

Original or Western Imitation: The Case of Arab Theatre

Abdulaziz H. Alabdullah
Kuwait University, Keifan, Kuwait

When discussing the roots of Arab theatre, we find ourselves confronting two main streams of thought. The first one, represented by prominent Arab writers like Najib Mahfuz, Abbas Al-Aqqad, M. Badawi, and other critics, rejects the theory that an Arab theatre existed before the mid-19th century. The second stream, represented by prominent scholars like Ali Al-Rai, Ibrahim Hamada and S. Moreh, see modern Arab theatre as part of a continuum, emphasizing of some elements of dramatic manifestations in Arab literary heritage. This paper intends to examine these two streams, their evidences and arguments. Such examination will shed some light on the origin of Arab theatre as a literary genre, and how it was influenced, if any, by Western theatrical heritage. Thus, answering the main question of this paper, whether Arab theatre is original or simply a Western imitation.

Keywords: originality, Modernism, imitation, heritage

Introduction

The 19th century marked the birth of modern Arab theatre and the beginning of a period of interplay between Arab drama and Western drama. Many studies recognize the Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria) as where the modern Arab theatre began its life in the mid-19th century. Many great writers in all the major genres of Arabic literature have emerged from that part of the Arab world, including such figures as Marun al-Naqqash, Ahmed Aby Khalil al-Qabbani, Mikhail Nuayma, Khalil Mutran, Jibran Khalil Jibran, and many others. Each one of these has left his own distinctive mark on his field of literature.

When discussing, as these writers have done, the roots of Arab theatre, we find ourselves confronting two main streams of thought. The first one, represented by Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, Najib Mahfuz, Mustdafa Badawi and some critics, rejects the theory that an Arab theatre existed before the mid-19th century. They consider that it was Europe that provided the impetus for the creation of modern Arab theatre. They argue that the Arabs were first exposed to the theatre as a modern literary genre during the military expedition led by Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt from 1798 to 1801, when some French amateurs entertained the French troops in Cairo by performing some plays. The Egyptian playwright and academic, Rashad Rushdi, considers any argument, regarding the roots and origins of Arab theatre, as futile. He argued that there is no doubt that we have borrowed the theatre, an artistic form, from Western civilization, as we have borrowed the novel and modern poetry.

The second stream, represented by Ali al-Rai, Ibrahim Hamada, Shmuel Moreh, and others see modern Arab theatre as part of a continuum, emphasizing the existence of some elements of dramatic manifestations in Arab literary heritage. Amongst such manifestations or pre-theatre forms, where those performers who recited popular story-tales, or presented *The Shadow Plays* (khayal al-zill) and *The Carpet Theatre* in North Africa

Abdulaziz H. Alabdullah, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of English Literature and Arts, Kuwait University.

during religious festivals. Some scholars consider the art of *Maqama* as an early manifestation of semi-dramatic form. Some critics and scholars of this second group go even further by claiming that such pre-theatre forms can be traced back to pre-Islamic times, and were to be witnessed at the famous poetic festivals held in souks *Ukaz and Adhruat*, as well as being seen through the ages at marriage and religious ceremonies and other social celebrations such as the *Samir*.

In his valuable study, "The Background of Medieval Arabic Theatre" (1992), S. Moreh has produced evidence that the Arabs did know the theatre in the early years of Islam, but has suggested that their attitude towards such as art as live theatre might have been influenced profoundly by the negative approach of Christian and Jewish religious authorities before Islam, who had rejected drama and considered it a vulgar and anti-religious genre.

There are also numerous historical references to acting or theatrical experiments in certain parts of the Islamic World. From which, during the Abbasside era, the plays of Ibn Danial (1248-1311), who produced the genre of shadow play (*khayal al-zill*), the most well-known traditional literary genre that could rightly be considered a precursor of the modern theatre. This kind of traditional popular theatre, often known as *Qarakuz*, also survived in Syria, as well as in many Arab countries, alongside the modern Europeanized Arab theatre, to the late 19th century and in some places later, performed in the streets, private homes and cafes.

Manifestations of Early Arab Pre-theatrical Forms

Popular entertainment in the Arab world was scant and very modest compared to the Far East, Persia, or Hellenistic experience. There is only scant evidence for Arab awareness of theatrical performances in the Byzantine Empire on the eve of Islam. Mainly poets and poetry supply such evidence. In one of these poems, Hassan Bin Thabit—the Prophet's Poet mentions the term "Mayamis", which means literally the person who is ridiculed. The word "yal`ab" (play) appears also in other poems to refer to some form of acting.

