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**Structure in Modern and Postmodern Theater: Performing Power in  
Third Space A Comparative Study of Ammar Seif's *The Chair* and  
Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs***

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**Abstract**

In the realm of power, even the absence of a chair can inspire revolutions where form collapses and meaning rises from the fragments. This is where political theatre breathes. Transforming the chair into a third space in Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs* and Ammar Seif's *The Chair* reveals the legitimacy of power, which is rooted in the memory of violence and the absurdity of discourses. Both plays use the performative body (seating movements, gestures) to criticize the political systems. The present study uses Modern and Postmodern theatre to examine the fragmentation of forms and political discourse, revealing how artistic structures can become mirrors of the crises of the time. While Edward Soja's concept of third space analyses the fragmentation of theatrical structure to examine the chair as a political symbol, Judith Butler's theory of identity performativity highlights the significance of the repeated acts of sitting and rising as expressions of the dominant regime. This study of theatrical structure as a mode of performing power, identity, and resistance in modern and postmodern drama. Grounded in comparative analysis and the theoretical perspectives of Edward Soja, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault, the study is informed by the following questions: How does space reform itself as a third space of ideological contestation and per formative disclosure in *The Chair* and *The Chairs*? How are the repeated physical comportments of characters, especially their sitting and standing, embodied enactments of discipline, desire, and subjection? How do postmodern and absurdist structure elements serve the political critique and aesthetic disruption in the plays? Despite the different contexts (Iraqi/European), the techniques are similar, employing meta-theatre to break the illusion and integrate it with the stenographic space (as a site of conflict). The present study tackles postmodern aesthetics of fragmentation, deconstructing political discourses through aesthetic formation, and



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providing a model for reading Arab theatrical texts through global theoretical lenses.

**Keywords:** Fragmentation of theatrical form, Performance of power, Third space, Postmodern theatre , Political scenography, Ammar Saif's *The Chair*, Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs* - Judith Butler

### 1. Introduction:

Theater has always been an arena of reflection, to address aspects of human experience, power relations, and identity formation. Contemporary and postmodern theatre has broken increasingly with traditional dramatic form to foreground fragmentation, instability and resistance. It is the contribution of these spatial elements, whether physical or symbolic, that appears central to the interpretation of the performing and contested making of meaning on stage. The paper comparatively analyses Ammar Seif's *The Chair* and Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs*, concentrating on how each play employs the symbol of the chair to work power in the "third space", concerning Edward Soja. The selected plays, although firmly rooted in disparate epochs and cultures of struggle, similarly use minimalism, repetition, and symbolic abstraction to critique hegemonic common senses and to perform the instability of identity in late modernity.

The primary concern of this study is to examine how the theatrically structured environment of these plays emerges as a location of ideological contestation and spatial enactment. On Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Foucault's disciplinary power, and Soja's spatial theory, this paper contends that both *The Chair* and *The Chairs* convert stag...

In the theatre, silence turns into a scream and emptiness into a political map to explore the impact of worn-out or empty chairs reflecting reinterpretations of power and human fragility. Postmodern or what nowadays called meta-theatre emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the limitations and conventions of modernist theatre. This shift marked a significant transformation in the stories told and interpreted on stage, moving from a focus on realism and individualism to an exploration of ambiguity, fragmentation, and the instability of meaning. Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Harold Pinter were among of the first postmodernist playwrights to break the rules of postmodern theatre by going against narrative linearity and coherence. Martin Esslin (2004) contends that absurdist theatre, exemplified by Ionesco, rejects traditional narrative logic, employing fragmentation and cyclical discourse to expose existential misery.



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Following their style, the Iraqi dramatist Ammar Seif reflects on the Iraqi political crisis in his play *The Chair*. Though postmodern culture and literature reject the classical ideal of “high art” and culture, promoting popular culture or mass culture is a valid aspect of artistic expression. Postmodern theatre redefines the social role of theatre, democratizing art and culture by integrating popular forms of mass or low culture into theatrical performances. Postmodernist dramatists follow an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating elements of dance, music, visual arts, and technology into theatrical performances, advertisements, pop music, and television as legitimate forms of artistic expression (AlMaarof, 2025, p. 6-35).

## 2. Literature Review

In modern and postmodern drama, the stage has been an active site for debate about power, subjectivity and resistance. According to scholars, structure—be it linear realism or absurdist fragmentation—does not just replicate ideology but enacts it. In this critically evolving space, theorisations by Foucault (1977, 1980), Judith Butler (1997) and Edward Soja (1996) have been applied by researchers to interrogate how theatrical forms have inscribed, refracted and re-circumscribed spatial, political and corporeal significances. This literature provides the backdrop to position works of art, including new work, and established, which overlap with power plays, performative architectures and spatial politics in contemporary theatre.

### 2.1. Drama as Critique and Imitation of Reality

(2009) and (2010) explain the important role of theatre in (re)presenting or subverting dominant realities. When reading Wilder's *Our Town*, for example, Al-Maarof (2010) has shown how minimalist form allows an affective "mirroring" of existence, a critique of life not in monumental, but everyday terms. Likewise in *The Use of Drama as a Mean of Criticism* (2009), he suggests that the dramatic form allows for a space of socio-political interrogation, where the interplay between narrative and performance structures institutional contradictions.

