

THE WARRING SHEHEREZADE TRADITION AND FOLKLORE IN THE IRAQI DRAMA

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Contemporary Arab writers of various fields of literature incessantly look back towards the past of human communities, particularly that of their own. This trend has developed since the middle of the 19th century, i.e. from the beginning of the *nahda* — the Arab Renaissance. Well-known poets like Aḥmad Ṣawqī and ‘Azīz Abāza in Egypt sought their themes in historical events, myths and legends. Generally speaking, Arab writers of this period considered the past of human communities as a source of artistic devices and reflections over contemporaneity.

Iraqi authors shared this attitude with the whole of the Arab world. For instance, a famous traditional poet, representative of the so-called trend of the renewal of classical poetry, Ġamīl Ṣidqī az-Zahāwī, in his poem “*The Arabic community*” (‘*Urūba*), expressed nostalgic longing for the excellent Arab past. In an other poem, “*The revolution in hell*” (*Tawrat al-ġahīm*), he recalled the great poet Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 1058) and raised him to a post of leader of a rebellion in the beyond (Bielawski & Skarżyńska & Jasińska 1978: 308). Such pairs of notions like *the past* and *revolution*, *the tradition* and *renewal* irrevocably entered literature, and they had wide repercussions in the Iraqi drama of the successive decades.

In this place, I would like to confine myself to the wide semantic field of the notion of tradition: “However, the word «tradition» has many various meanings according to what aspects of the dependence of the present day on the past are borne in mind. Generally, it can only be said in this subject that it refers to a phenomenon of the durability of culture or of some of its elements (...), and to the «inheritance» of culture by consecutive generations” (Szacki 1991: 207).

This understanding of tradition seems to be very close to Arabic culture, in view of the great popularity of the notion of *turāt*, the cultural heritage, in Arab countries. The strong links with *turāt* guarantee the durability of culture and its further development today and in future. Contemporary Arab playwrights do not spare pains in order to create and strengthen these links.

Precursors of the Iraqi drama on the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries already showed an indisputable “will of inheriting”, which Szacki links (*ibid.* 210) to the notion of tradition, as they found their plots in myths, legends, folklore and a broadly-conceived past. Seeking their themes, they reach the oldest times; one of the first dramas in Iraq is a play “Adam and Eve” (*Adam wa-Hawwā*, 1800) by Ḥanna Ḥabašī, on the origins of human kind. Iraqis, together with Lebanese, — both communities connected to the church — introduced Christian subjects into Arabic plays.

At the beginning of the 20th century and in the following decades, Iraqi playwrights were taking their themes from the life of ancient communities, but most willingly they presented the events and legends of their own region. The writers were attracted by the ancient past, and old, semi-legendary kingdoms experienced once more their full bloom and collapse in Iraqi play-writing, e.g. in the play "The ring—dove from Niniweh" (*Yamāmat Naynāwa*) of Sulaymān Šā'ig. However, the protagonists representing the Arabs and Moslems of the first centuries of the *hiğra* took the lead in this drama. The Arabs carried on here their desperate tribal struggles, and fought for honour and reputation according to a vendetta law which often served as a basis of dramatic conflicts, e.g. in "The valour of Arabs" (*Šabāmat al-^carab*, 1938) of Nasīm Malūl. The authors also used to stage the victorious march of the first Muslims on the various roads of Asia and North Africa. The concrete stages of this march were reflected e.g. in *al-Qādisiyya* (1935), "The conquest of Syria" (*Faḥ aš-Šām*) by Yaḥyā ^cAbdalwāhid or "The conquest of Amūriyya" (*Faḥ al-Amūriyya*) by ^cAbdalmağīd Šawqī. Till the 1960s and even 1970s, long Iraqi plays, sometimes even five-act plays, were written in a discursive and didactic manner. They were illusionary dramas imitating the phenomena of the past, and showed, above all, the right and wrong of old-time, always full of moralising examples. Their aesthetics was meeting the rules of literature rather than the needs of theatre. The language of these plays consisted of poetic and prose utterances, and it included rhymed prose, often all appearing in one play. I include this kind of Iraqi plays in trend of Arabic drama which I call neoclassicism (from the second half of the 19th century to the 1960s).

