Realizing Dreams through Embedded Narratives in Doaa Mohammed Hamza's Moftah Shohra (Key of Fame) (2018)

تحقيق الأحلام من خلال السرديات المضّمنة في مسرحية "مفتاح شهرة" لدعاء محمد حمزة (٢٠١٨)

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Abstract:

Can dreams ever be fully realized? Is the "actual world" of the characters fixed and unchanging? In Key of Fame (Moftah Shohra) (2018), Egyptian playwright Doaa Mohammed Hamza presents two background actors, Moftah and Shohra, who find themselves trapped in a room—imprisoned not just physically but within their unfulfilled ambitions. Their only means of escape is through the creation of fantasy worlds. As they construct these alternate possibilities, the audience is drawn into a stacked narrative structure, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. At times, reality itself seems to dissolve, leaving the audience immersed in the ever-expanding web of worlds. This study analyzes the contemporary Egyptian play, Key of Fame (2018) through the lens of Brian McHale's theory of embedded narrative and Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible Worlds theory, demonstrating how dreams can be fulfilled, where reality and fiction continuously overlap, shaping new possibilities for the characters.

Keywords: embedded narrative, possible worlds, postmodernism, drama, Egyptian theater.

تحقيق الأحلام من خلال السرديات المضّمنة في مسرحية "مفتاح شهرة" لدعاء محمد حمزة (٢٠١٨)

ملخص:

هل يمكن تحقيق الأحلام بالكامل؟ هل العالم الفعلي للشخصيات ثابت ولا يتغير؟ كيف يمكنهم التحرر لتحقيق طموحاتهم؟ كل هذه الأسئلة تطرحها مسرحية "مفتاح شهرة (٢٠١٨) والتي تقدم فيها الكاتبة المسرحية المصرية دعاء محمد حمزة شخصيتين من الكومبارس وهم مفتاح وشهرة، ويجدان نفسيهما محبوسين في غرفة الملابس، ليس فقط جسديًا، ولكن أيضًا داخل طموحاتهما غير المحققة. وسيلتهما الوحيدة للهروب هي خلق عوالم خيالية، حيث يجسدان أدوارًا وحقائق مختلفة. وأثناء بنائهما لهذه العوالم المحتملة البديلة، ينجذب الجمهور إلى بنية سردية متراكبة، حيث تتكشف الطبقات السردية واحدة تلو الأخرى، مما يطمس الحدود بين الواقع والخيال. في بعض الأحيان، يبدو أن الواقع نفسه يذوب، ليترك الجمهور غارقًا في شبكة من العوالم المتداخلة. لذلك تحلل هذه الدراسة المسرحية المصرية "مفتاح شهرة " من خلال عدسة نظرية السرد المضمَّن لبريان مكايل، ونظرية العوالم الممكنة لماري- لور رايان، موضحةً كيف يمكن للأحلام أن تتحقق في فضاء تتداخل فيه الحقيقة بالخيال باستمرار، لتشكل إحتمالات جديدة للشخصيات وفرصة لتحقيق الأحلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مابعد الحداثة، مسرح، سرديات مضمنة، مسرح مصري، عوالم محتملة.

Realizing Dreams through Embedded Narratives in Doaa Mohammed Hamza's Moftah Shohra (Key of Fame) (2018)

Truth in postmodern literature is not absolute; reality is presented as fragmented, multi-layered, and open to varied interpretations. Fiction, particularly in this literary mode, places readers in complex narrative structures resembling puzzles, where each layer requires interpretation and negotiation. Techniques such as embedded narratives and the exploration of possible worlds disrupt traditional coherence, introducing contradictions, ambiguity, and shifting meanings. Additionally, narrative disjunction, self-conscious storytelling, and destabilized authority further emphasize the complexity and fluidity characteristic of the postmodern condition.

Doaa Mohammed Hamza1's Key of Fame (Moftah Shohra) (2018) exemplifies this embedded narrative structure by following two background actors, Moftah and Shohra, who are physically confined in a locked room while symbolically trapped within their unfulfilled artistic aspirations. As they navigate their frustration with the film industry, they construct alternate realities through performance, stepping into roles drawn from iconic Egyptian films. Their re-enactments of iconic these roles serve both as escape and critique; while these imagined performances offer agency, they also underscore their marginality. This study situates Key of Fame within the theoretical frameworks of Brian McHale's embedded narrative theory and Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible World theory, arguing that the play's narrative complexity reflects the tension between ambition and anonymity. In other words, by examining the play's recursive structures and variable realities, this study explores how Key of Fame critiques the systemic marginalization of background actors, while simultaneously celebrating the transformative power of performance.

