

Islam, Modernity, Theatre Ambivalent Tensions in the Muslim World

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Abstract

This article seeks to revisit, perchance re-ignite, the debate around the nature of both Islam and modernity, as well as the role theatre played in disseminating Modernist discourses in contemporary Muslim cultures. In the Muslim World, the debate is locked in a time warp or at best stimulated by secular paradigms that do not seem to budge despite their unruly discordancy with Islamic views of life at a time when Islam seems to be strongly making a comeback to the world arena. The question why and how Muslim cultures embraced theatre and modernity is competing indeed; yet the debate it prompted is misplaced and unguarded, and in some respects misplacing, if not totally misguiding. To remove this misleading misplacement and give the debate a new (im)pulse, the article deems it needful to revisit Constantine the Great's and Darwin's modernist project. Seen from the Islamic perspective, modernity comes out as a *jahili* way of life brought to contemporary Muslim cultures by theatrical emissaries from the White World, which has bilged and infected the Muslim World with a strange existential duality. Thanks to these emissaries, which convinced their avid-for-reform-and-modernity victims of the need to climb on the bandwagon of modernity, this world is now Muslim in the heart and the mosque and secular in life and conduct, which is not only schizophrenic and psychosistic, but also absurd and futilitarian.

Keywords: Islam, christianity, theatre, modernity, tension, culture

1. Introduction

Whoever has had the chance of becoming acquainted with the mental condition of the intelligentsia in the countries stretching from North Africa all the way to South Asia could have possibly observed that there is a great distaste for invoking Islamic thought in the debate around Arab-Muslim theatre. It was the politic and therefore the apropos course to refrain from all reference to this thought and to keep it as far as possible fading into the background. Indeed, the idea of invoking such a thought in such a debate has been treated in modern Arab-Muslim cultures with contempt and derision simply because the spirit of Islam no longer inspires the policy of Arab states. Yet what is amusing is that this derision is still taking place at a time when military fervor in behalf of faith is now tangible everywhere on the planet.

This article therefore seeks not only to disturb the tranquility of modernity minded Arab-Muslim theatre scholarship, which is now breaking down under the weight of its own inconsistencies, but also to present an Islamic reading of such a timely issue. It is timely because we live in the daybreak of an Arab Spring which has come to announce that we have indeed come to the brink of a great intellectual change embodied in the toppling of the ruling regimes in the Muslim World, which are vested with such positions only to protect the Renaissance order of things and guard the Enlightenment temple, which is the bequest of nineteenth-century colonial Europe to the Arab World. Though apparently killed in its infancy by Western superpowers that are in control of the political cords in the Arab World, the spell of the Arab Spring is still in effect, signaling the return of Islam to the global arena to once again fulfill its mammoth political undertaking. The Arab Spring is a clear rejection of European modernity, which was imposed by force and varnished with 'scientific' propaganda to hopefully seduce followers from Arab-Muslim territories stretching from North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula and others from Asia and beyond. Embodied in its dodgy endeavors of removing democratically elected 'Islamic' governments and establishing modernity oriented ones in their stead, as well as re-establishing others on the debris of Arab Spring newly-formed governments that came to life thanks to the revolutionary spirit of the era, not to forget the hostile act of providing partisans of western projects in conflict zones with heavy war machinery to silence 'religious haters' of the West once and for all, the western rejection of the latter (the Arab Spring) has now turned into a direct clash with Islamic thought as to 'who' is entitled to be in line to the throne in Muslim territories. Given its current weighty historical significance, Islamic thought cannot therefore be smothered by derision, vituperation, or by force. Eliminating it from the ongoing discussion of Arab-Muslim theatre under the pretext that it is 'a mediaeval idea of existence which does not fit into the patterns of the modern world,' or that it is too 'ugly' to be allowed a place on the proscenium arch of today's 'friendly' civilizations is without rhyme or

reason. By looking at the subject matter from the Islamic perspective, this article, adopting a qualitative method, aims to provide a diligent reading of the relationship between Islam, modernity and theatre, as well as the gigantic challenges modernity has created in the Muslim World. In other words, the article seeks to show the role of theatre in spreading the cultures of modernity in Muslim territories. Thus, an elucidation of the historical context in which modernity first appeared is offered. This elucidation is very important because it helps us understand the nature of both modernity and Islam, which scholars, be they Muslim or non-Muslim, fail to grasp due to the gravity of the multiple junctures that characterize the development of human modern epistemic systems. It is in the spirit of elucidating the relationship between Islam and modernity, as well as the role theatre plays in dismantling religion (Christianity and Islam) that this article is compiled.

2. Islam and Modernity

The Helleni(sti)c Period is the venerated sweetheart of modern Europe, while the Mediaeval Period is its horrendous incubus beyond all question. The Hellenic as well as Hellenistic defiance of god¹ adumbrated in the Legend of Prometheus marked the entire revered period, while the mediaeval submission to voracious ecclesiastical gods outlined in churchly indulgences, manorialism and feudalism marked the other. In the fifteenth century, Europe arranged a number of extensive overseas explorations inspired by its invincible desire to amass a huge fortune from far-flung continents and ship it home. This gave it the privilege of building schools and universities at home, where the surge of interest in Classical knowledge and values that marked its Renaissance period were and still are highly encouraged. Yet with the coming of Charles Robert Darwin (1809-1882), who is now elevated to the status of an infallible prophet and who rang the bell of the gigantic events in the humanities that took place right after he had scoffed at medieval ecclesiastical legacy, thus following in the footsteps of those who had defended the ideals of the French Revolution before him, and also the coming of the Industrial Revolution, which, in turn, prompted a big social, cultural and political upheaval in Europe, the latter (Europe) 'had to' align with the new deliverer and found itself 'forced' to let go of whatsoever de trop remnants of its ecclesiastical religion, which nevertheless was still influencing, though slightly, European social cultures owing to its attachment to such cultures that lasted long ten centuries. It was from this historical womb that the European child of modernity was delivered. It suckled the breast of Evolution, nursed in its bosom and grew up in the cradle of disbelief.

In their attempt to expound the question of modernity in Arab-Muslim theatres/cultures, scholars from the Arab-Muslim World tend to bypass this glistening historical fact. This unconscious attempt not only does Europe the favor of justifying its (neo)-colonial project and 'civilizing mission' through native tongues, but also grants it a golden opportunity of an easy escape from the charge of "denying its own vision of Man" (Kaiwar, 2014, p. 160). These scholars approach the question of modernity in their cultures of performance from a post-colonial perspective of Subaltern Studies; a critical tendency which is at heart bewitched by the Enlightenment atheistic view of existence. It sells itself to the inspirations of such a view and finds itself unable to exorbitate from it. Defenders of this view unconsciously move within the intellectual framework of European modernity sketched for them by Europe's finest brains of Evolution, which boasts its 'destructive character' as theorized by Walter Benjamin and others sharing the same philosophy such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, George Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche, to name but a few.² Borrowing their knowledge from Darwin's theory of Man clearly outlined in Julian Huxley's *Man Stands Alone* and *Man in the Modern World*, these 'scientists' seem to have drawn the picture of a humanity battling against internal and external forces and set it on a track where nothing is fixed or static. Each from his own specialty has contributed to the spread of Evolution in the humanities and tinged it with the attribute of 'science'; a headlong endeavor that enjoins us now to have recourse to the American physicist Percy Williams Bridgeman's theory of meaning³ in order to scientifically redefine the concept of science, though callers of modernity in the States and elsewhere have recklessly declared Operationalism defunct, especially in psychology and philosophy. We also need to go back to level-minded scholarship⁴ on Man to direct attention to the blunders that inform and provide fodder for modern thought in various directions, including proscenium arch stages upon which Man behaves like Darwin's

¹ In reference to this fact, John W. Draper says that: "In the East, gods descended from heaven, and were made incarnate in men; in the West, men ascended from earth, and took their seat among the gods." (2009, pp. 35).

