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A PSYCHOSOCIAL ANALYSIS OF APPROACHING ZANZIBAR BY TINA HOWE

Sabah Atallah Khalifa Ali [1]
Ali Qasim Radhee [2]

Abstract

Tina Howe's Approaching Zanzibar (1989) is a postmodern road drama that explores themes of mortality, familial bonds, and the cyclical nature of life through the journey of the Blossom family. Blending realism and surrealism, the play explores death as an archetypal transformation, challenges gendered social constructs, and frames existence as a continuous loop of renewal. Drawing on Jungian psychology and Eriksonian lifecycle theory, this analysis highlights Howe's use of symbolism, character dynamics, and stylistic innovation to reconcile despair with hope. The study concludes that the play's power lies in its ability to juxtapose existential dread with transcendent optimism, offering a meditation on aging, creativity, and legacy.

Keywords: death, surrealism, psychosocial, absurd, Tina Howe.

Introduction

Approaching Zanzibar was premiered at the Second Stage Theatre in New York City in April 1989. It is a road drama about the Blossoms, who trip through America to bid a final farewell to their dying aunt (Walker, 1989).

[1] Department of English Language, College of Education/ Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences, University of Baghdad, Bagdad, Iraq sabah.atallah@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.

[2]Department of English Language, College of Education/ Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences, University of Baghdad, Bagdad, Iraq, Ali.Radi2207m@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq.

The setting of the play is an innovative gesture. “The action slowly moves across America, from Luray,Virginia, to the Blue Ridge Mountains, to Asheville, North Carolina, to the Smoky Mountains, a lake in Oklahoma City, the Texas Panhandle and, finally, Taos, New Mexico” (Bigsby, 1999, p. 73). Howe decides to go on with an episodic atmosphere, a journey across America. Therefore, the scenes are set in cars, tents, boats, lakes and mountains.

The Blossoms are driving from New York to New Mexico where their aunt lives. The family consists of four members, the husband, Wally is 49 years old. Charlotte, his wife is 45 years old. Their children, Turner and Pony. The journey of the Blossoms is not about discovery and landscape, but rather about revelation and discovery of universal and personal truths.

The children quarrel in the backseat and the parents try to maintain control. Charlotte criticizes Wally's driving who loses his temper. The dialogues between the children and the parents continuously intervene (Bigsby, 1999, p. 74). The scene foreshadows series of tensions that are about to emerge.

Charlotte: Why do they always have to push us to the breaking point? Why . . .? It’s not fair.

Pause.

Wally (Suddenly whirls around, glaring at the kids)-. Answer her! WHY DO YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO PUSH US TO THE BREAKING POINT, HUH . . .? HUH . . .?!

Pony: I didn’t do anything.

TURNER: Don’t look at me. Pony was the one who —

Charlotte: WALLY, EYES ON THE ROAD, PLEASE!

Pony: Right, right, it’s always my fault. (Howe, 1989, p. 11)

Two days later, they have their first stop on a rainy day. Some of the challenges and fears of each character are revealed; Charlotte has hot flashes and hears an imaginary child crying in the woods. Pony and Turner stand on their heads and state

that the world looks different upside down (Juurinen, 1999, p. 6). The scene ends with a surrealist gesture as they hear a weird sound outside the tent:

TURNER (Barely audible): There it is again.

Wally: What?

Turner: The earth is turning.

Wally: What are you talking about?

Turner: Shhhh!

Silence.

PONY (In a whisper): I hear it.

