

The Arabs and The Theatre

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The dramatic art is a social phenomenon that left lasting effects in the life of so many peoples in old and present. It occupies a superior place among other arts.

This phenomenon was first known by the ancient Egyptians, the Romans as well as by the Indians, the Chinese, and the Japanese and in many other parts of the world.

Now a question arises: did the ancient Arabs know the dramatic art as other nations did or is it something newly introduced into the Arab life?

The answer to the question is dealt with in a book entitled. «The Arabs and The Theatre» by Muhammad Kamal Al-Deen and published by Al-Hilal Publishing House, Cairo.

Now, we provide the reader with the main points the author raised, then discuss the conclusions he came to in his book.

The author introduces his book by saying that some western and Arab scholars think that the Arabs had never



been acquainted with the theatre before the French campaign conquered Egypt in the nineteenth century and brought therein some theatrical groups. Through Egypt the eastern Arabs had their first touch with the dramatic art. Hence it spread out with its western type. On the same lines the pure Arabic theatre was to be founded later.

Their main point, then, is that the Arabs, throughout all their past history, had no pre-concept of the theatre.

In his first chapter the author gives examples of some Arab intellectuals who stand in support of this attitude: that the ancient Arabs had been alien to the theatre.

He begins with Al-'Aqqad who believes that «acting is an art closely related to the kind of community life the people lives. As the old Arab community had no hierarchy of social responsibilities due to the absence of any diversity in life activities, workcrafts and social classes, the dramatic art was unlikely.»

Zaki Naguib Mahmoud adds that the Arabs had never known the play or novel writing for they never attended to the individual characteristics that distinguish a man from another.

Whereas Tawfiq Al-Hakeem relates this absence of the theatre to the unsettled nomadic life of the Arabs Ahmed Amin attributes it to religious factors. Islam, he says, prohibits impersonation. So it is irreligious to act.

However, Sahair Al-Qalamawi goes further to allege that the Arab mind itself is the cause behind this absence. It is, by nature, an abstractive and not an analytical mind, a situation contrary to the prerequisites of the existence of the theatre.

The German orientalist, Justave von Grunebaum, maintains that Moslem 'Sunni' writers could not create a



dramatic art in spite of their contact with the Greek and Indian cultures. The reason did not relate to any historical factor. It is a product of the concept of man in Islam itself, that concept which resists any dramatic conflict within a moslem.

Jacque Burke, the French orientalist, stands in the same camp even though he relates the cause to the classical Arabic language as an inadequate tool of dramatic communication in his view.

In refutation of these arguments the author quotes the opinions of Taha Husain and Abdul Rahman Badawi.

Taha Husain thinks that in Arabic poetry we could find many characteristics of narrative poetry. This is best represented by the Arab poets like Gareer, Al-Farazdaq and Al-Akhtal where we have a reflection of the community life and of their age, the same part played by the Iliad and the Odyssey in Greek poetry.

Abdul Rahman Badawi adds that the Arabs had received in their own land, some dramatic types reminiscent of the Greek theatre after the decline of that art and the civilization that gave it life.

As for the instable kind of life of the Arabs referred to the author says the Arabs had known settled life in the old Yemen civilization and in their Arabian urban centres of Macca, Taif, Yathrib, Yanbu', Mena and Khaibar. They also experienced this kind of life at large in Baghdad, Damascus, Palestine and Syria.

He moves to defend the Arab mind taken by some as merely abstractive. Examples of the Arabs analytical mind are shown in their long «Mu'allaqat» their minute descriptions of colour differences, the annales of 'Zuhair....etc.

Besides, he continues, the Arabs had never been taken as people of brevity in expression. On the contrary, their writings are generally accused of being too lengthy and detailed. As for classical Arabic it could communicate efficiently enough dramatic and theatrical expression. We can comprehend the dialogue in old Arabic writings, grasp its meaning and memorize it no less than we do with that of modern dramatic and novel writings.

In the third chapter (From the Arab Social and Cultural History) the author gives a bird's eye look on the Arab history throughout the ages. He starts by Arabia, its surface, climate and population in relation to those of other countries that experienced the dramatic art. His object is to make clear that all peoples share many aspects of similarity in the early stages of their human and cultural growth. He then gives an idea of the Arabs cultural life as represented by their seasonal literary contestations during the pilgrimage where poems could pass from mouth to mouth and where they could recite poetry and talk and boast of their high-breeding and noble descent. These seasonal competitions were known as 'Okaz', 'Dhul-Magaz' and 'Meganna'. Other examples of the Arabs cultural legacy are shown by thousands of books and manuscripts. The author also gives an idea of the islamic and popular tales.