I. Theoretical Background

The emergence of postmodernism in mid-to-late twentieth-century literature marked a departure from modernist certainties, emphasizing fragmentation, multiplicity, and skepticism toward grand narratives. Jean-François Lyotard (1979) notably identified the decline of overarching

ideologies, while Brian McHale (1987) distinguished postmodern fiction by its ontological focus—interrogating the nature of reality—unlike modernism's epistemological concerns. Marie-Laure Ryan's (1991) Possible Worlds theory further developed this shift by exploring the construction of fictional realities and their intersections with the actual world. Julia Kristeva's (1966) theory of intertextuality, drawing on Bakhtin's dialogism, highlighted the relationality of texts through layers of reference and allusion. Metafiction, gaining prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, underscored the constructed nature of narrative, involving readers in meaning-making processes. These theories collectively offer critical tools for analyzing the complexities of contemporary narrative. While largely developed within Western literary contexts, this study demonstrates their adaptability by applying them to Egyptian theatre, where they illuminate culturally specific expressions of marginality, fragmentation, and resistance. Despite the richness of the contemporary Egyptian stage, minimal critical attention has been given to its analysis through postmodern narrative frameworks; this paper aims to address that gap.

This study situates Key of Fame within postmodernism, a literary movement "characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason" (Duignan, 2025). Since it rejects traditional narrative forms, "postmodern literature includes elements such as fragmentation, unreliable narrators, and metafiction, which highlight the artificiality of storytelling" (Greene, 2024). Postmodernism is thus a movement "marked by decentralized structure, lacking clear leaders and cohesive direction, and embraces chaos and disorder in both its themes and styles" (Greene, 2024). These devices dismantle conventional narrative logic, creating layered realities that challenge the audience's perception.

Intertextuality, a cornerstone of postmodernism, denotes how texts continuously echo and absorb other cultural artifacts. It is defined as "a term to indicate that all texts, whether written or spoken, whether formal or informal, whether artistic or mundane, are in some ways related to each other" (Van Zoonen, 2017, p.1). Originating in literary theory, it encompasses all forms of media and asserts that no text exists in isolation.

Julia Kristeva (1980) defines intertextuality saying: "any text is a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (p.64).

Another important concept related to postmodernism is metafiction. Greene (2024) defines metafiction as it "deliberately invokes a self-referential awareness of the artificial nature of literature." Metafiction is a narrative strategy that exposes its own fictionality to explore the boundaries between reality, imagination, and representation. It is a defining feature used to question artistic authority, narrative stability, and the very nature of truth in storytelling. Patricia Waugh (1989) defines metafiction as:

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (p.2)

Therefore, metafiction highlights its role not just as a stylistic device, but as a philosophical inquiry into the nature of representation itself. It draws attention to performance, not just in the theatrical sense, but as a mode of being.

When metafiction merges with intertextuality, a unique narrative device emerges: metafictional intertextuality. Here, the text not only references other cultural works but simultaneously exposes its fictionality. In Hamza's play, the characters shift between themselves and famous roles with self-awareness, blurring the line between act and actor, fiction and reality. In other words, the story does not merely allude to prior texts; it openly acknowledges, performs, or even parodies them in a way that reveals its constructed nature. This layered approach creates a dialogic space in which meaning is generated through the interplay between their dreams and the stories they cite.

But what happens when a text is structured like Russian dolls, with multiple levels of narratives and reality? Embedded narrative is another key feature of postmodernism:

the most widely accepted use of the term 'embedding' in the context of narrative theory is to designate the literary device of the 'story within a story,' the structure by which a character in a narrative text becomes the narrator of a second narrative text framed by the first one. (Nelles, 2005)

A story within a story creates an intricate link between the layers, which the reader must decipher. As Nelles (2005) further explains, "the relationship between the embedding and embedded stories inevitably entails significant interpretive consequences, as the reader can hardly fail to speculate about the dramatic and thematic connections between the two distinct yet conjoined stories." Each embedded story adds depth and complexity, sometimes mirroring or contradicting the outer story. Because of this layered structure, such narratives are often compared to a Chinese box. The term "Chinese box" refers to a metaphor in literature that describes a structure made up of multiple layers, where one element is enclosed within another. It originates from traditional Chinese nesting boxes, which, like Russian Matryoshka dolls, consist of progressively smaller boxes fitting inside larger ones. This technique is known as the embedded narrative and is commonly used to create intricate, multi-layered storytelling.

