

A REVIEW ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARABIC DRAMA LITERATURE

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Abstract:

Arabic literature dates back to sixteen centuries to unrecorded beginnings in the Arabian Peninsula. At certain points in the development of European civilization, the literary culture of Islam and its Arabic medium of expression came to be regarded not only as models for emulation but also, through vital conduits such as Moorish Spain and Norman Sicily, as direct sources of inspiration for the intellectual communities of Europe. The Arabic drama is The musical plays produced by Marun al-Naqqash from the mid-1800s are considered the starting point of modern Arab theatre. Modern Arabic drama began to be written in the 19th century chiefly in Egypt and mainly influenced and in imitation of French works. It was not until the 20th century that it began to develop a distinctly Arab flavour and be seen elsewhere. The most important Arab playwright was Tawfiq al-Hakim who produced his play from the Qur'anic story "Ahl al-Kahf" (Sevent sleepers); his second one was an epilogue for the famous tale "Alf Laylatun wa Layla"(Thousand and One Nights). Other important dramatists of the region include Yusuf al-Ani from Iraq, Saadullah Wannous from Syria and many others.

Keywords: *Arabic Drama, Theatre, Play, Marun al-Naqqash, Tawfiq al-Hakim*

Introduction

As the most public of genres, drama always presents the literary historian with a rich blend of exemplars and issues. In classical literature drama was conspicuous by its absence. Nor has any convincing reason been given for its non-existence in Arabic. Perhaps a type of drama was produced in Pre-Islamic period; but that was to closely linked with idolatry.

It has become customary to trace the beginnings of modern Arabic drama entirely to Western influence, as part of the process of *al-nahda* ("the renaissance"). Any search for a library of textual precedents in Arabic drama that would be analogous to the Western canon—from Greek tragedy, via William Shakespeare and the French tragedians Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine, to such 20th-century Playwrights as Luigi Pirandello and Berolt Brecht—would be in vain, as would any attempt to identify a tradition of theatre buildings and companies that

would parallel that of the West. However, in the history of Western culture, drama's performance boundaries also extend beyond such a canon, which is limited to those texts performed within a theatre and reliant on the expectations and conventions of such a space.

Development of Arabic drama

Arab scholars started translating literary works from other languages in early Islamic era, but no drama was found there. The first writer to introduce Arabic drama was the Lebanese Marun al-Naqqash(1817-55) who in 1847 obtained permission from the ottoman authorities in Syria to produce in his house *Al-Bakhīl*, a play inspired by Molière's drama *L'Avare*. Most of the actors involved either were members of his family or were friends. While there are reports of earlier performances by visiting European theatre troupes, this performance is generally regarded as the beginning of the modern Arabic tradition of staged performance of text-based drama.

Nikula al-Naqqash, Marun's brother, writes in *Arzat Lubnan* that Marun introduced elements of music with poetry and prose as he felt that the poetry and prose would appeal to a section of the audience while music is open to all. Nikula al-Naqqash also explains that Arabic drama pioneered by Marun al-Naqqash did not spring from any old form known to the Arabs, nor from folk art, like shadow plays.

After Marun's effort to make popular the theatre, the Lebanese gradually started to translate, adapt and stage plays. Explorers in this field were Salim al-Naqqash, Adib Ishaq, Ibrahim al-Ahdab, Salim al-Bustani and Khalil al-Yazigi. Ismail was the first man who brought the theatre to Egypt for introducing French cultural norms into Arab life. He also established the first theatre and got French and Italian troupes to perform plays. The first play in Arabic was produced by Yaqub Sanu in Ismail's palace. A type of vaudeville performance with song, dance and sport, it drew a gathering of thirty thousand when staged again outside the Azbekia theatre. Encouraged by Ismail, who gave him the title "Moliere of Egypt," (Sanu copied profusely from Moliere), Sanu established the first Arabic theatre in Egypt, the National theatre in 1870.

The most gifted Syrian playwright was Abu Khalil al-Qabbani (1841-1902) who also built his own theatre in Damascus. Al-Qabbani had all the ingredients for producing successful plays. He was an adept in music and song and excelled in *Zajal* and other verses. He explored dramatic sequences and suspense and popularised the theatre by basing his plays on popular folk themes taken from Arab history and *Alf Layla wa Layla* (One thousand and one nights). Apart from giving a boost to the Egyptian theatre, al-Qabbani showed the potential of historical plays written in classical Arabic. Al-Qabbani's success led others to follow suit. In fact the period

between 1882-1922, called *fatrat al-Nidal* (period of struggle), saw increased activity of the stage in Egypt. Many troupes were performing and this led to a healthy competing. Notable litterateurs like Khalil Mutran, Najib Haddad and Farah Antun started writing for the theatre. Most played produced by the Syro-Lebanese émigrés in Egypt were actually translated from French and English plays; just names and events were changed and sometimes verse was introduced instead of the original prose to give an Arab flavour.

