



Drama in Arabic Literature: A Brief Study from Historical Perspectives

Dr. Mahbubur Rahman

Substitute Teacher, B.P. Chaliha College, Nagarbera, Assam, India

Abstract

The modern drama what we know today was not seen in classical Arabic literature. Instead it is observed that pre modern Arabic literary tradition followed dramatic elements and there existed some forms of drama including Taziya, Khayl al-Zill, Mimicry etc. But it did not bring full-fledged dramatic quality rather it was developed in an unpolished manner. In fact drama was introduced into the Arab lands in the 19th century when Arabic speaking people came into direct contact with European literature and culture. And in the first decade of 20th century Arabic drama entered new stage of its development. The important role played by the different dramatists such as Lebanese, Syrian and Egyptian along with their various groups in the development of Arabic theatre in Egypt was noticeable. As a result of it there appeared so many brilliant writers such as Farah Antun, Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad Taymur, Antun Yazbak and Tawfiq al-Hakim who contributed a lot and fulfilled the demands of the public.

Key Words: *Arabic drama, Taziya, Khayl al-Zill, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Ahmad Shawqi etc.*

Introduction: Drama was not seen in classical Arabic literature like that of real drama is performed on a stage through dialogue by actors. According to M. M. Badawi, “classical Arabic literature did not know drama in the sense of an established art form which provides an imitation of an action on a stage through dialogue in verse or prose by human actors.”¹ In the pre Islamic period poetry was served as a main medium of expression of the sentiments of the people of Arab in which they excelled.

As regards dramatic elements it is visible in some poems and we can find out it in the form of stories and historical facts. These elements represented the Bedouin characteristics such as fulfilment of promise and loyalty, entertainment of guests, purity of blood and horsemanship which occupied an important place among the Arabs. For example, the story of Hatim al-Tai who slaughtered his camel for his guest, leaving his sons hungry, is meant only to infuse into the hearts of the Arabs the sense of generosity and to encourage them for it. The story of Samaw'al-b-Adiya who did not surrender to the enemy though his son was killed before his eyes, also represents loyalty. Similarly, the love story of Majnu and Layla, which resembles Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, signifies steadfastness in love.²

These types of unique elements became disappeared from the Arabic poetry after the emergence of Islam. The people of Arab especially the Muslims dedicated their life for the

teaching of Qur'an and sunnah. They used to recite the Qur'anic verses on all occasions. As far as Islamic period is concerned, the famous poet like Hassan bin Thabit and Qa'b bin Zuhayr used to compose their odes in the light of the Qur'anic teaching, where they used and applied dramatic elements. Apart from this most of the dramatic elements are noticeable in some of chapters of the holy Qur'an for example sura [Yusuf (Prophet) Joseph] XII.

The dramatic elements can be noticed in an unpolished form in Abbasid Period. We can cite the example of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, *The Romance of Antar* and *Risalat al-Gufran* etc. In fact, pre modern Arabic literary tradition followed dramatic elements and there existed some forms of drama. One of the eminent writers named Yousuf Idris has rightly remarked that there are a number of native genres which display dramatic qualities.³ Some of them are-

(1) *Taziya* or Passion play, (2) *Khayl al-Zill* Shadow Play

One of the important genres is *Taziya* or *passion play*. In the medieval period the Shi'a community of the Middle East played *Tazyias* or Passion Plays in connection with the commemoration of the death of the Prophet Muhammad's (SAS) grandson, Al-Husayn, at the battle of Karbala in 680 A.D. It is observed every year on the tenth day of Muharram, with great fervour by the Muslims especially the Shia community. During the first nine days of this ceremony religious notables recite, with great emotion, details from Hussain's life, while groups of men dance passionately in the streets inflicting wounds upon themselves with chains. On the tenth day, a symbolic coffin is carried in procession, followed by horses, bloodied men, and a steed representing Hussain's warhorse.⁴ This practice has dramatic presentation and is closer to drama. According to Jacob M. Landu-