Building on this work of drawing a contrast, for example, between cause and ‘pure’ event, one of the key features that Elam (2002) and Lehmann (2006), among others, specify in terms of the post-dramatic theatre is a departure from the unity of Aristotle, an approach that is anti-narrative, anti-closure, embracing instead of fragmentation, of simultaneity, of the performativity of effect. These are the key components of both modernist experimentation and



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postmodern theatre, where structural dismemberment is a form of ideological protest.

## 2.2. Power and Performance in Theatrical Discourse and Design

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, Abdullah and Almaarouf (2022) suggest a convincing interpretation of King Lear in which power crumbles when it cannot be institutionally authorized or linguistically supported. For them, power does not so much force itself upon us as it is taken into ourselves, echoed in Butler's (1997) claim that we are made through the force of repeated discourse.

In Almaarouf's reading of David Ives' *Sure Thing*, language repetition, interruption and revision are crafted as strategies that trace minute power plays between the characters. Here, the dramatic structure, made possible by comic reset devices like the bell, operates as a medium for negotiation and refusal. Power is never static but reconstituted with every retelling of history. Additional perspectives are offered by Pavis (2003), who sees structure in the modern theatre as operating "as spatialized negotiation of meaning" especially when the performance challenges the line between stage and audience or language and gesture when he again says: "the spaces of theatre have become one of the key substance of the performance, where meaning and experience is (de)constructed". Almaarouf (2024) sheds more light on this issue by explaining how "the experimental dramaturgy manifests as a form of political confrontation, in which *Verfremdungseffekt* and aesthetic extremity dissolve the audience's identification with the hegemonic values" (3).

## 2.3. Spatiality, Performance and the Battle of Ideas

Thirdspace (Soja, 1996) informs the reader's approach to stage space as more than just a physical dimension but an ideologically inflected one. Theatrical, and especially site-specific/minimalist theatre, has the potential to create a hybrid space which restages and reworks dominant ideologies. This is evident in Kaye and LeBrecht's (2011) consideration of the ways in which scenography and staging make performance into a political event.

In *Street Drama as a Rejection of the Agonic Reality*, Almaarouf (2023) links this spatial politics to activist performance, highlighting theatre in the public sphere as "a gap in a city's hegemonic visibility" and as a call for action. His work centres around the stage, be it literal or metaphorical, as a battleground for articulation between the visible and the submerged.



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## 2.4. Postmodern Structures and the Disruption of Politics

The political power of aesthetic fragmentation has recently been brought to the fore by postmodern drama studies. In their examination of Sweat, Badie and Abdullah (2023) explore how its nonlinear form and open-ended dialogue serve as a formal critique of rooted wage slavery and racialized labour under capitalism. Similarly, Lyotard (1984) and Hassan (2001) suggest that postmodern aesthetics challenge metanarratives, with fragmentation and irony as tactics to resist cultural logic.

Despite the rich literature on drama as a form of critique and power performance, there are some lacunae: No comparisons of modernist, and postmodernist dramas which foreground structure as a mode of ideological performance, and not simply as an aesthetic form. "Tenuous integration of spatial theory (Soja), power discourse (Foucault), and performativity (Butler) in an integral critical framework to multiple theatrical traditions (those beyond Western canonicity, specifically post-western cases such as Ammar Seif's *The Chair*)." Lack of attention to physical comportment as a bodily dramatization of power (e.g., sitting, standing, repetition), particularly vis-à-vis structural minimalism and absurdist dramaturgy.

This is due, in part, to the fact that a generalised, ontological slippage in literary studies means that our fascination is squarely on the 'content' or 'theme' of the narrative, not the structure-as-performance that this study argues is one of the primary vectors of analysis. Together these studies demonstrate how drama performs, rather than merely represents, power, ideology, and resistance. Al-Maarouf and others have built solid grounds for the interpretation of dramatic texts as critiques of power and of the real. However additional research that combines modernist and postmodernist structural tactics, examines power as bodily and spatial agency, and extends its analysis to non-Western theatrical offerings is necessary. This study seeks to address this absence through an examination of how plays like *The Chair* and *The Chairs* deploy form, bodily repetition, and spatial minimalism as vehicles of ideological excoriation and political practice.

## 3. Methodology

This paper argues that both plays use the metaphor of the chair as a performative third space where power, identity, and political critique are enacted through postmodern aesthetics. This study follows the textual analysis approach in analyzing the selected plays and conducting close reading.



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#### 4. Theoretical Framework

Exploring the spatial and ideological nuances inherent to both Seif's and Ionesco's plays, this article's critical mainframe is based on Foucault's notion of power and surveillance, Butler's idea of performativity and Soja's concept of third space. Between them, these three have the analytical capacity to look at how space, language, and embodiment work in modern and postmodern theatre.

##### 4.1.Foucault: Discipline and the Power of the Normal

The notion of surveillance and the production/disciplining of docile bodies which is second nature to Michel Foucault, provides a critical dialect for examining institutional and ideological power within the theatrical monome. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault develops the consolidation of surveillance in modern society which "make individuals a 'self-regulating subject', a 'particular form of subjection'". The panopticon is an example of this, a paradigmatic ideal of space control, where everyone is seen and subsequently subordinated.