² See for example David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (The MIT Press: Cambridge University Press, Massachusetts, 1986)

³ See Percy Williams Bridgeman, *The Logic of Modern Physics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927)

⁴ See for example Alexis Carrel, *Man, the Unknown* (Harper & Brothers, 1939)

invented creature with no God⁵ or static morals. It is these blunders that cast ridicule on the origin of Man and more than that scrap the foundations of faith.

Before Christianity gave the throne of the Caesars to Constantine the Great (272 AD-337 AD), the Roman Empire was divided between the followers of Christ and the epicurean pagans who were in control of its government. By means of military force, which was the only maxim of the lustful Roman emperors, internal conformity was to be maintained at all costs. However, the events that marked the years 302 and 303 AD, and which manifested themselves in the refusal of the Christian soldiers “to join in the time-honored solemnities for propitiating the gods” (Draper, 2009, p. 38) of the pagans, had enkindled the spark of a great intellectual change that characterized the entire European Middle Period, which, as all turning moments in human history, had to start with “an infuriated civil commotion.”⁶ As events marched rapidly along, and as they tilted in favor of the rising new political tendency, Emperor Diocletian finally sensed the pincers around his neck and had to abdicate the Roman throne to Constantine the Great in 305 A.D, who turned the clock back by paganizing Christianity which really threw a spanner in the works. According to Draper, Christianity fell victim to paganization when it allowed pagan principles to interweave with its ‘monotheistic’ doctrine. Thus, even if we assume that by the time Constantine had ascended the throne of Rome Christianity was still pure and monotheistic, the alterations that had befallen it due to his act of mixing between the two religious dogmas make it difficult for us not to pass any remonstrances against its ‘pure monotheistic’ spirit, for the truth is that this spirit had already undergone serious alterations that wrenched and befouled its monotheism.⁷ Unlike Islam, which completely annihilated its antagonistic rival of paganism, Christianity was unable in the absence of Jesus to spread its own principles without adulteration even in its early days. What Constantine did was to kill the political spirit of Christianity, which was really a thorn in the flesh of the Roman Empire. This was his remarkable stratagem to keep his rising empire from anarchy and to win pagan hearts as well (Draper, 2009, p. 45-46; le Goff, 1988, p. 4-5, 11; Durant, 1950, p. 8-9, 10). This vulpine step not only sold the distorted Christian faith to paganism, but also stifled the Christian political pulse after its bloody struggle against paganism that lasted more than three hundred years. Constantine thus was the first to put the adobe of modernity in European systems of thought. In a historical sense, modernity appeared in Europe thanks to a well-calculated effort which had a double-barreled intention: namely, to distort Jesus’s divine message and smother its political spirit.⁸ This stratagem was Constantine’s bequest to modern Europe.⁹

⁵ Here the word God refers to the Creator of the universe. However, it should be emphasized that in Arabic the word *ilah* (إله), which is translated into English as God, has several meanings. The word in Arabic exists as a verb, a noun, and an adjective. It has several meanings: 1) to worship; the worshiped; to take (him, it, whatever) as a god; worship; 2) to protect; protector; defend; defender; 3) to become confused; 4) to put up at; 5) to take refuge in; 6) to feel restless; 7) to overpower. Check this word at <http://www.almaany.com>

⁶ Draper also writes that: “The church of Nicomedia was razed to the ground; in retaliation the imperial palace was set on fire, an edict was openly insulted and torn down. The Christian officers in the army were cashiered; in all directions, martyrdoms and massacres were taking place. So resistless was the march of events that not even the Emperor [Diocletian] himself could stop the persecution.” pp. 38-39.

⁷ See Tertullian, ‘Apology or Defense of the Christians against the Accusations of the Gentiles’ trans. Herbert Bindley (M.A. Merton College, Oxford, 1890). In this historical document, we could see that Christianity speaks of the doctrine of Trinity, which is very polytheistic at heart. Jesus is no longer a prophet, but the Son of God.

⁸ It is advisable here to read Tertullian’s speech which he addressed to the magistrates when the Christians were being persecuted at the hand of the pagans during the second century A.D to understand the modifications that befell Christianity under the reign of Constantine, called “Apology or Defense of the Christians against the Accusations of the Gentiles.” Draper writes, “From Tertullian’s able work we see what Christianity was while it was suffering persecution and struggling for existence. We have now to see what it became when in possession of imperial power. Great is the difference between Christianity under Severus and Christianity after Constantine. Many of the doctrines which at the latter period were preeminent, in the former were unknown.” (2009, p. 45). Draper adds, “As years passed on, the faith described by Tertullian was transmuted into one more fashionable and more debased. It was incorporated with the old Greek mythology.” (2009, p. 47) Constantine restored Rome to its ancient Hellenic habits. He killed Christianity and aborted its dreams as soon it possessed the throne of the Caesars by confining its influence to the heart, which reduced it to a mere creed that does not exceed the relationship between Man and God, while actual reality is left in Constantine’s hand to do with as he pleases.

⁹ About Constantine, Draper writes, “It is altogether erroneous to suppose that ... he was a Christian. His actions are not those of a devout convert; he was no proselyte, but a protector; never guiding himself by religious principles, but now

