies that comedians are not missionaries; rather, they are makers of laughter. Challenor argues:

Challenor: A couple . . . of hints. Don't try to be deep. Keep it simple. I'm not looking for philosophers, I'm looking for comics. I'm looking for someone who sees what the people want and knows how to give it to them. It's the people pay the bills, remember, yours, mine . . . Mr. Waters's. We're servants, that's all. They demand, we supply. . . . We're not missionaries, we're suppliers of laughter. (٢٢)

The sharp antagonism between Waters and Challenor flows from the former's insistence that comedy is "more than just a form of entertainment; it is a tool for confronting the often painful truths of people's lives" (Garner ١٣٢). In highlighting such truths, Waters not only criticizes the husk of capitalist values, but also brings into play what Bakhtin calls "a specific carnival sense of the world" (*Problems* ١٠٧). This carnivalesque sense is the significant feature of serio-comical tradition that "possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality" (*Problems* ١٠٧). Such vitality motivates one to stand by Waters's concept of comedy as a medium for revealing the sociopolitical problems of the audience mainly because laughing truths produce new relationships to reality. These relationships enable the comedian to dramatize what Althusser names "the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited" (٢٠٢). If these mutual relations are taken a step further, one can sum up that the school in which the budding comedians are trained is a clear symbol of "Ideological State Apparatus." This assessment can be attributed to the maxim that the Ideological State Apparatus is "a system of defined institutions, organizations, and the corresponding practices" (٧٧). These institutions, including the school in which the play takes place, are part of "the State Ideology" which maximizes the position of Challenor by giving him the power to decide who will be rewarded with a contract, as well as minimizing the role of Waters because he represents the socialist ethics. For all that, the capitalist ideology maintains that the school is "a neutral environment purged of ideology" (٢٠٢). In this respect, the would-be comedians are faced with the dilemma of choosing between two confronting ideologies: Waters's and Challenor's theory of comedy. The contrast between these two theories outlines the dialectical relationship between socialism and capitalism, a dichotomy that will be illustrated through the audition of Waters's students.

The discussion of such a dichotomy is initiated with the stand-up performance of Mick Connor, an Irish student who sticks to Waters's teachings. Motivated by his Irish culture, he jokes about the way the English people receive the Irish. He tells a joke about his first day in Manchester

when he searches for a room to stay in. His search is repulsed as the English believe that the Irish are troublemakers: "I never knew we wuz troublemakers till I got to England" (٣٨). Then, he cracks a joke about the religious differences between the British Catholic Church and the Irish Protestant one, arguing that the former seems to be "a bloody one," while the latter "is more like a market." This comparison paves the way for Connor to satirize the Catholic Church in which the priests organize church confessions for economic profits, not religious ones. He recounts how the priest tempts him to speak out his sins without taking into account the presence of the priest because he is "either half deaf or half stewed." This forces Connor who speaks on behalf of the priest to admit that he has "fornicated." His fornication stems from listening to the confessions of the young girls because their confessions are nothing but a form of "voyeurism." Although the priest has committed many sins, he gives an ear to the bad things perpetuated by others to relieve them as well as to satisfy his desire for sexual intercourse:

Connor (*very Irish*): I told him not to say anything about me bein' Irish. . . . You know, even the Catholic Church is different here. I went to Mass at the Holy Name, like a bloody opera. Back home in Wexford it's more like a market. The priest charges ten percent commission on all transactions. . . . Jesus. . . . In England you can hear the candles melt, so you can. . . . Your Irish priest is either half deaf or half stewed. Speak up my son, there's nothing to be ashamed of . . . so you've gotta burst your lungs off to get absolution, safact. (*Bellow.*) Bless me, father, for . . . I have fornicated. (٣٧f)

Connor's joke aims to make the audience laugh at the act of confession directed by the English Catholic priest. Despite that, his joke contains an element of seriousness, which asserts that he "has remained true to the spirit of Waters's teaching" (Patterson ٧٩). This element is best demonstrated when he advises the spectators not to slap an Irish on the back because "one day he'll stick a pack of dynamite up his jacket to blow your bloody arm off. . . . Like the IRA man who knocks at the gates of Heaven and . . . says . . . I'm from the IRA" (٤٠). Such is a serio-comical act in which Connor combines laughter with seriousness, which springs from the belief that the man whom the English slap on the back belongs to the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This army consists of a group of Irish volunteers, who "use force to secure the creation of a united and republican Ireland" (Plowright ١٥٢). In carrying the audience to the heart of the living present which lies in the Irish Crisis, Connor, to borrow Bakhtin's terms, hinges on the carnivalistic ritual of "the *mock crowning and subsequent decrowning*" (*Problems* ١٢٤) of key figures like the English priest. This denotes that the mocking representation of such a priest helps Connor create a sort of "joyful

relativity," which evinces that "laughing truth . . . degraded power" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* ٩٧f). That is to say, degradation enables Griffiths to probe deeply into the historical present to degrade and debase political problems, abstract ideas, and social norms which in turn "bring forth something more and better" (*Rabelais* ٧١).

Nevertheless, the idea of degrading key-figures vanished with the performance of the brother team of Ged and Phil Murray. They both begin their act as planned before: they depict a working-class life in Manchester. However, their stand-up is self-destructed because Phil alters "their prepared routine by inserting a racist joke, presumably to please Challenor" (Baker-White ٧٠٨). This is emphasized by Phil's insistence that Ged should tell him a joke about a Pakistani who is charged with raping an English woman. Rather than make a joke, Ged recommends that Phil will do it. Phil is acutely embarrassed at this accidental request, demonstrating his best to regain confidence before the audience, Challenor, and Waters. For all that, his joke seems to be superficial, silly and, above all, devoid of climax. It shows how the coppers organize "an identity parade" of suspected criminals to discover the real rapist. Thus, the coppers bring eight or nine Pakistanis. As soon as the criminals are on parade, a Pakistani shouts out that the girl is the rapist, not him:

Phil (*terrified, struggling for confidence*): There's this Pakistani, see, up on a rape charge. So the coppers decide they'll have an identity parade. And they get eight or nine other Pakkies and they put this one at the front and explain what they're doing. Then they bring the girl in and the Pakistani shouts (*Pakistani voice*.) She is the one, Officer. No doubt about it. (٤٤)

The failure of the two brothers' audition can be referred back to the opposing viewpoints of both Waters and Challenor regarding the motif of comedy. Not only do these viewpoints disrupt the performance of the two brothers, but they also disquiet them both as they force Ged to follow up Waters's concept of comedy and Phil to pick up that of Challenor. This conflict indicates that the joke of a Pakistani rape charge, to utilize Bakhtin's words, suffers from the absence of crisis, which wipes out "carnival laughter," mainly because such laughter is an aesthetic relationship between what is carnivalized and reality. This explains that the joke of Ged and Phil should be directed "toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change; it deals with the very process of change, with *crisis* itself" (Bakhtin, *Problems* ١٧٧). In trying to avoid dealing with the crisis itself, the two brothers never liberate the audience from "the prevailing truth and the

established order," nor suspend the "privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* ١٠) invented by hierarchical ideology.