The main form of popular entertainment therefore, was the reciting of poetry, as it was accepted and seen as the highest level of the literary canon. Poets compete with each other during the festivals and feasts, especially at certain days in Souk Ukaz (Ukaz Market). Poetry was the early and probably the only form of recording historical and political events of the time and passing it to the coming generations.

Players of Kurraj

The word *Kurraj* is of Persian origin meaning colt, donkey or mule, which suggests that the acting was of Persian origin too. At all events, the definition of the *Kurraj* given by Arab lexicographers is a wooden hoppy-horse. This foreign popular game is associated with Shamanic and seasonal fertility rituals. An Arab story speaks of the use of Qasaba (a horse-headed reed, or simply a stick horse) telling of the besieged Persian king Bahram Gour who put a reed between his legs and galloped about with a crown of sweet basil on his head, together with his 200 maids, singing, shouting, and dancing. This seems to have been a mock-play imitating a Shaman rite to defeat the besieging enemies. This form of popular entertainment was not widely performed; nevertheless, it was mentioned several times by prominent Islamic figures.

The description of *Kurraj* given by al-Isfahani and Ibn Khaldun shows clearly that the player was hidden behind the drapery of the *kurraj*, which had no wheels or legs to support players.

Muharrijun (Jesters)

This term is one of few Arabic theatrical terms which passed to some European languages. According to Wetzstein, the term *muharrij* was brought by the Umayyads to Spain. On the other hand, Dozy and Engelmann

think that the Spanish term *muharrache* or *homarrache* are from the Arabic *muharrij*, and are synonyms to *mascara*, and that both of the terms *mascara* and *moharrache* have meaning of buffoon and masquerade (false face = mask).

A figure wearing a conical cap with bells and the tail of an animal describes the *muharrij*. Many performances involving players (actors) dressed as bears, monkeys and other animals were played in *Damascus and Egypt*:

There is in *Damascus* a class of people representing various crafts who perform at night at large assemblies. At these parties they have music at first; then the "hakawati" (story-teller) presents short witty declamations "shir mudhik" (funny poetry); then come the *muharrij*, always in group of three or four; if there are only two of them they choose one from the assembly to perform "fasl al-naqa" (the play of the she-camel), where a Bedouin hires the naqa; then "fasl al-fadis" (the play of the carcass)—one is enveloped in a cloth and sold to the gypsies as a carcass. (Wetzstein, 1868, p. 132)

In Egypt, a similar act is mentioned in Said Al-Bustani's novel *Riwayat Dhat al-Khidr* (1904). He mentions an actor called Ali Kaka who used to appear in the shape of various animals on the Prophet's birthday (Mawlid al-Nabawi). Such performance is described by the author of *Tamthil and Hazl* (acting and jest):

Dhat al-Khidr saw a large crowd of people behind the circle of tents (in the Mawlid's square, where the prophet's Birthday was celebrated). They were staring at a man, stretching their necks in order to see him. He was playing in their midst, in such a way that good taste would reject it and a chaste soul would shun it. The man is called Ali Kaka. He acts in his play with different forms and shapes. Once in the form of bear and once in the form of monkey. (Al-Bustani, 1904, p. 34)

Many described the performance of *muharrijun* as "ape-like, obscene dances and absurd jokes". Such performances are accompanied by music. No dialogue is attested to it in the beginning, but later it developed differently. It is a type of buffoonery, whereby actors wear masks and draw laughter from the audience by dance and funny acts.

Hikaya (Story)

Impersonation and plays: Arab lexicographers define *Hikaya* as meaning imitation, impersonation, and aping, as well as a story or tale. The original meaning of the word is imitation, and in early Arabic literature it is sometimes used in the sense of performing an actual play. This term *haki* (imitator) was well known in early Islam times.

Al-Jahiz, who also remarks on the ability of such persons to mimic animal cries, was clearly talking about professional performers, probably the type who performed in market places. Other accounts, however, refer to ordinary people mimicking each other, and here the mimicry is invariably parody, the intention being to tease or humiliate the person mimicked.

The meaning of *hikaya*, shifted by the 14th century to mean a tale, story or sketch. The early examples of *hikaya* do not indicate that impersonation could be combined with any kind of plot, but rather attestations make it clear that *hikayat* sometimes amounted to actual plays, or more precisely scenes or sketches, which might be based on written texts.

