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# **Revolutionary Egyptian Playwrights**

**Samy Selim**

January 2024

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## Abstract

This thesis addresses the revolutionary role of an Egyptian playwright during times of socio-political flux. The key question is: to what extent do socio-politically engaged Egyptian plays mirror and contribute to historical moments characterised by revolutionary and political flux. After providing a critical survey of the history of Egyptian theatre, I analyse and contextualise plays by three Egyptian playwrights after which I subject those plays to six criteria I have composed. The playwrights are Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898 – 1987), Nu'mān 'Ashour (1918 – 1987) and Sa'ad Wahba (1925 – 1997). The theoretical framework of this thesis employs terms from Marxist-Leninist writings such as *Party Organisation*, Antonio Gramsci's *Hegemony* and Raymond Williams' *Structures of Feeling*. Since I contend that a revolutionary play should break the rules of Aristotle's *Poetics* as understood by Egyptian scholars, I have used Rashad Rushdy's translation of the Greek text. I also employ Egyptian founding documents, *The National Charter* (1962) and the six tenets of the 1952 Free Officers' July movement. The conclusion of this thesis is that 'Ashour and Wahba's writings play a revolutionary role in the history of Egyptian dramaturgy while Al-Hakim, despite his contributions to the development of Egyptian theatre, has, in terms of dramaturgy, provided the Egyptian canon with texts that critiqued the socio-political order in a manner that Nasserists would view as counter-revolutionary.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to the fifty brave theatre practitioners who lost their lives in the fire of the Bani Soueif Cultural Palace in 2005.



### **Author's Declaration**

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: ..SAMY SELIM..

DATE:.3 January 2024..

### Author's Note on Translation and Transliteration

All translations are my own unless specifically mentioned otherwise. Transliteration, except for well-known names such as Tawfiq Al-Hakim and Taha Hussein, was based on the system used by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.

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## Introduction

Two of the leading Egyptian dramatic critics of the 1960s and 1970s, Fouad Dawara (1928 – 1996) and Farouq Abdel Qadir (1938 – 2010), composed two books with titles that shared the verb *takhreeb* (sabotage). Dawara’s book, *Takhreeb el masrah el masry fel sab’eenat wal thamaneenat* (*The Sabotage of the Egyptian theatre in the Seventies and Eighties*) was published in 1989, while Abdel Qadir’s, *El masrah El masry: tagreeb wa takhreeb* (*The Egyptian Theatre, Experimentalism and Sabotage*) was published in 1979. Both books were published during the era of dictators, Anwar Sadat (1918 - 1981) and Hosni Mubarak (1928 – 2020). Furthermore, both books were published by state-owned publishing houses which are subject to the most stringent state vetting and censorship. The publication of Dawara’s and Abdel Qadir’s books by the state meant the tacit approval of the crux of both books; both authors argue extensively that the Egyptian theatre, having witnessed what Roger Allen agrees was a revolutionary period during the “halcyon days of the 1950s and 60s”, was eventually sabotaged and destroyed by counter-revolutionary forces (Allen, 1979). These two works join another negatively titled work, *homoom elmarsah wa homoomy* (*The Troubles of the Theatre as well as my Troubles*) by another pillar of Egyptian dramatic criticism, Ali al-Ra’i. The short dedication is an optimistic appeal:

To all those who ignited the flame of the theatre in its days of vitality: the 1950s and 60s.  
To their great ancestors who paved the way for the rise of the art of the theatre in our  
Arab homeland. To the tireless theatre youth who have dedicated their lives to the cause  
of restoring to the theatre its light and fire (Al Rai’ 1994, p. 4)

This testament to the supremacy of the theatre in the 1950s and 60s, though strong and impassioned, is by no means prevalent. As will be discussed in Chapter One, there are other schools of thought that find the theatre of that period to have been the propaganda machine of President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s (1918 – 1970) regime and its cultural hegemony. These latter

voices hearken back to an era prior to the 1952 revolution when Egypt was a monarchy under the occupation of the British Empire. The key distinction between the two camps is the extent of political involvement and engagement of the theatre. The revolutionary critics favoured plays that were written in the realistic mode and about the realities of Egyptian life, while the counter-revolutionaries were more in favour of detached entertainment, usually adaptations of Western plays. As shall be shown in chapters three and four, the revolutionary Egyptian playwrights discussed in this thesis, defying the censor, dissected the woes of Egyptian life while providing the Egyptian literary canon with plays that excited and compelled their audiences.

The consistent and ruthless censorship of theatrical endeavours is a testament to the theatre's ability to subvert authority. I will define censorship in this thesis as any obstruction, through funding or use of authority, by the state or stakeholders that results in the banning of all or part of a play as intended by the playwright and their theatre collaborators. In the context of Egyptian theatre, and for the purposes of this thesis, censorship involves the cutting, editing, or banning of a play's publication or performance by the state appointed censor for reasons of craft, social propriety, or national security. Dictatorships have frequently made it a priority to exercise the greatest level of control over the public's access to the output of this elusive and ephemeral medium. Egyptian dramatists have faced regular duels with the censor since General de Division Kleber codified the jurisdiction of the Napoleonic police in Egypt in November 1800 (Ismail, 2018, p. 15). In today's democracies, censorship may take the form of depriving a theatre company of funding<sup>1</sup>, while in less subtle regimes, it can be as direct as depriving the playwright of their freedom (Selim, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> The consistent attacks by successive GOP presidents and Speakers of the House in the United States against the National Endowment for the Arts since its inception in 1965 are a prime example. The announced arguments for the elimination and/or defunding of the NEA ranged from performances being Anti-Christian to Anti-American/communist, to elitist.

Defying direct and indirect censorship, and with little to no publicity or marketing, some of the plays I will analyse in this thesis have managed to sustain, as I shall demonstrate, long runs of sold-out performances of original Egyptian texts that became entries in the Egyptian National Theatre's repertory during the era of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. These texts, once so successful in terms of box-office performance as well as publishing sales, are now out of print and, in the case of those not banned by the censor, never performed. Furthermore, the texts I shall analyse are no longer part of academic discourse, emphasising the original contribution of this thesis.

The focus of this thesis will be the extent to which socio-politically engaged Egyptian plays mirror and contribute to historical moments characterised by revolutionary social and political flux. To do so, I intend to examine the plays that punctuate the oeuvres of Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898 - 1987), Nu'mān Ashour (1918 - 1987) and Sa'ad Wahba (1925 - 1997). I will address the dramatic landscape before their contributions, their struggles with censorship, their relationships with the ruling regimes, and their influences on subsequent dramaturgy. By the end of this study, I hope to have identified a pattern of revolutionary dramaturgy which demonstrates the playwrights' resistance to the cultural hegemony of the ruling elites in the form of innovative, revolutionary and defiant dramaturgy, dialogue, character mix, and subject matter. In order to make that pattern easily discernible, I intend to unpack the terms "cultural hegemony", "censorship", "dramaturgy", and "revolutionary".

The reasons for choosing these three playwrights are predicated upon my opinion of their dramatic contributions as well as their political beliefs, an opinion predicated upon my readings of the plays, my participation in the production of several of them, my understanding of the time period (1952 - 1974) and my appreciation of the theatrical and metatheatrical difficulties faced



by Egyptian playwrights. Both revolutionary playwrights, Nu'mān Ashour and Sa'ad Wahba, produced plays that created regional, not just national, critical and public tidal waves that, in equal measures, scandalized and satiated strata of the press, the theatre industry, and the authorities. Each of the playwrights is in possession of a unique voice and style despite echoing others that preceded them; none can be said to copy another known playwright.