Brian McHale (1952–), the prominent literary theorist, has extensively analyzed the concept of the Chinese box in narratives, also known as recursive structures. McHale elaborates in Postmodernist Fiction (1987) that "a recursive structure results when you perform the same operation over and over again, each time operating on the product of the previous operation" (p.112). This process of nesting or embedding has "the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction" (McHale, 1987, p.112). In another instance, McHale (2012) adds: "The category of world can also be pluralized and foregrounded through vertical proliferation by nesting secondary 'micro-worlds' within the primary narrative world" (p.147). Every narrative generates multiple possible worlds - such as imagined scenarios, subjective perceptions,

plans, expectations, speculations, dreams, and fantasies; however, these worlds "are normally subordinated to a single actual world, which they orbit like satellites" (McHale, 2012, p.147). Consequently, the Chinese box technique challenges the reader's perception of reality, making them question where the true story begins and ends. That is why "only the most attentive reader will notice the breach of logic, unless the text is riddled with such contradictions" (Ryan, 2012, p.370).

McHale (1987) further explains the Chinese box or embedded narrative with its different levels, where the primary level is called diegesis, and "with every level down is called hypodiegetic world and an additional 'hypo' being prefixed for each level as we descend 'deeper'" (p.113). Going up and down in those levels, from a possible world back to fictional reality, creates recursiveness and infinite regression. The cognitive and computer scientist, Douglas R. Hofstadter (1945-) calls it the strange loop. Hofstadter (1999) defines it:

The "Strange Loop" phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started. . . Sometimes I use the term Tangled Hierarchy to describe a system in which a Strange Loop occurs. (p.10)

Hofstadter (1999) explains the Tangled Hierarchy as it "occurs when what you presume are clean hierarchical levels take you by surprise and fold back in a hierarchy-violating way" (p.691). He adds, "There are still different levels, but the distinction between 'lower' and 'higher' has been wiped out" (p.688). This recursive structure challenges traditional narrative forms and reflects the complexity of hierarchical systems, ultimately blurring the lines between different levels of reality and fiction.

Brian McHale (1987) thus questions, "why stop the recursive operation of nesting worlds within worlds at any particular level of embedding? why stop at all, ever?" (p.115) He notes that "Infinity can also be approached, or at least evoked, by repeated upward jumps of level as well as by downward jumps" (p.115), which is called the infinite regression. With this confusion between the different levels, trompe-l'oeil is encouraged, "deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an

embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world" (p.115). Trompe-l'oeil is a technique that tricks the viewer/reader into blurred distinction between reality and fiction. McHale (2012) explains, "Vertical proliferation creates opportunities for a variety of paradoxes that further foreground the category of world. Among these are trompe l'oeil, when the inset world is mistaken for the primary world" (p.147). This recursive play with levels and realities not only challenges the reader's perception but also emphasizes the fluidity and instability inherent in the concept of fictional worlds.

Accordingly, recentering is a major idea related to this type of complex narrative structure. Marie-Laure Ryan (1946-), the leading scholar in narrative theory and Possible Worlds theory, introduced the idea of recentering to explain how readers engage with fictional worlds. Ryan (1991) explains: "For the duration of our immersion in a work of fiction, the realm of possibilities is thus recentered around the sphere which the narrator presents as the actual world. This recentering pushes the reader into a new system of actuality and possibility" (p.22). Ryan differentiates between the TAW or the Textual Actual World and the PW or the Possible World within the fictional text. The possible worlds could be hypothetical or imagined worlds inside the narrative. Ryan (1991) elaborates: "As a traveler to this system, the reader of fiction discovers not only a new actual world, but a variety of APWs revolving around it" (p.22). The Alternative Possible Worlds or APWs are a myriad of possibilities created within the fictional world. Ryan (1991) thus adds: "Fiction is characterized by the open gesture of recentering, through which an APW is placed at the center of the conceptual universe" (p.26). The result of this fictional recentering is "the creation of a recursive structure" (Ryan, 1991, p.27). This recursive structure not only enriches the narrative but also deepens the reader's engagement with the fictional world, inviting them to explore its multiple dimensions.

Ryan (1991) pinpoints the various types of possible worlds: reports of dreams, hypothetical, projections, fantasy, wishes, intents, beliefs, and knowledge (p.19-20). She illustrates that these possible worlds are "formed by the mind's creations: dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, and fictional stories told to or composed by the characters.

These constructs are not simply satellites of TAW, but complete universes, and they are reached by characters through a recentering" (Ryan, 1991, p.119). These categories illustrate the diverse ways narratives construct and navigate multiple layers of reality. The reader temporarily enters this new universe and accepts its rules, even if it contradicts reality. Ryan (1991) says that "The relations among the worlds of the narrative system are not static, but change from state to state. The plot is the trace left by the movement of these worlds within the textual universe" (p.119). This dynamic interaction between worlds highlights how narratives are constantly evolving, shaping both the characters' experiences and the reader's engagement with the story. This fluidity underscores the transformative nature of storytelling, where both the narrative and the reader's perspective are in a constant state of flux.