The power of carnival laughter as a shift of world order reaches the fore with the audition of Gethin Price, an English working-class student. His performance is not directed to the spectators but to "a pair of dummies who impersonate a stereotyped bourgeois couple waiting for a commuter train" (Baker-White ٢٠٨). He starts his action with a strange pantomime in which he attempts to play a tiny violin. On failing to play the violin, he breaks it up under his boot as if it were a cigarette. Then, he runs into the two dummies that he tries to negotiate with by cracking two jokes, but in vain. The negative reception of the jokes drives him to follow up three tactics. First, he accuses the woman of being a whore, whom Eric Yates takes home one night; second, he attempts to thump the man by blowing the smoke of the cigarette into the man's face, accusing him of being a puff or puffer: "Are you a puff? Are you a puffer"? Finally, he pins a flower between the young woman's breasts, expecting to be thanked for this delicate behavior. Instead, Price is frustrated because the flower makes the girl bleed so profusely that dark bloodstains discolor the white dress of the woman, which has been transformed into red color. This situation merges Price's aagh's into one central piercing laughter in which he wonders about what happened to the girl. This tragic scene turns the spotlight on Price who for the first time addresses the spectators, stating that he does not intend to kill the couple of mannequins but to make them get his jokes. He holds another violin and plays "the Red Flag," insisting that he succeeds in making the buggers laugh:

Here. (*He takes a flower out of his pocket, offers it to them.*) For the lady. No, no, I have a pin. (*Pause. He pins the flower—a marigold—with the greatest delicacy between the girl's breasts. Steps back to look at his work.*) No need for thanks. My pleasure entirely. Believe me. (*Silence. Nothing. Then a dark red stain, gradually widening, begins to form behind the flower.*) Aagh, aagh, aagh, aagh. . . . (*Chanting.*) U-n-i-ted. Uni-ted. You won't keep us down there for long, don't worry. We're coming up *there* where we can gerrat yer. (°·f)

By playing "the Red Flag," a socialist famous anthem of the Labor Party in England and Ireland, Price adds a sense of seriousness to his stand-up. This indicates that Price's routine is electrified with an aesthetic mélange of seriousness and comedy, a carnivalistic portrait of sociopolitical problems which contends that he is clearly "the most artistically gifted and ideologically motivated of the comedians" (Stott ١١٠). This assessment can be traced back to the notion that the couple of mummies stand for the aggression of the English bourgeois class, while Price himself is a symbol for the working-class people who are exploited by the capitalist class. With this in mind, Price's failure to be on good terms with the two dummies vis-à-vis the Red Flag song offers a savagely "flawless demonstration of class

hatred" (Rabey ١٤١) brought on by the English capitalist conservative government during the ١٩٧٠'s—when Mrs. Margaret Thatcher was elected as Prime Minister of England. This implies that the gap between socialism and capitalism is widened to the degree that the English working-class represented by Price is ready to adopt violence as a political mechanism against the two bourgeois dummies. In this respect, Price's violent audition emerges from the belief that the couple of dummies symbolize the capitalist government led by Thatcher that devours the working-class.

Nevertheless, the play ends with the sweeping victory of capitalism over socialism, which is best clarified in the third act, where Challenor praises the stand-up of Sammy Samuels, a Manchester Jewish auditioner, and George McBrain, an Irish student. The secret of their success can be traced back to the fact that they both narrate jokes in the light of Challenor's theory of demand and supply, away from any serious significance to any political questions. In his comment on the performance structure of the would-be comedians, Challenor points out four major critiques that can be considered a manifesto of capitalist theory of comedy. Firstly, he attacks Connor's routine, mainly because it draws on highlighting that being an Irish is the main topic of laughter. He contends that people do not attend theatre in order to learn; rather, they want to laugh: "People don't learn, they don't want to, and if they did, they won't look to the likes of us to teach 'em" (٥٦). Secondly, he praises Samuels for providing a different act that hinges on a plethora of jokes about the Irish and black. Despite that, he criticizes Samuels as his jokes lack climax. The lack of climax makes the audience fall asleep. To avoid such a defect, Samuels should be keen on inserting a climax into each joke: "You need an ending, you were just sticking one after another till you'd done. No climax. People want a climax" (٥٦). Thirdly, Challenor reproves Ged and Phil for disrupting the audience. Their audition of a Pakistani on rape charge is devoid of content: "It's a nice idea, but you need the material" (٥٦).

Fourthly, even though Challenor extols McBrain for the excellent manipulation of the theme of sex that seems to be "subtle but not too subtle" (٥٧), he warns him of imposing his own "particular prejudice" on the audience. Lastly, Challenor, motivated by the capitalist market value, disdains Price's act for not speaking directly to the audience. This drives Challenor to describe such an act as "repulsive" and unfunny. That is why he reminds Price and all the students that if they look forward to being good comedians, they should be armed with four critical practices. First, audiences are not clever; rather, they are thick. The bad comedian is the one who gives them a chance to discover their thickness. Second, the true comedian should increase laughter because "two laughs are better than one." Third, the artist is not in need of loving the spectators, but he ought to make

them love him/her. Last, he induces them to learn how to sell themselves by representing what the audience needs:

Four golden rules. For all of you, though some more than others. One. All audiences are thick, collectively, but it's a bad comedian who let 'em know it. Two. Two laughs are better than one. Always. Three. You don't have to love the people, but the people *have* to love you. Four. Sell yourself. If you're giving it away, it won't, it won't be worth having. (٥٨)