Prior to the analysis of the Egyptian playwrights, there will be a chapter that will critically survey the theatre landscape in Egypt between 1847 and 1974. These dates encompass the dramatic efforts that were spurred by what Ali al Ra'i, Louis Awad, and Yussuf Idriss refer to as an "indigenous Egyptian theatre" (Idriss, 2019). Ali al Ra'i believed that an indigenous Egyptian theatre should address contemporary social problems (Al Rai' 1975, p.167). Louis Awad also made the case for a socially committed and engaged theatre, but he stipulated the need for plays to be written in the vernacular ('Awad 1975, p.179). Yussuf Idriss, a successful 1960s playwright, novelist, short story writer and critic, argued that Egyptian playwrights should abandon the European model altogether and revive other modes of performance from Egyptian cultural lore such as *El Samer*, *El maqama*, and other forms popular during Abbasid and Mameluke periods. Marvin Carlson has investigated the most popular author from that period, Ibn Daniyal (1238 – 1310), and has analogously bestowed upon him the title of "The Arab Aristophanes" while making allowance for the fact that this playwright's output was exclusively performed by puppets and/or a mix of puppetry and shadow plays (Carlson, 2013). To highlight the extent to which the Egyptian post-1952 duo have revolutionized the Egyptian theatre in a manner equivalent to that of Ibsen's with European theatre, I shall provide a survey of some of the era-defining plays that preceded 1952. Part of the historical context provided in Chapter One will show a critical distinction between the pre and post-1952 theatre traditions: the search for an

Egyptian identity in the performed scripts ceased to be an individual effort and became a collective mission on the part of the now left-wing revolutionary and newly state-funded group of young playwrights. It is this nationalist streak which sets the Ashour and Wahba apart from Tawfiq Al-Hakim. There is also what Raymond Williams refers to as the unifying “structures of feeling” (Williams 1987, p.17)<sup>2</sup> whereby the 1950s and 1960s playwrights capture the feel of their time while crafting a new, provocative, and confrontational structure, replete with debates about the inevitable class warfare. In chapter One, using the theoretical framework that I shall compose later in this chapter, I shall address the pre-1952 landscape of plagiarised performances of western classics juxtaposed with adapted productions also of western classics. The pre-1952 theatre scene in Egypt was an era of appropriation with varying degrees of creativity by the actor-managers of the various privately-owned troupes who held up the British occupier’s theatre as the ideal to which they aspired. Appropriation in this thesis refers to the practice defined by Shaymaa Basheer as follows:

If the muse’s interference exceeds a certain limit, it will turn the translator into a co-author, claiming part of the adaptation process as the translator’s own—hence a degree of appropriation. If the adaptation is limited to minor additions and/or omissions it is normally passable and acceptable as more or less inevitable. However, if the muse’s work introduces changes which transform the character of the source text, then the adaptation will bespeak appropriation (2021, pp.73-4).

This definition and accompanying limitations are informed by Julie Sanders’ qualification that appropriation frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain, often through the actions of interpolation and critique as much as through the movement from one genre to others (2016, p.35).

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<sup>2</sup> Williams defines structures of feeling as “the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period.

Occasionally there would be playwrights who similarly idealized Continental European and, occasionally, American plays but who were unwilling to merely imitate the west. Chapter One will survey Playwrights such as Antun Yazbak, Ibrahim Ramzi and the Taymour brothers, playwrights who were too socially and politically conscious to allow their writings not to convey their messages. These playwrights, with varying degrees of success and exposure opportunities, were the proto-social realists who, as we shall see in Chapter One, probed the topics of colonialism, political corruption and socioeconomic injustice.

Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898 – 1987) and his works are well researched and documented by Western scholars. He is well represented in translation and his most prominent translators into English are Denys Johnson-Davies and William Hutchins. Having been sent to France to study law, Al-Hakim instead decided to satiate himself with the theatre and eventually became well versed in many French interpretations of theatrical forms of western culture from the Greeks to, at the time, Pirandello and Shaw. The play that I will analyse in this study is *Al Safqa (The Deal)* (1956), encapsulating as it does the playwright's attitude towards revolutionary dramaturgy as I will define it in the next chapter. *The Deal*, written in 1956-7, will exemplify Al-Haikm's middle period when he was appraising the early effects of the 1952 revolution and its effects on the arts in general and playwriting in particular. Chronologically, the play was written at the peak of the popularity of the Free Officers movement which took place on 23 July, 1952 and in the aftermath of the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. *The Deal* was one of the major hits, third highest attendance of the 1956/57 season at the Egyptian National Theatre (Rushdy 1966, p.260) and, until the late 1990s, has had successful though disparate runs at various state and university theatres. *The Deal* is an examination of the exploitation dynamic that characterizes the relationship between the foreign elites, the Egyptian elites, and the downtrodden Egyptian

peasants. Al-Hakim educates his urban audience about a world of corruption with which they are tragically disconnected, a world that was nurtured and sustained by the pre-1952 regime, but which should no longer be tolerated in revolutionary Egypt. Al-Hakim is consistently credited by western critics and a few Arab critics with the establishment of Egyptian realist playwriting. Roger Allen, Jacob Landau, and even M. M. Badawi insist on this fallacy which I believe to be the result of not having been exposed to enough mature realistic Egyptian plays written prior to Al-Hakim's own contributions to the sub-genre. I intend to reclassify Al-Hakim's play as counter-revolutionary writing that emphasises the unworthiness of the peasants to rule themselves.

The second Egyptian playwright I shall examine is Nu'mān 'Ashour (1918 – 1987). 'Ashour graduated from the Department of English Language and Literature at Fouad I University (now Cairo University), wrote short stories and radio plays, and laboriously wrote and rewrote his first play, *Al Maghmatis (The Trickcyclist)* between 1950-4 until he found a troupe to perform it in 1955 ('Ashour 1975, p. 126). On 14 October 1955, at the Cairo Opera House, Egyptian playwriting changed fundamentally. Gone were all the Egyptianized European topics that haunted the Egyptian stage since the 1860s. Actions and lines were organic and clearly motivated by events and given circumstances. The language was accessible and naturalistic. The issues under discussion were contemporary, realistic, compelling, and had, prior to the trendiness of Boal and Freire's Theatre of the Oppressed, the effect of a forum discussion in an ersatz parliament where the audience were deeply involved. Despite attacks from critics who seemed to agree that *The Trickcyclist* had no discernible Aristotelian plot, many of those same critics as well as the audiences embraced it. Most Egyptian columnists, most of whose writings I will survey in Chapter Three, were baffled when 'Ashour's subsequent plays *El Nass Elli taht (The*

*People Downstairs*) (1956) and *El Nass Elli Foq (The People Upstairs)* (1957) became the top plays and veritable cash cows of the National Theatre for several years. Like most of his generation of artists and intellectuals, ‘Ashour was a socialist whose playwriting advocated for ideals such as nationalization and the abolition of the Turko-Albanian aristocracy that nominally ruled Egypt while executing the will of the British Empire. ‘Ashour’s successful plays may be considered satirical comedies, but they are not without their tragic elements. The plays I shall be analysing are *El Maghmatis* (1950), *El Nass Elli Taht* (1956) and *Seema Awanta (This Movie is Trash)* (1959). ‘Ashour’s three plays serve to confront the counterrevolutionary forces in Egypt by educating the audience and pointedly subverting the forces of cultural hegemony and the status quo.

Sa’ad Eldin Wahba (1925 – 1997) was the most vocal, critical, and aggressive of the national playwrights. His scathing attacks on pre- and post-1952 corruption culminated in a volume of three plays rejected by the censor with the umbrella title of *Al masrahiyat al mamnoo’a (The Banned Plays, 1996)*. Wahba was a former police officer who expressed his grievances through writing. A prolific writer of full length as well as one and two-act plays and short stories, Wahba has penned some of the most iconic, popular, and influential stage and screenplays in Egyptian dramatic history. Amin El Ayyouty most eloquently sums up Wahba’s development as a playwright by identifying two main periods (Ayyouty, 1966, p.180). The first period is one where Wahba was steeped in socialist realism where he overlaps slightly with Al-Hakim and completely with ‘Ashour. This period was characterized by an authentic colloquial Egyptian Arabic that is rooted in rural inflections and terminology. Like Al-Hakim in *Al Safqa*, Wahba educated his urban audience about a rural reality that is distant from theirs in terms of both time and space. Unlike Al-Hakim, however, Wahba’s plots are more convincing, the

characterizations are more authentic, and the language is more realistic and varied. Despite their technical brilliance, these early plays do not challenge the status quo as much as the plays of the post-1967 military defeat period. This latter period is where the most subversive Wahba plays are to be found. The plays I have selected and that contribute to undermining the cultural hegemony of the regressive bourgeoisie and the corrupt elements of the post-1952 regime are: *El Masamir (The Nails)* (1967) and *El Ostaz (The Professor)* (1969). *El Masamir* is a warning against complacency on the part of the subaltern class and a welcome morale boost after the military defeat against Israel during the six-day war. Wahba is the first major Egyptian playwright to respond to the 1967 defeat and the disillusionment it inflicted upon the Egyptian population. *El Masamir* is a play that serves as an indictment of society as a whole, identifying the class structure and the class warfare as the real chink in the Egyptian armour. This argument runs contrary to the official party line which claimed that Egypt lost because the fight was against the USA rather than Israel. *El Masamir* employs a simple Aristotelian structure including a clear peripeteia and does not include any digressions from the central anti-colonialist struggle. *El Ostaz*, on the other hand, is a highly experimental time-travelling affair that employs symbolism that caused the play to be banned by the censor during Nasser's era and then President Sadat personally in 1980. *El Ostaz* has suffered from consistent censorship as well as a dearth of scholarship which this thesis should begin to correct. Both plays reject the concept of exploitation through any form of hegemony. In both plays the subaltern class possesses the power to eradicate its downtrodden status and forfeit that power due to a mix of infighting and exploitation by the bourgeoisie and the ruling class.

