

## **Leadership Problem and Consequences of Individualism in Tawfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach***

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### **Abstract**

This study is an investigation of North African drama, aimed at contributing to the few available discourses on the few rather “silent” voices of writers from North African mainstream world literature. Within the theoretical framework of new historicism, the study examines the influence of Arab nationalism, colonialism, as well as literary trends and movements on the development of modern North African drama. The study provides textual analysis of selected work of Tawfiq Al-Hakim which is available in English translations for French. The paper evaluates the exact reading of the absurdity of human existence in Tawfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach*. The focus on themes and techniques with regards to the culture of Arabian society. The work identifies themes of anti-colonialism, cultural identity, quest for freedom, leadership problems and patriarchy as recurring themes in North African Drama. The study traces and locates the place of North African drama in world literature, Al-Hakim, the Egyptian dramatist belongs to the theatre of absurd, whose thoughts are deeply shaped by existential philosophy. The study aims to show how modern civilization has killed the mankind by fatal weapons instead of giving him luxurious life. The discussing the autobiography of the playwright, the paper concludes that there's a relationship between the attitudes of the playwright and his contributions to the literature, especially in the Arabian culture as the focus of this study.

**Keywords:** Absurdity; Leadership; Individualism; Anti-Colonialism; Africa.

## Introduction

Northern African drama also known as Maghrebi drama is a style of theater that emerged in countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia in the mid-20th century. This style is influenced by the social and political context of Northern Africa, including colonialism, independence movements and the Arab Spring. North African Drama developed from different traditions and experiences of the countries that make up North Africa. From the linguistic, religious and cultural standpoint, this literature includes works from the Middle East. Anissa Talahite posits that the literature of the region offers a perspective that makes it part of Arabic literature, which includes the Middle East (39). The drama of North Africa is made up of works from the three Maghrebian countries; Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, as well as

the plays from Egypt, Libya and Sudan. These countries share a common ethnic, cultural, linguistic and Islamic identity that has significantly distinguished them from the rest of Africa. Sudan is one of the most unique of the North African countries. Mazurui, quoted in Soghayroon has argued that Sudan is an “African country in a racial sense and an Arab country in a cultural sense .... For many of them, Arabism is a cultural acquisition rather than a racial heredity” (7). As it is with the rest of the continent, European colonization, particularly French occupation of the Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, has had great influence on North African drama.

Many of the North African writers have published works under the three genres. Some of them have attained international recognition. Naguib Mahfouz, Author

of *Cairo Trilogy* (1957), was the first Arab to win the Nobel Prize for literature; he is a leading Egyptian writer.

Assia Djebar, Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi are among North Africa's most influential internationally acclaimed female writers, known especially for their extensive fictional works on the plight of the Muslim-Arab woman in a patriarchal culture. The literary works of these writers often lead to several problems for them in their societies; for instance, the feminist ideologies of the feminist writers clash with their religious backgrounds, and have resulted in bitter criticism of the writers.

Generally, many North African writers have had to put up with censorship, imprisonments and death threats from government and Islamic fundamentalists. Some writers, such as Algerian playwrights Abdulkader Alloula and Taher Djaout have been assassinated. According to Olusegun-Joseph, there is an enduring view by many North Africans that they

belong to pan-Arabic confederacy rather than to African socio-ideological block (223). In this study therefore, the term 'Arab' shall be used interchangeably with North African.

Yomi Olusegun-Joseph has identified that European "...Orientalist remapping of North Africa as largely belonging to the 'Middle East' rather than Africa is because of its predominant Islamic cosmic leaning and Arabic socio-cultural predisposition" (220). He has also argued that colonialist representation of Africa in European literature, which resulted in black oriented cultural and nationalistic reactions, has contributed to the marginalization of North Africa in African literary criticism (224). Bentthar is however of the opinion that the origin of African literature as the subject of academic discipline was construed along racial terms, with "blackness" as a literary category (224). Olusegun-Joseph has described this postulation as one that has a gap in that it fails to recognise that black racial affinity

possessed by some North African writers has not exempted them from being left out in mainstream African literary criticism (224). Achebe has pointedly called attention to the significance of the complexities of the African scene in any definition of African literature (27).