Wally: It's something outside the tent. (Howe, 1989, p. 26)

The second stop is at Blue Ridge Mountains. Wally is fly-fishing with Turner. He tells his son how the death of his parents affected his talent:

> Then poof, it was all over. Grandad and Mamie both got sick, I was put in charge, and ashes, ashes, we all fall down. Though I can't blame everything on them. I just lost it, that's all. It can happen to anyone. The trick is to accept it and go down gracefully, right old buddy? Blub, blub, Blub ... (Howe, 1989, p. 44)

Howe focuses on the figures of artists. There are three artists in the play. Wally is a composer, Turner is a musician, and Olivia is a site specific artist, Howe says:

> I seem to write about artists because for me artists are the closest we come to heroes in our society. If I were asked who do I perceive as the modern-day hero, I would again and again point to artists, whether they're visual artists or poets or whatever. (Kolin & Kullman, 1996, p. 267)

Along the trip, the Blossoms meet Scotty, Charlotte's brother, his daughter Amy, and his African American wife, Joy. They keep the company of the Blossoms as they sail on a lake in Oklahoma City. Charlotte and Scotty recollect their childhood stories (Juurinen, 1999, p. 8).

SCOTTY: And of course . . . the crucial carton of eggs.

Charlotte: Yes, don't forget the eggs.

Turner, Pony and Amy: The eggs, the eggs, the eggs!

Wally (Snapping away): OH YES!

Charlotte: Which all smashed when I tried to shut the lid.

Amy: Yuck!

Pony: Eeewy gooey, eeewy gooey.

JOY: This is the saddest story I've ever heard.

SCOTTY: What do you mean?

Charlotte: It's not sad.

JOY: Running away from home to fry eggs on top of a mountain . . . ?

SCOTTY: We were city kids. (Howe, 1989, p. 60)

Part of the play's innovation lies in Howe's utilization of elements of realism and surrealism. Activities like fishing, camping, hiking and driving a car are related to American audiences. Still, scenes like the sound of earth turning and roar of bears are exotic. By presenting a surrealist setting along the realist one, Howe tends to disrupt the basic instinctive sense of reality, creating another version of reality that is subjective (Ferguson, 1999, pp. 13-14).

Howe culminates the final destination of the Blossoms at Taos, New Mexico. The family road trip is over when they meet their aunt, Olivia. Though she is vulnerable and bid-ridden at first, she regains power and enjoys the company of her relatives, a gesture that suggests that there is hope even in the darkest of hours. When the Blossoms meet Olivia, Wally says:

Our feelings play strange tricks on us. (Putting an arm around each) Oh, hi guys. This has been a tough year. The last thing I wanted to do was drive to New Mexico to watch another relative die. But the closer we got, the better I began to feel. I mean, look at us ... we drove over two thousand miles and we're still talking to each other. We had a few laughs and saw some dynamite

> scenery. It was a great trip, a great trip! And here's poor Livvie hanging on by a thread, and I'm still raring to go. (Howe, 1989, p. 89-90)

Death as an Archetype

The biographical element is present in the play, Howe says:

> In conjunction with turning fifty I'd been watching various family members of mine die. There's also the reality of AIDS, which is ever-present in New York, which I find devastating and which I think about daily. And I wanted to write a play that in some way would deal with some of this pain, the bewilderment, turning fifty, death, people dying, survivors, how the survivors keep going. (Kolin & Kullman, 1996, p. 268)

Wally and Turner go fly-fishing together. The father coaches his son on the rudimentary nature of life "It's all about the fine art of letting go" (Howe, 1989, p. 44). And he should accept his fate willingly "The trick is to accept and go down graceful"(Howe, 1989, p. 44). The speech of Wally indicates that Howe is aware of her ageing process (Taylor, 1997). Gregory Lee LeGault is a critic who comments on Howe's biographical effect:

> Writing it helped her deal with fears of her own mortality, providing her a means of acknowledging [her] own fear of death but trying to celebrate life at the same time. Also, since one of the characters in the play is a composer who finds himself in the midst of a painfully long creative dry spell, Howe […] may have also been dealing with her own fear of prematurely losing her creative powers. (LeGault, 1987, p. 8)

The long journey of the Blossoms is a journey through life. It is a case of self-realization where each character faces his own fears and challenges concerning birth, death and mortality. The play contains images and symbols that are closely related to death. Death is an element that permeates the dynamic scene of *Approaching Zanzibar*. The Blossoms are escaping their daily routine and venturing towards death (DiGaetani, 1991, p. 153). The journey itself, however, is shadowed by the proximity

of death. There is the fear of a car accident "Is that how you want to start our vacation? All being piled into body bags at the side of the road?" (Howe, 1989, p. 16). And there is the danger of a wild animal "The bears got them, the bears got them!" (Howe, 1989, p. 52).