Therefore, the contemporary Egyptian drama Key of Fame plays with the layered narrative. The reader moves upwards and downwards in a tangled hierarchy to decipher the codes of the story, while unveiling important issues that the playwright addresses. Metafictional intertextuality is at play, showcasing the artifice of the performance, through the stories they cite. The Possible World theory is presented in the creation of flashbacks, fantasy and dream worlds that the two main characters delve into. Moreover, McHale's Chinese box is evident through moving into different stories and realms. Hence, this study contributes to bridging postmodern narrative theory with Arab stage performance, specifically within Egyptian cultural production. By applying frameworks such as embedded narratives and possible worlds theory to Key of Fame, the paper foregrounds how local theatrical texts engage global theoretical discourses while uniquely addressing issues of visibility, artistic labor, and marginality. It offers a fresh reading of postmodern techniques as tools for reclaiming forgotten or invisible figures within cinematic and theatrical history.

II. Stardom Backstage

Moftah Shohra, or Key of Fame, written and directed by Doaa Mohammed Hamza, gives an insight to the feelings and dreams of background actors in cinema -those who are usually silent, not given much of a role, but their dream to appear on the big screen keeps driving

them. The play is about two background actors, Moftah (which means Key) and Shohra (meaning Fame). They are both stuck in a locked room, whilst a movie is being shot outside without them. They have missed their scene, and no one on set notices their absence. They both complain of the poor conditions extras and background actors suffer from; they complain from lack of appreciation and recognition, no proper opportunities and roles, and terrible conditions on set in exchange for little money. This, in fact, gives Moftah and Shohra a chance to express their disappointment at the whole industry and not receiving a proper opportunity till that moment; they open their hearts and narrate the challenges and agonies they face from family, friends, and society altogether, chasing the lure of the Big Screen, but so far in vain. However, through the wish-world (APW), Moftah and Shohra realize their dreams, enacting roles of the protagonists from famous Egyptian movies; they play roles of famous scenes for Ahmed Zaki, Ismail Yassin, Shweikar, Foaad El-Mohandes, among many others. These scenes and characters are brought to life in a swift, elegant, and hilarious way at times by Moftah and Shohra, but no camera is rolling, and no one is watching, except for us, sneaky theater-goers, to testify to the brilliance of Moftah and Shohra themselves this time.

Being stuck in a dressing room backstage intrigues the idea that space functions not merely as a physical site of confinement but as a postmodern heterotopia- where memory, fantasy, identity, and intertextual projections converge. Michel Foucault (1967) defines heterotopia as "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." He calls them heterotopias as the contrast to utopia. Foucault (1967) explains heterotopias as real spaces that mirror, invert, or challenge all other spaces, where norms are suspended or reimagined. The locked dressing room in Key of Fame functions as a heterotopic site: although it is a confined and marginal space, it paradoxically becomes a stage for fantasy, resistance, and transformation. Moftah and Shohra create alternative realities- rehearsing famous roles, reliving memories, and inventing identities- that subvert the dominant cinematic world from

which they are excluded. As Foucault (1967) suggests, heterotopias often juxtapose multiple incompatible spaces within one real location, and the dressing room exemplifies this by hosting simultaneous layers of past, present, fantasy, and performance. Furthermore, the dressing room becomes mobile in narrative function, allowing the characters to move between diegetic and hypo-diegetic worlds. In this room, Moftah and Shohra perform alternative selves and challenge the limitations imposed upon them. In other words, this dressing room, as both a literal and symbolic space, plays a central role in shaping narrative dynamics. This room is simultaneously real and imagined, serving as a threshold between the characters' reality and their possible worlds. As the characters shift roles and identities, space transforms from prison to portal to their dream worlds. The heterotopic dressing room, while a space of creative resistance, ultimately reinforces their confinement. Unlike Foucault's liberatory counter-sites, this room traps them in a loop of performative escapism that never transcends their material conditions. In this sense, the locked costume room in Key of Fame operates as a liminal space; their dreams remain static, performed but never fulfilled.

