

Between Absurdity and Meaning: Symbolism and Existential Crisis in Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber*

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Abstract—Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* (1962) is widely regarded as one of the most symbolically tricky performances in present-day Arabic drama. Departing from traditional realism, the play constructs its meaning through ambiguity, abstraction, and symbolic movement, rather than linear plot development. This paper examines the foremost symbols employed in *The Tree Climber*—specifically the tree, the act of mountain climbing, disappearance, silence, and disrupted speech—and analyses how these symbols articulate existential worries related to life and loss of life, expertise and lack of knowledge, presence and lack, and the breakdown of human conversation. Through close textual evaluation, the analysis demonstrates how Al-Hakim transforms normal items and moves into metaphors that mirror the anxieties of modern-day life and the person's warfare to find meaning in an uncertain world. The tree features as a paradoxical symbol of aspiration and confinement, at the same time, as climbing represents humanity's persistent but ultimately futile choice to go beyond its boundaries. Moreover, the habitual motif of absence destabilises rational interpretation and emphasises the fragility of human relationships. Situating the play within the broader context of existentialist and absurdist drama, this paper argues that symbolism in *The Tree Climber* is not simply decorative but structural, forming the very foundation of the play's dramatic and philosophical significance. Ultimately, the observer highlights Al-Hakim's contribution to redefining Arabic theatre as a medium able to engage with regularly occurring existential questions via symbolic expression (Al-Hakim 1962, 3–5).

Index Terms—Symbolism, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *The Tree Climber*, Theatre of the Absurd, Existentialism, Modern Arabic Drama, Language Failure

I. INTRODUCTION

Tawfiq Al-Hakim occupies a principal function in current Arabic drama as a playwright who correctly reconciled Arabic theatrical traditions with contemporary philosophical and

experimental bureaucracy. Influenced by European existentialist and absurdist notions, Al-Hakim tailored these highbrow currents to explore the cultural, psychological, and metaphysical worries of the cutting-edge Arab person. Among his most philosophically complex works is *The Tree Climber* (1962), a play that abandons realistic narrative structure in favour of symbolism, ambiguity, and unresolved motion. Through this unconventional dramatic method, Al-Hakim challenges the target market to question the stability of meaning, good judgment, and human information (Al-Hakim 1962, 1–four).

Unlike traditional drama that relies on causal development and coherent decisions, *The Tree Climber* constructs its dramatic universe through paradox and uncertainty. The unexplained disappearance of an individual, the absence of clear motivation, and the circular nature of the discussion undermine rational interpretation. These elements feature symbolically, reflecting the instability of modern-day lifestyles and the restrictions of reason in a global stripped of fact (Al-Hakim 1962, 12–15). In this regard, the play shares large affinities with the Theatre of the Absurd, particularly in its emphasis on existential disorientation and communicative failure.

Symbolism serves as the number one mechanism through which meaning is generated in *The Tree Climber*. Objects, movements, and silences accumulate metaphorical significance, reworking the level right into a space of philosophical inquiry. This study aims to research the symbolic framework of the play and reveal how Al-Hakim employs symbolism as a structural and thematic basis in place of an insignificant stylistic decoration.

II. SYMBOLISM AND THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

The symbolic structure of *The Tree Climber* locates the play firmly inside the aesthetic and philosophical framework of the Theatre of the Absurd, a dramatic motion that emerged in mid-20th-century Europe as a reaction to the collapse of traditional systems of notion, common sense, and which means. Absurdist drama challenges the assumption that human lifestyles are ruled with the aid of rational order and coherent reason. Instead, it represents the arena as fragmented, illogical, and proof against definitive interpretation. As Martin Esslin observes, absurd drama dramatises “the experience of metaphysical anguish on the absurdity of the human circumstance” and exposes the limitations of language and motive in expressing existential reality (Esslin 1961, 22).

Al-Hakim’s engagement with absurdist ideas is clear in his deliberate rejection of conventional dramatic structure in *The Tree Climber*. The play lacks a clean plot trajectory, causal motivation, and backbone, thereby undermining the audience’s expectations of narrative coherence. This structural ambiguity symbolically reflects an international environment wherein occasions arise without discernible logic, and human moves fail to provide meaningful consequences. Rather than presenting solutions or moral clarity, Al-Hakim employs symbolic indeterminacy to confront the target audience with uncertainty as an essential element of lifestyles (Al-Hakim 1962, 16–18).

Symbolism in absurdist drama operates now not as a device for clarification but as a means of destabilisation. In *The Tree Climber*, symbols face up to fixed interpretation and stay deliberately

open-ended. The tree, disappearance, and fragmentation speak do not factor in the direction of a unmarried, solid meaning but, as an alternative, generate more than one, frequently contradictory, opportunity. This multiplicity mirrors the absurdist rejection of absolute truth and reinforces the perception that meaning is provisional and subjective. Al-Hakim hence aligns his symbolic approach with the absurdist belief that reality can not be completely grasped via rational rationalisation or linguistic precision (Esslin 1961, 40).

