From Existentialism to Nihilism As Represented in Rajiv Joseph's Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

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Abstract

Rajiv Joseph is a contemporary American playwright. His play Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo was premiered in May 2009 at Kirk Douglas Theatre, California. The play sheds light on looting crimes committed by American soldiers in Baghdad 2003 after American invasion of Iraq. It puts into focus an important period in American literature which focuses on the aftermath of 9/11 events and the war on terrorism. It examines human beings' perception of the world and others during hard times. The aim of this paper is to analyze Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* in the light of Jean Paul Sartre's existential concepts, focusing on characters' eventual nihilist attitude, giving up morals and values. The play tries to put into focus war bewilderment which encourages the characters to search for salvation in an absurd world, drawing attention to the effect of the war on Iraqis and American soldiers' lives, and suggesting that human world is as cruel as animal world.

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Keywords

existentialism, nihilism, Baghdad, ghosts, identity, dilemma

الملخص:

راجيف جوزيف كاتب أمريكي معاصر. تم عرض مسرحيته "نمر البنغال في حديقة حيوان بغداد" في مايو ٢٠٠٩ على مسرح كيرك دوجلاس، بولاية كاليفورنيا. تلقي مسرحية "نمر البنغال" الضوء على جرائم النهب التي إرتكبها بعض الجنود الأمريكان في بغداد عام ٢٠٠٣ بعد الغزو الأمريكي للعراق، كما أنها تلقى الضوء على فترة هامة في الأدب الأمريكي، حيث تركز على الفترة التي تلت أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر والحرب على الإرهاب. تدرس المسرحية إدراك الإنسان للعالم والأخرين في ظل الظروف القاسية التي قد يمر بها. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل مسرحية "نمر البنغال" في ضوء أفكار الفلسفة الوجودية لدى جان بول سارتر، حيث تتبنى الشخصيات موقفا تنكر من خلاله الأخلاقيات والقيم. تحاول المسرحية أن تركز الضوء على الحيرة التي تتسبب فيها الحرب، مما يدفع الشخصيات للبحث عن الخلاص في هذا العالم اللامعقول، ويجذب الإنتباه إلى أثر الحرب على حياة العراقيين والجنود الأمريكان. وتقترح المسرحية أن بني البشر أكثر قسوة من عالم الحيوان.

الكلمات الدالة:

الوجودية، العدمية، بغداد، الأشباح، الهوية، معضلة.

1. Introduction

Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo tackles real looting incidents in which prominent American soldiers and other coalition officers were convicted of bribery and fraud crimes in the federal court. It presents a horrific picture of war, putting into focus individuals' existential

dilemma during the war. According to David Ng, "the play's dominant mood is philosophical, almost existential" (n. pag.). Joseph puts into focus the private lives of American soldiers during the war and the influence of the war on their relationships with each other. This study adopts a theoretically informed approach, highlighting existential themes displayed in Joseph's play. As a response to the war, the play depicts characters' existential quandary and confusion about life, death and the world altogether.

The play tells the story of a Bengal tiger who is caught and transferred to Baghdad, two American soldiers, an Iraqi Translator and the ghosts of Uday and Qusay, sons of Saddam Hussein. Tiger, the central character, is shot and turns into a ghost who tries to answer the play's central question about the significance of the war and life altogether. Tom and Kev, two American soldiers, who guard the Baghdad Zoo, are war profiteers involved in looting Uday's golden gun and toilet seat. Tom intends to sell the stolen items for a fortune. Kev loses Tom's golden gun and dies suffering from mental disturbances, while Tom dies searching for the golden toilet seat in the desert. Musa, an Iraqi translator, works for the American army. He is infatuated by American culture. Although he despises Saddam's regime, he is shocked by American soldiers' malpractice, threatening Iraqis peace. Finally, Baghdad is depicted as a cursed city full of ghosts roaming the streets. Chris Jones believes that the play deals with "the impact of conflict on soldiers; the difficulty of surviving with your body and your dignity attached; and the horrors of destroying an ancient culture (the zoo is, in many ways, a metaphor for

all the Iraqi assets, be they antiquities or living people, in great peril)" (n. pag.). The play presents the effect of war on Iraqis and the American soldiers alike. It describes the impact of the chaotic situation in Iraq on characters' perception of their existence in the world and their relationships to one another. In the meantime, the zoo symbolizes the destruction of the infrastructure of Bagdad and Iraqis valuable properties.