Though modern Europe holds the entire Middle Period in disgust, it somehow ironically seems to find afflatus in the very ecclesiastical gods of the era, who did it the favor of culturing secular Hellen(ist)ic values in Christianity¹⁰ and ablating its political force. Christianity thus was throttled in actual life and confined to the heart. It has never ruled over European actual life, neither in the Middle Ages nor after. It gave that privilege to Caesars, kings and popes: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17, The New King James Version). It is this swindling political step that seems to have given modern Europe a reason to put its entire intellectual prowess not only to vindicate and eulogize Constantine the Great's hoodwinking secular project, which marked the rise of the first seeds of modernity, but also to jibe and upbraid those "whose intelligence discerned the motive" (Draper, 2009, p. 48), those who find fault with its intellectual premises and subject them to scrutiny. It is this step that wreaked havoc in the life of mediaeval Christian Europe as it entrusted the Church with the task of ruling Man's life not according to the divine code which was sent down upon Jesus, but according to the whims of the slandering clergy whose limitless cupidity and harum-scarum ways led them to dare sell even unseen things, such as Heaven and Hell, to large crowds of people who did not entertain even the least ability of proper reasoning; a reckless clerical effort that put an end to any sense of purposeful existence. This step is also responsible for the ideational misdirection and conceptual confusion,¹¹ which now characterize modern and post-modern European systems of thought. Though claiming to have unlocked the mysteries of life, this system is actually unable to present a coherent conception of human life because it is infected with the illusion of Evolution; another form characterized with its curmudgeonly suspicion of any sense of purposeful existence. Like paganism, which "limit[s] the hopes and destiny of man to this world" (Draper, 1981, p. 268), both Christianity and Evolution seem to direct public worship to the here and now. Both of them gave rise to modernity in Europe, a way of life that excludes God from human worldly existence. Though Christianity and Evolution are contrary to one another, they both took part in laying the abodes of modernity in Europe. Both of them exclude God's interference in human life. This exclusion can be spotted in Constantine's act of confining Christianity to the heart and excluding it from actual life, which marked the Christian character with a strange duality; that is to say, this character was Christian in the heart and the Church, but Hellenistic in actuality and conduct. This exclusion can also be spotted in Darwin's atheistic turn, which denied God not only the right to *Robobiya* (Lordship) but also the right to *Olohiya* (Godship). In this sense, Christian modernity is disbelief in disguise and atheistic modernity is manifest disbelief.

To renounce these forms of disbelief, expose the gigantic plans of modernity inventor, and expound the monotheistic creed of the believers of Islam, the Quran cites the prostration incident. Upon refusing to kneel in prostration to Adam, Iblis (Lucifer) finds himself dragged into a three-round judicial proceeding. In the first round, the following conversation between Allah and Iblis takes place:

He (Allah) said: *'Iblis, what is the matter with you that you did not prostrate yourself (like the others did)?* He (Iblis) replied: I will not prostrate to a mortal You have created from clay, from molded mud. (Allah) said: Be gone, you are accursed! A curse shall be on you till the Day of Recompense. He said: 'My Lord, reprieve me till the day they are raised. He (Allah) answered: 'You are among those reprieved till the appointed time. (Lucifer) said: 'My Lord, for Your perverting me, I shall make (matters) in the earth seem most fair to them and I shall pervert them all, except the devoted worshippers of Yours. He (Allah) said: 'This is for Me the right path over My worshipers you have no authority, except the perverse who follow you. Hell will be the promise for all of them. (Surah Al-Hijr: 33-43).

giving the most valuable support to his allies, now exhibiting the impartiality of a statesman for both forms of faith..." (1981, p. 279-280).

¹⁰ Le Goff says that four main ancient legacies characterized the Middle Ages which transmitted them to modern Europe. These include the Greek heritage, the Roman heritage, the trifunctional Indo-European ideology, and the Bible (2005, p. 10-13).

¹¹ Here one could point to the word 'god' as it exists in European cultures to show this conceptual confusion. In the English version of the Bible, the word god refers to a number of beings or things such as the creator of the universe and Jesus. Both of these beings are gods. But in the Arabic version of the Bible, the word god refers to Allah, who is the god of the Muslims. Consider the same verse in English and Arabic to grasp this conceptual confusion:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:2)

"في البدء خلق الله السموات والارض. وكانت الارض خربةً وخاليةً وعلى وجه الغمر ظلمةٌ وروح الله يرفُ على وجه المياه." (سفر التكوين 1: 2)

Is the Bible a Christian book or a Muslim book? One is confused! The Christians disbelieve in Allah, but it seems that they unconsciously repeat the name of this God hundreds of times in their Bible. This is a clear example out of many that shows what I call Conceptual Confusion, which characterizes modernity and post-modernity European cultures.

From this conversation we could see that Iblis admits the Lordship of Allah, but does not admit His Godship. Lordship refers to the belief in Allah as the Creator, Manager and Sustainer of the universe, yet Godship refers to the worship, obedience and submission to Allah at the heart and actual levels. Islam is both the belief in the Lordship of Allah and submission to His Godship. Belief in His Lordship alone does not make one a Muslim. Excepting the lunatic fringe of atheists who are in denial of even the semantic dimensions of the language they speak, everybody knows that this universe has a Lord who created it, looks after it and sustains its creatures. Allah did not send His messengers to ask people to believe in His Lordship or to say to them that 'I exist.' He sent them to ask their folks to believe in His Godship, that if He is their Creator and Sustainer, that if He is the Creator and Sustainer of all the worlds, He must by necessity be their God to Whom they should submit and offer obedience. Submission and obedience are manifested in living according to His Law: "But no, by your Lord, they will not believe until they call you to arbitrate in their disputes, and find within themselves no resentment regarding your decisions and submit themselves completely" (Quran 4:65). Thus, those who see Him as Lord and not also as God Allah does not see them as Muslims. Quraish disbelievers¹² for example were called disbelievers though they admitted the Lordship of Allah:

And if you ask them, "Who created you?" they would surely say, "Allah." (Quran 43: 87); If you ask them, "Who created the heavens and the earth and subjected the sun and the moon?" They would surely say, "Allah." (29:61); And if you ask them, "Who sends down rain from the sky and gives life to the earth after its turns dead?" They would surely say "Allah" (29:63).

Iblis's admission of Allah's Lordship and denial of His Godship reveals his disguised disbelief, that is to say his early form of modernity. To expose Iblis and use his disobedience as a parable to teach Adam that this form of belief is in fact a form of disbelief, that Lordship and Godship are inseparable, Allah holds a second round for trailing this rebellious, ungrateful creature:

He (Allah) said: "*Iblis, what prevented you from prostrating yourself towards that which I have created with My Hands? Have you become arrogant, or are you among the grand?*" He (Satan) replied: "I am better than him. You created me from fire, and You created him from clay." "Be gone!" said He, "you are stoned." "My curse shall rest on you until the Day of Recompense." He (Satan) replied: "Reprieve me my Lord till the Day of Resurrection." He (Allah) said: "You are among those reprieved till the day of the known time." He (Satan) said: "I swear by Your Might that I will seduce them all except Your sincere worshippers." He (Allah) said: "This is the truth, and I speak the truth: I shall certainly fill Hell with you and every one of them who follows you." (Surah Saad: 77-85).

From Iblis's replies we could sense his dodging and quibbling; that is to say, we become aware that he did not prostrate because Adam is 'inferior' to him in creation as he claims, but because he is sick with arrogance and lordliness. In the second round, Allah exposes this disease in the culprit's character and warns Adam and his descendants not to follow in his footsteps. Allah also expresses His rage at Iblis and curses him a special curse. Sensing his eternal damnation, Iblis discloses his plan a second time to lead Adam's children astray. We could also observe that at this stage Iblis is still a believer in the Lordship of Allah. However, in the final round he extrudes this belief and declares manifest disbelief:

He (Allah) asked: "What prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you?" "I am better than him," he replied. "You created me from fire and You created him from clay." He (Allah) said: "Descend from it! This is not the place for you to boast your arrogance. Be gone, you are of the humiliated." He replied: "Reprieve me till the Day of Resurrection." Said He (Allah): "you are among the reprieved," he (Satan) answered: "Because You have caused me to go astray, I will waylay them as they walk on Your straight path, and come upon them from the front and from the rear, from their right and from their left. Then, You shall find most of them ungrateful." "Be gone!" said He (Allah), "despised and outcast. (As for) those who follow you, I shall fill Hell with you all." (Surah Al-Ar'raf: 13-18).