The four golden rules made by Challenor are the centre-point of the play; they explain the rationale behind the confronting strategies of Waters and Challenor. These strategies are extended to such an extent that they set up a dialectical relationship between Waters and Price whose violent routine of killing the young girl forces Waters to contend that "a real comedy should empower the audience in a rational way" (B, "Trevor" ١٩٢), not aggressive one. Motivated by this contention, Waters launches a heavy attack at the act of his faithful student Price, accusing him of being ugly, full of hate, and free of the power of truth. This criticism raises a debate over the meaning of truth. In this respect, Price elucidates that Waters has no conception of truth, mainly because he perceives it in terms of capitalist institutions, e.g. "Music hall, Colone Hippodrome, Bolton Grand . . . and the Lancashire lad." Unlike Waters, Price contends that truth is an iron fist that should be used to blow up such capitalist institutions as they brought on "hunger, diphtheria, filth, unemployment and bed bugs." This signifies that Price's very project is to reveal the destructive influence of capitalism on society by proving that nothing has changed. His frustration of the impossibility of changing the current political situation makes him believe that he is still handicapped, exploited, popped and slaughtered by the capitalist ideology that devours the socialist enterprise:

Price: The truth. . . . What do you know about the *truth*, Mr. Waters? You think the truth is *beautiful*? You've forgotten what it's *like*. You knew it when you started off, Oldham Empire, People's Music Hall. . . . Because you were still in touch with what made you . . . hunger, diphtheria, filth, unemployment, penny clubs, means tests, bed bugs, head lice. . . . Truth was a fist you hit with. . . . Just like you fifty years ago. We're still caged, exploited, prodded and pulled at, milked, fattened, slaughtered, cut up, fed out. We still don't belong to ourselves. Nothing's changed. You've just forgotten, that's all. (٦٣).

Consequently, Price's frustration at the sociopolitical state of England brings into prominence how comedy can be used as a festive practice to illustrate the carnival sense of the living present. It also urges one to maintain that Griffiths's *Comedians* dramatizes a cynical expose that emerges from a dialectical relationship between Waters and Challenor. The clash between these two characters indicates that the central aim of the play is to reveal the "passiveness of working class people in Britain who lack ideological stance of Waters and active energy of Price" (B, "Trevor" ١٩٢).

In illustrating such passiveness, Griffiths's *Comedians*, to utilize Bakhtin's words, manipulates "the complex nature of carnival laughter" (*Rabelais* ١١) in order to vilify and relativize the sociopolitical condition of England. To accomplish this aim, Griffiths uses the dialectical relationship among Waters, Challenor, Connor, Ged, Phil, and Price to evince that laughter should not reflect "an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event" (*Rabelais* ١١). Rather, it should be directed to all members of society, particularly the downtrodden because the carnival laughter is "universal in scope" (*Rabelais* ١١).

The universality of such laughter endows the would-be comedians, above all, Connor and Price with a chance to mock and deride the sociopolitical ills of the working-class people, mainly because their performance "asserts and denies; it buries and revives" (*Rabelais* ١١) the ideological power represented by the right-wing ideology. This ideology is best demonstrated through Challenor's theory of demand and supply. If such an assessment is taken a step further, one may conclude that Connor's joke of the IRA along with Price's violence against the bourgeois dummies is the outcome of the destructive politics of Thatcherism. In fact, Thatcherism, a coherent political program, was coined by Margaret Thatcher (١٩٢٥-٢٠١٣), a stateswoman who was elected as prime minister from ١٩٧٩ to ١٩٩٠. Her politics brings about "mass unemployment, the growth of the yuppie culture, the erosion of Britain's manufacturing base, and the widening of the divisions between North and South and between the rich and poor" (Plowright ٢٩٣).

Like Griffiths's *Comedians*, al-Ramli's *In Plain Arabic* dramatizes an experience of a festive laughter that derides and hence criticizes the idea of Arab solidarity. This implies that al-Ramli uses comedy to launch a biting self-criticism of the sociopolitical conditions that befall the Arabs. His criticism surprised many critics at seeing "Egyptians and Arabs laughing at their own abject predicament: at their own self-deception, internal defeat, and backward mindset" (al-Ramli "Comedy" ١٧٥). To theatricalize this predicament, al-Ramli deals *In Plain Arabic* with a carnivalesque performance in which Sadiqa Salih, an Egyptian female announcer, and Amin Falih, an Egyptian male announcer, film a television program about a group of ١٤ Arab exchange students in London. In it, the two announcers address the viewers directly, stating that their aim is to represent the reality of the students accurately. This intention stems from their belief that "the recorded picture did not reflect the whole truth" (٣). To overcome such a defect, they swear to show the audience a detailed analysis of what transpires behind the cameras, partly because they get the feeling that the audience needs nothing but an original version of the truth.

Hence, the program begins with the Arab students introducing themselves; each student harps on one of the salient geopolitical features of his/her own country. The students divide themselves into formations accompanied by the anthem "My Beloved Homeland." Although they come from different countries, they share the same cultural and historical experience. This leads them to address their parents by using the possessive pronoun "our": "our honorable parents." They ask their parents not to worry about them because they are all fine. They say that what disturbs their journey of gaining knowledge is the absence of these honorable parents, asserting that all Arabs are brothers and brethren in England. This close sense of intimacy spurs the Arabs to be united against the plots and immoral behavior of the West that seeks to entrap them. The Western conspiracies implant in them a strong will to acquire knowledge as though it were a drug that can be used to irrigate and develop the Arab world, enabling the Arabs to overcome the false achievements of the dead Western civilization. This creed implies that the Arabs hold the belief that gaining academic degrees grants them a sweeping victory over the West:

All: Our honorable parents. . . . Love to you all. Rest assured, we are all fine. . . . We are all brothers and brethren here; Meeting in a foreign land, united for better or for worse, Resisting the debauchery of the West with full will and determination. We are addicted to acquiring knowledge, as if knowledge were a drug! So that we can come home and pour our knowledge on our beloved land, and irrigate it, To revive its glory and supersede the achievements of those who have taught us. (٥)

The announcers' insistence on depicting "what happens behind the cameras" (٣) and the Arab students' dogged determination to address their viewers directly is one of the key carnivalistic practices. This practice springs from Bakhtin's notion that carnival does not acknowledge the existence of footlights. In a sense, it does not recognize "any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance" (*Rabelais* ٧). This indicates that al-Ramli's play is not a spectacle seen by the audiences. Rather, it is a carnivalesque portrait of reality in which the spectators live as well as participate in it - for its very idea embraces all the people, including the viewers and the honorable parents. Such a portrait enables al-Ramli to engender a critique of the Arab mentality that regards unity as a device for expressing their hatred for the West. In this regard, the Arab mentality contains nothing but contradicting and opposing views that talk them into believing that even though they come to England to receive knowledge, they should resist the widespread corruption that permeates this society. In projecting the political corruption of the Arab countries onto the screen of the Western world, the students shed light on the disunity and the absence of coordination among the Arab nations. This becomes clear when the students insist that they "are united for better or for worse" (٥). This statement is,

most likely, a contradictory sentence that produces laughter, or rather a carnivalistic sense of the Arab nation because this nation is devoid of any form of unity or integration. Such is a heavy political joke on the modern Arab politics, which succeeds only in evincing that the Arabs are talkative phenomenon that inhabits a society of meaningless slogans. Maisah Zidan argues:

