

Popular Theatre: Puppet and Shadow Play in the Arab World

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Theatrical manifestations like puppet plays, Shadow plays and the Qarakoz, with the exception of the art of story-telling, were probably brought to the Arab world from the Far East. While story-telling was probably the primal theatrical form in that part of the world, shadow theatre and the qarakoz were a developed popular theatrical stage. The only difference between the qarakoz and the shadow theatre is that the former depends on presenting the puppets live on stage, while the latter displays the shadow of puppets on a lighted white screen. The puppet art and the shadow play performers spread throughout the Arab world, especially in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. The performances traditionally took place in plazas, public gardens and public cafes. This paper attempts to explore the history of this art and the role it played in spreading such an entertainment in the public life of the concerned societies, as well as portraying its importance as a tool for social and political criticism.

Keywords: shadow plays, story-telling, allegory, popular art

Introduction

The puppets theatre is considered one of most important performance techniques to be used to enhance directing theatrical performances addressed to children, adding flavor to the dramatic scenes and creating action in the events of the plot in a dynamic way. This type of theatre is close to the children's mental, emotional, sensual and movement elements, for this theatre uses dwarf animals in various dramaturgical methods, swaying between tragedy and comedy. It also fluctuates in various scenes between beauty and ugliness, and seriousness and satire. This will entertain the children as well as educate them.

It is well known that the puppet theatre has many terminologies and concepts, such as, the puppet theatre, marionette, karaquz , Aragoz . The first two use different kinds of colorful dummies, made of various materials and being activated by a player or actor on stage. As for the karaquz and aragoz, a Turkish term meaning, named so because the gypsies, who have black eyes, were the ones who use this type of performance.

Puppets have been used for various purposes since the existence of mankind on earth and through many civilizations. The pharoses in Egypt used this type of theatre, as well as the Chinese, the Japanese, Mesopotamia and Turkey. However, the Japanese were amongst the first who mastered this art, so it became a vital method for educating and initiating children. In the West this theatre was the precursor for the children's theatre, and was used by players touring different places and cities to perform their plays and anecdotes.

Puppet Theatre in the Arab World

In the Arab and Islamic world, this art, except for the shadow plays, did not appear until the 14th century

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in Turkey and Iraq, and then spread to Greater Syria, Egypt and other Arab and Islamic countries. In Egypt, they accompanied certain religious rituals, such as funeral processions during ancient Egyptians times. These puppets were made of leather or wood and stuffed with straw or hay. Puppets were also made from palm leaves or tree branches or fruits of some plants or grains, like the rice bride, which was used in religious festivals. These were used during Christian times in Egypt. G. Wilkinson described some children games, especially the moving puppets, which were attached to strings that control the movement of its hands and legs (Wilkinson, 1837, p. 84-85). Ibn Khaldoun, the famous Arab anthropologist mentioned, in his Introduction, a game called kurraj, which was widely played during the Abbasid era, saying “they were indulged in game-playing and amusement, by using instruments for dancing called ‘kurraj’. These were statues in the shape of saddled horses, made from wood covered with cloth which women wore mimicking horse riding. They run back and forth and dance while moving”.

In Morocco, during the colonial era, the children's theatre intermixed with the common theatre, however, after the independence, such interweave was resolved, thus paving the way for a dedicated children's theatre. The Moroccan theatre did not use puppets properly before 1959, when a troupe named “Al-Masrah Al-Maghribi” created a special section dedicated for children. These puppet performances were used to promote certain moral and social elements and was used by the Ministry of Health to promote vaccination and other healthcare issues in faraway villages and the popular parts of Casablanca. Such participation increased the audience and demand for this art, which led to a vast and broad productions of performances throughout Morocco.

What encouraged audiences from all ages to attend these performances, is not the quality of these performances, but rather the popular heritage to this ancient type of art. The puppet theatre was able to attract the children in schools, nurseries and youth. It was also able to attract older audiences who were fascinated by this childish theatre. This led the Ministry of Youth and Sport to pay more attention to it culminated by the organizing in 1964 the first puppet's theatre festival held in the General Park in Rabat. Then followed by a series of seminars in 1964 discussing this art. Amongst the plays that were produced and performed were: “*Aroos Fas*”, “*Raqsat Al-Khadra*”, “*Mughamarat Qaraqush*” and “*Tajer Baghdad*”.

