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# **THE ROOTS OF ARABIC THEATRE**

**SUBMITTED BY: BAKER AI-SHEDDI**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**THE FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM**

**C. M. E. I. S.**

**JULY, 1997**



**19 FEB 1998**

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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To my beloved wife, Latifa

As a token and a remembrance for her love and support.

To the future, my sons: Faisal and Mo'taz.

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## Abstract

Some Western and Arab scholars claim that, for religious reasons, Islam prohibited the practice of theatre because the religious authorities believe that theatrical portrayal of humans would challenge or compete with God in his unique creative power. As a result of that, Arabs did not attempt to express themselves through the medium of theatrical arts. Those scholars consider the Napoleonic Expedition to Egypt to have been the turning point which accelerated the Arab Renaissance.

The main aim of this study is to demonstrate that various forms of performances, music and oral traditions have been enjoyed in the Middle East since ancient times. These activities have reflected the artistic, intellectual and popular taste of the peoples of the region.

*Hikâya*, *Khayâl al-Zill* and *Ta'ziya* were some of the forms of public entertainment already known to the Arab world before the arrival of theatre in the middle of the nineteenth century. Those types which contain theatrical elements appealed both to the Arabic general public and to the educated classes across the generations.

The study is divided into two parts. The first consists of a brief introduction to Islamic history with reference to the contribution of the Muslims to the various fields of civilisation, in particular fine arts. It focuses on events that have provided materials for storytellers and *Ta'ziya* performers and examines the attitude of Islam toward entertainment and theatre. This section includes an investigation into the possibility that drama did exist in Arab history prior to its contact with the West. The negative perspective and the positive perspective have all been explored. Also the European theatrical conventions are set out as a standard of comparison for the "old forms."

The second section begins with a short history of a number of traditional Arabic forms of entertainment, including *Samâjât*, *Nawrûz*, *Kurraj*, *al-Muhabizzîn* and *al-Sâmir*. It looks at *Ta'ziya* and attempts to identify in it certain basic elements of the European conventional drama, such as: plot, mimicry, characters and audience participation. *Khayâl al-Zill* (the shadow play) is also examined in detail. The art of *Hikâya* (storytelling) is explored in depth as this also involves a performance before an audience. The section leads us, logically, to the modern roots of the last phase of the Arabic theatre, concentrating on Mârûn al-Naqqâsh, Abû Khalîl al-Qabbânî and Ya'qûb Sannû'. These dramatists failed in their attempt to produce perfect imitations of the European dramatic forms for two reasons: firstly, their inexperience in writing European drama, and secondly the old forms of Arabic entertainment strongly influenced their writing and thinking. So they included the older elements in drama, reflecting the Arabic styles of drama rather the European, in order to satisfy their audiences. The thesis concludes with the movement of Syrian and Lebanese theatrical troupes to Egypt and with lyrical theatre.

## TRANSLITERATION

### System of Transliteration from Arabic to English :

alif        a

hamza     ’

fâ'        f

bâ'        b

qâf        q

tâ'        t

kâf        k

thâ'      th

lâm        l

jîm        j

mîm        m

hâ'      h

nûn        n

khâ'      kh

hâ'        h

dâl        d

wâw        w

dhâl    dh

yâ'        y

râ'        r

zây        z

Fatha ( short ) a. ( long ) â.

sîn        s

Kasra ( short ) i. ( long ) î.

shîn      sh

Damma ( short ) u. ( long ) û.

sâd      s

dâd      d

tâ'        t

zâ'        z

'ayn      ‘

ghayn    gh

## INTRODUCTION

It has long been the belief of Western scholars that no theatre existed in Arabic-Islamic culture due to a supposed Islamic belief that theatrical portrayal of humans would challenge or compete with God in his unique creative power. For this reason such scholars claim that Muslims prohibited the practice of theatre. According to the prominent historians of this field, Arabic drama and theatre can only be traced back as far as the Napoleonic Expedition to Egypt. They consider this Expedition to have been the turning point which accelerated the Arab Renaissance which in turn provided the climate in which Mârûn al-Naqqâsh (d.1855) was able to ‘invent’ the Arabic play and theatre.

There have, in fact, been two instances of theatrical tradition of foreign origin being imported into the eastern Mediterranean. Firstly, following the Greek and Roman conquests of the Near East (331 B.C.E.), Hellenistic theatre was introduced. The ruins have been found of several Hellenistic and Roman theatres in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and North Africa. These indicate that the theatre played an important role in the religious, political and cultural life both of Hellenistic pagans and, to a certain extent, in that of Jews and, later, Christians. The question has to be asked: what was the situation in the period between these two stages, the spread of Hellenism, on the one hand and the Napoleonic on the other?

Two outstanding motives have inspired this research: Firstly, why did Arab culture not develop its own theatre tradition independent of that of the West? This question is one that every person working in the field of Arab theatre has asked himself at some stage in his career. Secondly, what made shadow theatre, *Ta'ziya* and storytelling acceptable to the Arabs, especially during the medieval Islamic period?

Several types of public entertainment had been enjoyed by the Arabs for centuries. These included *Hikâya* (storytelling) which consists of a story which is performed before an audience, *Ta'ziya* (the passion play), with its plot, characters, songs and scenery, and *Khayâl al-Zill* (shadow play) which employs satirical representations in the form of mimicry. All these forms contain elements which are characteristic of their own and also contain elements from Western drama. Improved communications between the Arabs and Western nations caused Arab dramatists to emulate Western forms in place of the "old forms".

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, drama began to be accepted by the majority of the Arabs, who appreciated its aesthetic power to refine, entertain, and educate its audience. Had this newly educated public afforded this kind of respect to the "old forms" of entertainment they might have been able to develop into authentic Arabic drama. As it was, the inclination of the Egyptians and the Syrians to imitate Europe was so strong that the "old forms" were unable to compete with the more sophisticated European drama. As a result, all the pioneers of Arabic conventional theatre attempted to produce perfect imitations of European forms. These early playwrights were unable to accomplish this feat, a fact often described by

commentators on Arabic drama as a failure. However, it is my contention that it was the power of the old forms which dominated the thinking and activity of these playwrights, rendering it impossible for them to produce “perfect” European imitations. Their adherence to the forms, the material, and the expectations of Arab culture indicates that the old forms continued to be a powerful natural force toward the development of authentic Arabic drama and theatre. Since the late 1960s, Arab playwrights have attempted to employ elements from the old forms of entertainment in order to produce a drama that is purely and distinctively Arabic in both form and content, rather than forcing Arabic content into alien European forms as had previously been the case.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Arabs, particularly the educated and the wealthy, did not view acting as a respectable profession. They also considered the “old types” of entertainment to be the lowest form of art, or even not to be art at all. For this reason they completely ignored the “old forms” and their dramatic elements.

In this study, I aim to trace the roots of the modern Syrian and Egyptian theatres which were established respectively by Mârûn al-Naqqâsh in Beirut in 1847, and Ya‘qûb Şannû‘ in Cairo in 1870. I believe that the theatrical performance consists of an actor performing in front of an audience. I will therefore use the term “theatre” to refer to any place with a stage on which actors perform before an audience. In my view, the actor and the audience are the principal elements of theatre. Theatrical forms differ among various societies and cultures, with each culture developing its own theatrical forms, which reflect its own needs and beliefs. Despite the fact that the

Islamic theatrical tradition encompasses a wide non-Western theatrical tradition that characterises Oriental and African theatres, I will attempt to employ European theatrical conventions to measure the theatrical elements in the Arabic “old forms”.

I have divided my study into two parts. The first consists of a brief introduction to Islamic history with reference to the contribution of the Muslims to the various fields of civilisation, in particular fine arts. It focuses on events that have provided materials for storytellers and *Ta'ziya* performers and examines the attitude of Islam toward entertainment and theatre. This section will include an investigation into the possibility that drama did exist in Arab history prior to its contact with the West. The negative perspective, the positive perspective and al-Hakîm's perspective have all been explored. Also the European standard of conventional drama is set out as a standard of comparison for the “old forms”.

The second section begins with a short history of a number of traditional Arabic forms of entertainment, including *Samâjât*, *Nawrûz*, *Kurraj*, *al-Muhabizzîn* and *al-Sâmir*. I will look at *Ta'ziya* and attempt to identify in it certain basic elements of the European conventional drama, such as: plot, mimicry, characters and audience participation. I will also examine, in great detail, *Khayâl al-Zill* (the shadow play) and discuss and analyse three of Ibn Dâniyâl's plays. This analysis also indicates that shadow plays contain elements found in European conventional drama. They contain mimicry, dialogue, characters and plots. The art of *Hikâya* (storytelling) will be explored in depth as this also involves a performance before an audience, and the work



of a storyteller is composed for public performance, rather than for a reader, therefore in essence it is theatrical. The study of Ibn al-Jawzî's life and performances indicates the extent of the medieval storyteller's influence over his audience. The performances of the popular religious storytellers are also discussed in this section. Special attention is given to the use of characterisation, imitation of action, and dramatic dialogue. There is also a review of a number of theatrical devices and tricks employed by the popular storytellers. The section concludes with a discussion of the modern roots of the Arabic theatre, concentrating on Mârûn al-Naqqâsh, Abû Khalîl al-Qabbânî and Ya'qûb Ṣannû'. These dramatists failed in their attempt to produce perfect imitations of the European dramatic forms for two reasons: firstly, their inexperience in writing European drama, and secondly, because the old forms of Arabic entertainment strongly influenced their writing and thinking. They tended to focus mainly on several simple elements of European drama, rather than on the more complex elements, such as unified plot and round characters, which were only occasionally achieved. The research concludes with the movement of Syrian and Lebanese theatrical troupes to Egypt and with lyrical theatre being established by Salâma Hijâzî.

This study is concerned with the "old forms" and will explore them individually, with a view to demonstrating the relationship between them and formal European drama.

## Chapter One : HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ARABS

### 1.1. The Jâhiliyya :

The period of the history of the Arabs prior to the coming of Islam is called *al-Jâhiliyya*. According to Philip Hittî this term is usually rendered as "time of ignorance" or "barbarism", but in reality it means the time during which Arabia had no inspired prophet and no revealed book, for ignorance and barbarism cannot be applied to such civilization as was developed in South Arabia. In the old language there is also the concept of *'ilm* ( knowledge) which is contrasted to *jahl* (ignorance), but this opposition is founded on a secondary meaning of the Arabic root *j-h-l* ( ignore). The opposite of it is *hilm*, which means firmness, strength, physical integrity and health and mildness of manner. A *halîm* is, in short, a civilized man.<sup>[1]</sup>

When the followers of Islam wanted to eliminate the customs and habits of *al-Jâhiliyya*, they were thinking of the barbaric customs and wild mentality which distinguished Arab paganism from Islam. What the prophet Muḥammad wanted to reform was his people's morality, which was characterized by tribal pride, constant strife, the cult of revenge, rejection of forgiveness and other attributes of the Arabs in pre-Islam. Therefore, what Islam attempted to achieve was nothing but a *hilm* of higher nature.

As to the period of *al-Jâhiliyya*, Jurjî Zaydân divides it into two parts. The first *al-Jâhiliyya* lasted from pre-history until the fifth century of the Christian era. The

second began in the fifth century and lasted until the rise of Islam. According to Zaydân, there was a great difference between the Arabs of the first part of *al Jâhiliyya* and the second one. In the first part most of the Arabs, such as the Hamurabians, were civilized and living in houses in cities, while the Arabs of the second part of *al-Jâhiliyya* were mostly nomads.<sup>[2]</sup>

### 1.1.1. The Structure of Society :

The Arabian peninsula is divided into several provinces. One is Hijâz, with the chief towns being Mecca, Medinah and Tâ'if. To the southwest part of Arabia lies *Yaman*. It is the most fertile part of the country, and was once the home of Southern Arab civilization. The third part of Arabia is *Najd*. In the southeast of Arabia lies 'Umân. To the north of Oman is *Bahrain*.<sup>[3]</sup>

The inhabitants of Arabia fall into two main groups, namely, Bedouin and settled folk. The Bedouin had not attained in the sixth century the same degree of civilization as their forefathers, such as the Hamurabians. They led a wandering life as nomads. Nomadism was the dominant feature of Arabian society in the period prior to the rise of Islam. The family was controlled by a head man, while families merged into a tribe ruled by a shaykh. Thus tribalism was the basis of Arab society in the time immediately preceding the coming of Islam.<sup>[4]</sup>

The tribe was a big family which united its members through blood relationship and marriage. Whenever an Arab expressed his obedience to a tribe, he would be considered a member of the tribe. If a member of a tribe violated the rules or

regulations set by the tribe, he would be expelled.<sup>[5]</sup> Before the period preceding Islam, the Arabs had no organized government or judicial system. Those rulers who called themselves kings in reality were merely shaykhs of towns or tribes. Each tribe acted as a separate and independent governing body and this independence extended itself also to the individual members of the tribe.<sup>[6]</sup>

The pre-Islamic Arabs liked to launch raids on other tribes . Those raids were in fact due to tribal prejudice. The scope of the pre-Islamic Arabs' life was limited to the narrow concept of tribal organization. The tribal relationship was based on the principle of kinship or common blood which served as the bond of unity and solidarity among the members of the clan. Each member was required to stand by the side of his people whether they were the oppressor or the oppressed.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **1.1.2. Religion :**

The pre-Islamic Arabs followed different beliefs and religions. The most important were Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, idolatry and Hanafism. Some pre-Islamic Arabs worshipped one God and did not participate in any form of idolatry. The pre-Islamic Arabs also followed the religion of Abraham. Sabaenism is a religion involving the worship of heavenly bodies such as the sun and the moon; it spread in Arabia before Islam especially in Yemen. The effect of Jewish teaching paved the way for the Arabs to embrace Islam. Christianity spread among the tribes in the north of Arabia and Yaman in the South. The most important home of the Christians was Najrân; it was a fertile country whose inhabitants practiced agriculture and produced silk, skin and weapons.<sup>[8]</sup> The majority of the pre-Islamic Arabs worshipped stone idols.

Whenever the stones resembled a living form, they called them idols (aṣnâm) and images (awthân). Every family in Mecca had an idol in its home. Whenever a member of the house wanted to set out on a journey, his last act was to touch the idol and pray for a peaceful journey. On his return, he would do the same, expressing his gratitude for his successful journey. It is said that idol-worship was a practice foreign to the sons and followers of Ismâ'îl. 'Amr Ibn Luḥayy is credited with introducing idols. He was the ancestor of Khuzâ'ah, a Yemenite tribe which came and settled in Mecca and in time took over the duties of caring for the Ka'bah. Having organized his people and led them to security in the holy city, 'Amr was venerated and obeyed by his tribe. One day he went on a journey to Syria seeking the benefit of medicinal springs near Tiberias. There he was introduced to idol-worship, and then he brought home an idol, perhaps Hubal. He is even credited with having systematically spread idol-worship in Arabia, assigning to every tribe or major division of tribes an idol of its own.<sup>[9]</sup>

At time passed, however, the Arabs began to worship any stone or other object to which they felt an inclination. They worshipped the idol of other races, and they even dug up objects to which Noah's people accorded veneration. They preserved certain rites of the religion of Abraham and Ismâ'îl which had survived time and which the Arabs performed and practised as part of their rituals such as the rite of halting at the mountain of 'Arafât, offering sacrifices, and so on. The purity of these rites, however, was not preserved, for they introduced practices which were alien to them. It was left to the new religion to purify these rites and give the pilgrimage a new meaning.<sup>[10]</sup>

## 1.2. The Rise of Islam :

The rise of Islam in Arabia brought about a great change in Arabian culture. Islam introduced the concept of *tawhîd*, that is, the belief in Allâh as the one God. Islam also rejected pre-Islamic values and practices, such as tribalism and it introduced, in their place, the concept of brotherhood and *umma*, a form of universal community whose membership is not based on race, color and class.

Muhammad was born in Mecca in approximately A.D. 571. His father, 'Abdullâh, died before his birth. At the age of forty, he received the prophetic call while meditating within a cave called *Hirâ'* on a hill outside Mecca. He started to preach God's message: God is one, He is the all powerful creator of the universe; there will be a judgment day; there is a paradise and a hell; the Qur'ân is the book of God. Early believers included the Prophet's first wife Khadijah, his cousin 'Alî, and his friend Abû Bakr. The circle of believers grew larger as time passed, but the Meccan aristocracy of Quraysh stood firm against the new religion because it presented a threat to their interests. At first they laughed and ridiculed the Muslims. Later they carried out persecution and torture in their fight against the new religion.

The number of believers, nevertheless, swelled to include a group of Yathribites, who in 622 invited the Prophet to make Yathrib his home and to help make peace between the *Aws* and the *Khazraj*, the two main tribes in Yathrib. Consequently, Muhammad's followers slipped quietly into Yathrib. His later departure from Mecca with his friend, Abû Bakr, was an important step in the Prophet's mission. This date (July 16, A.D. 622), called *Hijrah* in Arabic, marked the start of the Muslim

calendar. The Prophet was honored as chief of the small community of Yathrib; the name of which they changed to Medina, literally "city". An Islamic state began there under his leadership.<sup>[11]</sup>

One of the first things Muḥammad did when he arrived at Medina was to build a mosque to be used as a center of worship for the Muslims and as his own residence. The mosque also served the Islamic community as a center for spiritual, social, and political life with various activities in addition to worship and instruction. In June 632 the Prophet died after a short illness.

### **1.2.1. The Islamic State After the Prophet :**

Because he did not leave any instructions for his successor in leading the Islamic state, the death of Muḥammad brought the first crisis in Islam. Abû Bakr was chosen to succeed the Prophet, with the title of Caliph. The first four caliphs were close companions of the Prophet and are known as The Orthodox or Rightly Guided Caliphs (al-Khulafâ' al-Rashidûn) 632-661. Under Abû Bakr, the first caliph(632-634), and 'Umar, the second caliph (634-644), Muslims conquered the northern territories of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, which had been under Byzantine control, and the lands of Iraq and Persia. 'Umar introduced an organized system of civil administration into the Islamic provinces.

The third caliph, 'Uthmân (644-656), was elected by a small council of leading Muslims. He belonged to the clan of Umayyah, one of the leading Meccan aristocratic clans. His reign ended in the rebellion of discontented Muslims and his own assassination.

Conflicts exploded into a civil war during the reign of the last orthodox caliph, 'Alî bin Abî-Tâlib (656-661), Muḥammad's cousin, foster brother, and son-in-law. However, he could not enforce his full authority in the territories of Mu'âwiyah, governor of Syria, who protested the killing of 'Uthmân. 'Alî moved the capital to Kûfa, a city in central Iraq, but was assassinated. Mu'âwiyah seized all rights to the caliphate (661-680) and introduced the monarchical system of the Umayyad dynasty (661-749). Mu'âwiyah, who had been a governor of Syria for twenty years before becoming caliph, moved the capital to Damascus where he established the political and administrative tradition of the Islamic empire. After the death of 'Alî, Muslims never again saw an elective caliphate.

Husayn, the son of 'Alî and grandson of the Prophet, revolted in 680 against Yazîd, the second Umayyad caliph (680-683). On the tenth of Moharram, the first month in the Islamic calendar, at Karbalâ' in Iraq, Husayn, his family, and his followers met an Umayyad army and were killed. Their dramatic martyrdom and resulting themes of sacrifice, guilt, and devotion inspired the Muslims, especially among the Shî'ah, with a ten-day cycle performance called *Ta'ziya*.

In June A.D. 747, the 'Abbâsid movement, under the leadership of Abû al-'Abbâs, revolted against the Umayyad caliph, finally overthrowing the Umayyad dynasty in A.D. 749. The 'Abbâsids belonged to the Prophet's family, Their movement brought revolutionary changes that formed the 'Abbâsid dynasty, A.D. 749-1258, moved the capital to the newly-built city, Baghdâd, and gradually ended Arab racial



supremacy. Within the empire there developed a new ruling group of multi-racial non-Arab Muslims who used the Arabic language as their medium of communication.

In A.D. 1258 the Mongols completely destroyed the Baghdâd caliphate, and three years later, the 'Abbâsid caliphate emerged again in Cairo but without power. The caliphate continued as a mere religious symbol in a fragmented empire until the establishment of the Ottoman dynasty in A.D. 1571.

The beginning of the ninth century marked the beginning of the Golden Age. Metropolises, such as Damascus, Baghdâd, Aleppo, Cairo, and Cordoba in Spain, appeared throughout the Islamic empire, and an age of creative activity in science, philosophy, literature, medicine, music, and fine arts began. Islamic culture became a melting pot after a movement of comprehensive study, including the translation of Greek, Persian, Indian, and Syriac literature in all branches of knowledge. Further, the economic, political, and social stability of the Golden Age encouraged cultural and artistic development. People turned to a variety of entertainment to fill their hours of leisure: music, dance, mimes, shadow plays, and improvised poetry became daily fare for both the court and the general public.<sup>[12]</sup>

### **1.3. The Muslim Contribution To Civilization :**

Islam is a comprehensive concept of life and not merely a religion describing the relations between man and his Creator. It is interesting to note that the very first revelation that came to the Prophet, who was born among illiterate people, was a command to read and write, and praise of the pen which is the only means of human knowledge:

"Read with the name of thy lord, Who createth,  
Createth man from a clot.  
Read, and thy Lord is the Most Bounteous,  
Who teacheth by the pen:  
Teacheth man that which he knew not." ( Q. 96: 1-5 )

So Islam encourages Muslims to read and write and to contribute to human civilization. For the purposes of this short sketch, I will refer only to a few sciences in which the contribution of the Muslims has been particularly important for mankind.

The part played by the Muslims in developing the social sciences has been very important. The Qur'ân was the first book ever written in the Arabic language. Two hundred years later, this language of the illiterate Bedouins developed into one of the richest in the world. The first Muslims were almost all Arabs. Later on Arabic spread more widely than any other language of the world, since it was the official language of the Muslims' state whose territory extended from China to Spain.

Muslims also contributed to the field of mathematics, history, sociology, geography, philosophy and law as well as literature. They continued their work in the service of science until great misfortunes destroyed their principal centers, Baghdâd in the East, and Cordoba-Granada in the West.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### **1.4. The Islamic Contribution to the Fine Arts :**

As in the case of science, the Qur'ân took the initiative in the development of arts among Muslims. The recitation of the Holy Qur'ân created a new branch of music. The structure of its text necessitated calligraphy and book-binding. The construction of

mosques developed architecture and decorative art. In its care for an equilibrium between the body and soul, Islam taught moderation in all things, led the natural talents in the right direction, and tried to develop in man a harmonious whole.

#### **1.4.1. Architecture and Painting :**

The Arab showed, in his art, a keen appreciation of the particular and the subjective with a delicate sense for detail. However, in architecture and painting, he did not, as he had in the sciences, attain a certain degree of progress and then make no further advancement.

The first *minbar* (pulpit) in the mosque, which was prepared for the prophet, was decorated with two balls, like pomegranates, and the two little grand-children of the prophet enjoyed playing with them. This was the beginning of wood-carving. Later on, copies of the Qur'ân were illuminated in color, and the greatest care was taken in their binding.

Of the architectural monuments which once decorated the city of Baghdâd no trace has been left. Two of the noblest surviving structures of Islam, the Umayyad Mosque at Damascus and the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem, date from the earlier period.

The builder of Sâmarrâ', the Caliph al-Mu'tasim, had the walls of his palace there ornamented with frescoes of nude female figures and hunting scenes. His second successor, al-Mutawakkil, under whom this temporary capital reached its zenith,

employed for the decoration of his palace Byzantine painters. Muslims created the decoration of the mosques, which for the Muslim mind of the time, represented a unique aesthetic value. It was they who supplied princely residences with plates and vases rivaling those of China, with chairs and folding and pedestal tables in wood or metal delicately inlaid or carved. Muslim Persians, whose culture the Arabs appropriated, had proved themselves masters of decorative design and color. Through their efforts, the industrial arts of Islam attained a high degree of excellence. Carpet weaving was especially developed. Hunting and garden scenes were favored in rug designs. Decorated silk fabrics, the product of Muslim hand-loomers in Egypt and Syria, were highly prized in Europe.<sup>[14]</sup>

Qashânî tiles, decorated with conventional flowers, which were introduced from Persia to Damascus, found great vogue, together with mosaic work, in exterior and interior decoration of buildings. The characters of the Arabic alphabet lent themselves to decorative designs and became a powerful motif in Islamic art.

#### **1.4.2. Calligraphy :**

Calligraphy as an art is a Muslim specialty. It makes writing a piece of art, in place of pictures; it is employed in painting or mural sculpture, to decorate fine cloth and other material. This art arose in the second or third Muslim century and soon became the most highly prized art. Through it, the Muslim sought a channel for his aesthetic nature, which could not express itself through the representation of animate objects. The calligrapher held a position of dignity and honor far above the painter. Even rulers sought to win religious merit by copying the Qur'ân. Calligraphy is perhaps

the only Arab art which today has Christian and Muslim representatives in Turkey, Cairo, Beirut and Damascus whose productions excel in elegance and beauty any masterpieces that the ancients ever produced.<sup>[15]</sup>

#### **1.4.3. The Auditive Arts :**

The auditive arts of Islam, such as cantillation of the Qur'ân, music, singing, or those allied with visual elements such as dancing, have been developed to an extraordinary degree both in the religious and wordly spheres of life. Since the Qur'ân is the center of the faith, it was natural that the recitation of the Book, from memory, or following one of the traditional methods of reading it, should develop into an art, that of cantillation. There is an infinite grace in the letters and sounds of Arabic, due to the presence of the Uncreated Qur'ân in them. Calligraphic art communicates this grace in the letters visually. The chanting of the Qur'ân, in simple or elaborate fashion, communicates that grace through the sounds, so that seeing and hearing the Qur'ân conveys a celestial blessing ( *barakah*).

Music and song, under the patronage of kings and other wealthy people, have had their development among Muslims. The refined and dazzling court of Hârûn al-Rashîd (A.D. 766-809) patronized music and singing, as it did science and art, to the extent of becoming the center of a galaxy of musical stars. Two thousand singers took part in a musical festival under the caliph's patronage. His son al-Amîn held a similar night entertainment in which the personnel of the palace, both male and female, danced till dawn.<sup>[16]</sup>

Among the many Greek works translated in the golden age of ‘Abbāsids were a few dealing with the theory of music such as Euclid's *Kitâb al-Mûsîqâ* and Pythagoras's *Maqâlât fî al-Mûsîqâ*. From these works, Arab authors acquired their first scientific ideas on music and became schooled in the physical and physiological aspects of the theory of sound. But on the practical side, they had purely Arabian models. About the ‘Abbasid time the word *mûsîqî*, later *mûsîqâ* (music) , was borrowed from the Greek and applied to the theoretical aspects of the science, leaving the older Arabic term *ghinâ*. *Qithâr* (guitar) and *urghûn* (organ), as names of instruments, and other technical terms of Greek origin now appeared in Arabic.<sup>[17]</sup>

Theoreticians like al-Fârâbî, the authors of the *Rasâ'il Ikhwân al-Safâ*, Avicenna and others have not only left monumental works on the subject, but have even made appreciable corrections in the Greek and Indian music.<sup>[18]</sup> They employed signs to denote music, and described different musical instruments.

#### **1.4.4. Poetry :**

Before the advent of Islam in Arabia, the pre-Islamic Arabs achieved high literary excellence in poetry. The pre-Islamic period has been considered the golden age of Arabic poetry. In spite of the fact that the pre-Islamic Arabs produced masterpieces of poetical literature, they had certain weaknesses in their creative abilities. Each poet excelled in only one genre. For example Zuhayr bin Abî Salmâ is known in the field of rhetoric; Imru'al-Qays is popular for his portrayal of the life of youth, and ‘Antara excels in the description of bravery and celebration of love.

Islam introduced a form of Arabic literature which was new to the Arabs. The Qur'ân, the speech of God, is not poetry or *khutbah* or *saj'* of the *kâhin*. Instead, it is a kind of prose. The people of Mecca who heard the Qur'ânic recitation were astonished because the Qur'ân was composed in the highest degree of literary excellence in its rhetoric, tone, style and meaning; the musical effect of its recitation moved the hearts of the listeners, convincing them of its message.<sup>[19]</sup>

The Qur'ânic aesthetic in the form of its style and eloquence is expressed through the means of the Arabic language, the medium of revelation. This element is untranslatable. Whenever the Qur'ân is rendered into an other language, it loses its original beauty. A reader who wants to realize the miraculous nature of the Qur'ân has to master the language of the Qur'ân in order to appreciate its style and its eloquence.

The Qur'ân had a great impact on the Arabic language and literature. Before Islam the Arabs spoke different dialects; however the dialect of Quraysh was also familiar to the Arabs through their participation in the pilgrimage at Mecca and the annual market at 'Ukâz and others. The Qur'ân was revealed in the language of Quraysh. After the Arabs converted to Islam, they began to adopt Qur'ânic Arabic in their communication. Dialects such as those of Tamîm, Qays, Himyar and others gradually disappeared. Thus the Qur'ân helped to establish a standard language in Arabic.<sup>[20]</sup>

The unique style of the Qur'ân influenced the style of Arabic language. This occurred because the Muslim orators and authors began to imitate the Qur'ân in its artistic expression. The Muslim orators and authors imitated the Qur'ân in order to

inspire the audience or the readers with the spirit of the divine book. The imitation of the Qur'ânic style is visible especially in the speeches of the Muslim caliphs and military leaders in early Islam.

As for poetry, the Prophet recognizes:" There are verses of poems which are full of wisdom, and there are discourses of orators which produce a magical effect." The Qur'ân discouraged immoral poetry. Following this direction, The Prophet surrounded himself with the best poets of the epoch, and showed them the road to follow and the limits to observe, thus distinguishing between the good and the bad use of this great natural talent. Poetical works by Muslims are found in all languages and relate to all times. An Arab, even a Bedouin, finds himself always "at home" in his poetry. He derives his poetic terms from his environmental sphere ( his residence): *Bait* means both a tent and a verse of two parts; *sabab* means the rope of the tent as well as the prosodical foot; *watad* means a tent peg as well as the syllables of the prosodical foot. The names given to the different metres of poems are synonymous with the different paces -fast, slow, etc.- of the camel.<sup>[21]</sup>

#### **1.4.5. Prose :**

Stories and tales were often told by the pre-Islamic Arabs. This literary genre was in the form of an oral tradition. The pre-Islamic Arabs were fond of listening to tales at night, or during their free time. Most of the tales narrated in the pre-Islamic period were based on mythology and on pre-Islamic beliefs. These tales were about stars, animals etc.



During early Islamic times, this genre of literature developed a lot, especially when new forms of tales, and new themes, emerged with the appearance of the new religion. At the same time, Islam brought, gradually, a big change in the way of life of the Arabs, from simple living to high civilization. These changes affected the themes of Arab literary prose, including those of stories and tales. The new forms and themes that arose in the stories and tales told after Islam greatly enriched Arabic literature.

The spirit of learning which grew during the 'Abbasid time led Muslims to render into Arabic many works on all branches of the sciences and literature from non-Muslim sources, especially from the Greeks, Persians and Indians. In the field of literature, the Muslims translated into Arabic several works from Persia and India. Among the Arabic literary works which originated from Persia are *Kitâb Mazdak*, *Hazar Ifsanah*, *Kitâb Namrûd*, while Arabic narratives which originated from India are *Kalilah Wa Dimnah*, *Kitâb Sindabâd* and others.<sup>[22]</sup> The Arabic narrative tradition flourished during the Umayyad and 'Abbâsid periods.

Mûsâ Sulaymân, a Lebanese academic researcher, divided the genres of Arabic narratives into five categories:

- Instructional narratives: glorious tales, love stories, satirical tales, and ballads.
- Romances of heroes: *The Romance of 'Antarah*, *The Story of Bakr and Taghlib*, *The Story of Kistrâ*, and *The Romance of Sayf bin Dhî Yazan*.
- Religious narratives: the stories of the prophets of Allâh and other religious short stories.

- Linguistic narratives: *Maqâmât al-Hamadhânî*, written in 939, and *Maqâmât al-Harîrî*, written in 1122.
- Philosophical narratives: *al-Tawâbi‘*, written by Ibn Shahîd in 1075; *Risâlat al-Ghufrân*, written by al-Ma‘arrî in 1057; and *Hayy Ibn Yaqzân*, written by Ibn Tufayl in 1185.<sup>[23]</sup>

## NOTES

### "HISTORICAL BACKGROUND"

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## Chapter Two : ISLAM AND THE FINE ARTS

### 2.1. Introduction :

Islam is a religion which is concerned with the whole of Man's life, in both its spiritual and material aspects. It does not create a division between these aspects as do other religions, nor is it purely individualistic and materialistic as is often the case of religions in the West in the present century. The approach of Islam is based on the idea of monotheism, and calls for both behavioral and moral attitudes. So, where is the material aspect of Islam? This aspect does indeed exist, and is reflected in economic, political and social life.

Islam has its own contribution to make in various aspects of life; it is concerned with physical education, for example, as shown by the famous saying of the Prophet, "Teach your children archery, swimming and horse-riding." Islam does not end at this point but extends to include art and literature as well. It is enough for us to say that the Qur'ân contains wonderful literary pictures which make clear the importance of truthfulness in the art of storytelling and in the composition of poetry . The *sûras* (chapters) ' The Poets' and ' Stories' are good examples of Islam's concern with art and literature. Qutb, an Islamic Arabic researcher, says:

"Islamic art is not of a necessity an art which speaks of Islam, and it is certainly not preaching guidance and enjoining virtue. Equally it is not the bare facts of faith crystallized in a philosophical form.... It is an art which portrays the form of existence from an Islamic point of view of this world, it is an eloquent expression of the Universe, Life and Man through Islam and human life, it is an art which paves the way for the complete integration of beauty and truth, for

beauty is the reality of this universe while truth is the summit of beauty, and so they meet at the peak at which all the realities of existence come together."<sup>[1]</sup>

In tradition art and literature in Islam are concerned with emotional sympathy with other peoples, things and creatures. E. Khalîl, an Islamic researcher, states:

"Islamic art (not as a historical concept but as an ideological one) gives the broadest aesthetic view of Man and the universe because the Muslim's view is in its essence a universal one, because the Muslim is universal, and is not restricted by boundaries of region, race or land. He tends to be in harmony and to interact with this universe of which he is a part, and to be in accord with it ceaselessly in order to achieve continuous development directed toward Allah the Almighty ... he aims at unity which is in agreement with the movement of the universe on aesthetic bases."<sup>[2]</sup>

Islamic art in its message puts an end to nationalism and works to dissolve it in everything, even in literature. In Islamic art the fundamental feature is the purity of belief and the strength of faith as indicated in the Holy Qur'ân:

"O mankind! We created you from a single ( pair) of male and female, and made you into Nations and tribes, that ye may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is ( he who is) the most Righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted ( with all things.)"<sup>[3]</sup>

This is the first meeting-point between Islam, and art and literature; no attention is paid to barriers of language, nation or race, because it is a human expression of humanity in its broadest sense. The whole of humanity meets in the common human essence, and comes to know the features common to all.

Islamic art is open to various artistic influences from everywhere as long as they continue to be in harmony with the universe, Man, truth and justice. There is no harm in interacting with nature and rejoicing in beauty, for it is Allâh Who created the universe and created beauty in it. He implanted in the soul of Man the ability to perceive beauty and to enjoy it. The Qur'ân clearly directs the sense towards beauty in nature, teaching us to appreciate it in the mountains, valleys and meadows, to see it in roses and flowers, in the climate and the rainfall, and to meditate on the reality of the creation of cattle and other animals:

"And cattle He has created for you ( men) : from them ye derive warmth, and numerous benefits, and of their(meat) ye eat. And ye have a sense of pride and beauty in them as ye drive them home in the evening, and as ye lead them forth to pasture in the morning."<sup>[4]</sup>

Allâh Almighty also says:

"It is He who sendeth down rain from the skies; with it we produce vegetation of all kinds: from some we produce green ( crops) , out of which we produce grain, heaped up ( at harvest); out of the date-palm and its sheathes ( come) clusters of dates hanging low and near: And ( then there are) gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates, each similar ( in kind) yet different ( in variety). When they begin to bear fruit, feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! In these things there are signs for people who believe,"<sup>[5]</sup>

We read, in the *Sahîh* of Muslim, and the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal , an interesting saying of the prophet: " God is beautiful and likes beauty." Another of his sayings is: "Beauty is prescribed in everything; even if you kill somebody, kill him in a nice manner."<sup>[6]</sup> God has spoken in the Qur'ân: " We have beautified the lower sky with lamps" (67:5) and "We have placed all that is in the earth as an ornamental thing that We may try men: which of them is best in conduct."(18:7).

In the life of the Prophet, we come across the following instructive incident: one day he saw the interior of a grave which was not fully leveled. He ordered the defect to be mended, adding that it would do neither good or harm to the dead, but it was more pleasant to the eye of the living, and whenever one does something, God likes one to do it in a perfect manner.<sup>[7]</sup>

The taste for fine arts is innate in man. As in the case of all other natural gifts, Islam seeks to develop the artistic talent with the spirit of moderation.

## **2.2. Islamic Attitudes Toward the Fine Arts :**

Islam, as a religion, calls for balance and organization in human life, saying that material and spiritual lives should be balanced against one another. Playfulness and amusement are a part of the world; man should enjoy them as long as they do not lead him to sinful acts. As part of life, entertainment fills a human need and prepares one for a more productive life. The Prophet Muḥammad understood human nature and its needs; for this reason he said: "Refresh your hearts periodically, for if they get dull, they become blind."<sup>[8]</sup>

The principles of the permissible and the prohibited are part of general Islamic legal dogma. The doctrine of Islam is incorporated essentially in the Qur'ân. Because Muslims believe that the Qur'ân is the book of God, every word of which was dictated to the Prophet Muḥammad by Gabriel, the Qur'ân is the first place to look for any particular point. When the Qur'ân is silent on a point, scholars refer to accounts of the Prophet's life ( *Sîra* ) and the prophetic traditions ( *Ḥadîth* ) as models and guides. So



according to this, if there is no direct evidence concerning prohibition or objection, permission is the origin of all things in Islam.<sup>[9]</sup> In Islamic belief, God alone may determine the permissible and prohibited. God has set forth in the Qur'ân what is prohibited : "He hath explained to you in detail what is forbidden to you." (11:119 ). In the following few pages, I would like to shed some light upon Islamic attitude toward fine arts.