2. Theoretical Background

Existentialism is a movement that had existed before the end of the World War II. Existential thought is primarily related to wartime. It was prominent in philosophy and works of art. Jonathan Webber suggests that "Existentialism" is "an aesthetic movement rooted in certain philosophical thoughts and supplanting surrealism at the centre of European artistic fashion" (Webber 1). Webber suggests that Sartre views "Existentialism as 'a form of humanism, which means that it takes humanity as the central value. But it is distinguished from other forms of humanism in the way it understands humanity" (Webber 5). That is to say, the nature of human existence is an important issue in existential thought. This movement focuses on human beings' values, interests, needs and freedom. However, Paul Vincent Spade suggests that "the Freudian think that what Sartre calls the 'original project' and what they call 'complex' is always the same in the end." (Spade 229). Sartre did not use universal/general symbols to interpret everyone's behaviors. He suggests that everyone has a general project to be like God. According to Sartre, the ultimate goal is to be unique and create independent values.

Man can stop copying these values and change them. However, Sartre suggests that self-deception is called "bad faith" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 47-48).

Existentialism provides an illuminating understanding of characters' motivations and cravings in Joseph's play. As existentialism mainly focuses on the individual, Joseph's play underlines soldiers' experience during the war. The play deals with an existential theme, as characters begin a journey of discovery, trying to find the meaning of their life and death. It depicts the characters' urge to recreate themselves as 'God'. However, they prioritize their need for freedom rather than creating a unique project of themselves. At the end of the play, they adopt a nihilist attitude, denying all values and morals, adopting a destructive point of view, and denying God's existence.

Nihilism is defined as the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy. (Pratt, n. pag.)

According to Pratt, this movement is associated directly with Friedrich Nietzsche. Nihilists reject highest values and approve of a subversive, materialistic attitude. Accordingly, Joseph's characters refuse to believe in any values or morals that restrict their freedom. They begin a journey of enlightment, during which there are no answers for their critical questions.

Discussion and Analysis

The existential crisis of the characters begins during Iraqi war. They try to find the essence of their unique existence as lonely figures, feeling estranged in the bereaved city of Baghdad. However, there are limits to human knowledge. Webber maintains, "The nature of reality and the limits of knowledge are important, according to this approach to philosophy, only in so far as they enlighten us about the structure of our own existence" (Webber 4). Tom and Kev try to be Gods by liberating Iraqis, but they had 'bad faith' and end up by killing them. Later, Kev tries to use reason in the afterlife to figure out the significance of the war/ life dilemma. Again, he failed to achieve this goal. Therefore, he chooses to be free. Likewise, Tiger uses his reason to find God and his true identity, but he fails too. Feeling disappointed, he adopts an atheist attitude. The characters want to be free, which entails understanding the significance of their existence that remains a probing question that they fail to answer until the end of the play. Since they found themselves imprisoned in Baghdad, they treasure their freedom more than their original projects as unique individuals. Webber argues that "Since our goals are freely chosen and pursued, this means that once we understand this aspect of our existence, we cannot value anything without also valuing 'freedom as the foundation of all values'" (7). Kev, Tom, Uday, Musa and the Tiger value freedom and denounce other values/ethics in life. They abandon their responsibility for their actions, blaming God for imposing upon them a torturing life, which is a false premise since they are responsible for their actions.

Actually, there is a difference between the values the characters are calling for such as liberty, freedom and authenticity, and their real intentions which is to kill and loot others' wealth. This is applicable to Tiger who decides to be indulged in a journey searching for his true self/identity. Finally, he chooses to stop and switches back to his brutal nature. Webber believes that "Nothing can determine which goals we adopt, according to Sartre, and nothing can determine whether we continue to pursue a given goal or abandon it altogether" (9). The characters use reason to solve problems. However, the play suggests that many things cannot be understood by reason. Our perception of reality can fail us. The world is not what it seems to be. Moreover, Tiger's existential dilemma and search for his true identity, whether he is a herbivorous or a carnivorous and the significance of life and death, reveal the main focus of the play which suggests that the characters lose sense of the world in times of crisis. Sometimes, traumatized individuals are incapable of understanding themselves. Beside existential questions, the play raises questions about the significance of the war and the effect of war on the individual and his perception of himself and the world/life. For example, the characters keep asking: why we are here? What are we doing in Baghdad? Is our perception of the reality of the war true? These questions have to do with Sartre's ideas about man's perception of the truth. It also suggests that man's perception of reality could be false/mistaken.