To further expose Iblis's disease and teach Adam about the essence of Islam, Allah sagaciously moves in His interrogation from general to specific dimensions. He moves from "*Iblis, what is the matter with you that you did not prostrate yourself (like the others did)?*" to "*Iblis, what prevented you from prostrating yourself towards that which I have created with My Hands?*" to "*what prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you?*" We could observe that Allah does not address Iblis with his name in the last round because He has already cursed him a special curse, which means He has expelled him from His mercy. Similarly, Iblis stops using "My Lord" with which he used to address Allah in the first two rounds, which means he now admits neither Allah's Lordship nor His Godship. In this regard, we could claim that modernity, which is an "antireligious" secular way of life, is Iblis's big project which he disclosed in the presence of Allah to lure mankind into disbelief.

Iblis's words speak of erecting a *civitas* (a city) in which Allah has no concern. His aim is to lure Man into challenging Allah, that is to say, into establishing *De Civitas Terrena* (the city of man) in separation from *De Civitas Deil* (the city

¹² Quraish was Prophet Muhammad's tribe.

of God). This separation has one objective and that is the separation between the Lordship and Godship of Allah. Ruefully, even those who spoke wisely in Europe did not pay attention to this gambit. On the contrary, they vindicated and adduced adequate grounds for this Iblistic ploy:¹³ “And Iblis had already confirmed his assumption through them, so they followed him, except a group of believers” (Quran 34:20). From this vantage, it seems that Iblis has a hand in dictating ancient and modern European systems of thought. First, he whispered to his victims in Europe to disconnect their Creator from their actual life, that is, to see Him only as their Lord and not as their God as well. To achieve this end, he has chosen a hypocrite to convince early Christians that “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” is one of the teachings of Jesus. When these victims have proved themselves docile and showed no questioning of the separation act, he proceeded to seize another bite of the cheery to convince them this time to let go of their belief in Allah’s Lordship and proclaim their manifest disbelief. To achieve this end, he has chosen Darwin and his adherents to convince the very same victims of the ‘illusion’ of God. In this sense, Iblis’s project of modernity is fueled by a psychological condition and a mode of governance in denial of divine guidance and law. It is a *Jahili* mode of life: “Are they seeking the *Jahili* mode of governance? Yet who is better in governance than Allah for a people who are certain (of Him)?” (Quran 5:50).

Unlike Constantine’s classical modernity, which found inspiration in the word, Darwin’s modern modernity seems to invest its entire trust in the body. In it lies not only the secret of life alone, but also that of existence. For modern modernity, the body is the center of existence and the mover of modern civilization. It suggests motion, transformation and evolution. In theatre, avant-garde brought the body center stage and did away with the word. Its central thesis is that theatre is not a textual practice as classical Europe thought, but a performative practice inspired by the body from which all other aesthetic dimensions in modern theatre take their significance.

3. Theatre and Modernity

The word dominated European theatres for a considerable period of time. However, this verbal domination had to stop when Europe recognized the power of the body which began to take the place of the word right after this recognition occurred. Between the word and the body one could locate not only the history of theatre but also the history of modernity in Europe. If the word signifies the lenses of constancy through which Europe saw itself in the past, the body refers to the lenses of transformation through which it sees itself at present. Again, between constancy and transformation one could locate not only Europe’s history of theatre but also that of modernity.

Those who speak in defense of the word (of constancy) such as the lunatic fringe of Greek theatre see Thespis as the “inventor of drama” (Buckhman, 1827, p. 14). For them, theatre came into life when playwriting was born. Those who put forward this claim unconsciously see life through Biblical lenses: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1, The New King James Version). However, this uncertain belief is now proved a mere fallacy with no bearing whatsoever on the truth of the ‘origin’ of theatre. Anthropologists, on the other hand, see Greek tragedy as a grave ritual “sprang out of the indigenous worship of the dead, especially of dead chiefs” (Ridgeway, 1915, 5). Ridgeway maintains that “the cult of Dionysus was not indigenous in Sicily, but had been introduced there by Cleisthenes (as it had been also brought into Attica and Naxos), and had been superimposed upon the cult of the old king” (p. 5). From a Deconstructionist perspective, these Dionysian primordial rites and rituals are in essence forms of writing that previously occurred before writing in the narrow scripto-centric sense, for “the word is the cadaver of psychic speech, and along with the language of life itself the ‘speech before words’ must be found again,” (Derrida, 2005, 302), while the play is “a text already written, thought, or lived outside the stage” (p. 299). In this sense, the Deconstructionists’ critique of the European classical view of theatre is a call for liberating histrionics from what Derrida calls “the theatrical superstition of the text” (p. 302) so as to restore “the creative and founding freedom” of the *mise en scène* (p. 299). In his study of “the visual dimension of tragedy,” Oliver Taplin (2005) observes that great dramatists have been theatre practitioners, never mere playwrights, and have written plays to be performed before an audience because “for them the play is realized, finds its finished state, in the theatre” (p. 1). He confirms that the text is a mere transcript, a “scenario” lacking context:

The written quotation of any spoken sentence is a very incomplete transcript of what was conveyed by the utterance itself. On one level we miss the tone of voice, nuance, pace, stress; and we miss facial expression, gesture and the physical posture and positioning of the speaker and addressee. Even more profoundly, the transcript does not convey the roles and social or personal relationships of the real people involved, their past, their shared assumptions, the full circumstances of the speech-act. It lacks *context*. All these attendant circumstances conflow to turn a lifeless sentence, such as may be delivered thousands of times every day, into a unique and expressive communication (p. 2).

In Taplin’s words we could sense an implied thread of criticism leveled at the lunatic fringe of Greek drama and their

¹³ See for example Saint Augustine, *The City of God* (tans) John Healey Vol. II (John Grant, 1909).

followers who should admit that it was only after the flowering of Greek tragedy, which spanned hundreds of years, that reading plays started to replace performance as the primary mode of literary communication.

In their study of performance, theatre scholars agreed that it is “a consciousness of doubleness” through which “the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of action” (Bauman, 2003, p. 5). Thus, central to Bauman’s “doubleness” is the act of acting *for* and *before* a spectator. That is, Bauman does not associate performance with a written script, which was the backbone of traditional mainstream theatres in the past. Unlike dramatic theatres whose existence was mainly reposed upon “characters previously created by artists” (2003, p. 5), which condemned spectators to silent observation, performance arts such as theatre and dance rely upon the body (of actors), scenery, stage props, costumes and spectators. Of particular interest here is George Gurvitch’s relevant idea of “a simple reception or a gathering of friends” (cited in Bauman, p. 11), which fairly amounts to a theatrical performance.