### **2.2.1. Poetry :**

The Qur'ân contains a very outspoken revelation concerning poetry or, rather, poets. This is so for obvious reasons. Among the opponents of Prophet Muḥammad, the poets were perhaps the most dangerous, which should not surprise us in a society where poets played a leading role in political life. It has often been said that the poets of pre-Islamic Arabia had the role of rhyming columnists. They were, in fact, the propagandists of their respective tribes. And there are many tales which reveal the terrific and, at times, destructive impact of their verses. Indeed poets were believed to be inspired by jinns.<sup>[10]</sup>

The Qur'ân did not oppose poetry in general. It opposed the behavior of the pre-Islamic poets who encouraged enmity and bloodshed among the Arabs, while the Qur'ân called for peace, justice and brotherhood among men regardless of ethnic group. The Qur'ân also argues that the Prophet is not a poet, because the behavior of the pre-Islamic poet from the standpoint of the Qur'ân is unethical. Therefore the Qur'ân says, " We have not instructed the Prophet in poetry nor is it meet for him. This is not less than the message and the Qur'ân making things clear." (69:36)

The Qur'ân describes pre-Islamic poets as "the misguided who follow the poets." (26: 224). The Qur'ân means those poets who were unbelievers and who attacked the Prophet and disgraced him. The Qur'ân does not refer to all poets in general as the next makes clear: "except those who believe and work righteousness." (26: 227). Therefore the Qur'ân excludes from criticism poets who were believers and who supported the Prophet in his fight against his enemies. Among his poets is Hassân bin Thâbit whom the Prophet instructed "Satirize them ( the Quraysh) and Gabriel and holy spirit will be with you." It is reported that on one journey, the Prophet asked his companion to recite some poetry of Umayyah bin Abî aṣ-Ṣalt. Whenever his companion stopped, he asked him to continue until the companion had recited a hundred verses. Then the Prophet remarked "In his poetry, Umayyah has almost become a Muslim."<sup>[11]</sup>

The Prophet made use of poetry in his struggle to establish Islam. The Prophet also employed poets to champion the cause of Islam. Three poets were known as the strongest defenders of Islam against the attack of the enemies. They were Hassân bin Thâbit, Ka'b bin Mâlik and 'Abdullâh bin Rawâḥa.<sup>[12]</sup>

The Prophet Muḥammad was succeeded by the Caliphs Abû Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmân and 'Alî. They patronized Arabic poetry as long as it did not have an evil influence upon Muslim society. The caliphs themselves were lovers of poetry. Abû Bakr and 'Umar had recited poetry, while 'Alî was the most talented among them. Many verses composed by the first four caliphs are recorded by Ibn Hishâm in his *Sira*.

### 2.2.2. Painting :

It has been stated that the painting of pictures is forbidden in the Qur'ân; but there is no specific mention of pictures in the Holy Qur'ân, and the only verse ( 5:92) - "O believers, wine and games of chance and statues and (divining) arrows are an abomination of Satan's handiwork; then avoid it." - which theologians of a later generation could quote in support of their condemnation of this art makes it clear that the real object of the prohibition was the avoidance of idolatry.

The Arabic word for "painter", which has passed from Arabic into Persian, Turkish, and Urdu in the same sense, is ' *musawwir* ', which literally means ' forming, fashioning, giving form',<sup>[13]</sup> and so can equally apply to the sculptor. Originally, this word is applied to God Himself in the Qur'ân (24:109):" He is God, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner (*musawwir*). Thus, the highest term of praise which in the Christian world can describe the artist, in calling him a creator, in the Muslim world serves to emphasize the most damning evidence of his guilt.

#### 2.2.2.1. The View of Traditionalists :

Two arguments are in the foreground: one is that painting distracts the believer during prayer and the other is that the sculptor pretends to emulate the Creator. Some relevant reports date back to 'Â'ishah, wife of the Prophet, concerning this topic:

"The Prophet returned from a journey. I had covered one of my legs with a cloth of mine on which there were pictorial representations. And when the Prophet beheld it he tore it into pieces and said: "The most severe punishment on Doomsday will be suffered by those who emulate the creation."<sup>[14]</sup>

"'Â'ishah had a cloth with which she used to cover one side of the tent. The Prophet said: 'Remove it, it disturbs me during prayer.'"<sup>[15]</sup>

Other reports say that the Prophet cursed the makers of pictures and the women who tattoo themselves. The Prophet is reported to have said that those painters, on the Day of Judgment, will be called upon to breathe life into the forms that they have fashioned; but they cannot breathe life into anything. It has been argued that the aversion to pictures reflected in the Hadîth did not go back to the time of Muḥammad but developed only in the late Umayyad period, probably under non-Muslim influence. It is said that converted Jews played a very important part in the formation of many aspects of early Islamic thought.<sup>[16]</sup>

In fact the Prophet did not appear to have objected to the figures of men or animals on the woven stuffs with which his house in Medina was decorated, so long as they did not distract his attention while engaged in prayer, and so long as they were in their proper place, being either sat upon in cushions or trampled underfoot in carpets. When he found that 'Â'ishah had hung up a curtain with figures on it at the door of her room, he exclaimed that those who imitated the creative activity of God would be most severely punished on the Day of Judgment; but he was quite satisfied when his wife cut up the offending fabric and made cushion covers out of it. The great danger to be avoided was idolatry. Similarly, the Prophet does not appear to have taken exception to the dolls which 'Â'ishah, who is said to have become his wife at the tender age of nine, brought into the house; on one occasion he asked her what she was playing with, and she replied, 'The horses ( or, the horsemen ) of Solomon.'<sup>[17]</sup>

I believe that when the Prophet prohibited figures and statues, that was because the Arabs were still not far removed in time from the worship of representations (*suwar*). So he forbade them entirely, and when his prohibition had been established, he permitted figures on a garment.

Al-Nawâwî, a traditional Shâfi'î scholar, summed up the accepted doctrine of his own time, and it may be taken as representing the orthodox view of succeeding generations also:

- The painting of a picture of any living thing is strictly forbidden and is one of the great sins because it implies a likeness to the creative activity of God.
- The painting of a tree or of camel saddles and other things that have no life is not forbidden.
- It is forbidden to make use of any object on which a living thing is pictured, but if it is on a carpet trampled underfoot, or on a pillow, then it is not forbidden.
- Some later authorities make the prohibition refer only to objects that cast a shadow, and see no harm in objects that have no shadow.<sup>[18]</sup>

#### **2.2.2.2. The View of Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh :**

Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh, one of the outstanding men of Islam in modern times, has a unique point of view which is different from the view of the traditionalists on the prohibition of representations. He says:

"If you are aware of the reason why your forefathers preserved poetry, set it down in anthologies and gave such an inordinate amount of attention to editing it, particularly the poetry of the pre-Islamic period; and if you understand the care taken by your ancestors in collecting and arranging it, then you can comprehend the reason why people have preserved these artifacts and portraits (and statues). For portrayal is a kind of poetry which is seen but not heard, while poetry is a kind of portrayal which is heard but not seen. These portraits and statues have preserved the various aspects of the life of individuals and of societies in many places, what can be called an anthology of societies and of the state of mankind. The preservation of these remains is truly to the benefit of knowledge, and he who does it should be thanked for his initiative. If you understand any of this it is as I wish; but if you do not comprehend them I do not have the time for more words to make you understand. Perhaps as you read these words there will occur to you the question: "What is the judgment of Impermissible, disapproved, deplored or enjoined? I reply to you that portrayal (*rasm*) has already been practised and that there is no disputing its usefulness. Any significance of worship or of veneration of statues or representations has disappeared from men's minds."<sup>[19]</sup>

In view of all this, therefore, I have no doubt that representations and statues in themselves have nothing to do with the question of whether they are lawful or unlawful as debated by some jurisconsults. I agree with Thomas Arnold, a British scholar, that this prohibition had come from the Jewish influence that had a negative attitude towards painting.<sup>[20]</sup> This attitude was adopted by Jews who had been converted to Islam, like the famous Yeminite Jew Ka'b al-Aḥbâr, who was called Rabbi Ka'b on account of his wealth of theological and especially Biblical knowledge. He is frequently cited as an authority for Hadîth, and 'Abdullâh Ibn 'Abbâs, one of the earliest expositors of the Qur'ân, was a pupil of his, likewise Abû Hurayrah. Another famous Jewish convert was Wahb bin Munabbih. These two men were the great authorities among the early Muslims on all points of ancient history.

My conclusion, therefore, is that the prohibition against painting (*taswîr*) did not exist either in early Islam or modern times, but it grew gradually as a result of the negative attitude and dislike of Semitic races for representational art. I believe painting and statues represent one of the crafts which elevate the mind, an art which develops thought. No one should say that Islam opposes that which elevates the mind, and develops thought, or that it desires to lead men away from the march of culture and civilization.

### 2.2.3. Music :

The Qur'ân is entirely silent on the subject. The words for music, song, to sing, etc. do not occur except for the commandment *rattili l-Qur'âna tartîlâ* or "recite the Qur'ân (in the way called *tartîl* [ singsong] )" which may or may not be regarded as a form of music. Also, there is no mention of any kind of musical instruments except for the *sûr* and *naqûr*, the trumpet of doom. The advocates of music would quote from the first verse of Sûra 35 the words: "He adds to His creation whatever He pleases," contending that the meaning was the beautiful voice of the singer. Similarly, they would adduce Sûra 31:20: "Walk at a moderate pace and restrain thy voice, verily, the most disagreeable sound is the bray of a donkey" arguing that the reprobation of something implies the approbation of its opposite, which in this case is the beautiful human voice.

The opponents of music, in turn, would point to another verse of the same Sûra, 31:6:

"Some people spend their time and substance acquiring idle diversions to lead people astray from the path of Allâh, without knowledge, and to make fun of it."

Even the Hadîth remains silent about the subject. There are two traditions which attribute to the Prophet the following sayings: "Allâh has not sent a Prophet except with a Beautiful Voice," and, "Allâh listens more intently to a man with a Beautiful voice reading the Qur'ân than does a master of a singing girl to her singing."<sup>[21]</sup> It is related of Anas bin Mâlik ( d.715) that the Prophet used to make him sing the *hudâ'* (caravan song ) when traveling, and that Anjushah used to sing it for the women and al-Barâ' bin Mâlik ( the brother of Anas) for the men.<sup>[22]</sup>

Another story indicates the approval of the Prophet of singing. It says that 'Â'ishah said, "A slave-girl was singing in my house when 'Umar asked leave to enter. As soon as she (the slave-singer) heard his steps she ran away. He came in and the Apostle smiled. 'O Apostle of Allâh ' said 'Umar, ' what hath made thee smile?' The Apostle answered, 'A slave-girl was singing here, but she ran away as soon as she heard thy step!' 'I will not depart, ' said 'Umar, ' until I hear what the Apostle heard.' So the Apostle called the girl back and she began to sing, the Apostle listening to her."<sup>[23]</sup>

As H. J. Farmer, a British scholar, pointed out, the four schools of Islamic law were agreed in their negative attitude toward music. A number of instruments, such as the lute, the reed-pipe, the barbyton, were forbidden, and in addition their destruction was not punishable.<sup>[24]</sup> Some legists, on the other hand, say that Islam does not totally forbid all music and song. There are occasions when certain forms of music and song are lawful. During the days of festivity which mark the celebration of the great Islamic festivals, innocent singing and beating on the *daff* as a rhythmical accompaniment is



permissible. Likewise, it is permissible to let the women and young girls sing and beat upon the *daff* during the wedding feast. Other occasions during which innocent singing is permissible have been mentioned by the scholars of Islam. For example, in order to give one strength in carrying heavy loads or doing laborious, monotonous work, pure songs with clean lyrics may be resorted to individually or in chorus, as was done by the Prophet and his companions in digging the ditch around Medina. During long travels by horse, camel or other riding animals, one may sing or chant rhythmically to relieve boredom and to quicken the animal's pace, as was done by the Arabs during their travels by caravan.<sup>[25]</sup>

#### 2.2.4. Theatrical Arts :

The word *at-tamthil* derives from the root *mathal*. Ibn Manzûr says, "*mithlun* is a word of likeness or resemblance" (*taswiyah*). To say *mithlahu* means "something looks like it." and *mathaluhu* means "something resembles it." The verb *maththala* means *sawwara* (to make a picture.)<sup>[26]</sup> So, the early Muslims embraced a negative attitude toward this action because it was related to painting and pictures. Even the interpreters of the Holy Qur'ân, like al-Shawkânî, Ibn Kathîr and al-Tabarî, give the terms the same meaning.

When modern theatre was introduced to Islamic countries, there were no jurists opposing it in Turkey, Iran or the Arab World. In India, Muslims participated in the theatre. Even before the emergence of modern Islamic theatre, historical works and autobiographies of renowned shaykhs mentioned the theatre. There were no

expressions of opposition to this art; on the contrary, there were signs of acceptance.<sup>[27]</sup>

When did the Arabs use the term *tamthîl*? In this regard, two pioneers, al-Tahtâwî and Mârûn al-Naqqâsh, are most important. Al-Tahtâwî used the term *at-tiyatr* in which he Arabicizes the French term " le théâtre " while describing the places of entertainment in Paris:

"Among their places of entertainment there are those called theatres and spectacles in which are performed imitations of everything that happens in life. In truth, such performances are highly serious though they are mere plays..."<sup>[28]</sup>

Al-Tahtâwî uses the term theatre but when he describes the actual performing he does not use the word *tamthîl* (acting); he uses the two Arabic words *taqlîd* (imitation) and *al'âb* (plays). Mârûn al-Naqqâsh uses the word *marsah* which does not have any connection with the nature of theatre. However, both al-Naqqâsh and al-Tahtâwî use the Arabic words *yal'ab* and *al'âb* (play and plays) when they describe a performance on stage.

#### **2.2.4.1. The Negative Attitude :**

As in the case of *at-taswîr* (picture making), some Muslim jurists oppose theatre and acting depending on various traditions (Hadîths) which prohibit representational figures. So acting, whether presented in shadow plays or plays performed on stage, suffered from rejection by the people and the government.

Al-Hajjâjî, an Egyptian researcher, gives some examples showing to what extent al-Qabbânî was viewed as undesirable and distasteful. Al-Hajjâjî discusses the religious opposition to al-Qabbânî's theatre in 1884. A religious shaykh named Sa'îd al-Ghabrâ went to Istanbul and obtained an official order from the Caliph, 'Abdul Hamîd II, to close al-Qabbânî's theatre which, in their view, spread decadence and adultery in Syria.<sup>[29]</sup>

Another event narrated by al-Hajjâjî demonstrates that religious men always take a stand against what they do not know. He recorded a dispute between al-Shaykh al-Dars, a religious man, and other writers in Egypt. Al-Dars had attended the performance of a company which had visited his hometown, Dimyât. He had no knowledge of theatre. The company presented a play called *Ghannouj*, which, in Arabic, has sexual implications. He was astonished to see the performance in full of what he considered sexual scenes. He became furious and wrote two articles against what he called Egyptian theatre. He condemned Egyptian theatre as immoral and corrupt. Many writers supported al-Dars and many others opposed him.<sup>[30]</sup>

#### **2.2.4.2. The Positive Attitude :**

Both the Qur'ân and the Prophetic tradition are completely silent about theatre. They contain no direct mention of theatre, acting, or even imitation, either negative or positive. The absence in the two sources (Qur'ân and Sunna) of any mention of theatre means that Islamic culture does not prohibit theatre. Al-Qaradâwî, a Muslim scholar, points out that the permissible is the origin of all things in Islam, and all that is not forbidden and does not lead to a sinful act is permissible.<sup>[31]</sup>

But the implicit permission of theatre means that any theatrical form in Islamic culture must be adapted to the requirements of the faith. Theatrical forms as phenomena of human endeavor appear in communities and cultures as reflections of the needs of the particular society.

Some critics believe that Islam has never been an obstacle to Arabic theatre. Al-Hajjâjî suggests that Islam encouraged such arts. For example, he speaks about the shadow plays and *Ta'ziya* as Islamic theatre. He writes that the rudimentary theatrical art of Islam took several different forms ( i.e., *Ta'ziyah*, *Karagôz*, and *Khayâl al-Zill*)<sup>[32]</sup> Al-Hajjâjî writes showing that Islam has never conflicted with the shadow plays:

"On the first of Ṣafar, which is the second month of the lunar calendar, they used to decorate the domes of the houses with all sorts of beautiful decorations. A group of singers and a group of shadow players also prepared for these circumstances. Every day, after the afternoon prayer, (*al- 'Asr*), Muzaffar ad-Dîn used to stand on one of the domes and hear the songs and look at the shadow plays and their appearance on the domes.

Sultan Ṣalâh ad-Dîn al Ayyûbî took the shadow players from the Fatimid palace in order to show their art to his assistant al-Qâḍî al-Fâḍil. When the play started, al-Qâḍî al-Fâḍil tried to leave. The Sultan told him that if the play was prohibited by the law of Islam they did not have to see it. Being a new employee, al-Qâḍî al-Fâḍil did not wish to annoy the Sultan, so he stayed until the curtain fell. After the performance, the Sultan asked for his opinion. Al-Qâḍî al-Fâḍil replied: "I saw great morals. I saw nations pass and others come. And when the cloth folded, it was exactly like folding the paper of a book." <sup>[33]</sup>

Furthermore, al-Hajjâjî judges that Islam does not prohibit theatre. He bases his judgment upon the fact that some theatrical houses have been established in Egypt with the full knowledge of al-Azhar, the world center of Islam. Al-Hajjâjî writes:

"In Egypt, before theatre was known, Khedive Ismâ'îl built al-Azbakiyyah Theatre in 1868. Then, in 1869, he built an opera house to receive foreign companies. From what is known, no criticism, either printed or spoken, was made of Khedive Ismâ'îl for building these theatres. Ya'qûb Sannû', in 1870, established the first theatre in Cairo for performances in Arabic. An Azharite shaykh wrote a play which was performed by the company of Ya'qûb Sannû'."<sup>[34]</sup>

It is interesting to note that the Muslim Brotherhood movement, a fundamentalist Egyptian group, considered 'Alî Bâkathîr, a Muslim playwright, their official writer even though he announced in A.D. 1954, after Nâsir had dissolved the Brotherhood, that he wrote *Oedipus* to fight those who were making religion a business, meaning the Muslim Brotherhood. This movement not only accepted theatre but also used it as a propagandistic tool to express their ideas.<sup>[35]</sup>

The acceptance of theatre by a conservative Muslim group, like the Muslim Brotherhood, and the silence of the 'Ulamâ' of al-Azhar toward the theatrical arts, meant one thing: theatre and acting are permissible. There is no objection in the Qur'ân and Sunna, and this lack of objection may be extended to theatrical elements added for performance needs, such as decor, painting, make up, sound effects etc.

## NOTES

### " ISLAM AND FINE ARTS "

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## Chapter Three : THE ORIGIN OF DRAMA

Tragedy was invented by the Greeks, with Thespis who is generally considered to be the first actor and the first tragedian winning the first tragedy contest in Athens in 534 BC. During the Greeks' Golden Age, in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, they produced four of the world's greatest dramatists as well as introducing new forms of tragedy and comedy which are still used as models, together with a theatre which throughout the ages has continued to embody the basic principles of drama.

### 3.1. Thespis :

Thespis is said to have been the first actor and dramatist in the history of drama. He first performed in the city of Icaria at the beginning of the sixth century BC, with a cast that consisted of a chorus of fifty local men and boys. In his performance, he begins by taking the role of a storyteller, recounting the adventures of a local hero. He then moves away from the chorus and, mounting an altar stone, located in the centre of a circle, he is transformed into the hero himself. This miraculous appearance of the hero causes the chorus to move towards him and watch, riveted, as he acts out the ordeal of suffering. They look on as, apparently wounded, he struggles and then dies. By means of mime the chorus responds to the hero's performance, sometimes singing and dancing, their bodies and voices following him. They sing a hymn of supplication during his suffering. On his death they congregate around the altar lamenting. They then take up his body and, in a solemn procession,

they move around the circle. By this point the audience has become completely enraptured by the dramatic atmosphere of the production.<sup>[1]</sup>

With the switch from narration to impersonation Thespis also changed the form of presentation from *recitation* to *enactment*. Previously in their stories of legendary heroes the Greeks would recite their tales in the form of narration. Thespis, however, altered this by actually taking on the role of the character. He surrendered his own identity to that of the hero. This was to be the beginning of the art of presenting imaginary characters in action. This innovation, introduced by Thespis, also brought about a significant change in the role of the chorus. Once the hero had become a living character, the chorus too had to become actors in response to him, taking on the roles of elders, handmaidens, warriors, suppliants etc., responding and reacting to his fate. They did not, however, take on the roles of distinct individuals.<sup>[2]</sup>

Having perfected his art and written plays which were appropriate to his innovation, Thespis went to Athens where his shows were a great success, earning him great praise and approval. Imitation is accepted to be the highest form of flattery, and in the case of Thespis, his art, which had now come to be known as "tragedy", was very soon being copied. These tragedies made such a great impression on the ruler, Pisistratus, that in 534 BC he established tragedy contests. These were included in the city Dionysia, a festival which commemorated Dionysus, god of wine, vegetation and fertility. In its first year the prize was won by Thespis.

### 3.2. The Great Dionysia Festivals :

In the sixth century BC the tyrant Pisistratus introduced the god Dionysus Eleuthereus to Athens from the village of Eleutherae. A temple was erected in his honour, and then another. Then, the Theatre of Dionysus was built on holy ground beside the temples. The stage-building eventually obstructed the audiences' view of the temples, but the drama continued to maintain its religious purpose.

The Great Dionysia, celebrated towards the end of March each year, was an important fertility festival. It took place under clear blue skies in the warmth of a spring day. Lyric choruses and tragedies and comedies, produced in the Theatre of Dionysus, were all a part of the festival. As was the tradition in most Greek festivals, the plays were presented in the form of a competition. <sup>[3]</sup>

On the day before the Great Dionysia it was usual for the names of the plays, playwrights and leading actors who were taking part, to be announced in the theatre itself. Also, the statue of Dionysus was paraded around the theatre, accompanied by the singing of hymns and the offering of sacrifices. The beginning of the festival, on the following day, was marked with another procession. The *choregoi* were dressed in colourful and lavish robes and sacrifices were offered to the god. That evening revelers, sometimes disguised as animals, gave a lively performance, known as a *komos* (the root of the word *comedy*). For the next three or four days plays were presented from dawn until dusk. A special assembly took place in the theatre on the final day of the festival. This allowed anyone who wished to air any grievances regarding misconduct or injuries connected with the festival, to do so. These performances of

dramatic contests added to the attraction of the Great Dionysia which was open to the whole Hellenic world and served to display the extent of Athenian wealth, power, and public spirit, and to highlight her position as a leader in the world of art and literature. For these reasons the festival became very important during Greece's Golden Age.<sup>[4]</sup>

### **3.3. European Dramatic Conventions**

#### **3.3.1. Aristotle's Definition of Drama :**

Aristotle's *Poetics* is probably the most widely-discussed critical work in dramatic literature. He begins by defining tragedy as follows:

"Tragedy, then, is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude, by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts, enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative, through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics."<sup>[5]</sup>

#### **3.3.2. Dramatic Action :**

Action can be explained, in its simplest form, as referring to the physical movement of the play. This includes all the movements necessary to the plot: the entrances and exits; the movement of the characters on stage; the larger movements of the cast; the quarrels, the love scenes, and reunions. The time span represented by the events of a play should be limited and should not exceed twenty-four hours. The events should take place in one location, so that there will be no need for changes of scene, and the plot should be kept simple. Aristotle was the first critic to write about drama and his *Poetics*, written in the fourth century BC, is still a main source of critical

theory. Sooner or later, any discussion of the subject will refer to him. In this work we will use Aristotle's ideas and terminology in describing the various elements of drama. In analysing tragedy he listed the following six factors, in order of importance: plot, character, thought, language, music and spectacle. A brief definition of each of those elements is necessary in order to be able to understand the relationship between western conventional drama and the "old forms" of Arabic entertainment.

#### **3.3.2.1. Plot:**

The first and most important element of the play is the plot. This is what gives the action its form. Plot is "the basic principle, the heart and soul of tragedy".<sup>[6]</sup> Plot is to the playwright what composition is to the musician. In the words of Aristotle "the structure of events, the plot, is the goal of tragedy, and the goal is the greatest thing of all".<sup>[7]</sup> The plot can be described as the "shape" of the action. The playwright selects the incidents and information he wants to convey to the audience and then organises them into a structure, called "the plot" in order to involve the audience in the action of the play. Forster distinguishes between story and plot in his definition, regarding a story as "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequences", and a plot as "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality".<sup>[8]</sup>

#### **3.3.2.2. Character :**

Aristotle places "character" second in his list of elements, defining it as what the character says and does. The plot enables the audience to observe the many connections and contradictions displayed in the actions of the character. Aristotle describes character as:

"the utterance which clearly reveals the bent of a man's moral choice (hence there is no character in that class of utterance in which there is nothing at all that the speaker is choosing or rejecting.)"<sup>[9]</sup>

Both "flat" characters and "round" characters are essential to a play which contains a complex plot. The good playwright will include round principal characters, who develop by acting and reacting within the context of the plot. According to Forster, the complexity portrayed by the round character should be sufficient to surprise the audience "in a convincing way".<sup>[10]</sup> He goes on to say that if the character "never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round".<sup>[11]</sup>

#### **3.3.2.3. Thought :**

The fourth element of drama is "thought", which represents the intellectual aspect of the play. It is portrayed in the speech or actions of the characters when they debate, make decisions, or reason. Thought is described as "the ability to state the issues and appropriate points pertaining to a given topic, an ability which springs from the arts of politics and rhetoric".<sup>[12]</sup> Drama, like all forms of literature, should be meaningful. Thought relates to the theme of a play and should summarise its moral and indicate the symbolic meaning of the play as a complete entity. A good play has the ability to convey a variety of interpretations to the audience.

#### **3.3.2.4. Language :**

The fourth element of drama mentioned by Aristotle is language, or diction, that is the dialogue spoken by the actors. The characters and their actions present a system of verbal signs to their audience. Language is that which is expressed verbally, it is 'a statement which has the same meaning whether one says "verses" or

"speeches"<sup>[13]</sup> The relationships between characters can be understood through dialogue. Through language we can also look inside the characters at their thoughts, and see the suffering going on, or understand their progress or otherwise. We understand the progression of actions through dialogue. It is important for spoken language to be immediately understood by the audience. As well as being simple and economical, it must at the same time be interesting. The dramatist must take great care in his choice of vocabulary, images, syntax and even sounds. He must be careful when writing his play as:

"If he be writing 'realistically', endeavouring to give an abstract of ordinary life, a sentence which simply could not have been uttered in ordinary conversation will strike this wrong note."<sup>[14]</sup>

### **3.3.2.5. Music :**

Aristotle cites music as the fifth most important element. As well as music and sound effects he also includes all auditory material. According to Aristotle "the song-composition of the remaining parts is the greatest of the sensuous attractions".<sup>[15]</sup> In its early association with dithyrambs, Greek drama fully exploited the musical potential found in the singing and dancing of the chorus. Also important were the sound patterns involved in the acting of the main characters: singing, chanting, dancing and speaking with great variety in sound texture. Originally melodrama was associated with music, with musical backgrounds accompanying the entrances and exits of key characters and reinforcing the atmosphere of emotionally charged scenes, such as pursuits, battles, escapes, love scenes and death scenes.

### **3.3.2.6. Spectacle :**

The sixth and final element listed is spectacle, which includes all visual aspects of the drama, including scenery, lighting, costume, make up and the movements of the performers. The actual location of the performance is also part of the spectacle, whether it be in a theatre or in the open marketplace. The audience can also be included in the spectacle as it is often as important to them to be seen as to see. The emotion shared by them as a result of witnessing such a stirring event as the performance is a spectacle in itself. Theatres have always had a visual appeal as well as auditory, regardless of whether scenery was used. According to Kelsall:

"a theatre is any space in which actors and audience are brought into relation. The making of a stage creates special significance. The eye reads the stage as if it were a book."<sup>[16]</sup>

### **3.4. Development of the Theatrical Conventions :**

As with all forms of art, theatrical production is conventionalised, in that there are certain common agreements between audience and performer regarding the manner of creation and production that must be conformed to. On entering the theatre spectators become a part of the production in that they must conform to conventions governing time, space and the manner of performing. The playwrights, actors, audiences and the theatres themselves have all had their effect on theatre conventions through the ages, and those conventions have, in turn, affected all elements of drama.



### 3.4.1. The Greek Theatre :

The theatres in which Greek drama was staged were huge, accommodating up to fifteen thousand spectators. The stage itself measured between sixty to seventy feet across and the audience was arranged in tiers almost completely surrounding the stage. The first element of the theatre to appear was the *orchestron*, or dancing place, followed by the *auditorium*, or hearing place. The final element to appear was the *skene*, or scene building, which later developed into the raised stage. During the fifth century these three component parts of the theatre did not come together as a complete architectural unit, but each year each individual element was improved upon: the *orchestron* was paved and drained, the tiers of wooden benches were replaced by stone seats, and each year a more elaborate *skene* was introduced to improve the stage picture.<sup>[17]</sup>

When Thespis stepped out of the chorus and took on a dramatic role he won the distinction of becoming the first actor. The second actor was introduced by Aeschylus, and Sophocles, despite the fact that he himself did not actually participate in the performance, introduced the third actor; from then only three actors appeared with each portraying several characters. The three actors used various masks, changes of costume and different voices to change roles. Many of Euripides's plays included children among their cast but they did not have speaking parts. The plays were dramatisations of legends and myths and followed a simple story set within a short time span. They were usually presented in a single, permanent setting. Words, gestures and body movements were used by the actors. Three types of speech were used:

- Iambic trimeters, i.e, metrical speech, accompanied by music, in dialogue or monologue.
- Recitative speech, which was written in tetrameters and iambics inserted in the midst of lyric systems. This was accompanied by the flute.
- Lyrics accompanied by music.<sup>[18]</sup>

The chorus which had originally presented the entire performance, continued to play a part in all Greek drama. It assumed the major role in the early plays of Aeschylus, but after the second and third actors were introduced it began to diminish in its importance. Aeschylus used a chorus consisting of twelve men, whereas Sophocles and Euripides used fifteen men. Each member of the chorus wore a mask and costume which indicated the character he portrayed. In tragedy the costumes were designed to make the characters appear noble, regal and dignified, whereas in Old Comedy they were more varied and indecent to make the characters appear comic and thereby induce laughter.<sup>[19]</sup>

### **3.4.2. The Roman Theatre :**

Roman drama, like its Greek predecessor, began in primitive religious rites and crude comedy. A succession of writers adapted Greek originals to the Roman taste for rhetoric, spectacle and sensationalism. Early in the third century B.C., Livius Andronicus, a Greek educated citizen, translated into Latin the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides as well as Greek New Comedies. These works provided inspiration and source material for Roman playwrights such as Plautus, and Terence, more than two

generations later following the same source and produced comedies of greater refinement. Then, Seneca (5 B.C.-65 A.D.), the last important Roman playwright, composed ten tragedies, which kept the dramatic and the theatrical forms of his Greek models. Seneca's plays are of special interest in the history of the drama because of their powerful influence on the playwrights of the Renaissance. Shakespeare and his contemporaries are known to have read, admired and imitated the plays of Seneca.

At first Rome had no permanent theatre. The simple wooden buildings required for a production could be put up when required. Interior scenes and changes of setting within a play were unknown. The first permanent stone theatre was built in 55 B.C. While the Greeks had never unified the three elements of their theatre- the auditorium, the orchestron, and the scene building - the Romans succeeded in combining these elements to form an architectural whole. The Romans eliminated the orchestron and joined the auditorium to the scene building. The stage itself was high and narrow, and the background was a permanent architectural facade fitted out with three doorways. A curtain was lowered into a slot in the stage floor at the beginning of the play, and raised when the play was over; at a later time, it was raised and lowered in the manner familiar to us. Backstage were the dressing rooms for the actors. As the Roman Empire spread throughout the Mediterranean world, more than one hundred and twenty theatres of similar design appeared in Syria, France, Portugal, England and North Africa.

Costuming, like other aspects of Roman theatre, followed Greek tradition, with long gowns and elevated boots for tragedy and short tunics with shoes for comedy.

Only men acted in tragic and comic roles, but pantomimists could be either sex. Masks were used by the actors. The facial features of masks, posed in an exaggerated expression, emphasised the stereotyped nature of each character and enabled a single actor to assume multiple roles.

In the sixth century A.D., the Emperor Justinian of Byzantium embraced Christianity and ordered the closing of all places of public entertainment in his realm. This marked the end of public theatre and drama until their revival in the medieval period. <sup>[20]</sup>

### **3.4.3. The Medieval Theatre :**

The end of the tenth century saw churches being used as theatres during the Christmas and Easter holidays. The scenes of the play would take place in different parts of the church. Each platform or stall where the scenes were performed was called a *mansion* or house and the actors moved between the stations within the church presenting their long cycle of plays. The plays consisted of a dramatisation of the Bible, starting with the Creation and going right through to Doomsday.

Between the tenth and the sixteenth centuries, hundred of monks, priests, and brothers worked at composing and revising religious plays. Rather than creating original plays they adapted and dramatised stories from the Bible, the legends of the saints, or religious doctrine. By the ninth century words, written in Latin, had been set to the music associated with the high festivals. Gradually the simple dialogue and action developed into full-length, highly developed dramas. Initially they were called

"mystery plays" and mostly portrayed the events of the Old and New Testaments. By the twelfth century the Latin dialogue was replaced by English. The mysteries came to attract large crowds into the churches. These were followed by "miracle plays" which were more advanced and secular. As well as portraying religious stories the miracle plays also depicted the lives of the saints. By this time the plays had become so corrupt that the theatre was expelled from the church. The craft and trade guilds took over the plays and transferred their location from indoors to outdoors. Once again they were set outdoors, but now instead of one stage a series of platforms or mansions would be set around a town square, and the actors were transported from one to another on elaborately decorated carts or "pageants". Such a drama had to be performed in episodes. Finally, after the mystery plays and the miracle plays, came the "morality plays". These were more original than the first two and also more complex in structure. Instead of being based on stories from the Bible, they drew upon well-known allegorical tales, and their characters personified such concepts as Wealth, Lust and Faith.<sup>[21]</sup>

Up until the late fifteenth century, when semi-professional acting troupes began to appear, the medieval actor was an amateur. The medieval stage had simple and usually symbolic scenery. The tomb of Christ, for example, was originally symbolised by the altar of the church. This was later replaced by a simple tomb of wood or iron. The different mansions or houses would have been small and furnished in a simple fashion. The morality plays were usually located in open fields or town squares and their sets had to be movable. They would not have been any more elaborate than the sets used on the pageant wagons. Clearly then, the simplicity of the scenery means it

would have lacked realism. As the plays were performed outdoors in ordinary daylight, there would have been very little in the way of realistic lighting effects. It would therefore have been necessary for the medieval writer to clarify both time and place through the dialogue of the cast.<sup>[22]</sup>

#### **3.4.4. The Elizabethan Theatre :**

The close intimacy between the wide audience and the actor continued in Elizabethan theatre. At the same time the playwright ceased to have religious responsibilities as the role of his acting company became more professional and commercial. As with the Greek theatre, all the roles in the Elizabethan theatre were played by male actors. The plays continued to be performed outdoors during the day, with little or no realistic scenery. The form and content of the plays, which were written in verse, differed quite considerably from that of Greek drama. Usually the plot was complicated, consisting of several plot lines; comedy and serious material were combined and highborn character was mixed with low. Professional actors now performed the plays. Whereas the Greek plays had generally been confined to a single time and location, the Elizabethans moved about freely, without the benefit of stage scenery.<sup>[23]</sup>

The precise details of the Globe may never be known, but from the following points we can get a fairly good picture of what it was like:

- Over 2000 spectators surrounded at least three sides of the stage.

- The plays were performed in daylight, with a minimum of scenery and props and with very little in the way of stage setting and lighting.
- The area where most of the action took place was a very large open platform with access from upstage doors.
- The rear facade of the platform provided a permanent architectural and neutral "set" providing two or three levels and a large number of acting areas.<sup>[24]</sup>

Performances of the Elizabethan play were given in the afternoon. Natural daylight was the main source of illumination, but any night time scenes or scenes set in caves or cells called for the use of torches, candles and lanterns. The use of such props in daylight was one of the conventions of the theatre and did not detract from the enjoyment experienced by the Elizabethan spectator. The actors performed the actions on the platform and, when necessary, the words and actions of the characters allowed the audiences' imagination to transform that platform and facade into a field, forest, cave, mountain, private chamber, castle, or city gate - in short, any conceivable setting.<sup>[25]</sup>

Very often the costumes were expensive and elaborate. Various props were used, such as thrones, tables, beds, altars, tombs, tents and trees. Flourishes were played for the processions by musicians who also provided accompaniment for the numerous songs and dances, and appropriate background music both for solemn scenes and terror scenes.

### **3.4.5. Restoration Theatre :**

As with Shakespeare's London, Paris too possessed its own lively popular drama that combined comedy and tragedy, kings and clowns, poetry and pageantry. Whereas the general public continued to enjoy the spectacle of street clowns and acrobats, royal processions and public executions, those whose taste in entertainment was more refined preferred to frequent small theatres. Here man 's solitary struggle with the moral problems of the time was portrayed through carefully balanced plots that followed the neoclassical unities of time, place and action, and adhered to strict patterns of heroic verse. Charles II returned to England from France following the Restoration in 1660, bringing with him a taste for drama. The French influence on the theatres was considerable. One particularly important element of the theatre at this time was the introduction of actresses to the English stage for the first time. The introduction of the proscenium arch brought a space which could be given wings and back shutters. This provided scenery. It was not until the late eighteenth century that curtains began to be used between acts. Props were changed in full view of the audience and the setting was not realistic. Candles were used to light up the stage and auditorium.<sup>[26]</sup>

Playwrights at the time of the Restoration did not place importance on scenery and many sets tended to be used and re-used simply as a decorative background. In the eighteenth century, however, the scenes were more precisely set which meant that there was less need for the location to be mentioned in the dialogue, fewer scene changes were necessary and a less episodic play structure could be employed.



#### **3.4.6. Modern Times :**

The open stage, one without scenery or with a setting that represents any locale, is a modern innovation. Looking at a modern script of a play, we can see that, for the most part, it consists of lines of dialogue; the playwright's stage directions are minimal, and he does not provide a detailed description of the characters' psychology. The script requires further input from the performers and production staff.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the theatre was dominated by the conventions of realistic production which were aimed at fostering the illusion of reality. This was achieved by means of lifelike representation of both character and setting. At this time performer and spectator did not interact, to the extent that the performers would pretend that the audience did not exist. There was no communication between the two. Dramatic structure tended to be linear and was tied in with a story line. Scenery was realistic, with doors and windows that actually opened and props and furniture that appeared practical. As with all things in life, artistic conventions change and the twentieth century has seen a revolution in theatrical conventions. Those working in the theatre no longer wish to be restricted by the proscenium arch and, with the thrust or the arena stage have attempted to bring the audience and the performer closer together.

This gives the actor the freedom to move freely amongst the audience and interact with him, speaking to him directly, touching him and surprising him in various ways. In recent times, locations such as warehouses, garages, store buildings and street corners have provided the setting for performances. Scenery has gone from

being illusionistic to being openly theatrical. This revolt against naturalistic scenery was led by two influential theoreticians, Gordon Craig and Adolph Appia, who objected to painted canvas and cluttered stages; they preferred the use of simple platforms, screens and drapes and the use of light to provide mass, line and colour. When accompanied by music this new kind of theatrical impressionism was aimed primarily at affecting the emotions.<sup>[27]</sup>

The conventions of realism have been rejected by playwrights who desire more freedom. Acting itself has become quite flamboyant. According to the Stanislavsky method the performer attempted to create realistic dramatic characterisations embodying psychological truth. The precise attention to detail in designing costumes and settings, together with many improvements in makeup and stage lighting, brought about the most realistic theatre presentation ever seen on the stage. This realism was rejected by, among others, Erwin Piscator and Bertold Brecht, who preferred to adopt the methods of the younger Russian directors, Meyerhold and Tairov. Such techniques were employed in epic theatre, in order to create an "alienation effect", so that the audience would at all times be aware of the fact that they were watching a play and not reality. There is no longer a separation between audience and performer; instead those working in the theatre aim at involving the audience in the production.

Modern stage lighting can be used to intensify the audience's emotional reactions to the performance; this can be achieved through subtle changes in the level of lighting. As with acting and scenery, lighting can also be symbolic, stylized, or theatrical.<sup>[28]</sup>

### 3.5. Confusion of the Term :

It is essential to understand the true nature of the theatrical event if we wish to examine a theatrical form from a particular period of history or a particular culture. As there appears to be no consensus on the definitions of the two terms drama and theatre, and they often appear to be almost identical, it is essential at this point for me to make a distinction between them.