Foucault's theory can help explain how space confinement and minimalism help to uphold domination in *The Chair*. The lone chair becomes a disciplinary mechanism, at once symbolic and tangible, in which the character is oppressed, examined, and ultimately disempowered.

##### 4.2.Butler, Performativity the construction of identity

identity as it effulges from repeated performances regulated by discursive norms, as they have been elaborated and critiqued by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Excitable Speech* (1997). For Butler, utterances, physical acts, and discursive acts will be performative as they produce the subject in regulatory processes.

This model is helpful in analyzing how the plays use repetitive speech and action. The characters in *The Chairs* feel compelled to seat and serve invisible guests, not unlike the compulsive pageantry of "making meaning" and identity through the gaze of social convention. The play serves as an allegory for the failure of representation itself, where "speech is boundless and yet finds itself having exhausted its own power.

##### 4.3.Soja: Third-space and Politics of Space

Third-space by Edward Soja (1996) Third space is a conceptual space which refers to an imagined world outside of our body, which is not a part of our first-space or second-space. Third-space is not a physical or imaginary place, but a paradoxical space of potentiality and resistance.



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In both plays, the stage is this space. The chair in Seif's play, for example, becomes more than simply a piece of set dressing, it's a symbolic locus where presence and absence, authority and resistance, come into collision. In the same way, Ionesco's fictional pile-up of invisible chairs forms a topsy-turvy terrain in which spatial logic is upended and meaning beyond linear storytelling or realistic staging emerges as a possibility.

### 5. Analysis and Discussion

According to Judith Butler, performance in the context of theatre studies introduces the concept of performativity as a framework for analyzing how social and political relations are constructed through repetitive practices. Butler asserts that power is not a fixed entity but a repetitive performance produced by everyday discourses and practices. Key elements of the theory include curative repetition, transformative performance power, and the third space (integration with Soja).

“Bodily actions are not an expression of a pre-existing reality, but rather the mechanism by which social reality is created”(Butler, 1997, p. 8)

Butler's here provides tools for understanding how bodily practices transform into political discourses, and thirdspace to produce the conditions for this transformation. Ritual repetitions stabilize or deconstruct power relations. This notion focuses on political performance, the production of hegemony through repetition, and the interaction between body and space. While excluding discussions of gender, the emphasis is on the political and theatrical applications of the theory.

Edward Soja's third space presents three notions to think about space that look at how spaces are real, imagined, and lived. Taking into consideration that Derridain notion of meaning is always different, deconstructing the fluid and contested category reveals the negotiation of power, identity, and inequality across these interconnected dimensions. Thus, the third space is characterized by radical openness, social struggle, and alternative futures. It encompasses not only objects and thoughts in space but also the fully lived space of everyday experience. Soja's main point is that space is neither fixed nor neutral; it is a place where politics and culture are contested all the time (Borch, 2002, p. 116). This issue is highly adopted within the absurd theatre. Absurd theatre emerges in the mid-20th century as a reaction to the disintegration of traditional structures to represent a fundamental turning point toward postmodern theatre. This theatre, created by writers such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, rejects logic and narrative consistency,



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presenting a world where the boundaries between absurdity and political reality dissolve (Yousef et al, 2012, p. 8). Both selected plays tackle how postmodern techniques deconstruct the political discourse of the chair on the stage through two different cultural performances.

Ionesco's play, *The Chairs*, portrays a story on an isolated island, an old couple fills their days with private games and fading memories. The play with its brilliant absurdity, blends a comic portrayal of human folly with a theatrical experiment brimming with possibility. Ionesco's 'tragic farce' delves into a bleakly funny and sombre examination of the human condition, set against an uneventful world. The play reveals the characters' deep resentment and yearning for recognition, respect, and remembrance. This makes the work an existential challenge, deepening the reader's understanding of human vulnerability. The characters' experiences, rich in complexity and often erratic, engage the audience, making it a piece that invites deep reflection and contemplation. While, in Seif's *The Chair*, the dramatic scene unfolds on a bustling street, where an old wooden chair catalyzes the revealing of the deep-seated truths of the individuals who sit upon it. Seif's play features characters such as a worker, a clown, an intellectual, and a government employee each confronting their inner struggles and societal roles. As each character sits in the chair, they unknowingly express their hidden thoughts, frustrations, and fears, uncovering the larger societal issues that bind them. Both plays represent the Foucauldian notion of power discipline.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the chair symbolizes the internalized power structures that govern the characters' lives. Foucault's theory of disciplinary power suggests that power operates not just through direct repression but through subtle mechanisms that shape the individual's subjectivity (Foucault, 1977, p. 215). In the play, the chair functions as a tool for self-examination and internalization of societal norms, where the characters, through their confessions, illustrate how power is not simply imposed from the outside, but internalized and self-regulated. Each character reveals aspects of their subjectivity shaped by disciplinary power, whether in the form of labour, knowledge, or bureaucracy, highlighting the ways in which power operates through invisible structures within society.