Neoclassical dramas in Iraq referred to the broadly-conceived tradition, understood as a part of the past submitted to "the will of inheriting". Starting with the 1960s and 1970s, it has shown distinctly folk and folkloristic features. The beautiful and clever Sheherezade, whose charming figure stood on the front of the new drama in Iraq, has originated from the folk epics. In this period, Iraqi writers included the dramas in a current of changes which permeated the whole of Arab dramaturgy. Arabic playwrights resisted the former illusionism and became great creators of a new dramatic reality, full of unusual solutions and approaches. Above all, they juggled and played with time and space, trying to encompass *turāt* and ground it in contemporaneity. A spirit of change existed also in the contents of the dramas of the new wave. The playwrights protested openly or by way of various camouflages against all the forms of coercion, compulsion and violence in relation to an individual and a community¹. I include this drama, developed in the 1960s and 1970s, in a trend which I call crea-

¹ They are particular: Aḥmad aṭ-Ṭayyib aš-Šiddīqī and Aḥmad al-^cAlağ from Morocco, 'Izz ad-Dīn al-Madanī from Tunisia, ^cAbdallāh al-Quwayrī from Lybia, Šalāh ^cAbdaššabūr, Šawqī ^cAbdalḥakīm, Maḥmūd Diyāb, Alfred Farağ, Yūsuf Idrīs, Miḥā'il Rūmān, Nağīb Surūr from Egypt, Walīd Iḥlāšī and Sa'd Allāh Wannūs from Syria, Yūsuf al-^cĀnī, ^cĀdil Kāzim, Qāsim Muḥammad from Iraq.

tionism (Machut-Mendecka 1992: 118). Iraqi playwrights do not lag behind but keep up with other Arabic writers. One of the first plays written in the new style in Iraq is "The Death and Matter" (*al-Mawt wa-l-qadiyya*) by ʿĀdil Kāzīm. This is exactly the play in which Sheherezade entered with her inseparable companion Shahriyar, though this sinister king from *The Arabian Nights* assumed here a form of a dolly listening to the princess' fairy-tales. Sheherezade lived on the border of dream and reality, and in this fantastic space, she coped with the inertia of two dervishes inefficiently seeking purity. A Revolutionist tears her out from the dream, conveying the Book of the Revolution to her. It seems that the brave Sheherezade will carry out this responsible task. Sheherezade is not a lonely figure in Iraqi drama. Her duties are shared particularly by the protagonists of the plays of Yūsuf al-ʿĀnī, ʿĀdil Kāzīm and Qāsīm Muḥammad. All those protagonists occur in the same space, on the border of fantasy and reality, which form a coherent unity. The real part of this space is a fairyland of Baghdad, Kufa, or Damascus, vibrant with life. In these towns, active merchants, sellers, smart beggars and avaricious, boastful rich men experience many adventures; there stir about various craftsmen, wander ruffians as well as heralds who always have to say something important. On streets and bazaars pass figures of folk artists, trainers of apes and other animals, and walk about more or less gifted poets or chiromancers. The latter group offers services which meet the spiritual needs of the inhabitants. There come and go figures of wise men; one of them is Abū l-ʿAql, the literary Rational in "It once happened" (*Kān yā mā kān*), who wanders through out the world, seeking knowledge. The colourful crowd from Arabic towns and countryside keeps exactly medieval standards. It is offered by authors who enclose with their texts lists of the historic, literary or folkloristic sources of artistic concepts. In this form, ʿĀdil Kāzīm mentioned a dozen or so *maqāmāt* on which he had based his drama "Maqāmāt of Abī l-Ward" (*Maqāmāt Abī al-Ward*), while Qāsīm Muḥammad quoted titles of folk tales which he used in writing his play "The eternal Baghdad, half joking, half serious" (*Bagdād al-azal bayna l-ḡadd wa-l-hazal*). The traditions, precisely outlined, begin almost to live their own life. The drama free of the cause-and-effect order of events and linear time enables one to develop creative imagination. That is why in the play titled "The time Killed in Dayr al-ʿAqūl. al-Mutanabbī" (*az-Zamān al-maqtūl fī Dayr al-ʿAqūl. al-Mutanabbī*) by ʿĀdil Kāzīm, two great poets from the different epochs of the Arabic Middle Ages, Abū l-ʿAlā' al-Maʿarrī, and al-Mutanabbī (915-965), about one century more recent, stood side by side. Perhaps this example shows to what extent the Iraqi playwrights disregard the natural course of events while creating a new dramatic reality. Despite their ethnographic disposition and inclination to outline all the details of medieval customs and habits, they decidedly opposed illusionism in the theatre. Their resolute attitude almost automatically brings to mind the personality of a great foe of theatrical illusionism, Bertold Brecht. Above all, Iraqi drama is lavish in Brecht's famous effect of alienation, which does not leave the spectator to identify himself with the course of dramatic events,