The patriotic redundant statements made by the Arab students trick the readers into holding that the students have high expectations of achieving Arab progress and unity. However, the deep analysis of such statements shows how far the Arabs hate the West as well as themselves. This intense hatred refers one to infer that the Arabs live under two false principles: first, they study in England to fight western corruption; second, they are united for worse and better. These principles form the central contradictory argument of the play, which confirms that the Arabs have no form of unity, or union. Rather, they experience disconnection, anarchy, and divergence. This signifies that the Arabs are talkative phenomenon that inhabits a society of shapeless slogans. ^٤(٤٤f [trans. mine])

The Arab students' reaction to the West proves that al-Ramli manipulates comedy as a medium for theatricalizing a wholly different kind of politics than does Griffiths. While Griffiths criticizes the sociopolitical condition of England when Thatcher rose to power, al-Ramli produces collective laughter that slams the politics of all the Arab leaders, not a specific one. This laughter is best reflected in the opening scene of the play in which the Arab students celebrate the advent of Ramadan Feast. Their celebration is suspended with the appearance of Fayeze, a Palestinian student, who bleeds profusely. When asked about what happened to him, he says while being on his way to the hotel, a group of English imperialists express their will to have a talk with him, but he rejects their offer. His refusal motivates one of the imperialists to call him an Arab: "You . . . Arab" (٧٧)! Not only does this call disquiet Fayeze, but it also leads him to feel that his blood is up because he receives it as an insult. In his attempt to avenge the stigma of being an Arab, Fayeze revolts against the imperialists, but he is beaten and his body is found in a pool of blood. This tension is reduced when Professor Wisdom, an English orientalist and master of Arabic language, interferes in the problem, reminding the Arabs that the word "Arab" is not an insult. Rather, it is a descriptive term. His interference urges Adham, a Jordanian student, and Sayf, a Saudi student, to wonder why Fayeze is offended by this descriptive term as well as disregard his reaction. In defence of his instinctive reaction, Fayeze argues that the imperialist spells out the word Arab as if it were "an insult or a damnation" in the hope of proving the false belief that all the Arabs are no more than beasts, backward savages, and uncivilized creatures:

Prof. Wisdom: Friends, allow me to explain that the word "Arab" is not meant as an insult. It is merely a descriptive term, no more and no less. Adham [*exclaiming in sudden recognition*]: By God! You're absolutely right! We are actually Arabs! . . .

[All mumbling together, denigrating Fayez's reaction.]

Fayez: Listen to me! . . . He threw it at me as an insult or a damnation! A spell! He threw it at me with total scorn. It flew out of his lips like spit in my face. He meant you beast, backward savage, uncivilized creature! Everyone there laughed at me! (٢٢)

Fayez's reaction to the English imperialists inserts a sense of seriousness into the celebration of the Ramadan Feast. This seriousness signifies that the play is not only a serio-comical drama, but also a truthful expression of al-Ramli's intention to suspend the celebration of the official feast on purpose. Such an attempt results from his desire to replace the official feast with a carnivalistic one in which all the characters take part in celebrating it in the hope of analyzing the Arab characters. The analysis, to use Bakhtin's terms, emerges from the notion that carnivalistic feast, unlike the official one, offers "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (*Rabelais* ١٠). The suspension of hierarchical structures enables one to find out the essential carnival element employed by al-Ramli. This element is grounded in the maxim that the Western colonization of the Arab countries drives the Arabs to suffer from what Zidan calls "the inferiority complex" (٤٧ [trans. mine]). Not only does this psychogenic trauma implant into them the creed that they are inferior to the Western people, but it also explains the reasons why the Arabs show no talent for arguing with the other. The inability to set up any dialogue with the other "can be traced back to the absolute dictatorial regimes that transform the Arab nation into a wasteland devoid of any shape of democracy" (Zidan ٤٨ [trans. mine]).

In order to highlight the etiology behind the Arabic relapse, al-Ramli lays heavy emphasis on what Rafat Essam names "the theatre technique of dirty realism" (١٤٨ [trans. mine]). This technique helps him create festive laughter that unfolds the negative aspects of Arabic character. His festive laughter is achieved when the Arab students set out to attack the English imperialists who scold Fayez. Instead of taking revenge, they go to the fancy-dress party organized at the Pleasure Palace, where they wear different masks that hide their identity. In this masquerade, the Arabs seem to be so hesitant, worried, and nervous, but they relax gradually, stick to the right side of the stage, and start to dance. Unfortunately, when the ball reaches the climax in which a woman begins to strip, three robbers in cowboy clothes break into the party, firing their guns in the air. These thieves ask the audience to take off their masks, otherwise they will be killed. Of all the audiences, the Arabs obey them. On removing their masks,

the Arabs are threatened again by the cowboys, mainly because the Arabs wear another "white featureless mask." This extra mask gives the thieves a chance to blackmail the Arabs into choosing between two painful options: removing the second mask, or giving their money to the thieves. The Arabs opt for the second option and start one by one to hand over their money, watches, and rings to the cowboys:

First Robber: This is an armed robbery!

Second Robber: Hand in all your money and jewelry. Quick, or I take your life! . . .

Third Robber: Face to the wall and hands up. Try anything funny and I'll shoot. [*All obey, turning their backs to the audience. The group wearing politicians' masks watches in silence.*]

Third Robber: Take off those masks!

[*All obey quickly, but each is wearing a white featureless mask underneath.*]

Third Robber: All of you! Remove the second mask!

[*All hold on to their masks, moaning in supplication.*]

Third Robber [*laughs, then shouts*]: Hurry or I'll take your mask. . . . Your money or your mask! (ʔʔf)

The masks worn by the Arab students are merely festive actions invented by al-Ramli to shed light on the seriousness of laughter. This seriousness reveals the reasons that lead al-Ramli to make the Arabs wear two masks, not one. These two masks, to cite Bakhtin, clarify that the theme of mask is "connected with the joy of change and reincarnation" because it contains "the playful element of life" which encapsulates "the intricate multiform symbolism of the mask" (*Rabelais* ʔʔf). In analyzing the symbolism of the two masks, one can figure out that the Pleasure Palace in which the costume ball takes place stands for the Arab League established in 1945 to maintain coordination among its members. This league is a sociopolitical organization that holds summits in which the Arab leaders are used to wearing masks over masks to conceal their political agenda. This attitude implies that the Arab League, to employ Muhammad Heikal's view, is not an institution that seeks to achieve Arab integrity. Instead, it is "a place where the Arab rulers are met to collide and initiate topics that give rise to political and social crises, not solidarity or unity. This collision can be related to the fact that each Arab nation has its own political interests, visions, and problems. That is why the Arab unity reaches a deadlock" ^(\) [trans. mine]).