## **Theoretical Framework:**

The composite theoretical lens I shall create in this thesis shall serve to subject each analysed text to the following question: Is the play written within the revolutionary tradition prescribed by Egypt's historical context while interacting with the public sphere in a manner that promotes the progressive socialist principles of Nasserism? This theoretical lens will be a composite made up of Williams' structures of feeling, Gramsci's thoughts on cultural hegemony, the public sphere as defined by Habermas, and Engels's prescription of realism. To these I will add the critique of foreign influence on modern Egyptian drama by Mahmoud Amin El Alim, the definitions of "Egyptian Drama" by Louis Awad, M. M. Badawi, Farouk Abdel Qadir, and Ali Al Ra'i. This composite will guide the thesis by answering the following question: What functions have been assigned to Egyptian plays in times of socio-political transition and revolutionary flux within the post-1952 Egyptian context? The answer I hope to arrive at is that an Egyptian play composed post-1952 must engage, entertain and educate audiences, subvert and expose anti-revolutionary efforts while sustaining recognisably indigenous structures of feeling that help deliver the culture from the cultural hegemony of the former colonisers. There is also the need to invent a definition for what constitutes a revolutionary Egyptian play.

Two documents have led me to choose a particular set of lenses with which to create my composite: a letter to the editor of *Al-Masrah (The Theatre)* theatre journal from February 1967 (Mokhless, 1967, p. 1) and an excerpt from Egypt's *Al Mithaq al-watani (The National Charter)* (Abdel Nasser, 1962). *Al-Masrah* was an influential publication that included articles and reviews by the Egyptian theatre luminaries of the day in the private and public sectors as well as translations of contemporary European or American plays considered meritorious by the editor, Rashad Rushdy (1912 - 1983), Chair of Cairo University's English Department. The journal

would also occasionally include a translated article by a notable European or American theatre scholar. There would also be a state of the theatre article by Rashad Rushdy. Fronting every issue would be the letter to the editor. The February 1967 issue letter reaffirmed the policy of the state regarding the theatre fifteen years after the Free Officers revolution of July 1952:

We are all aware of the importance of the message of the theatre these days. It is a message that carries no less importance than that of other media and cultural outlets. The theatre carries the burden of cultivating the national spirit, raising awareness, and consolidating the faith of the citizens in the socialist and progressive principles called for by our modern state. The theatre achieves these objectives through the ethical, social and intellectual morals that can be attained by the audience after watching a theatre performance. This process will help audiences abstain from the dregs that remain of feudalism and imperialism. An audience member will have seen, heard, and thought... This is why the state considers the theatre to be a structure that is worthy of care, supervision, and guidance (Mokhless, 1967, p. 1)

This abbreviated manifesto acquires more authority when one realizes that this contributor to the journal was a key member of the state-run *Tali'a (Pioneers)* theatre troupe in the coastal city of Port-Said, representing the party-line par excellence. The statement highlights the elevated status of the theatre as more than entertainment, but also a highly influential forum. This forum may also be seen as a propaganda outlet, but that does not diminish the influence of the theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. The excerpt stresses the socialist mentality of both the state and its theatre. This socialist aspect leads to the second document, *Al-Mithaq al-watani (The National Charter)*. Written in 1962, the charter states the objectives and principles of the nascent revolutionary state after ten years of turmoil and improvisation. In the Third Chapter of the charter, the Egyptian arts scene is acknowledged as both a regional hub as well as one of the pillars of the Egyptian struggle against imperialism (Abdel Nasser 1962, p. 29). The terms used to signify the arts scene are revealing since "*masrahan lefonounih*" literally means "a theatre for its arts" (29). This choice of words is one of many indicators that the Egyptian lawmakers were thinking in theatrical phraseology. The verbs used are all theatre parlance such as *tagseed (physicalization)*,



*tashkhees* (impersonation), and *tahye'at el mashhad* (setting the scene). Chapter Six of the charter, "The Inevitability of the Socialist Solution", contains a section which delineates the two paths to achieving the people's total hegemony over all factors of production:

Firstly: The creation of a strong public sector that is capable of leading the progressive charge in all fields and that bears the main responsibility for the national development plan. Secondly: The existence of a non-opportunistic private sector that participates in the development plan within the framework set for it. Provided that the people's oversight over both sectors is comprehensive (74-5).

This brand of socialism, which eventually became known as Nasserism, is clearly derived from the base and superstructure components in Marx and Engels's *Capital*. It is essentially the direct result of the "annihilation" of accumulated private property and "narrow" and "primitive" limitations of societies guided by the "vandalism" to which Marx refers (Marx 1938, p. 787).

Of Marx's other writings, I will also be incorporating Marx's "Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy" where Marx attempts to reconcile artistic development with historical development and the material substructure of society (Marx, 1971). I will also use Marx's ideas about revolutionary acts, particularly the revolution that leaves the "pillars of the house standing" (Marx 1970, p. 9). Of Lenin's, I will draw on "Party Organization and Party Literature" where parameters are clearly defined by writing as part of a whole:

What is this principle of party literature? It is not simply that, for the socialist proletariat, literature cannot be a means of enriching individuals or groups: it cannot, in fact, be an individual undertaking, independent of the common cause of the proletariat. Down with non-partisan writers! Down with literary supermen! Literature must become *part* of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and a screw" of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organised, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work (Solomon 1979, p. 180).

The tone of exclusion applied to elitist and capitalist works in the Egyptian National Charter clearly finds its roots in these criteria and sentiments expressed by Lenin. Self-enrichment also excludes private-sector theatre from the revolutionary category.

## **Methodology:**

I will apply close reading and contextualisation to plays by progressive revolutionary writers to highlight and analyse the transformations in dramaturgy that took place between 1955 and 1970. The Egyptian revolution which took place on 23 July, 1952 was a movement that had a clearly articulated intention to subvert the previous order. The Free Officers, as they called themselves, broadcast the following six tenets of the revolution over the national broadcast service:

1. Ending feudalism [in Egypt]
2. Ending Colonialism [in Egypt]
3. Ending the supremacy of capitalists
4. The institution of a sound democratic life
5. The institution of a strong national army
6. The institution of social justice. (Sadat and Naguib, 1952)

A defining element of the revolutionary act was the obvious dichotomy where the first three tenets ended the defining features of the past regimes while the latter three instituted replacements. Another defining element of the revolutionary act of these officers was the choice of targets to eliminate; all targets were popularly despised by the masses, as evinced by the chain of popular mass demonstrations that preceded the Free Officers' movement.

Feudalism was a cause of peasant oppression and exploitation and was one of the key reasons for repeated conflagrations in rural areas where the feudal lords resorted to summoning armed personnel to subdue the riotous peasants. Such was the popularity of the occasional peasant uprisings, that folk tales and ballads were composed to honour the men and women who led any resistance to the British-supported Pashas (Turkish term for Lord). Adham El Sharqawy

and Aly El Zaybaq were two of the most popular Robin-Hood-like characters whose exploits the local bards would use to regale the throngs of listeners in village squares. The end of feudal Egypt was a popular revolutionary ambition.

Colonialism was a natural popular target due to its affiliation with feudalism and its affront to the dignity of the Egyptian people. The British occupation started in 1882 and had officially ended in 1922. Nevertheless, the British had retained their control over the Mohamed Ali dynasty that had previously furnished the Ottoman Empire with a chain of viceroys. The de facto ruler of the kingdom of Egypt until 23 July 1952 was the British Ambassador in Cairo (Thornhill, 2002, p. 133; Mahgoub et al., 2023, p. 79). Despite stringent censorship, colonialism was such a popular target that the popular street theatre and rhapsodes as well as established playwrights such as Mohammed Taymour and Ibrahim Ramzi would use thinly veiled metaphors in their plays to demand independence. The end of colonialism was a popular revolutionary ambition.

The aristocratic capitalist elite presided over an economy that caused 93% of the rural population of Egypt to live below the poverty line (Tignor, 1984, 217). “The most militant political actors in Egypt tended to be those with deep-seated socioeconomic grievances; they fulminated against capitalism as well as against imperialism” (215). The maldistribution of wealth caused an income gap that, by 1952, had become unsustainable. Popular melodramas produced by aristocrats such as Youssef Wahbi, while never actually condemning capitalism, repeatedly depicted the grinding poverty in Egypt while laying the blame on the laziness and unworthiness of the Egyptian peasantry. The eradication of the unregulated capitalism that prevailed in Egypt was such a popular request, that the demands for this popular revolutionary

ambition aligned the polar opposites of the Muslim Brotherhood with its radical view of Islam, with the full range of revolutionary activists, including extreme Leninists.

