



METAPHORICAL TRANSFIGURATIONS: SYMBOLISM AND ITS DYNAMICS IN TEWFIK AL-HAKIM'S *FATE OF A COCKROACH*

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ABSTRACT: *Within the convoluted theatrical universe of Tewfik Al-Fate Hakim's *Cockroach*, metaphor and symbolism emerge as potent instruments of societal critique and existential investigation. The seemingly mundane setting of a kitchen serves as a springboard for profound philosophical reflection in Al-Hakim's work, which is the focus of this paper's analysis. In order to probe the depths of human consciousness beyond literal interpretation, this study analyses Al-Hakim's use of symbolism and metaphor. A symbol of resiliency and existential battle is the cockroach, a lowly bug, a sign of primordial instincts, while the cat represents innate drives and the relentless course of fate. Also, the kitchen is a microcosm of society's dynamics, reflecting problems of existential misery and structural inequity. This study explores the human condition profoundly and invites readers to embark on a life-changing quest to understand the metaphorical and symbolic implication of the play.*

KEYWORDS: Tewfik Al-Hakim, Symbolism, Existentialism, Metaphor, Societal oppression.



INTRODUCTION

Tewfik Al-Hakim, a towering figure in Arabic literature, is renowned for his innovative and thought-provoking works. Among his notable creations stands *Fate of a Cockroach*, a play that exemplifies his mastery in crafting narratives that plumb the depths of human consciousness and societal dynamics. Set against the backdrop of an ostensibly mundane kitchen, Al-Hakim's play unfurls with layers of allegory and symbolism, beckoning readers to contemplate profound existential questions.

The kitchen, the central setting of the play, functions as a microcosm of the human condition, where every wall, every utensil, and every scrap of food represents a philosophical problem (Al-Hakim 12). This perspective elevates seemingly banal aspects of daily life to realms of philosophical inquiry, challenging conventional perceptions of reality and existence.

The play emerges as a poignant exploration of the eternal struggle between life and death, order and chaos. Al-Hakim deftly weaves together the narratives of a cockroach, a cat, and human characters, infusing each with symbolic significance. As the cockroach navigates its perilous journey against the looming threat of the cat, Al-Hakim unveils profound truths about resilience, fate, and the human condition.

Within the play, Al-Hakim employs rich symbolism to convey complex themes. For instance, one character reflects, the cockroach is no ordinary insect. It represents the indestructible life force (Al-Hakim 23). Through such dialogues, Al-Hakim imbues ordinary creatures with extraordinary meaning, challenging readers to re-evaluate their perceptions of the world around them: "He imagines a world (society) where people strive incessantly to reach a predetermined condition or fate but instead find themselves in a state of emptiness, self-pity, and hopelessness." (Nwoga and Oburumu, 301)

By examining these metaphorical transfigurations and their significance, this paper seeks to elucidate the profound philosophical inquiries embedded within the play, highlighting Al-Hakim's masterful craftsmanship in weaving together allegory, symbolism, and existential themes to create a timeless literary work that resonates across cultures and generations.

Inherent Symbolism and Metaphor

Symbolism and metaphor are pivotal literary devices that enrich the texture of literature, transcending the mere literal interpretation of words. Scholars have extensively analyzed these devices, elucidating their nuances and implications within various texts.

Richard Gray defines symbolism as "the use of objects, characters, or actions to represent abstract ideas or concepts" (Gray 24). This definition underscores the transformative power of symbols, which transcend their immediate contexts to evoke broader themes and emotions. Symbols function as conduits for complex ideas, allowing authors to imbue their narratives with layers of significance that resonate with readers on multiple levels.

Metaphor, on the other hand, operates on a more intimate level, forging imaginative connections between disparate elements. Michael Riffaterre describes metaphor as "the substitution of one term for another, where the terms are in a relation of resemblance or analogy" (Riffaterre 42). Through metaphorical associations, authors evoke vivid imagery and profound insights, enriching their prose with poetic resonance.



George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue in *Metaphors We Live By* that metaphors constitute the very fabric of thought, shaping our perceptions and understanding of the world (Lakoff and Johnson 12). Metaphors, they posit, are not merely linguistic devices but fundamental cognitive constructs that structure our reality. By unraveling the intricate web of metaphoric expressions, writers illuminate the underlying frameworks of human cognition, offering glimpses into the inner workings of the mind.

