

Examining the Agential Performativity of Water
through Material Ecocriticism in J. M. Synge's
Riders to the Sea (1911), David Farr's *Water* (2007),
Sabrina Hahfouz's *A History of Water in the Middle
East* (2019), Eva O'Connor and
Hildegard Ryan's *Afloat* (2021)

RANIA M RAFIK KHALIL
THE BRITISH UNIVERSITY IN EGYPT
rania.khalil@bue.edu.eg

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ABSTRACT:

*The current environmental crisis around water, has led to an urgency amidst theatre makers to find better methods that reimagine the relationship between humans and water in drama and performances. Theatre has actively engaged with the idea of water over centuries in unique ways. This paper aims to draw on material ecocriticism, as well as the theoretical dialogues of critics like Joanna Zylynska, and Karen Barad among others to examine how water is depicted and performed as a nonhuman form and to analyze how water is configured as a form of power and strife in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1911), David Farr's *Water* (2007); Sabrina Hahfouz's *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019); and Eva O'Connor and Hildegard Ryan's *Afloat* (2021). Material ecocriticism lends itself well to studying the agentialism of water*

because of the natural element's metamorphic behaviour. The analysis further highlights the traditional and the non-traditional representations of water on the theatre stage inviting audiences to consider the dramaturgical depictions of the agency of the nonhuman. The selected dramatic texts help trace the evolving depiction of the natural resource over the span of a hundred and ten years; thus, creating thought-provoking discussions that reopen pathways for research around the relationship between water and the human. The study argues that theatre and other earlier literary genres play a key role in portraying the reformation of the literal meaning and understanding of ecological elements such as water in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: *Theatre, Water, Afloat, A History of Water in the Middle East, Ecocriticism*

Análisis de la performatividad agencial del agua a través de la ecocrítica material en *Riders to the Sea* (1911) de J.M. Synge, *Water* (2007) de David Farr, *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019) de Sabrina Hahfouz, y *Afloat* (2021) de Eva O'Connor y Hildegard Ryan

RESUMEN:

*La crisis ambiental actual en torno al agua ha generado una urgencia entre los creadores de teatro para encontrar mejores métodos que reimaginen la relación entre los seres humanos y el agua en el drama y las representaciones teatrales. El teatro ha interactuado activamente con la idea del agua a lo largo de los siglos de formas únicas. Este artículo tiene como objetivo utilizar la ecocrítica material, así como las teorías de Joanna Zylińska, para examinar cómo se representa y se presenta el agua como una forma no humana, y para analizar cómo el agua se configura como una forma de poder y conflicto en *Riders to the Sea* (1911) de J.M. Synge, *Water* (2007) de David Farr, *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019) de Sabrina Hahfouz y *Afloat* (2021) de Eva O'Connor y Hildegard Ryan. La ecocrítica material resulta adecuada para estudiar el agencialismo del agua debido al comportamiento metamórfico de este elemento natural. El análisis también resalta las representaciones tradicionales y no tradicionales del agua en el escenario teatral, invitando al público a considerar las representaciones dramáticas de la agencia de lo no humano. Las obras de teatro seleccionadas ayudan a trazar la evolución de la representación de este recurso natural a lo largo de diez años y crean discusiones provocadoras que reabren caminos de investigación sobre la*

relación entre el agua y el ser humano. El estudio sostiene que el teatro desempeña un papel clave en la representación de la reformulación del significado literal y la comprensión de elementos ecológicos como el agua en el siglo XXI.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Teatro, Agua, Afloat, Sabrina Mahfouz, Ecocrítica Material, J.M. Synge*

The essentiality of water has always been at the forefront of humanities' existence, but its scarcity in the twenty-first century raises alarm bells around its importance. Water is not just a natural resource; it is symbolically and materially tied to almost all aspects of life; it has and continues to have the power to affect and influence humanity. According to Gosselin & Gé Bartoli (2022: 15), "The fundamental categories that have structured the horizon of human action are now shaken by other – than – human existents with whom we share a common condition: the 'terrestrial condition.'" More recently, Federico Luisetti (2023) has explained that geobodies and earth-beings are the new protagonists, hence, the need to pay attention to examining the relationship between humans and the ecologies of which they are part of. The current environmental crisis makes this need a primacy.