The need for a functional democracy had a sloganeering allure in 1952 due to the fraud that pervaded the Egyptian parliamentary elections, and which was highlighted by frequent dissolutions of parliament during the period of British occupation. Selma Botman emphasises that the anti-British Guerrilla war of 1951-2 not only expressed Egyptian “impatience with the British presence”, that war also demonstrated the concrete reality that “the existing institutions and leaders disappointed the majority of the population to the extent that they were now ready for and in support of a major change in the country” (1985, 63). While the Free Officers never specified the type of democracy they espoused, preferring to couch the tenet in abstract terms, time eventually showed that a rule of the people, represented by the officers, was as close as the revolutionaries ever came to the understanding of the term. Free and fair elections within a multi-party system were not to be seen in Egypt until 2012.

The Egyptian military, ill-equipped, demotivated, poorly trained, and fighting in the name of a King in whom they had no faith, was a microcosm of the entire nation in that it demanded revolutionary measures. The Free Officers revolution was born in the military in the aftermath of being used as cannon-fodder against Rommel’s forces in North Africa and a crippling defeat by the newly formed state of Israel in 1948. Rumours, both substantiated and exaggerated, of malfunctioning weapons and expired ammunition, fuelled further hatred of the King and the British, both accused of causing the defeat of the Arab states against the nascent Israel, amongst the Egyptian public in general and the military in particular. (Nutting 1972, p. 28).

The maldistribution of wealth and social status in Egypt has historically been a consistent feature of life in Egypt. As the number of literate people, schools, universities, and scholarships to the west increased, so did the awareness of social justice and Marxism. Educated Egyptians were gradually exposed to democracy, liberalism, progressive taxation, various interpretations of Marxism, and many other values that challenged the Egyptian status quo. The Soviet Union's forays prior to 1943 into the Anglo-French colonies via the Comintern recognized the various left-wing societies, organizations and trade unions that called for social justice and workers' rights such as the Egyptian Communist Party under Salama Moussa (Botman, 1985, p. 54). Until 1952, anyone in Egypt who actively demanded social justice, progressivism, women's rights, or workers' rights was labelled a communist regardless of whether or not they subscribed to any form of Marxism. When the Free Officers promised social justice, they immediately made good on that particular tenet by abolishing all titles of nobility and aristocracy as well as all the social privileges that came with such titles.

These six tenets of the revolution form a foundational document that, at least until the publication of the National Charter of 1962, guided the spirit of post-revolutionary Egypt. These six empirical principles were either adhered to or rejected altogether by the dramatists of the Nasser era. How a playwright positioned themselves vis-à-vis the six tenets of the revolution, gives a strong indication as to whether they were revolutionary or counter-revolutionary in their dramaturgical approach.

The National Charter (1962) is a theoretical and historical framework intended to guide the laws and future constitutions of Egypt. The document begins by reviewing and unpacking the six tenets of the revolution. During the televised presentation delivered by Gamal Abdel Nasser himself, the audience cheered at the mention of each of the tenets, socialism, and the names of

the Egyptian revolutionaries who stood up to imperial interventions in Egypt. The National Theatre and all other institutions administered by the Ministry of Culture and the Broadcasting/Information Services would have had to conform to the spirit of the National Charter in general and specifically the sections that addressed cultural activities, production and the “socialist solution” (Abdel Nasser, 1962, p. 74).

Nasser discussed cultural activities and national cultural projects in romanticised terms using poetic language. Nasser essentially portrayed Egyptian cultural and intellectual supremacy among the Arabs as both the source of colonialism and its cure. The structure of the argument depicts culture as a double-edged sword:

And it is no coincidence that these blossoming flowers on the banks of the Nile were the bright spots that drew the attention of the elements that aspired to progress to Egypt from all parts of the region. This made of Egypt, during the second half of the Nineteenth Century, a pulpit for all Arab thinking, a theatre for Arab arts, and a symposium for all Arab revolutionaries, crossing real and imagined borders. The Imperialist cartels that possessed special interests in this region felt that this new hope was gathering steam and momentum. Britain in particular never turned its gaze away from Egypt since it guaranteed the security of the passage to India and so Britain weighed in on the Egyptian revolutionary struggle of the time between the popular forces of Egypt and the alien adventurers of the Mohamed Ali Dynasty. (29)

This quasi-Hegelian thesis-antithesis structure left the synthesis to the cheers of the audience and the expected enthusiasm of the reader. That implied synthesis seems to be a motivational prompt to be prepared because once a strategically important region removes itself from an imperial sphere of Influence, that region will immediately become a target for direct imperial intervention. Nasser does not allow the optimistic tone of the National Charter to wane or waver. After demonstrating how Egypt fell victim to British occupation in 1882, he reminds the audience and readers that the cultural supremacy of the country resulted in revolutionary voices to come forth and eventually galvanise the Egyptian population against British rule and pave the way for complete independence (31).

Revolutionary playwrights such as Nu'mān 'Ashour and Sa'ad Wahba had lived lives that were guided by Marxist writings encountered during their university studies – 'Ashour studied English Literature— or through their involvement with secret revolutionary societies. Sa'ad Wahba, a Police Academy graduate, was self-educated when it came to Marxist and other socialist writings. Both playwrights were fervent believers in subversive action and the need to avoid reactionary activity since it was an inadequate substitute for revolutionary change. This thesis will demonstrate that these two playwrights' writings and approach to dramaturgy was revolutionary in content and form, thus standing in stark contrast to the counter-revolutionary writings and dramaturgy of Tawfiq Al-Hakim. Therefore, to determine the extent to which an Egyptian play or playwright is revolutionary, I will apply the following six criteria:

1. Revolutionary Egyptian plays must engage with and interrogate one or more of the six tenets of the 1952 revolution (Sadat and Naguib, 1952).
2. Every revolutionary play needs to demonstrate that the purpose of its performance is in keeping with the spirit of the 1962 National Charter, especially when interrogating topics related to imperialism, capitalism, and the exploitation of the working class. Furthermore, a revolutionary Egyptian play should, whenever possible, take the side of a strong national public sector against a private sector that is not answerable to public oversight. ('Abdel Nasser, 1962)
3. Egyptian revolutionary plays broke the rules of Aristotle's *Poetics* as understood by pre-revolutionary Egyptian critics. Egyptian critics of the 1960s generally followed the interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics* delivered by Prof. Rashad Rushdy in his 1968 book *Theory of Drama from Aristotle to the Present* (Rushdy 2000). In that book, Rushdy disseminated the teachings he had confined to the Department of English at Cairo

University, of which he was the Chairperson. Rushdy's influence as the University of Leeds educated Chair of Egypt's foremost literature department, editor-in-chief of *Al Masrah (The Theatre)* –Egypt's sole theatre journal, risqué playwright and prolific translator, all came after Ashour's first five plays and were contemporaneous with Wahba's rise.

4. A revolutionary Egyptian playwright must be clearly providing the revolution with a play that furthers its aims rather than personally financially enrich the author (Lenin, 1974).

5. A revolutionary Egyptian play must generate a substantial following in the state-owned theatre. (Gramsci and Antonio, 1994)

6. The Egyptian revolutionary play must communicate the “structures of feeling”, “lived experience”, “semantics”, or “tonality” of its period. It should indicate the residual corresponding elements of the preceding period. The play's “feel” should provide a precursor to a succeeding period (Williams, 1987).

Due to issues of censorship and an impoverished publishing infrastructure in Egypt, there is a dearth of theoretical writing in English or Arabic that can guide researchers through the critical annals of Egyptian theatre composed during the 1950s and 1960s. To compound matters further, the 1970s was a decade that saw Egyptian President Sadat mount an Islamist backed counter revolution against all the socialist aspects of Nasser's Egypt with a particular emphasis on the theatre, which was seen by the majority of the middle class, urban and rural, as Nasser's greatest cultural achievement. Nasser had, after all, provided unprecedented and unmatched funding for the theatre to the extent that, during his fourteen-year tenure as president, Nasser had broken the monopoly over theatre performance spaces previously held by Cairo and Alexandria



and helped his ministers of culture to ensure that every governorate in Egypt had what was known as a “cultural palace.” Sadat’s counter revolution, discussed in Ghali Shoukri’s definitive text, *Egypt: Portrait of a President, 1971-1981: The Counter-Revolution in Egypt: Sadat's Road to Jerusalem* (1982), illustrates the constant threat of counter-revolution and the struggle for cultural hegemony between progressive forces of independence and the regressive forces of conservatism.