In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, as in Ammar Seif's *The Chair*, the theatrical void becomes a third space in which memory and power clash. The Iraqi playwright presents the chair as a witness to the violence of power. While



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Saif's play's fragmented theatrical structures become metaphors for Post-2003 Iraqi political disintegration, Ionesco's *The Chairs* transforms into a third space where bodily performance enacts political submission/rebellion. Ionesco and Saif broke the fourth wall, involving the audience in the dramatic performance. In both plays, the repetition of sitting and rising movements reflects the production of political hegemony. Each sitting is a citation of the power and fragility of power, while circular movements in *The Chairs* reflect a martyrdom of political absurdity.

Nevertheless, Saif's *The Chair* presents a critical vision of the difference between fleeting perceptions of reality and sustainable awareness capable of change. By employing epic theatre techniques, the play prompts the audience to rethink their role in society, asking whether they are capable of transcending temporary awareness to a permanent awareness that leads to action. Is change possible, or is society governed by a cycle of perception without results? With these questions, the play becomes not just a theatrical performance but a critical mirror of reality and an open invitation to awareness and change. This notion is clear from the opening scene of the play:

A busy street, bustling with activity and noise. People move randomly between vendors, the sounds of cars, and the overlapping conversations. In the middle of the street, an old wooden chair appears, surrounded by a small box containing money and simple items. The light shining on the chair arouses the curiosity of passersby. The "owner of the chair" enters, carrying his box under his arm, looking around intently, and calling people closer to him (Saif, 2025).

Here, the theatrical space transforms into a microcosm of social negotiation, a contested one where materiality, symbolism, and lived experience collide. The scene employs a mixture of space and action to portray the chair as both a physical object and something that requires interaction. The performance stands out in the busy city, prompting people to engage while revealing the limitations of space. When questions of identity and belonging are prominent, such liminal sites become particularly fruitful. In this scene also, the chair owner's call mirrors the strategic interpellations of officials, who navigate power, and the position of power that is contested. The deliberate framing of this scene, with light isolating the chair amid chaos, echoes Butler's assertion that "the body becomes its meaning through the very act of performance" (1993, p. 30), inviting the audience to witness spatial power in motion.



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In Seif's *The Chair*, each character experiences a performative act as they sit on the chair. This sitting represents self-examination and internalization of the power structures that govern their lives. Also, it observes how the characters' actions and confessions reveal the tension between self-regulation and external societal forces. The chair, as a site of performance, invites the characters to confront the fragmentation of their identities and the hybrid realities shaped by invisible power structures. The worker (for example) represents subjugation through his work. His life revolves around the perpetual grind of labour, working from dawn till dusk, chasing a fleeting dream. As he sits on the chair, he begins to reveal the inner workings of his oppression:

“I work from dawn until the night swallows me. Every day, I chase a dream that fades before me... I've been promised justice, but all I find are lies consuming the truth, and fear eating what remains of my heart.” (Seif, 2025)

The workers here highlight how disciplinary power operates within the internalized roles dictated by labour. According to Butler's performativity, the worker's actions (sitting and confessing) express the social roles imposed on him—labouring, yearning, but never fully realizing his dreams. The chair becomes a third space, where the fragmented realities of the worker collide—his external role as a labourer and his internal yearning for justice. Through this performative act, the worker confronts the power that governs his life but cannot escape it, showing how social norms shape his identity without his active awareness.

Another performative act is intellectual which reflects the knowledge, fragmented ideology, and performativity of the postmodern crisis. The intellectual identity is fragmented, caught between intellectualism and the reality of a disillusioned world. The performance of sitting on the chair forces the intellectual to confront the power dynamics inherent in his own ideological beliefs. His initial rejection of the chair symbolizes his inability to reconcile knowledge with truth, highlighting the fragmented nature of truth in a postmodern world where knowledge is shaped by external influences like technology and society.

“I thought culture was the solution, but now words have become mere algorithms, and thoughts stolen by artificial intelligence.” (Seif, 2025).

The intellectual's rejection and eventual confession on the chair illustrate the performative conflict between the truths he seeks and the falsehoods he is forced to internalize. His intellectual identity, shaped by institutional power,



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is now fragmented—he recognizes that the culture and knowledge he once believed in are now commodified. The chair acts as a third space, a site of rupture between the academic world and the disillusioned self. As the intellectual performs his truth in the chair, he realizes the performance of knowledge is shaped by societal and technological forces that dictate how truth is constructed and perceived. Thus, the chair reveals the invisible forces of knowledge production that have fragmented his intellectual identity. The burden of knowledge within the intellectual represents another facet of disciplinary power, one that concerns the power of knowledge and ideology. His initial reaction to the chair is scepticism, dismissing it as a mere tool for emotional manipulation. He views the chair as nothing more than a superficial trick, a sentiment that echoes the intellectual's internalization of power through knowledge and critical thinking.

“I thought culture was the solution, but now words have become mere algorithms and thoughts stolen by artificial intelligence.” (Seif, 2025).