So who are the characters of Key of Fame who occupy this room? Moftah sees himself as a serious theater actor with past recognition, but in cinema, he remains an unnoticed background performer. Despite his dedication to analyzing scripts and character details, he is confronted with the harsh reality that his input is insignificant. Shohra, in contrast, is pragmatic; she once dreamed of stardom but has accepted her role as a background actress, prioritizing financial stability over artistic ambition. Unlike Moftah, she finds contentment in simply being part of the industry, balancing her passion for acting with the responsibility of supporting her family. Despite their differing perspectives, Moftah and Shohra share the same fate as overlooked background actors. Their confinement in a locked room symbolizes the unattainability of fame, though their dreams remain deeply ingrained. For them, the path to recognition lies in escaping into hypo-diegetic narratives, where they can momentarily realize their aspirations. However, their anonymity is reinforced by the absence of a definite article in their names, suggesting that they may remain unrecognized.

The diegesis or the Actual World (AW) is the textual reality level where Moftah and Shohra find themselves locked in the costumes' room, a stark reminder of their insignificance as background actors. While the director shouts orders on set, commanding silence, they are left unheard, and their presence unnoticed. Their confinement follows an argument during a wedding scene, where Moftah's clumsiness led to their dismissal. Outside, the film continues without them, reinforcing the harsh reality that they are easily replaceable. Frustrated and disappointed, they turn on each other, each blaming the other for their lost opportunity.

The first part of the play shifts from the diegesis to hypodiegetic levels, revealing Moftah and Shohra's struggles as background actors. Moftah, who sacrificed marriage for his acting career, fantasizes about stardom by donning a crown and playing a king. This hypo-diegesis highlights his aspirations but also underscores their futility. The King played by Moftah in this scene expresses the deep agonies of Moftah himself. The melancholic King says, "I haven't reached my kingdom yet. My head is not crowned with gold and ruby . . . I run and run, I almost touch the ruby, but it flies further and further" (Hamza, 2018, 8:17). His shift from Egyptian slang to formal Arabic recenters him into this imagined world, blurring the line between reality and fantasy. Ultimately, his dream collapses, and he returns to reality, where Shohra's mocking remark reinforces his disillusionment.

In return, Moftah mocks Shohra's dream of becoming an actress by creating a new hypo-hypo-diegesis, going down into a deeper level, and an Alternative Possible World (APW), where he plays a demanding director, forcing Shohra to repeat her single wedding scene line. He uses costumes to embody the role, shouting orders and accusing her of being a weak actress. The APW grants Moftah power he lacks in real life, while Shohra remains unchanged. Eventually, she surrenders, admitting, "Acting never loved me as much as I loved it" (Hamza, 2018, 12:32). Her inability to meet Moftah's high expectations forces her to end the hypo-diegetic level by taking off her wedding dress, returning to reality and the diegesis. This scene illustrates how their dreams and identities shift across different narrative layers.

Marie-Laure Ryan has elaborated on how the APW are created surrounding the actual world of the characters or the AW; Ryan (1991) explains that the Fantasy-Worlds (F-W) are made up of a central fictional world surrounded by the personal imagined worlds of its characters; due to the recursive nature of recentering, individuals within these worlds can create new realities: characters in a dream may have their own dreams, and fictional heroes may craft their own stories (p.119). Hence, Moftah's Fantasy-world, where he is the protagonist, represents a possible world where he can attain qualities he lacks in real life: courage, strength, and heroism. In this F-world, Moftah declares, "No one can touch me," talking to an imaginary antagonist (Hamza, 2018, 14:44). He imagines himself as the hero, surrounded by villains he alone can see. This F-world mirrors the action movies of Farid Shawky and Mahmoud El-Meligy, where the protagonist has absolute physical strength and can easily overcome obstacles, symbolized by the imaginary rope that ties his hands and how he breaks free. This Fantasy-world offers Moftah a chance to explore his ideal self, facing his struggles with courage and fighting against injustice. Ryan (1991) explains, "Hallucinations can tell characters something about their real selves" (p.119), which aligns with Moftah's journey to reconcile his fantasy and reality. However, infinite regression takes place when Moftah is back to his actual world and back to diegesis.

Meanwhile, Shohra also feels sorry for herself. Through a new hypo-diegesis, she enacts a flashback, narrating her struggles in life when she had to work for the circus as a fire performer. In this hypo-diegetic level, Moftah becomes part of her past life and performance (something that defies logic for the audience). He is seen playing the drums as an entertainer in the circus, while Shohra, wearing a hat, performs her fire-playing act. Their new world is a past-life of Shohra and a new character for Moftah; they recenter as if in an actual circus world for their new identities. This hypodiegetic level allows the audience to see different parts of the characters' past lives, highlighting their various talents as well. While Shohra uncovers part of her past and her struggles to earn a living, Moftah recenters as a different character from himself opening a different possibility for him if he had not been an actor.