Death is as important as birth. For an aging person, however, death is an existential question that has to be answered. Carl Jung argues that "death is not an end but a goal, and life's inclination towards death begins as soon as the meridian is passed" (Jung, 1968, p. 46). One will either be in desperate fear of annihilation or will have hope in the hereafter.

In Western culture, death is considered as synonymous to extinction. It is the absence of life. Death is associated with blackness and night, it is depicted as a skeleton (Mehrtens, 2024). Pony associates death with skeletons "And, and then I start thinking about being there forever and ever and ever and ever until my body's a skeleton" (Howe, 1989, p. 97).

The annihilation of the physical body reflects human mortality. It is a gate into a journey which "requires an encounter with fear and recognition that the reality is not neat and in human control. It is essential to trust the process of letting go, whether chosen or not, as part of the metamorphosis" (Mayer et al., 2021). Death can be accepted as a freedom from physicality or denied as an end by itself. John Ryan Haule is a psychologist who argues that death takes its meaning from:

> The empirical world [which] is set within a greater cosmos where beings undergo mysterious transformations and reveal underlying kinships with one another, where death becomes meaningful as finally passing over the spiritual relationships between the domain of the living and the forces of the supernatural cosmos. (Haule, 2010)

When the Blossoms see Olivia for the first time, Pony exclaims "She's dead, she's dead!" (Howe, 1989, p. 80). At certain serious moments of silence, Howe uses

the following expression "Dead Silence" (Howe, 1989, p. 26). In classical antiquity, death was depicted as a mourning woman.

In *Approaching Zanzibar*, each of the Blossoms perceives death according to his/her personal perspective. Anna Gaidash argues that "In Wally's vision of ageing we detect stereotyped assumption of the body's impairment" (Gaidash, 2014, p. 15). Wally's speech clarifies his perception about the physical deterioration of an old person:

> WALLY: It'll take us seven-five years to get there.
>
> CHARLOTTE (Opening her window): God it's hot in here!
>
> WALLY: We'll all be in walkers!
>
> CHARLOTTE: Who is always complaining that we never take a vacation?
>
> PONY (daughter): Mommy…?
>
> WALLY (Putting on a creaky old voice): "Well, hi there Livvie, we finally made it! That is you, isn't it Liv? I don't see so good anymore."
>
> PONY: Mommy, what's Livvie dying of?
>
> TURNER (son): God Pony!...
>
> WALLY (Still playing aged): "Hey there, Char, want to pass me my ear trumpet? I don't hear so good neither. (Howe, 1989, p. 16)

Charlotte is another epitome for the fear of death. She suffers from psychological and physiological shortcomings because of her infertility. She perceives her childbearing ability as an art of her own (Douglass, 2005, p. 13). As an artist who lost her creativity, she is frustrated. In *Jung on Death and Immortality,* Jung advocates:

> when a human life comes to its end before our eyes, and the question of the meaning and worth of life never becomes more urgent or more agonizing than when we see the final breath leave a body which a moment before was living. […] Youth—we should like to think—has purpose, future, meaning, and

value, whereas the coming to an end is only a meaningless cessation. (Jung, 1999, p. 11)

Throughout her interaction with other characters, Charlotte's fear of death is exposed. At one point she exclaims "I don't know which I dread more – getting there too late or having to see her suffer" (Howe, 1989, p. 64). Later on, she says "You dance through childhood, race through the teenage years, fall in love a couple of million times, bear some delicious babies, and then ...whhhhhhst, it's all over" (Howe, 1989, p. 87). "Charlotte's fear stems from her troublesome state, her contemplation of her own future, with a possibility of either death or extreme physical decline" (Gaidash, 2014, p. 17).