The intellectual's words reveal how power operates through knowledge, particularly in a system where culture and ideas are commodified. He recognizes that even intellectuals, in their pursuit of truth, are often controlled by external forces, whether in technology, politics, or social expectations. The intellectual's growing disillusionment underscores how ideological power shapes his identity and actions. *The chair*, like Foucault's panopticon, reveals the truths that the intellectual has hidden from himself, he has internalized a system that dictates not just his labour, but his sense of truth and authenticity. The chair forces him to confront this and reveal the contradictions in his beliefs, showing how intellectualism is subject to power dynamics.

Also, the government employee represents conformity and bureaucratic control. This character represents bureaucratic power that operates through official procedures, policies, and protocols. His role within the bureaucratic system reflects how disciplinary power works to shape identity through institutional control. When the government employee sits on the chair, he begins to express the invisible forces of bureaucratic power that govern his life, particularly the systemic nature of his subjugation:

“I work in cold offices, signing papers I don't believe in, following procedures that don't touch reality. I see corruption everywhere, but it's bigger than me, and I'm just a piece in a game I don't understand.” (Seif, 2025).



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This performance of sitting reflects the postmodern crisis of identity. The employee's power is internalized through bureaucratic procedures, and his identity is shaped by his role within the institutional structure. The third space of the chair allows him to reflect on the power of bureaucracy and realize that his compliance is a performative act shaped by invisible forces. His identity is no longer his own but a fragmented role within a larger, impersonal system. The chair acts as a site of revelation, forcing the employee to confront his complicity in a system that dehumanizes him. Unlike the employee, the revolutionary activist represents resistance, self-confrontation, and postmodern fragmentation. The revolutionary activist represents a direct challenge to the patriarchal and bureaucratic systems. However, despite his outward resistance, he struggles with internal fear and inaction, illustrating the Foucauldian notion of power as it operates in individual resistance. His fragmented identity is revealed through his performance of sitting on the chair, where his revolutionary ideals clash with his internalized fear and paralysis.

"We are all afraid! We blame the government, the circumstances, on everything... but we don't dare to move! We hide behind empty words, behind slogans that don't represent us." (Saif, 2025).

The sitting here forces the activist to confront not only the invisible power structures of the state and society but also the internalized power of fear and inaction. The activist's internal hesitation before sitting on the chair reveals how even those who resist are still performing their roles within the larger systems they seek to challenge. The third space of the chair becomes a site of self-examination, where the activist is confronted with his paradoxes and internalized oppression. His resistance is fragmented, caught between external ideological struggle and internal self-doubt.

In Saif's play such kind of awareness contrasts with temporary awareness, which emerges in moments of revelation but fades quickly, and with permanent consciousness, which leads to sustained change through deep understanding and action. It explores how these two forms of consciousness are embodied in the characters, particularly the government employee, intellectual, and activist, who experience moments of realization but return to inaction. So the play concludes by emphasizing how the character's behaviour encourages the audience to shift from temporary awareness to permanent consciousness, urging them to take action for societal transformation (Al-Maaroof, 2025).



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Thus, the performance of sitting on the chair in Seif's play shows a crucial moment of self-revelation for each character, revealing the invisible power structures that govern their lives. Through the lens of Foucault's disciplinary power, Postmodern fragmentation, performativity, and third space, we see how the fragmentation of identity occurs when characters are confronted with their roles in society, roles that are often imposed on them by invisible forces such as labour, knowledge, bureaucracy, and social expectations. The chair serves as a metaphor for power, forcing each character to confront their internalised oppression and the fragmented selves they have become. Through performance, the characters reveal their struggles with power and self-regulation, challenging their place within the societal structures they inhabit.

In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, the act of sitting similarly serves as a performative act, representing the characters' submission to an unseen power. Like in Seif's play, the Old Man and Woman perform repetitive actions dictated by external societal forces, where arranging chairs becomes a ritual that reflects their internalised roles. The chairs, filling the space, symbolise the absurdity and emptiness of the power structures they are complicit in maintaining. Through their frantic efforts to prepare for invisible guests, they confront the fragmentation of their identities, shaped by societal norms do not fully understand but are bound to. Their actions, while seemingly ordinary, reveal the tension between their inner desires for recognition and the external pressures of conformity. The couple, much like the worker in Seif's play, is caught in a cycle of self-examination that underscores the hybrid nature of their identities, caught between personal agency and external oppression, unable to break free from the invisible forces that govern their lives. The chair, in this sense, functions as a third space, a site of both performance and passive submission, reflecting the tragic absurdity of their existence within societal frameworks.

As the invisible guests begin to arrive, initially in small numbers, and then increasing steadily, the couple finds themselves in need of more chairs to accommodate their growing, unseen audience. The old woman, taking charge, dutifully moves from one door to another, collecting chairs as though trying to meet an unspoken demand. The process is almost mechanical, each chair appearing as a piece of the puzzle that never quite fits, representing the endless cycle of compliance with an unknown authority or expectation. The couple, overwhelmed by the increasing number of guests, become isolated by



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the sheer volume of space filled with chairs. Despite the presence of these chairs, the room remains eerily empty, underscoring the illusion of presence and the invisible power structures at play.