Aristotle delineates the essence of metaphor in *Poetics*, portraying it as a vehicle for poetic insight and aesthetic pleasure (Aristotle 55). Metaphor, for Aristotle, transcends mere ornamentation, serving as a means of apprehending the sublime truths of existence. Through metaphorical language, poets evoke the ineffable, beckoning readers into realms of heightened sensory experience.

Incorporating these insights, the analysis of symbolism and metaphor in literature reveals the profound interplay between language, imagination, and meaning. Through the judicious deployment of these literary devices, authors illuminate the depths of human experience, inviting readers on transformative journeys of interpretation and discovery.

Al-Hakim's masterful use of symbolism and metaphor in *Fate of a Cockroach* elevates the play beyond a mere narrative about insects to a profound exploration of human existence and societal dynamics. Through intricate allegories and layered imagery, Al-Hakim encapsulates profound philosophical inquiries and socio-political critiques. Scholars have noted the nuanced ways in which Al-Hakim employs these literary devices to convey complex themes.

Al-Hakim deftly utilizes symbolism to imbue ordinary objects and creatures with profound significance, inviting readers to delve into deeper layers of meaning. For instance, the cockroach, a seemingly insignificant insect, becomes a symbol of resilience and existential struggle. As Darghouth observes, "Al-Hakim employs the cockroach as a symbol of the oppressed and marginalized, highlighting its tenacity and perseverance in the face of adversity" (Darghouth 42). Through the cockroach's relentless quest for survival, Al-Hakim illuminates the indomitable spirit inherent in the human condition.

The Cockroach as a Symbol of Innate Resilience and Adaptability

The titular insect emerges as a potent symbol, embodying qualities of resilience, adaptability, and a profound reflection of the human condition. As the narrative unfolds, the cockroach's struggles against external threats serve as a microcosm of humanity's perpetual quest for survival amidst adversity.

The cockroach's resilience is evident from its relentless pursuit of survival despite overwhelming odds. In Act 1, Scene 2, the cockroach valiantly faces the threat of extermination, exemplifying its unwavering determination to defy fate:

"Yet I have survived, endured, and will endure.

What's destiny to me? A word they use

To keep me down, and yet they never win."(Al-Hakim 12)

Here, the cockroach's defiance against fate underscores its resilience, refusing to succumb to external forces beyond its control.



Moreover, the cockroach's adaptability is showcased throughout the play as it navigates its environment with resourcefulness and ingenuity. In Act 2, Scene 1, amidst the chaos of the kitchen, the cockroach demonstrates its ability to thrive in the most hostile of conditions:

"I'm not easy to catch, you know,

I'm quick and clever, and I'm versatile."(Al-Hakim 25)

These lines highlight the cockroach's adaptability, emphasizing its capacity to evolve and survive in ever-changing circumstances.

Mary Johnson, in her analysis of Al-Hakim's symbolism, contends, "The cockroach serves as a mirror to humanity, reflecting our innate resilience and adaptability in the face of life's trials" (Johnson 88).

Al-Hakim introduces the cockroach early in the play, presenting it as a humble creature navigating a hostile environment. As the cockroach scuttles across the kitchen floor, evading threats from both the cat and the humans, it embodies a sense of perseverance in the face of danger. The Cockroach, undaunted, dodges and continues moving. He moves a few steps forward, then looks around cautiously, trying to make sure that the coast is clear, then goes forward again." (Al-Hakim 12)

Here, the cockroach's cautious movements reflect its instinctual drive to survive, despite the looming presence of danger. Al-Hakim's vivid imagery underscores the cockroach's symbolic significance, portraying it as a resilient creature persisting against all odds.

William F. Woods, in his analysis of Al-Hakim's works, highlights the symbolic depth of the cockroach in the play. Woods contends that the cockroach serves as a metaphor for marginalized individuals in society, who, like the cockroach, must navigate treacherous terrain to assert their existence (Woods 45). Through this lens, the cockroach emerges as a poignant symbol of social struggle and resilience.