To date theorists, despite their endeavours to distinguish between the terms drama and theatre, have been unable to provide a convincing distinction. Taplin, in his book *Greek Tragedy in Action*, explains the origins of the two terms as follows:

"The very word "theatre" first occurs in the fifth century; *theatron* means a place where things are seen, the audience are *hoi theatai* - those who look on, the spectators. So too, the word *drama*: something that is acted out, a communication through action."<sup>[29]</sup>

He describes the dramatist as both director and producer, responsible not only for the script, but also for the performance through his instructions to both the chorus and the actors.

Allardyce Nicoll, however, does not see drama and theatre as being synonymous. He defines the two the two terms as follows:

"The word "theatre" implies a performance given by one group of persons (who may be called the "actors") before an assembled audience. If, for the moment, this be accepted as a working definition, what is the significance of the words "drama" and "play"? Basically, these may be taken as synonymous, conveying the idea of a literary work written, by an author or several authors in collaboration, in a form suitable for stage presentation."<sup>[30]</sup>

Although Nicoll's definitions of the two terms are not equally explicit and distinct, we are able to infer from them the following:

Theatre = performance + actors + audience

Drama = written play + author + stage presentation

The performance and the stage presentation are common to both definitions. The existence of actors is essential to the written play and theatre is included in the text of a drama or play. In his definition of theatre Jerry Grotowsky emphasises the importance of the text as a dramatic feature:

"What does the word theatre mean? This is the question we often come up against, and one to which there are many possible answers. To academics, the theatre is a place where an actor recites a written text, illustrating it with a series of movements in order to make it more easily understood. Thus interpreted, the theatre is a useful accessory to dramatic literature. The intellectual theatre is merely a variation of this conception."<sup>[31]</sup>

Nicoll further describes drama in *Theory of Drama*, as:

"the art of expressing ideas about life in such a manner as to render that expression capable of interpretation by actors and likely to interest an audience assembled to hear the words and witness the actions."<sup>[32]</sup>

It should be noted that although drama or a play has its author and its text it is still closely related to theatre. Hamilton appears to link theatre inextricably with the definition of a play, stating:

"A play is a story devised to be presented by actors on a stage before an audience. This plain statement of facts affords an exceedingly simple definition of the drama - a definition so simple, indeed, as to seem at first glance easily obvious and therefore scarcely worthy of expression. But, if we examine the statement thoroughly, phrase by phrase, we shall see that it sums up within itself the entire theory of the theatre."<sup>[33]</sup>

When an actor performs before an audience the result is theatrical performance, therefore actor and audience can be seen as the principal elements of theatre. Peter Brook says:

"I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged."<sup>[34]</sup>

Grotowsky used his practical experimentation in theatre to show that theatre "cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, live communion."<sup>[35]</sup>

Another definition of theatre in which the terms drama and theatre are almost synonymous is that of Beckerman in *Dynamics of Drama*, which states:

"Theatre... what shall the verb be? but theatre is. Shall we write theatre is... not a thing. Theatre is not an object to be manipulated. It does not have the solidity of a physical form which one can touch, like sculpture or the permanence of a printed form to which one can return, like poetry. We cannot write theatre is... Instead, we might write theatre occurs... Theatre does not exist except when it is occurring. The building may exist. The performance may exist individually. The script may exist as well as the scenery. A poem is a thing made. Theatre is not. It is something happening."<sup>[36]</sup>

In this definition Beckerman makes the link between theatre and happening, the Greek word for which is "drama", meaning to do or to perform. This explains how the confusion associated with the two terms came about.

Thompson makes a distinction between the printed novel, which he sees as a complete artistic creation, and the printed play (drama), which he does not. He suggests that the reader should learn the art of imaginative production in the same way that the skilled musician is able to hear the music of a score simply by scanning the musical symbols on the page. In this way he sees drama as having a dual nature in a way that fiction does not. The playgoer is able to appreciate drama in the theatre, but even the less fortunate lover of drama is still able to enjoy it in the form of a book.

However, he concludes that for drama to fulfill its intended purpose it should be performed as a stage production, not merely seen as a piece of literature to be read.<sup>[37]</sup> On the other hand, Boulton believes that a true play:

"is three-dimensional; it is literature that walks and talks before our eyes... The text of the play is meant to be translated into sights, sounds and actions which occur literally and physically on a stage."<sup>[38]</sup>

In order to make this distinction I will use the term "theatre" to mean a place with a stage on which actors perform in front of an audience. The term "drama" will be used to refer to the complex act of playacting, for which material is written to be presented on stage by actors performing in front of an audience.

## NOTES

### " THE EUROPEAN STYLE OF DRAMA "

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4- Ibid., p.13.

5-Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by: Gerald Else. Michigan: M.U.P., 1980, p.25.

6- Ibid., p.28.

7-Ibid., p. 27.

8- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1954, p.86.

9- Aristotle, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

10- Forster, op. cit., p.78.

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12- Aristotle, op. cit., p. 28.

13- Ibid., p.29.

14- Nicoll, A. J. *The Theory of Drama*. London: George G. Harrap & Company Ltd., 1931, p. 81.

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16- Kelsall, M. *Studying Drama*. Sidney: Arnold, 1987, p.14.

17- For more details, see Brecht's *Brecht on Theatre*. Translated by: John Willet.  
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20- Paraphrased from Marry Ellen Snodgrass's *Roman Classics*. Lincoln: Cliffs  
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23- Styan, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

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31- Grotowski, Jerzy. "The Theatre's New Testament." In *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, Bernard F. Dukore, ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974, p. 97.

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33- Hamilton, Clayton. *The Theory of The Theatre*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910, p. 3.

34- Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York: Atheneum, 1968, p. 9.

35- Grotowski, J. *Toward a Poor Theatre*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968, p. 19.

36- Beckerman, Bernard. *Dynamics of Drama*. New York : Drama Book Specialists, 1979, p.6.

37- Thompson, Alan. *The Anatomy of Drama*. Berkeley: U.C.P., 1946, pp. 2-3.

38- Boulton, Marjorie. *The Anatomy of Drama*. New York: Routledge, 1968, p. 3.

## **Chapter Four : ARABS AND DRAMA**

There is a long-standing and ongoing dispute between both Arab and non-Arab critics as to whether or not drama existed in the Arab world prior to their contact with the West. There are two opposing viewpoints concerning this matter. One claims that there was no drama in the Arabs' history and puts forth its assumptions and justifications accordingly; the other is equally adamant in its argument that drama did indeed exist. This section is devoted to the examination and discussion of two these perspectives.

### **4.1. The Negative Attitude :**

#### **4.1.1. The Religious Conflict :**

The Tunisian researcher, Muhammad 'Azîza, regards the subject in terms of an enigma, which he approaches from three angles. First, he claims that the Arab Muslims disregarded dramatic expression. Second, despite having translated Greek thought and culture, they failed to translate even a single verse of Aeschylus; nor did they translate as much as one short dialogue of Sophocles, or even a meditation of Euripides. Third, in translating the two Greek words for 'comedy' and 'tragedy' as *hijâ* and *madîh*, Ibn Rushd mistakenly replaced the dramatic terms with poetic terminology. In addition to this, 'Azîza claims that conflict is an essential element of Greek drama involving four levels, the concept of which Arab Muslims are unable to conceive. These four levels are: a vertical conflict between the will of God and the will of man, a horizontal conflict between the individual and the society in which he lives, a dynamic conflict

between human striving and predestination, and a conflict between man's positive and negative attitudes toward his own existence. 'Azîza sees Islam itself as having been instrumental in preventing the adaptation of drama and other such art which has at its centre the idea of conflict between man and God and even between man and his own self.<sup>[1]</sup>

#### **4.1.2. Poetry, Paganism and Religion :**

The Egyptian critic, Muḥammad Mandûr also takes the view that despite having a long history of literary art, the Arabic literary tradition has no place for dramatic art. He suggests the following reasons for this:

1. From pre-Islamic times the Arabic literary tradition concentrated on poetry, and throughout Islamic civilization Arabic poetry continued to be at the forefront of the literary tradition. In order for prose to be accepted it had to be artistic prose of a very high standard. The oratorical tone and emotional, sensory descriptions characteristic of Arabic poetry are not conducive to dramatic poetry for which the dialogue of individual tones is necessary. Whereas Arabic poetry provides sensory descriptions, dramatic poetry portrays characters, dramatic situations and events of everyday life.
2. The underdeveloped nature of Arab paganism in pre-Islamic times was unlike that of the paganism of al-Farâ'ina (The Pharaohs) and the Greeks and did not provide dramatic opportunities. This resulted in a lack of dramatic form and meaning in Arab literature until the Islamic period.

3. Greek drama was based on Greek legend and tradition and therefore Islamic translators considered the non-Islamic nature of Greek theatrical legacy unsuitable for translation.<sup>[2]</sup> According to Mandûr:

"whether it is true or not that "orthodox" Islam continuously and absolutely prohibited the making of statues, it is self-evident that making statues is utterly different from depicting characters and making them move in a play. It is known that the philosophic origin of depicting dramatic characters and also of the creation of various literary genres, is imitation, mimesis, as Aristotle says, and not creation ex nihilo, that is, art is imitation of nature created by the divine. Aristotle elaborately clarified this concept in *The Poetics*. For this reason it is difficult to accept what is sometimes said, namely that Islam regarded Greek dramatic personification as a challenge to the omnipotence of God or imitation of it."<sup>[3]</sup>

#### 4.1.3. Tribal Regulations :

The Egyptian director and writer, Zakî Tulaymât, sees the Arabs as no different from any other nation in their use of imitation as a means of understanding life. It appears to be in man's nature to attempt to dramatise and emphasise his emotions, ideas, beliefs etc. through linguistic skills, movement, and gesture. It also seems to be instinctive for man to wish to display his skills and abilities to others. The Arabs practised this artistic form of literature, either by imitation, spontaneously, or for a purpose. However this is entirely different from dramatic art.<sup>[4]</sup>

Mandûr's argument is confirmed by Tulaymât, who also cites the nature of Arab society as another reason for dramatic art not being a part of the Arabic literary tradition. Society was based on tribal regulations which discouraged individualism..

#### **4.1.4. Lack of Interaction with Greek Theatre :**

Landau, also on the side of those arguing against the existence of drama in Arab history, speculates on the reasons that prevented the development of Arabic theatre:

"The fact that there was no regular Arab theatre until the nineteenth century may be explained by two main reasons:

One. The people with whom the Arabs came into close contact had no well-developed theatre.

Two. Women, particularly if unveiled, were strictly forbidden to appear on the stage.

Only the combination of these two reasons may account for the fact that while a large part of literature, science and thought was translated into Arabic at various times, no item of the classical drama found its way into Arab translation until recent years."<sup>[5]</sup>

Landau's first point is quite convincing as by the seventh century nothing remained of Greek drama for the Arabs to emulate. The Eastern Church played a key role in the demise of Greek theatre with its unyielding opposition. The dramatic festivals of Athens were successfully opposed by the Orthodox Church in Byzantium over a long period of time.<sup>[6]</sup>

His second point, however, is less convincing. Although it is true that the fact that women were not allowed to perform would have affected the development of drama, it is unlikely that it would have prevented it entirely. During the "Golden Era" of English drama women were also forbidden to perform. The parts of women were played by boys and men until the Restoration in 1660 when women began to appear as

actresses.<sup>[7]</sup> If it were the absence of women that prevented drama from developing in the Arab world it does not make sense that Greek theatre or any other European theatre, should have flourished as they did.

Another proponent of the theory that drama is not part of the Arab literary tradition is Gibb who writes that:

"Drama is not a native Arab art. Various sociological explanations have been suggested for this fact, but the simplest reason is perhaps the best that the dramatic art of Greece, from which the Western theatre derives, remained unknown to them. Comedy found its expression in the picaresque tale, embellished for the intellectuals by literary graces and verse; dramatic tragedy in the still more poetic setting of romantic and unhappy love. Representation came in with the shadow play in the later Middle Ages, but the attempt to raise it above the level of popular entertainment was still-born."<sup>[8]</sup>

In his book, *The Development of Early Arabic Drama (1847-1900)*, the Bahrainian scholar, Al-Khozai, expands on the circumstances that prevented Arabic drama from developing. He states that:

"Drama as a manifest European form, as a literary genre that describes life and characters, or tells a story by means of action and dialogue through acting on a stage, in the presence of an audience, was unknown in Arabic before the historic attempt made by Mârûn an-Naqqâsh at his house in Beirut in 1847. It was not feasible for drama to be developed by the Arabs for a number of factors that can be described as mental, aesthetic, religious, environmental, and historical. These factors interrelated and, complementary as they are assisted the hindrance, or rather the divorce, between Thespian arts and Arab civilization."<sup>[9]</sup>

#### **4.1.5. The Arabs' Mind :**

The absence of drama in early Arabic culture is ascribed by the Egyptian critic, 'Izz ad-Dîn Ismâ'îl, to the inclination of the Arab mentality toward abstractions rather than to details. This explains why the early Arabs avoided dramatic expression even during their ages of glory and activity. Ismâ'îl cites the Arabs' denial of the tragic aspects of life as a reason why drama does not appear in Arabic literary history. To see life as a tragedy would directly contravene the fundamental principles of Arab morality and basic religious beliefs. According to the Muslim faith one should never complain of one's fate, but accept it gladly; if one does one's best then trusts in God the path of good will be made clear. In this way life holds no sense of drama, which explains the lack of the dramatic tendency in ancient Arab expression.[1<sup>0</sup>]

#### **4.1.6. Other Reasons :**

The Egyptian Maḥmûd Taymûr analyses the reasons for the absence of drama in Arabic literature in a more specific manner. He concludes that:

1. Ancient heroic poems and plays were generally written in verse, and the early Arabs tended to be of the opinion that translating poetry into prose causes it to lose its charm.
2. Their literature, and in particular their poetry, was a source of great pride to the Arabs, to the extent that they felt no need for the literature of other nations.
3. At the time when the movement to Arabicise Greek literature was popular, the popularity of the theatre in its native countries was beginning to wane.

4. The paganistic elements which were an essential part of Greek heroic poems and plays brought about strong opposition from the Arab religious leaders.<sup>[11]</sup>

Curt Pruffer is also of the opinion that the Arabs did not possess drama and reinforces Landau's claim that the Arabic "view of life" was to blame. He writes:

"The reasons for this curious failure of the Arab mind to produce anything really dramatic due to the view of life, with its autocratic idea of God and fate that has absolutely no comprehension of individual conflict of rebellion against the external mover or any combat between will and duty, and has therefore no comprehension of the dramatic."<sup>[12]</sup>

#### **4.2. The Positive Attitude :**

The opposite side of the argument, according to the critics, is that: "Yes the Arabs had drama, but they did not practise it on stage as the Greeks, and later the Europeans, generally did."

According to al-Khozai the Arabs possessed their own form of dramatic expression, but this did not develop into a national drama. According to him:

"Despite the fact that the Arabs had their own dramatic expression in two embryonic forms, namely *Khayâl az-Zill* and the *Ta'ziya*, these two antecedents of Arabic drama failed to develop and evolve into a national drama."<sup>[13]</sup>

##### **4.2.1. Istisqâ' and Pilgrimage Prayer :**

The Syrian playwright, 'Alî 'Uqlah 'Arsân, examined this subject in great detail in his book, *al-Zawâhir al-Masrahiyya 'Ind al-'Arab*. 'Arsân was of the opinion that like certain other peoples, such as the ancient Egyptians, Indians, Japanese and



Chinese, the Arabs did have drama in their history, but for some reason this did not develop into a national genre. He gives as an example an early Meccan ritual from pre-Islamic times which consisted of dancing around the Ka‘bah, in worship of multiple gods, quoting a Qur’ânic verse to support his claim that in the days before Islam religious rituals existed involving singing and dancing: “And their prayer before the house is nothing but whistling and clapping of hands” (Qur’ân VIII 35). These rituals, which involved circling the Ka‘bah while chanting the *talbiyah* (songs of obedience) were performed twice yearly. Each tribe had its own *talbiyah*. Nizâr, for example, had the following *talbiyah*:

Here we are! O Allah, at your service.  
Here I am at your service,  
No partner you have but a partner is yours.  
You owe him, he owes not.<sup>[14]</sup>

The *Istisqâ’* (prayer for rain) was a pre-Islamic practice which ‘Arsân considers to be a dramatic phenomenon. In times when there was no rain the people of Mecca used to wash themselves with water, perfume their bodies then circumambulate the Ka‘bah seven times, after which a pious man would call upon Allah to send rain. According to ‘Arsân, as well as singing and dancing for ritual and religious purposes, the Arabs would also do so to celebrate other occasions, including when the Meccan Arabs received visitors from outside the city during the pilgrimage.<sup>[15]</sup>

'Arsân claimed that not only did Islam not prevent the Arab Muslims from singing and dancing, it actually encouraged them to do so. In support of this he quotes the Prophet as having said: 'Carry on, O Banî Arfidah, so the Jews and Christians know that there is entertainment in our religion.'<sup>[16]</sup>

In support of his claims 'Arsân cites certain written texts with theatrical aspects, such as al-Muṭahhar al-Azdî's narrative of Abû al Qâsim al-Baghdâdî and the story of the Prophet Muḥammad's ascension to the Seven Heavens. In addition to this he mentions certain elements of the theatre, such as the shadow play and popular entertainment forms.<sup>[17]</sup>

#### **4.2.2. Popular Entertainments :**

The Egyptian critic, Muḥammad Kamâl ad-Dîn considers that although the Arabs practised various arts in pre-Islamic times, including the art of drama, they did not practise it formally.<sup>[18]</sup> He speaks of three stages of Arabic drama:

1. Popular theatrical plays represented in the *Sâmir* and festivals such of those as '*Îd* and *Mawlid* and activities such as shadow plays and the *Maqâma*.
2. Borrowing from European drama and its influence through translation, Arabisation, and performance.
3. Attempts by the Arabs to draw upon their rich history in order that their drama would reflect their own culture.<sup>[19]</sup>

#### **4.2.3. Maqâmât and Hakawâtî :**

The Egyptian anthropologist, ‘Abdul Hamîd Yûnis sees the Maqâma <sup>[20]</sup> as a theatrical work in both pre- and post-Islamic times. He considers those researchers who only view shadow plays or the Karaqôz as being part of Arabic theatrical tradition to be short-sighted. He included various elements as part of theatrical phenomena including the Maqâmât, the Naqâ’id (polemic poems), Munshidîn (songs that were sung by professional singers), Hikâya and Hakawâtî (narrative and narrator), Mufakhara (boasting).

#### **4.2.4. Religious Rituals :**

According to the Palestinian critic, Muḥammad Najm, Arabic literature consists of a number of dramatic phenomena and considers it to be far less simple, primitive and isolated from everyday life than has been suggested by certain Islamic sources. Instead, he sees Arabic paganism as having been complex and deep-rooted in the hearts of the people, and affecting many aspects of life, including human emotions, nature and the seasons, the rituals of purification and resurrection, and festivals. Music and singing played a part in all these events and rituals. Najm cites examples of popular art found in historical works by al-Tabarî and later al-Mas‘ûdî, which go back as far as the third century after the Hijrah.<sup>[21]</sup>

#### **4.2.5. Kurraj And Polemic Poetry :**

Kurraj is a Persian word meaning donkey or mule.<sup>[22]</sup> The Iraqi scholar, ‘Umar al-Tâlib, in his book, *Malâmiḥ al-Masrahiyya al-Arabiyya wal-Islâmiyya*, provides evidence to support the theory that theatrical performances were known in Arabian

society in Islamic times. Al-Tâlib cites the use by the poet Jarîr of the term al-Kurraj in some of his poems. Jarîr says :

[Labistu Silâhî wal-Farazdaq lu‘batun / ‘alayhi wishâhâ  
kurrajin wa-jalâjiluh]

(I have put on my arms while al-Farazdaq is a laughing stock /  
dressed in the two ornamented belts and bells of a kurraj.)

[Amsa’l-Farazdaq fî jalâjili kurrajin / ba‘da al-Ukhaytal  
lu‘batan li Jarîrî]

(al-Farazdaq with his bells of kurraj became / after the small  
Akhtal a toy to Jarîr.)<sup>[23]</sup>

In explaining his theory, al-Tâlib refers to the theatrical aspect of pre-Islamic rites of worship and pilgrimage. According to Al-Tâlib, when the Arab tribes used to visit Mecca in order to perform the Hajj, as they were walking around the Ka‘bah seven times they would recite certain hymns. He sees the participants in this act as both actors and audience at the same time.<sup>[24]</sup> Furthermore, Al-Tâlib sees the literary gatherings which took part in Mecca during the peak commercial seasons to have been highly theatrical. They gave the poets the opportunity to gather to present their poetry before an audience who would provide feedback, thereby creating an interaction between the performers (the poets) and the audience. Al-Tâlib describes how some of the rich rulers in the days before Islam used to pay actors and entertainers to imitate other rulers and emirs in a satirical way.<sup>[25]</sup>

#### 4.2.6. Ta'ziya :

The Egyptian researcher, Shawkat, is also of the opinion that theatrical forms existed for the Arabs both before and after the advent of Islam. He also notes that the Persians were familiar with the passion play, which was only performed by the Shī'ites of Fatimid Egypt and in Iran. This would be performed on the tenth day of the first month of the Islamic calendar and commemorated the killing of the Prophet's grandson, Husayn. The performance was usually given in the open air surrounded by tents. The actors played the parts of Husayn, al-'Abbâs, Zaynab, Sukayna and others. The performance ended with a recitation of the story of Husayn's martyrdom in a sad voice intended to make the audience weep.<sup>[26]</sup> The Syrian researcher, Qatâyah told of how the actor who played the part of 'Shimr', Husayn's killer, was paid a great sum of money to do so<sup>[27]</sup> because the character was so unpopular that whoever played him would be cursed and outcast by the villagers. Shawkat likened this dramatic form to that of Christian plays in Medieval Europe adapted from religious books by priests who wished to achieve educational and moral goals.<sup>[28]</sup> This type of performance is known as *Ta'ziya*.

#### 4.2.7. Nawrûz and Popular Festivals :

In his book, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, the Israeli writer, Shoshan, describes the celebrations of Nawrûz. He gives an account of the occasion and provides some information on the performances given at that time. He mentions a visit by a group of actors to the 'Abbâsid caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-61) and also mentions

masquerades of Nawrûz that feature in a hemistich written by the Iraqi poet Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d.908) which describe the activities of Nawrûz:

The demons appeared to us during the day [of Nawrûz],  
Some in lines and some holding hand in hand,  
In their dance and bodies swaying  
As Cypresses swaying in the wind.  
Ugliness was installed upon their beauty  
Yet in their masks (samâjât) there is beauty.<sup>[29]</sup>

Shoshan claims that in the tenth century Egyptians were familiar with the art of acting and with make-up and costumes. He writes:

"There were also masks and masquerades. In 975, in celebrations which lasted three days, crowds marched in the streets of Cairo; masquerades (or masks), theatrical performances, and man-made imitations of elephants, possibly a means of mocking two (real) elephants which had featured in a procession presided over by the Fâtimid caliph al-Mu'izz two years earlier, all were present. A medieval critic lamented the adverse effect of the holiday not only on the common people but on the learned as well. On that day, he tells us, schools were shut down and turned in to playgrounds"<sup>[30]</sup>

#### **4.3. Al-Hakîm's Attitude :**

Any investigation of this subject would be incomplete without a close look at the work of al-Hakîm, the most famous playwright in the Arab world. Al- Hakîm wrote extensively on this matter, approaching it from all angles, rather than restricting himself to one of the common explanations. He took into account mental, aesthetic, environmental, religious and historical aspects of the issue in an attempt to analyse and pass judgment on the topic.

#### **4.3.1. The Poetic Ode:**

According to al-Hakîm Arabic literature is so deep-rooted in the Arab heritage that it is very difficult for it to imitate any other literature. He says:

"the deep-rooted part of literature is its character preserved and handed down from the past. Arabic literature, then, is like other deep-rooted literature. It does not lightly accept change to its substance or character without examination, caution, and circumspection. When in the last century it took this cautious attitude towards the theatre, it was not to be censured or blamed for that. For the way the theatre was introduced in the Arab East it had no foundation which could justify it in the eyes of that deep-rooted literature."<sup>[31]</sup>

The matter of inheritance arises again for al- Hakîm as regards the manner in which the Arabs celebrate their literature, in particular poetry. He notes that despite the fact that the ode is valued, the play is not recognised, even when written in verse. Al-Hakîm concludes that in the same way that dramatic poetry has been inherited by Western literature from its past, so too the ode has been inherited from the distant past.<sup>[32]</sup>

#### **4.3.2. Lack of Translation :**

In highlighting the inheritance aspect of Arabic literature al- Hakîm in no way attempts to justify the division between Greek and Arabic literatures. In fact he would prefer to reconcile the two. He voices his disappointment that Arabic literature did not recognise Greek drama earlier and interpret it and even goes as far as censuring Arabic literature for having ignored Greek drama. Having examined the roles of deep-

rootedness and inheritance in the failure to transfer Greek drama into Arabic, al-Hakîm goes still deeper into the subject, asking for example who was responsible for this failure to translate Greek poetry into Arabic. He suggests that if the Arabs were in contact relation with Greek only through Syriac they would have translated only that which was available to them. The fact that they translated only scientific and philosophical works suggests that they were the only types of work they found. It was only later, having learned Greek that the Arabs were able to translate directly. Al-Hakîm does not believe that the Arabs were completely unresponsive to Greek poetry, but he does blame them for not translating some of the Greek tragedies and comedies. Al-Hakîm, like the majority of scholars, considers the origin of Greek tragedy to lie in pagan religious rituals and considers that it may have been the Arabs' religious beliefs which prevented them from accepting this art form. He concludes:

"This is the opinion of a group of scholars. They assert that Islam stood in the way of the acceptance of this pagan art. I do not share this opinion. Islam has never been an obstacle for an art form. It permitted the translation of many works produced by heathens. There was *Kalîla and Dimna* which Ibn al-Muqaffa' translated from Pahlavi. There was Ferdowsî's *Shahnâme* which al-Bundârî translated from the Persian. It is about their pagan age. Similarly, Islam did not prevent the circulation of the wine poetry of Abû Nuwâs, the carving of statues for the palaces of the caliphs, or the expert portraiture of Persian miniatures. Likewise, it did not prevent the translation of many Greek works which mentioned pagan customs. No, it was not the pagan quality as such which turned the Arabs away from dramatic poetry."<sup>[33]</sup>

Although al-Hakîm is correct to say that Islam did not stand in the way of Greek drama being translated into Arabic, it is necessary to make the distinction



between Islam as it is represented by its law, (*the Sharî'a*) and Islam represented by Muslims, be they rulers, kings, caliphs, or the ordinary people.

#### **4.3.3. Understanding Drama :**

Al-Hakîm also addresses the issue of the difficulty of understanding drama. An explanation is often needed to understand a story in poetry. Quoting a remark by the critic Francisque Sarcey, who advised the audience that they should read a summary of the play *Oedipus Tyrannus* before watching the performance, al-Hakîm goes on to remark that this was the clearest and the purest of Greek tragedies. He asks the question that if this was the advice given to ‘the public of a nation whose culture was based on the Greek legacy’, what then of the Arab reader in the ‘Abbâsid or Fâtimid periods?’<sup>[34]</sup>

The fact that the Arabs were known to have translated many Greek works more difficult than drama causes al-Hakîm to reject the suggestion that difficulty was the reason for drama not being translated. According to al-Hakîm:

"Despite the validity of this explanation, I do not believe that it would have prevented translation of some examples of this art. For Plato's *Republic* was translated into Arabic, and I have no doubt that it contains ideas concerning that ideal city which would be difficult for the Islamic mentality to digest. Yet that did not prevent its translation."<sup>[35]</sup>

#### **4.3.4. Stability and Staging Drama :**

Another factor which al-Hakîm considered may have been instrumental in preventing the translation of Greek tragedies into Arabic was that they had been written specifically to be performed, not read. Al- Hakîm writes:

"Perhaps this is what made the Arab translator stop perplexed before tragedy. He would cast his eyes over the silent texts trying to see them in his mind throbbing and moving with their characters, atmosphere, locations, and items, but that mind would not comply with his wishes. For he had never seen this art acted in his land. The chorus among the Greeks created acting. It was the actor Thespis who created the play, the play did not create the theatre. The theatre was the creator of the play. So, so long as the Arab translator was certain that he had before him a work not made to be read, for what purpose would he translate it?"<sup>[36]</sup>

Another problem for the Arab translator, according to al-Hakîm, was that even if he had translated Greek theatre, the question would then have arisen regarding where it should be performed. The life of the Arab was based on a nomadic existence, always traveling from place to place. Stability, however, is an essential element of Greek theatre. Al-Hakîm writes:

"Everything, then, in the moving homeland separated it from the theatre. The first thing the theatre requires is stability. The Arab lacked a settled feeling. That is in my opinion, the true reason for their neglect of dramatic poetry which requires a theatre."<sup>[37]</sup>

He describes the "Arab instinct" as theatrical, suggesting that even if they were unable to adopt the Greek form of theatre, they did express it in other forms. He gives the examples of al-Ma'arrî's *Risâlat al-Ghufrân*, dialogues from *al-Aghânî of al-Asfahânî*, and some of al-Jâhiz's writings.

## NOTES

### " ABSENCE OF DRAMA "

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- 2- Mandûr, Muhammad. *al-Masrah*. Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1959, pp. 17-19.
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- 8- Landau, op. cit., preface by: H. A. R. Gibb.
- 9- al-Khozai, op. cit., p. 224.
- 10- Ismâ'îl 'Izz ad-Dîn. *Qadâyâ al-Insân Fî al-Adab al-Masrahî al-mu'âsir*. Cairo: Dâr al-Fikr al-'Arabî , 1968, pp. 43-47.
- 11- Paraphrased from Riyâd 'Ismat's "Masrahunâ Baina al-Ibdâ' wal-Ittibâ'" *al-Hayâh al-Masrahiyya*. No. 2, 1977, pp. 114-119.
- 12- Prüfer, Curt. "Drama, Arabic," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 4 (1911) pp. 872-878.
- 13- al-Khozai, op. cit., p. 225.
- 14- 'Arsân, 'Alî. *al-Zawâhir al-Masrahiyya 'Ind al-'Arab*. Damascus: Ittihâd al - Kuttâb al-'Arab, 1985, pp. 32-33.

- 15- Ibid., pp. 48-49.
- 16- Ibid., pp. 68-69.
- 17- Ibid., p. 153 and pp. 493-588.
- 18- Kamâl al-Dîn, Muḥammad. *al-‘Arab wal-Masrah*. Cairo: Dâr al-Hilâl, 1975, pp. 9-20.
- 19- al-Nuṣayrî, Balqâsim. "Muḥâwala fî Istiqâ’ Madda Min al-Turâth" In *al-Hayâh al-Masrahiyya*. Nos. 22-23, 1984, pp. 160-167.
- 20-The word *Maqâma* signifies "a place where one stands upright" and hence, the place where one is at any time. Next it is used metonymically to denote "the persons assembled at any place" and finally, by another transition, "the discourses delivered or conversations held in any such assembly". This metaphorical use of the word *Maqâmât* has however been restricted to discourse and conversations like those narrated by al-Ḥarîrî and his predecessor al-Hamadhânî, which are composed in a highly finished style. See *The Assemblies of al-Ḥarîrî*. Retold by Amina Shah. London: The Octagon Press, 1987 and ‘Abdul Ḥamîd Yûnis's "al-Drâma al-Sha‘biyya." *al-Masrah* 69 , (1970), pp. 49-52.
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- 24- Ibid., p.57.
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## **PART II**

## **THE OLD TYPES OF ENTERTAINMENT**

## Chapter Five : THE DEVELOPMENT OF MIMICRY

### 5.1. Introduction :

According to Aristotle, action is the basic element in drama. "The action of a play may be conveyed by physical movement, by clash of dialogue, or by the narration of events supposed to have taken place off-stage."<sup>[1]</sup> When action happens in real life it may cause pain, yet when it is imitated or presented it may entertain or give pleasure to others. As Bentley writes: "In other words a raw slice of life may be served as art. It is not deviation from life that we are enjoying. The fact of imitation is sufficient to turn pain to delight."<sup>[2]</sup>

Thus the action of theatrical drama is concerned with imitation: "it is a mimetic action, action in imitation or representation of human behavior."<sup>[3]</sup>

"The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood", Aristotle declared, "one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures."<sup>[4]</sup> This may be one of the secrets which makes drama so enjoyable, and in this respect, of course, Arabs do not differ from other people.

According to Moreh<sup>[5]</sup>, Arabs had an awareness of theatrical performances in the Byzantine Empire on the eve of Islam and after. The most important evidence for it is supplied by Hassân b. Thâbit ( d.54/674), Muḥammad's poet and defender, who was active in both Jâhiliyya and Islam. In one of his poems, he cites *Mayâmis Ghazza*. The commentators of his *Dîwân* distinguish the term *Mayâmis* as follows: *Mimâs* is the singular of *Mayâmis*, he is the person who is ridiculed (*wa-huwa alladhî yuskhar minhu* ). Another example of the Arab's awareness of the non-Arab theatre is the story about 'Amr b. al-‘Âs (d. 42/663), who was a merchant of leather and perfume in the *Jâhiliyyah*, and he used to frequent Egypt with his merchandise. There, 'Amr attended,



in Alexandria, different feasts which the Egyptians used to celebrate in a *mal'ab* ( theatre or amphitheatre) with plays or as al-Kindî puts it "a feast in which they assemble and play" (*yajtami'ûn fîhi wa-yal'abûn*).<sup>[6]</sup> Moreover, Arabs translated a Syriac text which had been translated from Greek in 501 C.E. The Arabic translation from Syriac employs the following terminology:

- The Greek term *teatron* is given in Arabic as *yusayyiru nafsahu shuhra*.
- The Greek term *ippika* ( hippodrome) is given as *halabât* ( horses' race track).
- The Greek term *stadium* is given as *mawâdi ' al-Sirâ'*, ( places of wresting).
- The Greek term *mimoi* is given as *mud' hikûn*.<sup>[7]</sup>

Mimicry is associated with *hikâya* in the Arabs' tradition and *khayâl* was synonymous with *hikâya* and *tamthîl*. That is also clear from the Arabic translations of and commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics*. Thus Mattâ b. Yûnis (d. 328/940) paraphrased Aristotle's *mimesis* as *al-tashbîh wa-'l-muhâkât* and *al-tashbîh wa-'l-hikâya*, while al-Fârâbî (d.339/950) adopted *al-tashbîh wa-'l-tamthîl* but Ibn Sînâ (d.428/1037) used the expression *yukhayyilûn wa-yuhakûn* and *al-muhâkât wa-'l-takhayîl*. The fact that Mattâ b. Yûnis translated the *Poetics* in the first half of the tenth century suggests that *muhâkât*, which is also used by al-Jâhîz in the ninth century, was the earliest term for impersonation and that *khayâl* replaced it in the course of the tenth century.<sup>[8]</sup> There is a well-known account of mimics in the early Islamic world in the *Bayân* of al-Jâhîz (d. 255/868):

"We find that the impersonator( *hâkiyah*) is able to imitate (*yahkî*) precisely the pronunciation of the natives of the Yemen with all the special accents of that area. This is equally true of imitation ( *hikâya*) of the Khurâsânian, the Ahwâzian, the Negro, the Sindî and others. You may, in fact, find that he seems to be more natural than they. When he imitates the speech of the stammerer, it

seems that he has become the ultimate stammerer, as if all the peculiarities of every stammerer ever born have been rolled into one. When he imitates the blind man, copying the distinctive features of his face, eyes and limbs, you realize that even in a thousand blind men you would never find one who has all of these combined traits. It is as if he has synthesized the peculiar features of all blind men in one complete character."<sup>[9]</sup>

Arab historians and geographers also used the term *mal'ab* to describe the ruins of classical theatres. Thus, according to Moreh, al-Himyarî mentions a *dâr mal'ab* and other antiquities in the vicinity of Murviedro in Spain, while al-Idrîsî, also, uses the word *tyâtir* and says that "it is said that this building was a *mal'ab* and *mujtama'* (meeting place)."<sup>[10]</sup> So the function of such theatres was clearly well known to Arab scholars.

Even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Arabs in Egypt used the term *yal'ab* to mean perform. Al-Tahtâwî uses the root *l' b* in his account of the theatre he had attended during his studies in Paris. He describes it as a place in which imitation (*taqlid*) of any sort of event is performed (*yal'ab fihâ*), calling the acting *la'b*, the play *la'ba*, the actress *lâ'ib* and *lâ'iba*. He apologizes for the fact that he does not know an Arabic term for 'spectacles' and 'theatres' and suggests the term *khayâlî* for 'theatre'. In north Africa the term *la'ba* was used to mean a shadow play.<sup>[11]</sup>

## 5.2. In the 'Abbasid Period :

It has been mentioned that the people of the 'Abbasid period found their amusement in story-tellers, and that among them there were many jesters who were specialists in farcical imitation, mingling with the crowds and imitating behavior and manners of speech. The 'Abbasid Caliph, al-Mutawakkil (846-861), seems to have been fond of them and invited them to perform in his palace on many occasions. He gave them the name *al-Sammâja* ( people who imitate others in a comic way to entertain the audience). Jesters, boon companions, slapstick comedians, singers,

musicians and other entertainers at court all received wages (*arzâq*) as well as money thrown to them when they performed (*nuqût*). Al-Mutawakkil was generous to them. It has been said that he was once criticized by one of his important companions for allowing these performers to gather around him and so he ordered a special compartment to be built for him so that he could watch their performance without being in direct contact with them.<sup>[12]</sup> It is said that al-Mutawakkil mourned al-Kuttanjî, his favourite boon companion, and wondered who would comfort him in his grief. He was told that al-Kuttanjî had two witty sons, had them brought before him, admired them and bestowed their father's wages on the elder son, nominating a lower wage for the younger.<sup>[13]</sup> It is said that when this Caliph was assassinated in 247/861, his expenses were audited and found to include payments to slapstick clowns (*safâ'ina*), jesters (*mud' hikûn*), ram and cock holders (*kabbâshûn wa-dayyâkûn*), and trainers of fighting dogs (*as'hâb kilâb al-hirâsh*) coming to five hundred thousand dirhams.<sup>[14]</sup>

Imitators' numbers increased during al-Mu'tamid's era (256-279/870-892). Meanwhile, he issued a decree to prevent them from practicing their activities, which were taking place even in the mosque. Later, however, during the reign of al-Mu'tadid (279-289/892-902), a distinguished imitator called Ibn al-Maghâzilî is recorded. He presented his wide repertoire in marketplaces and courtyards. Al-Mas'ûdî told that Ibn al-Maghâzilî told stories and produced comic imitations (*al-akhbâr wal-nawâdir wal madâhik*) to his audience who would form a circle around him (*halqa*)<sup>[15]</sup> This may prove the continuity of improvised mimicry in spite of al-Mu'tamid's decree.

### 5.2.1. Samâjât :

In the Arabic dictionary, *Samâja* is defined as 'foul or ugly', but in literary and historical works it has another meaning beside ugliness, that is a "masked actor" or "mask worn by such an actor".<sup>[16]</sup>

The actors dressed up, using masks and other forms of disguises (such as trousers of monkey skin used by Ash‘ab, the monkey attire with which Jarîr credits al-Farazdaq). *Samâja* actors might also use make-up rather than masks.