## Chapter 1: History of Modern Egyptian Theatre

It was as if there was a conspiracy to end the role of the Theatre Trust and call curtains on public sector theatre. Eleven theatres where a kaleidoscope of laughter dances, laughter at the expense of the duped paying audiences, their minds, their hearts, and the Theatre Trust. All private sector theatres against a solitary public sector theatre. It was a textbook conspiracy. The actors have left the state's theatres for the commercial theatres. Serious playwrights have abandoned writing and their pens and simply watched from the side-lines, having lost all faith in the [new] reading committees. Isn't the French theatre full of texts that may be plagiarised? It was a conspiracy maliciously and deliberately crafted to destroy the Egyptian theatre and halt its progress (Dawara, 1989, p. 25).

To contextualize the writings of the three playwrights under study, I will contrast two theories that attempt to explain the origin of Egyptian theatre. I will subsequently use the theories as a point of departure to list the most significant playwrights and troupes that shaped the Modern Egyptian theatre landscape leading up to the 1952 coup. I will then explain the relationship between the theatre and the state before and after 1952. Finally, I will demonstrate that the shifting attitudes towards translation and adaptation of foreign texts are a function of the quality of playwriting and the patronage it enjoys from the state.

### **1.1 Genesis of Modern Egyptian Theatre:**

The origins of the modern Egyptian theatre are an unresolved debate that began in 1962<sup>3</sup> and only increases in intensity and controversy with time. The debate is a function of variables that are further problematised by slipshod archival documentation, dubious political motivations, questionable academic rigour, and relentless state censorship<sup>4</sup>. The main variables of the debate

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<sup>3</sup> More details about this debate, initiated by Youssef Idris, will be provided in the next section of the chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Archival documentation is incomplete and/or primitive at best in Egypt's top university libraries and the Higher Institute of Theatre. Scholars have confided to me personally that they purchase many of their archival materials from second-hand books dealers at Ataba Square in Downtown Cairo and hoard them for future use. It is evident from the writings of many academics that a substantial amount of their research focuses on "never-before-seen" material/evidence that cannot be found through legitimate academic channels. The political motivations of Egyptian are evidently dubious if one merely looks at some of the highly charged and politicized titles of textbooks and monographs that applaud Nasser during his lifetime and

are: what qualifies as theatre? Is the Egyptian oral performance tradition to be considered? Are many of the most established Egyptian theatre scholars justified in equating Egyptian theatre with Arab theatre? How is an academic source verified given the near absence of oversight and academic rigour in the Arab world during colonial times? Are adaptations and translations to be considered part of the Egyptian theatre canon? Should foreign theatre in Egypt be included in Egyptian theatrical history? Should Aristotle provide the ultimate yardstick against which Egyptian plays should be measured? Each of the two schools of thought below provides contrasting answers to each of these questions, thereby positing two origins of modern Egyptian theatre which differ in chronology and terminology.

The first school, led by Youssef Idris, defines theatre as any performance in the presence of an audience and claims the origin of modern Egyptian theatre to be the Thirteenth Century mimetic efforts of *karagöz*<sup>5</sup> thus presuming an uninterrupted and unchanged form that persisted for seven hundred years, while the second school, led by Ali Al Ra'i, Farouq Abdel Qadir and

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attack him after his death. An example of scholarly hypocrisy would be Louis 'Awad's *Aqne'at Al Nassiriya al sab'a* (The Seven Masks of Nasserism), a blatant attempt at revisionist history written five years after Nasser's death. For proof of the lack of academic rigour in Egyptian scholarly work, not only did Mahmoud Saqr, the Head of Egypt's Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, announce in 2015 that, globally, Egypt "maintains the highest rates of research plagiarism", but also perusal of a random sample of research output will demonstrate that citations are few and far between, with the majority of the work being a rehashing of the work of established scholars, foreign and domestic. It is also telling that peer reviewed theatre journals reach out to only two theatre scholars in Egypt, the Late Hazem Azmy and Mahmoud El Lozy. Relentless state censorship is evident in the sheer volume of letters of acceptance and rejection as well as post viewing reports written by censors. The letters and reports cover every single play performed in Egypt from 1923. Prof. Sayed Ali Ismail published Part 1 of these letters and reports, covering 1923-88, in 2017. Censorship is so aggressive and knows no bounds in Egypt to the extent that state security troopers shut down the theatre of the American University in Cairo (officially American soil) in 2000 due to a play's political stance vis-à-vis the 1973 October war with Israel.

<sup>5</sup> Turkish word meaning "Black-eye". A misnomer that has come to mean a conflation of puppetry and shadow plays. Will be further explained later in the chapter.

Tawfiq Al-Hakim, proposes that the origins are a wholesale import of European theatre during the Nineteenth Century<sup>6</sup>.

## **1.2: Modern theatre as an evolution of indigenous mimetic performance:**

One of the earliest formal academic studies into the origin of modern Egyptian theatre was actually a broader study of the origins of Arabic drama by Dr. Ibrahim Hamada (1963)<sup>7</sup>. Hamada's study reintroduced an oculist called Muhammad Jamal al-Din Ibn Daniyal (1248-1311) into the debate regarding the genesis of Arabic Drama. Ibn Daniyal, recently referred to by Marvin Carlson as "The Arab Aristophanes,"<sup>8</sup> is unique among the performed authors of the thirteenth century in Egypt and the Arab world in that three of his texts are extant. The existence of these three plays is noteworthy for both the historical value as well as a confirmation that, in the largely oral performance tradition that prevailed in the Arab world at the time, a written tradition, no matter how minor, did exist in parallel. Hamada's study was predicated upon the assumption that Ibn Daniyal's point of departure was the classical Arabic subgenre of the

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<sup>6</sup> For a recent chronology of the first school's claims, see Ceccato, R. (2006) "Drama in the post-classical period: a survey," in Allen, R. and Richards, D. S. (eds) *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature), pp. 345–368. Ceccato's timeline spans the thirteenth till the nineteenth century. For a similar chronology of the second school's claims, as well as a guide to the thought process of that school, see Badawi, M. M. (1988) *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and *ازدهار وسقوط المسرح المصري* (1979) فاروق عبد القادر. Dimashq: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Irshād al-Qawmī. [Abdel Qadir, F. (1979) *The Flourishing and Collapse of Egyptian Theatre*. Damascus: Ministry of Culture and National Guidance]. A longer list is to be found in the appendices.

<sup>7</sup> A booklet by Ahmed Taymour Pasha, written in the 1920s but only printed posthumously in 1957, predates Hamada's study. The booklet includes rare samples of shadow plays and monologues from puppet theatre. Taymour, A. (1957) *Shadow Theatre, Plays, and Crafted Statues in the Arab World*. Cairo: The Taymour Family publishing committee.

<sup>8</sup> Carlson, M. (2013) "The Arab Aristophanes," 47(2), pp. 151–166. Carlson cites uses of scatology and lyricism as justification for the idea that Aristophanes' plays adumbrated the works of Ibn Daniyal. Carlson's celebrated essay is highly problematic since, in the twenty-nine footnotes, not once does he mention an Arab scholar or the Jacob Landau's pioneering effort *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema* (1958).

*maqama*, “a tale told in rhyming prose with some verse, often about the tricks of an articulate vagabond who has to live by his wits through impersonating other characters” (Badawi 1988, p. 2). Hamada provides edited versions of the three extant plays discussed in his and Carlson’s writings<sup>9</sup>. Carlson does not mention the *maqama*, but he does contextualize the plays while providing commentary and plots that are useful to a non-Arabic reading audience. Taken together, Hamada and Carlson bookend, so far, the attempt to provide a premodern origin for Arabic theatre while maintaining a link between that origin and classical Arabic poetry. Within this framework, Yussuf Idris (1927-1991), one of Egypt’s leading novelists and short story writers of the 1960s, coined the term *tamasruh* (theatricalization) (Al Ra’i 1975, p. 167), by which he meant total immersion and commitment on the part of all collaborators, including the audience. Idris’s theoretical writings were focused on his search for an indigenous identity for Egyptian theatre. Ali al-Rai interprets Idris’s theoretical call to arms as “the formula... recommended for a truly national drama” (167). As such, Idris has jettisoned the poetry-based Arab *maqama* model and adopted the more performance oriented Egyptian *samir*, an arena style performance intended to pass the time in rural areas of Egypt (167). This switch has had the effect of highlighting the difference in genres and, politically more significant, removing the Arab connection and identifying Egypt’s theatre as an indigenous Egyptian enterprise owing no influence to foreigners. Idris stresses that every nation has its own naturally occurring theatre, born of its social mores. Today’s academics would be forgiven for thinking of Idris as a proto-performance studies scholar when he defines theatre in the following terms:

This congregation, these theatrical forms, occur frequently in our daily lives; weddings, funerals, public occasions, the many festivities that the human race has invented as an excuse —oft comic— for congregation. Examples would be a circumcision, rainfall, the harvest, religious events. Further examples would include evening revels in homes after