“The chairs must be brought in—quickly, quickly! We must make room! Make room! (She goes to the door, opens it. She looks at the audience, waits, then goes to the other door and opens it.)” (Ionesco, *The Chairs*, p. 22)

In this scene, the frantic actions of the old woman in collecting chairs symbolically reflect the overwhelming and invisible force that governs the lives of the characters. The mechanical nature of her actions, repeatedly moving from door to door, mirrors the passive compliance of individuals under unseen societal pressures or authority. The process of adding chairs, though seemingly practical, highlights the absurdity of their existence: the more chairs added, the more the space seems to remain empty, symbolizing the illusory nature of power and presence. This cycle of compliance can be interpreted as a metaphor for the invisible and pervasive power structures that Foucault describes in his theory of disciplinary power. Just as in Ionesco's play, where the couple responds to an unseen and increasing number of invisible guests, society may find themselves caught in an endless loop of conforming to expectations and norms that they cannot see or fully understand. The chairs, much like the mechanisms of power, serve both as a physical and a symbolic representation of this constant, but unseen, force.

Within such a scenario, the invisible guests function as a metaphor for disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), where authority and expectations are pervasive but unseen. The couple's frantic preparation and eventual subjugation to the overwhelming presence of the guests reflect the way power operates subtly, shaping their actions without their direct acknowledgement. Just as Foucault's panopticon suggests that individuals internalize surveillance, the old couple blindly fulfils their role as hosts, constantly providing more chairs as though responding to an invisible force that dictates the terms of their existence.

The growing number of chairs in Ionesco's play and the persistent call to sit in Saif's play highlight a recurring theme in both works: the idea that individuals are governed by unseen forces. Just as the couple in Ionesco's play blindly fulfils their role in accommodating an increasing number of guests, the characters in Saif's play blindly comply with the promise of self-revelation by sitting on the chair. This dynamic can be related to Foucault's concept of the panopticon, where individuals internalize surveillance and



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perform actions dictated by invisible forces. In both plays, power is subtly exerted through the repeated acts of sitting and rising, mirroring how societal pressures, whether in political discourse or personal introspection, shape the characters' behaviour without their full awareness. The empty chairs in Ionesco's play and the symbolic chairs in Saif's act as instruments of compliance, reinforcing the theme of power that is both pervasive and unseen.

"Did the world get too tight for you? Have your worries piled up? This is not an ordinary chair! This is the chair of wonders!" (Saif, *The Chair*)

In this passage from *The Chair*, the "Owner of the Chair" invites the characters to sit, offering the chair as a transformative object that promises to reveal hidden truths and alleviate their existential burdens. The act of sitting on the chair becomes symbolic of an internalized submission, much like the invisible guests in Ionesco's *The Chairs*, who trigger a mechanical response from the old couple, compelling them to add more chairs. Both plays explore the subtle mechanisms of power: in Ionesco's case, the invisible guests represent unseen authority, while in Saif's play, the chair functions as a metaphor for self-examination under an external force, promising enlightenment or self-discovery.

In both Ionesco's *The Chairs* and Saif's *The Chair*, power manifests in ways that are either explicit or implied, but ultimately reveal how societal systems enforce control through both visible and invisible means. Both plays explore the invisibility of power, yet they approach it in different manners, reflecting the cultural and political contexts in which they were written. *The Chairs* present patriarchal power as more visible and active. Here, the characters confront the chair as a literal and metaphorical symbol of power, where their truths and subjugation are made explicit. The characters do not just perform their roles unknowingly; they actively confront the patriarchal oppression they live under, though still unable to break free. "We have always been what we are. But what we are, no one knows. No one understands us. We are nothing but two poor old fools." (Ionesco, 1952, p. 23). This reflects the couple's internalization of their subjugated roles within a patriarchal system that operates subtly, without being overtly acknowledged. The invisibility of power is palpable here, though the couple has been moulded by societal expectations and gendered roles, they are not fully aware of the larger system shaping their actions and identities. The phrase "we have always been what we are" conveys a sense of inevitability and passivity, indicating that the



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couple's lives are governed by forces beyond their control. They live according to the roles assigned to them, the woman as the helper, the man as the speaker—without questioning these roles or their origins.

In contrast, Saif's *The Chair* offers a more confrontation with power, particularly the patriarchal system. The play's central symbol, the chair, acts as a medium of power, revealing the internalized struggles and truths of the characters. As individuals sit on the chair, they are compelled to express their deepest, often hidden truths, exposing the power that governs them.

Unlike in *The Chairs*, where power operates quietly in the background, in *The Chair*, the revelation of power through personal confessions provides a more explicit confrontation with the societal structures that shape the characters' lives. "The chair is not just for sitting, it is for revelation. It reveals your soul, your truth, the lies you have been telling yourself." (Seif, 2025). This directly contrasts with the invisibility of power in *The Chairs*. The chair in Saif's play is not only a physical object; it is a symbolic tool for unveiling truths. The characters are forced to confront their internalized subjugation and the power that governs them. The chair in this case reflects a more visible, tangible form of power, one that requires active participation in its exposure. This supports Foucault's idea of power being productive and not merely repressive, as the chair helps the characters reveal truths otherwise hidden from their awareness.