Depression is one of the major symptoms Charlotte suffers from. She imagines a child sobbing in the wilderness. Her biological and psychological states are in decline. Charlotte mirrors Howe who says "I'm a mother and have my own children and have also reached the age when I won't have any more" (Kolin & Kullman, 1996, p. 268). Upon meeting Randy and his three-week old baby, Charlotte bursts:

Pony: What's wrong with Mommy?

Charlotte weeps and weeps.

TURNER: Mom, are you okay?

Charlotte: Oh Wally, I can't bear it . . . I'll never feel life moving inside me again . .

Wally (Arms around the kids): Hey, hey, you've still got Turner and Pony . .

Charlotte (Racked): No, no, you don't understand . . .

Wally (Not moving): Honey, honey . . .

Charlotte: It's like . . . like part of me's dying .... The best part. (Howe, 1989, p. 41)

Charlotte is aware of her deteriorating state. Therefore, she seeks to overcome or at least lessen her process of aging either by tending her family or caring for her physiology (Brandenburg, 1995). Howe explains her condition as she says:

> Part of her anguish is realizing that she won't have children anymore. And she's on this odyssey to visit this wonderfully creative old woman before she dies, and they keep running into babies along the way, which are both life-affirming and cause for great joy, but which in an odd way catch the mother up and make her sad. So it's really acknowledging my fear of death but trying to celebrate life at the same time. I just feel that all of us, in one way or another, are in a period of mourning. (Kolin & Kullman, 1996, p. 268)

Charlotte's hot flashes invoke a sense discomfort "God, it's hot in here!" (Howe, 1989, p. 24). As she starts to fan herself for air, she exclaims "Well, I guess these are the hot flashes my doctor was warning me about, though I still say I'm much too young to be going through this" (Howe, 1989, p. 33). In *The Archetype and The Collective Unconscious*, Jung argues that:

> There are natural transformation processes which simply happen to us, whether we like it or not, and whether we know it or not. These processes develop considerable psychic effects, which would be sufficient in themselves to make any thoughtful person ask himself what really happened to him. (Jung, 1959, p. 130)

Pony is a character who is consumed by the fear of death. Early in the play she exclaims "Mommy, what's Livvie dying of?" (Howe, 1989, p. 15). Pony's fear overshadows her behaviors. Later on, she confesses her fear to Olivia "You know, being dead in a coffin, being underground all alone in the dark" (Howe, 1989, p. 97). She interprets most of the weird sounds she and her family hear across the journey as bears "It's bears. Big black bears!" (Howe, 1989, p. 51). She fears the unknown.

At Smoky Mountains, Tennessee, midnight, Pony and Turner are left alone when their parents go hiking. Being scared, Pony associates every sound she hears with negative connotation. She believes that there are snakes and bears outside.

Pony: (Frozen): It's bears!

Pony: (Jumping): What was that?

Turner: What was what?

Pony: That!?

Turner: I didn't hear anything.

Pony: It sounded like snakes.

Turner: Will you stop it?

Pony: It's snakes, it's snakes! (Howe, 1989, p. 52)

Pony and Turner stay in the dark tent. Noticing that their parents are late, they are afraid that something bad happened to them. Pony is afraid of the darkness. She thinks of her dying aunt:

> What if she dies in front of us? What if she tums blue and starts gasping for air ... ? (she makes lurid strangling sounds) What if she wants to be alone with us? What if we're locked in the room with her and she comes after us ... ? What if she falls and dies right on top of us...? (Howe, 1989, p. 55)

Pony associates Olivia with the weird sounds she hears with Turner when they are left alone: "IT'S HER, IT'S HER .... SHE'S COMING TO GET US!" (Howe, 1989, p. 53). Later on, when she meets Olivia, her fear escalates "Turner, you promised you wouldn't leave me alone with her . . . Turner . . . ?" (Howe, 1989, p. 91).