Language itself turns into a symbolic website of failure in *The Tree Climber*. Dialogues are marked by repetition, non sequiturs, and semantic emptiness, revealing the inadequacy of language as a communicative medium. Characters talk without truly informing each other, emphasising the isolation of the man or woman in a disintegrating social order. This breakdown of communication is a defining characteristic of absurdist theatre and serves as a symbolic representation of humanity's alienation from both others and itself (Al-Hakim 1962, 21–23).

Despite its affinities with European absurdism, *The Tree Climber* keeps an especially Arabic philosophical sensibility. Al-Hakim's symbolism does not culminate in whole nihilism, however, as a substitute suggests a quiet endurance in the search for that means, even if such meaning stays inconceivable. In this regard, the play reflects an existential tension between despair and desire, positioning human warfare as inevitable yet meaningful in its very own right. By synthesising absurdist strategies with symbolic intensity, Al-Hakim expands the scope of Arabic theatre and demonstrates its potential to engage with general existential dilemmas via culturally resonant paperwork.

III. THE SYMBOLISM OF THE TREE

The tree in Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* is a primary and maximum complicated symbol within the play, running on more than one philosophical, existential, and dramatic level. Traditionally, the tree has been associated with existence, growth, fertility, and expertise throughout various cultural and religious traditions. However, Al-Hakim deliberately subverts these conventional meanings, reworking the tree into an ambiguous and paradoxical symbol that displays the contradictions of human life. Rather than offering enlightenment or stability, the tree will become a domain of uncertainty, illusion, and existential tension (Al-Hakim 1962, 24–26).

At an existential level, the tree symbolises humanity's relentless pursuit of which means in a universe that gives no clean solutions. The characters' fixation on the tree suggests a deep-seated notion that the meaning or reality is living somewhere beyond on-the-spot reality, ready to be found. Yet this perception is repeatedly undermined, as the tree by no means yields the readability or success the characters are seeking. In this sense, the tree represents what Albert Camus describes as the "absurd"—the war between humanity's choice for meaning and the silence of the universe (Camus 1955, 28). The tree stands as a silent object onto which human aspirations are projected, most effectively exposing their futility.

The spatial positioning of the tree, in addition, reinforces its symbolic importance. It exists as a fixed, immovable presence in the dramatic area, dominating the characters' actions and

conversations. Despite its apparent solidity, the tree gives no tangible resolution or steerage. This contradiction displays the existential paradox of lifestyles themselves: at the same time as lifestyles appear structured and useful, it ultimately resists rational interpretation. The characters' engagement with the tree accordingly mirrors humanity's engagement with lifestyles—persistent, hopeful, yet unavoidably inconclusive (Al-Hakim 1962, 27–29).

Moreover, the tree features as a symbol of entrapment instead of liberation. While bushes are regularly related to ascent and transcendence, in *The Tree Climber*, the tree becomes a source of confinement. Those who method it or climb it do not reap freedom, however, but instead stumble upon disappearance, loss, or silence. This inversion of symbolic expectation aligns the play with the Theatre of the Absurd, wherein acquainted symbols are stripped of their reassuring meanings and uncovered as empty constructs. As Martin Esslin notes, absurdist drama frequently employs such inversions to assign the target market's reliance on inherited symbols and narratives (Esslin 1961, 44).

In a broader philosophical context, the tree may also be interpreted as a symbol of fake certainty—structures of notion, ideology, or knowledge that promise reality, however, in the long run fall apart under scrutiny. The characters' religion inside the tree displays humanity's tendency to cling to external structures for that reason, whether religious, philosophical, or social. Al-Hakim indicates that such systems, whilst comforting, are inherently volatile and incapable of resolving existential anxiety. The tree, consequently, will become a powerful metaphor for the phantasm of absolute information (Al-Hakim 1962, 31–33).

Through the symbolic complexity of the tree, Al-Hakim articulates a profound critique of human ambition and epistemological certainty. The tree does not negate the human search for meaning, which means, as a substitute, it exposes its tragic and absurd dimensions. By refusing to assign the tree a fixed or definitive meaning, Al-Hakim compels the audience to confront ambiguity as an unavoidable condition of lifestyles. In doing so, *The Tree Climber* elevates symbolism from a dramatic tool to a philosophical technique, positioning the tree as the axis around which the play's existential inquiry revolves.