The break with the previous obsolete notions of theatre occurred with the rise of Theatre Studies as an independent academic discipline. Max Herrmann (1865-1942) maintains that “theatre and drama are... such extreme opposites that their symptoms will always reveal themselves; the drama is a linguistic-artistic creation by an individual; theatre is something achieved by the audience and its servants” (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2002, p. 4). Quoting Herrmann, Fischer-Lichte observes¹⁴ that what he “emphasizes is not the drama which makes theatre into an art,” but “the performance,” and that “it is the performativity of theatre which fundamentally differentiates it from literature or the fine arts” (2002, p. 4).

Before Herrmann, Johan Wolfgang van Goethe (1749-1832) ridiculed the deception of German theatres that are but “boxes” full of both “painted” as well as “real spectators,” who, unlike the former, “took it amiss that anything so untrue and improbable was put upon them” (1862, p. 118). For Goethe, theatre is viewed as performance. After Goethe came Richard Wagner (1813-1883) who similarly shared Goethe’s concept of theatre: “real art will never live until its embodiments need be subject only to the laws of Nature and not to the despotic whims of mode” (1895, p. 71). In Martin Esslin’s words, Wagner viewed “drama and theatre as festive events of deep spiritual value” and wanted to renew them “on the model of ancient Greek tragedy” (1997, p. 365). Indeed, Wagner deified music and made it his bread and water. This had a great impact on Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), who wrote and dedicated *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* to Wagner. Nietzsche argued that Greek tragedy was born from music (singing) and dance. He saw Euripides and other playwrights as murderers of arts because they threw Dionysus out of tragedy (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 37). He traced the origin of Greek tragedy to a sacrificial ritual. It was during this time that new impulses, as yet barely noticed by neither their contemporaries nor by the public, began to stir up on the fringes of the theatrical world of Europe. Yet unluckily, these new impulses appeared as no more than marginal aberrations, while in fact they contained the new seeds of development that were yet to germinate till the coming of Herrmann. As a result, the centrality of dramatic literature, which hitherto had to remain undisturbed, continued to thrive for a while. Central to Herrmann’s understanding of theatre, however, was the primacy of performance over the literary dramatic text: “the most important aspect of theatre art is the performance” (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2005, p. 19). He thus problematized the ‘text’ culture through which the nineteenth-century Europe understood itself. Herrmann in fact revitalized the olden ‘performative’ culture of Europe to which all great writers ascribed the origin of theatre.

Herrmann’s concept of theatre is central to avant-garde perspective. For him,

The original meaning of theatre was derived from the fact that it was a social game – played by all for all. A game in which everyone is a player – participants and spectators [. . .] The spectator is involved as co-player. The spectator is, so to speak, the creator of the theatre. So many participants are involved in creating the theatre as festive event that the basic social nature of its character cannot be lost. Theatre always involves a social community” (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2005, p. 24).

The relationship between actors and spectators is of central importance to Herrmann’s understanding of theatre. When actors and spectators gather at a particular time and space in order to celebrate a game, the theatrical event comes into being. What distinguishes this game is the active participation of both actors and spectators. That is, the spirit of theatricality is driven by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. In this sense, “the spectators are neither distant or empathetic observers of the actions unfolding in the scene, making sense of what they perceive,” nor are they “intellectual decipherers of a message formulated by the actions of the actors” (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2005, p. 24). As Fischer-Lichte rightly observes, Herrmann’s notion of theatre does not have to do with the “representation or expression

¹⁴ Fischer-Lichte quoted Herrmann, who said: “theatre and drama are... such extreme opposites that their symptoms will always reveal themselves; the drama is a linguistic-artistic creation by an individual; theatre is something achieved by the audience and its servants”.

of something which already exists elsewhere – like the text of a play,” but with “something which is brought forth by the actions, perceptions, responses of both actors and spectators” (p. 22-23).

Because theatre is a “festival,” “a game” – an event – which occurs “here and now *between* actors and spectators” (Herrmann cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2005, p. 24), avant-garde theatre scholars insist that real theatre is ephemeral and transitory; that is to say, it exists in performances that are transitory, not in texts that are the same without fail. Unlike dramatic theatre which relies on fictional characters portrayed by playwrights, and in which the actor is “a mere carrier of meaning, as a semiotic body – a text composed of signs for the character played” (p. 24), “post-dramatic theatre,” to use Hans-Thies Lehmann’s phrase, is concerned with the “real body” (p. 24) of actors as creators of meaning. These “real bodies,” which are constitutive of the essence of performance, have emancipated themselves from the tyranny of nineteenth-century Naturalism which imposed upon them the dramatist’s authority. Theatre studies rejected the idea that the theatre is “a work of art,” and emphasized the eventness of the theatrical process, which by the restoration of behavior,¹⁵ renders itself both collective and generative. By viewing theatre as an event driven by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, theatre studies thus “shifted the focus away from fictive characters in their fictive world...towards ‘the real body’ and to ‘real space’” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 33-34). Its view of “real space” entails the “the most important theatrical factor” (Herrmann cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 35-36): that is, by annulling the spell textually imposes upon the spectator, the latter becomes free to interact in the event unfolding. It strongly rejected Naturalism and Expressionism alike calling them “a fundamental mistake.” It sees “acting is the principal factor of theatre” (p. 33).

Due to the dialogue between theatre and anthropology and to the remarkably productive and rigorous ritual analyses of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, Ritual Studies emerged as a new academic discipline to emphasize the hierarchy of ritual over myth.¹⁶ Influenced by William Robertson Smith’s theories and lectures on sacrificial rituals and totemic practices of the Greeks outlined in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) as well as by James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), Ritual Studies also emerged to place theatre in a context that is no longer in the service of the representation on stage of a primarily fictive world. These studies have emerged to define “man’s ‘roots’ whether in the psyche or prehistory” (Innes, 2004, p. 3). As Christopher Innes shows, the hallmark of ritual studies lies in what defines the avant-garde which “is not overtly modern qualities...but primitivism.” This ‘primitivism’ is reposed mainly on “two complementary facets”: “the exploration of dream states or the instinctive and subconscious levels of the psyche; and the quasi-religious focus on myth and magic, which in the theatre leads to experiments with ritual and the ritualistic patterning of performance” (p. 2-3). In Fischer-Lichte’s words (2008), ritual studies thus “advocated the reversal of hierarchical positions: from myth to ritual and from the literary texts to the theatre performance” (p. 31).

Ritual studies are indebted to a group of scholars known as the Cambridge Ritualists who were inspired by Jane Ellen Harrison’s work on Greek rituals. In *Themis* (1912), Harrison traced the origin of Greek tragedy to a ritual. In his “Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy,” which forms a significant chapter in *Themis*, Gilbert Murray argued in favor of Harrison’s argument. Fischer-Lichte rightly observes that “Harrison’s theory fundamentally challenged contemporary beliefs about Greek culture as primarily textual and thus paradigmatic for modern cultural values. The much admired texts of Greek tragedy and comedy suddenly deflated into belated results of ritual actions, originally performed to celebrate a seasonal god. Theatre as well as text developed out of ritual; furthermore, text was written in order to be performed (Ibid). Ritual studies thus emphasized the pre-eminence of performance over text and found in ritual the heart of the theatrical event. By elevating ritual, ritual studies abandoned the notion of an artwork for that of an event, which only rituals and rites could engender.

