

Arab History and Tewfik Al-Hakim's Theatre: Accounting for Paucity Of Dramaturgy

Abdullahi Kadir Ayinde, Ph.D

Introduction

This paper examines the historical and cultural configuration that shaped the theatrical sensibilities and ultimately the performance pattern on which Tewfik Al-Hakim's Arabic theatre is predicated. An exposition of how drama fits within the context of cultural Islamization requires an account of the historical matrix which shows the synthesis of Islam and indigenous culture as well as the hybridity brought to the convergence by the harsh realities of colonialization. In order to grasp the basis of the dramaturgy in Al-Hakim's theatre, a limited survey of his selected texts is necessary.

Tewfik Al-Hakim is one of the most prominent contemporary playwrights in North Africa. Davies Johnson recalls that even though Egypt had a theatrical tradition dated back to more than ten decades, Al-Hakim bequeathed to the Arabic Drama the foundation of respectability it enjoys today¹. His numerous collections of plays are popular for their use of Arabic modified classical language to express a clear theatrical dialogue.

The general observations are that dramatic works inspired by the Arabic heritage and its folklore have increased and the current experimental trend in Egyptian theatre focuses on a clear political or social message.

The most clearly defined thematic and genre trends are revivals; plays which use historical or mythological sources to deal with contemporary social issues. In this way, Al-Hakim's works embrace the rampant contradictions of life seen in the sphere of human existence in Egypt. In some of his plays, he expresses the conflict of art and life, the mind and the heart, materialism and spirit, reality and the truth, freedom and bondage, man and fate among several others.²

This essay clearly examines how the historical movement in North Africa precipitated a style of dramaturgy in Afro-Arab theatre which makes it uniquely distinctive from dramas in the Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone African countries. The craft of play writing takes on a unique configuration in the hands of Afro-Arab playwrights due to the influence of Islamic culture. The paper

specifically examines what exactly are the theoretical elements that characterize Arabic drama as extrapolated in the selected plays of Al-Hakim.

African dramatic scholars and critics have continued the unending debates on the standard criteria for evaluating African theatre. They tend to postulate the unifying elements in all considerations of an African theatre aesthetic, which invariably include elements of culture and history. Other elements include a consideration of the divergent nature of the background, intellectual orientation and ideological temperament of numerous writers on African culture and aesthetics. In considering what an African theatre aesthetic would comprise, emphasis on matrices of culture has been outlined. These matrices include:

- i. a subject matter that is of deep communal concern or implication
- ii. the exploration of this concern through the agency of myth, legend or history or aspects of traditional lore.
- iii. a theatrical expression which exhibits a conscious reliance on songs, mime, improvisation, dance, music and folklore, all drawn from indigenous culture and
- iv. a language, of whatever origin, which, however, exudes a robust African flavour.³

As identified above, critical issues involving contexts, historical formulations, ideological frameworks, the impact of Islam on African traditions are the emerging issues in Arabic drama. In fact, these common features of history and similar institutional patterns allow us to classify an African Islamic culture and literature. The central issue posed by the study of Afro-Arab theatre is the way in which North African writers appropriated Islam and made it a dominant feature of their literature. As concerned Islam in Africa and its subsequent literary expression, what happened was a series of adaptations in which Islam came to occupy increasingly important space in the lives of various writers and the physiological spaces governing the territory of their mind.⁴ Because Islam and Arabic language are closely interwoven, there is an overwhelming presence of formal and technical norms and conventions drawn primarily from the Koran and Arabic creative tradition.⁵ For this reason, there is a large collection of literature in Africa that is of Arabic and Islamic inspiration dealing in a significant way with Islamic beliefs, cultural practices or social patterns.