The writings from North Africa have been considerably influenced culturally, politically and in terms of language of expression by Berber oral traditions of pre-Arab inhabitants, as well as Arabic civilization, and contact with Europe. Talahite's summation is that "It seems more appropriate to speak of North African literatures rather than of one literature" (39). While some of the non-English North African literary works are available in English translations, they mostly consist of writings in Arabic and French. The thematic preoccupations of the North African writer include cultural identity, colonialism, European misrepresentation, hybridization, and poor leadership, the quest for societal and

individual freedom, political corruption, oppression, Islamic fundamentalism, war, disillusionment, the Palestine problem, gender relations and patriarchy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

New historicism has been chosen as the theoretical underpinning for this study. According to the New Historicists, any understanding of the truth which is based on the past or a foreign culture that is unrepresented or underrepresented is at best, a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. Secondly, according to Grudzina, the very existence of any text in a culture changes the culture it reflects, raising an awareness of vital issues and helping to bring about change (253). For any new historicist reading, there are some essential questions to ask; for instance, what event occurred in any given writer's life that made him or her who he or she is? What or who has influence and affected the writer's world view of life or philosophy? What are the writer's social

concerns and what did he or she do about them? What was happening at the time the book was written or in the time in which it is set? Who are the powerful and who are the powerless? What is similar or different about the perspective of the book to others written in that era? In the light of these questions, the study evaluates the subject matters of the selected texts against relevant backgrounds. This approach has been selected for this study because answering the questions posed by this literary theory in the work of the selected writer is central to understanding trends that have shaped North African Drama.

### **The Genre of Drama**

The question of whether or not the Arab world has had a tradition of theatre remains an issue for debate among writers from that part of the world. According to Selmane, one popular argument has been that Islam does not allow figurative arts (ii). Tawfiq Al-Hkim has refuted this

assertion. According to him, Islam “permitted the translation of many works produced by heathens . . . [it] did not prevent the circulation of wine poetry of Abu Nuwas, the carving of statues for the palaces of the caliphs, or expert portraiture of Persian miniatures” (377). The fact has been established that indigenous art forms existed in pre-Islamic societies; and “Arab-Muslim societies have long traditions in the performing art and in drama in particular” (3). This has been further promoted by colonialism and western cultural influences.

Arab dramatists have thus been involved in what Selmane describes as pouring “local dramatic content into a borrowed form (13)”. For instance, in describing the important role which translation has played in introducing new ways of writing into Arabic Literature, Talahite has cited Al-Hakim’s example. According to Al-Hakim, in drama, dialogue and characterization, among other dramatic techniques are

adopted to suit the demands of the Arab culture. Some adaptation of European plays to the Arabic stage have required a change of plot “so that male and female characters were related” since “tradition did not allow an Egyptian woman to appear unveiled in front of a person not related to her” (42). It has been further argued however, that North African playwrights “have now found a content which creates its own form (13). Therefore, the study of North African drama will require a proper study of style and thematic preoccupations. Translations and adaptations of European plays and the changes these have required to suit the Arabic audience have played significant roles in bringing about the development of the Arabic drama (42 – 43).

### **Tawfiq Ismail Al-Hakim**

Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898-1987) is one of the most brilliant Egyptian writers. His family was very interested in his education moving from town to another to join school. His father sent him to a village near Alexandria to attend his primary and

secondary schools. Then, he moved to Cairo with his uncle and studied Law at Cairo University. He got Bachelor’s Degree in Law in 1924. His stay in Cairo enabled him to attend theatre and give him the chance to begin his drama writing.