The Arab failure is best represented in the play with the disappearance of Fayeze. Although the English police accuse Fayeze of being a terrorist who sets fire at a bookshop that sells books attacking the Arabs, the students are confident that he has been kidnapped. This accusation urges them to call for an emergency meeting in which they swear to act together

so as to clear Fayez of being a "book burner." Hardly does the meeting start when the Arabs are involved in a dispute not only over the minutes of the meeting, but also over the person who presides over the meeting. This dispute leads Mighwar, a Moroccan student, to try to settle the dispute by asking for "a dollop of discipline" (٦٦) more than once. The absence of such a dollop forces many Arabs to withdraw from the summit. Mustafa, an Egyptian student, attempts to relieve this tension by suggesting that it is better for them all to "draw straws" in order to give fortune a chance to nominate the chairperson. For all that, they squabble over the person who will organize the draw. This profound disagreement compels them to resort to violence, which is best illuminated when Antar, an Iraqi student, attacks Khuzaa, a Gulf student, by throwing a plate at him:

Mighwar: Please, I've been requesting a dollop of discipline for more than an hour. . . . Brethren. . . .

Mustafa: I've found a compromise. We draw straws. This way, we'll all have equal status and we let luck decide who will be leader. . . .

Sakhr: Let's move now to the central question: who do we elect to organize the draw? . . .

Antar: No, anyone but you! . . . You are all agents of the enemy! . . .

Sayf: This is heresy!

Khuzaa: This is apostasy!

Antar: Passive elitism, reactionism!

Sayf: Communists!

Yazid: Imperialists!

Antar: Shut up, you Arab! [*He hits Khuzaa with a plate.*] (٦٦f)

The above-mentioned argument proves that, like Griffiths, al-Ramli shows a talent for composing a serio-comical dramatic work that politicizes the context of theatre. In it, he transforms the tragedy of Fayez's abduction into collective laughter that not only mocks and satirizes modern Arab policies on unity, but also assists in engendering what Bakhtin calls "a specific *carnival sense of the world*" (*Problems* ١٠٧). This carnival sense sustains the atmosphere "of *joyful relativity*" (*Problems* ١٠٧) that provides the spectators with a "sensitive ear" in terms of which they can interpret the echoes raised by any carnivalistic act. Bearing this in mind, the anarchy that spreads over the meeting of the Arab students reminds one of the crucial events that happened in two Arab summits. The former took place in Morocco in ١٩٨٩, while the latter was held in Egypt in ١٩٩١.

Accordingly, al-Ramli's conception of carnival sense of the world advances an aesthetic analogy between the dramatic events of his piece, particularly the conflict among the Arab students over the chairperson, and the histories of Arab league. This analogy proceeds from the notion that the Moroccan Mighwar calls for a dollop of discipline more than once. His call

urges one into eliciting that he is a symbol of king of Morocco, Hassan II (١٩٢٩-١٩٩٩) who is the leader of the Arab summit of ١٩٨٩. In it, Hassan II does his best to keep a little dollop of discipline among the Arab nations, simply because most of Arab countries freeze the membership of Egypt in the Arab League and refuse its return to any Arab talks. This refusal stems from the fact that Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel separately without having any Arab consent on it. Because of the political importance of Egypt, Hassan II holds secret negotiations with many Arab nations to convince them of the necessity of the return of Egypt to the Arab League. Most countries welcome this return except for Syria and Libya. Although these two nation protest against the return of Egypt, Hassan II imposes his desire of achieving a dollop of discipline in the corridors of the Arab League by persuading such two states to receive Egypt with open arms. In his *Harb al-Khalij: Awham al-Qwah wa al-Nasr* (١٩٩٢ [*The Gulf War: the Story from A to Z*]), Muhammad Hassanein Heikal simplifies the conditions of the Arab world as follows:

Even though Hassan II realizes that the discussion of the return of Egypt to the Arab League is a problematic topic, he insists on adding this topic to the minutes of the introductory session of the meeting. He communicates with all Arab kings and presidents, doing his best to get their agreement on unfreezing the membership of Egypt. Only Syria and Libya revolt against the discussion of this topic. (٢٩٤ [trans. mine])

In addition, the clash between Antar and Khuzaa refers one to the Arab Summit of Cairo. In it, ١٤ Arab League countries hold talks that aim at preventing Iraq from pushing its forces into Kuwait. For all that, Iraq invades Kuwait and swiftly "gains control of the country, claiming to have been invited in by Kuwaiti revolutionaries" ("Keesing's Record" ٣٧٦٣٤). This invasion leads later to the ١٩٩٠-١٩٩١ Gulf war, which breaks up the Arab nation and Iraq as well. Instead of easing the tensions of this invasion during the Cairo summit, Tareq Aziz, the Iraqi foreign minister, throws plates at his Kuwaiti counterpart, Sabah al-Sabah. This festive action is repeated in the play—when Antar hits Khuzaa with a plate. That is to say, al-Ramli uses theatre as a festive medium that highlights the political significance of laughter by ascribing the downfall of the Arab League to the Arabs themselves who succumb to disunity, autocratic regimes, and poor governance.

In order to emphasize the disunity and poor governance that befalls the Arab world, al-Ramli hinges on what Bakhtin calls "carnavalesque debates" (*Rabelais* ١٥). This critical practice is accomplished when Professor Wisdom invites the Arab students and some European youths to an open debate over Fayez's case. Though the Arabs long for proving that Fayez is innocent of the charge of setting fire at the bookshop, they hesitate

for a moment over accepting such an invitation, mainly because the autocratic Arab systems make them suffer from the phobia of arguing with the other. Later on, they accept the invitation on condition that the Western young men should not tackle any religious or political issues. That is why the Arabs set out to make a mock debate in order to train themselves on the tactics of the art of dialogue. In it, the male announcer plays the role of the spokesperson for the European imperialism, while the other Arabs perform their natural part as defender of Arab nationalism. The debate reaches the foreground when the male announcer launches a heavy criticism at the Arab politics and morality, accusing the Arabs of drawing on magic, not science, or hard work. He also blames them for relating their sociopolitical setbacks to the West that helps them discover and export oil. His criticism contends that the Arabs are the true criminals who stripe their nation of any form of solidarity, voicing that the Arabs are not brothers. Rather, they are natural born enemies that succeed only in plotting against each other. Their plots bring on the division of Arab countries into smaller fragmented destitute semi-states:

M. Announcer: You were one Arab nation and we came as a thorn between lovers? We instigated the rift between Syria and Egypt, Egypt and Sudan, North Sudan and South Sudan? South Yemen and North Yemen? We started the wars in the Western Sahara and in the Arabian Gulf? The only thing your rulers agreed upon was the subjugation of your own people!