In Egypt, the *Samajât* are not mentioned as performing in the rulers' courts but rather in the streets and markets of Cairo, during the Nawrûz and other feasts, together with other types of mimes, as well as elephants and giraffes, sugar statues, music, songs and dancing. These festivals and performances were encouraged by the Caliphs. Al-Mutawakkil (847-61) was fond of these events and entertainers. On one of the Nawrûz days, he was visited by a group of masked actors and they were rewarded by the Caliph.<sup>[17]</sup>

### 5.2.2. Kurraj :

*Kurraj* is another type of entertainment found during the ‘Abbasid period. *Kurraj* is a Persian word meaning donkey or mule, which suggests that the acting was of a Persian origin too. This play was so popular at the time of the ‘Abbasid Caliphs that al-Amîn played *Kurraj* ( riding a hobby-horse) and ordered two singers to join other singers in a courtyard full of big lit candles. The Caliph continued to rove the courtyard while the servants and players recited over and over again a short love poem until dawn. There was no dialogue in connection with *Kurraj*, only singing and dancing; and no activities other than 'attack and withdrawal and competing in skill (with weapons)'.<sup>[18]</sup>

Thus, the further we continue our journey through the history of Arabic mimicry, the clearer the picture of development gradually becomes. The phenomenon of imitation began with the voices of people and animals, and grew to include movements and gestures.

Then the imitator/story-tellers mixed movements with narrative and improvisation, as well as making use of written texts, such as *al-Maqâma* and *al-Hikâya*. The change from pantomime to narrative finally gave rise to the wandering-actor traditions known in different regions by different names, such as al-Hakawâtî in Egypt and Syria, al-Muhaddith in Iraq, al-Qawwâl in Algeria, and so on.

Because of the hostile attitude of some fanatic Muslims towards such activities, and their low status in Islamic society, their appearance, though at first linked with Islamic festivals, began to drift away towards the popular domain for secular occasions, performing side by side with famous poets, musicians and singers of the Caliphs.

In addition to the imitators already named, we should mention the pantomime actor, singer and jester, Ash'ab from the ninth century, and Abu al-Ward, who was considered the best and most popular imitator of the period. There is also a manuscript entitled *Daf' al-Hamm* (Driving away Care) written by a Syrian called Abû al-Faraj (1226-1286) which contains a chapter entitled *Stories of Jesters and Clowns*. Here the author recounts many stories of the lives and the behavior of such people. This indicates that the art of acting has existed in the Arab world since the thirteenth century at least.<sup>[19]</sup>

### **5.3. The Fatimid and Mamlûk Era :**

According to Muḥammad K. Husayn,<sup>[20]</sup> an Egyptian critic, shadow theatre flourished in Egypt under the Fatimids (shadow theatre will be discussed in detail in due course). He recalls that the Fatimids in Egypt patronized different kinds of art. He goes further to indicate that the shadow theatre performers might have emigrated to Egypt because of the encouragement and the facilities provided by the Fatimid Caliphs. He also asserts that those Caliphs patronized the shadow theatre performers to the

extent that they hired them to entertain sick people in the hospitals and the soldiers in their barracks as I will show in the next chapter. Ahmad Taymûr describes the shadow play as the main form of "entertainment at the court of the Fatimid palace in Egypt."<sup>[21]</sup> With the advent of the Ayyûbids, and especially under the famous Sultan Salâh al-Dîn, Egypt changed once more from the *Shi'a* to the *Sunni* faith. Salâh al-Dîn himself was a keen supporter of the shadow theatre; and made some successful efforts to interest his ministers in this art.

In the Mamlûk Era, art, festivals, and theatrical performances reached their peak. According to Shoshan, in 975 A.H. Cairo celebrated three days and the crowds marched in the streets. Masquerades (or masks), theatrical performances, and man-made imitations of elephants, all were present.<sup>[22]</sup> When the Sultan al-Malik al-Nâsir Muḥammad b. Qalâwûn entered Cairo, the city was decorated, Arab singers sang, and all the streets from Bâb al-Naṣr to Bâb al-Silsila and the citadel, were decorated with small fortresses; at Bâb al-Naṣr the governor (*wâlî*) of Cairo built a fortress full of various types of plays, serious and funny.<sup>[23]</sup> In Mamlûk Egypt the parade of the *mahmal* provided the occasion for the development of a new performance by the Royal Mamlûks. The comedians among them, known as *'afârît al-mahmal*, the demons of the *mahmal*, used to exchange their clothes for comic or ugly costumes and to ride horses decorated with bells in order to amuse people. Eventually they began to molest people, collecting money for their performances by disguising themselves as "beggars". They would even dare to force their way to shops and the houses of amirs in order to obtain their "fees", and by 871/1467 they had become so troublesome that the Sultan ordered their performances to be canceled.<sup>[24]</sup>

#### **5.4. The Technical Side :**

On the technical side, those performers made use of primitive conventional disguises by, for example, removing their headgear and wearing the headgear of the

character they were about to present. Another convention was the use of a handkerchief as a stage-prop, and a stick which they used to beat in order to imitate the sounds of birds and beasts.<sup>[25]</sup> Al-Maqrîzî's account of the judge Shams al-Dîn Muḥammad al-Harrâwî implies that actors ( *Sunnâ' al-khayâl* ) would change clothes. This man, he says, changed his attire (*ziyy*) every time he was appointed to a new post. Once he had worn a non-Arab costume; when he was appointed chief judge, he put on a wide-sleeved *jubba*, enlarged his turban and let its ends hang between his shoulders; when he was appointed secretary, he donned the attire of secretaries, narrowed his sleeves and changed his turban to a smaller one; but when he was once more appointed chief judge, he changed back again. We notice, here, that in his various changes of attire he resembled the slapstick comedians who amuse their audience.<sup>[26]</sup> This is clearly a reference to live actors who know the role of costume and make-up in this 'profession' to persuade and entertain the public.

### 5.5. Ta' ziya :

The word 'Ta'ziya' itself is an "expression of condolence in general or consolation."<sup>[27]</sup> but the word Ta'ziya for the Shi'ite Muslims, signifies an annual event commemorating the slaughter of 'Alî's descendants.<sup>[28]</sup> Samuel Chew reports that, "the tragedy of the house of 'Alî was not dramatised till quite recently, probably towards the close of the eighteenth century or even in the first years of the nineteenth."<sup>[29]</sup> This statement is true if Chew means the performance of this event in the context of conventional theatrical presentation ( i.e., performed in a theatre on a conventional stage before an audience who paid admission ). But since the second half of the tenth century, the event has been commemorated and performed as a ritual drama in public places and in private homes every year during the first ten days of the

Muslim month of Muḥarram, specially in Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon. <sup>[30]</sup> When Shi'ism became the state religion of Persia after the Safavids came to power in A.D. 1502. <sup>[31]</sup> Ta'ziya was endorsed and gained its importance.

### 5.5.1. The Origin of Ta'ziya :

After the Prophet's death, the Muslim community split into two opposed parties, those who believed in the ancient Arab practice of succession by election and those who supported inherited succession in the family of the Prophet. The result was two sects known as Sunnites (orthodox Muslims) and Shi'ites ( the partisans of 'Alī, the cousin and the son-in-law of Muḥammad.)

During the struggle for the Caliphate, 'Alī, Caliph at the time, was assassinated on his way to the mosque at Kūfa (A.D. 661) and later his elder son, Ḥasan, was poisoned in Madīna (A.D. 669). The headquarters of the Caliphate had already been moved by 'Alī's efforts from Arabia to Iraq and after the death of 'Alī, to Damascus, Syria. 'Alī's second son, Ḥusayn, who lived in Madīna, refused to acknowledge the rule of Yazīd, the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus. After the death of his father and brother, the Iraqis invited Ḥusayn to be the Caliph. Ḥusayn therefore left Madīna with a small escort of relatives and supporters, for Kūfa in Iraq.

At the beginning of Muḥarram (holy month) A.D. 680, 'Umar Ibn Abī Waqqās besieged Ḥusayn with his escort near Kūfa, in the open field of Karbalā' and attacked them on the tenth of Muḥarram after their refusal to surrender. Ḥusayn received a mortal wound in the course of the battle and his body was decapitated by Shimr. The head was sent to Yazīd in Damascus for display as a trophy, but was later buried with



the body in Karbalâ'. Therefore, the people of Kûfa, the partisans of 'Alî, repented their failure to give Husayn their promised support.

In commemoration of Husayn's martyrdom, 'Alî's partisans, the Shi'ites annually observe the first ten days of Muharram as a period of mourning and lamentation. As an expression of grief, they have developed a passion play enacted in three interrelated complementary parts, opening with *majlis al-ta'ziya* (mourning assemblies), followed by *mawâkib al-'azâ* (mourning procession ) and culminating in *mashhad 'âshûrâ* (presentation of the events of the tenth of Muharram).<sup>[32]</sup>

The first function, *majlis al-ta'ziya*, is held throughout the first ten days of Muharram in a house or a hall. In this assembly a *qâri*' ( reciter) narrates the story of the Martyrdom of Husayn and his family and enhances his narration with poetry. On the tenth day or 'âshûrâ', the processions are performed in the streets leading to Karbalâ', or the place representing it. Here the mourners express their grief by wailing and they also enact in a pageant parts of the events of 'âshûrâ'. The climax which constitutes the core of *mashhad 'âshûrâ* is the massacre of Husayn and his male family. This recreates and revives the tragedy by means of acting and miming. This is a case in point from Arab culture where narrative expression using prose, poetry and movement is employed to recreate a significant moment in history for the purpose of remembering and learning.<sup>[33]</sup>

#### **5.5.2. The Author of the Play :**

It is difficult to ascertain exactly who wrote the verses of the various texts of Ta'ziya. Any pious Shi'ite who felt the urge could compose verses of *majlis*, whether

he was a poet or not. Typically, poets who composed verses for the *majlis ta'ziya* preferred to remain anonymous. The producer/ director of a *majlis ta'ziya* often functioned as a "play-doctor" and altered the script. Sometimes an actor made alterations in his speeches during performance of a *majlis*.<sup>[34]</sup>

### 5.5.3. Theatrical Elements In *Ta'ziya* :

Although the *ta'ziya* tradition did not offer a developed performance style of dramatic literature, the ritual theatre of Iran did attract the attention of Peter Brook (one of the great theatre directors in the twentieth century ). In his *The Empty Space*, Brook shows a deep concern for establishing a vibrant relationship between audience and performer and expresses the belief that although the West yearns for a ritual theatre, it has lost the ability to create such a theatre.<sup>[35]</sup> In his search for a spiritual tradition which he believed the Western theatre had lost, Brook turned his attention to the Third World and encountered the *ta'ziya* tradition in Iran. He discovered that the ritual theatre of *ta'ziya* contained many elements which he believed essential to all theatre. He says, "The ancient theatre clearly was, and theatre must always be, a religious action; and its action is very clear : it is that by which fragments are made whole...The great force of artistic events is that they are temporary glimpses of what might be, and there is a healing process attached to these glimpses.<sup>[36]</sup>" Peter Brook explored the *ta'ziya* tradition in search of answers and found that the passion play (*ta'ziya*) offered contributions. Lewis Pelly, a colonel in the British army, spent some time in Iran and was so impressed by the power of the *ta'ziya* tradition to move its

audience, that he took the time to collect fifty-two plays from oral tradition, in spite of the fact that he had no specialised knowledge of theatre or Shi'ism. <sup>[37]</sup>

#### **5.5.3.1. Performance Space :**

*Majlis ta'ziya* may be staged in a variety of places. Performances have taken place in open fields, at the intersection of city streets, in the courtyard of a private residence, and within structures specially constructed to house ta'ziya productions. Whenever possible, a raised, circular platform serves as the main performance space. The audience encircles the area around this central space, leaving several aisles free for entrances and exits. Elaborate productions may also erect auxiliary stages which extend into the audience and are used for the staging of short segments of action. Occasionally, a scene may involve the combined use of auxiliary and main stages. <sup>[38]</sup> In this way, the performance space thrusts into the audience and invites a free flow of energy between performance and audience.

#### **5.5.3.2. The Setting :**

The action of a staged *majlis* flows from one area to another without elaborate preparation of decor and without the use of curtains. Elaborate lighting effects are not used to mark scenic divisions. One reason for this is the fact that performances are not confined to evenings but may take place outdoors during daylight hours. Another reason is the unavailability of advanced technical equipment. <sup>[39]</sup> A journey is indicated by circling the area surrounding the platform twice. The addition or removal of a piece of furniture is generally sufficient to suggest a new location and if additional information seems necessary, an actor provides it in his speech.

Productions use relatively few props and minimal scenic decor. <sup>[40]</sup> Those that are used may be practical, decorative or symbolic. Among the realistic props are implements of battle such as swords, daggers and shields. Other props which are realistic but which carry symbolic meaning are the waterskin and the ring used by Husayn to alleviate the thirst of exhausted champions. Other props are constructed prior to the production to create special effects such as severed heads, hands, and dummy corpses.

#### **5.5.3.3. Costumes :**

Whenever possible, the costumes are colour-coded to maintain a strict visual delineation between heroes and villains. Antagonists wear red, male protagonists are clothed in green or white and female protagonists are typically covered in black. The symbolism implied by these colours is quite obvious. Red clothing implies the blood-thirsty nature of the wearer. Green identifies the wearer as a descendant of the Prophet and white is the colour used for burial shrouds. Black signifies mourning. Angels, ghosts, and jinn wear specialised costumes to set them apart from the rest of the characters in a play. <sup>[41]</sup> Since all three exist in a world beyond the known world, their costumes tend to conceal their humanity.

#### **5.5.3.4. Acting :**

Religious personalities and preachers play active parts in *ta'ziya*. The *sayyids* (descendants of Husayn ) monopolise the prominent roles which gave them claim to gifts from patrons. <sup>[42]</sup> Some of the most difficult roles to cast are those of the villains, Yazîd, the Umayyad Caliph, and Shimr, the military leader who beheaded Husayn, as

they will always be associated with their *shabîh* ( likeness ), the symbol of evil. As the plot develops and Shimr goes to cut off the head of Husayn<sup>[43]</sup>, no spectator is surprised to see Shimr in tears for the oppressed *Imâm*, for it is clear it is not Shimr crying but the player. Performers developed a representational style in which they recite the lines of the character but do not become one with the character. For this purpose the text, or the actor's lines, are read from a piece of paper even when the ta'ziya player knows his lines by heart.<sup>[44]</sup> Here is an example for an actor who became too involved and needed to remind the audience that he is Mr. Sulaymânî playing 'Abbâs while reciting an ode that he himself composed. In the middle of it, he emphasised the separation between himself and the character he was playing :

I am not 'Abbâs; neither is this Karbalâ'  
I am Sulaymânî, the slave of the King of heavenly power.<sup>[45]</sup>

There are some gestures which carry special meaning , such as throwing straw on the head and beating the chest to signal mourning. These conventions are not unique to Islam but are typically Middle Eastern and extend back to pre-Christian funeral customs. Another typical gesture carrying symbolic meaning comes from the audience and relates to the Muslim custom of communal participation in the last rites of the dead. When the body of a martyr is carried through the audience to be placed on stage, those who are close to the procession strive to lend a hand. The audience members who are not close enough to actually help carry the corpse, stretch out their hands to symbolise their assistance.<sup>[46]</sup>

The combat scenes are choreographed sequences resembling dancing patterns.<sup>[47]</sup> Generally, the combat begins in the performance space and then continues off stage. Following a brief fight, the protagonist may depart, followed by the antagonists, and re-enter with bloody and torn shroud, still pursued by the villains. Frequently, the slaughter of the hero takes place off stage and his corpse is carried out before the audience.<sup>[48]</sup>

Audio-visual signs are present in the performances of *ta'ziya*. There is the *kafan* (shroud), a visual symbol of martyrdom; red spots of blood signify wounds, green versus red representing good and evil. The distribution of water is a reminder of the thirst experienced by Husayn's family. The chanting of verse signifies a good character, whilst bad characters declaim their lines. All spectators and performers join in a chest beating and wailing to form a unified expression of grief against the oppressors. "The flexibility of representation in *ta'ziya* through costumes, props and language serves to reinforce the connections between the action and the everyday lives of the spectators"<sup>[49]</sup>

#### **5.5.3.5. General Commentary :**

From the description above, it is clear that *ta'ziya* contains three basic elements of the European conventional drama : plot, mimicry and characters who are dramatised on a stage before an audience. Another resemblance between *ta'ziya* and the European play is the element of audience participation with the actors and the story. In the European passion play as in *ta'ziya* during certain episodes, the audience participates in the performance. *Ta'ziya* has another aspect of ritual drama: the chorus. Sometimes

the audience acts as a chorus in *ta'ziya*, and members of the audience also beat on their chests as an act of emotional catharsis.

Finally, *ta'ziya* resembles the European passion play in that the antagonists viciously kill the protagonists. With the episode of the final slaughter of Husayn the *ta'ziya* ends, but the European passion play contains one more act in which the resurrection of Christ is enacted.

### **5.6. Acting Groups and Skits :**

During the 'Abbasid period *al-mulahhûn wal-munaddirûn* (imitators) would narrate their stories by means of acting and narration, also encouraging other story-tellers to employ mimicry. As well as mimicry, those stories which included dialogues provided the story-teller with the opportunity to present these as conversations between the characters in the tale. According to Landau a number of examples of mimicry (*hikâya*) exist which are very similar to modern mimicry. *The Maqâma* also contains certain obvious mimetic elements through which "the theme was frequently presented in the guise of conversations, parts of which imitated various characters."<sup>[50]</sup> Imitators would also include in their performances witty anecdotes, taken from literary sources or everyday life, with which to entertain their audiences. In this way their popularity continued down the generations. Their greatest achievement, however, was the introduction of a short pantomime scene which provided "comic relief from the tension their captivating stories would create amongst the listeners"<sup>[51]</sup>

It is believed that probably over a period of several centuries the tradition was for imitators to form small groups, or troupes. One of these, belonging to the renowned imitator Aḥmad Fahîm al-Fâr at the beginning of this century, is cited by Landau. Al-Fâr's troupe of twelve men performed the roles of both men and women and their main type of performance consisted of improvised farcical mime.<sup>[52]</sup>

The existence of this kind of troupe has been recorded much earlier. For example, the Danish traveler, Carsten Niebuhr, <sup>[53]</sup> reported having seen an acting troupe made up of Muslims, Christians and Jews, during a visit to Cairo in about the year 1780. Niebuhr concluded from their appearance that they were fairly successful. The group would perform in the open air, using the side of a house as a theatre. Screens would be erected behind which the cast could change their costumes. It would appear from Niebuhr's description of their performance that this particular troupe used to perform farcical mime. He described the play itself as an improvisation, with one of the men from the troupe playing the role of a woman who forced men to visit her in her tent one by one. She undressed each of her visitors and then drove him out of her tent. Despite the fact that this was probably considered one of the popular 'plays' of the time for the Egyptians, neither Niebuhr nor his Italian host's guests were impressed by it.<sup>[54]</sup> It does, however provide an example of farcical mimicry in Egypt prior to the arrival of the French, and can therefore be seen to have developed from traditional Arab mimicry.



### 5.6.1. E. Lane's Account :

The English Orientalist, Lane, described *al-Muḥabbazīn*, performers of a type of improvised mimetic farce, which he witnessed during his time in Cairo during the first half of the nineteenth century:

"These frequently perform at festivals prior to weddings and circumcisions, at the houses of the great, and sometimes attract rings of auditors and spectators in the public places in Cairo. Their performances are scarcely worthy of description; it is chiefly by vulgar jests and indecent actions that they amuse and obtain applause. The actors are only men and boys, the part of the woman being always performed by a man or a boy in female attire... The *dramatis personae* were al-Nâzîr (or a governor of a district), Shaykh al-Beled (or chief of a village), a servant of the latter, a Copt clerk, a *Fallâh* indebted to the government, his wife and five other persons of whom two made their appearance first in the characters of drummers, one as hautboy-player and the two others as dancers. After a little drumming and piping and dancing by these five, the Nâzîr and the rest of the performers enter the ring."<sup>[55]</sup>

This play describes how the *fallâh*, 'Awad, has been beaten up and thrown in jail because he owes a thousand piastres, of which he has only paid five piastres. He asks his wife to bribe the clerk and seduce the Nâzîr to liberate him. She consents to this, and by means of smiles and gestures she conveys her willingness to al-Nâzîr to respond to his sexual desires on condition that he release her husband from jail. The skit ends with al-Nâzîr receiving his bribe and freeing the husband.<sup>[56]</sup> According to Lane this farce "was played before the Pâsha [an old Turkish title], with a view of opening eyes to the conduct of these persons to whom was committed the office of collecting the taxes."<sup>[57]</sup> This *Muḥabbazīn* performance is obviously based on real characters and actual events from Egyptian society of that time. We see then that the

aim of the skit, as well as to provide entertainment, was to satirise administrative corruption.<sup>[58]</sup>

If this farcical skit is compared with that described by Niebuhr, the development of dramatic structure is apparent. The first consisted of only one character repeating the same action over and over to the point where the audience became bored and forced the actors to stop. The second consisted of many characters and was full of action and conflict, maintaining the audience's interest and keeping them in suspense: this element was missing from the eighteenth-century Arabic farcical skit described by Niebuhr.

#### **5.6.2. The Influence of the Commedia Dell' Arte :**

The nineteenth century *al-Muhabbazîn* performance is similar to the sixteenth century Italian *commedia dell'arte* which was created by small groups of professional actors.<sup>[59]</sup> The common factor shared by these two is that the main feature of the performance is the actors, who would compose the outline of the plot beforehand and then improvise it in front of the audience, inserting dialogue, jokes and tricks. In the *commedia dell'arte* "speech was also stereotyped: dialects for the comic characters, elegant Tuscan for the lovers; oaths and obscenities abounded in the clown's talk".<sup>[60]</sup> The similarities between these two suggests a possible influence on the *al-Muhabbazîn* by the *commedia dell'arte*. It could be that those comic groups from the Far and Near East who according to Dr. 'Alî al-Râ'î used to visit Caliphs to entertain them in their palaces, either saw or heard about the art of the Italian actors there.<sup>[61]</sup>

### 5.6.3. Al-Muḥabbazīn and al-Sâmir :

*Al-Faṣl al-Mudhik'* (the comic scene) was, usually, represented in a round of spectators. It was known as *al-Sâmir*.<sup>[62]</sup>

The *Muḥabbazīn* performance differed greatly, however, from the *sâmir*. Although both have a musical band and a few actors, the band of the *muḥabbazīn* consisted of two drummers, a piper and two dancers, whereas, as well as the musicians, the *sâmir* had a dancing girl and a singer. The *muḥabbazīn* usually began with the band performing music and dance, then when the acting began the band would take on the parts of extras, playing the members of the crowd in the scene about to be performed. Lane does not mention whether the main actors of the *muḥabbazīn* were professionals or whether, like the actors of *al-sâmir*, they acted part-time.

The *sâmir* contains musical interludes which provide a distinct division between the acting scenes. Some of the scenes contain satirical words and proverbs, while others consist merely of farcical material aimed at amusing the audience. Yûsuf Idrîs sees these farcical scenes as representing the true spirit of Arabic theatre, passed down orally from generation to generation. These were improvised before the audience by the *sâmir* actors, according to a previously agreed plan, a trait which may have been common to both groups.

Although both groups divided the acting roles equally between the actors, the *sâmir* always revolved around a principal role played by the main actor, the *farfûr* (someone light, flimsy and fluttering or flipflap). All the events of the scene would

revolve around the character of the *farfûr* and the jokes, witty comments and farce aimed at making the audience laugh would arise from the *farfûr*'s attitudes, situations, ideas and movements. The role of the other characters was simply to assist the *farfûr* in delivering his dialogues: they were not there as genuine *dramatis personae*. This clever, frank, witty and talented individual with the ability to laugh at people and to make them laugh at the same time, is seen by Yûsuf Idrîs as a natural phenomenon who exists anywhere at any time. Idrîs describes this character as a *farfûr* both in his everyday life as an individual, and among his colleagues on the acting circuit.<sup>[63]</sup>

The distribution of the roles in the *muḥabbazîn* performance is more equal than in the *sâmir*, although the characters of its *dramatis personae* are not dramatically well structured. The *muḥabbazîn* has no *farfûr*. 'Awad, the *fallâh*, cannot be described as a *farfûr* despite his farcical behaviour, as his part ends immediately after his meeting with his wife. His wife is not a *farfûr* either, despite playing a central role, and managing to obtain her husband's release from prison, as by offering her body to the Governor as a bribe she has failed morally and also her actions show no cleverness. From this we can conclude that the *muḥabbazîn* performance is a form of Arab mimicry that differs considerably from the *sâmir*.

Tawfiq al-Ḥakîm was of the opinion that the *sâmir*, with its theatrical scenes only appeared after the French expedition to Egypt.<sup>[64]</sup> Idrîs, however, did not think it possible to put a precise date on its origin.<sup>[65]</sup> It is possible that the *sâmir*, a provincial entertainment, may have developed into the *muḥabbazîn* in the big cities, or on the

other hand the *sâmir* may be a provincial imitation of the *muhabbazîn* that developed in the Egyptian countryside.

#### 5.6.4. *The Hadji and The Camel* :

The Italian traveler, Belzoni, witnessed two plays at Shubrâ in Egypt in 1815. These were possibly performed by the same troupe as Lane witnessed only fifteen years later. Belzoni reports that:

"When the dancing was at an end, a sort of play was performed, the intent of which was to exhibit life and manners, as we do in our theatre. The subject represented a Hadji who wants to get to Mecca and applies to a camel-driver to procure a camel for him. The driver imposes on him, by not letting him see the seller of the camel, and putting a higher price on it than is really asked, giving so much less to the seller than he received from the purchase. A camel is produced at last, made up by two man covered with cloth, as if ready to depart for Mecca. The Hadji mounts on the camel, but finds it so bad, that he refuses to take it, and demands his money back again. A scuffle takes place, when, by chance, the seller of the camel appears, and so finds that the camel in question is not that which he sold to the driver for the Hadji. Thus it turns out, that the driver was not satisfied with imposing both on the buyer and on the seller in the price, but had also kept the camel for himself, and produced a bad one to the Hadji. In consequence, he receives a good drubbing, and runs off. Simple as this story appears, yet it was so interesting to the audience, that it seemed as if nothing could please them better, as it taught them to be on their guard against dealers in camels etc.

This was the play; and the after piece represented a European traveler, who served as a sort of clown. He is in the dress of a Frank; and on his travels, comes to the house of an Arab, who though poor, wishes to have the appearance of being rich. Accordingly, he gives orders to his wife to kill a sheep immediately. She pretends to obey, but returns in a few minutes saying that the flock has strayed away, and that it would be the loss of too much time to fetch one. The host then orders four fowls to be killed; but these cannot be caught. The third time, he sends his wife for pigeons; but the pigeons are all out of their holes and at last the traveler is treated only with sour milk and *dhurra* (maize) bread, the only provision in the house. This finishes the play." [66]

### 5.7. Critical Commentary :

The two improvised skits described above conform to the description of the theatre as ‘the art of human relationships in action’.<sup>[67]</sup> We can see the interaction between performers and spectators in both and we can also see the interaction within each skit as a whole between events, characters and conflict. The second skit contains a great deal more farce than the first although it is possibly of less artistic value. However, it still fulfilled the main objective of such performances. Dr. ‘Alî al-Râ’î describes it as *al-fasl al-mudhik* (the comic scene), with the stupid European traveler, the boastful, naïve husband, and his clever wife who controls events to suit her purposes. Al-Râ’î is certain that this scene is a local production. <sup>[68]</sup>

The exposure and punishment of the swindler provides the moral of the first skit and, despite the fact that it was a simple performance, we can see from Belzoni’s comments that it was able to hold the attention of the audience throughout, whether to the actors and events, or to the outcome of the skit. The delight derived from the performance by the spectators is an indication that this popular activity has its foundation in such ancient Arab popular traditions as shadow and puppet shows, storytelling and, primarily, old Arab popular mimicry.

Belzoni describe the beginning of the first performance of the skit, ‘*Awad the Fallâh*’ as follows: “A band of tambourines and pipes continually playing and the entertainment began with dancing by two well-known and distinguished performers.”<sup>[69]</sup>

The similarities between the two theatrical forms can be seen, despite the fact that Belzoni says nothing about the number of musicians involved, mentioning only minor differences between the two bands, such as the use of tambourines rather than drums, and pipes instead of a single piper. In Niebuhr's description of the eighteenth century skit, we can see the development achieved before the 1830s. All the skits mentioned are based on topics taken from the environment with which both the actors and the spectators are familiar, and all contain farcical material. However, the first one consists purely of farce, the second is a social satire, and the third is a political comedy.

All three also have the 'beating scene' as a common factor, a phenomenon which may also have been taken from the old popular forms. The influence of the shadow and puppet theatres on the improvised comedy of the *muhabbazîn* is seen by Dr. 'Alî al-Râ'î to manifest itself in the scene of 'Awad's prostration, with reference to the tail of Shaykh al-Beled's horse, to his wife's trousers and her head-band. The obvious intentions demonstrated by certain characters and the direct responses made in reply to those intentions also have their origins in the old popular forms. For example, the wife's proposal of her body as a bribe is made without hesitation and accepted without embarrassment; the outcome of the bribe is immediate and automatic.<sup>[70]</sup> The only obvious difference is that whereas before the parts were played by puppets or shadows, here it is human beings who take on the roles.

We can observe certain obvious differences between the two subjects of *The Hadji and the Camel* (A.D. 1815) and *'Awad, the Fallâh* (A.D. 1830). Firstly, the beating of the camel driver who was a swindler satisfies the audience's sense of justice

and makes them laugh with satisfaction. The audience may have laughed at 'Awad, unless they were made up of the Pâsha and his entourage. Such topics were possibly intended to make their audiences laugh at their own problems and make them aware of what was taking place in their society. As well as providing entertainment with their farcical content, such performances were able to portray social and political problems and thereby expose the degeneration of society to the extent that a human being in Egypt at that time, was "unable to obtain his freedom unless he lost everything - his money and his honour". This particular skit was performed in front of Muhammad 'Alî, in which case the actors were extremely brave to have pointed out the corruption of his administration to him. [71]

#### **5.8. Other Imitators :**

Another example of a farcical political scene, this time with a different outcome, took place in the capital city of the Sudan in A.D. 1848. It begins with two Arabs in stage costume, one of whom plays the part of the policeman, while the other plays the role of a clown who has insulted the Caliph, the *qâdî* and the *imâm* of the mosque with his licentious jokes. When the policeman attempts to arrest him, the public, who are not represented on stage, unite with him against the policeman. In this way the clown defeats the policeman and, finally, insults him in front of the crowd. [72]

There are examples of other performances by imitators, mimetic actors and story-tellers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in other large Arab cities, but it is in Cairo that these have been preserved for us. According to Putinceva, a troupe of wandering actors performed in the houses and courtyards of Cairo during the year 1762, thirty-six years before the French expedition to Egypt. They used a



stage made from planks and shaped like an amphitheatre. They used scenery, behind which they would change their costumes. The audience would either sit or stand in rows around the stage.<sup>[73]</sup> This is possibly the same group seen by Niebuhr. The question arises, however, as to how these performers could have developed this European theatrical form, since it would have been necessary for Arabic theatre to have passed through a number of intermediate stages before eventually achieving this form.

Despite the fact that French occupation of Egypt covered a relatively short period of time (A.D. 1798-1801) it might appear, when we look at the improvised theatre during the nineteenth century, as if it were influenced by the French theatre. However, despite the existence of certain French theatres, referred to by Dr. Najm, such as the Tivoli, a small club established for the entertainment of French officers, the Republic Theatre and Arts, the Dargeval Club (1798), etc., it would appear that the influence was actually very limited.<sup>[74]</sup> According to Landau:

"It is reported that French actors and musicians came to Egypt after the Napoleonic invasion and that General Menou founded a French theatre. Even were this true, it is doubtful if the French theatre survived the defeat and repatriation of the French army. It is not until 1837 that one hears again of the existence of a French theatre in Alexandria, and even then its activities seem to be rather limited in scope."<sup>[75]</sup>

In the opinion of Landau and other scholars,<sup>[76]</sup> it is more likely that any European influence came from the Italian theatre. For the last 150 years Italians had lived in Alexandria, and for this reason Italian acting groups used to visit Alexandria

and Cairo. Landau claims that because of this the Italian theatre ‘had at least some share in preparing the local population for a truer appreciation of Western theatre’.<sup>[77]</sup> By this he refers to the influence the European theatre had on the modern Arabic theatre, which began during the second half of the nineteenth century in Egypt. In other words the old Arab improvised theatre existed and was developed by the efforts of those Arab imitators.<sup>[78]</sup>

## NOTES

### " THE DEVELOPMENT OF MIMICRY "

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- 25- Landau, J. M., *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*. Philadelphia: U.P.P., 1958, pp. 1- 4.
- 26- Moreh, *Live Theatre*, pp. 127-128.
- 27- See Landau, *Studies...* p.5. For more details see Pettys, Rebecca's *The Ta'zieh, Ritual of Renewal in Persia*, Indiana University, 1982.
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- 30- *Ta'ziya* is performed publicly, specially in Iran and Iraq, (majority Shi'ites ), while it is performed in private houses in other Sunni Muslim countries, where the majority are Sunni Muslims.
- 31- Persia's intimate relationship with the house of 'Alî was a result of Husayn's marriage to the Iranian princess, Shahrbanû, daughter of the last Sassanian king.
- 32- For more details about the events of Karbalâ', see Sâdeq Humayûnî, " An Analysis of the Ta'ziyeh of Qasem in *Ta'ziyeh Ritual and Drama in Iran*. Ed. by Peter Chelkowski. New York: N. Y. U. P., 1979, pp. 12-22.
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## Chapter Six: THE SHADOW THEATRE

### 6.1. Country of Origin :

There is a difference of opinion among scholars about the country of origin of the shadow theatre. George Jacob, a German scholar, believes that India was the country that gave birth to the shadow theatre. Jacob has put forward a thesis based on Dr. Pischel's theory on puppet-theatre that it is most probable that gypsies emerging from northwest India about a thousand years ago, traced a path across Asia and Europe, bringing the Indian shadow theatre with them. The earliest reference to the shadow theatre in documented history is indeed to be found in Sanskrit literature. The Buddhist text of *Teri Gata* ( Nun's Songs ) refers to shadow theatre about the first century B.C. A nun says to the man who has tried to seduce her that his desires are mean and that he sits with many other people to watch shadow theatre performances.<sup>[1]</sup> Among the Arabs who followed this tradition is Aḥmad Taymûr. He says "It is said that the shadow theatre is an old Indian play."<sup>[2]</sup> So from India shadow theatre is supposed to have spread to Java, Siam and then to the rest of South-East Asia.

Scholars who believe that China is the country of origin do not find the previously mentioned argument convincing. Landau for example, believes that China is the mother country of shadow theatre. He says "according to tradition, China is the home of the shadow theatre. Even the designation of this amusement as *Ombres Chinoises* was current in Europe for a long time."<sup>[3]</sup> Some other critics build their arguments on an



instinctive belief that China from time immemorial has enriched human knowledge with different kinds of inventions and contributions.

For his part, Prifer believes that the shadow theatre was imported to Muslim countries from the Far East but he is not sure about the mother land of this art. He says ".....Which of those people ( Indians or Chinese ) was the first to cultivate this curious kind of theatrical art it is difficult to say."<sup>[4]</sup>

## **6.2. The Mechanism Of Shadow Theatre :**

In the shadow theatre, the stage is separated from the audience by a frame holding a sheet of any white material but preferably fine Egyptian cotton. It is mounted like painter's canvas, stretched on a frame. The size of the screen in the past was 2m x 2,5m, in more recent time reduced to 1m x 0.60. The operator stands behind the screen, holding the puppets against it, using an olive oil lamp as a light source from behind. An oil lamp is preferable as it throws a good shadow and makes the characters flicker thus giving them a more life-like appearance. Light is fixed behind and just below the screen. The light distance is determined by the need for sharp focus. The puppets are put between the light and the curtain on which their shadows are to be thrown. The screen diffuses the light, and the light shines through the multi-coloured transparent material, making the figures look like stained glass. The puppeteer holds the puppet close against the screen with rods held horizontally and stretched at right angles to the puppet. With horizontal rods held at right angles to the screen there is far less shadow on the screen, but control is limited. Puppets are operated on the plane of action and the length of the control rods can be adjusted to the socket of the puppets,

allowing the puppets to work in the upper areas without the shadow of the operator's hands visible. Along the bottom edge at the back of the screen is a batten to act as a rest for the legs of the puppets. Underneath this there is a horizontal ledge on which to put the oil lamps. This ledge also has some holes in its surface in which to stick the supporting rods.

The figures are flat, clean-cut silhouettes in colour. Animal skin is used in the making of the puppets, especially that of the camel. The skin is well rubbed and soaked in a solution containing brand to remove its oily properties and to make it softer. The skin is dried under the sun during the months of July and August. It is smoothed out and treated until it is almost transparent, it is well scraped with a piece of broken glass to remove hairs to make it smooth. Finally it is rubbed and polished. The colours of which it is composed are tender blue, deep purple, leaf-green, olive green, red crimson, terracotta, brown and yellow. The action of the figures dictates their shapes. Each of them has a hole somewhere in the upper part of the body, which is reinforced by a double leather piece like a socket into which the control rod may be inserted from either side. A second rod gives the puppet his distinctive action. Puppets range in size from 25 cm to over 35 cm in height. An average size is 12 inches. The smallest figure is approximately 20 cm in height, while the tallest figure is over 57 cm.<sup>[5]</sup>

### **6.3. The Players of the Shadow :**

A group of *Khayâl al-Zill* ( the shadow theatre) may consist of more than one person; among them the *rayyis* (boss), who is the master of the show. The performance may take place in a tent, coffee-house or a public hall. A barrier is made in order to separate

the actors from the audience. The puppet master's assistant must do almost everything himself, that is play the tambourine, sing songs, introduce each character and hand the puppets in the correct order to the puppet master. He also must hold motionless the characters on stage not involved in that particular part of the action. Sometimes there are one or two musicians to help with the accompaniment. For his part, the puppet master himself, without hesitation, must be able to speak in two different tones of voice, must stutter and nasalize his words, change the inflection of and modulate his voice as the various characters of the play, both masculine and feminine, demand regardless of their age. Consequently, he needs to have a very good memory and he is also expected to have a good knowledge of poetry and music, since many plays depend on the parody of poetry and songs. A good deal of wit is required together with the skill to operate puppets simultaneously with their speech.