In Islam every aspect of the life of the society is seen in the light of religion. Unlike the Western secular societies that had clearly divorced religion from social life, the relationship between Islam and life is almost impossible to separate. Because of the seemingly impossibility of this separation, many critics and Arab intellectuals tend to see Islam as a strong impediment to the development of a virile theatrical tradition in North Africa. According to Omotsho;

The development of drama per se has not been possible because the establishment of Islam brought a new world-view a world view providing answers to man's problems and leaving no room for questions. Allah is responsible for the unseen order of man's life and Allah's revelation to Muhammed is man's only guide in his endeavour to adjust himself to that order. The ideal life is to follow the 'straight path' already charted by the prophet with the help of Allah. To present in writing or on stage deviations from this straight path only helps faint hearted men go astray. The concept of the good man who falls as a result of the machinations of the gods or circumstances or faults of his personal make up, or a combination of all these machinations has no place in this theologically oriented world view.⁶

Through the above assertion Omotoso aptly accounts for reasons why drama has not developed conventionally in Arabic genre due to a number of fundamental restrictions placed on the society by Islam. It is against this background that the history of drama and theatre needs to be foregrounded for one to understand the peculiar techniques of dramaturgy inherent in the plays of Tewfik Al-Hakim.

Drama and the Arabs

After the Arab conquest and subsequent take over of North Africa, the indigenous African culture becomes totally Islamized. Before Africa's contact with Arabs through trade enroute the Savannah, Africans were known for employing drama as a medium for treating political and religious issues. Before the pre-classical and classical periods of Arabic literature, drama had been most successful in Egypt and Iraq. Performances reached the height of aesthetic appeal during festivals at which common myths and rituals were reenacted. The festival drama provided an avenue for people to show case various social issues through the use of masked characters, puppets and other techniques.

In contact with Arabs, the mask and rituals which were fundamentally the symbol of both mystical and political authority were banned. The Muslims outlawed the use of character representation and severely restricted unfettered intermingling of both sexes. The attacks on the masks were aimed at the people's indigenous tradition, religion and political ethos.⁷

The condemnation of cultural associations and their consideration as anti-Islamic were ways to stamp out the art forms and politics inherent in them. It is therefore not difficult to see why Islam had a great influence in the configuration of Afro-Arab theatrical traditions. Any discussion of dramaturgical techniques in Arabic drama, therefore, invites a consideration of religion and its concomitant effects in community building, maintenance and disruption. The connection between Islam and dramatic performance in North African literature is strong. According to Joy Spauling:

Egypt and the other African provinces of Rome fell to the initial wave of Arab conquest during the seventh and eighth centuries and became important components within a new and wider Mediterranean Islamic imperium⁸.

With the conquest, Arabic replaced Greek as the official language of the trading community. Many prominent traders became Muslims. The emerged Islamic vision challenged the existing social order. It called to question the legitimacy of traditional dramatic conventions. In 1793 when Napoleon invaded Egypt, it was the first contact the Arab world had with outsiders for five centuries. This contact brought a new development to Afro-Arab life including their literature. New genres were introduced from Europe such as the novel, free verse, drama and the theater. The fictional prose has developed and matured in the modern period of Arabic literature⁹. For instance Naguib Mahfouz writes in the tradition of committed literature that is a defining characteristic of the African art. While other art forms like poetry, lyrics and free verse have equally developed drama cannot be said to have achieved the same standard of development and maturity¹⁰.

Techniques of dramaturgy in Temfik Al-Hakim's Theatre

When performance elements are incorporated into a play, they affect the play's content, structure and style and consequently, its overall effects. Performance aesthetics are conspicuously lacking in Al-Hakim's theatre. While some Egyptian dramatists like Ali Ahmed Ba-Kathir's play *Mismar Juha* (Juha's nail) that castigates the whole situation of Israel in the Middle East, and Yusuf

Idris, who challenged the assertion of some western orientalist that Arabs are incapable of producing drama were highly successful¹¹, Al-Hakim has remained consistently insensitive to issues that concern dramaturgy. In trying to solve the age-long problems of Arabic theatre, Al-Hakim created more. He insisted that his plays were not for stage performances, rather they were for mental performance. He thus contends with writing his plays for publication and reading.