In 1912, drama entered the second stage of its development when the Lebanese actor Jurz Abyad (1880-1954) formed his own troupe in Cairo. Abyad completing his study of drama in Paris began to translate popular European tragedies in pure and powerful prose. He also acted in the Comedie Francaise. Jurj also produced some social plays written by Arab playwrights such as Abd al-Rahman al-Rashidi, Ibrahim Ramzi and Muhammad Taymur. In 1913, Jurj produced Farah Antun's popular play *Misr al-Jadida wa Misr al-Qadima*.

Egypt served a pioneer role in the Arabic speaking world after the earlier but aborted initiatives in the Syrian region. Drama spread to other regions through the visits of troupes from both Western countries and Egypt itself. This was particularly true for the countries of northwest Africa (the Maghrib), where such visits to Tunisia in 1908 and Morocco in 1923 led to the appearance of local troupes, while the famous actor Jurj Abyad - a Christian from Syria—took his renowned troupe from Egypt to Iraq in 1926.

The most imaginative writer of the Arab world and its greatest playwright composed a series of lengthy plays based on themes culled from Greek legend, the Qurān, and Middle Eastern history in order to create a dramatic literature that was acceptable to the critical establishment in Egypt and beyond, particularly with regard to its merit as “literature.” The first of the plays was *Ahl al-Kahf* (Eng. trans. *Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's The People of the Cave*), based on the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, who emerge from a prolonged period of sleep to find themselves living in the Christian era. *Ahl al-kahf* is probably based on the interpretation of this story in sura 18 of the Qurān. Attempts to perform this play onstage in the 1930s revealed at once a tension between, on the one hand, a quest for a “literary” tradition of Arabic drama based on the form of the language that is standard throughout the Arab world and, on the other, the natural desire to employ colloquial dialects and other local cultural phenomena to portray the immediate and pressing social and political issues of the day—a tension that has continued to dog Arabic drama ever since (although, it must be said, with a host of intermediate positions between these two poles). Other plays by al-Ḥakīm, such as *Shahrazād* (1934; “Sheherazade”), *Pijmalīyūn* (1942; “Pygmalion”), and *Al-Malik Ūdīb* (1939; “King Oedipus”; Eng. trans. in *The Arab Oedipus*), all involve a minimum of action onstage and dialogues between characters in

which philosophical positions are argued at length . Initially, al-Ḥakīm responded to criticisms regarding the actability of these plays by resorting to the notion of a “theatre of ideas” and the argument that these were plays intended for reading only . However, as al-Ḥakīm’s career proceeded, he undertook a number of experiments in an attempt to reconcile the tensions that his pioneering works had provoked and illustrated. In the 1940s he penned a number of one-act plays, initially for newspaper consumption, many of which succeeded through a necessarily more concentrated medium in lending greater movement to the dramatic action; *Ughniyat al-mawt* (1950; “The Song of Death”; Eng. trans. in *Fate of a Cockroach, and Other Plays*) is particularly noteworthy in this regard.

Modern Arabic drama

Tawfiq al-Hakim was one of the favourite authors of then Egyptian President Jamal Abdul Nasir, who was in power during the revolution of 1952. The enormous process of social and political change in Egypt provided a rich backdrop for the development of a new tradition of theatre, and the government provided sufficient funds for that process. Theatre was apparently regarded as one of the few allowable outlets for the expression of public concerns and doubts that were rigorously controlled elsewhere. In retrospect, the two decades after 1952 have come to be regarded as a kind of “golden era” for not merely Egyptian drama but Arabic drama as a whole. Virtually every aspect of the theatrical community—the cultural apparatus of the state, a relatively large cluster of playwrights, a cadre of producers and directors, and a group of well-qualified and involved critics—seemed to be working towards the development of Arabic drama. Beginning in the 1950s and ’60s with Numān Āshūr, who used a series of plays to present the Egyptian public with insightful analyses of its own class structure and values , a series of dramatists, among them Saad al -Dīn Wahbah, Maḥmūd Diyāb , and Alī Sālim, penned in the colloquial dialect of Cairo dramatic texts that were highly recognised on stage. Yusuf Idris was also an important contributor to rich period; his celebrated play *Al-Farāfir* (1964; *The Farfoors*, or *The Flipflap*) combined elements of traditional comic forms of dramatic presentation.