Water is a natural resource that exists on the threshold between the animate and the inanimate; it is a medium, a thing, a living nonhuman entity with agency. According to Bruno Latour (2004:68), water is a muted being, and like many natural entities, it comes into visibility through spokespersons. This study recognises the changeability of water and consequently traces the shift from the traditional modes of representation in an attempt to deepen the meaning of the entanglement between humans and water as a living matter. The study, draws on canonical as well as lesser-known texts in order to demonstrate that the engagement with the agency of water was part of a dominant discourse across the span of over a hundred years. Earlier works across genres that reference water include the Greek myth of Poseidon, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and *Richard II* to name a few which depict water but do not necessarily

investigate it in depth. An overview of current publications on the relationship between humans and water include Brian Kulick's 2023 publication of *Staging the End of the World: Theatre in a Time of Climate Crisis*, gives a brief history of the end of the world through the perspective of theatre and drama. The book draws on the work of ecologists, scientists and philosophers to contextualise the selected works and highlight their relevance to our current troubled times. In tandem, is Federico Luisetti's book *Non-Human Subjects: An Ecology of Earth Beings – Elements of Environmental Humanities* published in 2023, focuses on the crisis of presence amidst the current ecological troubles. The book shares case studies of mountains and rivers that have been given legal rights to continue to exist and to preserve their legacy over centuries. *To be Like Water* by Ramona Mosse and Anna Street (2022) is also a recent publication on the performance of the posthumanist. Other works include Vicky Angelaki's *Theatre and the Environment* 2019, Carl Lavery's *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?* (2018), Una Chaudhuri and Shonni Enelow's *Ecocide: Research Theatre and Climate Change* (2014). Another publication of value is Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren's article "Dramatizing Water" (2013) which is a comprehensive overview of the global water crisis, our water-practices, the correlation between art and the environment, shared responsibility and the dramatization of water on the theatre stage. Other depictions of water in performance as an element of power include "L-Shaped Walks of Peace," in response to the 2011 Tsunami in Fukushima and subsequently, the Science Gallery "Future of Water" exhibition held in Dublin in 2011. Few of the current published scholarly work on theatre and the environment focus on water's agency and its ability to communicate with the human.

This research aims to examine how water is configured as a form of power and strife in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1911), David Farr's *Water* (2007), Sabrina Hahfouz's *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019), and Eva O'Connor and Hildegard Ryan's *Afloat* (2021). The essay argues that water is a pivotal natural

element that interacts with the humans and leaves its agential mark on their lives and minds; as such, it is essential to transform traditional perceptions about water in the face of the current environmental challenges of the twenty-first century (Arons and May 2012:2). The analysis contends that water is a living matter with the ability to reconceptualize and transform its agentiality. It further aims to draw on the recent school of thought of material ecocriticism; one of the leading developments of ecocriticism and will refer to essential theoretical dialogues that examine how water is depicted and performed as a nonhuman form. The importance of this study lies in the need for a deeper understanding of the capacity of water in creating new configurations of entanglements that emerge between the human and the nonhuman. Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren (2013:26) points out that we are moving towards “a new performative cartography, ... new forms of action... [that will] lead to a deepening of the interactions between communities, water activists, policy-makers, scientists, and artists.” Accordingly, re-representation of water requires that we adopt novel methods of understanding and necessitates shifting our rudimentary suppositions about the nature of our reality and our approach to it. Through its conclusions, the study prompts audiences to review their perceptions around water as a natural resource and to have the wisdom to relate to the nonhuman world with a sense of responsibility and duty. The selected dramatic texts offer thought-provoking discussions that open new pathways for research around the relationship between water and the human.

Theatre, across cultures, has dramatised the bonding relations between humans and the natural environment emphasising in the process, the subjectivity of the non-sentient beings. The current environmental concerns around aquatic shortages and pollution have triggered new interest for further exploration of the relationship between humans and water as well as the examination of the redefinitions around water. There is however, a crisis of imagination in finding novel ways to express the newly

configured attributes of the human-water dynamic on the theatre stage. This challenge has pushed theatre makers to move out of Peter Brook's "empty space" (Mosse and Street 2002:118) and expand the frame of representation. The imagined aquatic representations however do not ineradicably "other" water and "make present the invisible relationalities" (Arons and Theresa J. May 2012; Mosse and Street 2022:120). Theatre in accordance has more recently reshaped its dramaturgical paraphernalia to challenge the idea that water, as matter, is inert.

J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1911), is a one-act play steeped in depictions of the sea. The glory and agency of the waves are represented through a creative extended dramatic setting in the Aran Islands. Maurya's vision of losing her two surviving sons to the powerful waters comes true, she had already lost six other men from her family: her husband, four sons, and father-in-law. The protagonist of the play, the sea off the west coast of Ireland, is invisible and yet very present. Fast forwarding a hundred years, David Farr's *Water* (2007) focuses on the performative attribute of water as well as its dynamic agency, the play depicts the life of Graham Johnson, a marine biologist who has come to Vancouver to scatter his dead father's ashes across the ocean. Claudia Ford, another main character, represents the negotiations of mitigating carbon emissions at the G8 Summit. Her boyfriend, Joe Fisher, descends to the depth of a lung shaped lake in Mexico as part of an international event, only to meet his doom despite being a renowned deep-sea diver. British-Egyptian playwright Sabrina Hahfouz's *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019), time travels across the Middle East hitting hard on British Imperialism and modern-day hegemony of the Arab states through the access to water as a resource and commodity. Mahfouz's play merges theatre, poetry, and music together as a means of expression. The play ties water scarcity and war to the history of the nations. A more recent work, *Afloat* (2021) by Eva O'Connor and Hildegard Ryan, recounts the aftermath of a climate apocalyptic flooding crisis in Dublin city. The fifty-minute performance