Khayal Al-Zill

This art is one of the popular art forms formulated from different arts that shaped it. (Saleh, 1963, p. 32-33) The first one is literature, style and subject and it belongs to the text of the performance, verbatim or written, adapted or improvised, standard or colloquial and verse or prose. Due to the nature of dialogue within the text, Khayal Al-Zill was classified as a type of “theatre”. The second is the art of puppets, simultaneously in both form and practice, as it is related and connected to the art of sculpturing. The third is painting, as Menzel (1927) remarks “combines the mimic art with music, painting and poetry”.

Types of Khayal Al-Zill

The first type of this art is called the “common khayal al-zill”, which is performed through reflection of light on a white cloth. This art did exist in many countries baring different names, from those countries: India, Indonesia, Iran, China, Egypt, Turkey, Syria and Morocco. In France, England and Holland, around the mid-18th century, it took a more advanced form, textual and technical. It started in France led by Francois D. Seraphin. In England, it was developed by Henri Mathew and Hering. In Holland, it was Beekman, Ko Donker

and Peter Van Gelder who were attributed for the development of this art. In Germany, the efforts of Count Franz von Pocsee and Alexander von Bernus, led to the development of this art.

The second type is called "Al-Fanoos Al-Sehri". This is composed of a box where characters are attached to its inside walls and which are composed of hardened paper. These characters will start revolving once the lantern is lit and heated.

References to Khayal Al-Zill in the Arabic Literary Heritage

Many references to this art were detected starting as early as the seventh century A.D. These references have mentioned this art form and described it or something related to it through different means of literary value. Few lines of poetry attributed to a religious figure Al-Emam Al-Shafe'i may be the oldest or one of the first references to this art. These references were also detected in the 11th century, when Al-Musabehi in his book *Lata'ef Al-Hikmah* mentioned that "people in Egypt roam out the streets during certain festivals holding khayal, statues and dolls" (Al-Musabehi, 1871, p. 516).

During the Memluke era, many popular games and moving puppets were used in many Arab countries. From these games were the shadow play, a theatrical form that depends on the movement of leather puppets behind a white curtain lit by some form of light. Arab sophists praised the shadow play, as it mimics the universe through the vision it creates from the reflection of the character's images on the white cloth curtain, which makes the viewers compare or identify the Creator and his creations with the characters and their reflected shadows, as if reality is the shadow of the Creator.

One of the most famous figures in this art is a 12th century man named Ja'far Al-Raqes, as Ibn Al-Furat mentions in his book *Tareekh Al-Duwal Wal-Mulook*, referenced by Taymour in his book *Al-Tasweer 'Ind Al'Arab*, that this man is mentioned in relation to this art and how he conducts his art and play with khayal via a dome that he had created. (Taymour, 1942, p. 156)

The shadow theatre, bears resemblance to the puppet theatre in Europe, except for the white cloth curtain covering the width of the stage. The players move the colored leather puppets using wooden sticks accompanied by music. Such shows are held after sunset, in public plazas or popular places, to celebrate the nights of the holy month of Ramadan or other religious festivals or certain happy occasions (al-Khadim, 1966, p. 78).

Ahmad Taymour (1957), the famous Egyptian playwright, describes shadow theatre saying "they erect a square house from wooden support props, covered with sackcloth from three sides, and covering the fourth side with white cloth stretched and nailed to the wooden props, behind which the characters appear. At night, the players enter this house, normally five, with a young boy mimicking women and one singer. Then the show starts with lighting fire and moving the puppets behind the white cloth. These puppets are made of cow leather, dried, molded, and then painted". (p. 21)

The play starts, particularly in Istanbul — Turkey, with the character of reciting a poem praising God and damning Satan, and then say few words praising the sultan. An improvised dialogue and interludes of songs then follows between the two main characters haji Wad and Qaraquz. These two characters can be seen in almost every shadow play performance in Turkey. The dialogue is rhyming, witty, and comic. Haji Wad represents the cultured sophisticated middle-aged person, and Qaraquz represents the naïve vulgar gypsy, who is violent and green. The shadow theatre remained in Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and other parts of the Arab world until the beginning of the 20th century. As E. W. Lane mentioned while visiting Egypt. (Lane, 1836, p. 73)

Ibn Danial is probably the most famous playwright who experimented in this genre. He wrote many shadow plays, e.g., *Tayf al-khayal*, *Ajib wa Gharib*, and *al-Mutayam*.