Shohra brings us back into the diegesis, mourning her lost life, where men are afraid to propose to her, and she is stuck earning money to raise her nieces and nephews. This reflects the reality of life for their social class and the moral responsibility they bear towards their families. Moftah is seen onstage, touched by her story and feeling sorry for both of them. She abruptly shifts through metafictional intertextuality into a new hypo-diegesis, performing Ismail Yassin's famous comic monologue: "Don't be surprised," especially with the line that sums up Moftah and Shohra's life: "There are people who kill themselves for work, but gain nothing" (Hamza, 2018, 17:43). The melancholic tone of the previous diegesis is broken by the cheerful comic tone of the new hypo-diegesis and fantasy-world, as Moftah wears a black hat resembling Charlie Chaplin's iconic attitude. The dramatic choice of this monologue highlights the injustice of life, where some people gain money effortlessly and squander it, while others work so hard but earn little. This theme is further emphasized by an example Shohra later shares in the play, when she recalls a filming order that lasted for 22 hours without a sip of water, illustrating how life is unfair. Moftah and Shohra continue singing the iconic duet, recentering themselves in Ismail Yassin's movies, but they are soon interrupted by a shout from the director outside: "Silence, you donkeys!" (Hamza, 2018, 18:26) pulling them back into their reality -the diegesis. Hence, Moftah and Shohra's faces convey the truth: they are nobody. Their fantasy worlds do not last where they can attain fame and be part of glorious movies.

Moftah prides himself on being a theater actor who has won many awards, but he has yet to get his break in cinema. He jumps into a different hypo-diegesis, reenacting his family members who mocked and scolded him for being an actor: "You will die a nobody" (Hamza, 2018, 22:24). These words resonate with Shohra as well, as if they are directed at her too. They then transition into a hypo-hypo-diegesis, reenacting Moftah's past circus career, where he once performed by walking the line. They reverse roles, with Shohra putting on a glittery hat and adopting a cheerful attitude, playing along: "Let's salute, Moftah!" (Hamza, 2018, 23:28) recentering as a different character from Shohra the actress. Meanwhile, Moftah carefully walks an imaginary line on the couch.

These flashbacks, enacted in hypodiegetic levels, illustrate how both characters have come a long way and endured significant hardships. However, this constant movement between narrative layers creates temporal distortion for the audience, as Moftah and Shohra shift through a tangled hierarchy, moving backward and forward between different realities.

In the first part of the play, the different hypo-diegetic levels serve to portray Moftah and Shohra's past experiences, failures, and various aspects of their lives through their continuous recentering. These levels also provide the audience with insight into different worlds. This narrative form mirrors the psychological labyrinth faced by the characters: each narrative layer represents a deferred desire, a repressed memory, or a distorted reflection of the self. However, from this point on, the hypo-diegesis creates a new strange loop, where Moftah and Shohra continuously jump between levels and worlds, shifting from one role to another without returning to the diegesis for a while.

Marie-Laure Ryan (1991) notes that by creating fictional stories, they shift their reality to another level, one that feels real to them but remains a constructed layer of reality for the audience. (p.22). In this sense, Moftah and Shohra play along with the costumes in the room and assume different roles from famous Egyptian movies, thus creating a dream world. As Ryan (1991) has commented, "The inhabitants of fictional universes: their actual world is reflected in their knowledge and beliefs, corrected in their wishes, replaced by a new reality in their dreams and hallucinations" (p.22). To support this, whilst Moftah searches around the room, wondering where Shohra is and calling upon her, Shohra suddenly appears dressed as Jihad from the movie, "Oh Islam" (1961), playing the lead role, and answering Moftah: "I'm here, Salama" (Hamza, 2018, 24:14). Moftah thus plays along dressing as the character of Salama. He then shifts to another hypo-diegetic level (and Wish-world) and plays Aybak with new costumes, and Shohra is now Shajrat Eldorr saying:"Welcome, Sultan" changing roles from the same movie (Hamza, 2018, 25:40). They continue playing with costumes, stepping into different lead roles within their Wish-worlds. In other words, the loop of different layers of narratives gives them the