His mode of characters presentation is such that they would be almost impossible to represent physically on stage. In the view expressed by Helen Gilbert many of the requirements for ritual performances are similar to those of drama: actor, audience costume and space. When theatrical elements are adequately deployed as part of both the theatrical and the ritual spectacle, its codes add additional signification. This process is based on conceptions of the body as a composite signifier which can be trained to convey the desired characteristics through facial expression, gesture, posture, movement and so on.¹² The ritual elements composed of music, verse, chants and other affective forms of communication gives performance a ritualistic manifestation. All these dramatic elements of aesthetic performance are difficult to find in Al-Hakim's collection of plays. For instance all four plays in his collection of one volume titled Fate of a Cockroach provides a clear illustration of dearth of dramaturgical paraphernalia. According to Johnson, the collections deal directly or indirectly with the issue of freedom. In Fate of a Cockroach, man's natural love for freedom, his refusal to despair in the face of grim adversity are theatrically illustrated in cockroach's unsuccessful attempt to come out of the bath.

In The Sultan's Dilemma, which takes place in the thousand and one nights' atmosphere of the rule of a Mamuleuke Sultan, freedom and the choice faced by every absolute ruler are the themes. These themes are incidentally as valid for the world leaders in 1960; the year when the play was published, as for their forebearers during the times of the Mamelukes.¹³ This play has a scene that requires spectacles and performance, yet, Al-Hakim deliberately jettisons this. One interesting remark about folk tradition which captures the reminiscence of pre-classical Arabic drama in Egypt is a revelation from a character called Lady.

She recounts her experience to her Manumitted Sultan thus:

Lady: I shall say it purely to amuse you. I enjoy the company of men for their souls, not for their bodies. Do you understand?

Sultan: No not exactly

Lady: I shall elucidate. When I was a young slave girl of the same age as the slave girls I have with me now, my master brought me up to love poetry and singing and playing a musical instruments. He used to make me attend his banquets and converse with his guests who were poets and singer's, they also included intellectuals and men of wit and charm. We would spend the night reciting poetry, singing and playing music and conversing, quoting and capping quotations from the master pieces of literature and laughing from the depths of our hearts. Those were wonderfully enjoyable nights, but they were also innocent and chaste. Please believe that. My master was a good man and knew no pleasure in life other than these nights a pleasure without sin – without vulgarity. In this way he brings me up and educates me. And when I later became his wife, he did not wish to deprive me of the pleasure of those nights which used to enchant me, he therefore allowed me to continue to attend, though from behind silken curtains. That is the whole story. (p. 157)¹⁴

Scene like this is one out of many that demands an aesthetic deployment of artistic performance ethos which is deliberately ignored. In furtherance of his preference for non stage performance theatre, his play entitled Muhammed (a book of over three hundred pages) which narrates the life of the prophet of Islam, is written in a way that could not be staged. Most of the scenes are too short and the mode character presentation cannot be theatrically acted¹⁵. By 1948 when the state of Israel was forcefully established in the Middle East by Britain and America, a major political revolution ushered into the life of Arabs. Many politically motivated plays which were written to ridicule the Israel become predominant in Egypt yet, Tewfik Al-Hakim managed to keep his theater from the political turbulent that engulfed the Arab. He rather concentrated on producing plays which are either melodramatic adapted into classical Arabic from the French or dramatic farces often with focus on social life in Egypt and elsewhere.

Conclusion

Though, drama is a prominent genre of modern Arabic literature, it lacks a technique of dramaturgy found in the theatre of Africans elsewhere. This essay has examined some relevant historical and cultural concepts about Afro-Arab theatre without getting entangled in theory and criticism. It has revealed theatrical constraints common to Arabic drama with a specific focus on the selected work of Tewfik Al-Hakim.

Endnotes

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- 15- Omotosho, Kole, op.cit