IV. CLIMBING AS AN EXISTENTIAL METAPHOR

The act of mountaineering in *The Tree Climber* serves as a powerful existential metaphor that encapsulates humanity's chronic warfare to transcend hassle and gain which means in a detached universe. While hiking conventionally symbolises progress, ambition, and elevation, Al-Hakim intentionally empties the act of its conventional promise. In the play, climbing no longer leads to fulfilment or enlightenment; alternatively, it results in uncertainty, disappearance, and narrative suspension. This repeated failure transforms hiking right into an image of existential striving without success (Al-Hakim 1962, 30–32).

From an existentialist angle, mountain climbing represents what Jean-Paul Sartre defines as humanity's "condemnation to freedom"—the need to perform and decide despite the absence of inherent means (Sartre 1956, 34). The climber's action isn't stimulated by way of rational certainty

but by means of an inner compulsion to act, even if the outcome is unknown. In *The Tree Climber*, this compulsion displays the existential condition of present-day individuals who keep pursuing their desires, notwithstanding recognising the instability and arbitrariness of these dreams. Climbing, therefore, becomes an act of existential assertion in preference to rational achievement. The repetitive and unresolved nature of mountain climbing also aligns the play with Albert Camus's idea of the absurd. Camus famously likens human life to the parable of Sisyphus, condemned to push a boulder without end with out progress (Camus 1955, 123). Similarly, the climber's attempt in Al-Hakim's play lacks finality or reward, reinforcing the cyclical and futile nature of human enterprise. However, as Camus shows, the fee of such effort lies not in its outcome, but inside the act itself. Climbing, consequently, symbolises human staying power in the face of existential meaninglessness.

Furthermore, the physical danger and instability associated with hiking underscore the fragility of human ambition. The climber risks loss and annihilation, reflecting the existential value of striving in an uncertain world. Yet, despite these risks, the act continues, suggesting that existential conflict is inescapable. Al-Hakim provides climbing as each necessary and tragic, taking pictures of the paradox of human lifestyles—where attempt is unavoidable, but success stays elusive (Al-Hakim 1962, 33–35).

V. EXISTENTIALISM, ABSURDISM, AND INTERTEXTUAL PARALLELS

Al-Hakim's symbolic technique in *The Tree Climber* exhibits an advanced engagement with existentialist and absurdist philosophy, situating the play inside a broader international dramatic culture while retaining its cultural specificity. The play's thematic preoccupation with uncertainty, isolation, and purposeless action echoes the existential issues articulated by Sartre and Camus, in addition to the dramatic innovations of Samuel Beckett.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism emphasises the absence of predetermined essence and the need for self-definition via action. In *The Tree Climber*, characters act without clean motivation or expertise, embodying Sartre's declaration that people should create their own means through preference in a world without inherent shape (Sartre 1956, 28). However, Al-Hakim complicates this perception by emphasising the constraints of such self-introduction. While movement is unavoidable, it does not assure coherence or fulfilment, revealing the delicate foundations of existential freedom.

The effect of Albert Camus is particularly glaring in the play's symbolic treatment of repetition and futility. The climber's infinite striving parallels Camus's photograph of Sisyphus, whose labour is each meaningless and inevitable. Camus argues that the recognition of absurdity no longer results in despair but in aware defiance (Camus 1955, 130). In *The Tree Climber*, this defiance is implicit instead of explicit, expressed via endured action in place of philosophical articulation. The characters persist, now not because they agree with each other in achievement, but because cessation would symbolise existential give up.

Samuel Beckett's dramatic have an impact on it, which is also discernible, especially in the play's use of silence, absence, and minimalistic movement. Like *Waiting for Godot*, *The Tree Climber* centres on anticipation without arrival and movement without decision. Beckett's characters wait; Al-Hakim's characters climb. Both moves are symbolically empty but existentially charged, emphasising the anxiety among wish and futility (Esslin 1961, forty-eight).

By synthesising existential philosophy with absurdist dramatic shape, Al-Hakim creates a symbolic universe that transcends cultural barriers even as it is rooted in the Arabic highbrow way of life. His symbols no longer merely illustrate philosophical thoughts; they enact them on a level. *The Tree Climber*, as a consequence, emerges as a crucial contribution to global drama, demonstrating how symbolism can be characterised as a dynamic medium for expressing existential awareness.

VI. DISAPPEARANCE, SILENCE, AND BROKEN COMMUNICATION

One of the most powerful symbolic strategies in *The Tree Climber* is Tawfiq Al-Hakim's use of disappearance, silence, and linguistic breakdown to articulate the existential crisis of cutting-edge humanity. These elements function not simply as dramatic gadgets but as symbolic expressions of absence, uncertainty, and the collapse of meaningful verbal exchange. Through them, Al-Hakim exposes the fragility of human relationships and the inadequacy of language as a tool for understanding truth (Al-Hakim 1962, 38–40).