The *hakawati* (story-teller) recites and enacts stories and tales of heroism such as the story of Antarah, Abu Zayd al-Hilali, and Shehrazad in café's and public places, describing their bravery and heroism and reciting poetry in that regard. Such public entertainers attracted large audiences who listened and commented on what they heard. *Hikaya* served as a model for the narrative of the *Maqama* and *Khayal-al-Zill* later on.

The Maqama

The *Maqama* elaborated by Badi` al-Zaman al-Hamadani (969-1007) is a short and ornate picaresque work in a rhymed prose, couched in the first person singular. It usually contains a narrative element consisting of an amusing or surprising, real or true to life scene, and it is formulated in the present tense. In every *Maqama* there is a narrator (*rawi*) called Isa ibn Hisham, and a hero, Abulfath al-Iskandari, who generally appears as a disguised beggar (*mukaddi*) trying to earn his living by his wits, his linguistic virtuosity and rhetoric talent. Each *Maqama* contains a separate episode in which the narrator meets the disguised hero, there being no connection between them except for the haphazard wanderings of narrator and hero. There is no serious developing plot, narrative thread or full characterization. However, the purpose of the *Maqama* would appear to have been not just exhibition of rhetoric skills, and admonition, but also imitation of the dialogue of the *hikaya* (story) in the sense of play.

Some Egyptian scholars as Abd al-Hamid Yunis says that the *Maqama* has its origins in dramatic literature composed as early as the pre-Islamic period. The form was derived from standing (*qiyam*) in an assembly place (*Dar al-Nadwa*)... and, in fact, it consisted of one direct and continuous acting performance by single actor. The dramatic dialogue and structure of the *maqama* is an imitation of the *Hikaya* or *Khayal*. These were a useful composition of the category of fables (*hikayat* put in the mouth of animals and objects), known in Arabic literature as the stories of *Kalila wa-Dimna*. Such *hikayat* (stories), according to al-Hariri, were recited or performed by *ruwat* (story-tellers).

Khayal and Khayal al-Zill

The term *khayal* means figure or phantom. In its most prosaic sense it is a stick dressed in cloth so as to look like a man. It also means statue, shadow, reflection, and fantasy. *Khayal* was used in the sense of play or live performance, not just the implements associated therewith, before it came to be appropriated by the shadow play. Such *khayal* performers used to perform their acts or anecdotes during the day. Those live players used to be accompanied by music and used to tour many places to present their live entertainment.

Khayal al-Zill (Shadow play): The combination of the terms *khayal* and *al-Zill* (shadow) was adopted to describe a new type of entertainment originating in the Far East. Thus the word *khayal* acquired the meaning of play as part of this expression. One of the most prominent figures of this type of entertainment was Ibn Daniyal (1248-1311), who wrote several shadow plays, one of which is *Babat Tayf al-Khayal* (the doors of the phantom of shadow). Ibn al-Haytham describes this type of entertainment saying: "Moreover, when the sight perceives the figures behind the screen, these figures being images which the presenter moves so that their shadows appear upon the wall behind the screen and upon the screen itself" (Sabra, 1983, p. 67).

Conclusion

In conclusion, many cultures such as the Hellenistic, Byzantine, Persian, Turkish and Far East influenced early Arab popular entertainment. By the eve of Islam these dramatic ceremonies came to be understood as commemorating some legendary or historical event and became seasonal folk tales. They tended towards parody and mockery of the former customs and rituals.

A reference to pre-modern popular drama in Egypt was made by the well-known Danish explorer, Carsten Niebuhr and the Italian archaeologist, Belzoni, who visited Egypt and saw in 1815 two such crude burlesques performed by a group of traveling players (*Awlad Rabiya*) in the outskirts of Cairo. Such itinerant players may well have been providing popular entertainment of this sort for centuries in different parts of the Arab world.

However, the real inauguration of Arabic theatre in its modern sense was in 1847 when the merchant Marun-al-Naqqash directed—in Beirut—what was probably the first performance of his Arabic play *al-Bakhil* (the Miser) (1847), which was heavily indebted to Moliere's *L'Avare* (1668).

Al-Naqqash imported, on returning from his travels in Italy, the Western model of theatre believing that it was the only suitable and elevated form of literature in the world. In his Arabic theatre, he tried at a later stage to develop this imported art whilst maintaining its original western structure, but he soon realized that the Arab audience wanted something closer to their own culture stemming from their own history. This led him to seek his subjects from the traditional Arab literary heritage *The Arabian Nights* (1704).