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<sup>9</sup> The three plays are *Tayf al khayal* (The Shadow Spectrum), *Ajeeb wa Gharib* (Wondrous and Weird), and *Al motayyam wa alda’ei’ al yateem* (The Infatuated and the Lost Orphan).

the end of the working day, the impromptu gatherings in the marketplace after the cessation of market activities. (Idris 2019, p. 10)

Idris here tends to conflate rituals, customs, and the theatrical under one umbrella in an attempt to demonstrate that all theatre has common human roots. Despite Idris's minor divergence from the hypotheses of Hamada, Taymour, Landau, and others, he similarly advocates for a pre-colonial well of tradition from which "truly national" (Idris 2019, p.41) playwrights should draw. Idris's school of thought rejected plays that were adapted from non-Egyptian plays and would not hear of them as entries in the Egyptian theatre canon. In his "Response to the Importers and Beginning to Know our Own Features", Idris rejects Aristotle and his unities (2019, p. 29). Idris welcomed foreign theatre performances, but only as a curiosity or supplementary culture, but not as a staple in the Egyptian audiences' theatre diet and certainly not as ingredients of Egyptian dramaturgy (27). To provide practical support for his theory, Idris penned *El Farafir (The Fools)* for the National Theatre's 1963/64 season. Despite his theoretical insistence on audience participation, Idris's play, luckily filmed for all to witness its theoretical failure, was performed on a proscenium stage and had limited, awkward, and forced interactions with the audience. It is precisely this lack of consistency of form that weakens Idris's argument regarding the "truly national" theatre, despite the language of anti-orientalism in which he attempted to couch it. *El Farafir* was successful at the National Theatre box office, a questionable metric that will be further discussed here and in chapters 2-4, since it was watched by 10,249 patrons across 38 performances, the second highest viewership that season (Rushdy 1966, p. 267). But it was not the hit that Idris predicted when he claimed that his play would fare better than the "plays that are not the Egyptian theatre we desire and crave" (Idris 2019, p. 41).

Straddling the divide between the two schools is the Arab world's most prolific playwright, Tawfiq Al-Hakim. As I shall demonstrate in Chapter Two, Al-Hakim elevated the status of written plays by imbuing them with a veneer of respectability and intellectualism. He makes significant strides in bridging the gap between the focus on entertainment that may be found in the private sector and the cultural refinement for which the state troupes strove. He also considered himself a bridge between Egyptian theatre and its European counterpart. Al-Hakim concedes that modern Egyptian theatre owes its existence to the European tradition or, as he called it, the "template". In 1967, having written almost sixty plays, Al-Hakim wrote a study called *Qalibuna al masrahy (Our Theatrical Template)* (Al-Hakim, 1967) where he adapted excerpts from six Western plays (*Agamemnon, Hamlet, Don Juan, The Cherry Orchard, Six Characters in Search of an Author, and An Angel Comes to Babylon*) so as to conform to his vision of an Arab theatrical template. The impetus behind Al-Hakim's project was his observation that

All our output, whether indigenous or foreign, has always operated within global forms and templates. Even the *Samir* itself, including its theatrical elements, only came to the fore after the arrival of the French expedition in Egypt and their introduction of acting as described by Al-Jabarti. This is all part of a natural route, in my opinion, for our country's theatrical art to take. Nay it is the natural route for all human art; art always begins with transmission and culminates in originality... Our theatre also began with transmission and adaptation of European theatre... Our theatre went from *Samir* to translation and adaptation and has now arrived at the stage of original composition... Can we now exit from the framework of the global template and innovate a template and form that is rooted in our land and the depths of our culture? (Al-Hakim 1967, pp. 12-13)

Al-Hakim is advocating a modern *samir*, an Egyptian rhapsode that conflates what Idris would call the "imported" (Idris 2019, p. 41) Western form with what little has been orally transmitted of the Egyptian folklore. It is important to describe the scene as Al-Hakim penned it. A *hakawaty* (storyteller) who provides exposition and characterization is usually discovered on stage. A *muqallid* (Male Imitator) enacts the male roles while a *muqallida* (Female Imitator) enacts the

female roles. Al-Hakim makes no effort to hide the DNA of the three actors' format and its connection to the Greek model where actors played multiple roles.

The second school claims that modern Egyptian theatre is a culturally transmitted form that was consciously copied by Westernized men who were the Occidentalists progenitors of the first Arab actor-managers. M. M. Badawi begins his definitive study, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* by categorically stating that “[It] is an established fact that modern Arabic drama was borrowed from the West independently by Marun al-Naqqash in Lebanon in 1847 and by Ya’qub Sannu’ in Egypt in 1870” (Badawi 1988, p. 2). Badawi defines drama as “an art form in which an action is ‘imitated’ through dialogue spoken by human actors on a stage” (Badawi 1992, p. 329)<sup>10</sup>. This definition of drama is the key difference between the two schools of thought. Egyptian theatre historians who watched the plays that are the subject of this thesis from the front rows were predominantly advocates of the concept of the imported theatre model. Mohamed Mandour, in his *El masrah el nathry* (The Prose Theatre), was one of the earliest academics to not only name Lebanese actor-manager Marun al-Naqqash (1817 – 1855) as the first dramatist to import European theatre into the Arab world, but he also painted a full picture of Naqqash, complete with qualifications and, of vital importance to 1960s Arab academics, motivations (2019, pp. 7-10). Mandour assured his readers that Naqqash, portrayed as a quasi-angelic character who died at the young age of 38, was enamoured with theatre due to the medium’s ability to soundly advise and guide an audience (8). Both Mandour and Badawi identify Naqqash’s tendency to employ the colonialist term “civilizing” when referring to the purpose of theatre, but neither scholar ascribes orientalist motivations to the usage of the trope

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<sup>10</sup> Badawi, M. M. (1992). Arabic Drama: Early Developments. *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 329. In this particular publication, Badawi deliberately uses the terms “drama” and “theatre” interchangeably while juxtaposing them with “the theatrical”.



(Badawi 1992, p. 331). One of Mandour's sources, an 1869 tome with the title *Arzat Lebnan* (*The Cedar of Lebanon*), provides the year of Naqqash's first theatre performance: 1848 (Mandour 2019, p. 7). The performance that night was of *Al Bakhil* (*The Miser*), a play whose main character was inspired by Moliere's Harpagon, but whose plot was entirely Naqqash's own, an authorial claim highly contested until the seventies when the Arabic text became more available through the efforts of Mohamed Youssef Najm (1961). Naqqash affixed a prologue to the beginning of the play, a monologue which expounded upon the nature of this new art called theatre and which extolled its many virtues, especially its civilizing ability. The following is an extract from that sung opening monologue, extolling the virtues of theatre:

As I travelled through the European realms, and the foreign domains, I spied amongst the media and facilities intended to discipline the nature of men, theatres where they played strange games and told fantastical tales. Through these stories to which they alluded, the tales they formed and upon which they rely, through the apparent symbols and jest as well as the implied truth and reformation, the [theatres] attract, through their wisdom, monarchs from atop their thrones (Al-Naqqash cited in Ali 2016b, p. 24. My Translation).

That particular play began the still cherished practice of most Arab dramatists to include musical numbers in plays even if they seemed intrusive to westernised Arab critics since the songs did not grow organically from the plot. The actor-manager who brought Marun al-Naqqash's form to Egypt, along with his own, was his nephew, Selim. Selim al-Naqqash (d. 1884) "in 1876 took his troupe to Egypt, thereby setting an example for several gifted Lebanese and Syrians who were attracted by what they had heard about the Khedive's munificence and encouragement of the theatre arts" (Badawi 1992, p. 334). Farouk Abdel Qadir, a vociferous proponent of the imported theatre school, was unequivocal in his rejection of the theories of Youssef Idris, whom he indirectly accused of clutching at imaginary straws in the Egyptian oral tradition by invoking the *samir* (Idris 2019, p. 14; Abdel Qadir 2015, p. 5). Abdel Qadir highlights the main point of