While in *The Chairs*, patriarchal power operates in the background, shaping the characters' roles without being explicitly acknowledged. The couple's actions are dictated by societal norms, but they are unaware of the larger system shaping their behaviour. In Saif's *The Chair*, the power is more visible and active. The chair forces characters to confront their truths, revealing the societal and personal power structures that govern them. Here, power is unveiled rather than implicit. In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, the characters never truly escape the subjugation of power; they continue to perform their roles without questioning the system that dictates them. Their lives are controlled by invisible societal expectations. In *The Chair*, the characters confront the power that governs them through personal revelations. The chair acts as a tool of resistance, forcing the characters to reveal their internal struggles and subjugation, thus confronting the patriarchal control in a more explicit manner.

Thus, Both plays, through their use of the chair, explore the dynamics of power in patriarchal systems. In *The Chairs*, power is invisible, shaping the



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couple's lives without their awareness. while in *The Chair*, power is more visible and active, revealing the truths hidden within the characters' identities. The chair in both plays serves as a metaphor for patriarchal control: in *The Chairs*, it represents silent, invisible power, while in *The Chair*, it acts as a means of revelation, forcing characters to confront the oppressive forces that govern their lives.

In this way, Ionesco presents the invisibility of power: the couple is trapped within societal norms, yet they are unaware of how these norms dictate their lives. The gendered expectations that define their roles as hosts and speakers are internalized, and their identity is shaped by these unseen forces, creating an atmosphere of resignation and fatalism. This is a classic example of Foucault's idea of power: it's not always seen or explicitly imposed but is constantly at work, shaping identities and behaviours through subtle and pervasive means. Also, Seif's play resonates with the invisible power shaping identities and behaviours through subtle and pervasive means found in the interaction between the characters and the chair. The power dynamics are not immediately obvious but are revealed through the subtle acts of compliance and internalized roles characters perform in the play. "The chair is not just for sitting, it is for revelation. It reveals your soul, your truth, the lies you have been telling yourself." (Seif, 2025). Such a notion of invisible power operates beneath the surface. The chair, a seemingly neutral object, becomes a tool for unveiling the internalized truths and unspoken societal norms that govern the characters' actions and thoughts.

Thus, just as in *The Chairs*, the characters in *The Chair* are similarly shaped by invisible societal expectations. They are compelled to sit, revealing their inner truths, not because they are directly forced, but because they have internalized these powerful influences. This can be linked to Foucault's concept of power, where power operates invisibly, shaping individuals' behaviours and identities through mechanisms they may not consciously acknowledge. Both plays represent characters controlled by unseen forces, in Ionesco's case, societal norms, and in Seif's case, the power of truth and revelation, which forces characters to confront their internalized roles and struggles.

Language in both plays is vital. In *The Chairs*, language is a tool and a trap, a performative act that creates meaning even as it acknowledges its ultimate futility. An example is the Old Man's repetitive declaration: "I have a message, I have a message!" This increasingly desperate invocation is



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downright incantatory, the expected revelation is displaced back onto the Orator whose arrival is perfectly (mis)timed to reveal nothing but a load of babbling. The distance between intention and articulation is the primary drama of the play.

The build-up of hollow words and obsessive reiteration of pro forma greetings in *The Chairs*, for example, reflects what Wandor (1986) has termed the "linguistic entropy" of the theatre of the absurd. Language does not clarify, language does not connect; it falls into static, which, with the type of static noise it generates, reveals its inability to transmit meaning. In Ionesco's conception, this breakdown is not just verbal but spatial: the chairs grow in number out on the stage, representing the inescapable presence of the absent, the unseen, and the unheard.

This over-populated, linguistically and physically, is what Edward Soja (1996) calls a "third space", a space that is not entirely real nor entirely imagined, but produced through the push-and-pull of presence and absence. Performance in this space is an act of desperate insistence on meaning, even as that meaning, moments later, constantly slips into an elsewhere. Language in *The Chairs*, then, doesn't so much exist in space as produce a symbolic void; an echo chamber in which communication is perpetually attempted but never achieved.

### Conclusion:

Postmodern theatre has transcended the limitations of its absurd predecessor, by incorporating elements of popular culture and multimedia techniques. This development is evident in the treat of Seif and Ionesco, the chair is a symbol. While Ionesco presents empty chairs to reflect the absurdity of political discourse, Seif uses a single chair, which becomes a witness to the violence of power. Between Baghdad and Paris, the chair transcends being a mere piece of furniture, becoming an archive of violence and a space of resistance. This comparison reveals how postmodern theatre transforms traditional tools of the absurd into sharper critical weapons, where silence becomes discourse, emptiness becomes a spectacle, and the body becomes text. Thus, while the theatre of the absurd remained captive to existential philosophies, the postmodern theatre was able to offer a critique more closely connected to political and social reality while maintaining an absurd touch that challenges the logic of power and its dominant narratives.