opportunity to assume lead roles in renowned films, a stark contrast to their reality as background actors. Next, Moftah becomes Saladin, speaking to Shohra, now Louisa from Yousef Shahin's "Saladin the Victorious" (1963). She suddenly shifts to Fouada, and he transforms into Atris from "A Taste of Fear" (1969), discussing injustice. They swiftly change roles again, becoming Ahmed Zaki and Nabila Ebeid from "The Dancer and the Drummer" (1984), with Moftah instructing her on how to move and dance. Shohra then transitions into her dream actress, Souad Hosni (whom she has aspired to emulate since childhood), becoming Zouzou from the musical "Watch Out for Zouzou" (1972), and performing the famous dance scene. In this moment, she feels the judgment of being seen as a dancer from a lower class, while Moftah becomes the singer Shafeeq Galal. This transformation mirrors their feelings of injustice and how they perceive themselves to be looked upon. Thus, intertextuality in the play not only creates cultural echoes, but also performs a kind of resistance: reclaiming cinematic history to center marginalized actors and stories. Each imagined scene by Moftah and Shohra functions as a portal to an alternate world, one where they momentarily escape marginality by becoming protagonists. Yet, these performances ultimately fold back into their enclosed space, underscoring their persistent erasure. Moftah and Shohra's role-shifting exposes a paradox: their talent is undeniable, yet their agency exists only in fleeting fantasy. This contradiction serves as a critique of an industry that exploits artists' skills yet refuses to grant them genuine dignity.

Furthermore, this tangled hierarchy and infinite regression that McHale has noted mirros the characters' psychological entrapment. As they descend into layers of role-play, they never truly escape their marginal position. The structure becomes a metaphor for their social invisibility: no matter how deep they go, they loop back to the same confined space. This is where Hamza's postmodern dramaturgy offers a remarkable critique: layering does not liberate, it disorients- which is the whole purpose of postmodernism.

Nevertheless, the swift and uncanny transformation of Moftah and Shohra into various fictional characters showcases their immense talent while reinforcing the presence of Wish and Fantasy worlds, as well as the

strange loop they are entangled in. Ryan (1991) explains that Wish Worlds represent alternative versions of reality that a character or group desires or fears, whereas Alternate or Fantasy Universes encompass dreams, hallucinations, and fictional narratives created by the characters themselves (p.20). Moftah and Shohra's continuous recentering as different characters exemplifies McHale's Chinese box technique and enhances the trompe l'oeil effect, leaving the audience puzzled and breathlessly following their rapid transitions from one scene to another, disoriented by their playful manipulation of reality's boundaries. Moreover, this act of recentering is both liberating and futile. Though it allows characters to inhabit dream-selves, it simultaneously underscores the impossibility of sustaining these identities. The play thus asks a vital question: can performance itself be enough to claim visibility in a system that fundamentally denies it?

Ryan (1991) has illustrated, "A fictional story may be told within a story as a parable reflecting on TAW" (p. 119). Looking at the intertextual allusions and the examples used in this part of the play, one cannot help but notice the emerging love relationship between Moftah and Shohra through the intertextual examples they play in the hypo-diegetic levels. Ryan (2012) discusses the challenge posed at the reader/audience:

If the texts that construct such worlds pose a challenge to the reader, it is because they require the ability to shift back and forth between a narrativist/illusionist and a textualist perspective, so as to appreciate the text both as a representation of life experience and as a virtuoso verbal performance that pushes back the limits of the textually (im)possible. (p.378)

The play creates a seamless blend between fiction and reality through trompe l'œil. Moftah and Shohra's evolving relationship mirrors their initial dynamic, as they start as a couple with conflicts. Their love story develops, but Moftah continues to look down on Shohra, much like in "Watch Out for Zouzou," resembling his previous feelings when he compared his acting career as a theater actor to her, the silent actress. Eventually, their final metafictional intertextuality shifts to My Fair Lady (1969), where they take on the roles of Fouad El-Mohandes and Shouikar.

In this scene, a subtle confession of love takes place through her new recentered identity: "You are the big heart," and she moves physically closer to him (Hamza, 2018, 30:32). This layered reenactment not only reflects their evolving intimacy, but also underscores how performance becomes the medium through which identity and emotional truth are negotiated.

At this moment, Moftah and Shohra' performance feels more than just acting, suggesting a genuine emotional connection between them. The audience responds with applause (Hamza, 2018, 31:20), and Moftah and Shohra, whether as themselves or their characters, offer a theatrical salute (Hamza, 2018, 31:26), feeling a rare sense of appreciation. Yet again, the trompe l'œil effect raises an intriguing question: who is the applause really for? Is it for Moftah and Shohra as actors? or for the Wish-world of Fouad El-Mohandes and Shouikar? The audience is left to interpret the answer for themselves.

However, Moftah and Shohra's Wish-world is shattered again by a loud "Silence" from the director outside, pulling them back to the diegesis/textual world (Hamza, 2018, 31:47). This loud shout silences them and brings them back to their reality, leaving them disappointed. From inside the room, in their unaltered reality, Moftah and Shohra realize they have missed the filming, feeling frustrated. In fact, they have missed the opportunity to be on screen and also lost the job, and consequently, the payment. Ryan (1991) has illustrated that the characters' goal in the narrative game, which mirrors their lives, is to align the Textual Actual World (TAW) with their private worlds through actions that reshape the relationships between these worlds (p. 120). Hence, Moftah and Shohra, through their continuous recentering, seek to alter their reality, aspiring to acquire the qualities they lack, the love story they have been denied, and the stardom they long for. They dream about being lead actors, yet in reality, they achieve nothing, except, perhaps, the beginning of a love story.