references the human induced anthropogenic degradations and the unreliable consumption of natural resources like water. The four plays understudy are prime examples of works that tap into the reinvention of the boundaries between the exterior and that which is within, between water as a matter, and water as matter with agency. Examining a range of dramatic works that engage with water brings forward the different lived experiences in connection with this natural resource and prompts audiences to respond to the contemporary water dilemma. The dramaturgical tools utilized by the playwrights expose the personal through the sociological and the political. Water is the protagonist in all four works and its agency is a key aspect. Overall, what connects all of the four works together, is the depiction of water as the nonhuman in innovative techniques and the engagement of texts with the water crisis as a global challenge across time, cultures, and nations. The examination of the dramatic works understudy focuses only on the scenes where water is most evident as opposed to an extended reading of the texts. The aim is to highlight the prevalence of water scenes that address agency, hence suggesting that the importance of such depictions is a sign of acceptance of water as a sentient being. Rosi Braidotti (2017:26) argues that the current environmental crisis needs to be represented through a *reconceptualised* framework. It is in fact a new chartered territory that is directing audiences towards “a more sustainable performative cartography of water” (Kochhar-Lindgren 2013:22).

To better understand how water is configured within the four dramatized performances, this study attempts to offer a text-based analysis of the selected works through an ecocritical perspective, more specifically, the lens of material ecocriticism which is an extension of the latter and an evolvment of the interdisciplinary field of environmental literary criticism. Material ecocriticism is the reconceptualization of nonhuman agency, it goes beyond examining the entanglement between humans and matter. As explained by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010:1-43), matter is

not inert; it is a thing that is in a continuous process of becoming; a process which culminates in “a congealing of agency” (Barad 2007:151). The analysis aims to equally draw on the arguments of critics Joanna Zylińska and Karen Barad among others. Joanna Zylińska’s (2020:26), argument is that water is not just a natural resource that produces hydro-power, but an intra-active element that requires new ways of understanding. Zylińska (2020:220) explains “that water only ever becomes something in relation to its container, body or place.” The discussion and analysis of the texts argue that water connects, communicates, threatens and creates a liquescent dynamic of change. The examination of water through material ecocriticism is helpful in theorizing water as a substance that is neither static nor concrete. The analysis hence suggests that theatre is capable of giving dramatic form to the diverse material interactions between water and humans. The interconnectedness between water and humans supports the structural balance in the selected dramatic texts.

Riders to the Sea (1904;1911) by J.M. Synge is a one-act play depicting the sea as the protagonist; it is both a giver and a taker. The water, like Maurya, the mother, is the provider for the family and its potential demolisher. The key strength of the play lies in the open water’s indifference to Mauray’s grief and the ambiguous relationship between humans and nature. The young local priest promises Maurya that she will not lose her last son to the sea, Nora, her youngest daughter walks in at the start of Act I with the clothes of a drowned man, presuming it is her brother Michael: “It’s a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal” (Synge 1911:18). The play emphasizes that drowning was an inescapable hazard for men who sailed the sea; amusingly, the water seems to hold over these men a sense of fatalism which they never learned to overcome. Even today, with the advancement in science and technology, the oceans and the seas hold the same power over humans as evident from the countless individuals who drown. Maurya, after losing her battle against the ocean shares the hard fact she learned: “for when a

man is nine days in the sea, and the wind blowing, it's hard set his own mother would be to say what man was it" (Synge 1911:40). The island setting provides a metaphoric anchor for the human characters against the unexpected tides of the ocean which instill fear in their hearts. The agency of the water in *Riders to the Sea* overpowers that of the humans. This power of the sea, triggers a spiritual reckoning in the characters and instigates their development throughout the play. It also fosters the bond between the human characters and the geographical bearings of the setting. Agency, becomes the dynamic that catalyzes the spiritual and intellectual reformulation of the human, even the prayers of the young priest cannot save Maurya from the destitute of losing all the men in the family "I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house six fine men, ...but they're ... gone now the lot of them" (Synge, 1911:38). Water's agency is prominent from the opening of the play, the wall is mounted with fishing nets and equipment, an emblem of the power of the sea over the life of the human characters. The duality of water's power, to give and to take, is a motif that is featured throughout the one act play. Another duality is the power dynamic between the human and the non-human with water having the upper hand. The women in the play are forced to accept water's agency passively and live with the consequences of the destructive power of the ocean. Water's agency appears to supersede the prayers of the island's local priest an indication of the water's ability to spin the fates of the island's inhabitants to its ebb and flow. Maurya's family is sustained by the water. The power of the water is emphasized by the props on the stage. The fishing equipment, particularly the net, drives home the intended meaning that the sea can be a provider and a stifling element of the natural world, it can also be interpreted as an indication of an early interest by the playwright in the interdisciplinarity of ecology and theatre. The sinister atmosphere of the play is set out in the Introduction "In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do

be leaving things behind for them that do be old" (Synge 1911: X). The play relies on a number of small props to reinforce the agency of water, but the protagonist of the play remains hidden from sight. The ocean, the main crux of the play's setting, is at the forefront of the play's events through the dialogue and the use of sound:

NORA: "There's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind" (Synge 1911:19).