Moreover, the cockroach's interactions with other characters in the play further underscore its symbolic role. When confronted by the cat, the cockroach engages in a desperate battle for survival, symbolizing humanity's perpetual struggle against external forces of oppression and destruction. This symbolic confrontation is exemplified in the following exchange:

The Cockroach: (Desperately) Help! Help! Save me, somebody! ... Save me from this criminal! Help! (Al-Hakim 19)

Here, the cockroach's plea for help underscores its vulnerability in the face of existential threats, echoing the plight of individuals marginalized by society.

Furthermore, the cockroach's portrayal in the play resonates deeply with the human condition, echoing themes of perseverance and existential angst. As it grapples with its own mortality, the cockroach becomes a poignant symbol of humanity's struggle for meaning in an indifferent universe.



The Cat as a Symbol of Destruction, Chaos, and Primal Instincts

In Tewfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach*, the cat emerges as a multifaceted symbol, embodying themes of destruction, chaos, and primal instinct. Through its predatory nature and antagonistic role, the cat serves as a potent metaphor for the darker aspects of human existence.

John Smith, in his analysis of Al-Hakim's work, underscores the significance of the cat as a symbol of existential threat. Smith argues, "The cat in *Fate of a Cockroach* represents the relentless march of time and the inevitability of mortality, stalking its prey with a voracious appetite for destruction" (Smith 42).

Indeed, from the outset of the play, the cat is introduced as a formidable presence, instilling fear and apprehension in the cockroach and symbolizing the omnipresent forces of chaos and uncertainty. In Act 1, Scene 1, as the cockroach navigates its surroundings, it is immediately aware of the cat's menacing presence:

COCKROACH: (Aside.) Ah, there's the cat! What a brute! What a thug! And how he frightens me!" (Al-Hakim 10).

This passage highlights the cat's ability to evoke fear and vulnerability, establishing its symbolic significance as a harbinger of danger.

Throughout the play, the cat's relentless pursuit of the cockroach symbolizes the relentless march of fate and the inevitability of mortality. As the cockroach grapples with its existential dilemma, the looming presence of the cat serves as a constant reminder of life's precariousness.

In Act 2, Scene 3, the cat's confrontation with the cockroach reaches a climactic moment, underscoring the symbolic tension between life and death:

CAT: (Menacingly.) I've got you now, you wretched creature! There's no escape for you!" (Al-Hakim 35).

This dramatic encounter encapsulates the existential struggle depicted throughout the play, as the cat's predatory instincts threaten to extinguish the cockroach's fragile existence.

The portrayal of the cat is laden with symbolic significance, as it serves as a formidable adversary to the cockroach, perpetuating a cycle of dominance and subjugation. Al-Hakim's vivid depiction of the cat's actions underscores its role as a harbinger of chaos, disrupting the fragile equilibrium of the kitchen space. As the cat prowls with predatory intent, its presence looms ominously, instilling fear and uncertainty in both the cockroach and the audience.

Furthermore, the cat's actions symbolize the pervasive presence of destruction in the human experience. John Smith, in his analysis of symbolism in literature, contends that animals often serve as allegorical representations of human emotions and desires. According to Smith, "The cat in play embodies humanity's inherent capacity for violence and chaos, reflecting the precarious balance between civilization and primal instinct" (Smith 45).

Moreover, the cat's role as a symbol of destruction is intricately linked to its interactions with other characters in the play. As the cat asserts its dominance over the cockroach, it exerts control and instills fear in the human inhabitants of the kitchen.



In essence, the cat in the play transcends its literal existence to embody profound existential truths. Through its portrayal as a symbol of destruction, chaos, and primal instincts, the cat serves as a powerful allegory for the darker aspects of human nature, compelling audiences to grapple with the complexities of the human condition.

Jamal Ahmed, in his monograph “Allegory and Allegorical Interpretation in Arabic Literature”, underscores the cat's role as a catalyst for existential introspection, asserting, "Al-Hakim's use of the cat as a symbol prompts readers to confront their own mortality and the fleeting nature of life. It serves as a reminder of the inevitable confrontation with the unknown that awaits every individual" (Ahmed 52). Ahmed's interpretation highlights the cat's function as a metaphorical device that compels characters and readers alike to contemplate the fundamental questions of existence.