Finally the shadow players manipulate the figures with sticks placed in the holes in the figures. At the same time they deliver the dialogue according to the story being performed, so that the figures appear to be speaking.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### **6.4. Movement of the Shadow Theatre to The Muslim World :**

This form of acting has been found to have existed in Islamic and Arabic lands since the Middle Ages. The word *Khayâl al-Zill*, means ‘fantasy of the shadow’ is the most common name for the shadow theatre. The correct Arabic name, however, is *Zill al-Khayâl* (the shade of the shadow). Therefore we find that Ibn Dâniyâl names one of his plays *Tayf al-Khayâl* (The phantasm of the shadow). It was also for sometime known as *Khayâl al-Sitâra* (shadow of the screen).<sup>[7]</sup>

It is clear that the fate of *Khayâl al-Zill* (the shadow theatre) was no less unfortunate than that of any other old Arab folk tradition. The reason is the same as that which confronted many other secular, popular entertainment. All were despised and treated with indifference by educated people. Although *Khayâl al-Zill* first emerged amongst rich and aristocratic people before it became a public entertainment, it did not attract the attention of Arab and Islamic scholars to study it, nor to write more than a few casual remarks about it. In addition, it seems that the practitioners of the art were not well acquainted with the literary standards of their time. In general, they could not raise the literary value of their texts in form, purport or subject. Their language was considered colloquial, and as a result the circulation of their works was limited to their colleagues and audiences. Nor were the actors literally bound to the text; they used to memorize it through their performances. Therefore the text passed through different stages of alteration, modification and reorganization, to such an extent that it might be completely changed. For these reasons Arabic and foreign historical and literary references lack any precise information, such as how and when *Khayâl al-Zill* first emerged in Arab lands.<sup>[8]</sup>

It is possible that *Khayâl al-Zill* was brought over from South East Asia or India and performed in Muslim lands from the twelfth century A.D. Although Arabs had managed to create a shadow play of their own, Landau has described the Arabic shadow play as:

"Even more interesting than the Turkish, as it not only excelled in adapting the Turkish *Karagûz* to its own special environment but also created a new independent kind of shadow play not connected with the Turkish one."<sup>[9]</sup>

Some scholars of this field believe that there are links between Arabic and Chinese shadow theatre. They believe that the Mongols had passed over this art to the Muslims. A certain Persian historian, Rashîd al-Dîn ( d. 1388) in his *Jâmi' al-Tawârikh*, relates an incident of a shadow play being performed in the presence of the son of Genghis Khân the conqueror, who ordered that the performance should be stopped when it became clear that the performers' intentions had been to ridicule the Muslims.<sup>[10]</sup> By this time (A.D. 1388) the Arabic shadow theatre had developed almost to the point of degeneration. Ibn Dâniyâl, the only shadow playwright of medieval times whose plays have reached us, died in A.D. 1311, some seventy-seven years before this incident took place.

On the other hand, some German Orientalists, such as Kahle and Jacob, no longer regard the episode mentioned by Rashîd al-Dîn as the starting point in the history of the Arabic shadow theatre, since sufficient evidence has become available that the Fatimid Caliphs encouraged shadow theatre performers who used to entertain them in their palaces. Muḥammad K. Ḥusayn also asserts that those Caliphs patronized those shadow theatre performers to the extent that they hired them to entertain the sick in the hospital and the soldiers in their barracks.<sup>[11]</sup>

## 6.5. Old References to Arabic Shadow Theatre :

The efforts of certain historical and literary scholars and writers of recent centuries have been limited to a few casual remarks about the Arab shadow theatre, remarks which are mentioned within the context of historic events or incidents.<sup>[12]</sup>

The earliest is found in *al-Diyârât*, written by al-Shabishtî, and it is also mentioned by al-Qayrawânî, who records that Da‘bal the poet (d.250/864) once said that ‘nobody defeated me but effeminacy’. ‘By Allâh, I will satirize you’, I said, and he replied, ‘By Allâh, I will satirize you’, I said, and he replied, ‘By Allâh if you do, I will put your mother into the shadow’. This casual remark may indicate that *Khayâl al-Zill* was known throughout the ninth century.<sup>[13]</sup> However, Dr. Ibrâhîm Hamâda believes that the advance of *Khayâl al-Zill* into Arab and Islamic lands began from the period of the late tenth century and through to the onset of the twelfth century. His belief depends on the fact that *Khayâl al-Zill* was very popular during the late Fatimid period. One item of evidence is that adduced by the German Orientalist, Paul Kahle, who proves that Salâh al-Dîn al-Ayyûbî (A.H. 564-589), and his minister, al-Qâdî al-Fâdil, watched together a performance of *Khayâl al-Zill* during the year 567/1171.<sup>[14]</sup> This incident was previously mentioned by Ibn Hijja in his *Thamarât al-Awrâq*, and by al-Ghazûlî in his *Matâli' al-Budûr*. They give more detail about this incident, such as that al-Qâdî al-Fâdil agreed to watch *Khayâl al-Zill* reluctantly, just to satisfy Salâh al-Dîn, and that when the performance was over, Salâh al-Dîn asked him about what he had seen, and he replied that he had seen great morals and nations pass and others come, and when the cloth folded, it was exactly like folding the paper of a book.<sup>[15]</sup>

Dr. Hamâda has extracted two points from al-Fâdil's comments. First the fondness of Salâh al-Dîn for *Khayâl al-Zill* may indicate that this art had achieved a certain stage of development, and had become well formed and composed, thus encouraging an educated person such as al-Fâdil to make such comments. This could not have been achieved unless *Khayâl al-Zill* had undergone a period of practice and experiment. Secondly, it is obvious from al-Fâdil's comment that the art was not limited to farcical and satirical performances alone, but must also have used religious subjects and historical admonitory stories. These two points prove that the Arabic *Khayâl al-Zill* had passed through certain stages until it had achieved a standard which satisfied al-Fâdil and Salâh al-Dîn. However, because it was treated with indifference by literary historians, its heritage has fallen into oblivion apart from such casual references.<sup>[16]</sup>

There is also another record which says that Muzaffar al-Dîn (ruler in Iraq, A.H. 549-630) used to celebrate the Prophet's birthday every year, and that among other entertainments at this celebration was *Khayâl at-Zill*. There are also a few other references to *Khayâl al-Zill* at different stages in Arab history, such as the remark of Zayn al-Dîn al-Jazîrî in his *Durar al-Farâ'id al-Munazzama*, which says that when Sultan Sha'bân went on the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) during the year 778 A.H., he took with him some *mukhayyilîn* (shadow players).<sup>[17]</sup>

There are also some fragments of Arabic poetry in which *Khayâl al-Zill* is mentioned. One such interesting fragment mentions a woman shadow player. 'Umar al-Dasûqî said in his *al-Masrahiyya*, that al-Safadî in his *Lâmîyat al-'ajam*, and al-Nawâjî in *al-Halba*, have specified that a woman shadow player is referred to in a verse of al-Wajîh

al-Minnâwî, who says ‘she showed us *Khayâl al-Zill* from behind a screen, as though she has shown us the shadow of the sun behind the clouds’.<sup>[18]</sup>

Al-Qâdî al-Fâdil’s comment on the performance of *Khayâl al-Zill*, along with the above poetry, may allow us to assume that there were, in addition to the farcical shadow plays, shadow performances at least during the late Fatimid period, which were very different from the farcical types which pushed some Muslim leaders, such as al-Zâhir Baybars and al-Sultan Jaqmaq strictly to oppose this artistic activity because of its abundant sexual scenes and expressions, such as in Ibn Dâniyâl’s text. Certainly no text free from sexual content has been left for us to take as evidence.

However, some scholars have decided, perhaps because of the above remarks, that ‘historical shadow plays were performed, too, but more rarely’.<sup>[19]</sup> There is, however, another possible reason for this situation, which we can find in this quotation:

"The farces more frequently were humorous rather than satirical, but had important socio-economic and political undertones. In what amounted to a ‘comedy of character’, many shadow plays ridiculed the upper classes and denounced the exploitation of the poor, while in North Africa the shadow play sometimes criticized French rule."<sup>[20]</sup>

The Turkish *Karagûz* which is equivalent to the Arabic *Khayâl al-Zill*, may be confused with another type which had also been referred to by the same word, *Karagûz*. This second type was also found in Egypt. In Egypt *Karagûz* become *Aragûz*, according to Egyptian local pronunciation. It is equivalent to the hand puppet rather than to the shadow theatre, for while the latter is a silhouette of characters which appear on a screen lit from behind, the former comprises three-dimensional puppets which appear from the upper opening in a curtain behind which the puppeteer



conceals himself to manipulate his puppets by hand. Dr. Hamâda has noticed that some scholars, among them the English Orientalist, E .W. Lane, in his *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptian*, have confused *Qaraqûz* with *Aragûz*, to such an extent that this confusion led them to believe that the Arabic *Khayâl al-Zill* was brought to Egypt by the Ottomans.<sup>[21]</sup>

#### **6.6. The Movement of *Khayâl al-Zill* to Turkey :**

Although scholars are not yet agreed about the origin of the shadow theatre, and although there is a general belief that it may have spread from the East and South East Asia towards the Near East, it is obvious that the Arabic shadow theatre did not come from the Ottoman Turks, simply because it had existed in Egypt since the 6th/ 12th century.<sup>[22]</sup>

There is further evidence which suggests that the Ottoman Turks first know the Arabic shadow play during the year 923/ 1517. This was when Sultan Salîm I conquered Egypt and executed the last Mamlûk ruler, Tûmân Bey, on the Zuwayla Gate. When the conqueror had settled down in al-Rûda palace, he was told about an Egyptian shadow player who performed a shadow play which depicted the hanging of Sultan Tûmân Bey, and how the rope was cut twice. Sultan Salîm sent for the shadow player, and was so delighted with his performance that he gave him money and presents and told him: "When we go back to Istanbul, come along with us so that my son may see it".<sup>[23]</sup>

This evidence, which is related by many scholars, despite the sadness of the subject chosen by this Egyptian shadow player (without considering the feelings of his compatriots towards the invaders), may indicate that even if the Ottomans had seen a sort of *Khayâl al-Zill* before the time mentioned above, they certainly had not seen

such a high level of technical achievement in shadow theatre. What had perhaps confirmed this is the story related about this particular Sultan. He assembled six hundred skillful Egyptian men, among them several shadow players, and took them to Istanbul.<sup>[24]</sup> This certainly suggests that the Egyptian form may have been in advance of the Turkish, otherwise Sultan Salîm would not have been so enthusiastic about the Egyptian shadow theatre.

Landau states that “even if these Egyptian shadow players were sent back to Egypt three years later, they would have left their mark on the less developed Turkish shadow theatre”.<sup>[25]</sup>

On the other hand, scholars have observed that the Arabic *Khayâl al-Zill* began to decline from the seventeenth century onwards because of the decisive influence of Turkish domination, which permitted the Turkish *Qaraqûz* (Karagûz) to replace *Khayâl al-Zill*.<sup>[26]</sup> As P.N. Boratav writes:

"In all the regions to which this theatre spread, including lands with such diverse, non-Turkish populations as Greece, Tripolitania, Tunisia and Algeria, it is called by various metamorphoses of the word Karagoz. Similarly, the Turkish Karagoz came to Egypt from the Ottoman Homeland."<sup>[27]</sup>

In addition to the popular *Qaraqûz*, there was also the *Arajûz* (the hand-puppet theatre) which “was in the last century a favorite form of entertainment”.<sup>[28]</sup> It is also well known, however, that the Turkish *Qaraqûz* was copied by Arabic shadow players in several Arab countries, and also by some Arab theatrical artists during the last century.<sup>[29]</sup>

## 6.7. Arabic Shadow Theatre :

### 6.7.1. Introduction :

The pioneer of shadow theatre investigators is undoubtedly the German scholar, George Jacob (A.D. 1862-1937). His works in this field are the main source of information on the shadow theatre and in particular, on Turkish and Arabic shadow theatres. His views, analytical methods and conclusions have been in most cases adopted, reshaped and dressed up by his successors. His important successors who completed or elaborated his works were also Germans. His first publication of *Ibn Dâniyâl* appeared in 1901, and his last work was in 1935. He was working on these texts for about thirty-five years of his life.<sup>[30]</sup>

Other important scholars in this field are Paul Kahle, Ritter, Pruffer, Menzel, Littmann and the Russian Matrinovitch. This field is almost totally neglected in English except for the two books of Landau's *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema* and *Shadow Plays in The Near East*. These two books have not introduced any material unknown before. Apart from Landau, few articles in English (mainly written by German scholars) have appeared in English journals and encyclopaedias. There are some English Orientalists who have not written on this subject, but who, as travellers in the Middle East, watched some shadow play performances there and recorded their experiences. The English Orientalist Edward William Lane is perhaps the most important. In recent years, some Western scholars have paid a great attention to the Arab shadow theatre and the modern theatrical movement in the Middle East such as Shmuel Moreh, P. Cachia and P. Sadgrove.

Arab writers, in the past, completely neglected this field of research. The first major work to appear in Arabic was Fu'âd Hasanayn 'Ali's *Qasasuna al-Sha'bî* (1935). Another work which appeared after that was Ahmad Taymûr's *Khayâl al-Zill* (1957). There is another book by Muḥammad Taqqiyy al-Dîn al-Hilâlî, Moroccan and

pupil of Kahle, who worked some time with Kahle. This book was printed in Baghdâd in 1948, with his Arabic translation of Kahle's English article in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* under the title, *Thalâth Masrahiyyât 'Arabiyyâ*. In 1963, a valuable book for Arabic readers has appeared on this subject, by Ibrâhîm Hamâda: *Khayâl al-Zill wa-Tamthîliyyât Ibn Dâniyâl*. It can be regarded as the best and most interesting work that has so far appeared on the subject in Arabic.<sup>[31]</sup> In the seventies and the eighties, several books have appeared in Arabic covering this field from different angles such as 'Alî 'Arsân's *al-Zawâhir al-Masrahiyya 'Ind al-'Arab*, 'Alî al-Râ'î's *Masrah al-Sha'b*, Salmân Qatâya's *al-Masrah al-'Arabî*, 'Umar al-Tâlib's *Malâmiḥ al-Masrahiyya al-'Arabiyya wal-Islâmiyya*, and others.

Most of the contributors to the studies of the shadow theatre and in particular to the Arab shadow theatre seem to have accepted the authority and word of the first pioneer, G. Jacob. Their arguments are in most cases similar to each other, they use the same quotations and they come to the same conclusions. This is so, partly because there is not very much to quote from early Arab writers, and partly because the findings of Jacob have conditioned the flow of research in this field.

#### 6.7.2. **Khayâl al-Zill or Zill al-Khayâl :**

The term *khayâl al-zill* has caused much confusion for scholars in the field of Arabic performing arts and literature. The word *khayâl* in particular has caused much misunderstanding. *Khayâl* means figure, statue, phantom, image and shadow. However, the term *zill* also means shadow. The problem lies with the term *khayâl* which is often used on its own to refer to a live performance, or in combination, as in *arbâb al-khayâl*, to mean live performers. Early scholars in the field, both Arabs and Orientalists, interpreted *khayâl* automatically as *khayâl al-zill*. This caused great confusion as all live performances were now interpreted as shadow performances, thus aiding incorrectly the notion of the absence of live performance in the Middle East.<sup>[32]</sup>

Furthermore, the combination in the term *khayâl al-zill* is said to be linguistically incorrect. The linguistically correct term should read *zill al-khayâl*. However, it is explained that for rather aesthetic and musical reasons, *khayâl al-zill* came to be used regularly.<sup>[33]</sup> I believe that both terms are correct depending on which side of the screen the shadow may be seen. As we know, the *zill* ( shadow ) of the *khayâl* (figure) is cast on the screen from a light source behind the screen. From a performance point of view, the puppeteer handles and sees the *khayâl* which he manipulates, whereas the audience sees the shadows of the figures which the puppeteer is projecting. So it is natural for each of them to put in focus that which is in his field of vision. The puppeteer sees the *khayâl* which projects the *zill*, and the audience sees the *zill* projected by the *khayâl*.

#### 6.8. Ibn Dâniyâl :

Shams al-Dîn Muḥammad Ibn Dâniyâl Ibn Yûsuf al-Khuzâ'î, the oculist from Mûsil, as he is usually referred to, is the earliest Arab playwright known to us. Ibn Dâniyâl had remained almost unknown till the beginning of this century, when Marcus Joseph Muller the Munich Orientalist, drew the attention of Jacob to Ibn Dâniyâl and Jacob's first publication in this respect appeared in 1901.<sup>[34]</sup> The only work of Ibn Dâniyâl that has reached us is his *Tayf al-Khayâl*. This work contains his three plays : *Tayf al-Khayâl*, *'Ajib wa-Gharib* and *al-Mutayyam*. They were published in Arabic by Ibrâhîm Ḥamâda in Cairo ( 1963).

Ibn Dâniyâl was born. 646/1248 in al-Mûsil ( Iraq ), and as a child he must have witnessed the worst social, economical and political situations that the Muslim world has ever experienced in its long history. Nine years after he was born (656/1258), the Mongols invaded Baghdâd and they destroyed schools, mosques, houses, books..etc. We do not know anything about Ibn Dâniyâl's childhood, but we know that his home town, al-Mûsil, fell to the Mongols four years after the destruction of Baghdâd (660/1262) and

Ibn Dâniyâl had to flee the town five years later ( 666/1267) to Egypt, which was then under al-Zâhir Baybars, who effectively checked the advance of the Mongols. According to Hamâda, Ibn Dâniyâl started his medical studies in al-Mûsil and finished and practiced in Egypt and opened an eye clinic in Bâb al-Futûh and he seems to have become popular with the Cairenes in a short time. He was Bohemian, fond of intoxicating drinks, and his sexual desires were very extreme. He lived for the first years of his stay in poverty. <sup>[35]</sup> In 665/1267 al-Zâhir Baybars decreed a total prohibition. He ordered that all taverns and brothels be closed and destroyed all public-houses. He also ordered that prostitutes, homosexuals, etc. should return to God and reform. Ibn Dâniyâl was bothered by the prohibition more than he was previously bothered by poverty and he had to cope with both of them. The prohibition stimulated the genius in him and the best of Ibn Dâniyâl's writings is related to it, such as his poetry and his play *Tayf al-Khayâl*. After the death of Baybars, a great change of fortune happened to Ibn Dâniyâl. He somehow found his way to the palaces of the ruling Mamlûks and became very close to the new Sultan, Khalîl Qalâwûn and he performed the functions of the King's jester. This change of fortune did not change the character of Ibn Dâniyâl. He seems to have managed to keep out of politics in those troubled years till his death in 710/1310. <sup>[36]</sup> Jacob describes Ibn Dâniyâl as the most witty and amusing poet in the Arabic language, while Kahle describes him as an extremely witty, literary, and cultivated man, with a sense of humor which is unique in Arabic literature. <sup>[37]</sup>

### **6.9. Introduction to the Plays :**

In an attempt to save the shadow theatre which was declining in popularity, Ibn Dâniyâl was asked by a friend to write plays. <sup>[38]</sup> Initially he was reluctant to do so for reasons of *hayâ'* (modesty). However, he was concerned that people might come to doubt his creative ability if he declined to write, and he therefore decided to write the

three plays. Although they share certain common characteristics each play has its own unique atmosphere and theme. Ibn Dâniyâl's plays are extremely informative to the social historian as the characters portrayed are mostly taken from the lower echelons of society.

In Egypt scenes portrayed in *Khayâl al-zill* are called *bâbât* (singular *bâba*). This term, which has been used since the year 1001 AD is also used in reference to live plays contains features also found in *maqâma*, *hikâya*, and *khayâl*.<sup>[39]</sup> They are also sometimes known as *li'ba*, from the root *li'b* which means to play. In Syria, however, scenes in the shadow plays are known as *fusûl* (singular *fasl*) rather than *bâbât*. The root of *bâba* is *bâb*, meaning door or chapter in a book. The term *fasl*, meaning season or section is also used to mean chapter of a book. Later the term *fasl mudhik* (comic scene) was used both in Egypt and Syria, referring to live farcical scenes inserted to extend the length of the performance.<sup>[40]</sup>

The main means of literary expression in the medieval Arab world was verse, followed by rhyming and ornamental prose. Ibn Dâniyâl used both poetry and rhyming prose in the style of the *maqâmât* in his *bâbât*. In addition to this, where appropriate, he also used colloquial vocabulary. In order to appeal to a wide audience Ibn Dâniyâl's characters move with ease between a well-constructed *qasîda* poem and a folk *zajal*, sometimes mixing the two.<sup>[41]</sup> The obscene sexual references contained in his plays caused some problems morally and socially. The *bâbât* of other authors were written in colloquial Arabic which was considered inferior, and therefore not worth

documenting. These *bâbât* were considered to be part of the oral tradition and for this reason very few written examples are available to us.

The three *bâbât* are entitled: *Tayf al-Khayâl wa-l-Amîr Wisâl* (The Shadow Spirit and Prince Wisâl); *'Ajîb wa-Gharîb* (The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger); and *al-Mutayyam wa-l-Yutayyim* (The Love Stricken One and the Lost One). In the introduction to the collection, Ibn Dâniyâl begins by stating his commitment to compositions with a distinctly cultural flavor. He begins in the opening sentences by addressing his friend, Rayyis 'Alî. In this address we receive an indication of the character of this friend of Ibn Dâniyâl, and also of the kind of *adab 'âlî* he is about to present.

"You have written to me, ingenious master, wit, buffoon and uninhibited wag (*al-mâjin al-khâli*'), may God continue to protect you and maintain our lofty station, complaining that people have grown tired of shadow plays (*khayâl al-zill*) and have been put off by their repetitive character, and asking me to compose for you in that genre works with well-drawn characters of the mean and despicable variety. I have composed for you pieces (*bâbât*) in the genre of buffoonery, pertaining to good literature (*al-adab al-'âlî*) and not to cheap or inferior writing (*al-dûn*)."<sup>[42]</sup>

Ibn Dâniyâl states from the outset, his aim of double entendre. We are told that the characters and situations in his *bâbât* pertain to the lowest levels of society, but the *bâbât* are presented to us as cultured literature. His use of classical Arabic to recount the stories of the lives of lowly, non-conforming Cairenes displays a particular irony.

#### 6.9.1. *Tayf Al-Khayâl Wa al-Amîr Wisâl* :

The three *bâbât* have plots which are very simple in structure. *Tayf Al-Khayâl Wal-Amîr Wisâl* is the first and also the longest of the three. It begins with a prologue by



the Rayyis or master of ceremonies, who presents the show and calls forth the characters. The prologue is sung in verse and in it the Rayyis boasts that his *khayâl* is being performed to an audience made up of the best of people, the literate who are able to appreciate the seriousness contained in the satire.

This play has three major characters: Wiṣâl, a soldier who is an old sinner, his servant Tayf al-Khayâl and a matchmaker, Umm Rashîd. The play begins with an argument between Wiṣâl and his servant, Tayf al-Khayâl, over their past experience together. The argument reveals the points of weakness in Wiṣâl's personality and the point of abnormality in the character of Tayf al-Khayâl. Then the main plot is unfolded. It concerns the soldier Wiṣâl, who is reduced to poverty as a result of the life of debauchery which he had led. He is persuaded by Umm Rashîd to marry a young lady who Umm Rashîd says possesses both beauty and wealth. After the wedding, Wiṣâl, upon discovering that the bride is very ugly and poor, beats up the matchmaker, Umm Rashîd.

Moved by these events, Tayf repents to God and reminds the audience that death will eventually come to us all, but the happy ones are those who would see clearly the path to maturity. Wiṣâl then informs Tayf that he is going to travel to Hijâz (the Holy land) and purify himself of his past sins, with the water of Zamzam ( a holy fountain ), and also visit the tomb of the Prophet. It ends with the Prince asking Tayf to remember him as they are to part forever.

### 6.9.1.1. Stage Directions :

Here I will briefly outline the first *bâba*, in which there are eleven speaking characters, at least five walk-on characters and a horse. There is no mention, by Ibn Dâniyâl, of the setting of this *bâba*, and stage directions before the entrance of each character are restricted to: *yakhruju* (exits) onto the screen, as if the screen is the outside and the wings the inside.<sup>[43]</sup> One example is the stage direction: *fa-yadkhul wa-yakhruj fî zaffa*,<sup>[44]</sup> meaning ‘he enters towards the wing, then exits on screen in a bridegroom's procession’. This refers to the scene in which the Prince is carried on horseback to meet his bride. This means that ‘enters’, in the case of Ibn Dâniyâl's *bâbât* means that he goes towards the wings or backstage and ‘exits’ means going toward the audience. Moreh studies the term *kharaja* as used in different texts and concludes that in a theatrical context it is used to mean ‘to go and perform’. When used in reference to shadow plays, it can be understood as ‘appear on the screen’ or when used as *khurûj* and *dukhûl* it denotes the beginning and end of a shadow play.<sup>[45]</sup> *Yaqûl* (he says) is another stage direction referred to in the text. It precedes the lines of each character. These are the only stage directions mentioned and there is not mention whatsoever of such things as time or place. Occasionally items of costume, such as Amîr Wiṣâl's head-dress and the bride's veil are mentioned, as are musical instruments in Wiṣâl's wedding procession.

### 6.9.1.2. Sequence of Action :

The first half of the *bâba* consists of very little action other than that the characters appear, introduce themselves and then leave. The first character we meet is the Rayyis

who introduces Tayf, the hunchback. Tayf welcomes the audience with a song and dance and then calls forth his friend Amîr Wiṣâl who after speaking of his own lifestyle asks Tayf to call his secretary, Tâj Bâbûj; Amîr Wiṣâl then calls for the Rayyis and the poet Su‘ur Ba‘ar. Each of the characters tells us and one another about their lives and their past great sexual adventures. When the Prince decides to repent and marry, he asks Tayf to call for Umm Rashîd, the marriage-broker, who is ready with a bride for him and who also has a marriage clerk ready. Following the signing of the marriage contract, Amîr Wiṣâl ‘enters’ the back stage and then ‘exits’ onto the screen mounted on a horse. In this manner, and surrounded by singers and musicians, he goes to meet his bride. On unveiling his bride and discovering her to be an ugly monster, Wiṣâl faints, only to be revived by the sound of the bride’s grandson singing. Amîr Wiṣâl then beats everyone and chases them away. Wanting revenge Wiṣâl calls for Umm Rashîd and Shaykh ‘Aflaq, but the Shaykh states that Umm Rashîd is dead and the doctor confirms her death. Tayf and Wiṣâl repent. We can see then that most of the action occurs in the second part of the *bâba*, beginning with the wedding procession and then the Prince’s shock at seeing the face of his bride, leading to the characters involved being chased and beaten. Other than this the *bâba* concentrates on vivid descriptions by the characters of drinking scenes and sexual activities which have occurred offstage.

#### **6.9.1.3. Sound Effects and Music :**

Music is clearly important to the performance of the *bâbât*, with certain musicians being vital to the shadow show. Music is not added to the performance of the *bâba* after its conception. On the contrary, it is written into the structure of the *bâba*. From

this we can understand that a knowledge of musical scales, songs and dance must also exist in Ibn Dâniyâl's background. Each poem in his *bâba* has its own accompanying tune which is relevant to that particular poem. For example he uses the *muwashshah*, which comprises repeated rondo-like returns to a musical refrain, for Umm Rashîd. This is appropriate as it could be evocatively enchanting. Ibn Dâniyâl suggests the last tune as the Rayyis's introduction song. This is the first sound heard from behind, or in front of the screen. A different tune is suggested for Tayf al-Khayâl's welcoming song and dance and Ibn Dâniyâl names a different tune<sup>[46]</sup> for each of the sung poems that follow it. Music, song and dance form an integral part of Ibn Dâniyâl's *bâbat* and continue to play an important role in the Egyptian shadow play tradition to the present day.

#### **6.9.1.4. Theatrical Conventions :**

Certain conventions used in Ibn Dâniyâl's first *bâba* have continued to be used. Among them is the use of a screen stretched across a frame in a dark space. Music is heard prior to the appearance of the Rayyis. Rayyis 'Alî receives specific instructions from Ibn Dâniyâl telling him that when he is invited to a session he should bring Tayf al-Khayâl out to the round opening, *ukhruj Tayf al-Khayâl makâna al-qûr*. It is not clear whether there was an actual 'opening' on the side of the screen or whether he was to bring the figure out onto the screen itself. It is possible that if there was an actual opening, perhaps Rayyis was a glove puppet which performed the prologue in front of the screen and from there called upon Tayf to appear and then went on to sing his praises. He could then have disappeared and when Wiṣâl asks the Rayyis to call the Doctor at the end of the *bâba* it would not be necessary for him to appear on the

screen. It has to be said that this is just speculation as the meaning of the term *qûr* is not clear. Another possibility, suggested by Yûnis, is that the Rayyis may not be a puppet, but rather a person - probably the shadow puppeteer.<sup>[47]</sup> This would give the Rayyis the opportunity to be in direct contact with his audience before retiring behind the screen. In any case, the singing of the prologue by the Rayyis, announcing the aim of the show and calling the first character, is the first convention. The welcoming song and dance performed by the first character is the second convention. This follows prayers to God and the Prophet and good wishes to the Sultan. The character then declares that he intends to recount what he has witnessed and goes on to introduce himself. The third convention consists of the direct dialogue between the characters and the audience in which each character introduces himself to the audience. A fourth convention which is adhered to in all but a very few cases is that each character is called upon to appear. Sometimes dialogue can consist of exchanges of long lyrical poems or long passages of rhyming prose, or it may be just a few sentences uttered between characters. Each character always delivers his lines in his own distinct voice. Poetry, *zajal*, *muwashshah* and rhymed prose tend to be used in different proportions, and the presence of musicians is essential. Audiences always appreciate performances that are full of spectacle, such as dance, acrobatic games, religious and secular processions, or even fights. These are all essential in attracting audience. The final convention, and one that no *bâba* could afford to miss is the creation of situations which allow announcements to be made by the characters to encourage the audience to pay towards the cost of the show.

### 6.9.2. 'Ajīb Wa Gharīb :

Ibn Dâniyâl's second shadow play, entitled '*Ajīb wa-Gharīb* (The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger), follows the style of his first *bâba*. It begins with an introduction addressed to 'Alî, the friend of the shadow player, stating the aim of the *bâba*. The subject of this *bâba* deals with tricksters and strangers who speak the language of Sasân.<sup>[48]</sup>

As usual the *bâba* begins with the Rayyis praising the audience. This is followed by the appearance of a man called Gharīb (stranger), who introduces himself as a member of the Banû Sasân tricksters. These are men who live by their cunning, begging and deception. Gharīb gives an account of the many various ways he knows of deceiving people. This is followed by a 'procession of grotesque figures'<sup>[49]</sup>, which consists of about twenty-five characters together with their assistants and animals who parade one after the other. Each one introduces himself and displays his talents.

A preacher named 'Ajīb (amazing) is called. He delivers a mock sermon from a *minbar* (pulpit) in which he instructs the members of the Banû Sasân regarding their trade. The sermon is followed by a procession of the following characters: a snake-charmer, a quake-doctor, a vendor of medicinal herbs, an ophthalmic surgeon, an acrobat, a juggler, an astrologer, a trader of amulets, a lion tamer, an elephant man, a goat trainer, a prostitute, a trainer of cats and mice, a dog trainer, a tamer of beasts, a Sudanese clown, a sword swallower, a monkey-trainer, a rope dancer, a conjurer with self-inflicted wounds, a torch-bearer and, finally a camel driver. These characters appear without any interaction between themselves. The torch-bearer of the *mahmal*,

a splendidly decorated litter carried on a camel leading the caravan to Mecca, provides the first indication that repentance is to be the subject. This is taken a step further by the camel driver, who praises the Prophet. The first character, Gharīb (the stranger) then reappears to ask Rayyis ‘Alī for his opinion on this the latest *bāba* composed by Ibn Dāniyāl for him, and also to apologize for the lengthy *bāba* and the short apology. This brings to an end the parade of strange and amazing members of the Banū Sāsān.

Ibn Dāniyāl makes good use of the swindlers’ literary background in his writings, in particular describing the strangers from Sāsān as *udabā’* (men of letters). His use of beautifully structured verse, *zajal* and rhymed prose to project each character’s individual personality and trade is very effective. The poems and *muwashshahāt* are accompanied by music, each with its own specific tune as is the convention.<sup>[50]</sup>

### 6.9.3. : *Al Mutayyam wal-Yutayyim* :

The third *bāba*, entitled *Al Mutayyam wal-Yutayyim* (The Love Stricken One and the Lost One), is again preceded by a message from Ibn Dāniyāl to Rayyis ‘Alī, informing him of the theme of the *bāba*. This particular *bāba* concentrates on the theme of the conditions of lovers, a selection of *ghazal* (love poetry), some games and some ‘decent’ buffoonery. As is customary, the Rayyis opens the *bāba* by singing an introductory verse. This is followed by the appearance of an excited lover who begins by reciting a comical love poem, before going on to introduce himself as a poor lover from Mūsil. The man speaks of his male lover and the many admirers his lover has in the *hammām* (public bath). He follows this by singing a *muwashshah* which he has composed for his new lover. When he finishes the *muwashshah* his old lover appears

in the form of a short, ugly man, displaying jealousy and praising all things small, he himself being small unlike the new lover who is huge. Unmoved by the behaviour of his old lover, Mutayyam describes in great detail his meeting with Yutayyim, his new lover, and his servant Bayram, in a public bath. He tells of how Yutayyim helped him up when he fell, at which Mutayyam asked Bayram to introduce him to Yutayyim which he does.

Before long the lovers, are engaged in their favorite sport, animal fighting, beginning with a cock fight then rams and finishing with a bull fight. All this is refereed by Zayhûn who praises both the sport itself and each category of animals in turn. The fighting parallels the debate taking place between the lovers. It ends with Mutayyam's bull losing at which he gives instruction to Rayyis 'Alî to have the bull slaughtered and prepare a banquet to which all the lovers are invited. Mutayyam listens to ten of the lovers, one after the other, describing in short speeches their own sexual activities and individual interests. Mutayyam then plies them all with copious amounts of wine to drink, which causes them to fall asleep. While the lovers are in this deep slumber, the Angel of Death visits Mutayyam and allows him just enough time to ask forgiveness for his sins from God and pray before he dies. The end of the *bâba* shows Mutayyam's funeral, and hence indicates the restoration of morality.

#### **6.10. Various Themes and Structures :**

The preceding is an outline of the three *bâbât* composed by Ibn Dâniyâl in the last quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Each one is a complete entity in its own right, with its own structure, theme or story-line and characters. The first, *Tayf al-Khayâl wa-al-*



*Amîr Wiṣâl* can be divided into three separate parts, namely exposition, crisis and resolution. It begins with the outrageous moral and sexual aspects of the characters being exposed. Then comes the crisis, in the form of the unveiling by the poverty-stricken Amîr Wiṣâl, of the bride who turns out to be a terrible monster. Amîr Wiṣâl reacts by chasing and beating those concerned. With the news of the death of Umm Rashîd comes the realisation by Amîr Wiṣâl of the need for repentance and the decision to undertake the journey to the Prophet's tomb.

This parade of characters reminiscing about their past in the first part of the play can be seen as their rejection of the present, and perhaps a criticism of the severe measures taken by the regime against loose living. Ibn Dâniyâl's use of memories to deal with this most sensitive subject is a clever way of avoiding making any direct criticisms. He has taken the safe option of dealing with the obscenity and loose living by putting it in the past while at the same time managing to convey a veiled criticism of the matter of the strict measures implemented when dealing with the people of Egypt. We are also able to sense his discontent regarding the political situation which allows a Mamlûk Sultan to appoint a doubtful Abbasid prince as a Caliph with the aim of deriving false religious authority in return. Also the portrayal of Amîr Wiṣâl as a corrupt Mamlûk soldier can be seen as a criticism of representation of a political entity, badly defeated by the Mongols, by a mock Abbasid prince.

Ibn Dâniyâl's keen perception of the various ways in which the Mamlûk rulers exercised their control over the population is highlighted by *Hamâda*. By taking harsh

measures against certain forms of public entertainment the authorities are able to restrict the extent to which the general public are able to criticize the false authority of their Sultan.<sup>[51]</sup> The rulers of the time, while themselves enjoying a very sumptuous lifestyle, imposed heavy taxes. The Mamlûk period during which the rulers engaged in wars, is described as being 'dominated by a regime of blood and iron'.<sup>[52]</sup> At the same time it was a period of high architectural and artistic productivity. Ibn Dâniyâl's use of satire is an indication of how serious contemporary issues could be dealt with effectively in an indirect manner. The tale of a mock prince's farcical marriage, as well as being entertaining to the audience, would certainly have had a deeper message for the people.

The second *bâba*, '*Ajîb wa-Gharîb*', differs greatly in its structure from the first. In this one instead of a crisis which generates a resolution we are presented with a parade of twenty-five characters, each representing the various types one might meet at the *mawlid* fairgrounds in the back-streets of medieval Cairo. Despite being lengthy and detailed, this display of the twenty-five different characters, each describing their individual skills, both verbally and physically is both entertaining and amusing. The range of personae and professions is extensive and therefore does not become repetitive or boring. The characters, who are all members of a fraternity of tricksters, are advised by their leader of different ways of earning a living through deceit and trickery. The final example of deceit is displayed by a rogue who prays to God requesting that anyone who gives him charity should be rewarded that year by a visit to the holy lands. This particular *bâba* has a circular structure which sees Gharîb, whom

we saw at the beginning, returning to ask Rayyis 'Alî if he is satisfied by what Ibn Dâniyâl has produced. Gharîb then asks for God's forgiveness for both himself and Ibn Dâniyâl.

The basis for the theme of this *bâba* is poverty and the ensuing need to resort to craftiness in order to make a living. It seems that, having resorted to all kinds of sins in order to provide for oneself, it is considered sufficient to then repent and ask forgiveness of God. It is probably not only the strange tricksters portrayed in the *bâba* but Ibn Dâniyâl himself as a foreigner, and the Mamlûks who, although they are positioned at the top of the hierarchy, are also foreigners and are responsible to a certain extent for the poverty of the people. There is no disguising the social and political criticism being made in this *bâba*, which is no less direct than 'Ajîb's sermon to the tricksters, in which he advocates different forms of trickery.

The structure of the third *bâba* is different from that of the first two. This *bâba* begins with a crisis, then the characters are introduced, and finally a solution is presented. Although Mutayyam is able to survive his homosexual love affairs and then a fall in the public bath, having accumulated too many sins he is brought face to face with the Angel of Death, at which point he repents. This *bâba* is made up of a series of episodes linked by the presence of the anti-hero, Mutayyam. The first of the three main episodes sees Mutayyam singing the praises of his new lover; the second portrays their common interest, animal fighting; and the third shows the banquet which gives Mutayyam's lovers the opportunity to relate their depraved lifestyles. Mutayyam, however, pays the ultimate price of death for his corrupt existence, but not before

repenting. In this act of repentance Ibn Dâniyâl provides a note of optimism. Despite being the shortest of the three *bâbat*, this final one has some twenty-two characters and animals. The bouts of animal fighting gave the audience the opportunity to participate by taking sides as they would in real life cock-fighting, which was commonly found in those days both on the streets and in fairgrounds. They also gave the Rayyis the opportunity to improvise. We are informed by the 'referee' that this was not only a sport for the common people, but was also enjoyed by royalty.

#### **6.11. Some Notes on the Plays :**

Ibn Dâniyâl had an obvious talent for depicting the characters and reproducing the themes, settings and spectacles found in the everyday life of medieval Egypt. There is no doubt that the charlatans, sexual perverts, poets, drunkards, prostitutes, etc. represent the characters with whom Ibn Dâniyâl is acquainted as his introductory message to Rayyis 'Alî explains.<sup>[53]</sup> This explains his ability to provide such vivid descriptions of the characters in the *bâbat*. The background of each character is reflected in the names he gives them as well as in the vocabulary and style of language.

The way in which he pairs his characters in the first *bâba* is interesting. His portrayal of the hunchback, Tayf al-Khayâl, with his deformed figure and his name, the shadow spirit, is in direct contrast to the impressive, supposedly upright character of Amîr Wiṣâl. The contrast between Tayf, the outcast and Wiṣâl, a leading member of the community, however is in effect superficial, as we see when they share memories of their very immoral past. In fact Tayf, through repenting before his return to Cairo, shows himself to be better than Wiṣâl who only repents after suffering humiliation at

the hands of Umm Rashîd. Here lies another irony, when the matchmaker, Umm Rashîd, who is herself a prostitute and therefore another social outcast as she represents an illegal institution, is able to disgrace the soldier prince, who represents a noble institution. Umm Rashîd can in many ways be seen as Amîr Wişâl's female counterpart, in that they are each as corrupt as the other. However, Umm Rashîd shows the strength of her convictions by maintaining her wicked ways even on her death bed. Amîr Wişâl, on the other hand repents, thereby in his own way admitting defeat.