Antar: No, this is definitely more than I can take. . . .

M. Announcer: Are you afraid of Mommy and Daddy? Daddy the chief or the emir, and Mommy the government! (٨٢f)

The male announcer's critique of Arab open-ended present is no more than a cynical exposé, which paves the way for al-Ramli to compose what Bakhtin names "the atmosphere of cynical frankness" (*Rabelais* ٨٧) in terms of which laughter and irony motivate the audience to sum up that the Arab rulers are merely "stupid, illiterate . . . dictatorial leaders" (٨٢). It also urges one to infer that the destructive policies of the Arab leaders egg on the Arab nation to get lost in the labyrinth of the new world system that leaves the Arabs no choice, but to experience the state of total weakness and isolation. This miserable situation springs from two facts: the Arab's preoccupation with fighting each other and the division of the Arab countries into small states that have no political identity. This forces the Arab countries to go into civil wars, inner disputes, and political catastrophes. Even though the Arabs share the same cultural and historical experience, they fail to maintain the idea of Arab nationalism because they are engaged in fighting each other. Heikl observes that:

The Arab world lives in a destructive isolation not only from the rapid international political changes, but also from the mechanism of achieving Arab solidarity. This failure can be traced back to the fact that the Arab countries are divided into two groups. Whereas the former is obsessed with

civil wars that destroy its sociopolitical structure, the latter goes to war with its neighbors. This political instability fragments the Arab nation, as well as predicting its death knell. '() • [trans. mine])

Heikal's statement on the impotency of Arabic politics is best reflected in the play when the debate between the Arabs and Europeans is transformed into "a chaotic fist fight" (٩١). This fight spurs on the Arabs to admit that they all "have been to the brothel, the Pleasure Palace" (Leezenberg ٢٠٥). The admission verifies that the Arabs suffer from "a baffling chaotic . . . problem" (٩٦). In forcing the Arab students to declare openly that they have a problem, al-Ramli ends his piece by warning the Arabs that they should remove their masks in order to be able to face political threats, otherwise their nations will vanish. To strengthen his warning, al-Ramli ends the play with the arrival of an English inspector who announces that Fayeze is innocent because the investigations show that a gang burns the bookshop, not Fayeze. Despite that, the inspector insists that no Arabs are allowed to leave England without a legal permission from the English authorities as they are accused of disturbing public peace. This implies that the Arab students, like Fayeze, become hostages:

Inspector: By the way, I advise you all that you may not leave the country without permission from the investigation authority concerned. Good evening! [*Tips his hat and leaves.*]

Sakhr: It all started with one of us missing; now we're all hostages! . . .

Amal [*in another world, starts singing a national anthem*]: My beloved homeland. . . .

Mustafa: Who are we?? . . . We're all the Arab students . . . colleagues of Fayeze.

Khuzza: Dear God, let it be all right. . .

Amal [*singing*] . . . *its life is a bastion of victories . . . my homeland. . .*
Lights out. () • f)

Like Griffiths, who concludes *Comedians* with "the Red Flag" song, al-Ramli ends *In Plain Arabic* with the Arab national anthem of "My Beloved Homeland [Wāṭani Ḥabibi]." By so doing, al-Ramli not only asserts the presence of carnival elements in his piece, but also introduces the carnival sense of the world to the spectators. This tradition, to cite Bakhtin, can be ascribed back to the notion that songs of national and ideological content sustain "the theme of birth" of a new political system as well as "the theme of the death of the old" (*Rabelais* ٧٩) one. In this regard, the tragic place of the Arabs as hostages along with Amal's anthem bring forth a new relationship to reality, a carnivalistic comic portrait that harps on the living present of the Arab students. This implies that Amal's anthem aims to direct the attention of the Arabs to the fatal politics adopted by their autocratic systems that succeed only in disconnecting the Arab nation. That is why

Muhammad Subhi, an Egyptian actor and producer of the play, points out that al-Ramli's drama is a high-sounding political piece. This critical evaluation stems from his belief that it "expresses an Arab tragedy through comedy by coupling laughter with seriousness in order to produce a cynical exposé. In it, laughter is no more than a medium for unfolding the painful histories of the Arabs" (Subhi ° [trans. mine]).

Conclusion:

In rereading Griffiths's *Comedians* and al-Ramli's *In Plain Arabic* in the light of Bakhtin's theory of carnival, I would like to make the following four concluding points. Firstly, Bakhtin's concept of carnival is an aesthetic theory that provides the audiences/critics with a comic festive power in terms of which they can mock and deride the unjust sociopolitical structures that befall them. By deriding such structures, carnival offers a festive portrait of reality organized in terms of laughter. This laughter produces a new order of things that talks the spectators into understanding and evaluating their present life, mainly because the aesthetic analogy between laughter and politics brings into prominence the political implication of comedy. This practice urges one to infer that carnival does not only release the audiences from the dogmatism of authority, but also advances a new theory of drama that Bakhtin called serio-comedy, the thing that helps Griffiths and al-Ramli to dramatize sociopolitical issues in terms of comedy.

Secondly, despite belonging to two different intellectual backgrounds, both Griffiths and al-Ramli manipulate Bakhtin's theory of carnival, which lends both a hand to establish a festive contact with the open-ended present. However, each adopts a different dramatic vision to achieve his goal, as is clear in the two plays under study. Griffiths's vision utilizes the Marxist technique of dialects to engender theatrical laughter that reproves the capitalist establishment for smashing the dreams and the aspirations of the English working classes. He picks up a socialist vision. That vision helps him portray not only how the husk of capitalist hierarchical oppressions have negative consequences on socialist enterprise, but also what hurts, scares, and terrifies the audiences, since writing plays is no more than a solitary activity. This activity paves the way for Griffiths to draw on comedy in order to drive home the doctrine that dramatic pieces can change the political situation imposed by capitalism.