As the war awakens soldiers' primordial instinct, the characters are obsessed with killing and violence. Moreover, they experience a kind of

duality. Tom claims that he is a man of values, as he refuses to kill an Ostrich. Later, he kills a human being. His friend, Kev, laments that he has not have the chance to kill any Iraqi citizen yet. He argues, "I ain't seen shit. Nothing. Not one Iraqi did I get to kill!"(Act 1, sc. 1, 153). Meanwhile, Kev is astonished of Iraqis' hostile attitude toward American soldiers, denying Iraqis' right to protest, and ignoring the fact that they are invaders. Later, he shoots Tiger with the golden gun, as he devours Tom's hand. Tiger turns into a ghost who haunts Kev in the rest of the play. Ironically, he turns into a philosopher who tries to find out the significance of his existence. He thinks about home, freedom, life and death. He reflects about changing his primordial instincts as a predator. After his death, he gains a new understanding of the world and repudiates his instinctual behaviors' as a carnivore. He reflects, "You go your whole life never knowing how you look. And then there you are. You get hungry, you get stupid, you get shot and die. And you get this quick glimpse at how you look, to those around you, to the world. It's never what you thought. And then it's over" (Act 1, sc. 2, 155). The play denounces humans' brutality against animals and each other. It deals with violence as an animal instinct, which takes rule of humans' behavior during the war. It suggests that war and violence bring about more violence and chaos. Tiger reflects upon his brutal nature as a source of cruelty:

A basic primordial impulse isn't cruel! But here's what I'm wondering: What if it is? What if my every meal has been an act of cruelty? What if my very nature is in direct conflict with the moral code

of the universe? That would make me a fairly damned individual. After all, lunch usually consists of the weak, the small, the stupid, the young, the rippled. (Act 1, sc. 5, 187)

Tiger talks about the law of the jungle in which the powerful takes advantage of the weak. Perhaps the tiger's revelations have something to do with American invasion of Iraq in which a powerful country invades a weak country. Joseph explores the law of the jungle the international society lives by recently. His play suggests that Iraqi war resurrected or enacted the law of the jungle in international policy, as the war was not approved of by the United Nations.

Tiger roams the streets of Baghdad as a ghost. Lucy Komisar believes that "the tiger is our moral conscience" (n. pag.). Tiger tries to philosophize things. His soliloquy brings on a deep thinking of his true existence. He suggests that being killed is not as bad as being entangled between life and death. He wonders: "See, all my life, I've been plagued, as most tigers are, by this existential quandary: *Why am I here?* But now…I'm dead, I'm a ghost…and it's: *Why aren't I gone?"* (Act 1, sc. 4, 175). Although he has revelations about what is going on in the world, he does not know why he is still trapped in this life. He roams the streets aimlessly, searching for a solution for an ever-challenging question regarding the meaning of life.

Tom visits Kev in the hospital to ask him about the golden gun. Although Tom admits earlier that he has values, he tries to make a livelihood from selling the stolen stuff that should be guarded. While

Kev admits that he trusts Tom, Tom replies, "I don't even really know you, man" (Act 1, sc.5, 182). Although Kev considers Tom his best friend, Tom admits that he barely knows him. Tom is only interested in material gains. He adopts a nihilist point of view of the world, giving up his principles for the sake of a stolen golden gun and a toilet seat. He threatens to kill Kev if he does not restore the golden gun. Ironically, he leaves his friend in order to search for the golden toilet seat, which leads to his ultimate death.