Ibn Dâniyâl's choice of certain contemporary settings in which his characters meet, for example a court, market place, public bath, etc., is another important feature of his *bâbât*. Each place represents certain contemporary features and therefore offers an ideal opportunity for the author to make a statement regarding social matters of the day. The *bâbât* reflect many aspects of everyday life and the characters portrayed are an excellent indication of the urban social structure of the day. Very few women are represented in the *bâbât*, a further indication of the social fabric of the market place. The few women we do see tend to be those professionals who render services to the men. Segregation of the sexes in this metropolitan society provides an opportunity for sex to be discussed openly and frankly. This even includes such sensitive subjects as lesbianism and homosexuality, which are included in the *bâbât*.

#### **6.12. The Influence of Khayâl al-Zill :**

Although there is no documentation on the visual aspect of Ibn Dâniyâl's work, their literary and dramatic qualities continue to influence the Middle Eastern theatre

performance tradition some seven hundred years on. We must bear in mind, however, that *khayâl al-zill* developed in an environment of rich and versatile oral traditions, the historical roots of which can be traced back to the pre-Islamic period of al-*Jâhiliyya*. In those days poetry was recited by the poets themselves or by orators whose task it was to broadcast it throughout Arabia. The main forms of oral tradition to develop were *hikâya*, *maqâma*, *khutba* and *sîra*, which all required the skillful use of the voice, body, gestures and possibly a musical instrument. The possession of such skills made it easier for performers to move with ease from one genre to another.

### **6.13. Shadow Theatre After Ibn Dâniyâl :**

The tradition of shadow plays continued to flourish after Ibn Dâniyâl, but as they were composed and presented in the Egyptian colloquial dialect, they were not considered to be of any literary value. For this reason they were not documented, and what we now have is an oral tradition that has been passed down through the generations. The few scenarios for shadow shows that we are aware of are of different lengths and themes. Aḥmad Taymûr's book on *khayâl al-zill*, published in 1957, contains a collection of more than ten scenarios. If we consider that even the humblest shadow player would have, normally, had a repertoire of at least twenty-eight different scenarios which he would perform during the month of Ramadân, we can see how poorly shadow shows have been documented.

The events of the year A.D. 1517 are considered by most researchers to be a turning point in the history of the shadow play in the Middle East. In that year the Ottoman Sultan Salîm I watched a shadow play depicting the hanging of the defeated Mamlûk

Sultan Tumân Bey II.<sup>[54]</sup> He was so impressed that he invited the puppeteer to return to Istanbul with him. On the occasion of the Sultan's sister's wedding<sup>[55]</sup> in the year 1612 AD the Sultan invited some more Egyptian shadow players. These two events have been blamed by al-Suwayfi, an Egyptian researcher, for the loss of a number of skilled Egyptian shadow puppeteers to the benefit of the Turkish audience.

After this the glove puppet became much more popular in Egypt.<sup>[56]</sup> How or when the glove puppet came to be popular in Egypt is not clear. We do not know whether they co-existed with shadow puppets or indeed whether they were in use first.

It is my opinion that the tendencies towards festivities during the Fatimid period and also the use of all forms of images would have contributed greatly to the development of glove puppet shows in the popular *sûq*. This would possibly have been encouraged and promoted by vendors of the *mawlid* dolls. A particular brand of sugar dolls could easily have been brought to the attention of shoppers in the *sûq* by means of a mime actor, acrobat, *muqallid*, singer, or even a story teller. The processions, pageants and performances held in the fair-ground of the *mawlid* for which the dolls are on sale were usually frequented by the aforementioned performers. The carnival atmosphere found on the streets of Cairo, and in particular the *mawlid* fairgrounds, would have provided the perfect opportunity for creative performers to display their talents at little expense to themselves and with the backing of the authorities. Glove puppets are extremely versatile and cheap to produce and to perform. They can be used almost anywhere and at any time. There is no need for a screen or special lighting. The puppeteer can only animate up to two glove puppets at a time making for a simple performance. There would be no call for musicians, and the glove puppets were probably used to perform

popular songs, *zajal*, short dialogues, imitations and jokes. We can still see glove puppets on the streets of Cairo performing mainly songs and short dialogues.

In AD 1907 Kahle bought a manuscript from the son of a shadow puppeteer named Hasan al-Qashshâsh. Although the manuscript is dated 1707 the *li'ba* could have been composed long before then and not necessary by one person. Kahle concluded that this manuscript, which he purchased in Cairo, belonged to the same period as some figures he discovered in the village of Menzalah in Egypt, and were probably owned by the same puppeteer. The manuscript, entitled *Diwân Kedes* (shadow play collection) consists of poetry by Shaykh Sa'ûd, Shaykh 'Alî al-Nahla and Dâwûd al-Manâwwî. Rayyis Dâwûd, Kahle discovered, was one of the shadow players invited to Istanbul in 1612 by the Sultan Ahmad on the occasion of his sister's wedding.<sup>[57]</sup>

The manuscript of *Diwân Kedes* was discovered by Hasan al-Qashshâsh around 1900 who then used the *Li'ba of the Light House of Alexandria* for the purpose of enhancing Cairo's shadow performance business. This *li'ba* tells the story of an attack, led by Guillaume II, the King of Sicily, on Alexandria. The attack occurred during the Ayyûbid period (A.D. 1171-1250), and was successfully defended by the Egyptians, led by Salâh al-Dîn al-Ayyûbî.<sup>[58]</sup>

*The Lighthouse of Alexandria* describes the old lighthouse in minute detail. The *li'ba* comprises a series of lengthy *zajal* pieces which the Egyptians call *billiq*. Poems describe the boats on the sea; the Muslims fighting against the Crusaders are encouraged by reports on the progress of battles being fought and finally the



announcement of the Crusaders' defeat. As with the Egyptian shadow play many of the poems are ascribed tunes.

This style of serious *li'b* portrayed in *The Lighthouse*, was typical of court entertainment in the Fatimid and Ayyûbid periods. The more pious members of the community found this type of shadow play more acceptable and it was probably the only type of show seen in the courts. However, this type of shadow show would not have appealed so much to the ordinary man on the street. Many scenarios dealing with various social themes existed. These have long been popular, although their origins are not known. Their main features are their simplicity of story-line and humour throughout. Obscenity is rare in these scenarios, although where it was required by the story-line it did sometimes occur. Taymûr collected <sup>[59]</sup>more than ten such *li'b*, including, '*Alam and Ta'âdîr*, *The Crocodile*, *The Boat*, *The Pilgrimage*, *The Public Bath*, *Shaykh Sumsum*, *The Sudanese War*, *The Coffeehouse*, and *the Stranger's Li'ba*.

*'Alam wa-Ta'âdîr* is performed over seven nights although it could be edited to one night for such occasions as weddings. It includes some one hundred and sixty characters, including animals and plants. It is the story of a Muslim merchant from Baghdad, called Ta'âdîr. While visiting Syria Ta'âdîr meets and falls in love with a Christian girl, 'Alam, who lives together with her father who is a priest and her young brother Bûlus, in a monastery. He comes up against all kinds of obstacles in his attempts to visit and spend time with his beloved. He employs many ruses in his endeavors to meet her, including posing as a vendor of different wares every day.

Eventually, in his disguise of a vendor, he is invited into the monastery by 'Alam, but he is discovered and sent to prison. On his release from jail some years later, Ta'âdîr returns to the monastery, where he discovers the priest has since died. 'Alam is subsequently persuaded by Ta'âdîr to convert to Islam, after which they marry, make the pilgrimage to Mecca, build a palace in place of the monastery, and live happily ever after.

This *li'ba* contains a great deal of spectacle, many *zajal* pieces and games, which allows the performance to extend over a period of seven nights. The edited version, performed for weddings, maintains the *ghazal* (love poems), and the *hummâm* (public bath) scene which is a ritual that must be undergone by every bride. Most of the games and some *zajal* are omitted, however. The *li'ba* is made up of a series of episodes, therefore the Rayyis is able to improvise and alter the sequences according to the occasion and the audiences reaction. This gives the Rayyis and his assistant, al-Rakhim plenty of opportunity to display their skills and select the appropriate *zajal*, songs, games and repertoire of tricks for the occasion.

I conclude that *Khayâl al-Zill* was known to the medieval Arabs. The naked fact is that the history of modern Arabs has been written at a time when most of the facts about its antecedents and therefore its subsequent development, were not unknown. Ibn Dâniyâl and his successors have, therefore, been excluded from the history of Arabic theatre, not because they were deemed unworthy by the historians, but simply because they were not known by them at the beginning of the twentieth century. Moreover, we can conclude that any one of Ibn Dâniyâl's shadow plays that we have examined, can be

rendered easily on the stage by human actors where applicable. Meanwhile, those plays also provide an indication that certain elements of shadow plays were similar to European conventional drama. *Khayâl al-Zill* contains the basic dramatic elements found in European conventional drama; mimicry, dialogue, characters and plot. However, its most important attribute is that it conforms to Arabic culture and taste.

## NOTES

### ARABIC SHADOW THEATRE

- 1- Hamâdah, I., *Khayâl al-Zill*. Cairo: Maṭba‘at Miṣr, 1963, p. 34.
- 2- Ibid.
- 3- Landau, J., *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*. Philadelphia: U.P.P., 1958, p. 12.
- 4- Ritter., *EI<sup>1</sup>*, ( Karagûz ).
- 5- For more details see Metin And’s *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey*. Ankara: Forum Yayinlari, 1963.
- 6- For further detail see Hamâdah’s *Khayâl al-Zill*.
- 7- Ibid., pp. 8-9.
- 8- Ibid., p. 38.
- 9- Landau, J., *EI<sup>1</sup>*, p. 1136.
- 10- Abû Shanab, ‘Âdil. *Masrah ‘Arabî Qadîm*. Damascus, n. d., p. 26.
- 11- Hamâdah, op. cit., pp. 42-43.
- 12- Ibid., pp. 38-34.
- 13- Ibid., p. 45.
- 14- Ibid., p. 40.
- 15- Ibid.
- 16- Paraphrased from ibid., p. 41.
- 17- Ibid., p. 55.
- 18- al-Dusûqî, ‘Umar. *al-Masrahiyya*. Cairo: Dâr al-Fikr al-‘Arabî, 1970, p.16.
- 19- Landau, J., *EI<sup>1</sup>*, p. 1136.
- 20- Ibid.
- 21- Hamâdah, op. cit., pp. 62-63.
- 22- See *EI<sup>1</sup>*, ( Karagûz ), pp. 602-603, and some information in this section are paraphrased from M. Al-Wâthiq’s *A History of Arabic Drama, 1310-1914*. Khartoum: K.U.P., 1990.

- 23 Landau, op. cit., pp. 63-64.
- 24- Ibid., p. 23.
- 25- Ibid.
- 26- Hamâdah, op. cit., p. 68.
- 27- Boratav, P, N., *El<sup>1</sup>*, p. 603.
- 28- Landau, op. cit., p. 24.
- 29- Hamâdah, op. cit., p. 69.
- 30- Kahle, Paul, "The Arabic Shadow Play in Egypt, "*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1940, pp. 21-34.
- 31- Badawî, M., "Medieval Arabic Drama : Ibn Dâniyâl" , *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. XI, p. 89.
- 32- On the subject of the interpretation of the term *khayâl* and *khayâl al-zill* see al-Râ'î, 'Arsân, Yûnis and Moreh.
- 33- Yûnis, Hamâdah and Moreh all attribute the use of the incorrect term *khayâl al-zill* to linguistic and aesthetic factors.
- 34- Kahle, op. cit., p. 23.
- 35- Hamâda, op. cit., p. 92. Some information in this section are taken and paraphrased from M. Kenio's *Towards A National Puppet Center For The Lebanon*. University of Leeds, 1994.
- 36- Ibid., pp. 94-97.
- 37- Kahle, op. cit., p. 23.
38. In this study, I used two editions of Ibn Dâniyâl's plays: Kahle's version *Three Shadow Plays by Muhammad Ibn Dâniyâl*, Cambridge: Gibb Memorial, 1992, and Hamâda's *Khayâl al-Zill wa-Tamthîliyyât Ibn Dâniyâl*, Cairo: Matba'at Miṣr, 1963. Hamâda omitted a lot of scenes and verses because they have sexual and obscene language.
- 39- Moreh, S., *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arabic World*. Edinburgh: E. U. P. 1992, p. 138.
- 40- Ibid., p. 114.
- 41- Yûnis, A., *Khayâl al-Zill*. Cairo: G .E. B. O., 1994, p. 61.
- 42- Badawî, M., op. cit., p. 90.

- 43- The term *yakhruju* ( exits ) is used when Tayf calls upon Amîr Wişâl or when Rayyis calls upon Tayf. See play text in Kahle, pp. 1,6 & 13.
- 44- Kahle, play text, p. 40.
- 45- Moreh, op. cit., p. 135.
- 46- Kahle, play text, pp. 1-54.
- 47- Yûnis, op. cit., p. 35.
- 48- Banû Sâsân is a name used to call tricksters and beggars who appeared in the Islamic world in the 10th century AD. The name refers to the Persian Banû Sâsân realm which was defeated by Muslims causing its Royal Family to roam around as beggars. The members of the Royal Family were well educated and employed their wit as a means of begging. For this reason, the Arabs called every beggar a member of the Sâsân family. (Salmân Qatâya, *al-Masrah al-'Arabî min Ayna wa-Ilâ Ayn*. Damascus: Mu'assasat al-Kuttâb al-'Arab, 1972, pp. 52-53.
- 49- Badawî, op. cit., p. 103.
- 50-As a stranger in Cairo, Ibn Dâniyâl probably came across foreigners who had to adopt various different characters and talents by which they could deceive people into giving them charity, in the same way as the Banû Sâsân.
- 51- Hamâda, op. cit., p. 88.
- 52- Ibid., pp. 89-91.
- 53- Kahle, play text, p. 1.
- 54- On this subject see al-Râ'î, Yûnis, Qatâya, Hamâda and Badawî.
- 55- Hamâda, op. cit., p. 67.
- 56- For further detail see Mukhtâr al-Suwayfî's *Khayâl al-Zill wal-'Arâ'is fî al-'Âlam*. Cairo: Dâr al-Kâtib al-'Arabî, 1967.
- 57- Kahle, op. cit., p. 22.
- 58- Abû Shanab, op. cit., p. 48.
- 59- al-Suwayfî, M., op. cit., p. 171.

## Chapter Seven : Hikâya

### (Storytelling)

#### 7.1. Introduction :

By the time Islam appeared in Arabia the art of storytelling was already a well-established part of that region's culture. The pre-Islamic Arabs found great pleasure in gathering at night or during their free time to listen to tales, most of which were based on mythology and pre-Islamic beliefs. Stars, animals and human attributes, such as generosity and courage, which were highly valued by the Arabs, were often the subject of the stories.

With the advent of Islam, religious storytelling developed into a theatrical, ritualistic, ceremonial event. Narrative and religious traditions had been among the early elements by which the form and content of the art were influenced; imitation now became an essential element of the storytelling performance.

In medieval Islamic culture the art of storytelling developed into a profession, as the political and religious powers realised to what extent professional storytellers were able to influence their audiences with their performances, and bring about unity among them.

Islam brought about great changes in the way of life of the Arabs. What until then had been a simple existence, gradually became highly civilised, and these changes affected the themes of Arab literary prose, including those of stories and tales. Arabic literature

was greatly enriched by the new forms and themes found in the stories told after the appearance of the new religion.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Qur'ân often uses stories to illustrate a point, and indeed there is an entire chapter called 'al-Qasas' (the Stories), and throughout the Qur'ân the word al-Qasas\_ is mentioned some twenty-seven times.<sup>[2]</sup> Many chapters bear the names of prophets, and these relate the stories of those prophets, such as, Sûrat Hûd, Sûrat Yûnus, Sûrat Âl 'Imrân, Sûrat Yûsuf, Sûrat Ibrâhîm, Sûrat Maryam, Sûrat Luqmân, Sûrat Nûh, Sûrat Banî Isrâ'îl, and Sûrat Anbiyâ'. Other stories found in the Qur'ân include those of Hudhud and the Ant, the Cave Dwellers, Ya'jûj and Ma'jûj, and others.

It is said that the prophet Muḥammad was fond of listening to storytelling and had heard the storytelling of Tamîm al Dârî. During the early period of Islam, the preaching of the new religion was often accompanied by storytelling with Islamic themes and as such, during the lives of the Prophet and the Caliphs Abû Bakr and 'Umar, storytellers were allowed to perform in the mosques. These tales served to arouse love for Islam and aimed to turn the people away from idol-worshipping. Often their themes were taken directly from the Qur'ân and the Hadîth, and sometimes from the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. Many were tales of past nations and their fates.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **7.2. Religious Tradition :**

Preaching, exhortation and public recitation of the Qur'ân have always been part of Islamic culture. In order for the Muslim community to reflect on its faith and the belief in the Oneness of God, storytelling developed as a means of public exhortation.



As I have already mentioned, during the time of the Prophet and the first four Caliphs storytellers were allowed to use the mosques to perform as they adopted Islamic themes and used their performances to preach Islam. Ibn al-Jawzî,<sup>[4]</sup> a twelfth-century scholar and storyteller, reports that during the time of the Prophet storytelling evolved from the traditional practice of public readings and recitations from the Qur'ân. After this men who were gifted in the art of speaking in public added reading from the Hadîth and other literary material of the day. Professional storytellers, among them al-Hasan al-Baṣrî, appeared by the eighth century.<sup>[5]</sup>

Storytelling was also influenced by the Friday sermon. On Fridays, which is the Holy day in the Islamic world, Muslims meet in the mosque at midday to perform their Friday prayer and listen to a sermon. This sermon consists of matters relating to religion and everyday life. During the life of the Prophet he delivered the Friday sermon, and when he died the task fell to the caliph. With the spread of Islam the governor or other appointed official presented it.

As time went on the leaders and high officials became more and more involved in politics and less in religious affairs, to the extent that by the ninth century professional preachers were paid to give the Friday sermon in place of the caliphs.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Friday sermon and those of the two feasts of al-ʿĪd were delivered by the officially-appointed preachers. For the rest of the time official and popular storytellers performed for the community. The influence and power of the storytellers over the common people grew now that the caliph no longer delivered the Friday prayer.

The *minbar*, the Muslim pulpit, was used by storytellers when they performed in the mosque. As well as defining the area of the performance the *minbar* provided the storyteller with an important religious symbol.

### 7.3. Definition of Hikâya :

Storytelling that had its roots in a preaching tradition could be distinguished through imitation. Both preaching and storytelling were used for the same religious purpose, and at times therefore it became difficult to distinguish between the two. Ibn al-Jawzî made a clear distinction between storytelling and preaching, however, he described the forms of religious expression as preaching (*waʿz*), reminding (*tadhkîr*), and storytelling (*qass*). He defined them as follows: preaching ‘consists of instilling the fear that softens the heart’,<sup>[7]</sup> reminding ‘consists of informing men of the blessing God has bestowed upon them, urging them to render thanks to Him and warning lest they disobey Him’.<sup>[8]</sup> Important for our purpose is Ibn al-Jawzî’s definition of storytelling:

"The storyteller conveys the stories of the past through imitation [*hikâya*] and commentary [*sharh*]; this is called storytelling. It consists mostly of narrating [*yarwî*] stories [*akhbâr*] about the people of the past" <sup>[9]</sup>

This definition of storytelling explains the elements of storytelling as it was performed in medieval Islamic culture.

#### 7.3.1. Narration and Mimicry :

Ibn Manzûr defines “*hikâya*” as ‘imitating a person’s actions or way of speaking’.<sup>[10]</sup>

Religious storytelling as a form of artistic expression gradually developed into an art of

mimesis, moving away from its early preaching origins. In the early period of its development the principle of imitation through narration became a natural element in the performance of storytelling. In imitating the actions of his characters, a storyteller introduced acting into his performance. Jacob M. Landau observed that:

"Mimicry pervaded to a larger extent the art of the storytellers in the Near East, who distinguished themselves by their great powers of observation and still greater talents for imitation." <sup>[11]</sup>

As talented mimics the storytellers were able to observe life and perform it for their audience. As well as imitating, the storyteller provided a commentary for his audience on the subject of his imitation. He did this by interrupting the action during his performance with comments concerning the events. As well as a means of entertainment, storytelling was used to educate. One essential aim of its educative function from the earliest stages of storytelling was to arouse in its audience the fear of sin and damnation. One early Muslim storyteller, renowned for his powerful performances and his ability to instill fear in his audience<sup>[12]</sup>, was Ka'ab al-Aḥbâr. Ḥasan al-Baṣrî responded to his critics by citing the spiritual and educative power of storytelling. The storytellers' skills were also used by military leaders to inspire soldiers to fight the "enemy of God".

Ibn al-Jawzî saw both storytellers and preachers as having significant social roles to play in inciting people to do good. To him the storyteller played an important part in propounding moral excellence in Islamic society.

According to Islamic teaching, the prophets were sent by God with sacred books. It was their duty to warn people against evil and encourage them to do good. Certain people whose knowledge was considered greater than that of the others, known as '*ulamâ*', passed on their knowledge of what God wanted from the people. However the tales of the storytellers were able to simplify complicated issues in life and religion and pass them on to the masses in a manner they were better able to understand. Thus the storyteller was able to benefit large numbers of ordinary people in a way the '*ulamâ*' could not, teaching them how a Muslim might avoid self-destruction and do good.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### **7.4. Religious Hikâya and politics :**

Islam as a way of life does not separate politics from religion, therefore religious storytellers were also able to influence the political arena. They were used by politicians to rally support, incite the masses against enemies and to influence the opinions of the public regarding political events. This was done under the pretext of religious implications. However, unlike religious storytelling, political storytelling provoked a generally negative attitude toward storytellers. At times this led to prohibition, censure, or even in some cases execution.

It was customary when there were political differences in the Muslim community, for storytellers to rally public support for one side or another. Religious storytelling was used by both parties during the civil wars between 'Alî, the fourth caliph, and Mu'âwiya, governor of Syria, in 657. Each party used examples from the Qur'ân, Hadîth and everyday life to justify its position and refute the other.<sup>[14]</sup>

After 'Alî settled the civil war with Mu'âwiya, the Kharijites (*Khawârij*) 'dissenters' revolted against him. This radical, militant movement spread their ideas with the use of storytellers, taking advantage of people's suspicions toward non-Arab Muslims in areas to the east of Iraq. The people were greatly influenced by the storytellers, and Ibn al-Jawzî claimed that the use of storytellers in this way brought about a negative attitude in general towards them. According to Ibn al-Jawzî:

"When the Kharijites took over, they popularised storytelling and engaged in it frequently. The imitating of these Kharijite storytellers came to be frowned upon."<sup>[15]</sup>

As a result of the Kharijites vulgarising storytelling, it eventually became associated on the socio-political level with a tendency toward disorder, violence, and separation.

One early storyteller, Ibrâhîm al-Taymî (d.711), was imprisoned and punished by the man he criticised, al-Hajjâj. Al-Hajjâj was a cruel governor of the Iraqi city of al-Kûfa. Al-Taimî was described by al-Jâhiz as one of the outstanding storytellers of al-Kûfa,<sup>[16]</sup> known for his strong emotional involvement during performance, even to the point of weeping.<sup>[17]</sup> Al-Taimî's view that believers had good reason to revolt against unjust rulers led to his death in prison.<sup>[18]</sup>

In the same way that religious storytellers had been able to simplify complicated religious issues for their audiences, by incorporating politics into their policies they enabled the masses to understand complex political matters. In this way they could serve as either an aid or a threat to the government of the day. The official storyteller who was appointed by the government and represented its views to the masses was

easily controlled. However, in order to control the popular (free) storytellers the government had to ban them from performing in the streets or mosques during periods of political crisis or unrest. Such action was taken in 892 by the Caliph al-Mu‘tadid who banned storytelling performances on streets and in mosques and instituted punishment for anyone who gathered to listen to a storyteller.<sup>[19]</sup>

### **7.5. Professional Instructions :**

As storytelling developed as a profession it became necessary for anyone aspiring to become a storyteller to be trained by masters of the art. Ethical and moral standards for the profession also had to be established. The theologian, Ibn ‘Aqil (d.1119), stresses the importance of the storytellers' appearance and his separating himself from the common people, as a way of establishing his relationship to his audience.

"Now figures and external forms frequently exert greater influence over people than words...It is therefore, imperative for the preacher [storyteller] that he keep himself apart from the masses in order that his words might have a wholesome effect because of the awe in which he is held."<sup>[20]</sup>

He also advises that the storyteller should keep a moral distance in order to maintain the power to inspire fear and sublime feeling in his audience:

"[The storyteller's] withdrawal must not be something which he merely simulates but an expression of genuinely upright motives."<sup>[21]</sup>

Most important, the storyteller himself should have a real fear of God. If he truly holds that fear, he will be able to arouse the same fear in his audience:

"All of the preceding qualifications, however, hinge upon fear of God, for the impact of [the storytellers'] words will be in direct relation to his fear of God." [22]

Ibn al-Jawzî lays down the following criteria for the prospective storyteller. [23] First, he must be prepared to devote his life to the profession, not as a means to personal and financial gain, but to serve God and his community. Secondly, he must be satisfied with his situation so that he will not succumb to covetousness which, al-Jawzî says, leads to hypocrisy. Thirdly, he must possess financial security in order for him not to become vicious towards others. Storytellers were sometimes seen to become part of the social corruption which they were supposed to be fighting against when their desire for financial gain overcame their integrity.

Furthermore, Ibn al-Jawzî states that a storyteller should be knowledgeable in many fields, including law, history, Qur'ân, Hadîth, and biographies of pious men. In addition to this he should also be an expert in Arabic grammar, literature, philosophy and eloquent speech. [24]

Certain physical requirements were also necessary according to al-Jawzî. These included a good voice and simple clothing, which would suggest to the audience that he is a man of God. He gives examples of 'Umar bin al-Khattâb, the second caliph, whose *izâr* (outer garment) had many patches, and 'Alî, the fourth Caliph, who wore garments of poor quality. [25] Al-Jawzî suggested that by emulating the appearance of an early

Muslim, the storyteller would be setting an example for himself and his audience. He should refrain from mixing with common people or joking with them on a personal level in order to maintain the respect of the community.<sup>[26]</sup>

By studying, training, performing before audiences and believing in himself and his course of action a storyteller could attain al-Jawzî's standards. He had to undergo formal structured training in speech and voice, and had to personally strive toward self-discovery and understanding of his faith in order to qualify as a storyteller. As both scriptwriter and performer he had to fully understand the principles of his religion in order to be able to pass them on to his audience through his performance. As a performer, he was in direct contact with his audience, sharing with them his theatrical experience and expressing the ideas and emotions he wanted to share with them.

The government recognised the storyteller's power over his audience and, in order to utilise this to their own benefit, they assigned official storytellers to perform in public.

#### **7.6. The stage of action :**

The *minbar* is the pulpit used by Muslims, which in the early days of Islam was associated with worship and preaching. It was originally simply a raised seat, or two steps and a seat, used by the Prophet, in approximately AD 628, to give sermons. Following the death of the Prophet,<sup>[27]</sup> Abû Bakr, the first caliph, sat on the Prophet's *minbar*. Thereafter, it became a symbol of governing and was traditionally used by caliphs and governors on the occasion of their accession to office and to descend from it on their resignation.



In the days of the Prophet the *minbar* was not placed in the praying area of the mosque. However, it gradually came to be an essential part of the mosque and found its way into the praying area. By the end of the Umayyad dynasty, *minbars* were used as pulpits in most mosques during the Friday and sermon. They were placed to the right-hand side of the *mih̄rāb*, which is a niche in the wall of the mosque indicating the direction of Mecca. This was because the person who gave the sermon also led the congregational prayer before the *mih̄rāb*. The *minbar* was constructed of wood, brick, or stone, with between two and five steps leading to a seat. Later, decorative geometrical, or floral and leaf patterns were added.

As storytelling performances were held in the mosque in the early days, storytellers made use of the *minbar* as the presentation area and it came to be an important part of the storytelling performance. According to Al-Jawzī, the beginning of the storyteller's performance was signified by him ascending the *minbar* and the end was signified by him descending from it.

When they began to perform outside the mosque, the storytellers took the *minbar* with them, not only as a religious symbol, but also to establish the presentation area for their storytelling performances.

As their performances became more popular and important, the storytellers began to decorate the *minbar* in order to make it more attractive. Sometimes they covered it with garments to produce a strong effect on the hearts of the audience.<sup>[28]</sup> Storytellers covered the *minbar* from the time of Mu'âwiya' (AD 661-680), but Ibn al-Jawzī criticised the practice of draping it with multi-coloured garments,<sup>[29]</sup> a popular custom

in the twelfth century. Evening performances were enhanced by placing candles and lamps on the top of the *minbar*.<sup>[30]</sup>

### **7.7. Storytelling as a Profession :**

Officially-appointed storytellers in the early days of the Umayyad caliphate (AD 661-750), received salaries and were held in great esteem. This position was first given an important status by the first Umayyad caliph (AD 661-680) Mu'âwiya, who appointed a provincial judge as storyteller. Of course, this well respected and powerful storyteller effectively reflected the government's policies. The importance of the storyteller in society is reflected in the fact that their salaries equaled those of judges. Judges who were also appointed as storytellers received double salaries,<sup>[31]</sup> as in the case of a judge in Egypt whose salary totaled two hundred dinars per year for each office.<sup>[32]</sup>

Muslim Bin Jandab al-Hazlî (d.728) was a well-known storyteller and judge who used the Prophet's mosque for his performance. He was renowned for his eloquence, distinctness of speech, and his beautiful voice. According to al-Jâhiz, his student the Caliph 'Umar Ibn 'Abd al-'Azîz (A.D. 717-720), said of Ibn Jandab's public recitation of the Qur'ân: "Whoever likes to hear the Qur'ân freshly, as it was transmitted, should hear the recitation of Muslim bin Jandab ".<sup>[33]</sup>

The judge-storyteller's salary would probably have been made from the caliph's funds. However, during the time of the Caliph al-Ma'mûn (A.D. 813-833), the government allowed the people to give alms to subsidise the storytellers' incomes. Normally Islam

restricts the use of alms to such purposes as conducting holy wars or supporting orphans. <sup>[34]</sup>

### **7.7.1. The Costume :**

The official storyteller-preacher was required by the government to wear an officially prescribed colour. His dress varied according to each province's tradition. During the 'Abbasid dynasty in Baghdâd (A.D. 749-1258) he wore black. In the Faṭimid territories of North Africa, Egypt and Syria (A.D. 900-1171) he wore white. In Iraq and Khuzistan he wore full military uniform with tunic and girdle. In Khorasân he wore a coat. The costume served to reflect the local government of each province. <sup>[35]</sup>

### **7.8. Baghdad Performance :**

Ibn Jubayr was a Spanish Moor who traveled throughout the Islamic empire toward the end of the twelfth century. His travels took him to such cities as Cairo, Jerusalem, Mecca, Baghdâd, etc. His book *Rihlat Ibn Jubayr (The Travels of Ibn Jubayr)* is a description of life at that time and records observations of performances of religious storytelling, describing the nature of the performances and their effect on their audiences.

Despite certain similarities between the performance of the storyteller and religious ritual, it should be remembered that storytelling was not an obligatory ritual, but a custom practice which came about as a result of audience-performer expectations. The Muslim community felt a need to reflect its belief in one God, and storytelling was a

means of fulfilling this need. Ibn Jubayr's own reactions and responses to these performances are reflected in his description of them.

Ibn Jubayr described Ibn al-Jawzî as an extraordinary man after having attended two of his performances:

"He is the wonder of all time, and the consolation of the faith..., renowned for his splendid triumphs of eloquence and learning, controlling the reins of verse and of rhymed prose, and one who dived deep into the sea of thought and brought forth precious pearls." [37]

Ibn al-Jawzî, as the officially appointed storyteller, performed before the caliph inside the field of the caliph's palace at Bâb Badr twice weekly, and in front of the public on a weekly basis. [38]

On Thursday, May 25, 1184 Ibn Jubayr attended Ibn al-Jawzî's performance at the palace. The public had gathered in front of the palace gates early in the day in order to find a place from which to watch the performance. Mats were spread for the general public to sit on and the Caliph Al-Nâsir, his mother, and his harems watched from their rooms. Once the audience were seated, the chorus of Qur'ân readers took their places on chairs in front of the *minbar* facing the audience. Then Ibn al-Jawzî entered and ascended the *minbar* before loosening his *taylasân*, a scarf worn around the head, as a sign of respect to his caliph and the place he was in.

The chorus of Qur'ân readers consisted of more than twenty men, divided into groups of three. They began by reciting a selection of verses from the Qur'ân and then each

group in turn recited verses which were similar in meaning and rhyme. The audience were moved to tears by the chorus's 'heart-rending charming hums' and 'marvelous melodies'.<sup>[39]</sup> Ibn Jubayr described how the audience were moved to fear and yearning by the rhythms, motion and excitement.

This was followed by Ibn al-Jawzî's performance which he began by methodically going through the verses repeated by the chorus and commenting on and explaining each one of them individually. At the end of each explanation he repeated the rhyming words of the verse spontaneously.

He then continued praising the caliph and his mother. The depth of emotion provoked by Ibn al-Jawzî's performance was clearly shared by Ibn Jubayr who described the audience's reaction as follows:

"Eyes poured forth their tears, and souls revealed their secret longings. Men threw themselves upon him confessing their sins and showing their penitence. Hearts and minds were full of delight, and there was a great commotion. The senses lost their understanding and discernment, and there was no way to restraint."<sup>[40]</sup>

The emotions which he had aroused in his audience, in their turn, enveloped Ibn al-Jawzî himself as he stood soaking up the atmosphere. He was visibly moved to tears and almost unable to speak. Suddenly, he rose and left the *minbar*, leaving behind an audience shaken with emotion.

Ibn Jubayr was greatly affected by this performance, describing it as ‘one of his most splendid marvels and great miracles’.<sup>[41]</sup> Comparing it to other performances he had attended in other cities he said of Ibn al-Jawzî’s performance:

"We had attended the meetings of those whom we have mentioned in this journal, but they were poor beside those of this unrivaled man in their power over our souls, and we did not find them so good as their repute ".<sup>[42]</sup>

Of Ibn al-Jawzî’s last performance he attended, Ibn Jubayr said:

"Through his exhortation the souls of those present rose as clouds, and from their tears there poured a heavy shower of rain. Then, at the end of his meeting, he delivered some erotic verses, ardently mystical and emotional. At last weakness overcame him and he sprang from the pulpit sad and distressed, but leaving all repenting of themselves, weeping and sadly crying. Alas, what a pity! The weepers moved round like a millstone, wailing and all still unrestored from their intoxication."<sup>[43]</sup>

Ibn Jubayr describes in great detail the individual elements of the performance, including: the storyteller, the chorus, the details of the event, the audience and the emotional effect the performance has on the audience.

#### **7.8.1.Objectives :**

The performances, which took place weekly in Baghdâd, served to maintain and increase the popularity of the caliph. The caliph’s mother derived great pleasure from the storytelling performances and attended them regularly as did the caliph himself.

Ibn al-Jawzî's *Book of the Storytellers* described the people of that time as being extremely materialistic with little interest in their spiritual well-being. As their fear of God had diminished so their hearts had been conquered by greed and a desire for material pleasures. It was Ibn al-Jawzî's belief that storytelling could be used to influence public opinion and attitudes and keep them on the right path and that by arousing a healthy fear in his audience he could overcome the social ills he described. His aim was to transform the attitudes of his audience in order to improve society.

Later, however, he acknowledged that the influence he had, despite being dramatic, was not permanent. In his book *Al-Latâ'if* he told of how his audiences were temporarily reformed but very soon returned to their old ways. <sup>[45]</sup>

#### **7.8.2. Two Separate Audiences :**

The ruler and his harem were separated from the general audience and the ruler was separate from his harem. Ibn al-Jawzî used to insist on segregation of the sexes in his audiences, as did many other storytellers at the time. This was because he believed that mixing the sexes would encourage unnecessary intermingling between men and women when emotions were running high. He also used to avoid performances that would "arouse evil thoughts in the minds of people". <sup>[46]</sup>

Although he believed in provoking fear in his audience, he avoided taking them to the point where they would lose control. He preferred to end the performance before emotion reached its peak in order not to drain them of energy. <sup>[47]</sup>

### **7.8.3. The Chorus of the Performance:**

Initially the storyteller himself would read a selection of verses from the Qur'ân at the beginning of his performance. The Qur'ân readers comprise a chorus for his performance. They were needed to perform the introductory section of the performance. As audience sizes grew this became the task of the Qur'ân readers, who sat in front of the *minbar* facing the audience. Sometimes they sat on chairs, sometimes on the floor, or sometimes on the steps of the *minbar*. The number of Qur'ân readers is thought to have differed from one performance to another and possibly from one storyteller to another. Ibn Jubayr noted more than twenty readers at Ibn al-Jawzî's performance.<sup>[48]</sup> Sometimes the readers recited as one group and at other times they were divided into smaller groups of two or three readers, with first one group reciting a verse and then another. It would certainly have required training in order to achieve such cohesive results; however, we do not have any details of rehearsals from Ibn Jubayr.

Once the storyteller had ascended the *minbar* and welcomed his audience, the performance would begin with the Qur'ân readers reciting a selection of verses from the Qur'ân. Sometimes they would also recite or hum between sections of the storyteller's performance. This additional participation allowed the storyteller to rest.

The Qur'ân verses to be read depended on the subject of the performance. The Qur'ân readers would recite slowly and plaintively, arousing emotions of fear and yearning in



the audience, with their “marvelous melodies” and “heart rending and charming hums”. [49]

As well as recitation, the chorus had the additional role<sup>[50]</sup> of prompting a response from the audience, with cries of “O God! O God!” and “God is the Greatest”,<sup>[51]</sup> and during the evening performance they sometimes held candles in order to provide the performance with lighting. [52]

### **7.9. Religious Celebrations :**

Ramadhān, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, is very special to Muslims. It is a time of fasting when all adult Muslims who are able to do so refrain from eating and drinking from sunrise until sunset. During this month the Qur’ān was revealed and Muslims consider it a time for renewing their faith by intensifying their religious activities. Traditionally, the evenings of Ramadhān are a time of coming together, an opportunity for the community to unite through worship and be refreshed through special prayer and entertainment. This begins with the obligatory evening prayer and the *Tarāwīh* prayer, which is only recited during Ramadhān.

The Qur’ān was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad on one of the odd-numbered nights of the last ten days of Ramadhān . This night is known as “*Lailat al-Qadr*”, or “the Night of Power”, and is described in the Qur’ān as being “better than a thousand months”. It is not known exactly which of those nights is *Lailat al-Qadr*, although many believe it to be the 27<sup>th</sup>, so Muslims celebrate all the odd-numbered nights during

the last ten nights of the month. They do this by performing extra acts of worship and enjoying special entertainment.

Ibn Jubayr spent the month of Ramaḍān (December 18, 1183 to January 16, 1184) in Mecca, during which time he attended the evening performances of the odd-numbered nights of the last ten nights of the month.<sup>[53]</sup> He described the effects of the spectacular lighting and decorations, which accompanied the narration, imitation, and ritual of the storytelling performances. He told how the dramatic use of light as the symbol of belief and faith, together with scenery, produced a powerfully theatrical and imaginative effect. He also observed that the performance, as a celebration of the faith of Islam gradually increased, eventually becoming the main element.

There was always a great deal of audience participation in these performances and as the event was repeated every year during Ramaḍān, the audience gradually became familiar with its content and its associated rituals. It became a ceremonial event in its own right, celebrating the audience's belief in God, His Prophet and His book. The visual element utilized in the performances served to recreate an image of heaven in the minds of the audience. The storytellers were not officially appointed for this event, but it was under the supervision of the official.