The imagery of the ocean overpowers the whole play rendering all else insignificant. The mother figure in the play, Maurya, is a mirror of the ocean in her ability to give life through birth and to nurture, and her ability to bless or curse her offspring. Maurya's power, in comparison to that of the sea, is futile. No pagan or Christian god can save Maurya's sons from the waves of the sea. Gene Plunka (1988:131) comments that Bartley's going out to sea close to the coming of Samhain, awakens the wrath of the Almighty God. This paper argues that Bartley drowns at sea as a result of underestimating the agency of the ocean and the driving force of nature, a howling wind. Joy Kennedy (2004), points out that the root sources of Maurya's Irish name are fate and sea. Her maternal instinct foreshadows her son's death as she places the empty cup of holy water upside down, an indication that the blessing of the holy water is equally ineffective in the face of the water of the sea.

MAURYA: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening" (Synge 1911:42).

Maurya's acceptance of the loss of all her sons may not necessarily be a succumbing to the religious stipulations of accepting death because it is God's will, but rather, an acceptance of the power of the ocean waters over the inhabitants of the island. It is an acknowledgment that the agency of water is indifferent to its impact on the lives of humans. The material ecocritical approach to the analysis of *Riders to the Sea* highlights the victimizing of the human by the water surrounding the island. Previous scholarly work had focused on the folklore and Christian depictions, as well as the language. The duality of the agency of the ocean juxtaposed against the passiveness of the men and women in the play, emphasizes the agentiality of water and its capacity to shift between a source of bountifulness and a tool for killing. Synge posits the ocean against a backdrop of Christian and pagan elements which further heightens the intensity of the agency of water and parallels it with the power of the gods. This paper argues that Synge struck the right balance in depicting the power dynamic between water and man and the struggle of survival presenting "an indifferent, Darwinian landscape" (Kennedy 2004:27). While many other dramatic works after *Riders to the Sea* have addressed nature, Synge's craftsmanship remains unmatched for the period within which the play was written in 1904 and published in 1911. Read from an ecocritical angle, and analysed within the discourse of material ecocriticism, Synge's play is an early depiction of the agency of water. Durbach (1971:371) observes that "all men are riders to the same unappeasable sea." Here the sea is a vehicle and a catalyst. The connection between the woman (Maurya) and the sea is epitomized through the vision of death on the sea. Synge highlights the agentic power of the sea in its ability as matter to tell its own story and the stories of others. The stories of the sea are enmeshed with the lives of the islanders underscoring the metaphysical connection between them.

Water (2007), by David Farr, at first impression seems to follow the classic plotline of a climate-change play despite its human characters. The play seamlessly flows in and out of time

and space, it spans into intergenerational conflict, traverses across continents, dives into the darkness of the oceans, then resurfaces into the global. This non-linear development of the play's patterns highlights the connection with water. Creatively juxtaposed, the playwright mingles the underwater death of Joe Fisher, Claudia's pregnancy, depression, and the cave protected enclave of lungs. Critics argue that dramaturgically the scenes flounder to mimic water. This paper counterattacks this accusation. Farr uses the story-line, the props, and the backdrops to emulate water's properties and movement. The characters' fluidity extends beyond the impersonations and the osmosis between the private and the public, they replicate inanimate objects too. The three protagonists in Farr's performance incarnate water; at the spur of a heel on stage, they seamlessly glide from the present to the absent, from the private space of the intimate hotel room to cohabiting communal spaces like the airport and harbour. This paper argues that Farr's attempt at reimagining the representation of the non-human element of water on the theatre stage is innovative and dramaturgically unique. Claudia spits into a cup after brushing her teeth held up by one of the characters who embodies the shape of a bathroom sink. The stage is magically transformed from the G8 Summit into a grand high-end hotel or squash court in a matter of seconds. Mosse and Street (2022:126) point out that during the theatre performance: "[t]he stage floor also functions as a shiny reflecting pool, changing hues, as the lighting ebbs and flows."