Alfred Faraj took a somewhat different course, invoking tales and incidents from history and folklore (and especially from *The Thousand and One Nights*) to illustrate contemporary political and social realities. Faraj chose to follow al-Ḥakīm in selecting as his language medium a more literary level of Arabic than that adopted by his fellow dramatists. This gave him the additional advantage of affording his plays a broader audience throughout the Arabic-speaking world. During the days between 1980s and 90s a younger generation of Egyptian dramatists such as Muḥammad Salmāwī and Lenīn al-Ramlī also played an important role in this field

The development of Arabic drama happened in Egypt became echoed elsewhere in the Arab world. Following the early stages that have been sketched above, further developments were, more often than not, tied to the processes of nation building that followed the achievement of independence during the 1950s and '60s. In Syria, Sadallāh Wannūs made use of his strong interest in the theory of drama, and particularly in the relationship of stage to audience, to compose a series of works that contributed to the development of experimental theatre in the Arab world. Staged in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War of June 1967, *Ḥaflat samar min ajl al-khāmis min Ḥuzayrān* (1968) was a devastating commentary on the Arab defeat and on the Arab leaders who for several days had used the media to claim that victory was at hand (leading, almost automatically, to the play's being banned). *Mughāmarat ras al-mamlūk Jābir* (1971; "The Adventure of Mamlūk Jābir's Head") and *Al-Malik huwa al-malik* (1977; "The King's the King") continued his ongoing experiments with theatre dynamics through what he termed *masrah al-tasyīs* ("theatre of politicization"). Because Wannūs was such a crucially important figure, other Syrian and Lebanese dramatists of the latter half of the 20th century operated somewhat in his shadow, but Muḥammad al-Māghūt, Iṣām Maḥfūz, and Mamdūh Adwān wrote significant plays that were successfully performed at theatre festivals.

The lot of the Palestinian literary community, which reflected the turmoil that affected the larger community throughout the second half of the 20th century, was such that the promotion of a dramatic tradition proved extremely difficult and often impossible. However, there were plays that reflected the trials and conflicts that were part of daily life, such as Muīn Basīsū's *Thawrat al-Zanj* (1970; "The Zanj Revolt") and the poet Samīḥ al-Qāsim's *Qaraqāsh* (1970). The tightly controlled circumstances in which the Palestinians lived their lives also led to the appearance of one of the most interesting and creative theatre troupes in the Middle East, the Ḥakawātī troupe (named for the *ḥakawātī*, or traditional storyteller), which emerged from an earlier group known as Al-Balālīn ("Balloons"). An itinerant troupe established in 1977, Ḥakawātī toured villages and performed its own plays in a variety of public spaces through the turn of the 21st century. Tunisia and Morocco provide some of the best examples of a thriving theatre tradition. The Tunisian writer Izz al-Dīn al-Madanī, one of the most fruitful contributors to the history of modern Arabic drama during the 20th century, composed a series of plays that were both experimental and popular; they included *Thawrat ṣāḥib al-ḥimār* (1971; "The Donkey Owner's Revolt") and *Dīwān al-Zanj* (1973; "The Zanj Collection").

Moroccan theatre was represented at the turn of the 21st century primarily by the multitalented al-Ṭayyib al-Ṣiddīqī, who adapted textual materials culled from the heritage of the past, as in *Dīwān Sīdī Abd al-Raḥmān al-Majdhūb* (1966; "The Collection of Sīdī Abd al-

Raḥman al-Majdhūb”), and produced them with his own troupe, often casting himself in a role in which he would exhibit a unique comic flair. The theatre movement in Iraq was also constricted by political circumstances, but the dramatic tradition continued even so through the 1990s; an Iraqi play won first prize at the prestigious Tunisian Carthage Festival in 1999, for instance. Most prominent among 20th-century Iraqi playwrights was Yūsuf al-Ānī, whose *Anā ummak yā Shākir* (1955; “Shākir, I’m Your Mother”) graphically portrays the misery of the Iraqi people in the period before the downfall of the monarchy in the revolution of 1958. Elsewhere in the Arabian Gulf, theatre remained, where it existed at all, a very young cultural phenomenon, and efforts in the early 21st century to foster a dramatic tradition vied with the popularity of forms of entertainment readily available via television, CDs, DVDs, and the Internet.

Arabic drama seemed likely to remain a problematic genre in the 21st century, but one fulfilling an important cultural function. By daring to raise issues of political and social importance in a public forum and by testing the limits of the local and the pan-Arabic worlds through experiments with language, it showed signs of illustrating many of the larger areas of concern within the Arabic-speaking countries. While the status of drama and its practitioners varied widely across the region, it remained an invaluable outlet for popular sentiment and creative energy.

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