Al-Hakim was active against the British occupation of Egypt that resulted of being captured for a short period in 1919. His early work was *The Heavy Guest* was against the British occupation. This activity was against his father’s wish who thought seriously to get his son away from this corrupted environment. Therefore, he sent him to Paris for higher studies in Law in 1925. His stay in Paris gave him the chance to be in touch with European literature and theatre. It was a great chance also to meet famous playwrights. At that time, he has become well known among many great writers as Ibsin, Shaw, and Maeterlinck (22). In the twentieth century, Arabic literature has witnessed emergence of great writers as Taha Hussein (1889-1973), Abbas Al-Aqqad (1889-1964), Ibrahim Al-

Mazini (1890-1945), and Mohamud Taymur (1894- 1973) who initiated the foundations of modern Egyptian literature have taken the lead of the Arabic literature scene for many decades. Their works have been translated into many languages. This generation ended by the end of Al-Hakim's life in 1987, who according to Badawi, is entitled as the father of Arabic modern literature (949).

Tawfiq al Hakim, who has also written novels, short stories and essays, is a leading figure in drama. He has contributed immensely to the development of drama, not only in Egypt, but in modern Arabic literature. The Egyptian playwright has written plays, which deal with universal and local themes, such as the pursuit of freedom, loss of direction by the society, political oppression and the Israel – Palestine conflict. Plays by Al Hakim include *The People of the Cave* (1933), *Suicide Secret* (1937), *King Oedipus* (1944), *The Perplexed Sultan* (1960), *Food for Every*

*Mouth* (1963) and *Fate of a Cockroach* (1967).

Al Hakim has been influenced by the French Theatre of the Absurd and modernist theatre such as the Bertolt Brecht. However Islam had remained his major source and influence. In his adaption of *King Oedipus (Al-Malik Udib)*, the author removes superstitious beliefs, fate and prophesies, to fit with Islamic sensibilities (66). He has described his play as quoted in Sidebottom “a Greek tragedy through Muslim eyes” (31). Hermalain has stated that in translation, culture plays a decisive role in attaining an acceptable rendition (32). There is a need to present “a version which should produce the same effect(s) and stir up the same emotion(s) on the target audience” as Leo Hickey quoted in Sidebottom. (36).

### **The Thoughts of Absurdity**

The term “absurd” refers to nonsensical, opposed to reason, silly,

foolish, senseless, ridiculous, and topsyturvy things (Oxford Dictionary). It implies that man's life is purposeless. He cannot connect with others. The central themes of the Theatre of the Absurd are lack of purpose which produces a state of metaphysical anguish. In fact, "The Theatre of Absurd" appears in France in 1950s as a reaction of the World War II and the catastrophic events in the world at this time (15). The term itself was coined by Martin Esslin to describe works by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Tom Stoppard and others. This genre of drama writing cannot be described as an organized theatrical movement since the

playwrights who practice this theatre express their own personal approach for both subject and form. There is no school of thought that gathered them but they follow Albert Camus's philosophy.

Camus introduced the term "absurd" in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). His notion is used as the basic of the absurd theatre. According to him, there is no inherent meaning in the universe; human condition is meaningless. He believes that there is no God or supernatural force guided the Earth "The absurd, which is the metaphysical state of the conscious man, does not lead to God" (40). White says that:

Camus believed that, despite the limitation in perspective and the absurdity of life, humans can make decisions that lead to less suffering. This is not the eradication of evil...it is instead the work of humans to reduce suffering when they can, to act with acceptance that all cannot be healed, resolved, or explained on this earth (557).

This free, active and optimistic philosophy of Camus gives people the chance to rethink of their values and seek justice. He

invites people to focus only on present temporal existence. He clarifies absurdity simply as "a total absence of hope (which



has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be compared to immature unrest)” (31). It is clear that hope, which is related to future, has no place in this philosophy since future is nonexistent. Anderson claims that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a clear examination of the painful reality of human condition as the pursuit of meaning in a meaningless universe (54). Camus clarifies in his essay that humans like Sisyphus in repeating their daily tasks to reach nothing but their imminent death. He also asserts that man should revolt against the silence of universe to assert the dignity of his existence and affirm his identity as an “absurd hero” with an “absurd freedom”.