Musa is infatuated by American culture and language. His infatuation is highlighted by his desire to learn English from the *Fast and Furious.* He tries eagerly to memorize colloquial American language he hears from the soldiers. Kev boasts of his position as a soldier in the American military forces, demeaning Musa's job as a translator. Ironically, to Kev, Iraq war is just an exciting adventure, which parallels the thrill and excitement in the *Fast and Furious.* As he is fond of excitement and showing off, he lies to Musa and claims that he has joined the troops assigned to kill Uday and Qusay, Saddam Hussein's sons. Musa feels infuriated to hear the name of Uday who raped and murdered his sister. However, Musa's sins make him eligible to see Uday's ghost. Allegedly, Musa defines himself against Uday's character as a brutal traitor. Nonetheless, Musa adopts the same hostile nature of tyrants and traitors. Uday accused Musa of treason, as he works for the invaders. Moreover, he joins American soldiers who attack an Iraqi man and his wife in their house. He adopts the same nihilist ideology that repudiates values, as he

stole the golden gun from Kev and leaves him in the middle of a nervous breakdown.

Later on, Musa kills Tom in cold blood and leaves him to die alone in the desert. Working for the US troops and killing Tom puts him on equal grounds with the traitors who occupy a disgraceful position that is inferior to the repentant tiger. The play suggests that even the oppressed can commit the most atrocious crimes if he has the chance. Perhaps the war stimulates primordial instincts in human beings. Finally, human beings' killing instinct trespasses animals' primordial instincts in wars.

Uday is presented as a psychotic character who is overjoyed about everything, especially murder and violence. His body has the signs of many bullets. He roams the city holding the decapitated head of Qusay. He pursues Musa who betrays his people by working for the invaders and steals the golden gun from Kev. Thus, Musa is not better than his oppressor Uday, as he adopts the same ideology that is deprived of any sense of morality or humanity. As a wicked soul, he is haunted by the ghost of Uday. Meanwhile, Uday justifies his violence against others, claiming that he punishes those who harm him or his family. He chooses the most painful ways to humiliate his enemies before he kills them, as he is amused to see human beings in pain. He describes how he would like to torture his enemies. Uday suggests that he would

> break their ribs…. Pull out their teeth and their toenails and then watch them try to run away again. This is better than any movie you've ever seen! And then once they have tired of this, and they have given themselves up to you, ready for death, then you

> deny them this death and you bring in their women. And you have your way with them…. *And that* is why you don't ever fuck with Uday Hussein! (Act 1, sc. 6, 191).

Uday finds pleasure in torturing others, declaring that there are other people who will follow his path like the American who killed him by twenty six bullets in his body. Uday sheds lights on ransacking crimes committed by American soldiers in Iraq. He says, "The Americans got me. Me and Qusay. And then what do they do?.... They come into my home and they steal everything I have, like common little thieves. Like piranhas" (Act 2, sc. 6, 192). Instead of liberating Iraqis, the coalition troops ransack Iraq wealth. Uday is pleased by the destruction taking place in the streets. The play suggests that characters' chaotic world is a result of their disbelief in God and valueless world. As long as there is no God, there is no difference between right and wrong.

Uday claims that he has the right to enslave others. He believes that he owns those who work for him. Therefore, he rapes Hadia, Musa's sister. He argues, "you work for me, and so I have rights, and your little sister…*little Hadia*…she works for me too" (193). Feeling infuriated, Musa calls Uday "King Midas". However, Uday claims that he is more powerful. He does not need magic to fulfill his plans; he only needs a country upon which he can impose his totalitarian rule. He summarizes the situation in Iraq after the war, as the coalition leaves Iraq damaged and full of sectarian conflicts. He argues, "And you think the Americans are going to employ you forever? They're already retreating. And they're going to leave you here with nothing green and nothing to work with

except a big pile of shit. The only thing you have is me and my gun" (Act 2, sc. 6, 195).

Tiger feels disappointed, waiting for God to speak to him but in vain. Therefore, he adopts an atheist attitude. His frustration is accompanied by increased disbelief in God. He declares angrily, "I'm working out about sin and redemption since God is apparently nuts" (Act 2, sc. 1, 197). As he wanders in the streets of Baghdad which are now full of new annoying ghosts, he meets a little girl who has half a face because of an explosion. He tries to comfort the crying girl by telling her that she is in God's garden although he despises talking about Him. Being occupied by his redemption, he claims that he abstains from eating children. Ironically, even animals feel pity for human beings. Here, the tiger tries to stand against his instinct as a carnivorous, while human beings kill each other when they have the chance.