contention between his understanding of theatre and that of Idris, and, by extension, the schools of thought: the absence of the actor in the *maqamah* and the *samir* as a result of religious taboo (Abdel Qadir 2015, pp. 5-6). Whereas Abdel Qadir was of the opinion that some conservative religious accusations of lewdness had obstructed the acting profession until the nineteenth century, Idris did not consider the absence of actors (in the western thespian sense) to have disqualified the *samer* from being considered plays (Abdel Qadir 2015, p. 17). An important voice in the pro-western/imported theatre school is that of Louis Awad (1915 – 1990), a scholar who represents the counter-revolution in Egypt and therefore considers Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918 – 1970) and his regime to have been a nightmare in every sense, especially theatrically ('Awad 1975, p. 179). Awad explicitly dismisses Idris's notions about the theatrical nature of Egypt and proceeds to describe how this European import has served as a mirror that reflects Egypt's social status at any point in time after the 1869 inauguration of the Cairo Opera House (180). El Sayed Ali Ismail has recently cast doubt about the identity of the actual Egyptian pioneer who imported the Western theatre model into Egypt. Sayed Ali Ismail, Professor of Theatre Criticism at Helwan University in Egypt, has led the charge against Ya'qub Sannu' in (2001) *Muhakamat masrah Ya'qub Sannu' (The Theatre of Ya'qub Sannu' on Trial)* (Ismail 2016a). In this book and a number of articles and debates, Ismail has gone from insisting that Sannu' was not the pioneer previous scholarship makes him out to be, to claiming that no such playwright existed at all. Nevertheless, Ismail still concedes that modern Egyptian theatre is based on an imported European model. The infighting that exists amongst this group of scholars is a matter of crediting Ya'qub Sannu' (1839-1912) or Uthman Jalal (1829 – 1894) with the title of Egyptian theatre pioneer. This particular investigation is a matter of intense historiographical debate and is beyond the scope of this thesis. Essentially, all subscribers to this school concur

that Modern Egyptian theatre was imported from the West in terms of form and structure. They all further agree that the cultural transmission of this form started as translation and adaptation of French, Italian, and British texts with *Arabian Nights* stories subsequently added to the source material by dramatists who were not fluent in foreign languages (Badawi 1992, p. 341). The most strongly felt European influences were also agreed to have been Molière, Goldoni, and to a much lesser extent, Sheridan (Sadgrove 2007, p. 91), with the *Arlecchino* being one of the most popular stock characters in Egypt and the Levant (Landau 1958, 52-3).

Ali al- Rai (1920 – 1999) understood both schools of thought and attacked neither. Instead, al-Rai identified the source of resentment felt by Idris and others towards Western hegemony over the theatrical form in their country: Aristotelian structure. Al-Rai points out that, “Arab scholars of old could neither understand nor appreciate Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and their rendering of the terms ‘tragic’ and ‘comic’ bore witness to this” (Al Rai’ 1975, p. 171).

### **1.3. Theatre writing under British occupation:**

Both schools contesting the genesis of Egyptian theatre agreed that the popularisation of theatrical performance reached its peak under British occupation (1882 - 1952). Egypt had been an Ottoman vassal state since 1517, with Mameluke governors (*Wali*) and, starting with Ismail in 1867, viceroys (*Khedive*). This three-century epoch was interrupted by Napoleon’s Expedition (1798-1801) and effectively ended in 1882 when the Wolseley task force defeated the nationalist forces of Ahmed ‘Urabi (1841 – 1911) and began a military occupation of Egypt that lasted until 1952. That British occupation was nominally ended on 28 February 1922. For the following thirty years, the confused, independence-seeking, and politically involved Egyptian identity gave rise to a similarly characterized theatre identity.

Prior to the nominal independence of 1922, many Egyptian playwrights had been experimenting with their dramaturgy in an effort to find a recognizably Egyptian voice for their theatre, while others, more mindful of their economic prosperity, were focused on writing material that would be successful at the box office. To begin with, the only successful theatre troupes in Egypt were the Levantine successors of the Naqqash family. Most notable among those were the troupes of Abu Khalil al-Qabbani (1833 – 1903), Sulaiman al-Qarhadi (d. 1909) and Iskandar Farah (1851 – 1916). These troupes, being foreign, from the Levant, and subject to highly complex censorship and commercial British rules (Ismail 2018), were heavily reliant on Khedivial patronage in order to remain viable and operational (Ismail 2016b, p.298). This quasi-royal patronage entailed a strict avoidance of political messaging, subliminal or otherwise as well as several entries in their repertoire that the social elites would recognise as intellectual such as musical adaptations of *Othello*, *Le Cid*, and *Télémaque* (Landau 1958, p. 69). The complement to this largely musical theatre fare was a substantial array of vaudeville, belly dancing, and recitation acts. Most theatre production was concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria (Al Rihani 1949, p.31). The struggle against this framework installed by the British occupation eventually spawned revolutionary characters, temperaments, and playwrights.

The first successful Egyptian endeavour, Sheikh Salama Hijazi (1855 – 1917), was not a troupe per se, but rather a one-man-troupe with backup vocalists. Hijazi was primarily a singer who also happened to act and was possessed, in the eyes of his western admirers, of a “resonant, mellifluous voice, which impelled his admirers to call him the ‘Caruso of the East’”(Landau 1958, p. 71). Hijazi had worked with all the outstanding troupes of his era prior to forming his own highly successful troupe. Not only was he admired by all who met him, he is responsible, given his status as a man of God who has learned the holy Quran, for providing the precedent

that respectable Egyptian people may work in the theatre, a precedent that later enabled Tawfiq Al-Hakim to be involved in the world of the theatre and help to elevate it intellectually (71). Hijazi's example also paved the way for Egyptians of all classes, even conservative aristocrats, to not only be patrons of theatre, but also to form their own troupes. One such troupe, formed by an aristocratic heir to a large fortune, Youssef Wahbi (1898 – 1982), was the Ramsis Troupe.

The Ramsis Troupe was formed in 1923 amidst what Farouq Abdel Qadir depicts as an unflattering theatre landscape where, for the most part, the plays that were performed were poorly translated and/or adapted Western European, predominantly French, and uncredited (Abdel Qadir 2015, p. 10). Egyptians were especially fond of the revue, where the plot was merely an excuse to reveal popular actors and singers, at that time (Barbour 1937, p. 995-6). A star system led by the Ramsis troupe, the Kassab Troupe (1912), and the Rihani troupe (1917) came into being and competed to form a cartel that dominated the private sector theatre even after the 1952 revolution. The Ramsis troupe, under the direction of actor-manager-playwright Youssef Wahbi, was primarily concerned with the production of melodramas, tragedies, and some musicals (Landau 1958, p. 84). Wahbi, a tall and muscular trained boxer and Chiantoni trained actor (82), was known to his intellectual and artistic contemporaries as a plagiarist who coerced translators into ceding authorial credit (Abdel Qadir 2015, p. 13-14). These translators pillaged European classics and Hollywood films for Wahbi's productions and, as a result, the end product was a series of plays treating topics that never engaged with the realities of life in Egypt, especially not the political issues of the day. Wahbi's abuse extended to the legendary directors and performers with whom he worked between 1923-1935 who included the first formally trained actor, George Abyad and the first modern Egyptian director, Aziz 'Id (AL Rai' 1992, p. 358). Wahbi's acting style was an exaggerated variety of ham acting that relied chiefly on

grandiose gestures and affected vocalizations. Wahbi's detached and pretentious brand of theatre suffered from repeated financial failures (Hamroush 1998, p. 92), hence the need to periodically relaunch his troupe, albeit with the same stale stultifying scripts that frustrated celebrated actors who retired from the profession in protest (101). Wahbi's destructive role in the development of state-sponsored theatre will be discussed over the next two sections of this chapter.

Comedy was a domain over which presided the other two troupes, led by the two exceptionally gifted comedians of the day, Ali al-Kassar (1887 – 1957) and Najib al-Rihani (1889 – 1949). Al-Kassar produced theatre targeting the urban proletariat while al-Rihani provided comedy for the public at large, thus precipitating an intense competition not just at the box-office, but also for the best playwrights and composers of the day (Al Rihani 1949, p. 18). Al-Kassar had crafted a naïve and good natured *barbari* (A term used by Egyptians to refer to black people, especially those from the southern region of Nubia, Egypt) character, Uthman 'Abdel Basset. This character was much beloved on stage and screen by most Egyptians and remains a source of nostalgia until today. The character of Uthman enabled al-Kassar to deliver successive virtuoso performances that, to this day, and based on available recordings, remain unmatched in terms of super objectives, through-line, improvisational skill, clarity of intentions, and physical interpretation. The most remarkable achievement of al-Kassar was that, despite not having received any *commedia dell'arte* training, this actor made full use of the *Arlecchino* stock character to delight his audiences for decades. Al-Kassar used his key character in the majority of the forty films in which he participated, and which garnered varying degrees of success.