Hence, this kind of drama is written from an existential point of view with no true order. There is no specific form of writing to be followed. There are no ordered events that lead to a story. All events lead to nothing. It just ends where it has started. Also, there is no logically built-up dialogue. Audience is forced to think about the issues

presented since language confuses them. Absurd theatre can be perfectly described as Ionesco called it “anti-theatre” as it does not follow any of the main characteristics of traditional drama. It is a revolution against conventional theatre

### **Leadership Problem and The Consequences of Individualism in The Play**

In *Fate of a Cockroach (Masir Sirsour)*. Al Hakim uses allegory to dramatize the Arab nation’s inability to unite against a united Israel, and the consequences of individualism. The drama also expresses the need for better leadership in Egypt, as an attack on the leadership of Gamal Abdal Nasir, Egyptian president at that time. Another theme in acts 2 and 3 is feminine domination, which the playwright protests. Al Hakim is known to be a misogynist. He had given himself the title “Adu Al-marah”, - “Enemy of Women”. It is believed that he had taken this position as a result of his mother’s domineering attitude toward his father

while he was growing up (26). Absurdist elements abound in *Fate of a Cockroach*.

In act one of the play, the cockroaches, who are larger than ants, are individualistic; as a result, a cockroach is easily carried away by ants once it falls on its back. The king cockroach's court is made up of the self – appointed minister, the servant and the priest. Amidst jeering and taunting comments from the queen cockroach, these cockroach leaders are unable to come up with a solution to their

age-long ants' problem. The minister's son has just been carried off by ants. The king himself soon ends up falling into a human bathtub.

In acts 2 and 3, in the human world, Samia and her husband Adil argue over the fate of the cockroach in their bathtub. Eventually their cook runs a bath, the cockroach drowns and its corpse is carried off by the ants. The humans study the activities of the insects and wonder at the genius of ants, as seen thus;

Adil: Take note of that ant in the front. Do you see it?

Doctor: Yes, it's dragging the cockroach by its whiskers.

Adil: As though it were a ship tow rope.

Doctor: And these group of ants in the rear, they are pushing it from the back. Do you see?

Adil: The works are distributed among them with extraordinary discipline.

Doctor: And the most extraordinary thing is that they are going up at speed, despite their heavy load.

Adil: There's only a short distance left between them and a crack of warehouse.

But look, it seems as if the opening is too small for the size of the cockroach.

How can it be got in?

Doctor: Don't be afraid, it will get in – nothing is too difficult for the genius of ants.

(73).

## **Conclusion**

Within the New Historicist framework, the study has provided an understanding that North African Drama, in spite of its affiliations to Arab Drama, is African Drama. Indeed North African drama cannot be studied as purely African without acknowledging or engaging in some study of Middle-Eastern influences and affiliations of North Africa, as a result of Arab nationalism. There is a strong influence of the West on North African literary thought and style, (the influence on language has not been as strong though, since most North African playwrights have continued to write in Arabic language). In addition, the new historicist reading of the literary texts selected for this study, has shown that African drama from North of the Sahara has developed from colonial,

and socio-political experiences that are similar to that of their African counterparts.

However, drama emerged as a relatively new genre in modern Arabic literature. Today, however, North African drama, which is modelled after Western dramatic forms, has either been adapted to suit its new environment or modified in line with the individual Arab dramatist's style; and thrives as a distinctively Arab form. This fact is established through the critical evaluation of selected work of Tawfiq Al-Hakim.

This study arrives at the following conclusions: First, that North African Drama has not been adequately recognised or represented in African literary canon. There is indeed, the need for African literary studies and criticism to engage in what Olusegun-Joseph has described as a

re-orientation of its gaze “towards a template of the total artistic, thematic, cultural and epistemological dynamics of the African historic and textual experience...through functional reading of its plural representation...” (229). Secondly, that the thematic preoccupations of the playwright is mostly essentially the same, but vary, based on factors such as ideological positions, personal experiences and gender. Furthermore, the style of writing relies greatly on literary experiences. Essentially, both theme and style are significantly influenced by the societal concern at the time of writing. It is therefore evident that a writer is the product of his society.

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