Disappearance operates as an important symbolic motif in the play, destabilising both the narrative structure and the audience's expectations of causality. The unexplained absence of a character resists rational interpretation and refuses closure. This absence symbolises the elusiveness of reality and the impossibility of fully grasping life through logical reasoning. In existential phrases, disappearance displays what Jean-Paul Sartre describes as the essential instability of human identification, which lacks a fixed essence and stays invariably in flux (Sartre 1956, 45). The lacking determine turns into a symbolic void, forcing the last characters—and the audience—to confront uncertainty as an unavoidable situation of life.

Silence in *The Tree Climber* is equally good-sized, functioning as a powerful counterpoint to speech. Rather than serving as a pause among significant dialogues, silence becomes a shape of expression in its own right. It embodies existential emptiness, alienation, and the failure of human connection. Al-Hakim's strategic use of silence aligns with absurdist dramaturgy, in which silence frequently communicates more than language. As Martin Esslin observes, silence in absurd drama “exposes the breakdown of conversation and the futility of conversation” (Esslin 1961, 58). In the play, moments of silence underscore the characters' lack of ability to articulate their inner anxieties or recognise one another, reinforcing their isolation.

Language itself is portrayed as unreliable and insufficient. Dialogues are marked with the aid of repetition, contradictions, and semantic emptiness, suggesting that words no longer correspond to fact. Characters talk, but their words fail to bring meaning or produce information. This linguistic failure displays the existential crisis of modernity, in which traditional structures of that means—

spiritual, philosophical, or social—have misplaced their authority. Al-Hakim consequently dramatises what Albert Camus identifies as the “divorce between man and his lifestyles,” where language fails to bridge the gap between human recognition and a detached universe (Camus 1955, 15).

The fragmentation of language in *The Tree Climber* also parallels the strategies employed by Samuel Beckett, whose plays depict conversation as circular and self-defeating. Like Beckett’s characters, Al-Hakim’s figures have interaction in talk that looks functional but ultimately leads nowhere. This circularity transforms speech into a symbolic representation of existential futility instead of a means of decision (Esslin 1961, 61).

Collectively, disappearance, silence, and language failure function as interconnected symbols that improve the play’s existential imaginative and prescient. They dismantle the phantasm of coherence, which means and disclose the restrictions of human expertise. By foregrounding absence and communicative breakdown, Al-Hakim compels the target market to confront the unsettling truth that existence may not be completely intelligible or communicable. In doing so, *The Tree Climber* exemplifies how symbolism can transcend narrative characteristics and end up as a profound mode of philosophical inquiry.

VII. CONCLUSION

Tawfiq Al-Hakim’s *The Tree Climber* stands as a seminal painting in modern-day Arabic drama, outstanding through its profound symbolic complexity and philosophical engagement with the human condition. Through an elaborate community of symbols—along with the tree, the act of climbing, disappearance, silence, and linguistic fragmentation—Al-Hakim constructs a dramatic universe that resists definitive interpretation and demands the assumptions of rational order and narrative coherence. Rather than providing clear resolutions or ethical certainties, the play confronts the target market with ambiguity as an essential function of life.

This study has proven that symbolism in *The Tree Climber* isn't always an ornamental device but the structural and conceptual foundation of the play. The tree features as a paradoxical image of aspiration and confinement, reflecting humanity’s enduring yet frustrated search for meaning. The act of mountain climbing embodies existential striving, dramatising the anxiety of human ambition and the inevitability of failure. Disappearance destabilises presence and identity, whilst silence and linguistic breakdown disclose the inadequacy of language as a medium of actual verbal exchange. Together, those symbols articulate an existential imaginative and prescient wherein which means is neither given nor assured but remains perpetually elusive (Al-Hakim 1962, 24–42).

By situating *The Tree Climber* in the intellectual framework of existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd, this paper has highlighted Al-Hakim’s talk with thinkers, along with Camus and Sartre, in addition to dramatists like Beckett. However, Al-Hakim’s contribution extends beyond imitation. His symbolic method displays a quite Arabic philosophical sensibility that negotiates between depression and endurance. While the play recognises the absurdity of lifestyles, it no

longer endorses nihilism; as an alternative, it presents human conflict itself as a meaningful response to uncertainty.

Ultimately, *The Tree Climber* redefines the possibilities of Arabic theatre by transforming the degree right into a space of philosophical inquiry. Al-Hakim demonstrates that symbolism can be characterised as a dynamic and rigorous manner of exploring existential questions that transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. The enduring relevance of the play lies in its refusal to simplify the human circumstance, compelling audiences to confront ambiguity, isolation, and the bounds of information. In this sense, *The Tree Climber* affirms Tawfiq Al-Hakim's role as a pioneering determinist whose dramatic, imaginative and prescient work continues to resonate inside each Arabic and international literature.

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