Unlike Griffiths who strongly believes in the power of socialism, al-Ramli regards it as unsuitable for application in the present time, simply because, according to him, it is dead. This makes him manipulate a dramatic vision that has no close ties with politics. As far as he is concerned any writer should possess a form of complete autonomy. For all that, he hinges greatly on the dramatic technique of dialects that makes his pieces replete with a sense of political significance. This enables him to constitute a dialogic relationship between the audiences and dramatic actions, an endless contact that calls into question the aesthetic interaction between laughter and

politics. Such an assessment implies that al-Ramli's theatre is a festive platform in which al-Ramli mixes the rational elements of theatre with the comic ones in the hope of formulating a serio-comical dramaturgy that theatricalizes the sociopolitical history of the Arabs.

Thirdly, in comparing *Comedians* with *In Plain Arabic*, one discovers that both pieces are no more than serio-comical dramas, mainly because they employ laughter to establish a serious relationship between comedy and the living present. The analysis of these two pieces has made it clear that both plays revolve around the contradicting and opposing views of the theatrical characters. In introducing such contradicting viewpoints, both Griffiths and al-Ramli develop a vision of theatre as a mine of festive laughter. Griffiths's *Comedians* describes the antagonism between Waters's socialist concept of comedy and Challenor's capitalist agenda of comedy. This antagonism divides the six would-be comedians into two conflicting groups. Whereas the first group, represented by Connor and Price, follows up the teachings of Waters that comedy is an art of revealing the sociopolitical problems of the spectators, the second, exemplified by Samuels and MicBrain, adopt Challenor's view of comedy as an art of entertaining the audiences. To reflect the consequences of this dispute, Griffiths politicizes the stand-up performance of the comedians as well as the opposing viewpoints of these characters to vilify the sociopolitical ills that befall the English society.

Similarly, al-Ramli's *In Plain Arabic* is pivoted around the story of ١٤ Arab students, who share the same historical and cultural background but are obsessed with an absurd dispute over the absence of Fayeze and hence the loss of Arab integrity. This produces laughter, which helps al-Ramli to ridicule and criticize the idea of Arab nationalism and the Arabs' failure in sustaining unity among themselves. This failure is certainly related to the clashing views that not only spread over the Arab world, but also lead the Arabs to experience disintegration and the psychological disorder of inferiority. In criticizing the Arab mentality, al-Ramli formulates a biting criticism of the abject predicaments that hang over the Arab nation.

Finally, both Griffiths and al-Ramli are probably identical in employing Bakhtin's theory of serio-comedy, which motivates both to use comedy as a vehicle for slamming the hierarchical structures that attack their nations. In *Comedians*, Griffiths combines the jokes stated by the budding comedians with a sense of seriousness to compose a cynical exposé that gives rise to the birth of a joyful relativity. Of all the six would-be comedians, Connor and Price do their best to make their stand-up performance replete with such a relativity. In this regard, Connor's joke of the IRA man who knocks at the gates of Heaven introduces the audience into one of the crucial political problems that threaten England: the Irish Crisis. Also, the stand-up audition

of Price, particularly "The Red Flag" anthem, brings one closer to the class conflict that permeates English society. This conflict is the outcome of the destructive politics of the English capitalist Wright-wing government led by Thatcher.

Al-Ramli employs Bakhtin's theory of carnival to novelize a different area of politics from that of Griffiths, who uses comedy as a tool for reproofing the political conditions of English socialism under the leadership of Thatcher. Al-Ramli draws on the story of ١٤ Arab students in London to advance collective laughter that slams all Arab countries, not a specific one. To deepen such laughter, al-Ramli hinges on the theatre technique of dirty realism in order to enrich the seriousness of his piece. This seriousness is hammered home through five festive actions: the attack of the English imperialists on Fayez, the armed robbery at the Palace Pleasure, the disappearance of Fayez, the conflict between Antar and Khuzaa, and Mighwar's insistence on keeping a dollop of discipline. The examination of these actions denotes that al-Ramli, like Griffiths, creates a serio-comical discourse that combines laughter with seriousness, which brings into prominence a specific carnivalistic portrait of the Arab world, which endows the audiences with a sensitive ear. This ear helps one to probe deeply into the Arab histories to throw light on the downfall of the Arab league, the ١٩٩٠-١٩٩١ Gulf war, and the autocratic regimes that deteriorate the Arab countries. Griffiths and al-Ramli are artistically gifted playwrights, who deploy Bakhtin's theory of carnival in order to invite the audiences to laugh at their sociopolitical realities and then castigate them for doing so.

NOTES

All translations from Arabic are mine.

- ١- الاشتراكية وهم كبير بدليل أنها ماتت ولم تستمر، أنا مؤمن أن للغلبة حقوقاً في الحياة الكريمة والملبس والسكن والتعليم وغيرها، لكن مختلف في الأدوات ومنهج الوصول لهذه النتيجة.
- ٢- لينين الرملي . . . اعتمد علي بعض "تقنيات الكتابة الدرامية المسرحية" لإنتاج دلالات خاصة، تحوي في طياتها رسالة ما يصدرها للمتلقي في صورة فنية مسرحية، قد تختلف عن رؤية هذا المتلقي للواقع الاجتماعي والسياسي والفكري، أو قد تجعل هذا المتلقي يعيد النظر في رؤيته الخاصة لهذا الواقع المعاش، وأحياناً أخرى تؤكد للمتلقي علي بعض جوانب واقعه المعاش من خلال إبرازها بشكل كاريكاتيري ساخر.
- ٣- جميع أعمال المسرحية تدعو الناس لمراجعة أفكارهم، دون الاعتماد على الخطابة أو الكثير من الأصوات العالية، لا بد أن يكون للمسرح دوره في حث الناس على التفكير، ليس من باب التعليم أو الخطابة، ولكن من خلال وصول الفكرة أو الإحساس بها، ربما من خلال الشخصيات الكوميديّة أو الكلمات المضحكة تصل أعقد الأفكار وأكثرها ارتباطاً بالتفكير، بأبسط الأمور تصل الفكرة للمشاهد وعلى أسوأ الأمور إن لم تصل لذهنه فلا بد أن تصل لإحساسه، ولكن إن لم يكن المسرح ذهنياً فلا معنى له.
- ٤- فقد يظن القارئ للوهلة الأولى أن هذه العبارات الرنانة المؤثرة، تحمل معاني جادة يؤمن بها هؤلاء الطلبة العرب إلا أن المتمعن في دلالتها، يري أنها تحمل في طياتها احساساً بالضغينة ضد الغرب بصفة عامة. وكأنهم جاءوا إلي هذه البلاد كي يقوموا، كي يصلحو حالها الذي فسد، متحدون في السراء والضراء، فالعرب في الأساس ليس بينهم أي نوع من الأتحاد أو الوحدة، فهناك تفرقة وتشتت يلمسه رجل الشارع العادي . . . فهذا يدل علي أن العرب ظاهرة كلامية ومجتمع شعرات.
- ٥- دائماً المواطن العربي لديه إحساس بالدونية أمام الآخر الغربي.
- ٦- ويشير المؤلف من خلال عدم قدرة الطلبة العرب علي الحوار إلي النظم العقيمة التي تحكمهم والتي تعجزهم عن الحوار لافتقارها الديمقراطية.
- ٧- لأن المسرحية تعتمد علي تكنيك مسرح الكباريه السياسي.
- ٨- وانتهت هذه المرحلة بإنشاء جامعة الدول العربية، لكن الجامعة لم تستطع أن تكون أكثر من ملتقى تتقابل فيه – وتتصادم أيضاً – نزعات وتوجهات تختلف أسبابها باختلاف المصالح والرؤي . . . ومراحل النمو والتطور. ومرة ثانية وصلت الأمة العربية إلي نفس الطريق المسدود.
- ٩- وكان الملك يقدر حساسية الموضوع، ولكنه في صميم قلبه كان مؤيداً لعودة مصر. وراح يجري اتصالات مع ملوك ورؤساء الدول العربية الأخرى يسألهم في هذا الموضوع، وأحس أن هناك أغلبية تؤيده. وتركزت المعارضة لأدراج البند المقترح في سوريا وفي ليبيا.
- ١٠- كان العالم العربي في عزلة عن دنياه المتغيرة بسرعة، وكان في حالة خصام مع قيم عصره، وكان مشتتاً مع نفسه في حروب أهلية لا يكاد يخلو منها بلد، وكانت بعض أوطانه تتأكل هويتها ورقعتها، بينما بعضها الآخر يغرق في مستنقعات طين ودم، بل إن أوطاناً عربية مضت تغيب بسرعة في ظلام النسيان، ثم أن هذا العالم العربي كان علي خلاف مع الجيران حوله في الإقليم، وقد وصلت بعض هذه الخلافات إلي حد الحرب المسلحة.
- ١١- بالعربي الفصيح . . . اراها اضحوكة عربية وعروبة دامعة فيها مرارة اخذت من الضحكة سخرية ومن الدمعة تطهيراً وتنقيتاً.