The larger parts of the Ta'ziyas were written and performed in Persia, although some are known to have existed and been in Arabic and Turkish. The impact of the Ta'ziya on the majority of Arabic speaking communities in the near east through the centuries, however, was not considerable, as most of them were Sunnites. Still, it is plausible that the masked performances prevalent today among some of this communities in the first ten days of Muharram were influenced, even possibly derived, from the Ta'ziya. These were, then, the only dramatic performances of a tragic character in Medieval Arabic literature; they probably remained the only ones until modern times.⁵

Next to it is *Khayl al-Zill* (Shadow Play):

It was a very interesting theatrical phenomenon prevalent in the medieval Cairo, and was appreciated by all classes. Shadow play appeared in the Arab world in the eleventh century. The literal meaning of *Khaial al-Dil* is the imitation of the shadow. The indications of shadow play performances is found in the Ayyubid period, most remarkably that the famous Sultan Saladin attended one of these performance with his vizier Alkadi Fadel which the later described saying 'I learned great lessons ... I saw empires fall down, others arise ... but when the curtain was removed ... the mover (player) was one person'.⁶ In this Shadow play performances take place using a stage fully covered with a wooden partition which has a window in its middle; this window is normally covered by white fabric and lighted from the inside by a bright light, the player, or the puppeteer, uses different puppets of humanlike, animal ...etc. made out of leather, fabrics, or cardboard

and moves them between the lamp and the covered window; as a result the shadows of these shapes falling on the fabrics are reflected on the other side of the window (e.g. screen) where a group or audience are gathered to see the shadows and hear the voice of the player who imitates different voices, according to the characters that he is moving at a moment.⁷

The art of shadow play was remarkably developed by the Egyptian Shams al-Din Muhammad ibn Daniyal (died 1311). His three plays are- (1) *Taif al-Khayal* (2) *Ajib and Garib* (3) *Al-Mutayyan* etc.

From the discussion of the two genres of drama it is found that *Taziya* and *Shadow play* occupied an important place in the Arab history and were existed in the Arab world.

The modern drama what we know today in Arabic literature is indebted to European models. The imported form of genre came first to Egypt, Lebanon and Syria through the effort of Napoleon Bonapart and later by Maroun Al-Naqqash and his contemporaries. Napoleon had established theatre in Egypt in 1798 just to entertain his soldiers but it could not able to impress the Arabs. It was Marun al-Naqqash, a first Syrian writer who introduced Arabic drama being inspired by the Italian opera and attempted a musical verse play entitled *al-Bakhil* (The Miser) under the influence of Moliere's *L'Avare*. It was written mostly in verse and simplified classical Arabic containing many songs. This drama received a good response from the audience. In addition to this he also produced two more dramas: *Abul Hasan al-Mugaffal* and *Al-Salit al-Hasud*. Al-Naqqash is regarded as the father of modern Arabic drama who introduced first in drama the element of singing and secondly drawing upon the *Arabian Nights* as a source for drama.⁸

After the good effort of Marun al-Naqqash to make popular the theatre, the Lebanese writers like Salim al Naqqash, Adib Ishaq, Ibrahim al-Ahdab, Salim al-Bustani, Khalil al-Yaziji etc. started to follow the same path of al-Naqqash. They translated many dramas and performed them in their country. In Egypt, it is Ismail with whom the credit goes for bringing first the theatre where the French and Italian troupes performed plays. The Cairo Opera house was built by Ismail in 1869 as part of the celebrations of the opening of the Suez Canal and Verdi's *Rigoletto* was the first performance there.⁹ In 1871, Verdi composed *Aida* especially for the Cairo Opera. In this period many Arab dramatists contributed their works in the development of Arabic drama.