The importation of the concepts of modern European theatre to the Arab world was not such a unique occurrence. The 19th century was an era of change in the Middle East that was to see a resurgence of Arab culture and identity under Ottoman rule. New, sometimes disturbing ideas began to circulate and threatened to disrupt traditional patterns of life: Ideas of equality between Muslims and Christians, modernization, reform and nationalism. Most of these ideas came from Europe and were gradually absorbed into local society. The intellectual instability of this period, which accompanied these new ideas, persisted into modern times.

From the very beginning, Arab playwrights have problems in establishing a rapport between the stage and the audience from this alien proscenium arch stage of European theatre. In general, one may say that this new literary genre, drama, has been alien to the Arab audience, unlike poetry and other popular arts, it failed initially to elicit a response from the audience. This indifference was first noticed by Marun al-Naqqash; he was to say that despite his efforts the theatre was still alien in the Arab world. Al-Qabbani too had problems establishing the theatre in Damascus; he was forced to quit and flee Syria for Egypt. Similarly, the closure of the theatre of the Egyptian pioneer Ya'qub Sanu by the Egyptian ruler Khedive Isma'il, took place and succeeded, although Sanu claims otherwise, probably because this new art meant very little to the people of Egypt at the time.

Twentieth century Arab playwrights were to have similar problems; the Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim has expressed the same notion regarding his own theatre. He has described his theatrical journey as a "mission impossible", and has said that his theatrical art did not reach wide numbers of theatergoers, because the theatre is still remote from the people's hearts. This common feeling, shared by various playwrights throughout the history of the theatre in the Arab world, explains the difficult task faces any playwright in this part of the world. Despite the conflicting arguments which surround the origins of this literary genre in Arab literary history, it can clearly be seen that the modern Arab theatre laid its foundations by borrowing the forms and techniques of Western theatre, at first with little sense of the value of what it was borrowing. The English traveller David Urquhart (1805-1877) remarked upon the enthusiastic manner by which Marun al-Naqqash copied the art of Western theatre when he saw a performance of al-Naqqash's company, saying that "they had seen in Europe footlights and the prompter's box, and fancied it an essential point to stick them on where they were not required" (as cited in Najim, 1956, p. 36).

Arab playwrights have been trying since the modern theatre began to change the public's attitude to the theatre producing something closer to the hearts of the people, something arising from their own culture and history. However no one can deny that modern Arab theatre is an imitation of Western theatre.

References

- Abdel-Majid, A. (1956). *The modern Arabic short story* (pp. 14-18). Cairo: Dar Al-Ma'arif.
 Al-Bustani, S. (1904). *Riwayat Dhat al-Khidr (The story of the veiled woman)* (2nd ed.). Alexandria: Georgy Gharzoozi Printin Press.

- And, M. (1987). *A culture, performance and communication in turkey*. Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Culture of Asia and Africa.
- Basha, A. (1914). *Kitab Al-Jahiz al-Taj fi Akhlaq al-Mulook* (Al-Jahiz's book the crown in the king's morals). Cairo: Dar Al-Arqam.
- Dozy, R., & Engelmann, W. (1915). *Glossaire des Mots Espagnols et Portugais Dérivé de L'Arab* (Glossary of Spanish and Portuguese words derived from Arabic) (2nd ed.). Amsterdam: Leyde.
- Hameen-Anttila, J. (2002) *Maqama: A history of a genre*. Weisbaden: Otto Harrasswitz Verlag.
- Mair, V. H. (1983). *Tun-huag popular narratives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moreh, S. (1992). *Live theatre and dramatic literature in the medieval Arabic world*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Najim, M. (1956). *Al-Masrahiya fi Al-Adab Al-Arabi Al-Hadith* (The play in Arab modern literature). Beirut: Dar Sader.
- Sabra, A. (Ed.). (1983). *Kitab Al-Manazir wa Al-Dawr Al-Raed Li Ibn Al-Haytham fi Tatawor Al-Saykofyza* (Kitab al-Manazir and the pioneering role of Ibn Al-Haytham in developing psychophysics). Kuwait: The National Council for Culture, Arts, and Literature.
- Wetzstein, J. G. (1868). Sprachliches aus den Zeltlagern der Syriachen Wüste (Language from the tent: Camps of the Syrian Desert). *ZDMG*, XXII(1), 132.
- Wetzstein, J. G. (Ed.). (1906). *Die Liebenden von Amasia, ein Damascener Schattenspiel* (The lovers of Amasia, a Damascus Shadow Play). Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus.
- Yunis, A. H. (1965). *Kitab Khayal al-Zil* (The book of shadow play). Cairo: Al-Dar Al-Masriya Lita'leef Watarjama.