#### **7.9.1. The Night of Power :**

On the twenty-seventh night a special performance marked the "*Lailat al-Qadr*". Ibn Jubayr described the extensive preparations for this night which had begun three days before the performance.

Two three-storey structures were built beside the *ḥaṭīm* of the Shafi'ite imam. This consisted of very tall wooden poles which formed a continuous row, with long planks placed between them. The ceilings of the first two levels were drilled through with holes and glass pipes were placed in them to direct light upward from the glass lamps which were situated below the surface. Sharp-headed nails were hammered, close together, into the wooden surface of the third level, and candles were pressed onto them. From the beams of this structure were hung lanterns of various sizes. There were large brass discs, each of which had apertures connected to glass lamps by pipes which reflected light from below. These were hung horizontally by three chains each. When the oil lamps were lit the discs and pipes had the appearance of "a many-legged table shining forth light".<sup>[54]</sup>

The wooden *mīhrāb* was surrounded with candles. Light also featured in the *ḥaram*, the sacred territory of the great mosque at Mecca, where a circle of light, made up of torches, candles and candlesticks, illuminated the walls.

Along the four sides of the *ḥaram*, groups of Meccan boys, each with a cloth soaked in oil, occupied the balconies. When the oil-soaked cloths were lit, the boys could not be seen behind them and it appeared as if the flames were moving rapidly, leaping from balcony to balcony. At the same time the boys chanted in chorus "O Lord! O Lord!"

Ibn Jubayr described this spectacle of light:

"...the *ḥaram* shook with their voices. When all that we have described was set alight, the brilliant rays bade fair to blind the eyes, and not a glance could fall on any edge or fringe where there was not a light to engage the sense of sight turning elsewhere. Let the imagination play on the grandeur of what can be seen upon

that blessed night, which in its nobleness strips off the clothes of darkness and adorns itself in the illuminations of the sky." [55]

At this point the judge of the city entered to lead the audience in the obligatory evening prayer, followed by a recitation of *Sûrat al-Qadr*, the Chapter of Power. Then the imam of each sect represented in the city recited verses from the Qur'ân, before the evening's entertainment ended with a speech from the judge. By this time the audience were so excited the judge could barely be heard above their noise.

Ibn Jubayr's report of this night is concluded as follows:

"Their spirits had taken wing from emotion and their eyes streamed with tears; and from the grace of that blessed night their souls took hope...They perceived that it was indeed the noble night of Qadr described in the revelation." [56]

The audience was clearly moved by the performance. The feeling of a night worth more than a thousand nights, as described in the Qur'ân, was brought about with the aid of various forms of lighting. The ritualistic experience brought about by visual spectacle appears to have been the main element of this performance. Despite the detailed description of the techniques used to create the theatrical visual elements of the performances and the elements of spectacle and religious symbols reflected in them, there is no record of the details of the storytellers' performances. Ibn Jubayr gives a very detailed account of the lighting and scenery, and the emotions evoked, but says nothing of the storyteller's actions. This could be because the sight of a young storyteller performing before a large audience was not uncommon at that time; for

example, Ibn al-Jawzi is reported to have performed in public at the age of fourteen. <sup>[57]</sup> The description of this creative and imaginative use of the elements shows how this art was developed to relay a meaningful message through a performance.

Historically, the Islamic month of Ramadan is the most appropriate season for night entertainment shows because most people conduct their business during the night-time in this month. During Ramadan, the performance of special entertainments is among the secular activities appropriate to night-time. Besides storytelling, the number of presentations of other types of entertainment like *Karagûz* and *Khayâl al-Zill* increases greatly so that there were shows for every night of the month. Most of Arab countries in the Middle East have continued to adopt this annual routine till the present day.

#### **7.9.2. Recent Celebrations :**

Although Ramadân continues to be a time for communal celebration and entertainment, today the tales of Islamic history are presented via television, rather than through live theater. Unlike in medieval Islam, when audience participation was an important element of a performance, which contributed to the atmosphere of the performance, today's television dramas are aimed at a passive audience. This type of storytelling is a one-way process.

#### **7.10. Different Devices and Techniques :**

Ibn al-Jawzî dedicated an entire chapter of his *Book of the Storytellers* to the condemnation of those religious storytellers who used what he called "tricks" in their performances. This chapter, entitled "A Warning Against People Who Imitate the

Preachers, But Who Introduce Innovations and Whose Acts Call for Categorical Censure,<sup>[58]</sup> criticized the use of make up, inducing tears artificially and affected emotional attitudes to achieve a particular effect, e.g., humility, or used exaggerated gestures, movements, and emotions. During the recitation of the Qur'ân, certain storytellers typically impressed the audience with pretended humility. Others shivered and used an astringent-soaked cloth concealed in a hand to bring tears to their eyes and thus lead the audience into a similar emotional reaction.<sup>[59]</sup>

#### **7.10.1. Make Up :**

In Ibn Jubayr's book, *Kashf al-Asrâr* (Unveiling of the Secrets), he quoted a manuscript which was written in A.D. 1317, describing how storytellers used to prepare a mixture of ground mustard seeds and vinegar and leave it for a day and two nights before a performance.<sup>[60]</sup> They would dip a towel into the mixture, then during the performance, when they wiped pretended tears away with the towel, real tears would flow. Another trick was to apply oil and cumin to the face to create a pale appearance which was thought to indicate humility.<sup>[61]</sup>

#### **7.10.2. Physical Movements :**

Ibn al-Jawzî also objected to certain devices sometimes used by storytellers to encourage certain behavior from their audience, such as the one who feigned a mystical experience by rending his garments, or another who threw items of his clothing to the chorus of Qur'ân readers to indicate his appreciation of their reading and to encourage

his audience to do the same. <sup>[62]</sup> After the performance he and the Qur'ân readers divided what they had received through this means. Ibn al-Jawzî expressed his objection at what he saw as a means of taking advantage of the audience while they were emotionally aroused.

### **7.10.3. Setting :**

The introduction of scenery together with the practice of covering the *minbar* with colored garments and hanging prayer mats on the walls provided what Ibn al-Jawzî described as greater command. <sup>[63]</sup> They were ways in which the storyteller could attract larger, more affluent audiences, who would pay him.

### **7.11. Different Themes :**

As well as tales of Islamic traditions a storyteller might introduce themes which were not based on Islamic principles, in an attempt to attract larger audiences and thereby increase his financial gain. Sometimes they dealt with social problems, but were criticized for not treating them according to the teachings of Islam. One example of this, given in his *Book of Storytellers*, is that of an ascetic who abandoned his wealth, work, and family and spent all his time doing nothing. He neglected his appearance and stayed awake all night. Eventually he retreated to the mosque, at which point his wife went to a judge complaining about his behavior and accusing him of negligence. The storyteller criticized the judge for punishing a man who was devoting his life to God. <sup>[64]</sup> However, as Ibn al-Jawzî explained this storyteller was setting a bad example to his audience and risked confusing the common people with such a performance, as Islam

teaches that a Muslim has certain duties toward his wife, family, society and himself which he must fulfill, and cannot opt for the life of an ascetic.

Another example given by Ibn al-Jawzî, was that of a storyteller who encouraged physical self-punishment as a means of paying for a sin. Ibn al-Jawzî was concerned that people in their ignorance might follow this example and argued that our bodies and souls, as the property of God, must not be abused.<sup>[65]</sup>

Ibn al-Jawzî criticised some storytellers who recited verses which were thought to promote behavior that went against the teachings of Islam. For example, one recited the following verses from the *minbar* in a mosque:

Give me wine to drink, and tell me it is wine.  
Give it to me not to drink in secret  
For it is possible to give it openly.<sup>[66]</sup>

Such subjects may have been employed as a way of attracting audiences in an environment of fierce competition between storytellers. In their efforts to attract and retain audiences certain theatrical means were used such as movement and gesture and the use of emotion in the voice. Although they did not go as far as pretending to be the character they would imitate the character's action, and use make up, costume and scenery in order to create an overall environmental effect. At the same time the essential elements of narration, imitation, and ritual were maintained as essential parts of the storytelling performance.



## **7.12. Popular Religious Storytelling :**

The popular storyteller was self-employed, performing in streets, markets, cross-roads and other public places. He used various imaginative means to develop a strong relationship with his audience.

### **7.12.1. The Sufi Performance :**

The earliest recorded description of a popular storytelling performance is found during the reign of the eighth-century Caliph al-Mahdî (A.D. 775-785). In his book, *al-'Iqd al-Farîd* (The Unique Necklace), Ibn 'Abd Rabbih describes the performance of an unknown Sufi whom he describes as an "intelligent, hard-working man" who pretended to be mad in order to perform for the cause of God. In his performances he aimed to "command kindness and goodness and condemn the objectionable".<sup>[67]</sup> The Sufi gave twice-weekly performances on Mondays and Thursdays. He would ride around the city on a cane, as if riding a horse to advertise his performances, and large crowds of men, women, and children would follow him back over the hill to the place where his performance would take place. Children were even observed leaving their schools to follow him, "there, where no schoolmaster has control over obedience from his students."<sup>[68]</sup> When they arrived at the hill, the crowd would gather around him and the Sufi would ascend the hill and announce the subject of his performance, asking, "Where have the Prophet and God's messengers gone? Aren't they in the uppermost heavens?" To which the audience replied, "Yes."<sup>[69]</sup>

The Sufi then went on to imitate the actions of a judge, presiding over a court in the hereafter, to review the actions of each of the early Caliphs in turn. He passed

judgment on each one and designated to each one his appropriate place in the hereafter, according to his deeds.

He began by calling Abû Bakr al-Siddîq, the first caliph (A.D. 632-634). The caliph was represented by a young man who was brought in to take his place in front of the storyteller. He reviewed Abû Bakr's achievements [ the English text is translated by S. Moreh.<sup>[70]</sup> ] :

"May God reward you for your behaviour towards the subjects, Abû Bakr. You acted justly and fairly. You succeeded Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, and you joined together the rope of the faith after it had become unravelled in dispute, and you inclined to the firmest bond and the best trust. Let him go to the highest Heaven. "<sup>[71]</sup>

Abû Bakr was placed in the uppermost heaven, and the judge called for the second caliph, 'Umar Bin al-Khattâb (A.D. 634-644), represented by another young man, to be brought in. He entered and took his place in front of the judge for his deeds to be reviewed:

"May God reward you for your services to Islam, Abû Hafṣ [ 'Umar's surname ]. You made the conquests, enlarged the spoils of war and followed the path of the upright. You acted justly towards the subjects and distributed [ the spoils ] equally. Let him go to the highest Heaven! beside Abû Bakr. "<sup>[72]</sup>

Again the Caliph was sent along to the uppermost heaven.

A third young man was brought in, representing 'Uthmân, the third caliph (A.D. 644-656). Concerning 'Uthmân's reign the judge said:

"You mixed [ good and bad ] in those six years, but God, exalted is He, says, 'They mixed a good deed with another evil, It may be that God will turn towards them' ( Qur. 9:103). Perhaps there is

forgiveness from God." Take him to his two friends in the highest Heaven."<sup>[73]</sup>

The fourth caliph was called and a young man representing 'Alî Bin Abî Tâlib (A.D. 656-661) was brought in to take his seat before the judge. The judge praised him saying:

"May God reward you for your services to the *umma*, Abû al-Hasan ('Alî's surname) for you are the legatee and the friend of the Prophet. You spread justice, and were abstemious in this world. You kept yourself away from luxury, and didn't even touch it with your finger. You are the father of blessed descendants, and the husband of a virtuous and pure woman."<sup>[74]</sup>

He too was sent to the uppermost heaven of paradise.

Take him to the highest Heaven of Paradise."<sup>[75]</sup>

Next it was the turn of Mu'âwiya (661-680), the founder of the Umayyad dynasty.

This time a boy was brought in instead of a young man. A list of charges was read out:

"You are the killer of 'Ammâr Bin Yâsir, Khozayma Bin Thâbit, and Hajar Bin al-Adbar al-Kindî, whose face was worn out by worship. You are the one who transformed the caliphate system into kingship, who monopolised the spoils, gave judgement in accordance with whims and asked the assistance of transgressors. You were the first to change the *sunna* of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, to violate his rulings and to practice tyranny."<sup>[76]</sup>

Passing judgment, the storyteller said:

"Take him and place him with the transgressors!"<sup>[77]</sup>

Next Yazîd, the second Umayyad caliph (A.D. 680-683) was brought in to take his place in front of the judge. The judge gave forth a torrent of abuse, accusing Yazîd of despicable actions during his reign:

"You pimp! You are the one who killed the people of the Harra and laid al-Medîna open to the troops for three days, thereby violating the sanctuary of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace. You harboured the godless and thereby made yourself deserving of being cursed by the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace. You recited the pagan verse, ' I wish that my elders had seen the fear of the Khazraj at Badr when the arrows fell.' You killed Husayn and carried off the daughters of the Prophet as captives [ riding pillion] on the camel-bags"<sup>[78]</sup>

Thus, Yazîd was condemned to "the lowest Hell !."<sup>[79]</sup>

The judge went on this way naming each caliph in turn, reviewing their accomplishments and giving his verdict on them until he called for 'Umar Bin 'Abdul-'Azîz. As before another young man was brought in to take his place before the judge, who said of him:

"May God reward you for your services to Islam, for you revived justice after it had died and softened the merciless hearts; through you the pillar of the faith has been restored after dissension and hypocrisy."<sup>[80]</sup>

His accomplishments were rewarded by the judge:

"Take him, and let him join the righteous."<sup>[81]</sup>

Again, the judge resumed calling upon and reviewing the deeds of the caliphs. When he came to the first caliph of the 'Abbasid dynasty the Sufi fell silent. The audience prompted him, "Abû al-'Abbâs, the commander of the faithful," The Sufi replied:

"We have got to the Abbasids; do their reckoning collectively and throw all of them into Hell."<sup>[82]</sup>

We can see from the above description how the style of storytelling had developed through the use of theatrical elements such as purpose, place, time, audience, performers and language in a performance.

### **7.12.2. Objectives :**

The Sufi's main objective seems to have been to use the performance to encourage kindness and goodness. In riding around the town on a cane to attract spectators to his performance he allowed himself to be ridiculed for God's cause. His use of the Day of Judgment to display the good and bad deeds of the caliphs and to present the question of heaven and hell, enabled him to remind the audience of the importance of our deeds in this life in relation to the hereafter, and that social status and positions of power were unimportant in the hereafter. He used the performance as an education device to show that all, including the caliphs, would be treated equally by God, receiving reward for good deeds and punishment for wrong-doings. The performance was kept simple as it was directed at a simple audience.

### **7.12.3. Place of Action :**

As has already been mentioned the performance was held on a hill every Monday and Thursday. Riding a cane to represent a horse gave the storyteller a comic appearance as normally this was seen as a game played by women and children. As such it can be seen as part of the performance aimed at attracting children, who in their turn encouraged their parents to attend the performance. The audience was then led to a hill which he used as a stage, while they viewed him from below. He would probably have attracted a large crowd of men, women and children with this kind of material.

When the Sufi fell silent toward the end of his performance this brought about audience participation. They called out the name of the first 'Abbasid caliph, Abû al-'Abbâs,

expecting him to review his deeds, whereas his reply was to state that the 'Abbasid family be thrown into the fire. This ended the performance.

These performances would have been watched by people of the middle and lower classes, with little education. The stories of the caliphs served both as entertainment and education.

#### **7.12.4. The Speaking Role :**

The only speaking role in the performance was played by the Sufi, about whom we are told very little. There is no mention of his name or age, but he is described as an intelligent, hard-working Sufi. By pretending to be a madman he was able to say whatever he wished about the caliphs without fear of reproach. Although we are not told how many actors were involved in the performance, at any given time there would have been at least three actors on stage, representing the judge, a caliph and a guard who presented the caliph to the judge. There is no indication that any of the other characters spoke, and it is possible that members of the audience may have played the silent roles. However we have no information regarding this. Nor is there any description of entrances and exits from the performance area.

#### **7.12.5. Patterns of Language :**

The effective use of language was important to the Sufi's performance. The patterns and phrases were very repetitive, with the judge going through the same ritual with each caliph and pronouncing his verdict of heaven or hell on each one. However his use of strong, direct language in short sentences enabled him to put over his message

clearly. He began most of his sentences with a verb. This is a common structure in Arabic rhetoric, used to catch the attention of audience. His attitude towards the caliphs was respectful, as were his words, with the exception of Mu'âwiya and Yazîd, to whom he spoke harshly to reflect the bad deeds of which they were accused.

#### **7.12.6.Narration and Mimicry :**

Storytellers often used mimicry in their performances. Their imitation of the actions of the characters would be interspersed with personal comments on the characters and events as they occurred. This mixture of narration and mimicry was essential to the performance. Physical actions were often used to deepen the ritualistic element of the performance, and produce a mystical experience for the audience.

One storyteller renowned for his use of mimicry in order to invoke compassion and pity<sup>[83]</sup> in his audience was Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ghâlib (d.899). Also known as Ghulâm al-Khalîl, he was a popular storyteller in Baghdâd. In one of his performances he played the part of 'Abd al-Raḥmân b. 'Awf (d.652), an early Muslim general who played a prominent role in the civil war against the caliph 'Alî. According to Islamic teachings, on the Day of Resurrection everyone must cross the bridge of Sirât, a bridge leading to paradise. Whoever has been wicked in their lifetime will fall off the bridge into the flaming pit of hell,<sup>[84]</sup> whereas the good will cross the bridge with ease. In this performance Ghulâm al-Khalîl portrayed 'Abd al-Raḥmân b. 'Awf crossing the bridge on all fours, to show the difficulties and torture the wicked will face on the Day of Judgment.

On another occasion, he portrayed how God will “cast his protection around his servant on the Day of Resurrection”, by standing in a stooped posture with outstretched hands. In another performance he stood trembling with his face in his hands throughout the Qur’ân readers’ recitation.

Ibn al-Jawzî described how the popular storyteller would use mimicry to make the audience think he was undergoing a mystical experience. For example he might sit at the *minbar*, moving his upper body up and down and tapping his feet on the steps, calling out the Basmala! Another might throw himself off the *minbar* and lie trembling with his face covered.<sup>[87]</sup>

We can see from examples such as that of the Sufi, that imitation was used as early as the eighth century. Further examples from the ninth, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries show us that it continued to be an essential part of storytelling, attracting audiences and lending a mystical feeling to the performance, throughout the medieval period.

### **7.13. Other Storytellers :**

A poem written in the tenth century by Abû Dulaf, entitled *Qasîda Sasâniyya*, describes the vagabonds and beggars who made up the underworld of that time. Among these he lists an unscrupulous storyteller.<sup>[88]</sup>

One example was that of the two religious storytellers who gave performances in markets, during which each one would take an opposing viewpoint. One would represent Abû Bakr, the first caliph and give the Sunni’s viewpoint while the other would represent ‘Alî, the fourth caliph, and give the Shi’a’s viewpoint. Each



maintained his point of view to the end of the performance, after which they would each collect money from the supporters of their own side and then divide their takings between themselves.<sup>[89]</sup>

The location of these performances in the market place was ideal. As well as the people who were already in the area for shopping and trade, they also attracted people of diverse viewpoints who would not perhaps come together otherwise. For instance, the religious leader of a mosque who represented a particular sect would not welcome a storyteller who represented a different viewpoint

At times the storytellers' topics were so controversial that they caused arguments among the audience. Popular subjects were those in which the ideas of two sects were put forward in an unbiased manner. Each performance was made unique by the performers' improvisation and by spontaneous audience participation. Those performers who displayed great talent and creativity were rewarded by the enthusiasm and appreciation of their audiences.

My conclusion is that the suggestion of some Arab and Western scholars that medieval Islam had no theatre may no longer be accepted. The storytellers' central act is a performance before an audience in a given space and a given time, using actors, staging, lighting, dialogue, makeup, and imitation. The art of medieval *Hikâya* and the presence of other theatrical forms such as *Khayâl al-Zill*, *Ta'zia*, *Kurraj*, *Samâjât*, etc., persuade finally of the existence in medieval Islam of an early rich tradition of theatre.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the effort of three early Arab playwrights, who sought to produce perfect imitations of the European dramatic forms. But they failed on account of their experience in writing European drama and because of the strong influence of the old forms of Arabic entertainment on their writing and thinking. Their writing will demonstrate some influences the European forms exerted on Arabic transitional drama and how many elements of the old Arabic forms this drama nevertheless retained. This mixture of Arabic and European elements will be examined in the works of each of the three Arab pioneers.

## NOTES

### Hikâya ( Story-telling )

- 1- Ibrâhîm, 'Abdul Hamîd. *Qisas al-'Ushshâq al-Nathriyya fî al-'Asr al-Amawî*. Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1987, pp. 28-34 .
- 2- Ibid., p. 37.
- 3- Ibid., p. 62.
- 4- Dr. Muḥammad al-Ṣabbâgh considers Ibn al-Jawzî, a storyteller, writer and preacher, the most productive author of the Islamic World during the twelfth century A.D. Many of his works did not survive, but his known works are listed as more than 140 books. He wrote about history, poetry, medicine, biography, grammar and many other subjects related to medieval Islamic knowledge and life. Ibn al-Jawzî was born in Baghdâd in A.D. 1118 . At nine years of age he studied *wa'z* ( preaching ), continuing his formal training in *wa'z* until 1132, when he took the place of his teacher, Abî al-Fadl. During the reign of the Caliph al-Mustadî' (1170-1180) his career as a storyteller and preacher reached its peak. Caliph al-Mustadî' invited him to perform in his palace courtyard. After the Caliph's death, his enemies succeeded in humiliating him convincing the Caliph al-Nâsir to dismiss him from his post and to send him into exile in Wâsit. When Ibn al-Jawzî eventually returned to Baghdâd, the Caliph permitted him to preach or tell stories only on special occasions. His last performance was on the seventh of Ramadân in 1201. He died five days later at the age of eighty- nine. [ For more detail about his life, read the introduction of Ibn al-Jawzî's *Kitâb al-Qussâs wal Mudhakkirîn*, edited by Dr. Muḥammad L. al-Ṣabbâgh. Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islâmî, 1988.]
- 5- Ibn al-Jawzî. *Kitâb al-Qussâs wal-Mudhakkirîn*, edited by Dr. Muḥammad L. al-Ṣabbâgh. Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islâmî, 1988, p. 255.
- 6- Ibrâhîm, A., op. cit., p. 58.
- 7- Ibn al-Jawzî, op. cit., p. 161. Some Information in this section are taken and paraphrased from 'Alâ' Yahyâ's *Theatrical Elements in Religious Storytelling of Medieval Islamic Culture*. University of Michigan, 1986.
- 8- Ibid.
- 9- Ibn Manzûr, *Lisân al-'Arab*. Vol. 14, p. 191.
- 10- Ibn al-Jawzî, op. cit., p. 159.
- 11- Landau, J. *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*. Philadelphia: U. P. P., 1958, p. 3.

- 12- Ibn al-Jawzî, op. cit., p. 194.
- 13- Ibid., p. 176.
- 14- Ibrâhîm, A., op. cit., p. 72.
- 15- Ibn al-Jawzî, op. cit., p. 346.
- 16- al-Jâhiz, *al-Bayân wal-Tabayîn*, edited by A. Hârûn. Cairo: Maṭba‘at Lajnat al-Ta’lîf wal-Nashr, 1942, vol. 1, p. 367.
- 17- Ibn al-Jawzî, op. cit., p. 248.
- 18- al-Jâhiz, op. cit., p.367.
- 19- al-Ṭabarî, *Târîkh al-Ṭabarî*. Cairo: Dâr al-Ma‘ârif, 1960, Vol. 10, p. 54.
- 20- Ibn al-Jawzî, op. cit., p. 359.
- 21- Ibid., p. 300.
- 22- Ibid., p. 182.
- 23- Ibid., p. 359.
- 24- Ibid., p. 182.
- 25- Ibid., p. 184.
- 26- - Ibid., p. 359.
- 27- Most of the information is taken from " Minbar " in *EI*<sup>1</sup>.
- 28- Ibn al-Jawzî, op., cit., p. 295.
- 29- Ibid.
- 30- Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. R. C. Broadhurst. London: Jonathan Cape, 1952, p. 151.
- 31- Adam Mez. *Renaissance of Islam*, trans. Ṣalâh al-Dîn Khuda and D. Margoliouth. London: Luzac & Co., 1973, p. 326.
- 32- The Dînâr was a gold unit of currency in early Islam.
- 33- al-Jâhiz, Vol. 1, pp. 367-368.
- 34- Mez., op. cit., p. 326.
- 35- Ibid., p. 325.
- 36- Ibn Jubayr., op. cit., pp. 221-224.
- 37- Ibid., pp. 229-230

- 38- Description of the performance was taken from the Arabic text, Ibn Jubayr, *Rihlat Ibn Jubayr*. Beirut: Dâr Bayrût & Dâr Sâdir, 1964, pp. 195-200 and the English translation by R. Broadhurst, London: Jonathan Cape, 1952, pp. 228-234.
- 39- Arabic text, p. 195.
- 40- English trans. p. 195.
- 41- Ibid., p. 232.
- 42- Ibid., p. 233.
- 43- Ibid., pp. 233-234.
- 44- Ibn al-Jawzî, op. cit., p. 175.
- 45- Ibn al-Jawzî, *al-Latâ'if*, ed. Ahmad 'Atâ 'Abdul Qâdir. Cairo: Maktabat al-Qâhir, 1969, p.6 .
- 46- Ibn al-Jawzî, *Kitâb al-Qussâs*, p. 298.
- 47- Ibid., p. 300.
- 48- Ibn Jubayr, Arabic text, p. 194.
- 49- Ibid., p. 195.
- 50- Ibid., p. 153.
- 51- Ibid.
- 52- Ibid., p. 210.
- 53- Description of this performance was taken from the Arabic text, pp. 127-133 .
- 54- Ibn Jubayr, op. cit., p. 154.
- 55- Ibid., p. 156.
- 56- Ibid., p. 156.
- 57- Ibn al-Jawzî, *Kitâb al-Qussâs*, introduction, p. 9.
- 58- Ibid., p. 295.
- 59- Ibid., p. 260.
- 60- Bosworth, C. E. *The Medieval Islamic Underworld*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976, Vol. 1, p. 24.
- 61- Ibn al-Jawzî, op. cit., p. 296.
- 62- Ibid., p. 297.
- 63- Ibid., p. 295.
- 64- Ibid., p. 325.

- 65- Ibid., p. 327.
- 66- Ibid.
- 67- Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-Farîd*. Edited by: Amîn, al-Ibyârî & Hârûn.  
Cairo: Maṭba‘at Lajnat al-Ta’lîf wal-Nashr, 1949, Vol. 6, pp. 152- 154.
- 68- Ibid., p. 152.
- 69- Ibid.
- 70- Moreh, S., *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arabic World*. Edinburgh: E. U. P., 1992, pp. 92-93.
- 71- Ibid., p. 92.
- 72- Ibid.
- 73- Ibid.
- 74- Ibid.
- 75- Ibid.
- 76- Ibid.
- 77- Ibid.
- 78- Ibid., pp. 92-93.
- 79- Ibid., p. 93.
- 80- Ibid.
- 81- Ibid.
- 82- Ibid.
- 83- Ibn al-Jawzî, *al-Qussâs*, pp. 269- 297.
- 84- Ibid., p. 297.
- 85- Ibid.
- 86- Ibid., p. 296.
- 87- Ibid.
- 88- Bosworth, op. cit., pp. 48-49.
- 89- Ibid., pp. 199-200.

## Chapter Eight : MODERN ROOTS OF ARABIC THEATRE

### 8.1. Introduction :

In previous chapters we drew a distinction between 'theatrical' and 'dramatic' and saw how the old Arabic forms of entertainment were characterised by certain theatrical elements such as narration, improvisation, audience participation, broad satire, balance between serious and comic material, songs, and instrumental music. However, certain theatrical elements existed in the old forms, which were characteristically European, and considered to be the primary components of European conventional theatre. These included mimicry, coherent plot, developed characters portrayed by professional actors and dialogue. It is essential in European drama for a good play to contain a coherent, meaningful plot, with characters who are capable of complex development. Instead of a narrator standing on stage before the audience, the plot and movement of the characters are designed to be performed by actors and actresses. It is important to remember that certain theatrical innovations, such as human actors and actresses, dialogue, scenery, and stage sets, despite being commonplace in European theatre, were rarely found in Arabic culture. This means that when European theatrical form was first adapted by Arab dramatists, only the broadest outlines of Western theatrical aspects were adapted and presented to the Middle Eastern audience. At the end of the nineteenth century Arab playwrights tended to concentrate more on the simple elements of European 'drama', and only rarely did they concern themselves with the more complex elements such as unified plot and round characters. As a result, plays

written by the early Arab playwrights contain certain elements of European theatrical forms, but these exist only in a simple form.

Unfortunately, the trends toward Europeanisation in Egypt and Syria were so strong that the rudimentary forms were overwhelmed and suppressed by European theatre. It is therefore not a coincidence that all of the pioneers of Arabic conventional theatre tried to produce 'perfect' imitations of European forms. The fact that these early playwrights did not accomplish this aim is commonly described as a failure by many critics, but it is my contention that the difficulty that the early dramatists had in producing "perfect" European imitations is testimony to the power of the old forms to dominate the thinking and activity of these playwrights. Their writings will demonstrate some influences the European forms exerted on Arabic transitional theatre and how many elements of the old Arabic forms this theatre nevertheless retained. This mixture of Arabic and European elements will be examined in some works of the three pioneers.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, communication between the Arab world and the West developed as a result of military expeditions, colonisation, missionary work, etc. Some Arab leaders and educated people believed that the wholesale importation of what they considered to be an advanced civilisation, was essential if they were to progress from the backward state in which they existed under Turkish rule.

Included in this European civilisation was the theatre, which was first adapted by a young amateur poet, musician and singer from Beirut. Mârûn al-Naqqâsh (1817-1855)



was an educated Arab who in 1847, together with some members of his family, performed his first Arabic play, *al-Bakhîl* (The Miser), in his garden in Beirut. *Al-Bakhîl* was written in the style of a European play by al-Naqqâsh, who also performed in and directed it.<sup>[1]</sup>

It was not an easy task to adapt European theatre for the Arab audience as we can see from the difficulties faced by the first three Arab theatrical pioneers, Mârûn al-Naqqâsh, Abû Khalîl al-Qabbânî and Ya'qûb Sannû'. The three were regarded with contempt by the authorities, religious fanatics and even the ordinary theatre-goer, before eventually gaining recognition in their field.

The brother of the Christian merchant of Beirut, Mârûn al-Naqqâsh, has described how he failed in his attempts to amuse his audience. When he died without having achieved his aim, he declared in his will that his new-born theatre should be converted into a church.<sup>[2]</sup>

Abû Khalîl al-Qabbânî (1830-1902), a Muslim steelyard worker from Damascus established his own theatre in about 1865, but was forced to close it on the orders of Sultan 'Abd al-Hamîd.<sup>[3]</sup>

Ya'qûb Sannû' (1839-1902) a Jewish teacher from Cairo, established his theatre in 1870, but he too had to close it after only two years on the Khedive's orders.<sup>[4]</sup>

Despite all their efforts to overcome the difficulties they encountered, they continue to receive criticism from some modern Arab critics. Al-Naqqâsh, for example, has been criticised for trying to cultivate the European theatre, and also for basing his theatrical

writings on nineteenth-century Italian opera. However, the only similarity between his writing and Italian opera was the inclusion of music and songs in his work. Al-Naqqâsh, in his ignorance of Italian opera included pieces of Arab popular music in his scenes<sup>[5]</sup> without any thought of whether or not they were relevant to the theatrical events being portrayed. He based his choice of the Italian opera form on his own taste for it, believing that his audience would also like it. <sup>[6]</sup>

In fact, these three pioneers sought to produce perfect imitation of the European theatrical forms, but they failed on account of their inexperience in writing European 'drama' and because of the strong influence of the old forms of Arabic entertainment on their writing and thinking.

## **8.2. The Lebanese Theatre (1847-1900) :**

From the beginning of the nineteenth century several American and French religious missions worked in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, educating younger, mostly Christian people. These schools would produce an annual theatrical performance.

The need to expand and improve the Muslim education system was recognised by Ibrâhîm Pâsha, who conquered the region in 1834. Efforts were begun to revive Arabic literature, aided by the appearance of the printing press, together with the continuing rise of Arab nationalism.<sup>[7]</sup> Many younger Arabs became aware of the necessity of an Arab awakening which would bring them up to date with European civilisation, through their contact with Europeans.

One of these young Arabs, Mârûn al-Naqqâsh, took the brave step of introducing European theatre, together with his own style of play writing, as his contribution to the Arab literary revival. This was also an attempt to introduce a new literary genre into Arabic literature.

### **8.2.1. Mârûn al-Naqqâsh (1817-1855) :**

The Lebanese merchant, Mârûn al-Naqqâsh, is considered by all sources<sup>[8]</sup> to be the first Arab to import European conventional theatre to the Arab world. We have already seen how serious educational efforts were made in the Syrian region which included Lebanon at that time, both by Christian missionaries from America and France and by the governor, Ibrâhîm Pâsha. As a merchant, al-Naqqâsh traveled to several countries and it was during his travels to Italy that he saw the Italian theatre which impressed him so much that he decided to transmit theatre and opera to his country.<sup>[9]</sup> When he returned to Beirut in 1847, he began writing his first play, *al-Bakhîl*. He followed this with two more plays, *Hârûn al-Rashîd* and *al-Salîl al-Hasûd*. The three plays were published in Beirut in 1869,<sup>[10]</sup> under the title of *Arzat Lubnân* (Cedar of Lebanon). Al-Naqqâsh was well educated and well-versed in French, Italian and Turkish as well as Arabic<sup>[11]</sup> He may have received his theatrical education from missionary performances, his travels to Italy and his knowledge of some Italian and French plays, in particular those of Molière.<sup>[12]</sup> As well as being an admirer of Italian opera and attempting to transmit it to his country, Al-Naqqâsh was also influenced by the comedies of Molière which he translated into musical comedies, without paying much attention to literal translation. Some scholars have accepted these loose translations as necessary in order to assist his audience to accept this new European

art.<sup>[13]</sup> His followers did not translate operas into Arabic prose plays either. The reason for this could be that opera was connected with European music and at that time Arabs were not familiar with western music. As it was not to their taste they did not attend its performances.<sup>[14]</sup>

#### **8.2.1.1. His Plays:**

For Mârûn al-Naqqâsh, theatre was not only entertainment, it was also a means of education. He saw the main purposes of theatre as refining and educating people while also entertaining them.<sup>[15]</sup> His dramatic writing was also influenced by the old Arabic forms, with great emphasis placed on maintaining the balance between the comic and the serious elements in his plays. al-Naqqâsh's method of incorporating songs and instrumental music into his plays came about as a result of the influence of old forms and the audience's desire for music. The literary revival which was taking place at the time in the Syrian region caused him to attempt to write his plays in literary Arabic.

At the end of 1847, Mârûn al-Naqqâsh performed his first play, *al-Bakhîl* in his house. This play is clearly influenced by Molière's *L'Avare*<sup>[16]</sup> in both its form and its theme. This should not, however, detract from the credit due to al-Naqqâsh for his awareness in writing his play, of his audience's taste and cultural background. Molière's play was probably not the only source which al-Naqqâsh drew upon for the idea of writing about avarice. Other sources, such as *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* (*Book of Misers*), written by al-Jâhiz who died in about 869 AD could also have provided ideas for his play.

In 1849 Mârûn al-Naqqâsh presented his second play, *Abu'l Hasan al-Mughaffal*. His house was converted into an improvised theatre and foreigners and locals were invited to make up the audience. This play is based on an anecdote from the *Arabian Nights* (135<sup>th</sup> Night).<sup>[17]</sup>

#### 8.2.1.2. The Influence of The Old Forms :

*Al-Bakhîl* was written in literary Arabic verse and some prose. It is likely that al-Naqqâsh wrote his plays in verse, which was the most respected form of writing, so as to cater to the audience's taste as well as to earn the same kind of esteem for theatre as was afforded to poetry. This cultural influence on Naqqâsh's dramatic writing suggests his awareness of his audience's taste. However, he was unable to sustain a high standard of verse and prose throughout the entire play, which caused his style to suffer. In the fourth act the language, which is entirely colloquial Lebanese, is difficult to understand. In the fifth act the colloquial Lebanese is mixed with Turkish.<sup>[18]</sup> Instructions are given, regarding the singing, at the end of the play. The *du'â'* for the Sultan appears in the middle of the first act.<sup>[19]</sup> Where classical Arabic is spoken, the style of the *maqâma* is preserved.

The language of *Abu'l Hasan al-Mughaffal* is mostly classical, with Abu'l Hasan using "a most colourful language which still sounds comical today."<sup>[20]</sup> Many changes were made by al-Naqqâsh in the original story, both to render it suitable for a theatrical presentation and in order that it should conform to European theatrical standard. The original story of *Abu'l Hasan al-Mughaffal*, therefore, contributes little to al-Naqqâsh's work except a thin thread of its theme and the names of Abu'l Hasan and

the Caliph. New form and new content have been supplied by al-Naqqâsh to provide us with almost a new story whose nucleus was derived from that origin.

However, he was still able to cater for his audience's taste. The original story in *The Arabian Nights* was written in colloquial Arabic, but al-Naqqâsh changed the style to a more literary, rhymed prose, in a further attempt to conform to the literary revival taking place at that time. He also included lyrics to be accompanied by instrumental music. He also utilized the chorus to increase the number of songs throughout the play, whether the song suited the subjects of the play or not. The most important element, in his view, was to satisfy his audience.

Like his earlier plays, al-Naqqâsh's third and final play *al-Hasûd al-Salîl* also contains instrumental music and songs. The language in this play is however simpler and he has concentrated more on reproducing realistic scenes and characters. <sup>[21]</sup>

Al-Naqqâsh's plays are significant for many reasons. First, they attracted the attention of the Arabs to European theatre; Arab scholars really introduced European drama and theatre into the Arab world. Second, they inspired Arab scholars to emulate western drama by writing original plays. Third, al-Naqqâsh opened the door to assimilating European dramatic techniques, specially French, in Arabic.

### **8.2.2. Lebanese Theatre after M. Al-Naqqâsh:**

Al-Naqqâsh's untimely death in 1855 could have had dire consequences for his newborn theatre. However, between 1847 and 1855 he had succeeded in cultivating, in his followers, a love for the theatre. After his death they continued to spread his

message, beginning in Beirut and Damascus, and continuing in Cairo and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Niqûlâ al-Naqqâsh (1825-1894), brother of Mârûn, expounded his own understanding of the theatrical art and acting, as he had seen it in Italian theatre, in *Arzat Lubnân*. Together with his son, he presented one of Mârûn al-Naqqâsh's plays on the anniversary of the latter's birthday. The first troupe of actors to travel from Lebanon to Egypt to perform on the opera stage in the nineteenth century was formed by al-Naqqâsh's nephew, Salîm Khalîl al-Naqqâsh. As well as continuing his uncle's work in Beirut, he also played a prominent part in establishing the theatre in Egypt.<sup>[22]</sup> A lengthy article written by him on the subject of the European theatre and its message, together with a brief review of its history, appeared in the magazine *al-Jinân* (Beirut). He ended his article with an announcement of an agreement he had secured from the Egyptian authorities, allowing him to perform his theatrical productions on the opera stage.<sup>[23]</sup> In Egypt, Salîm Khalîl al-Naqqâsh's acting group branched out to form several other groups, including those of Yûsuf al-Khayyât, Sulaymân al-Qardâhî and Iskandar Farah. The majority of Egyptian dramatists over the last three decades of the nineteenth century were from Syria and Lebanon.