Arabic drama entered second stage of its development from the first decade of 20th century. The important role played by the different dramatists such as Lebanese, Syrian and Egyptian along with their various groups in the development of Arabic theatre in Egypt was noticeable. As a result of it there appeared so many brilliant writers such as Salama Hizazi, Jurji Abyad and Najib al-Rihani who contributed a lot to make the Arabic theatre popular. In order to meet the demands of the people the outstanding dramatists like Farah Antun, Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad Taymur, Antun Yazbak and Tawfiq al-Hakim started to write musical plays which were either translated or adapted from Western works. During that period theatre became a more permanent feature of Egyptian urban life it came to be used for political ends, mainly in Egypt's nationalist struggle against British occupation. Because of this deep theatrical activity Arabic drama got its maturity in Egypt in the second and third decades of the twentieth century.¹⁰

In the field of Arabic drama it is Tawfiq al-Hakim, an outstanding figure who occupied the same eminent place like that Mahmud Taymur in case of Arabic short story and Najib Mahfouz in case of Arabic novel. With the contribution of al-Hakim Arabic drama reached its zenith point. He is the only dramatist who tried to develop the art of dialogue in a manner as to make its reading accepted as a part of thought provoking literature. In his long career as a dramatist, he wrote more than eighty works, covering the period from 1920s to 1970s. His dramas can be divided into two categories: (a) Social plays and (b) Abstract plays

- a) His Social plays deal with the situations in societies which are either criticisms of life or efforts to reform it. He wrote forty five plays under this category and these play are collected in two volumes: *Masrah al-Mujtama* and *al-Masrah al-Munawa*. These plays include *Sirr al-Muntahirah* and *Rasasa fi al-Qalb* etc.
- b) His Abstract plays deal with the themes of universal rather than local interests, which are based on supposition posed by mythology or religion or by al-Hakim himself. Among the abstract plays the most popular are: *Ahl al-Kahf*, *Shaharзад* and *Sulaiman al-Hakim* etc. The eminent literary critic like Taha Husayn regarded *Ahl al-Kahf* of Tawfiq al-Hakim as a land mark in the history of Arabic literature, since in his view it signalled the appearance of a fully-fledged Arabic drama.¹¹

Ahmad Shawqi Bek, the great neo classical poet who is regarded as *Amir al-Shua'ra* (prince of the poets) throughout the Arab world. He started to write verse drama in his last life and wrote seven plays in all, six tragedies and historical dramas on Egyptian and Arab historical subjects, as well as a comedy inspired by contemporary life in Egypt. His dramas are: *Masra Kilyubatra* (The fall of Cleopatra) published in 1929 and his play describes the last days of the Egyptian Queen. *Majnun Layla* (The mad lover of Layla) published in 1931 and this play is divided into five acts. It is a sad story of Qais and Layla, the two desert lover. *Qambiz* (Cambyses) published in 1931. It is a historical and patriotic play set in 6th century B.C. *Ali Bey al-Kabir* (Ali Bey the great) published in 1932. In this play Shawqi has severely criticized the practice of slavery system and made an earnest plea for Egyptian and Arab Nationalism which sounds anachronistic. *Antra* (Antra) published in 1932. *Amirat al-Andalus* (Princes of Andalusia, 1932), *Al-Sitt Huda* (Lady Huda) published in 1932. It is only a comic drama by Shawqi.

End Notes:

¹ M.M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 241.

² J. Zaydan, *Tarikh adab al-Lughat al-Arabiyyah* Vol. 1, Dar al-Hilal, Cairo, n.d., pp. 61-63.

And quoted from *The Beginnings and Development of Drama in Arabic* by Maqsood Ahmad, p. 37.

³ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 195.

⁴ <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/visual/theatre.htm>

⁵ Landau, Jacob M., *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema*, Philadelphia, 1958, PP. 7- 8.

⁶ Yaqi, A. *Fi Aljohod Almasrahya Alarabia*, Cairo: Dar Alfarabi, p. 10.

⁷ Hamada, I. *Khial Aldil wa Tamthiliat Ibn Danial*. Cairo: Almoasasa Almesrya Alama Liltalif wa Alnashir, p. 43

⁸ M.M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 244.

⁹ Ismat Mahdi, *Arabic Literature*, p. 41.

¹⁰ M.M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 248.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, P. 255.

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