¹⁵ The idea of ‘restored behavior’ is indebted to Richard Schechner who argued that: ‘Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original “truth” or “source” of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted –even while this truth or source is being honored and observed. How the strip of behavior was made, found or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition...restored behavior is used in all kinds of performance... in fact, restored behavior is the main characteristic of performance.’ See “Restoration of Behavior” in Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia), p. 35.

¹⁶ William Robertson Smith emphasized the hierarchy of ritual over myth: ‘so far as myths consist of explanations of ritual their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshiper.’ Cited in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 30.

It must be noted that Herrmann's conception of theatre briefly discussed earlier should have by now given us a heuristic idea about avant-garde aesthetics of performance. I reduce these aesthetics to three basic concepts: 'mediality,' 'materiality,' and 'semioticity.'¹⁷ Because semiotic aesthetics proceeds from the known assumption that theatre in particular or art in general must be understood as language, I forsake it in favor of highlighting 'mediality' and 'materiality,' which create an aesthetics of atmosphere that direct attention to physical experiences.

Mediality refers to "the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators" who "gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime." In this sense, mediality, as demonstrated by Herrmann first, has to do with what we call production and reception: "the actors act," while "the spectators perceive their actions and respond to them." This means that Herrmann and twentieth-century dramatists and directors went against Naturalist and classical theatres which, not only valued textuality over performance, but also strove to discipline their spectators and expect "empathy" from them in a bid to prevent "the theatrical feedback loop." It is this feedback loop that encourages spectators to call into question the conventions of society, and renders the course of the performance "unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 38). With the rise of avant-garde theatres in the 1960s more freedom was given to the spectators whose "pivotal role...was not only acknowledged as a pre-condition" in the theatrical process "but explicitly invoked as such." Thus, "the feedback loop as a self-referential, autopoietic system enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process emerged as the defining principle of theatrical work" (Ibid, p. 39). Mediality in this sense establishes an umbilical relationship between actors and spectators and celebrates them both as active agents consciously gazing and returning the gaze, creating what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls "a *centrifugal* effect," with both actors and spectators performing in "a space of *centripetal* dynamic" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 150).

Reconsidering the problem of reception in theatre, Marco De Marinis looks at the spectator as "an autonomous 'maker of meanings' for the performance" (2003, p. 221). Drawing on Umberto Eco's 'Model Reader,' De Marinis proposes 'a Model Spectator' to show that "production and reception...are closely connected" and "in what way and to what degree a performance anticipates a certain type of spectator" (p. 222). According to him, performances are of two types: 'closed' and 'open.' In the closed performance, by which he refers to classical theatres, spectators react "in the desired way," while "the normal practice" in the open performance "is to leave plenty of interpretive freedom to the audience, and not to impose fixed readings" (p. 223). In the open performance, the conventional subject-object relationship is thus redefined and is governed by "a scintillating ever-elusive negotiation" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 40). Though sweeping in its exaggeration, Anne Ubersfeld's "The Pleasure of the Spectator" agrees at some point with Fischer-Lichte's notion of mediality in which Ubersfeld (2003) finds much pleasure for the spectators:

The pleasure of theatre is a thought-provoking one for us. Like any pleasure, it has an odor of sin about it: voyeurism is not a nice word; catharsis is a more refined one. But, clearly, something happens in theatre which satisfies the spectator while at the same time leaving him unsatisfied, something in which pleasure and dissatisfaction are conjoined (p. 224).

Yet for Schechner, the pleasure of spectators resides in their freedom "to enter the performance as equals," all celebrating "the social event" yet "according to a democratic model" (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 41). They become thus "shared bodies" creating meanings in "shared spaces" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 38). In this vein, Georg Fuchs maintains that "according to their nature" these shared bodies and spaces "are not in opposition. They are a unit" (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 51). If destroyed, Meyerhold laments, the theatre becomes "divided...into two mutually foreign worlds: those who act and those who watch" (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 51). Yet, if maintained, the theatrical relationship gives rise to "short-lived, transient theatrical communities of actor and spectators [that] are particularly relevant for an aesthetics of the performative" (p. 55), which entails "a condition of liveness" that makes "reversing roles, creating communities, or motivating physical contact" (p. 68) possible.

Materiality refers to the transient nature of theatre. Excluding material objects such as props and costumes, the theatrical performance "does not consist of fixed, transferable, and material artifacts"; rather, "it is fleeting, transient, and exists only in the present" and "is made up of the continuous becoming and passing of the autopoietic feedback loop" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 75). This article insists on the fact that the theatrical performances are "restored behaviors" that are never consciously recurrent reproductions, and that "even their deviations are part of the dynamic of restored behavior" (Carlson, 2004, p. 3). In this sense, the specific materiality of the theatrical performance is lost once it is over. Yet if documented aurally and visually (on videos, films, photographs), the theatrical performance can be preserved. To direct attention to the generation of materiality of performances onstage, the avant-garde dramatists of the 1960s developed a variety of useful methods which Fischer-Lichte reduces to three basic experimental strategies: 'corporeality, spatiality, and tonality' (2008, p. 76).

¹⁷ I am indebted here to Fischer-Lichte in particular. See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 37.

Corporeality simply refers to the phenomenal role of the body as aesthetic material in the whole theatrico-dramatic process. I am aware that scholars have problematized the notion of ‘body’ in their attempt to examine the generation of materiality in performances. Within such attempt arose a tension whether to view the body as “the material of one’s own existence” (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 76), as Helmuth Plessner puts it, or as a material representing the fictive character. Indeed, theories of theatre claim that there is a tension between actor and character driven by the doubleness of “being a body” and “having a body”; that is to say, actors exist both as characters in a fictive world and as performers on stage. For Fischer-Lichte, it is this tension between ‘being’ and ‘having’ that generates corporeality onstage and enables the perception of such corporality by the spectators. Yet “generating and perceiving corporeality...depend on two phenomena in particular: processes of embodiment and the phenomenon of presence” (p. 77).

We are not concerned here with the traditional dichotomy in the actor’s existence which is fairly outlined by David Graver (2003) in “The Actor’s Bodies,” and which begs the question whether this “existence rests upon a questionable distinction between artifice and reality or between representation and presentation” (p. 157). In the words of Jon Erickson (2003), we are here concerned with demonstrating that “theatre depends ultimately upon what is human” (p. 176). Theatre in this sense is the achievement of both actors and spectators, while drama is an artistic creation. It is an “independent art form no longer satisfied with expressing textually predetermined meanings” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 80), and exists in performance which “always occurs here and now, immediately before the eyes and ears of the audience which perceives and witnesses it” (p. 94). It is this very condition of the theatrical presence, which Elinor Fuchs defines as “the unique self-completion of the world of the spectacle, and the circle of heightened awareness flowing from actor to spectator and back that sustains the world” (p. 109), that avant-garde artists had become passionate with in the 1960s, as it constitutes the core of the entire theatrical process. We concur with Fuchs that the notion of theatrical presence assigns a positive value to improvisation, spectators, participation, myth, and communion and opposes the dramatic script “as a politically oppressive intruder demanding submission to authority” (Fuchs, p. 110).