Farr's play foreshadows Joe Fisher's death under the pressure of water through the image of an underwater cave that resembles the shape of a human lung. In this intense scene, Farr, immerses the stage under the molecular pressure of water in order to resemble the underwater cave, *El Pulmon* in Mexico. By recreating an alternate world that invites audiences to experience the danger of a deep dive with Joe Fisher, the play sets the stage for a captivating representation of the agency of water, as matter, over the human. The juxtaposition of Joe's capacitated body under the

pressure of the lake water during the dive and the depiction of Claudia getting a sonogram of Joe's unborn child in her womb are two ideas interpenetrated by the notion of death and the ending of a human to human relationship. The metaphor is extended by presenting on the stage backdrop an image of Fisher's father's failing bronchial lobes. Side by side, the interior of the human body and the exterior image of open waters are brought together by the projector showing the overlapping similarities and at the same time emphasizing the vast differences leaving audiences aghast.

Claudia's sinking heart at the failed attempts of negotiating reducing carbon emissions at the G8 summit is another level of metaphorical staging of water as it is brought in parallel to Joe Fisher's descent into deep waters to meet his death. While Claudia does not die, her efforts towards the mitigation of climate change at a global summit, are killed: "The whole point is to avoid empty declarations. ... how can this not be a long-term commitment? This is Bangladesh underwater in twenty-five years. This is thirty million displaced Muslims piling into Hindu nationalist India" (Farr 2013: 8). The personal and the political overlap in this scene as is the case in many of the scenes that follow. The intricacy of the representation is further compounded by the implications thrown at the audience by Peter in terms of the moral imperatives of relationship commitments: "How successful we are in our reaction to these challenges may rely on our ability to be like water. To reach beyond our own selves and bond with those around us. But are we capable of doing this? Or are we destined to be increasingly solitary, alone, and unbonded, constantly pushing further and further as individuals, placing the planet on which we live under intense pressure and leaving us unable to connect both with each other and the world we live in" (Farr 2007: 3). Joanna Zylinska (2020: 221) points out that "we need to be mindful of the fact that ... not only are we connected to water but that, by and large, we are water. As well as functioning as a dominant component of our bodies, with 77–78% of

the brain being made of water, we enter into many other watery relations through the atmosphere (rain, clouds, snow)."

Light and sound are intricately embedded in the structuring of the performance. Farr plunges the stage in blue light and water sounds that mimic dripping rain, drops of water, gushing waves, and the sound of a deep ascent into the sea pointing to water's many and intersecting physicalness and materiality. The sonic and light effects create an overpowering environment of waves of sound and light. This stage effect is played in the opening scene in parallel to Professor Peter Johnson's lecture at Vancouver University on "water as a sociable molecule" (Farr 2007: 2). He further raises his concern as a marine biologist regarding the rising temperatures of oceans: "It is my belief that this rise is connected to the increase of carbon emissions caused by human activity. I am aware that many do not share that belief. But if I am right, then in the coming decades we will be faced with a series of challenges unique in the history of human experience." The lecture is infiltrated by the sound of isolated droplets of water shown via the overhead projector till it is drowned by the sound of gushing water causing water as matter to overpower intellectual reflection.

Water's sonic power is equally evident in the play. Water is made audible to audiences on the stage because of the use of new media technologies. Stage directions in Farr's play are laid out to indicate other forms of communication between the human and water: "*He hears a drip, puts a saucepan down, hears a ting as the water hits the pan, puts a cloth down in the saucepan. Sits back at the computer*" (Farr 2007: 4). Claudia's keyboard typing is rapid and in sync with the pitter-patter of rain and Graham's email clicking is paced to slowly become the beep of mailbox messages and the ticking of a clock. The unrelated sounds are playfully incorporated to overlap the sonic landscape of water "Graham uses a saucepan to catch the dripping water which serves to amplify the noise, tapping the microphone with a metal object, and, finally, as Graham places a sheet of paper over the saucepan to

dampen the sound, slapping their inner biceps to produce the muted thud of water drops hitting paper” (2022:128). The actors are visible on the stage with the stage props and a digital soundboard which they use to actively engage in emphasising water’s sonic presence. The sonic power of water does not merely create a backdrop for the play, sound is a “corporeal part in the performance, serving to both summon and distance relations” (Mosse and Street 2022:128). To denote distancing, the actor on the stage alters his/her voice to symbolise a connection with someone who is not present in the room, country, or the continent; perhaps even with someone who is a decade apart from them. The glide between shared spaces is indicated by the sound of a ripple of water.

The ocular and the aural representation of water complimented by light and sound waves on the theatre stage is a unique performance that allows audiences to experience posthuman forms in a manner of continuity. The reimagined movement of water creates a visual suspension in the eyes of audiences and the sonic performance of water awakens the auditory senses to the motion of water. The aquarium atmosphere that overtakes the stage space with fish swimming over the heads of the characters implies that the climate crisis, in anthropogenic terms, is way over our heads. The connotation that we as humans should bear the characteristics of water as a natural element, is a message that runs throughout the play. The water scenes create a sense of fluidity of shared experiences between characters and audiences as well as fluidity in the repeated insinuation that water has agency.