Both *The Chairs* and *The Chair* depict how invisible power subtly shapes the identities and behaviours of the characters, whether through gendered



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expectations (in Ionesco's play) or the act of self-revelation prompted by the chair (in Seif's play). In each case, the power is not explicitly imposed but operates quietly in the background, moulding the characters' actions and identities. This demonstrates Foucault's theory of power as a pervasive force that works to shape and control individuals without their direct awareness. The same is applicable to *The Chair* (2025). In *The Chair*, the Clown gets to shout its invitations over and over ("Come! Come! Come!", and his emotional vacuity of pitches' ('laughter at truth, tears at lies) enact what Wandor (1986) calls 'linguistic entropy' in absurd theatre. Language, here, does not serve the purpose of communication or truth as a performance of sound, rhythm, or theatric without having meaning. Like the obsessive repetition in Ionesco's *The Chairs*, Seif presents speech as a ritualized failure of the play's absurd state of speaking yet being unheard and uncomprehended.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has shown how theatre as structure in *The Chair* by Ammar Seif and *The Chairs* by Eugène Ionesco is a performative language tool for portraying power, identity and resistance in Edward Soja's 3rd space. In both plays, space is not just a physical location but also a place of ideological struggle in which binaries of power and subjugation, presence and absence, meaning and absurdity are repeatedly problematized. This theatrical space pries open a transformative space in the exposure of structural and social tensions through symbolic emptiness and bodily performance, which then place the stage in the hands of the audience to re-imagine axe after axe to grind into authority.

The repetitive physical gestures of sitting and standing that characterise each play form a non-verbal idiom with which the power relations of discipline, desire and submission are performed. The body is not just an instrument of performance but the site of the operation of power, reminiscent of Judith Butler's formulation of performativity, taking shape and assuming different forms as it is constituted and reconstituted in repeated acts of compliance and defiance. In *The Chair*, sitting becomes a sign of isolation and control, while standing is to suggest the possibility of revolt. In *The Chairs*, sitting each other out on invisible chairs strips bare the emptiness of authority and the vacancy of meaning.

Formally, the texts' postmodern and absurdist dimensions of repetition, temporal dislocation, and semantic voids serve to strategically disturb the



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coherence of narrative and political logic. In *The Chair*, the circular language and the confines of space betray the failure of institutional speech. "In *The Chairs*" the condition -If one could call it such- of "no one" and "nothing" is at the root of a radical questioning of communication. Such visual techniques subvert the conventional theatrical model and independently instil critical consciousness within the spectators through the exposition of the exercise of power and of the theatricality of ideology. At last, in both *The Chair* and *The Chairs*, structure exceeds form as a means of revealing the discursive conditions that manufacture and re-manufacture subjection. The stage becomes a third site of visibility and resistance, which provides less a resolution than an interruption, a site where the prevailing structures can be called into question and alternative meanings broached.

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البنية في المسرح الحدائي وما بعد الحدائي: تجسيد السلطة في الفضاء الثالث: دراسة

مقارنة لمسرحية "الكرسي" لعمار سيف و"الكراسي" لأوجين يونسكو

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#### مستخلص البحث:

في عالم السلطة، حتى غياب الكرسي يُمكن أن يُلهم ثوراتٍ حيث ينهار الشكل وينبثق المعنى من الشظايا. هنا يتنفس المسرح السياسي؛ إذ يكشف تحويل الكرسي إلى فضاءٍ ثالثٍ في مسرحية/الكراسي لأوجين يونسكو ومسرحية/الكرسي، الجسد الأدائي (حركات الجلوس والإيماءات) لانتقاد الأنظمة السياسية. تستخدم هذه الدراسة مسرح الحدائي و ما بعد الحدائي لدراسة تجزئة الأشكال والخطاب السياسي، كاشفة كيف يُمكن للهياكل الفنية أن تُصبح مرايا لأزمات العصر. بينما يُحلل مفهوم إدوارد سوجا للفضاء الثالث تجزئة البنية المسرحية لدراسة الكرسي كرمز سياسي، تُبرز نظرية جوديث بتلر للأداء الهوياتي أهمية تكرار أفعال الجلوس والنهوض كتعبيرات عن النظام المهيمن. وتُستند إلى الأسئلة التالية: كيف يُعاد تشكيل الفضاء بوصفه "فضاءً ثالثاً" للصراع الأيديولوجي والانكشاف الأدائي في مسرحيتي "الكرسي" و"الكراسي" كيف تُجسد الوضعيات الجسدية المتكررة للشخصيات، وخصوصاً الجلوس والوقوف، أفعالاً مُجسدة للانضباط، والرغبة، والخضوع؟ كيف تُخدم العناصر ما بعد الحدائية والعبثية في البنية النقد السياسي والتقويض الجمالي في المسرحيتين؟ ورغم اختلاف السياقات (عراقي/أوروبي)، تتشابه التقنيات، إذ تستخدم المسرح الفوقي لكسر الوهم ودمجه مع الفضاء الاختزالي (كموقع للصراع). تتناول هذه الدراسة جماليات التجزئة في ما بعد الحدائية، وتفكيك الخطابات السياسية من خلال التشكيل الجمالي، وتقديم نموذج لقراءة النصوص المسرحية العربية من منظور نظري عالمي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تفكك الشكل المسرحي، تجسيد السلطة، الفضاء الثالث، المسرح ما بعد الحدائي، السينوغرافيا السياسية، مسرحية "الكرسي" لعمار سيف، مسرحية "الكراسي" لأوجين يونسكو، جوديث بتلر.