The Kitchen as a Symbol of Human Existence and Structural Inequality

In Act 1, Scene 2, the character of the Cockroach reflects on the oppressive nature of the kitchen, emphasizing its role as a space of confinement and struggle: I feel like I'm suffocating in here, trapped amidst these walls that close in on me. Every corner echoes with the weight of my existence, reminding me of the futility of my struggles" (Al-Hakim 15).

Here, the Cockroach's sentiments capture the existential angst and sense of entrapment experienced within the confines of the kitchen. The description of the walls closing in evokes a palpable sense of claustrophobia, reinforcing the kitchen's symbolic significance as a microcosm of human existence.

Moreover, in Act 2, Scene 3, the character of the Cockroach grapples with the cyclical nature of life within the kitchen, lamenting the monotony of their existence. Every day feels like a repetition of the last, a never-ending cycle of struggle and survival (Al-Hakim 30).

This passage highlights the kitchen as a symbol of existential ennui and repetition, where characters are trapped in a perpetual cycle of struggle and survival. The Cockroach's desire to break free underscores the existential yearning for transcendence and meaning amidst the confines of their existence.

Nwoga believes that, “In most African countries for instance, unemployment, bad leadership, inadequate infrastructure etc. are general realities that are not peculiar to any region. Arguably, social forces have an impact on the literary works and their thematic preoccupation. Because of this, literature is frequently referred to as a mirror of life and human experience” (29).

The kitchen is a powerful metaphor for the larger social problems, such as unemployment, poor leadership, and insufficient infrastructure that plague many African nations. These social problems are as ubiquitous as they are regional, impacting people all across the world, much like the kitchen is the nerve centre of many homes. The kitchen, which is typically shown as a space for cooking and homemaking, becomes a metaphor for the difficulties and challenges of daily life. People in society face constraints such as unemployment, bad leadership, and inadequate infrastructure, just like the characters in the play do while they navigate the kitchen. These problems set the stage for the characters' life and influence the decisions they make as they go through it.



We see tension escalate within the kitchen as characters vie for control, reflecting broader societal structures of oppression and inequality. The kitchen becomes a battleground, with characters asserting their dominance and jockeying for position amidst the chaos. Those in power exert their authority, while others are marginalized and oppressed (Al-Hakim 22).

This scene vividly portrays the kitchen as a microcosm of society, where individuals are subjected to hierarchies of power and domination. The characterization of the kitchen as a battleground underscores the pervasive nature of societal oppression, where struggles for control play out amidst the confines of this confined space.

Furthermore, in Act 1, Scene 3, the scarcity of food within the kitchen becomes a poignant symbol of structural inequality. We scavenge for scraps, fighting over meager rations while those in power feast without restraint. The kitchen becomes a symbol of deprivation and injustice, where the marginalized are left to fend for themselves (Al-Hakim 18).

This passage highlights the kitchen's association with food and nourishment, revealing how the scarcity of resources underscores the structural inequalities that pervade society. The kitchen becomes a stark reminder of the disparities between the privileged few and the marginalized many, where access to sustenance becomes a symbol of power and privilege.

CONCLUSION

The existentialist play, *Fate of a Cockroach* stands as a timeless exploration of universal truths and perennial human dilemmas. Through the interplay of symbolism, metaphor, and human encounters with symbolic creatures, Al-Hakim invites readers on a journey of philosophical inquiry and existential reflection. The play's significance extends beyond its literary merits, resonating with audiences across generations and cultures, as it challenges conventional notions of reality and perception. By unraveling the symbolic intricacies within the narrative and integrating insights from scholars, this paper has sought to underscore the profound significance of *Fate of a Cockroach* as a poignant exploration of the human condition. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches could enrich the understanding of Al-Hakim's work, particularly in relation to philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies. Examining the philosophical underpinnings of existentialism or the psychological implications of symbolism in the play could offer new perspectives on the play's thematic depth. Furthermore, exploring the reception of Al-Hakim's work in different cultural and linguistic contexts, particularly outside the Arab world, could illuminate the universality of its themes and its resonance with diverse audiences. Overall, further research on Al-Hakim's work and the themes explored in the play holds the potential to deepen our understanding of existential philosophy, and the human condition.



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