Spatiality refers to a space in which a performance can take a place. This space ‘opens special possibilities for the relationship between actors and spectators and for movement and perception’ (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 107).¹⁸ A number of distinguished avant-gardists encouraged a radical break from the current model of theatre with its proscenium, which separated the actors from the spectators in the darkened auditorium. This avant-gardist reform reconsidered the actor-spectator relationship, and rethought concepts of movement and perception in light of which this article insists we should perceive the concept of theatre. The avant-garde performative space puts at stake what Lehmann calls “the structure of the *mirroring*”: “the stage frame functions like a mirror that ideally allows a homogenous world of the viewers to recognize itself in the equally coherent world of the drama” (2006, p. 150). With an excellent comprehension of avant-garde theories and practices, Lehmann quotes Grotowski to insist that theatre is “the proximity of living organisms.” This conception reduces the distance between performers and spectators to such an extent that the physical and the physiological proximity (breath, sweat, panting, movement of the musculature, cramp, gaze) masks the mental signification, then a space of a tense *centripetal* dynamic develops, in which theatre becomes a moment of shared energies instead of transmitted signs (Grotowski cited on p. 150).

Performances were organized in spaces such as “former factories, slaughterhouses, bunkers, street car depots, shopping malls, fair centers, sports stadiums, on streets, squares and subway platforms, in public parks and beer tents, on landfill sites, in auto garages and ruins, in cemeteries” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 109-110). These spaces, being inclusive in nature, invite actors and spectators to create atmospheres of presence and of *tonality* (mixed tones, voices, rhythms, time) which are masked in Orientalists’ and Self-Orientalists’ analyses in favor of textuality.¹⁹

From this brief analysis of avant-garde theatre aesthetics we could observe that modern Europe does not see theatre as a text, but as a performance with “dynamic, immediate, and diachronic characteristics that are in opposition to the static, immanent, historically transcendent text as index and arbiter of cultural value” (Ward, p. 360). In Henry M. Sayre’s words, avant-garde theatre “is always in process, always engaged. It is, furthermore, purposefully undecidable. Its meanings are explosive, ricocheting and fragmenting throughout its audience. The work becomes a situation, full of suggestive potentialities, rather than a self-contained whole, determined and final.” (cited in Ward, p. 360).

From this examination of avant-garde theatre aesthetics we could also observe that Europe has been using theatre for the production of docility and for changing norms and behaviors since time immemorial. In his study of Greek tragedy,

¹⁸ I know that by spatiality Fischer-Lichte means a number of things; yet for the purpose of this article, I reduce the different meanings of this concept to the performative space, to which all the meanings of spatiality return.

¹⁹ For an excellent analysis of these elements, see both Lehmann’s *Post-dramatic Theatre* and Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*.

Augusto Boal (1979) observes that the “tragic hero appears when the state begins to utilize the theatre for political purposes” (p. 33). Khalid Amine (2000) sees this political utilization of tragedy “as an aesthetic coercive system of interpolation and the production of docile bodies” (p. 15). In this sense, it would be correct to claim that “stagecraft collaborates with statecraft in producing spectacles of power” (Tennenhouse, 1986, p. 15), which owes this production to the magical “transformative power” of performance. Inspired by Arnold van Gennep’s idea of *rites de passage*, Fischer-Lichte proceeds to show that performance has such power manifested in destroying cultural patterns and traditions and fashioning them anew. Indeed, it “can work within a society precisely to undermine tradition, to provide a site for the exploration of fresh and alternative structures and patterns of behavior” (Carlson, 2004, p. 13).

In 1576, the first playhouse was erected in England. Upon this event Glynne Wickham remarked that this was “a point toward which everything seems inexorably to move and after which those same things are never quite the same” (cited in Bounahai, 2016, p.52). In 1758, Jean d’Alembert suggested that Geneva needed a theatre to modernize itself; a suggestion Jean-Jacques Rousseau quashed in his *Letter to M. D’Alembert on Spectacles*. Rousseau maintained that it is due to “the constant outbursts of different emotions to which we are subjected in the theatre which disturb and weaken us” (Fischer-Lichte, 2000, p. 1) that we become weak and vulnerable. This puts at stake our cultural, gender (male and female) and individual identity. For Rousseau, the theatre is the enemy of traditional norms and cultures (Ibid) because “the actor seems to be a magical mirror to the spectator” (p. 2). Fischer-Lichte adds that “in theatre it is *always* a question of (in structural terms) the creation of identity and changing identities.” (p. 3). In fact, she rightly maintains that European theatre is best read “as a history of identity” (p. 4). In 1799, Napoleon brought theatre to Egypt “to change the customs of the country” (cited in Amine, 2013, online). In 1912, Lyautey, aping Napoleon, also brought theatre to Morocco “with the prospect of changing local histrionic practices forever” (Bounahai, 2016, p. 52) as well as cultural patterns and behaviors. Thus with recourse to erecting theatrical buildings and staging plays French colonialism convinced its avid-for-reform-and-modernity victims of the epistemic need for using ‘the Great Tradition’ harking back to Greco-Roman times to secure the whole region of Morocco out of its cultural decadence and, as Bounahai perceptively puts it, help its disfranchised inhabitants “jump onto the bandwagon of modernity” (p. 56). For him, these victims, being “spoken by a discourse on modernity that was gaining further currency in the *Mashreq* in mid-nineteenth century” (p. 54), clamorously harped on ‘the civilizing mission’ of theatre and heedlessly declared that “the majority of Arab writers of imaginative prose and poets demonstrated a distinct lack of imagination and flair in their works: the creative spirit needed to found a literary theatre was lacking” (cited on p. 53). Bounahai contends that these ‘connoisseurs,’ “who saw in proscenium-arch theatre a viable medium that can lift the region out of its cultural decadence,” had a strong passion for European theatre that later “would prove to be the biggest assault on festive customs... that once provided the theatrical sense to the community” (p. 56). Thus they eclipsed and overshadowed their own histrionic arts and unconsciously served in spreading Western modernist views of life.

Convinced that their own cultures were empty of any sense of theatricality, visiting theatrical troupes from Egypt and the Levant unknowingly embraced the ‘first in the West, then elsewhere’ historicist temporal structure and thereby functioned as tools of self-destruction.²⁰ These troupes and connoisseurs were historicists because they posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance that was assumed to exist between them and their colonizers and because they unconsciously legitimized the idea of ‘civilization.’ In Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) eyes, these disfranchised troupes “often rehearsed to their own subaltern classes—and still do if and when the political structures permit—the stagist theory of history on which European ideas of political modernity were based” (p. 9). Coming one after another, these troupes played an overarching role in familiarizing the erstwhile Moroccans with the western model of theatre making. Amine (2000) insists that these visiting troupes “served as mediators between the Moroccan audience and the newly established western theatrical building, a building that had long been refuted by the natives since the erection of the first European theatre in Tangier in 1913 called The Theatre of Cervantes” (p. 99). They served as mediators, for their productions were adaptations premised on the western repertory of Shakespeare, Molière and others.