The Turkish Qaraquz or Arabic Araguz and puppets were used to convey religious, moral, and didactic messages, especially to children. These are similar to Punch and Judy characters in Britain. British Explorer D. Alexander (1910), who visited Nigeria, described the popular araguz by saying: "This type of popular art is exclusive to gypsies and consists of three to four men, one uses the drums, another moves the wooden puppets, and the remaining voice-act the characters. The characters in this kind of play were called 'jooj', a dancer, "dambula, a naughty man and 'malam', a religious man". (p. 145-6)

There is no doubt that the popular folk of araguz in Nigeria was influenced by the Arabic heritage, as it contains references to the pilgrimage to Makkah and the visit to the prophet Muhammad's burial grounds, as they had to pass through Egypt to reach Makkah.

The popular araguz in the 20th century follows the same old pattern, a three-sided tent standing on three wooden rods, with the players hiding inside the tent and moving the puppets from the top. This kind of play resembles the shadow play except now there is no reflection of light or shadows. Now they see the puppets 'haji Wad' and 'Qaraquz' exchanging comic interludes and fighting each other with wooden sticks directly in front of the viewers and not behind the white cloth.

This kind of theatre, although popular, did not prevail for long, because religious leaders and the Ulama did not encourage such performances. In fact they spoke against it and described it as a means of Satan to allure the populace to neglect their religious duties. This made the puppet theatre exclusive to certain group of people, like gypsies and some roaming troupes.

The puppet theatre began to spread after WW I and after the shadow theatre became extinct. It continued using the comic interludes of the shadow play and adapted it to the puppets of the araguz. This spread was temporary, as the puppet and araguz industry slumped, due to lack of originality in dialogues, and therefore depended on rough and unrefined comic interludes, or sarcastic mimicking of certain singers to solicit laughter from the viewers. (al-Khadim, 1966, p. 78)

The players of araguz, included contemporary jokes in their performance, thus mixing popular folk tales with politics implicitly. It became like the Pandora Box, presenting stories and tales incarnating both the popular side as well as the nationalist side. This was absorbed into comedy and remained so until before WW II. The French writer, Saussey, in his study in 1937, included a good example of puppet play, entitled *Fasl al-Hammam*.

The play has several puppet characters: Qaraquz, Iwaz, the mother, Dazun, Tuffah, a boy, Mudallal, Qumaimi, Qraitim, and two old men. It revolves around a public bath, which Qaraquz and Iwaz want to buy. Comic interludes and exchanges of witty dialogue between the characters create the laughter in the play. This was typical of the puppet theatre in Turkey, Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere in the Arab world.

The Qaraquz drama depends on puppets, which are placed and moved behind a curtain or a Para van. Glove puppets constitute the base for this theatre. These are made of wood and paper. Glove puppets do not need a curtain or special lighting; all they require is a three-sided tent. This helped the spread of this kind of theatre amongst the popular classes.

Dr. Ali al-Ra I, an Egyptian scholar, describes his experience watching the araguz saying:

Some of the araguz shows, I saw during my youth at the festivity plaza celebrating the occasion of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, in the city of Isma iliya. In one of these dramas, the araguz presented a sketch depicting the

relationship between a husband and his wife. She is crying and complaining that she has to do all the household chores, dough making, baking, cleaning and sweeping...etc. The husband tries to calm her down, but does not succeed, as she starts insulting and physically attacking him. Suddenly, araguz disappears behind the Paravan, only to appear again holding a stick and starts beating his wife, who immediately calms down. Then both indulge in a form of sexual courtship, a result of which, she gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby.