Sabrina Hahfouz’s *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019), is a highly poetic play that addresses the interconnectedness of water and politics; it re-emphasizes the agency of water in making or breaking nations. The performance is a collision of music, acting, speaking of words, a lecture, gig, and opera. The structure of the play is designed to leave room for audiences to take part in meaning-making. Water is set as the tool through which the playwright attempts to answer questions such as how have

the landscapes of the Middle East been affected by the war on water, how has water shaped the lives of the communities that rely on them as a life sustaining force, and what are the legacies that water has left on the histories of the nations in the Middle East, and finally, in what ways does water expose imperialism. The diverse stories the actors share about water, come in diverse forms. In the play, water brings different voices together allowing everyone that was deemed irrelevant to be seen and heard. *A History of Water in the Middle East* is a foray of experimentation in retelling the history of the colonizing West and the British Empire in controlling water. The knowledge of the actors is brought into the script of the play and embedded in the plot line of the dramatic work. Public articulations of the history of the agency of water in the Arab countries and the subversion of power through this artistic dramatic performance touches on the sensitive issue of trust and national borders. Such an experimental theatre experience pokes at the audiences' sense of identity and questions their sense of entitlement to what they have for centuries been told is theirs to take. Sabrina's tact in manifesting a sense of urgency in the play unhinges the audiences' sense of trust and opens the dominant political files of strife around water, its agency, colonialism, and political agendas. *History of Water* is intercepted with bouts of investigations between Sabrina who takes part in the acting and the Spy Agent. It is, however, the audience that are in an investigation mode, questioning where their governments stand, and where they stand with regards to their hold on water. Engaging with the unpredictability of the performance and the actors, raises a mirror to the unpredictability of water and its ability to transform. Mahfouz's play, is a series of counterattacks that undermine the power structures in place yet empower the audiences and emphasize water as the true catalyst in the Middle East. *History of Water*, redefines the war on water dynamic. Transitions in the play between the forms of performance not only lend a sense of unpredictability to the whole production, but create an invisible thread of momentum

that allows audiences to connect the dots, and reevaluate their own perception of the agency of water. It further prompts them to seek answers to the factual knowledge imbued within the gigs. Emotional engagement with the performance is strong on both the actors' and audiences' parts. The play is padded with heavy and light music that align to the emotional engagement on the stage and amongst the audiences.

There is currently limited published scholarly work on Mahfouz's play *A History of Water in the Middle East*, the most recent publication is a Doctor of Philosophy by Philip Thomas Cleaves (2024) *Empowering the Student as Theatre Maker: A New Rich Knowledge Theatre A Level*, that focuses on experimental theatre and Sabrina's play is amongst the works selected. There is no published research that investigates the agency of water and the power dynamic between colonial governments and the natural element in its various forms of rivers, seas, oceans, and waterfalls.

Sabrina Mahfouz a British-Egyptian playwright and poet has used the theatre stage to engage both actors and audiences in an act of transformation, the play is a momentum of change. Potential change amidst audiences happens during the performance and spills beyond the limited time of the play; it is an act of change, not just a talk about change. The language used about water is the very act of releasing the agency of water as opposed to representing the agency of the natural resource. The play unfolds through four actors: Laura, Sabrina, Kareem, and Spy. The opening of the play lays out the degressions of humanity against water as a resource and viable commodity.

LAURA: *Polluted*

Depleting

Flooding

What form can something take without water?

SABRINA: Water shapes landscapes, lives, legacies. (Mahfouz 2019:3)

Mahfouz, depicts through her words, humanity's shift from the need to adapt to the power of nature during the industrial revolution to a stronger position which assumes the right to govern and own nature. The play is an edited history of water in the Middle East, it opens with a nod to the Nile and flows to Bahrain to tell a folklore story about the Sumerian goddess of the mountains, Ninhursag, and her husband, Enki, the god of fresh water. The imagery of fresh waterfalls rising into frothing rivers formulates to the idea of ports, docks, and harbours, an early manifestation of the colonialist's dream to rule through water. Britain set up its colonial protectorate in Bahrain; in 2018, the naval base was reestablished at a shocking forty million, proclaiming the water triangle as "Global Britain" (Mahfouz 2019:34). The story of establishing the colonial base through folklore is followed by a short gig of "*tell me lies tell me lies*" (3). The overflow of words, akin to the fluidity of water, relate the tales of Iraq where America displays its power to its ex-coloniser Great Britain. Britain's access to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in 1908 through Kuwait gave it unrestricted access to the Middle East. Iraq's border simmered with rage for seventy-four years till it invaded Kuwait in 1990. It was not the black gold that they were after, it was the other sentient being; water. Oil, a valuable commodity is of no value if it cannot be transported beyond the borders of the Arab state. Without water, there is no oil. The play is fast forwarded to 2050 in Jordan, the scene shifts to focus on a female plumber, a swift merge of water and gender. Laura leads on the gig and activates the storytelling mode: "LEAK! Leak! Is there a leak? Can you see one? Can you hear it, the hiss of water wiggling its way out into the world uncaptured, wasted...Let the world know, I stopped the leak. ... Superhero with a plunger" (Mahfouz 2019:44). Laura's extended gig proclaims the Jordanian female plumber as an Arab heroine who stops the water wars in the Middle East with her plunger "A plumber. I have power now. ...I flow through the roads unhindered, my uniform like the fin of a Great White moving ripples of fish away from my bite" (45). Jordan's water