and makes him keep distance from what is going on in the scene. Such a spectator avoids excessive excitement and is able to develop a discursive and critical thought. I do not intend to discuss here Brecht's influences on Iraqi drama. I am rather talking about parallelisms, all the more so, as the person responsible here for the effect of alienation is usually a classic Arabic narrator, called *rāwī*, *rāwiya*, *maddāh* or *ḥākī*, who conducted traditional folk spectacles. A typical *rāwiya* appeared in "The eternal Baghdad..." where he told the story of the town, from time to time interspersing the dramatic action with his remarks. *Rāwiya*, actors and choirs comment events, and link or unite loose, dramatic images, which are so popular in creationist dramas. Such a composition is another aspect of Iraqi play-writing that resembles Brecht's works. But parallelisms are more numerous, as they include Brecht's famous songs and stage setting, full of information or even statements. Folk songs illustrate the events of the Palestinian conflict outlined in "Maqāmāt of Abī al-Ward" by ʿĀdil Kāzim or "I, personal pronoun" (*Anā ḍamīr al-mutakallim*) by Qāsim Muḥammad. In the same play, inscriptions with the dates of 1948 and 1968 indicate the successive stages of the conflict: the establishment of the state of Israel and the period, very painful for the Arabs, following the so-called June war. Inscriptions and watchwords usually appear in the stage setting of the dramas. All those theatrical means are to stimulate the spectator's imagination and encourage him to become active. The rich fables and the dynamism of the dramas enhance the suggestiveness of the plays. Simple, folk tales turn into a jungle of crossing plots, bewildering a receiver. In "Maqāmāt of Abī al-Ward", the main hero leads a folk theatrical troupe and experiences various adventures, as well as passing through hard times in the course of the drama. Simultaneously, the troupe's spectacle on the medieval Iraqi, folk uprising is being developed. At the same time, the Damascus bazaar lives its own life and a family of beggars is in constant conflict with the local police. The dramatic action also takes place in the palace, where the strong queen-mother governs, while her son, the ruler, and the minister plan to resist a Byzantine attack at the expense of the people. This fable is also enriched with additional plots. Similar examples can be multiplied. There are many examples, but it is worthy of note here that "The Eternal Baghdad" by Qāsim Muḥammad includes about fifty dramatic persons and each of them has something to communicate. Only those approaches pointed to the significance of narrative forms and fables in the Iraqi drama. That is why I am inclined to call it epic drama. Similarly to the old *rāwī*, who once had been informing and entertaining his listeners, usually in a didactic way, the contemporary drama of Iraq conveys a clear message to its spectators. Within its framework, somewhat metaphorically speaking, Sheherezade is no more a submissive spouse of a despotic king, but stands in a row of fighters. Their number increases and encompasses many other protagonists of Iraqi drama. All the innovatory dramatic means and complicated fables make the heroes to clamour for their rights. The plays reject the illusionism of former play-writing but preserve its clear didacticism, which seems to be even tendentially exaggerated.