Dr. al-Ra'i comments on this stating that the husband was himself the araguz, the stereotype character, who embodies a mixture of cunning and good-heartedness, bravery if needed, cowardness if necessary, patience and rebellion.

Many interested in this type of drama agree that the araguz plays do not contain any artistic or literary value, nor any social context. They also claim that such drama seeks cheap laughter and mockery. Despite that, the art of araguz, was the tongue of the Egyptians expressing their ideas, taste, trends in political and social criticism and mockery, both explicitly and implicitly.

The Traveling Troupes

These troupes were mentioned as early as the Abbasside period, as a group of actors known as "Samajah" meaning, were invited to do their performances in the palace of the Abbasside caliph Al-Muntaser who invited them to perform some of their plays, and when he circumcised his son also invited those samajah to perform in his palace. (Jawad, 1950, p. 5)

The troupes that present the shadow play, puppet theatre, and other forms of popular entertainment, are traveling troupes as well. They travel from one place to another, especially remote areas and countryside villages, to perform their art. The Egyptian scholar S. Ghandour, relates the Pandora Box art to the traveling gypsies in Egypt, who travels all over Egypt performing this and other forms of popular or folk entertainment.

The Pandora box is an empty wooden box containing several lenses and a reel holding pictures winded by hand and moved through the lenses magnifying the moving pictures, thus producing moving pictures. The player uses a trumpet to announce his arrival in the area and to call the children to come and watch the show. Its subject matter was the stories of the Prophets, folk heroes, and other social issues.

Traveling troupes also presented another form of drama, the "Samer". The origin of the Samer dates back to old Egypt and the folk festivities held in celebration of the new agricultural season and the days of the harvest. Therefore, some see this form of drama as representing the Egyptian peasantry and that the Samer is the original genre of the Egyptian popular or folk theatre (al-Disuqi, 1970, p. 14). The literal meaning of the word "samer" is "night talk", which corresponds with essence of the art. It is a special kind of drama that takes place in special occasions, such as: religious festivals, circumcisions, harvest nights and gatherings in summer nights (al- Al-Alim, 1992, p. 32). The Samer troupe contains a singer, a belly dancer, and a group of actors. The acting was mainly improvised dealing with life's daily stories, personifying some local or public figures and poking fun at them. This type of theatre became extinct due to middle class advancement and the invasion of technological inventions, e.g. TV, radio, and traveling methods.

Similar traveling troupes in Morocco and North Africa presented what was known as the "carpet theatre". In function, it is similar to the Egyptian "Samer", but used a carpet as its stage, and performed improvised interludes and sketches in public places. This kind of folk or popular theatre can be seen also in Syria and Lebanon. When the Danish explorer Carsten Niebuhr visited Alexandria in September 1761, he talked about an art called "Al-Ghawazi" where a group of gypsy women belly dancers accompanied by a man playing on a

musical instrument and normally accompanied by an elderly woman tying an instrument named “tanbur” around her waist and shaking it to produce music (Kahle, 1940, p. 53). In Iraq, some acting activities were mentioned and these were named “Ekhhbari”. This type of art was a response to the Turkish shows presented in Baghdad. (Al-Ra'i, 1979, p. 31). However, with the rapid development of these countries in recent years, and the wide-spread of TV and other forms of media, such troupes began to disappear, if not already. Fortunately, governments or individuals are making many attempts to revive these cultural forms aiming to preserve Arab cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The puppet theatre lives today in some Arab countries, through certain specialized troupes, interested in reviving this kind of drama and aiming to educate children, as this type of theatre was still associated with children. The Lebanese Puppet Theatre, established 11 years ago, and helped by the existence of an all year round permanent puppet stage in Beirut, is among the very few troupes specialized in this type of theatre in the Arab world. It is a professional troupe specialized in presenting puppet plays in Lebanon and elsewhere. It has performed ten-puppet plays addressed to children. Came a play entitled *Yalla yinam Murjan*, which was awarded the golden medal as best theatrical work for children in Cairo 1998. More than 50 puppet characters perform in this drama. The play discusses the right of a child to play, and to live his childhood period. This is a committed troupe aiming to introduce theatre to children as a cultural, civilized, artistic, and educational value.

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