Eventully, Pony describes her fear to Olivia "with mice and, and spiders, and worms crawling over me . . . and, and dead people moaning all around me . . . and trying to call Mommy and Daddy but they can't hear me because I'm so far underground . . ." (Howe, 1989, p. 97). Howe describes her experience as "I put all my fear into that little child. Because she was only nine years old, she was vastly more inarticulate and vulnerable than any grownup could be" (DiGaetani, 1991, p. 157).

Female Social Construction

Howe presents femininity as a social construct. Characters can assume each other's roles. Howe utilizes “actors performing several characters whose gender and age are different from their own” (Ferguson, 1999, p. 17). This can be traced back in multiple incidents in the play. Olivia mistakes Turner for Amy, and she associates her with the likelihood of a boy. “OLIVIA (Snatches Turner’s hand): Amy . . . ! Come, give your poor old great-aunt a kiss like a good little girl” (Howe, 1989, p. 83). Amy is a character played by a boy as illustrated in the cast.

Amy’s strength and excellence in multiple sports are regarded as masculine characteristics. Such roles are presented as dynamic factors that can be shifted according to social expectations and personal perception, Sarah Ferguson argues:

> Seeing a woman as an object becomes infinitely more difficult when that woman is given "male" traits. In fact, the family actually objectifies Amy for her "masculinity" which is the opposite of the traditional male objectification of women for their "femininity". (Ferguson, 1999, p. 16)

The Blossoms make fun of Amy. Associating her with boyhood and masculinity:

> WALLY: So guys, is everyone ready for . . . (Trumpet fanfare sound) Gamey Amy?!
>
> Pony: She’s so weird . . . !
>
> Turner: Spare (Laughing)'. me! Oh no!
>
> Wally: Boy wonder of the western world!
>
> Charlotte (Trying not to laugh): Come on, don’t be mean.
>
> Pony: Mommy . . . ?
>
> Wally: The only eight-year-old girl I know who can throw a shotput fifty yards.
>
> Charlotte: Honey, she’s eleven!
>
> Wally: And already shaving! (Howe, 1989, p. 19).

In Identity, Youth and Crisis, Erikson advocates:

> Observation employed to test male and female performance might reveal few or no sexual differences in areas of the mind which have the function of securing verbal or cognitive agreement on matters dominated by the mathematical nature of the universe and the verbal agreement of cultural traditions. (Erikson, 1968, p. 273)

The parent-children roles are switched. Pony and Turner seize a chance to imitate their parents, pretending to drive. John Digaetani describes the children's behavior as "They aped what the adults were doing" (DiGaetani, 1991, p. 157). This serves as an alienation of social expectations, questioning the stereotypes of proper behaviors. What is said and acted by adults is perceived as subjugating and dominating by younger generations whose behaviors are often seen as reckless and irresponsible.

> They head for the car, Pony pretending she's Wally, and Turner pretending he's Charlotte.
>
> Pony (Sliding behind the wheel): COME ON GUYS, GET A WIGGLE ON!
>
> Turner (Gets in next to her): It would be nice to reach a campsite before dark for once!
>
> PONY (Yelling out her window): KIDS . . . ? (To Turner) What's your cash situation like?
>
> Turner (Yelling out his window): LET'S GET MOVING!. (Howe, 1989, p. 73)

The female figures in *Approaching Zanzibar* are depicted according to social expectations as second rate individuals, being subordinate to the male figures. Pony's status is circumscribed as an echo to others especially Turner. While Charlotte's infertility is viewed as disability and embarrassment by Wally (Bigsby, 1999, p. 73). Erikson asserts that this "keep[s] half of mankind from participating in planning and decision making" (Erikson, 1968, p. 292)

Howe's utilization of dynamic characters elucidates the fluidity of representation. Nature is arbitrary and reality is surreal, nothing is of fixed value, therefore, a character's perspective determines his specific role (Juurinen, 1999, p. 4). There is also an implicit invitation for the audience/reader to induct their perspective onto characters in order to determine the validity of their actions according to their own perceived reality.

The Cyclic Nature of Life

Howe describes *Approaching Zanzibar* as "a mythic piece about birth, death, and re-birth" (DiGaetani, 1991, p. 156). Taos is the Blossom's destination. It is an abode of death. Still, it has an aura, as if death is a gate into another reality, wherein one would end up meeting his own childhood, life is a circle where the starting point is the end point.