Being unable to resolve his existential dilemma, Tiger finds it unfair to be punished for instinctual desires. He tries to escape from his reality as a predator. Feeling powerless and paranoid, he decides to be a more lenient creature. Unable to define his identity, he suggests that he could be a plant. Ethan Youngerman asserts that "It is, for Tiger, a desperate thought but it at least gives him agency; Joseph's male characters may be created in sin, but they can at least contemplate change" (372). On the contrary, Uday enjoys his atrocious behavior against others. He feels pleased to recite how he would torture his enemies.

Being frustrated of Tiger's recurrent appearances, Kev commits suicide and turns into a ghost. He haunts Tom to make him feel the burden of his guilt. He reprimands Tom for leaving him to die in the hospital. Later, Tom regrets his negligence of Kev and admits, "I wish I hadn't done that! But it's over now. I'm fucked up with guilt" (Act 1, sc. 1, 214). Every character has regrets. Everyone has to atone for his guilt. Therefore, they turn into ghosts. Mainly, the ghosts of the characters witness great changes. Now, Kev is a "brainiac". He tries to figure out why they are haunting each other, while Tiger explores the essence of life. He believes that he can solve the riddle if he gathers the broken parts of their being. When the characters die, they contemplate over their lives which seem very confusing to them. They think that death could be a way out from their bewilderment. Nonetheless, their death appears to be more perplexing.

Kev goes astray in the desert. He prays desperately to God in Arabic as he suffers from excruciating mental pain. He cannot find his peace of mind after death. Although Kev has an eccentric character in his life, now he endures a philosophical dilemma and suffers from afterlife revelations.

KEV: I never expected to know so much. I never knew there was so much to know. And the very fact that I'm around? The very fact that I'm learning all these things? I gotta figure there's something going on little more important than just haunting Tommy. So what happens now, God? What happens now that I'm intelligent and aware and sensitive to the universe?

TIGER: I'll tell you what happens: God leans down just close enough and whispers into your ear: Go *fuck yourself*. And then. He's gone. (Act 2, sc. 2, 222)

As Kev suffers from mental confusion, he desperately waits for God to respond to his prayers, but in vain. The same thing applies to Tiger who gives up his journey for discovery and becomes an atheist. He appears at the end of the play with his face covered with blood, declaring his defeat in his combat to change his primordial instincts. Tiger's hopeless trial to talk to God precedes giving up his searching journey and accepting his real/instinctual nature.

All the characters try to escape from Baghdad because whoever comes to it dies and turns into a ghost. It seems like even death is not the way out of this damned city. After death, the characters find themselves roaming in a burning city that traps its visitors. The characters are very confused, as they experience the most horrific incidents in their lives. Being under tremendous psychological pressure, confusion, estrangement and homesickness, they act strangely. They are deprived of their humanity and values. For example, Kev kills Tiger, while Tom abandons Kev. Musa steals the golden gun and kills Tom, leaving him to die alone in the desert. Tom is haunted by the ghosts of Tiger and Kev, while Musa is haunted by Uday and Hadia's ghosts. This may be attributed to the actual relationships these characters have with the ghosts before their death. The ghosts torture the characters they haunt and motivate them to commit suicide, searching for relief. However, the haunted characters

turn into ghosts and suffer from perplexity, as they find themselves imprisoned in the same world. They live in the afterlife as condemned spirits who try to find out the significance of life and death. It is surprising to see how these characters turn into completely different characters after death. For example, Tiger becomes a thinker, while Kev becomes a knowledgeable ghost who has encyclopedic information about algebra and its origins. Hadia's character does not develop, neither does Uday have changes in his character because they appear as ghosts from the beginning of the play. Uday is a hilarious character; who enjoys brutal scenes in a strange way. However, Musa's character witnesses a significant change. He begins as a traitor who helps the invaders in the night raids against his people. However, he ends up rejecting invaders' hegemony and underestimation of the situation in Iraq after the invasion.