Meanwhile, performances continued to be given by the educational theatre in Lebanon. Arab history and religious books provided the basis for most of their plays. As well as the scholastic theatre, there also existed theatres of local societies and clubs, and individual performances.<sup>[24]</sup> The Turkish authorities, seeing how active the theatres in Lebanon had become, took the precautionary step of issuing a decree that obliged

citizens of the region only to present plays which had been sent to Turkey to be passed by the censor.<sup>[25]</sup> A new acting society, *Jam‘iyyat Ihyâ’ al-Tamthîl al-‘Arabî* (The Association for the Revival of Arabic Acting), was formed, following the announcement of the Ottoman constitution in 1908.<sup>[26]</sup>

Syrian actors and dramatists had a great influence when they went to Egypt to practise their art and to take part in the development of the Arabic theatre.

### **8.2.3. Abû Khalîl Ahmad Al-Qabbânî (1835-1902):**

At the beginning of al-Qabbânî’s theatrical career, which commenced in Damascus in 1865,<sup>[27]</sup> he was supported and funded by Midhat Pâsha, who was governor of the region in 1878-1879.<sup>[28]</sup> Al-Qabbânî was frustrated by the conservative people of Syria because they had a bad image about theatrical activities (this art was associated with debauchery, wine, etc.). They branded the theatre itself <sup>[29]</sup> as a heresy and complained to the authorities in Istanbul. This resulted in Qabbânî’s theatre being closed, and then Qabbânî left his home for Alexandria in 1884.<sup>[30]</sup>

Al-Qabbânî played musical instruments and sang for a hobby as a young man. These were both important elements of conventional Arabic theatre. He was well-read in popular literature, in particular *The Arabian Nights*, and employed his vast knowledge of Arabic literature and folklore, together with his musical skills and his talent for writing verse and rhymed prose, in order to commence his career in the theatre. Several factors influenced his playwriting, including: European conventional drama, the



old forms of Arabic entertainment and his wish to cater for the tastes of his audience. He presented his first play, *Nâkir al-Jamîl* in 1865.<sup>[31]</sup>

#### **8.2.3.1. The Influence of The Old Forms :**

As with al-Qabbânî's other plays, *Nâkir al-Jamîl*<sup>[32]</sup> was written in literary Arabic verse and rhymed prose, which perhaps indicates that al-Qabbânî was influenced by Mârûn al-Naqqâsh. It is also an indication of the general literary revival which existed in the Syrian region. Furthermore, the *maqâma*, which also placed emphasis on verbal complexity, had clearly influenced al-Qabbânî. Al-Qabbânî is considered the only Arab playwright to derive the majority of his themes from the old popular tradition. Three plots for his plays were taken from *Arabian Nights* and another play was taken from *Sîrat 'Antara*.

Al-Qabbânî also included in his play some irrelevant lyrics, performed to the accompaniment of instrumental music, in order to please his audience. He also introduced a Syrian folk dance (*al-Samâh*) into Arabic conventional theatre, as dancing was a part of any public or private festival. This consisted of a form of rhythmic, or group dancing.<sup>[33]</sup>

His choice of story and the themes dealt with in the story were probably influenced by his wish to use theatre as a means of teaching moral lessons to the Arab public. This play, some of whose scenes consist of lengthy discussions of moral issues, is packed with interesting advice.

Despite his interest in writing European-style plays, al-Qabbânî's desire to satisfy his audience meant he had to include elements of the old forms in his plays. For this reason he used literary Arabic verse and prose in the literary style of the *maqâma*. In addition to this, he focused on the benefits of theatre as a means of educating the public. He also included songs, music, and rhythmic dancing in his plays. Al-Qabbânî successfully imitated European conventional drama in his construction of a coherent plot, although he was not so successful in developing round characters.

Al-Qabbânî was the first Muslim to form his own troupe. Unlike his contemporaries, as a playwright he did not have to rely on the works of others, and at a time when most plays were adaptations and translations of foreign plays, he based his plays on *The Arabian Nights* and other folk tales. This is probably because he did not speak a foreign language and the stories of *The Nights* were easily accessible for him to use for his theatrical adaptations. His themes and plots, like those of *The Nights*, were kept simple, and his characters were rather flat. Al-Qabbânî was attracted by the story-lines of these tales, and felt they would appeal to his audience. He was more faithful to the original stories than al-Naqqâsh. Thus al-Qabbânî was criticised by Najm<sup>[34]</sup> for his obligation to the plot of the original story, and because his intention was directed towards rendering the original story, with exaggeration, using this as an excuse to present a number of lyrical pieces and popular dances. On the contrary, al-Qabbânî's theatre was very successful.

His play *Hârûn al-Rashîd*, for example, is written in theatrical form but the style of its prosy dialogue inclines to that of storytelling rather than to the 'dramatic' style. It is

not surprising that al-Qabbânî wrote it in this way for he was better acquainted with the literary and popular tradition, and might have been more attached to the art of storytelling than to the new theatrical art. He may have perceived the form of the modern Arab theatre as only a new artistic way of embodying a story by more than one storyteller, as well as a new artistic way to introduce his vocal gifts. His adaptation of the original story of *Hârûn al-Rashîd* is obviously made in line with this concept.

Al-Qabbânî founded Arabic musical theatre in Syria and later in Egypt. In his plays he highlighted the balance between the serious and the comic, and also dance. In Al-Qabbânî's works acting took second place to singing, dancing, poetry and recitation. <sup>[35]</sup> His success was limited in Egypt, in particular in the big cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. He often toured the provinces and when he stopped working in Egypt he went to Syria, where he died in 1902. <sup>[36]</sup>

### **8.3. The Egyptian Theatre (1876-1900):**

The French theatre first appeared in Egypt towards the end of the eighteenth century. At that time, however, the public already showed a preference for the local popular entertainment. They were also unfamiliar with the language of the plays, and their performances were only attended by the Egyptian elite, French soldiers, and other foreigners. As a result, the French theatre was unable to make an impression in Egypt. <sup>[37]</sup> Those Egyptian spectators who did attend, did so for one of two reasons: they saw it as a modern convention which they wished to imitate, or as a courtesy. <sup>[38]</sup> In general the Egyptian public did not visit these foreign theatres because, in Landau's words, "they did not understand them and anyhow, they did not appeal to them". <sup>[39]</sup>

Following the French expedition, communication between Egypt and Europe increased and, as a result, new political and social ideas developed which exerted a strong influence upon Arabic literature during the nineteenth century. On the completion of his studies in Paris, Rifā‘ah al-Tahtāwī (1801-1873) returned to Egypt in 1831, taking with him new ideas concerning the content and nature of French society. Revolting against the old inherited Arab customs, he called for the values represented by those conventions to be reconsidered. As a result, a new intellectual movement was established and the theatre developed into one of the most influential forces of the time, which helped to persuade the public to accept foreign arts. <sup>[40]</sup>

As a result of al-Tahtāwī's intellectual revolution, which had an effect on political, social and educational issues, the School of Languages and Translation in contemporary Egypt was established. It influenced the direction of intellectual movements for almost a century, until after the Second World War. We can see the effects of its influence on the likes of Sannū‘, Qâsim Amîn, Tâhâ Husayn, al-‘Aqqâd and al-Hakîm. <sup>[41]</sup> There is no doubt then, that the way had already been prepared for Arabic literature to accept the new art before the appearance of modern Lebanese and Syrian Arabic theatre, during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. <sup>[42]</sup>

The Khedive Ismâ‘îl tended to imitate the West which had made the theatre popular. Foreign troupes performed for the Italian and French population of Alexandria and Cairo. French and Italian troupes performed on the opera stage and in public and private theatrical halls. The majority of Molière's masterpieces were performed at the *Comédie Française*, in a theatre of the same name, which was built in 1868. *Masrah*

*Qasr al-Nil* (The Theatre of The Nile Palace) was where the first Egyptian dramatist, Sannû' presented his theatrical productions. These two theatres were built specifically for the Khedive Ismâ'îl. These foreign performances attracted the attention of the Egyptian Jew, Ya'qûb Sannû', inspiring him to form his al-Firqa al-Kûmîdiya (The Comedy Troupe). He established it during 1869-1870 and it continued for two years, during which time it presented some thirty-two different plays. <sup>[43]</sup>

### 8.3.1. Ya'qûb Sannû' (1839-1912) :

Ya'qûb bin Sannû''s early education in Egypt was in Hebrew and Arabic. As a teenager he spent three years studying in Italy. He also studied French, Italian and English. In addition to this he studied European dramatists including Goldoni, Molière and Sheridan in their native languages before establishing his theatrical group. Three of his plays which were written in Italian were produced in Genoa and elsewhere. <sup>[44]</sup> When in Cairo he would attend performances given by two Italian and French troupes. He also made a name for himself as a teacher and a journalist.

Towards the end of 1869 Sannû' penned his first one-act musical play. Like al-Naqqâsh, he included a number of popular Arab songs and melodies in the play. He took ten clever boys from his students, taught them the basics of acting, and sent the manuscript of his play to the master of ceremonies of Khedive Ismâ'îl. Initially he was able to win the confidence of the Khedive, but this did not last more than two years. In 1872 his theatre was closed and this was followed by his exile to France as a result of his political activity against the Khedive. <sup>[45]</sup>

Sannû's place as one of the three pioneers of the modern Arabic theatre is important, not only because he helped pave the way for the Egyptians to accept this new art, but also because he was the first to highlight and criticise political and social problems of the day, and take part in the struggle for modernisation in Egyptian life, by means of the theatre. He used the Egyptian dialect, rather than classical Arabic, in his dialogues, in order to make his works accessible for the general public.<sup>[46]</sup> Up until then classical Arabic had been the traditional language of the Arabic theatre. In form and wording his writing is similar to that of al-Naqqâsh. The influence of Molière and certain Italian dramatists can be seen in the work of both men. Both used the European comic form and they both included music and songs in their plays.

#### **8.3.1.1. The Influence of The Old Forms :**

Al-Naqqâsh concentrated on creating an Arabic literary tradition, whereas Sannû's work was similar to the Egyptian *Khayâl al-Zill* tradition in his use of theatre to highlight the social problems of society. He used theatre to portray real-life situations found in the society, in his bravely satirical and comic style.

In his plays, Sannû' utilises as many elements of the old forms as he does European forms. One aspect of his plays is satire, which was a common element in European drama and also the only medium used by *Karagûz* and by *Khayâl al-Zill*. Although his plays displayed coherent plots, Sannû' also permitted a certain amount of improvisation in his performance in response to his audience's reaction. From his memoirs we see that his plays were filled with songs which usually bore no relation to

the plot. The audiences of the time expected music to be included in a production and for this reason popular Egyptian melodies were included in the plays.<sup>[47]</sup>

Audiences were used to participating in the actions of *Karagûz*, *Khayâl al-Zill* and *Hikâya*, and expected to do so at Sannû''s plays. He allowed this participation and valued the audiences' comments. It was difficult for Sannû' or his audience to resist the strong influence of the old forms. This influence could be seen throughout his plays.

Sannû''s first play was *Rastor wa Shaykh al-Balad*, the text of which was lost. However, Sannû' delivered a lecture in Paris in 1902<sup>[48]</sup> which included the plot summary and it is this summary which provides the foundation of the following discussion: A young European prince, who is not named by Sannû', bets a thousand Egyptian pounds on his being able to enter a harem in Cairo within one month. His friend, the son of an Egyptian pasha, is sure it would be impossible for anyone to gain access to such a well-guarded sanctuary and accepts the bet. The prince fails in his bid and loses the bet. Sannû''s comments on the play indicate the existence of elements of European drama and also elements of the old forms. The language of the play, for example, was colloquial rather than classical Arabic which was typically used in formal literary works. At the time, colloquial language was considered vulgar and unsuitable for formal writing. However, Sannû' observed the Egyptian audience's appreciation of the use of colloquial language in *Karagûz* and *Khayâl al-Zill*, and in attempt to emulate their success he decided to employ the same language. He also wished, by

means of his plays, to educate the public, most of whom were lacking in linguistic sophistication, and therefore considered colloquial language was more suitable.

As well as satire, the first play contained popular songs, sung to the accompaniment of instrumental music. Ṣannû' makes no attempt to hide the fact that these songs, which were probably unrelated to the subject-matter, were included in his plays because it was what the audience had become accustomed to in the old forms of entertainment. This is a clear indication of the way in which the old forms influenced Ṣannû'''s plays.<sup>[49]</sup>

Ṣannû'''s use of narration, of the kind found in *Hikâya*, is another indication of the influence of the old forms on his first play. The narrator is also a character in the play, acting as a liaison between the European prince and the "beautiful lady". As well as informing the audience of whatever action is taking place off-stage, she also entertains the audience during scene changes by telling jokes. Improvisation and audience participation were permitted by Ṣannû', even to the extent of sometimes changing the ending of his plays in accordance with his audience's demands. This was the case, for example, with *al-Bint al-'Asriyya* (The Modern Girl).<sup>[50]</sup>

We can see then that old forms of Arabic entertainment greatly influenced Ṣannû'''s work. This can be observed in his use of colloquial language of the type used in *Karagûz* and *Khayâl al-Zill*, both for its entertaining effect and because it was accessible to the majority of the audience of that time. This influence is also apparent in the use of the character of the narrator, similar to the *Hakawâtî* in the old forms.



The unity of action in the plot is in accordance with European styles, but at the same time Egyptian songs are included.

The local play, which was created by Arab dramatists, is considered to have evolved from Sannû‘’s method of criticising society to invoke the audience’s laughter. It passed through several stages of development, including the farcical theatre, founded during the First World War. <sup>[51]</sup>

#### **8.3.1.2. Sannû‘’s Theatre :**

The Egyptian dialect was used by Sannû‘ in his theatre, in order to facilitate communication with his audience, as well as to increase the farce and to make his subjects more realistic. In some of his farcical plays obscene words were used. His actors and audience were made up only of boys and men. We are reminded of the *Muhabbazîn*’s performance, mentioned by Lane at the beginning of the century. The two differed, however, in that Sannû‘’s theatre depended upon written text, was based in a particular theatre hall, and used more accessible language, consisting of such literary forms as rhymed prose, wit and pun, and not the improvised slapstick of the *Muhabbazîn*. Local subjects were chosen by both, but the performance of the *Muhabbazîn* was more direct than that of Sannû‘. Sannû‘’s theatre can actually be seen as a refinement of *al-Muhabbazîn*’s performances.

The Egyptian Khedive Ismâ‘îl’s desire to Europeanise Egyptian life became an obsession, which caused conflict amongst educated Egyptians. Some accepted and imitated the modern behaviour in their daily life, but others held on to their Islamic principles and traditions. Some educated Arab patriots, together with some Islamic

leaders devoted their time to trying to reconciling the Arab and European civilisations. Their aim was to accept the best of European civilisation and reject anything that went against authentic Islamic principles. They wished to redeem Islam from the old medieval customs, to change the medieval mentality of the people by focusing on pure Islamic social and moral instruction. <sup>[52]</sup> Some of Sannû''s plays expressed these trends and issues, among them: *Ānisa 'alâ al-Mûda* (A Modern Girl) and *Ghandûr Masr* (The Dandy of Egypt).

In 1870, when Sannû' established his theatre, the national democratic movement was preparing for a confrontation with European colonisation on the one hand, and the Egyptian aristocracy on the other. His first two plays, mentioned above, provide a criticism of modernisation. <sup>[53]</sup> Khedive Ismâ'îl enjoyed his second play so much he gave him the title *Molière Masr* (The Molière of Egypt). However, the Khedive rebuked him for his third play *al-Darratân* (The Two Wives) and told him not to perform it again. *Al-Darratân* is a criticism of polygamy, the medieval custom practised by the Khedive and his aristocratic pashas. <sup>[54]</sup> Following his exile to France, Sannû' continued, both as a playwright and a journalist, to oppose the Khedive and his corrupt administration, together with his society's social defects. <sup>[55]</sup>

As the national democratic movement spread to the middle classes, Sannû' performed his play *al-Watan wal-Hurriyya* (The Country and Freedom), and his theatre became *al-Masrah al-Qawmî* (The National Theatre). <sup>[56]</sup> In just two years, the subjects of Sannû''s plays went from farce, to satirical social and moral plays, to political plays. This illustrates the difficult political situation which simmered under a dominant,

corrupt aristocracy, and the feelings of disquiet which existed towards foreign intrusion into local Egyptian politics. It also shows how influential the national democratic movement had become, even ten years before 'Urâbî's revolution. <sup>[57]</sup> Clearly then, Sannû's theatre successfully reflected the social and political corruption prevalent at that time.

#### **8.4. Syrian and Lebanese Troupes in Egypt:**

Several years after Sannû's theatre was closed, it was replaced in Egypt by Lebanese and Syrian dramatists and actors. In 1876, Salîm al-Naqqâsh brought his troupe of twelve actors and four actresses to Egypt. <sup>[58]</sup> Their repertoire included his uncle's three plays and some adapted French tragedies, including Racine's *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, and Corneille's *Horace*. During Christmas, 1876 they performed *Abu'l-Hasan al-Mughaffal* and *al-Hasûd al-Salîl*; this encouraged him to produce other plays and also to write his five-act drama *al-Zalûm* (The Tyrant). According to Najm, when al-Naqqâsh settled in Alexandria, he sent for his friend, Adîb Ishâq. <sup>[59]</sup> Ishâq had translated Racine's *Andromaque* for him in Beirut, but his translations of another play, *Charlemagne*, and others were, according to Landau, unable to compete on equal terms with experienced local companies. <sup>[60]</sup> Ishâq's political influence was such that he was able to persuade Salîm al-Naqqâsh to leave the troupe in the hands of the actor Yûsuf al-Khayyât, and practise their literary skills in journalism. <sup>[61]</sup>

##### **8.4.1. Yûsuf al-Khayyât :**

Yûsuf al-Khayyât realised, after his first production, that he needed a patron if he were to survive amongst experienced troupes. He requested the support of the Khedive, and

received it. He then took his troupe to Cairo in 1878, to perform on the opera stage.<sup>[62]</sup> According to Landau, it was al-Khayyât's choice of his master's play, *al-Zalûm*, which led to him losing his patron and also to him and his troupe being banished from Egypt, as the Khedive saw the play as a "reflection of his own personal rule".<sup>[63]</sup> According to Najm, however, al-Khayyât performed another play in Zizinia Theatre in Alexandria two months after having performed *al-Zalûm* on the opera stage. He claims that during 1879 and 1890 al-Khayyât continued his theatrical activity in Egypt, both in Zizinia Theatre, Alexandria, and in the Opera House.<sup>[64]</sup> He formed several troupes during this period, one of which, led by Sulaymân al-Qardâhî formed a separate group and became one of al-Khayyât's rivals, together with al-Qabbânî's troupe.<sup>[65]</sup>

#### **8.4.2. Sulaymân al-Qardâhî :**

Sulaymân al-Qardâhî left al-Khayyât's troupe in 1882, to form his own theatre.<sup>[66]</sup> This coincided with the outbreak of 'Urâbî's revolution, and was immediately followed by the occupation of Egypt by the British, and a cholera epidemic.<sup>[67]</sup> After his first appearance at the Opera House, together with the famous Egyptian singer, al-Shaykh Salâma Hijâzî (who had also been with al-Khayyât's group), nothing was heard of him until he reappeared in 1885 with a new troupe and a new singer.<sup>[68]</sup> His theatrical activities continued in Cairo and Alexandria, and he toured several Egyptian provinces during the period 1897 to 1900. During 1885 and 1888 he made two acting tours of Syria. In 1907 he went to Algeria and Tunisia, where he settled and established an Arabic theatre. He died soon after.<sup>[69]</sup>

Sulaymân al-Qardâhî introduced several actors and singers to the modern Arab theatre, who were later to become distinguished performers. These included al-Shaykh Salâma Hijâzî, al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Kassâr, Muḥammad Farîd and Aḥmad Fahîm al-Fâr.<sup>[70]</sup> He presented many adapted European plays, together with plays based on old Arab story-telling.<sup>[71]</sup>

#### 8.4.3. Iskandar Farah :

The Syrian, Iskandar Farah,<sup>[72]</sup> was a keen rival of al-Qardâhî. He went to Egypt in 1883, with Abû Khalîl al-Qabbânî, where they remained for five years, Farah as an actor and acting teacher, and al-Qabbânî writing songs and lyrical melodies. Farah then formed his own troupe, *al-Jûq al-'Arabî al-Waṭanî* (The National Arab Troupe), which for a period of eighteen years, was the most successful troupe.<sup>[73]</sup> Prior to that he had been active in Syria, where he had been ordered by Miḍhat Pâsha to establish a theatrical troupe. Having made an agreement with al-Qabbânî, he began his repertoire with a play entitled 'Âydâ. The troupe maintained the support of the *Wâlî* (ruler) until it performed *Abu'l Hasan al-Mughaffal*, after which certain religious shaykhs opposed them and managed to prevent Arabic acting in Syria.<sup>[74]</sup>

In April 1891 Farah's troupe began working in Egypt.<sup>[75]</sup> His main singer, al-Shaykh Salâma Hijâzî, was partly responsible for his success. However he left in 1905 to form his own troupe (*Jûq al-Tamthîl al-'Arabî*). Despite being able to form a new troupe, *Nahḍa Jadîda lil-Tamthîl* (A New Renaissance in Acting), Farah's success began to decline. Following the death of his chief actress, his troupe was disbanded. He formed

another troupe which continued until 1907, and yet another in 1909 which failed after two months. <sup>[76]</sup>

As well as those already mentioned, more than forty Lebanese, Syrian and Egyptian troupes existed between 1887 and 1912. <sup>[77]</sup> These troupes depended on French, Italian and English dramatic works for their repertoires. They were usually free to adapt such works, usually changing titles, names of characters, plots and details according to their purposes. For example, Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* became *Love and Friendship*; *Romeo and Juliet* became *Victims of Love*; *Midsummer Night's Dream* became *The Lover's Dream*; Corneille's *Le Cid* became *Love and Revenge*; Molière's *Tartuffe* became *al-Shaykh Matlûffe*, etc. <sup>[78]</sup> As well as adapting foreign plays, many attempts were made at Arab playwriting. Arab history and popular stories provided the material for this local writing, and sometimes Christian religious books were also used. Some plays were also based on real life situations and general history, and some were social plays. <sup>[79]</sup>

No theatre existed which criticised society of the time. The defeated middle class were in support of the melodramas of the period, which dealt with moral issues. Al-Shaykh Salâma Hijâzî, who was the best singer of the time, became hard currency to theatre owners.

### **8.5. Acting Styles in the Nineteenth Century :**

Most Egyptian actors were already used to facing audiences in other contexts, as orators, singers, reciters of the Qur'ân, imitators or jesters. They had little knowledge

of the theatre and their general education was poor which caused people to look down on them. The actor was known as *al-mishakhassâti* (the impersonator) or *al-mudahhikâti* (the jester).<sup>[80]</sup> Both words denote disrespect, and actors and entertainers in general, despite being seen as likable, were viewed as disreputable.

Such actors did not understand the art they were practising. They were unable to study the play in which they were to act as they did not have the education to do so: they could not analyse their characters' physical, social and psychological dimensions or study their actions and reactions in the plot. If they could have done so they would have been able to form a comprehensive idea concerning their roles. Even after the Dramatic Institute had been established in Cairo in the 1940s many actors continued to be ignorant of the nature of acting and its requirements.

At best, such actors could learn the obvious features of a character. For example, a ruler's character might be portrayed by boastful, arrogant behaviour, snobbery and by delivering lines in a loud voice. The role of a lover would require a more romantic, gentle approach, both in actions and delivery. Tulaymât saw such actors as being more like singers of roles than actors in the proper sense. The last word of each sentence would be stressed loudly by them and they would deliver dialogues in an affected manner, with exaggerated clarity and emphasis. It could be that this exaggeration derived from the actors' backgrounds, as reciters of the Qur'ân, singers, orators or story-tellers, jesters, farcical actors of *al-Sâmir*, etc. All were inclined to the tone of romance.<sup>[81]</sup> Performances were given in a stylised manner: before the actor delivered his lines, he would clear his throat several times, then deliver his first sentence, move

towards the audience and look at them in a strange way before repeating the first line and then going on with his speech. At the end of each verse he would pause, whether or not it was relevant to the meaning. Every sentence was accompanied with a movement and each sense had a different gesture. An actor who coordinated his speech with his hand movements, who had a loud voice, and whose movements and gestures were as varied as he could make them, was considered best. <sup>[82]</sup> This kind of primitive romantic acting was not a feature of the romantic European theatre, but was influenced by the old *râwî* of *al-Sîra* and the other more traditional entertainments.

#### **8.6. Salâma Hijâzî and the Lyric Theatre :**

The mood of the Arab audience in the first two decades of the twentieth century was receptive to the artificial melodrama of the nineteenth century. This, to a great extent, was due to the charming voice of al-Shaykh Salâma Hijâzî (1855-1917), which attracted many people to his lyric theatre from the coffee-houses.

Initially known as a reciter of the Qur'ân, Hijâzî became renowned as a vocalist who specialised in popular songs. It was through his acquaintance with Adîb Ishâq and Salîm al-Naqqâsh that he first sang on stage during the interludes of al-Khayyât's performances. He then went on to become a singer and actor in minor roles. Before long, however, he left to join al-Qardâhî's troupe in the hope of being given major roles. When it became apparent that this was not to be, he left the troupe to join that of Iskandar Farah. He remained there for eighteen years, during which time he was the best actor-vocalist of the time. <sup>[83]</sup>



He established his own theatre, *Jûq al-Shaykh Salâma Hijâzî*, in 1905. After a year he had achieved enough success to be able to provide a fully equipped theatre for his troupe. This was called *Dâr al-Tamthîl al-'Arabî* (Theatre of Arabic Acting). He was joined in his successful performances by the most respected actors and directors, including George Abyad and 'Azîz 'Îd, and by several actors from other troupes.

Hijâzî made a considerable contribution to the development of the lyric theatre. He paved the way for the development of the musical play in several ways. First he omitted the musical introductions to his popular melodies and related his songs more closely to the subjects of his plays, and made them more appropriate to dramatic situations. Secondly, he urged his educated contemporaries to write Arabic plays. His appeal resulted in three plays being written for him by Ismâ'îl 'Âsim and he took into account the preferences of his audience when composing the melodies.<sup>[84]</sup> The play *Sidq al-Ikhâ'* (True Brotherhood) by 'Âsim is considered the first truly original Egyptian play and illustrates contemporary Egyptian social and political life with actual historical events, even though it is written in social melodramatic form. According to al-Râ'î, the form of the play represents the mid-point between the Arabic *maqâma* and the European play.<sup>[85]</sup> Hijâzî's third major contribution to the development of the lyric theatre is that he presented modern Arab theatre, by means of his artistic tours, in several Arab countries, including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Tunisia. These tours clearly influenced the Arab theatrical movements in those countries.

The best entertainment was provided by the modern theatre of the time. This was due to Hijâzî's theatre and his vocal talents, which attracted and amused his audiences with their extravagant spectacle and costumes.

Some religious people were angered by his stage settings and effects, but many educated people supported him. His theatre was frequented by a number of distinguished writers, including 'Abbâs 'Allâm, Muḥammad Taymûr, Muḥammad al-Sibâ'î and Ibrâhîm Ramzî. <sup>[86]</sup>

Heroes, heroines and villains were depicted in the translated and adapted melodramas, and also in the locally romantic plays of the time. The plots were usually sensational, with crude appeals to the emotions, and bore little resemblance to real life.

This artificial melodrama appealed to contemporary audiences in several ways. At the time, audiences were under the strain of foreign military occupation as well as corruption from local authority, and were therefore in great need of spectacular entertainment, in particular that which included their favourite popular songs. On the death in 1908, of Mustafâ Kâmil, the romantic patriotic leader of the national movement, Hijâzî carried Kâmil's picture on stage and sang Aḥmad Shawqî's elegy on the deceased, immediately before a performance of his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Shuhadâ' al-Gharâm* (Victims of Love). <sup>[87]</sup>

I conclude that the influence of the old Arabic forms is discernable in the early popular plays and in the writings of the three early pioneers. It is important, as Badawî claims, "to remember those common features of popular traditional dramatic entertainments

because they seem to have influenced the imported foreign forms for many years."<sup>[88]</sup>

Song and music, remained a feature of the Arabic theatre during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, in spite of the European influence, the early Arab playwright was searching for a national theatre and an Arabic identity for his theatre. I agree with al-Hakîm<sup>[89]</sup> that the Easterner "moves in two worlds," for, while Arabs benefit from their contact with the European culture by borrowing styles and renewing methods, they still preserve their national spirit.

## NOTES

### MODERN ROOTS OF ARABIC THEATRE

- 1- For further details about Mârûn al-Naqqâsh's life and his speech at the opening of his first performance in 1847, which contains his opinions on various aspects of European theatre, see M. Y. Najm's *al-Masrahiyya fî al-Adab al-'Arabî al-Hadîth (1874-1914)*. Beirut: Dâr Bayrût lil-Tibâ'a wal-Nashr, 1956, pp. 31-34.
- 2- Ibid., p. 30.
- 3- Ibid., p. 68.
- 4- Ibid., p. 91.
- 5- Landau, J., Preface to *Studies in Arab Theater and Cinema*. Philadelphia : P. U. P., 1958.
- 6- Najm., op. cit., p. 34.
- 7- al-Khozai, M., *The Development of Early Arabic Drama (1847- 1900)* . London: Longman, 1984, p. 32.
- 8- There are many books and studies that assure us that Mârûn al-Naqqâsh is the "inventor" of acting and modern theatre in the Arab world, such as Landau's *Studies in Arab Theater and Cinema*, Najm's *al-Masrahiyya fî al-Adab al-'Arabî al-Hadîth (1874-1914)*, al-Khozai's *The Development of Early Arabic Drama (1847- 1900)* , Badawî's *The Early Arabic Drama*, P.Sadgrove's *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century (1799-1882)*, Sha'râwî's *al-Masrah al-Misrî al-Mu'âsir*, al-Râ'î's *al-Masrah fî al-Waṭan al-'Arabî*, Pruffer's study of Arabic drama in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, and many other sources.
- 9- Najm, op. cit., p. 32.
- 10- al-Khozai, op. cit., p. 33.
- 11- Ibid., p. 32.
- 12- Ibid., p. 35.
- 13- Tulaymât, Z., *Fann al-Mumaththil al-'Arabî*. Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya lil-Ta'lîf, 1971, pp. 38-40.
- 14- Mandûr, M., *Fî al-Masrah al-Misrî al-Mu'âsir*. Cairo: Dâr Nahdat Miṣr lil-Tibâ'a wal-Nashr, 1971, p. 30.

- 15- Najm, op. cit., p. 34.
- 16- Landau, op. cit., p. 57.
- 17- Badawî, M., *Early Arabic Drama*. London: C.U.P., 1988, p. 46.
- 18- Ibid., p. 45.
- 19- Ibid.
- 20- Ibid., p. 49.
- 21- Ibid., p. 51.
- 22- See Najm, op. cit., pp. 44-48.
- 23- Ibid.
- 24- Putynceva, Tamara. *Alf 'Âm wa 'Âm 'Alâ al-Masrah al-'Arabî*. Trans. by Tawfiq al-Muadhdhin. Beirut: Dâr al-Fârâbî, 1981, pp. 120-121.
- 25- Ibid., p., 57.
- 26- Ibid.
- 27- Ibid., p. 61. Al-Khozai believes that al-Qabbânî started his career in 1871. (*Development....*) p. 80.
- 28- Putynceva, op. cit., 157-158.
- 29- al-Hajjaji, A. S., *The Origins of Arabic Theatre*. Cairo: G. E. B. O., 1981, p. 26.
- 30- Badawî, op. cit., p. 57.
- 31- Ibid.
- 32- For the plot summary of *Nâkir al-Jamîl*, see Badawî's *Early Arabic Drama*, p. 58.
- 33- al-Khozai, op. cit., p. 118.
- 34- Najm, op. cit., pp. 372-373. Some information in this section are paraphrased from H. Y. Ali's *The Arabian Nights....*
- 35- Badawî, op. cit., p. 64.
- 36- Najm, op. cit., pp. 120-121.
- 37- Landau, op. cit., p. 56, and Najm, op. cit., pp. 17-26.
- 38- Najm, op. cit., pp. 17-26.
- 39- Landau, op. cit., p. 67.

- 40- Muḥsin, Ḥasan. *al-Mu'aththirât al-Gharbiyya fî al-Masrah al-Miṣrî al-Mu'âsir*. Cairo: Dâr al-Nahḍa al-'Arabiyya, 1979, pp. 18-24.
- 41- Ibid., pp. 18-24.
- 42- Ibid.
- 43- Putynceva, op. cit., p. 148.
- 44- Landau, op. cit., p. 67.
- 45- Putynceva, op. cit., p. 149-150 and see Najm, pp. 77-91.
- 46- Sha'râwî, 'A., *al-Masrah al-Miṣrî al-Mu'âsir*. Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya lil-Kitâb, 1986, p. 57.
- 47- Ibid., pp. 83-84.
- 48- See Ṣannû's lecture in Najm's *al-Masrahiyya*.... pp. 80-81, and the plot summary of this play on p. 88.
- 49- Najm, op. cit., p. 80.
- 50- Ibid., pp. 84-85.
- 51- al-Râ'î, 'Alî, *al-Masrah fî al-Waṭan al-'Arabî*. Kuwait: al-Majlis al-Waṭanî lil-Thaqâfa wal-Funûn wal-Âdâb, 1980, p. 59.
- 52- Ismâ'îl, 'A., *Drama and Society in Contemporary Egypt*. Cairo: Dâr al-Kâtib al-'Arabî, 1967, p. 31.
- 53- Khashaba, S., *Qadâyâ Mu'âsira fî al-Masrah*. Baghdâd: Dâr al-Ḥurriyya lil-Tibâ'a, 1972, p. 10.
- 54- Badawî, op. cit., p. 33.
- 55- See Najm, op. cit., p. 93.
- 56- Khashaba, op. cit., p. 11.
- 57- Ibid.
- 58- Najm, op. cit., p. 100.
- 59- Ibid.
- 60- Landau, op. cit., p. 64.
- 61- Najm, op. cit., p. 100.
- 62- Landau, op. cit., p. 65.
- 63- Najm, op. cit., p. 104.
- 64- Ibid., pp. 103-105.

- 65- Ibid., pp. 103-107.
- 66- Ibid., p. 107.
- 67- Landau, op. cit., p. 68.
68. Najm, op. cit., pp. 107-108.
- 69- Ibid., pp. 107-112.
- 70- Ibid., p. 112.
- 71- Ibid., pp. 107-112.
- 72- Landau, op. cit., p. 69.
- 73- Ibid., p. 70.
- 74- Putynceva, op. cit., p. 158..
- 75- Ibid., 160..
- 76- Najm, op. cit., pp. 125-132.
- 77- Ibid., p. 168.
- 78- For more details see Najm, op. cit., first part.
- 79- Khashaba, op. cit., pp. 11-16.
- 80- Tulaymât, op. cit., p. 34.
- 81- Ibid., pp. 34-46.
- 82- Ibid.
- 83- Najm, op. cit., pp. 135-149.
- 84- al-Râ'î, op. cit., p. 63.
- 85- Ibid..
- 86- Ibid., p. 97.
- 87- Khashaba, op. cit., p. 15.
- 88- Badawî, op. cit., p. 29.
- 89- al- Hakîm in the introduction of his *al-Malik Ūdîb*, p.3.

## Conclusion

The assumption that theatrical forms are forbidden in Islam cannot go unchallenged. In Islam all things are permitted except that which is expressly forbidden. Therefore the fact that there is no mention of the theatre and acting in either the Qur'ân or *Sunna* (traditions of the Prophet) is an indication that neither is forbidden in Islamic culture. The only restrictions which may be placed on theatrical forms would arise if a particular form or its content were to conflict with Islamic religious values.

We began this thesis with a review of the Arab contribution to various fields of civilisation, in particular to fine arts such as poetry, prose, architecture, painting and calligraphy. We then cited the various arguments regarding the absence of the theatrical tradition in the Arab world and looked at claims that the Arabs, like the ancient Egyptians, Indians, Japanese and Chinese, etc. did have theatre in their history, which for some reason, did not develop into a national genre. We also looked at the claims that the Arabs, for various reasons, including religion, stability, lack of translation of Greek drama, did not have 'theatre'.

The main aim of this study is to demonstrate that various forms of performance, music and oral traditions have been enjoyed in the Middle East since



ancient times. These activities have reflected the artistic, intellectual, popular taste of the peoples of the region.

*Hikâya*, *Khayâl al-Zill*, *Karagûz* and *Ta'ziya* were some of the forms of public entertainment already known to the Arab world before the arrival of theatre in the Western sense in the middle of the nineteenth century. Close contact with European nations, however, brought a new sophistication to the Arabs causing them to reject the old types of entertainment, through a mistaken belief that these were vulgar and unsophisticated. They now sought forms of entertainment which would distinguish them from the lower classes. The efforts of the early dramatists, such as al-Naqqâsh, al-Qabbânî and Ṣannû', to emulate the style of European plays were unsuccessful, as the Arab audiences of that time still preferred the old types of entertainment. For this reason these dramatists included the older elements in drama, reflecting the Arabic styles of drama rather than the European, in order to satisfy their audiences. Ṣannû', for example, focused on the educational function of theatre and transmitted his moral lessons in a satirical manner, so that his audience might benefit from both the education and the entertainment that theatre has to offer. He borrowed satire and colloquial language from *Karagûz* and *Khayâl al-Zill*. He also used the kind of narration and improvisation commonly employed by the Arab narrator or *Hakâwatî*. Popular Egyptian songs often found their way into his plays even if these songs were unrelated to the subject matter.

I have concentrated on certain types of entertainment, in particular *Hikâya*, *Khayâl al-Zill* and *Ta'ziya*, which contain conventional dramatic elements. These

forms appealed both to the Arabic general public and to the educated classes across the generations. Ibn Dâniyâl's three plays are proof that *Khayâl al-Zill* was known to the medieval Arabs. They also provide an indication that certain elements of shadow plays were similar to European conventional theatre. *Khayâl al-Zill* contains the basic dramatic elements found in European conventional drama: mimicry, dialogue, characters and plot. However, its most important attribute is that it conforms to Arabic culture and taste.

*Hikâya* (storytelling) was performed before an audience and incorporated certain theatrical elements into the performances. It included dialogue, chorus and additional performers. Makeup, costume, lighting, scenery and a stage area were used in order to enhance the production. An essential part of the performance was the interaction between the performer and the audience of men, women and children. The Sufi play, which takes the form of a dialogue between the Sufi and members of the audience, also contains mimicry and also contains a plot which presents the argument of the play.

Three basic elements of the European conventional drama- plot, mimicry and characters who are represented on stage before an audience- are found in *Ta'ziya*. It also contains the element of audience participation. The chorus is another aspect of ritual drama, and is sometimes performed by the audience. Members of the audience also beat on their chests as an act of emotional cleansing.

It is clear from what we have seen of *Khayâl al-Zill*, *Ta'ziya* and *Hikâya* that in fact there did exist an early tradition of theatre in Islamic culture. This would

suggest that the roots of Arabic theatre stretch back much further than the second half of the nineteenth century. If early Arabic drama displays the formal elements of European drama, these elements were consciously forced on the plays in order to make them conform to European styles. The early Arab dramatists were deceived by the trend of Europeanisation current at that time. They did not realise that with the newly discovered idea of a theatre as a public presentation combined with knowledge of the old Arabic forms these playwrights could have developed an authentic Arabic drama. But the trend toward Europeanisation was stronger than they or than succeeding dramatists could resist.

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