Maybe this means a new kind of an old genre of *piece a these*. The thesis indicates a categorical will of action; it is an assumption and a requirement, as well as a patriotic declaration. The will of action leads to useful and active life, based on the work of the heroes' own hands and minds in "Once happened" by Qāsim Muḥammad, the play in which the king's daughter, exhausted with life of sloth in a palace, willingly turns into a weaver. Above all, Iraqi drama sounds calls for a renewal and general change of the reality, to which the protagonists of "The Key" (*al-Miftāḥ*) by Yūsuf al-Ānī wander, according to the contents of an old, folk lullaby. In other plays — "The Ruin" (*al-Harāba*) by the same author, "The killed time in Dayr al-Āqūl. al-Mutanabbī" and "Maqāmāt of Abī al-Ward" by Ādil Kāzīm, "The Eternal Baghdad..." by Qāsim Muḥammad — the thesis stands for a concept of revolution, formulated *expressis verbis* by the protagonists themselves. The meaning of revolution is perhaps wider than that usually connected with this notion. After all, it is to break out because *turāt* is on fire in "The traditional repasts" (*Maḡālis at-turāt*) by Qāsim Muḥammad, and also because an inherited beautiful, free mare was lost in "I, the personal pronoun" by the same author. The revolution seems to be inseparably linked to the will of inheriting and the collective memory of the Arabs. Moreover, in the creationist Iraqi dramas, sometimes the echo of antiquity can be found e.g. in "The Ruin" by Yūsuf al-Ānī, a play devoted to Arab, Palestinian and Vietnamese struggle. Here *licencia poetica* enables a contemporary, ruthless woman, an advocate of the defence of Israel, to turn into Ashtarut, an ancient goddess cruel towards men, whose marriage proposals are being constantly rejected by the great Gilgamesh. In this way, the legendary hero warns against the force of evil that has been so vital since ancient times.

However, the plays of Yūsuf al-Ānī, Ādil Kāzīm and Qāsim Muḥammad most often refer to the great Arab-Muslim community. In this respect, trends of neoclassicism and creationism in the Iraqi drama carry a similar message. The dramatic thesis of works of the two trends expresses a feeling of the unity of the Arab-Muslim community in every historical period. Al-Mutanabbī, the title protagonist of the play by Ādil Kāzīm, goes to the desert to restore the great Arab state. Baghdad occupies the particular position of a capital of a real state and a meaningful symbol in "The traditional repasts" by Qāsim Muḥammad, since the author describes this town as the place of action, and calls it "a symbolic homeland as well as part of our great homeland that was, is or will be raped" (Muḥammad, *Maḡālis*). The protagonists of the play "I, personal pronoun" declare their affiliation to the Arab nation, resorting to arms among explosions and the whistle of bullets... The Iraqi drama indicates that "the will of inheriting" is significant for present and future relations. This semantics is emphasised by the new lay-out of time and space, inconsistent with the natural course of events, which I mentioned above. The signs of the three realities — past, present and future — simultaneously force their way to the old Baghdad, "The eternal Baghdad", the play by Qāsim Muḥammad which I often quoted in my paper as very

representative of the Iraqi creationist drama. Here, against a background of medieval stage setting, carefully observing a traditional style, there appears a merchant in a palanquin assuming the form of a contemporary car. This small detail, besides many verbal statements, points out that, for Iraqi playwrights, the past and the present are inseparable.

The epic, monumental theatre with a thesis has been developing due chiefly to three outstanding authors, Yūsuf al-Ānī, ʿĀdil Kāzīm and Qāsīm Muḥammad, whose literary output served as a basis for my paper. In addition to this trend, lyrical dramas, free of pathos, are also written in Iraq, e.g. "The white tragedy" (*al-Masā' al-baydā'*, 1977) by Ġālib Fāḍil al-Muṭṭalibī, a play which takes place in the unconsciousness of a ruler longing to become a beggar. Nevertheless, the attachment to tradition and folklore distinguishes Iraqi playwrights against the background of the whole of Arab drama. With the admirable ardour of patriots, they promote their wide legacy in defence of national and humanistic values.

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