Later, Musa refuses to give the golden gun to Tom. Ironically, Tom claims that it is his property. Musa agrees to give him the gun on one condition that Tom will bring him weapons. Musa predicts to endure a chaotic situation in Iraq after the military coalition departure. He claims that weapons will be the most popular commodity in Iraq. Tom replies, "You think I'm just going to supply some crazy terrorist with guns and shit?" (Act 2, sc. 2, 220). Apparently, Tom has more patriotic emotions than Musa. He refuses to help Musa get the weapons while Musa helps them in their military raids against Iraqis. Iraqi war is supposed to bring democracy and peace to Iraqis; however, it brings absolute chaos. If US invasion is eligible, it causes destruction to Iraq. Musa is well aware of American intrusion in Iraqis affairs under numerous claims such as

liberation and democracy. Nonetheless, he is infatuated by the Western culture and does not find it insulting to work for the invaders. After American invasion of Iraq, a new phase of insurgency begins. Ironically, Tom calls Iraqi resistance a kind of terrorism. Jones argues, "One of the great strengths of this work is how Joseph charts the way anything and everything that was good and pure in Iraq was destroyed by a succession of plunderers and invaders" (n. pag.). Joseph tries to represent the horrors of war and its effect on both the tyrants and the oppressed. He depicts how this liberating war, as alleged, ended up with destroying and looting Iraqi fortunes by a group of mercenaries.

While Tom and Musa are searching for the golden toilet seat in the desert of Baghdad, they run into a leper woman and ask her about the bag which includes the golden toilet seat. However, she asserts that there is no bag. Later, Musa discovers that Tom will not bring him any weapons. Feeling enraged, he kills Tom with the golden gun. Before he dies, Musa tells him, "Don't pray to God. Don't pray to any god…. No god is going to hear you. Not out here. Not anymore" (Act 2, sc. 3, 229). Musa leaves Tom dying in the desert. Kev enters with Tom's bag. While Tom is dying, he asks for Kev's help. Kev asks the leper for help, and she gives them first aid equipment. Tom is fully persuaded that he is going to die in the desert. Ironically, Kev states, "At least you got your toilet seat" (Act 2, sc. 3, 232). Kev's reply is cynical as Tom's life is wasted as a price of a golden toilet seat. The characters end up their journey in life empty handed, suffering from mental anguish after their death. Tom dies and the leper declares, "(Arabic) Nothing. There is no God. No heaven, no hell.

Death is nothing. It is peaceful" (Act 2, sc. 3, 234-235). The leper gives up her faith in God as a result of an excruciating disease. It seems that the characters are caught in no man's land. They give up their values and morals. They search for salvation from an agonizing life. Ironically, they end up trapped in the same world as ghosts.

Uday is delighted to see Tom, his murderer, killed. He celebrates Musa's cruel behavior. He cheers, "He suffered, Mansour. He died slowly in the desert all alone…. He called out for you! Begging you to come back and save him! He *begged* you! Ha! Fuck me, man, you're good! And shot him, why? Because he was *annoying you*! Because he wouldn't shut up" (235). Uday is proud of Musa's cruelty, leaving Tom to die alone in the desert. Like Tiger, Musa loses his combat against his evil self as he shoots Tom in cold blood. Musa tries to justify his crime, but he does not find valid reasons.

MUSA: Because…we were in the desert… and the sun was going down….And… (beat) and the sun was going down.

UDAY: …What?

MUSA: (*quiet*) The sun was going down.

UDAY: The sun was going down!....even my father needed better reasons than that! (Act 2, sc. 4, 236)

Finally, Musa admits that he feels good after shooting Tom and leaving him to die. He is amused to see him on his knees, praying and begging for his life. It seems that the ghosts push characters to take revenge for them. Tiger haunts his killer, Kev, who commits suicide at

the end. Uday haunts Musa to make him to kill Tom who kills him and his brother. Youngerman argues that

> while the murder of Tom at the hands of Musa, an embittered Iraqi translator, is the play's narrative peak, the emotional and intellectual climax actually comes afterwards. This is no accident. Joseph's play has a putative plot, but he rejects the trappings of story; he's much more interested in the cumulative meanings of his imagery. (371)

The play reaches the climax when Musa, who is infatuated by American culture, discovers that Iraqis replace Saddam's totalitarian regime by invaders, leaving the audience to wonder about the legitimacy and significance of the war under these circumstances.