الملخص:

توظيف السياسة في مسرحيتي "الكوميديون الستة" لتريفور جريفث و"بالعربي الفصيح" للنين الرملي: دراسة مقارنة
اسامة رسلان

يقدم هذا البحث دراسة تحليلية مقارنة لمسرحية "الكوميديون الستة" (١٩٧٩) للكاتب الإنجليزي تريفور جريفث (١٩٣٥-) و مسرحية "بالعربي الفصيح" (١٩٩٢) للكاتب المصري لنين الرملي (١٩٤٥-) في ضوء نظرية الكرنفال (theory of carnival) التي أرساها الناقد الروسي ميخائيل باختين، وتؤكد القراءة النقدية التحليلية لهاتين المسرحيتين أنه علي الرغم من أن جريفث والرملي ينتميان لسياقين ثقافيين مختلفين كلياً وجوهرياً، إلا أنهما يشتركان في تبني أدبيات وجماليات نظرية الكوميديا الهادفة (serio-comedy) التي أرساها باختين (١٨٩٥-١٩٧٥). تهدف هذه الكوميديا إلي استخدام الضحكات (laughter) كوسيلة من وسائل كشف المشكلات السياسية والاجتماعية (sociopolitical issues) التي يعاني منها المجتمع ومن ثم يتأثر بها جمهور المسرح عبر المكاشفة الكوميديية، وعلي الرغم من أن كلا من جريفث والرملي لم يُعلنا من قريب أو بعيد تأثرهما بتلك النظرية، فإن الباحث يسعى إلي إثبات أن كلا من المؤلفين قد تأثرا تأثراً ملحوظاً بنظرية الكرنفال ودورها في تبسيط الهجاء (satire) الاجتماعي والسياسي للأنظمة الاستبدادية (hierarchical structures) عبر المعنى الأعمق لما وراء النص . تلك الانظمة التي قهرت الإنسان ولم تترك له فرصة للتعبير عن آلامه إلا عبر السخرية من الحاضر العثي (the living present) الذي يعيشه. لذا، نلاحظ من خلال الدرس أن جريفث وظف نظرية باختين لنقد الوضع المزري للطبقات العاملة في إنجلترا أثناء حكم رئيسة الوزراء السيدة مارجريت تاتشر. أما الرملي، فقد اعتمد علي تلك النظرية للسخرية من السياسات العربية التي أدت لاندلاع حرب الخليج.

الكلمات الدالة: (الألفاظ المفتيح)

جريفث - الرملي - باختين - الكوميديا - الكرنفال - الضحكات - الكوميديون الستة - بالعربي الفصيح.

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APPENDIX Transliteration System

Description	Transliteration	Name	Letter
voiced bilabial stop	/b/	ba	ب
voiceless alveolar stop	/t/	ta	ت
voiceless dental fricative	/th/	sa	ث
voiced palato-alveolar affricative	/j/	jim	ج
voiceless pharyngeal fricative	/h/	ha	ح
voiceless uvular fricative	/kh/	kha	خ
voiced alveolar stop	/d/	dal	د
voiced dental fricative	/d/	zal	ذ
voiced alveolar roll	/r/	ra	ر
voiced alveolar fricative	/z/	za	ز
voiceless alveolar fricative	/s/	sin	س
voiceless palato-alveolar fricative	/sh/	shin	ش
voiceless alveolar fricative	/s/	sad	ص
voiced alveolar stop	/dh/	dad	ض
voiceless alveolar stop	/t/	ta	ط
voiced dental fricative	/Z/	za	ظ
voiceless pharyngeal fricative	/ʕ/	ain	ع
voiced uvular fricative	/gh/	ghain	غ
voiceless labio-dental fricative	/f/	fa	ف
voiceless uvular stop	/q/	qaf	ق
voiceless velar stop	/k/	kaf	ك
voiced alveolar lateral	/l/	lam	ل
voiced bilabial nasal	/m/	mim	م
voiced alveolar nasal	/n/	nun	ن
voiceless glottal fricative	/h/	ha	هـ
voiced bilabial semi-vowel	/w/	waw	و
voiced palatal semi-vowel	/y/	ya	ي

voiced glottal stop	/ʔ/	alif	ء (همزة)
Vowels			
front open short	/a/		-----
front close short	/i/		----- -----
back close short	/u/		----- ----- -----

A sequence of two identical consonants or vowels= length.