Approaching Zanzibar seems to have a linear structure about an ordinary family road trip. Yet, it is also about the dynamicity and the cyclic nature of life. The Blossoms are moving from life to death, and from death to life. Their decision to travel to their dying aunt is a movement from life to death. Meeting Olivia turns out to be as happy and fruitful as a resurrection from death to life. Jenni Juurinen comments on the cyclic nature of the play:

> One strong aspect in Approaching Zanzibar is its cyclical nature. Everything in life and in the world of the Blossoms seem to run in cycles. The old are replaced with newborns, the life starts again and again. People are connected even when they are strangers, things and places remind us of something that we have experienced before. (Juurinen, 1999, p. 6)

The play encompasses major and minor life cycles. Olivia represents the major one. She is the center of concern from the beginning till the end. The Blossoms's fear of death escalates as they move closer to meet her (King, 1991, p. 26). Pony's increasing fear and Charlotte's sense of loss are compensated when they meet Olivia.

They find that she is such an enthusiastic person who appreciates life. Her love is shared with Pony, as a continuation for the cycle, which begins with fear and loss and ends with love and gain.

Olivia's surroundings and attitudes maintain the sense of cyclicity of life. Her breathing is described as that of a baby and angel which indicates "the never ending cycle of life" (Gaidash, 2014, p. 17). Being unable to recognize other family members asserts that she is behaving like a child.

Olivia's art celebrates the evanescent nature of life. Her usual masterpieces like a giant kites and massive sculptures are built on sacred Indian sites, linking the temporary with the eternal, the young with the old. In *The Archetype and The Collective Unconscious*, Jung advocates:

> [A] person who participates in a sacred rite experiences a state of transcendence of life, his life becomes perpetual through transformation and renewal, the transcendence of life is usually presented by the death of a hero or a god-like figure. (Jung, 1959, p. 117)

Olivia is that god-like figure who is dying, but her death is juxtaposed with life. Even in death, life persists in the afterlife where souls live for eternity. Death in this regard turns to be a social experience that bonds generations together, Erikson advocates:

> Each human being receives and internalizes the logic and the strength of the principles of social order and develops the readiness under favorable conditions to convey them to the next generations. All this, at any rate, must be recognized as one of the essential built-in potentials for development and recovery. (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 81)

Howe denounces the sole presence of death. Elements of life are used to achieve equilibrium: "The play is a journey to death transformed into life" (Andreach, 2003, p. 35). Pony is scared: "I don't want to die, I don't want to die!" (Howe, 1989, p. 98). Olivia reacts to Pony's fear with an optimistic statement

"There, there, no one's going to die" (Howe, 1989, p. 98). She comforts Pony by narrating the most joyful experience in her life. It is her unique love story, concerning a handsome man who took her on actual trip to Zanzibar:

> Standing on the platform was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen — tall, with olive skin and a thrilling mouth. He wore a white suit and was pacing up and down the platform carrying this enormous bouquet of poppies that stained his face crimson. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was like something out of The Arabian Nights. (Howe, 1989, p. 98)

In *Childhood and Society*, Eriskon advocates that old people experience a propensity towards achieving order and meaning in life, in their pursuit they can denounce any physical or psychological decline. Eriskon asserts that "It is the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions" (Erikson, 1950, p. 268). Love serves as a remedy to the transient nature of life, where one's memory outlives the mundane reality and lives to eternity.

In the final scene, Olivia foretells Pony's future, expecting that she will experience her adventure "Well, you'll do it too, you'll do it all, wait and see" (Howe, 1989, p. 99). The scene culminates as they exchange positions. They wear each other's accessories, Olivia wears Pony's glasses and Pony wears Olivia's wig. As they dance on Olivia's supposed death bed, they mock the transience of life and embrace the limitless power of hope (DiGaetani, 1991, p. 157).