At some point, Musa gains a revelation that US invaders are tyrants like the previous regime. He is fed up of serving dictators and is tired of repeating the same mistake. He observes, "I always work for the wrong people" (Act 2, sc. 1, 221). On the one hand, Musa turns into a traitor, enjoying the suffering of others, stealing others properties, and killing others in cold blood. He feels guilty, on the other hand, being responsible for his sister's misery, as he hands her to a traitor who enslaves those who work for him.

At the end of the play, Tiger has mistaken Musa for God before he admits that God is lost. Additionally, Musa gives up his faith in God before he experiences a change in his character. Mainly, characters' disbelief in God precedes being changed into traitors, adopting a nihilist attitude. Youngerman suggests that "When we play God, Joseph seems to

say, we run the risk of being mistaken for Him. And we cannot, ultimately, bear the burden" (373). The play presents the characters' chaotic life and death. They end up losing everything; their lives, faith and hope for redemption. Tiger says to Musa, "We should hunt You down lock You up just like every other wild thing in the world. I can see it: God in a cage, right here" (241). After all, Musa is the one who deserves to be put in a cage like beasts because he gives up his human instincts and adopts animal instincts. He is cruel and disloyal. He also takes Uday's gun. Thid signifies that he is the successor of Uday, fulfilling his prophecy that there are others who will follow his path.

Kev is violent, hostile and dumb, while Tom has a twisted character. He is compassionate and caring for the animals but he is ready to kill human beings. He has values, but he is a thief. While Kev is haunted by the ghost of his victim; Tiger, Tom is haunted by his greed and avarice. Accordingly, Musa is haunted by the ghosts of his sister, Uday and Qusay, as he works for the invaders. He is haunted by the ghosts of the murderers and the victim. The Tiger is haunted by his memories about the child he kills. He experiences an enduring conflict between his nature as a predator and the morals he tries to apply in the world of spirits. He refers to the law of the jungle which destroys the weak, the small and the stupid. He is estranged, as he is sent to the Baghdad zoo like the soldiers. Generally, the play portrays characters' estrangement and longing for their natural lives. The Tiger longs for the forest life, while the soldiers crave for their family life. Rajiv **Joseph** says, "Being able to experience, through this play, like a character, such as the tiger or the soldiers or this

translator, of people far from where they want to be out of their natural habitat, forced into situations that they need to fight to get out of" (Lunden, Jeff, n. pag.).

There is a kind of miscommunication between the characters. They could not communicate with each other. The tiger is tortured by his memories, asking for help. Kev is searching for a friend, while Tom is looking for his golden stuff. Everyone is chased by memories, longing for special people in life and past experiences. They only share a feeling of despise of the time and the place they are trapped in. The play suggests that evil exists in everybody. Everyone in the play is capable of doing brutal actions; the American soldiers, Musa, Uday and Tiger. For example, Kev kills the tiger who kills the children. Uday kills Musa's sister. Musa kills Tom who kills Uday and steals Uday's golden pistol and toilet seat.

The characters have limited point of view of life, death and war. After their death, they get a kind of revelation that paves the way for a profound understanding of things. However, this new understanding does not make it any better. They figure out that their lives are worthless. Tom dies without accomplishing what he aspires to, calling for help from the one whom he continuously oppressed throughout the course of the play. Meanwhile, Kev's nihilist point of view of war and his desire to kill motivates him to be involved in a fearful experience, which is to terminate his life in response to continuous reappearance of a fearful ghost of the tiger whom he killed intentionally not only to defend his

friend Tom but also to show off American power over the uncontrollable situation in Iraq.

The most significant question in this play is; why do the characters act violently at the end of the play? Why do they lose faith in God? Why do not they adopt a humanitarian approach toward others and stick to their faith in God? This would have made things much easier for them. However, they give the chance to excruciating suffering to affect their lives and afterlife as a means to challenge their past lives and current positions as ghosts in a burned city. Their revolt or new projects are motivated by their experience of a depressing situation that is not going to change in the near future. Moreover, they seem to find comfort or relief in facing violence by cruel actions. They do not have the power to challenge their natural instincts. They like violence and enjoy it. They enjoy seeing others in pain. Perhaps, the main reason is that they also suffer in their lives. For example, Kev's hunger for violence and killing proceeds to include himself by committing suicide. Tiger's violent and brutal nature reappears at the end of the play, making his journey of exploration merely insignificant. Furthermore, Musa's agonizing memories for his sister, who was raped by Uday, motivates him to kill Tom.