Despite this self-delusion, Moroccan dramatists such as Mohamed al-Quri, Mohamed al-Hadad, Abdelkhalik Toress and others “realized theatre’s intricate ability to subvert, or even dispense with the colonizer’s authority” (Ibid). In other words, Moroccan theatre of resistance was a nationalist rejection of historicist history as it encouraged Moroccans to reject the Franco-Hispanic historicist democracy. When Moroccans expelled their colonizers, they were basically arguing against the idea that Moroccans as a people were not *yet* ready to rule themselves. However, though this theatre deployed mimicry’s subversive power to “turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (Young, 1990,

²⁰ Will Durant maintains that “the death of a civilization seldom comes from without; internal decay must weaken the fiber of a society before external influences or attacks can change its essential structure, or bring it to an end.” See *Our Oriental Heritage*, p. 984.

p. 148), destabilize the position of the colonizer, and disperse his very identity and authority and displace western hegemony (Amine, 2000, p. 101), it “stands guilty of paying less attention to the artistic merits of theatre making” (ibid). In other words, though it resisted European political modernity, it fell in the snare of what may be called “European theatrical modernity” as it succumbed to the historicist temporal thought of ‘first in Europe, then elsewhere.’ It was naïve, lacking any sense of vision and artistic approach as it “foregrounded the political at the expense of the aesthetic” (Ouzri, 1997 p. 210) and can be compared to the Brechtian theatre and its *Lehrstück* plays in that “the early Moroccan performances were characterized by a general tendency towards politicizing the general public. Changing the world was the main task of such early attempts at playwriting rather than representing the world” (Amine 2000, p. 102). Yet in these performances “there was no mastery of the mechanisms of playwriting and theatre making, and no sense of theatrical location” (Ibid).

Due to its political, anti-colonial spirit, Lyautey thought it necessary to strip Moroccan theatre of resistance of its political force and render it apolitical in the process in a bid to “produce a perfect copy of the western master model” (Ibid). For this reason, “the French protectorate administration appealed to French instructors – Charles Nugu and André Voisin, French directors – to administer theatrical workshops” (Ouzri, 1997, p. 43). Nugu and Voisin were professional theatre makers who were brought to orient, and hence fashion, Moroccan theatre in the direction set by the Protectorate authorities. Assisted by Abdessamad Kenfaoui, Tahar Ouaziz, Tayeb Saddiki and others, these French theatre makers supervised theatrical trainings and workshops at the Mamora Centre which led to the birth of Mamora Troupe. In other words, such troupe was begotten and raised in the cradle and with care of the state “to absorb the nationalist subversive actions,” “establish a mystifying theatrical apparatus that would smooth conflict and resolve social tension” (Amine, 2000, p. 123), and “give Moroccan theater the picture designated to it by the state” (p. 171).

The French colonial system of power managed to beget dramatists who produced plays one could barely distinguish from those of the colonizers. As Frantz Fanon noted, colonialism was never simply satisfied with imposing its grammar and logic upon the “present and the future of a dominated country.” It was not simply contented with merely holding the colonized people in its grip and emptying “the native’s brain of all form and content.” Rather, “it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon, 1963, p. 67). Fanon correctly unraveled the processes of universalizing Western particularisms through epistemological colonization (colonization of the mind) that de-centered pre-existing African knowledge systems. This epistemological colonization is now evident in the works of Arab-Muslim theatre harbingers who are now calling for interculturalism, interweaving and productive friction as forces of creativity and change in modern theatre. Though these trends are in an obvious opposition to the Islamic creed, which boasts the transcendent fact of *Tawheed* and its necessities, they are welcomed *à bras ouverts* as they have persuaded those who embrace them of the sore need to engage in productive friction if they want to modernize their theatrical institutions as well as their cultural patterns and behaviors, which productive friction places in a mode of seemingly unstoppable motion and offers them the possibility of interweaving across local and global cultures. Interculturalism, interweaving or productive friction open the possibility of universal interconnections and engender engaged motions from one space to another, which inevitably leads to the emergence of new productive spaces in which cultures engage in frictive processes to create new identities. Though it passes all belief that these productive spaces are blind and work for no one’s benefit, they have wielded an enormous influence on the Arab-Muslim World, which is now mired in chopping and changing its systems of thought and perception in a mode that shows its strong passion for Western ways of life. In other words, these frictive spaces of production are au fait with Western liberal tendencies only. Their ruling passion lies in disseminating Western modern views and particulars and they are trying every trick in the book to seduce other cultures to cast aspersions on their past and abandon themselves to Western aspirations. Beguiled by modern modernity’s teachings, these spaces see life through Darwinistic lenses which ridicule origin, constancy, religion and God. In these spaces, nothing is static or constant. On the contrary, everything is in constant flux and transformation. Allah, Man, values, ethics and morals are all constructs of particular historical, cultural, political and religious circumstances and are therefore liable to change. In these spaces, anything other than European modernity and its yearnings is a mere joke, a thing from the ancient past which should be consigned to oblivion. Yet though European modernity is clearly a return to the Greco-Roman past, it presents itself to other cultures as an anti-past tendency. From this perspective, modernity is an essentialist cry in support of the Greco-Roman heritage.

4. Conclusion

From the Islamic perspective, modernity is a *Jahili* way of life. It encourages people to challenge Allah and urges them on to discredit His laws. It gives them man-made laws to run their lives. This secular way of life is called *Jahili* not because those who embrace it lack knowledge and science, but because they lead their lives away from Allah’s guidance and assume that they have the right to establish social, economic and political laws for themselves. Any disagreement which might arise around this substantial Islamic issue must seek decision from the Quran. To claim otherwise is to stickle for a whimsical speculation, which has no Islamic basis neither in the Quran nor in the Sunnah. Yet to stickle for

both modernity and Islam and see them as existential pals is to prescribe a strange existential duality. To be Muslim in the heart and the mosque and secular in life and conduct is not only schizophrenic and psychosistic but also absurd and futilitarian.

The Arab-Muslim World has now entered this schizophrenic, psychosistic, absurd and futilitarian stage thanks to the efforts of Western colonialism, which convinced its avid-for-reform-and-modernity victims of the need to climb on the bandwagon of modernity; a need which theatre has blessed from day one. Adopting a civilizing discourse, this institution of play has managed to transform Arab-Muslim cultures into hybrid cultures where identity takes the form of Kafka's worm, where ethics are subject to the mercy of social, economic and cultural evolution, where religion becomes secluded into the heart, where Allah is excluded from Earth, where Man behaves not like Allah's creature but like Darwin's invention with no static morals or politics. Everything in this hybrid space extols the virtues of disbelief.

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