The game of Geography is played by the Blossoms twice over the course of the play. Each player must use the last letter of the city the previous player named, and starts again with the same letter. Baghdad becomes Detroit, for example. The game represents life as a cycle, the beginning becomes the end and vice versa. In this regard, the play becomes "a journey to death transformed into life" (Andreach, 2003, p. 36). The game, however, is an epitome of life and rebirth, when Pony plays it with Olivia "the young girl rejuvenates Olivia from a dying stupor" (King 26).

“Paradise" (Howe, 1989, p. 102). Is the final word that their Geography game ends with. Howe asserts that:

> In the last scene of Approaching Zanzibar, there is a transforming scene between a terrified little girl and dying old lady. They literally exchange identities. The girl puts on the old lady’s wig, and the old lady puts on the girl’s glasses. With that gesture, both receive' comfort and grace. (Greene, 2001, p. 236)

Charlotte’s life cycle is “reinforced by the creation of life around her, both Joy's unborn child and Randy's new born baby” (Ferguson, 1999, p. 20). Witnessing life being created around her gives her a sense of comfort. Anna Gaidash argues:

> Charlotte’s character of mother in Approaching Zanzibar is central both to the understanding of ageing and life-as-a-cycle in the play. [her] response to the coincidence that the baby they met on road was born the same day as Olivia, with a gap of 80 years, Charlotte unconsciously asserts the idea of life as a cycle. (Gaidash, 2014, p. 16)

Wally also represents a cycle of decline and rejuvenation. His fading talent is recovered through the rising prowess of his son. Wally’s sense of loss triggers his instinct of survival as he teaches Turner fly-fishing “I’ve finally got a chance to teach you something I’m really good at, so take advantage of it!” (Howe, 1989, p. 43). His legacy lives in Turner’s excellent quality. Water is a recurrent element in the play. There is rain, a lake and a fishing tour as the family discusses the possibility of reincarnation. Bidermann says “the AFTERLIFE would be spent in the regions over the sea or RIVER encircling the world of the living” (Biedermann, 1992, p. 91). Wally’s speech asserts the cyclic nature of life. His conversation with Turner tackles the idea that people are just like fish. They are created from water and to water they shall return:

TURNER: Fish are great.

Wally: Fish are great! (He casts) Boom!

Turner: They're so weird! What are they, anyway?

Wally: Souls. Departed human souls.

Turner: Come on . . .

Wally: We begin life in water, so it's where we end up. (Howe, 1989, p. 41)

The analogy of fish continues. When Pony asks Joy about conception and birth, Joy says "You see, nature is very logical. Since life began in water, we begin in water too. When a baby's tiny it looks just like a fish. Then it grows hair and lungs and turns into an egg-bearing mammal" (Howe, 1989, p. 64). Pony learns something about the beginning of life while Turner learns something about the end of life. Neither of their perceptions are complete. Still, when put together, they suggest the cyclic nature of life, with water as its medium, which is an element of regeneration.

Though the general theme in the play is death, Howe ends it with a happy, rhapsodic scene, where the ashes of death are transformed into the feathers of life. She states:

> I was writing about a family going to pay a last visit to a dying relative, I wanted the play to end with a trumpet voluntary. I am an optimist. I believe that it's more important to leave the audience with hope than in a pool of shattering despair. We go to the theater to find a respite, a moment of transcendence. That imperative is factored into every play I write. (Greene, 2001, pp. 236-237)

Howe's optimism influences the structure of the play. Whenever death is hinted at, birth and regeneration are nearby. Hope is always present in the play.

Conclusion

Approaching Zanzibar is a poignant exploration of mortality and renewal. It transcends its surface narrative as a family road trip to become a profound meditation on the interplay of life and death. Howe presents the Blossoms journey as juxtaposition between realism and surrealism that is manifested throughout the presence of binaries of youth and old age, hope and despair, sociology and psychology. Howe is able to achieve balance between these binaries. In doing so, the play becomes not just a story about dying, but a message for living and a call to embrace the chaos, creativity, and the connective nature of human existence.

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