The characters find out that there is no mercy in this world. Therefore, they resort to God as their final refuge, asking Him to respond to their prayers. However, they find no response to their constant prayers. Consequently, they lose faith. They ask God for help, while they are the reasons of this worldly chaos. They try to find a justification for a war

they started deliberately. Unfortunately, they are convinced of the rationale behind the war. However, they blame God for their behavior, accusing Him of not responding to their prayers as a means to abstain from responsibility. Spade argues, "For example, I might know quite well that certain actions of mine are motivated, say, by a self-destruction urge. That's just a matter of reflection. I might not want to face that fact about myself, since it may be unpleasant" (228). Accordingly, the characters try to find out the meaning of their actions. They are involved in a journey of enlightenment, looking for reasons or justifications for them.

Joseph's characters adopt a nihilist attitude as a response to their failure to find answers for their existential dilemma; therefore, they devalue their highest morals and values, looking down upon humanity and human relationships. The characters adopt an indifferent and destructive attitude toward themselves and others as well. They believe in nothing except their ability to destroy and they revolt against morals, values and God. Joseph's characters live in a meaningless and empty world. Therefore, they commit endless violent actions against themselves and others.

The characters defy God by adopting the cruelest behaviors toward other creatures/human beings. This is represented by Tiger retreat to his carnivorous nature at the end of the play. Additionally, it is also prominent in Musa's violent attitude toward Tom, the oppressor. However, Kev's suicide is motivated by a 'self destruction urge'. Maybe this is his response to the shocking fact that he is a killer when faced by his victim: Tiger. The characters are trapped in world where death is the

only exit. Kelly L. Ross argues, "To be without value and meaning is also to be without standards for behavior" (n.pag). Accordingly, the characters find themselves wondering aimlessly in a void world, in which the borders between right and wrong do not exist since the main value/truth, God, is missing. As the characters declare their disbelief in God, they refuse to abide by any values/principles and adopt barbarous behaviors. If there is no God, life and afterlife are futile. There is no escape from this hell. The play underpins faulty perception of reality and maintains that man's perception of reality could be changed. It could turn into a mere distortion of reality. The peak of this dilemma is quite apparent in Tiger's case, as he is not sure about his true nature, whether he is herbivorous or carnivorous.

The play suggests that human world is as cruel as animal world. Sometimes, humans are crueler than their animal counterparts. Tiger regrets his instinctual behavior as a predator; however, he cannot help it. In the meantime, human beings kill each other willingly and without regrets. As a result, they are haunted by their sins and the ghosts of their victims. Moises Kaufman, the director of the play, argues, "At our core, what are we? Are we primal beings that will continue killing one another? Or are we really beings in search of a spiritual goal? And I think that dichotomy between those two selves is what plays itself out in this play" (qtd. in Lunden, n. pag.). The play underlines the characters' existential quandary. They are defined as human beings; meanwhile, they act as primordial animals who kill one another in cold blood.

Conclusion

Bengal Tiger depicts the characters' desperate search for salvation in a meaningless world. They search for an answer for an existential question: what is the meaning of their existence? When they failed to find the answer, they deny the existence of God and give up their ideals in life. Tiger ends up as predator. Kev loses his mind at the end of the play. Tom loses his life and dreams when he lost the golden pistol and the toilet seat. Musa ends up endorsing the same brutal tendency that is used by Uday. Everyone is vulnerable and is able to commit crimes and brutal actions. Everyone has the same fatal flaw which is promoted by war cruelty.

Joseph's play represents the absurdities of Iraqi war. It deals with war from an existential point of view. It puts into focus war confusion and perplexity. It underlines and highlights American soldiers and Iraqis' suffering from the same dire consequences of war. It explores characters' hopeless search for salvation in a condemned world. It begins by the characters' investigation of the significance of their existence and ends by denying the existence of God. *Bengal Tiger*, as an existential work, deals with the absurd when the characters are confronted by their need to rationalize or make sense of unreasonable world and irrational events, suggesting that human world is crueler than animal world.

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