By the end of the play, Moftah and Shohra consider taking the costumes as a final token of their unrealized dream. Silently, they begin miming different roles: she is Cleopatra and then a noblewoman; he is a king, Abdel Halim Hafez, and a 1940s protester, playfully transforming

with each costume. Without speaking, they move from one character to another, engaging the audience in one last hypo-diegetic level, a Fantasy-world filled with intertextual allusions. As Ryan (1991) states, "For the duration of a dream, the dreamer believes in the reality of the events he or she experiences" (p. 119), and in this moment, Moftah and Shohra fully immerse themselves in their dream. Moftah takes a warrior's helmet, while Shohra stealthily places the wedding dress in her black plastic bag, symbolizing her hidden desire for love and marriage, just as Moftah longs for his chance at a lead role.

With the word "Cut!" heard from outside, an order is finally given to open the room (Hamza, 2018, 35:17). Likewise, Moftah and Shohra are awakened from their fantasy world and back to the actual world. They are about to be freed at last, but are they truly free? Shohra angrily remarks, "Just as they forgot us, we don't want to remember them either" (Hamza, 2018, 35:56). She even suggests locking the door from the inside as an act of revenge, yet this also reveals her hidden desire to remain in the Wish-world she has created. Meanwhile, other background actors are heard offstage, arguing with the producers and demanding their rights, exposing the poor conditions that every aspiring actor, like Moftah and Shohra, must endure. Standing in silence, burdened by their reality, Moftah and Shohra wrap their dreams in plastic bags. They conclude the play, exiting among the audience, with a final monologue by Ismail Yassin, smiling as they deliver the iconic line, "Oh my, poor artists, oh my" (Hamza, 2018, 38:55). Their last duet unfolds in a final act of metafictional intertextuality and hypo-diegesis, encapsulating both their dreams and the harsh reality they face. Though their aspirations remain alive, their suffering persists. Hence, the play ends not with resolution but with collapse. The audience is left uncertain whether the preceding scenes were dreams, memories, performances, or all at once. By refusing closure, Hamza critiques the very idea of narrative coherence and reminds us that fame, like fiction, is constructed, unstable, and always slipping away.

To conclude, Moftah and Shohra's journey in Key of Fame epitomizes the tension between reality and fiction, as explored through Brian McHale's embedded narrative theory and Marie-Laure Ryan's possible world theory. Through intricate layers of embedded narratives

and metafictional intertextuality, the play not only showcases their struggle for recognition but also mirrors the broader plight of background actors in the film industry. The tangled hierarchy of narrative levels, from their diegesis to multiple hypo-diegetic levels, allows them to momentarily escape anonymity. Their dreams materialize within these alternative possible worlds, where they embody lead roles, yet reality -the textual actual world- ultimately asserts itself. The Chinese box structure in Key of Fame not only reflects postmodern playfulness but also mirrors the cyclical despair of Moftah and Shohra. Each nested narrative layer becomes a futile attempt to escape their marginality, underscoring how performance, while transformative, cannot dismantle systemic exclusion. Nonetheless, their performances are not escapes but confrontations; they are acts of agency within confinement. Their silent departure, with dreams wrapped in plastic bags, mirrors the precarious existence of artists who, despite their talent, remain trapped within the industry's hierarchical structures. Through its layered narrative complexity, Doaa Mohammed Hamza's Key of Fame (2018) not only critiques the systemic invisibility of background actors, but also highlights the paradox of performance, where the act of dreaming itself becomes a form of resisting invisibility. This play is not merely about failure: it is about refusal; they refuse their status quo, the economic constraints, and their marginalitzation in the industry. The characters reclaim their invisibility and transform it into a performative space of assertion, where memory and imagination defy marginalization.What Hamza achieves here is more than a postmodern experiment; she stages an ethics of attention. By making the audience witness what the film industry ignores, the play rewrites the power dynamics of who gets seen, and how.

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1 Doaa Muhammed Hamza (1979-) is an Egyptian playwright and actress. Moftah Shohra (or Key of Fame) was first presented in October 2017 in Rawabet Theater and then in Al-Falaki Theater at the American University in Cairo. Performed by Al-La'aba Theater Group, the play participated in renowned festivals, like Donzdorf International Theatre Festival in 2018 and Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theater in 2021.