In the fourth chapter (Old Dramatic Phenomena) the author talks about novel, poetry, epic and «Maqama» writing. On the novel he says that tale - telling is a quality common in all peoples. The teller would choose for himself his own subject, his situations and the emotions he feels making use of the experience of others. The Arabs knew all this in the past and the present. As for poetry it has been the life record of the Arabs and the manifestation of their pride and genius. In that poetry we find so many dramatic features especially in the «Seven 'Mu'allaqat'» and some other long poems. About 'Al-Maqama', the author continues, it had been originally meant, since pre-islamic time, to be dramatic literature. One single actor would undertake

the performance from beginning to end directly before an audience. Of the most famous 'Maqamat' are those of Al-Jahiz, Al-Hamadhani and Al-Hareeri.

In the fifth chapter (Some Arabic Dramatic works) the author reviews some dramatic tales to point out their historical significance in Arabic literature as well as their precedence over similar works in the east and the west alike. An example is the work titled 'Al-Teejan Fi Mùlùk Himyar' by Abu Muhammad Abdul Malik ibn Hisham. Ibn Hisham tells the story of the world, beginning with the creation of the universe, the skies, the angels, the stars, paradise, hell, 'Iblis', the demons, the animals, the seasons, the earth down to the creation of Adam and Eve and their posterity until he comes to the age of the Himyarite kings.

Another example is the book named 'Al-Farag Ba'ad Al-Shedda' (Relief after Suffering) by Al-Qadhi ibn Tameem Al-Tùnùkhi which can be considered as one of the most extensive Arabic books containing seeds of dramatic literature. The main theme of the stories included in the book is quite simple: man's life-lasting struggle in this world, and the difficulties he meets without losing heart or giving in until he emerges victorious in the end.

Other examples of Arabic dramatic writings are 'Resalat Al-Tawabe'a wa Al-Zawabe'a' (The Message of the Demons) by Ibn Shaheed Al-Andalousi, and 'Resalat Al-Ghufran' (The Message of Forgiveness) by Abu Al-'Ala' Al-Ma'arri where we find, in the latter, dramatic action and dialogue accompanied by poetic expressive hymns which we might call incidental music. Al-Ma'arri imagines himself on a sight - seeing ride in paradise after beholding the horrors of the Judgment Day.

The last example given in this chapter is the integrated play 'Yawmu Al-Qiyama' (The Day of Judgment) by Muhammad ibn Mehrez Al-Wahrani. The whole play is but a dream in which the writer imagines himself on the day of



final judgment. It is written in an elegant non-rhymed dialogue. With some adaptation the play could be performed on the stage.

With the Sixth chapter (A Pure Arabic Theatre) the author's journey comes to an end. Again he stresses the idea that the Arabs, since long time past, had been acquainted with the dramatic art be it playwriting itself, a stage to play on, actors to perform the play or an audience to attend the performance. No other people could compete with them in the forms of expression they devised for their tales and poems. They were the first, among all peoples, to start telling a tale by saying "Once upon a time.....", and "It happened long long ago...." ..etc. It was this pure Arabic drama, as the author noted, that gave the play 'Al-Ta'azi' (The Condolences) which tells the story of 'Al-Husain, : of his life and martyrdom in 'Karbala'. The play was the theme of a Ph.D. thesis by the Tunisian writer Muhammad Aziza. It tells about the murder of Al-Husain. The telling is accompanied with music and sound effects. It glorifies the heroic values in Al-Husain and his followers, their bravery, patience and sacrifice.

Other texts of this 'Pure Arabic Drama' are 'Sarah Wa Hajar' (Sarah and Hadjar) which tells the story of Sarah and Abraham and 'Sa'ad Al-Yateem' (Sa'ad The Orphan). The Arabs also knew the 'Karagöz' show - an old form of children and adult theatre - and the 'Khayal Al-Zil' theatre (The shadow play) where, in the first, we have dolls moved directly before the audience by using either strings or hands, and, in the latter, the audience beholds only the dolls shadow moving on a transparent curtain.

In his book the author managed to prove that the Arabs' dramatic experience is not restricted to recent age but dates back to olden times, an idea contrary to what some modern studies on the subject have affirmed.

His book has come to be a historical study based upon chronological observation of phenomena without objec-



ting them to proper scientific analysis. He should have made an analytical and comparative scrutiny of the textual evidences he gave to highlight their theatrical aspects, if there are any. In our view, those texts are of more narrative than dramatic nature. The historical approach itself, if not supported by a critical study, is not sufficient to secure accuracy and objectivity. Moreover, most of the author's views we quoted came as general judgments that should not have been so given without close and thorough study of the subject especially when we know that the same subject has been dealt with in so many studies all of which have come to a conclusion that the Arabs' dramatic experience is quite recent. The reason is simple. The Arab need for the theatre only arose in modern time. It was their need, and not any deficiency in the Arab creativity, that decided the absence and the presence of the theatre.

Any art does not grow from nothing but must be helped to grow. When certain conditions existed in the last century the theatre had the chance to sprout. It grew to satisfy an Arab need.

To sum up, we disagree with the author's conclusion that the Arabs had been acquainted with the theatre in their past history.

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