crisis is presented to the audiences through a gig, but then the seriousness of the action in place is relayed by Sabrina who highlights that by 2050, Jordan intends to have the best team of water plumbers, or more accurately, “women water leaders” (47) who will save lives, legacies, and landscapes. It can be concluded that the fluidity of the performance, occasionally interrupted by gigs and factual knowledge, mimics the ebb and flow of water. River water, seas and oceans transform and shift to bypass rocks, land, and flora, and so does *History of the Water*. The thread of stories spun by the actors about water starting with the folktales of Sumeria in Bahrain and gushing through to the water crisis in Jordan with a proposed solution set forth in 2050 confirms water as an agential element. In *History of Water*, water is not just a literary symbol, it is the protagonist with a long history and tradition that is dominant across nations and cultures. The play emphasizes water’s cultural vitality; it also reinforces the idea that water is a key player in world politics and the shaping of national identity.

Between 2019 and 2021, the attention to water proliferated. Households, lives, and livelihoods were affected in some way regardless of the geographical location. Water became the world’s centre of attention whether because of water shortage, pollution of the oceans, war, national security, or power strife. It was the new black gold. The climate crisis equally magnified the concerns around water, and the Anthropocene quickly became material for theatre makers to engage with.

Afloat (2021) by Eva O’Connor and Hildegard Ryan is a fifty-minute display of water’s agency and the coexistence of the human with the non-human. The opening scene of *Afloat* (2021:2) titled “The Wave” is set in Dublin with a view of the open waters, Debs realises that there is something unusual with the ocean: “... Something’s not right.... The water is way out past the Poolbeg towers ... a wall of grey water” (O’Connor and Ryan 2021:2). The lights flicker as the stage plunges into total darkness “When the lights come back up the girls are lying flat on their backs in the middle of

the stage, their bodies convulsing, illuminated by strobe lights. Another blackout" (2021:3). A tidal wave has drowned the city of Dublin engulfing everything except the two female survivors. The female characters are flooded with water and repeated pulses of light. Stage directions in the opening scene describe a flickering light with tension in the air and the sound of the girls "speaking fast and cutting each other off" (2021:2). The arbitrary depiction of the human sound mimics the wildness of the water waves. The desolation and alienation of the characters is an immediate reminder of the aridness in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Read as an eco-poem divided like dramatic acts, the early work registers the first signs of environmental degradation and water scarcity. According to Gabrielle McIntire (2015: 178-193), Eliot's poem exposes "the anthropogenic detritus in an increasingly industrialized world." Both *Afloat* and *The Waste Land* despite the ninety-nine years difference between both works share anthropocentric dimensions that "mourn the exhaustion of the land and the depletion of such essential resources as water" (Serrano 2022:143). Both works equally address the state of exhaustion of the Western civilization and shed light on how human lives are inextricably situated in material space enmeshed with the more than human world.

In scene two of *Afloat*, light is utilised again to spotlight the disheveled plants and the plastic bottles collected in the corner of the Liberty Hall; a significant reference to the consequences of human's environmental neglect. This internal chaos is contrasted against the exterior where the girls can view the sea and hear the waves. The chaos in *Afloat* is represented by the female protagonists. John Durham Peters (2015:121) explains that "there are profound and urgent reasons not to forget the enormous pressures that human beings are exerting on sea, earth, sky, and all that dwells in them." The two humans are deposed of their centrality and the agency of water is emphasized. Water, in *Afloat*, is presented as a potentially destructive power. Re-imagining water through the use of sound and light on the stage extends the

human into the natural. The use of sound and light is a recurrent technological interference that drives home the urgency of the climate crisis and foregrounds water's agential nature. O'Connor and Ryan blur the boundaries between the human self and the environment recognising that water is "animate" (Evernden 1996:101) and that the nature of the human-water relationship is interactive. *Afloat* challenges the concept that humans are the source of all meaning and action in the world.

The depiction of the performativity of water in the selected four plays indicates that "literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and [humans] interact" (Glotfelty 1996: xix). The complexity of the relationships between the human characters and water in the four works urge us to look beyond water's basic form. Water is "a social space" (Starosielski 2012: 165) capable of maneuvering an intricate "matrix of power relations" (150). The dramatic works depict various examples that help us recognize that water always comes to us in a mediated form. *Riders to the Sea* (1911), *Water* (2007); *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019); and *Afloat* (2021), offer audiences intense experiences of water as a metaphor, a medium, and as matter. O'Connor and Ryan's *Afloat* and David Farr's *Water* employ distinct material dramaturgy that foreground the experiences of water as an environmental matter, this helps audiences realign their perceptions of the natural element with the experiences of water within their surroundings. The performance of water on the theatre stage in the selected texts successfully reimagines the entanglement between the human and the non-human pushing audiences beyond the limitations of their experiences. Jamie Linton (2010:224), argues that "water cannot be identified as something separate from ourselves except when it is violated as an abstraction." The idea of "Exteriority within" bridges the relationality between meaning and matter (Haraway 1997:93). This juxtaposition of the interior with the exterior is repeated in all four plays where the relation

of the scientific to the social is guided by the same notion of exteriority and interiority. The personal is projected via the political, the living through the dead, as well as the metaphorical similarity between the darkness of the sea and the immaculate depth of being clinically depressed. The plays equally rely on the diffractive ability of light and sound and water by foregrounding their materiality to give meaning in three ways: “1) the pervasiveness of water’s cohesive properties, combining the professional with the ...scientific, ..., and political; 2) by the staging and dramaturgy that mimics water’s movements and properties; 3) by a sonic atmosphere that incessantly permeates the membrane separating exteriors and interiors” (Mosse and Street 2022: 123).

The materiality of water indicates that there are many waters and accordingly, there are many stories relating the interactive history between humans and water. Material ecocriticism lends itself well to the analysis of these dramatic works as it facilitates the examining of water’s ability to infiltrate the lives of the actors on the stage with the same equal force with which it has penetrated the culture and lives of the inhabitants of Synge’s Aran Islands, Farr’s Mexican enclave, Mahfouz’s twelve Arab countries, and O’Connor and Ryan’s city of Dublin. Joanna Zylinska (2020:223) explains that the story of the human race is a retelling of the history of water. The dramatic texts showcase water in its many forms and depict the reconfigurations of the natural element in both traditional and non-traditional dramaturgical practices. Theatre practitioners creatively capture the dynamic process of water as it temporarily stabilises into rain drops, rivers, oceans, tears, and less obvious infrastructures such as dams, caves, and maps. The extension of the human into the exterior is an envisioning of the shared agency, this relationship has however anthropomorphised over time where human agency has shifted from a narcissistic position of power of controlling nature to one dominated by the agency of water. Reconceptualising water’s agency in each of the four dramatic texts, accentuates that the nonhuman is animate; hence water is agential. The plays fo-

cus our attention on the performativity of water and depict an account of the human engagement to the non-human across cultures, geographies, and eras. The dramatic performances allow audiences to explore water's agency and how its "materiality plays an active dramaturgical role in configuring power and meaning" (Mosse and Street, 2022, 130). Synge's *Riders to the Sea* portrays water in its traditional form off the stage, the nonhuman hero is unseen, yet Synge emphasises throughout the play, water's destructive power on the lives of Maurya and the island's inhabitants. Water here is represented in its natural form, with agency, but without anthropomorphism. *Water, A History of Water*, and *Afloat* focus more on water's ability to transform and the impact of its agency to equally transform the lives of the human characters drawing affinity between the human and the nonhuman. Water's malleable nature is enacted on the stage with the aid of technological theatrical interventions and digital soundboards as well as the use of light. Water is the trigger of the events in all of the four plays; Maurya's sons are claimed by the waves of the sea till she is left with no men in the family, the sea not only emasculates the men, but wipes them off the surface of the island. While this is a more traditional depiction of water's agency, the dynamic and agility of water's force increases in aggressiveness in each of the representative plays. Farr's *Water* is perhaps the most intricate in its depiction of water's materiality and agility in transforming itself as matter and meaning. *A History of Water* by Sabrina Mahfouz takes water and audiences deeper into the silenced historical facts of nations and their evolving identities through an unfolding of water's history and imagery. *Afloat* brings into view the climatic crisis and water's rampaging effect on the modern city of Dublin enmeshing the emotional fear of lost relationships with the fear experienced by the protagonists under the tidal wave. Water is depicted as an actant. In both *Afloat* and *Water*, the characters exist together in the same space yet inadvertently fail to connect with each other; water, a molecular force brings these protagonists together in

multiple ways: the flooding, the deep-lake diving, the crossing of the ocean together on a flight.

The main message of the four dramatic texts is that under the immense pressure of the world, our only means to survive is to accept the agentiality of water, alternatively, it would serve us well to be able to adapt and transform and to be like water. To understand this, we must reach beyond ourselves and interpret water beyond its capacity as just liquid. Water's agency is performed on the theatre stage in various forms denoting the complexity of the relationship of the human to the non-human. The plays offer unique ways of reimagining the presentation of the nonhuman on the theatre space and engage audiences with water as metaphor, medium, and matter. This research adds to the discussions around theatre and the performativity of water and shares the tracing of the reconfiguration of the agency of water through selected dramatic texts that depict the power dynamics between the human and the nonhuman. The analysis contends that water is a living matter with the ability to reconceptualize and transform its agentiality.

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