Whereas al-Kassar's acting ability alone made him one of the three most successful theatre entrepreneurs of his time, al-Rihani was also a gifted Francophone writer as well as an efficient actor-manager. From 1916 till 1936, al-Rihani, like al-Kassar, had a key character that

attracted full houses on a consistent basis: Kish Kish Bey<sup>11</sup>. Many of the Kish Kish Bey vaudevillian sketches were adapted by Amin Sidqi (1890 – 1944), who later defected to al-Kassar, from French boulevard plays while the bulk of the most popular post-1917 social satires were co-written by al-Rihani and Badi' Khairi (1893 – 1966) (Landau 1958, p. 88). Despite the revue-like atmosphere of the plays, al-Rihani provided the audience with the closest experience to an ensemble that may be found in a private sector theatre during his lifetime. Al-Rihani's mature post-1936 plays saw him portray a downtrodden endearing working-class man who undergoes an unrealistic social-class transformation which enables him to tacitly critique bourgeois society from within without revolutionary incitement, but rather hoping that the rich, an ever-increasing proportion of his target audience, would one day be more charitable towards the poor (Abdel Qadir 2015, p. 17). Nine of al-Rihani's plays were made into highly successful films, six of which, *Abu Halmous*, *Ahmar Shafayef (Lipstick)*, *salama fi kheir (Salama is fine)*, *Si Omar (Mr. Omar)*, *Ghazl El Banat (Cotton Candy)* and *Le'bet el Sett (A Woman's Game)* are regularly rerun on Arab Television channels to this day.

The three pillars of private sector theatre mentioned above were consistent in their avoidance of all political discourse in their productions. Even the changes in fortune such as that which takes place in *Si Omar*, occurs as a result of mistaken identity, rather than a socio-politically feasible action. The main motivation of the private sector was profit, not any expression of political discontent. Youssef Wahbi in particular, was so class conscious that he would not allow any aristocratic character in his plays to be associated with a vice or the slightest hint of indecency (Abdel Qadir 2015, pp. 19-20). When it came to portrayals of the lower middle class and the proletariat, he was similarly consistent in displaying utter contempt and loathing

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<sup>11</sup> Bey is a Turkish title of aristocracy that was the equivalent of a British Knighthood.

towards them while associating the downtrodden with every malicious characteristic in his plays (19). As far as Wahbi was concerned, the poor are the root of all evil due to their innate indecency, greed, and laziness. To accentuate the loftiness and elitism of his tragedies in particular, he would commission them to be written in grandiose Classical Arabic. That elevated diction was construed by audiences and critics as his seal of quality that set tragedy apart from comedy and Wahbi's plays apart from his "rabble" rivals who used colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Al-Kassar and al-Rihani avoided political commentary by attributing all fortunes to the will of fate, God, or both.

In stark ideological contrast to these three private ventures, that period before 1952 witnessed the emergence of socio-politically engaged playwrights who planted the seeds of subversive theatre in Egypt. Without the precedent of these pioneers, it is difficult to imagine how the following generations would have been permitted to create the theatre of the post-1952 revolution. Mandour and Badawi, thirty years apart, have identified the same four playwrights as the proto-nationalist theatre voices of the pre-1952 epoch. The four playwrights are: Farah Antun (1874 – 1922), Ibrahim Ramzi (1884 – 1949), Muhammad Taymour (1891 – 1921), and Mahmud Taymur (1894 – 1973).

Farah Antun, "one of the most highly educated and well-read journalists and men of letters", coined the term *al-riwayat al-ijtima'iyyah* (social plays) (Badawi 1992, p. 343). Mandour credits Antun further with the first usage of fictional characters in historical dramas in *Al Sultan Salah al-Din wa Mamlakat Urshalim* (Sultan Saladin and the Kingdom of Jerusalem) (1914) (Mandour 2019, p. 45). Antun was adamant that, even in a historical drama, the history must be subservient to the social critique and the exciting development of the plot. Antun's fictional characters must behave in a manner consistent with their social background and beliefs



as well as the needs of the imagined plot even if that behaviour is historically anachronistic (45). Badawi and Mandour disagree as to the reason Antun's plays were not commercially successful. Whereas Badawi believes that Antun's use of three levels of Arabic dialogue—Classical, Colloquial, and a hybrid— was cumbersome for actors and audiences, Mandour argues that the dialogue was too simple at a time when audiences craved poetic lines laden with meaning and nuance (46). Farah Antun was one of the first playwrights in Egyptian theatre history to attempt to bridge the gap between the respectability associated with Classical Arabic and the accessibility and naturalism of colloquial dialogue. The debate regarding the choice of diction remains controversial today and is a frequent tangent that emerges from the overarching debate regarding the identity of the Egyptian theatre. I will probe this debate further in Chapter Two when I discuss the “third language” of Tawfiq Al-Hakim.

Ibrahim Ramzi was unequivocal in his commitment to the use of a homogenous, literary, and elevated Classical Arabic in his historical dramas and a natural spoken colloquial when he wrote social drama. While both Mandour (2019, p. 47) and Badawi (1992, p. 344) recognize Ramzi's British education as a source of his eclectic theatre taste, only the former links the rise of Ibsen and Shaw, which Ramzi witnessed first-hand during his time in England around the turn of the century, to the Egyptian's formative education as a playwright and a dramatist. Ramzi's historical plays suffered from censorship at the hands of the British High Commissioner in Egypt during World War I and were refused a license to perform until 1918 (Ramzi 2011, p. 7). In a direct comparison between the historical dramas of Farah Antun and Ibrahim Ramzi, Mandour favours the latter due to his more focused and psychologically charged dialogue (Mandour 2019, p. 45-7). Badawi claims that while “there is no doubt that *Dukhul al-hammam* (Admission to the Baths, [1916]) is the first fully fledged Egyptian social comedy . . . in *Abtal al-Mansurah*

(Heroes of Mansourah, [1915]) . . . he produced the first historical drama of literary merit in modern Arabic literature” (Badawi 1992, p. 345-7). Ramzi’s legacy is intense, flowing dialogue, fast pace of events, and a commitment to patently Egyptian topics and events.

The wealthy aristocrat, Muhammad Taymur, whose younger brother, Mahmoud, will be discussed at a later stage, was a vocal campaigner for a nationalist Egyptian theatre as part of the *Tamsir* (Egyptianization) movement. A pattern emerges with Taymur whereby a young dramatist is sent by his family to study law in France only for the dramatist to pay greater attention to attending the French theatres than to academic attainment. This pattern and its implications will be repeated with Tawfiq Al-Hakim who will be discussed separately in Chapter Two of this thesis. Having died young, at the age of twenty-nine, Taymur left behind only three extant plays<sup>12</sup> amongst a corpus of critical essays, poems, short stories and an operetta. Taymour’s plays exhibit energetic colloquial dialogue as well as vivid and diverse characterization (Badawi 1992, p. 353).

Mohamed Taymour’s younger brother, Mahmud, was not concerned with writing nationalist Egyptian plays, but rather humanist and universal drama. His plays were written using the authentic language and vocabulary his characters would have used in real life. For the sake of universality and easier translation, Mahmud Taymur would rewrite most of his plays into Classical Arabic, hoping for their performance outside Egypt, probably Europe where he had been educated. This dual approach to the problem of classical versus colloquial dialogue, though it may be reminiscent of the hybrid approach employed by Farah Antun, was unique yet equally divisive. Taymour’s rewriting of his plays for foreign theatres called into question the validity of the colloquial Egyptian Arabic, which in turn caused scholars such as Mandour to debate the

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<sup>12</sup> The plays are: *Al Usfur fi’l qafas* (The Bird in the Cage) (1918), *Abdel Sattar Afandi* (1918), and *Al-hawiya* (The Abyss) (1921)

translatability of colloquial Arabic into Classical Arabic. This debate, though far beyond the scope of this thesis, is a key reason for the historical significance of Taymour's writings.

Furthermore, he criticized his own class, a feat his older brother avoided.

Tawfiq Al-Hakim, mentioned earlier as a dramatist who straddled the divide between the two schools that theorised the genesis of Egyptian drama, began his fifty-year writing career in the 1930s. The sheer length of his career makes him difficult to place stylistically or generically. Like many of his contemporaries, he wrote novels, short-stories, philosophical treatises, essays, and plays of every sub-genre and length. Al-Hakim, a man possessed of a constantly shifting political compass, played a significant part in establishing drama as a respectable and serious literary genre. Taha Hussein (1889 – 1973), the Dean of Arabic Letters, was of the opinion that Al-Hakim “raised the status of Arabic literature as a whole” by providing the first example of what Hussein was content to designate as an “enacted story” along French lines, an observation that seems to praise the union of an imported dramatic form with a local plot (Hussein 1966, p. 85)<sup>13</sup>. Despite this literary seal of approval, specifically directed at the government sponsored National Troupe's<sup>14</sup> opening performance in October 1935, *Ahl Al Kahf* (People of the Cave) at the Cairo Opera House, Al-Hakim's play was a commercial failure. The intellectual nature of the Quranic story conflated with the Christian legend of the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* (Al Hakim 1989, p. 6) may have been too intellectually demanding despite the venue being the Royal Opera

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<sup>13</sup> Hussein, Taha. (1966). *Fusul fi al-adab wa al-naqd* (Chapters on Literature and Criticism). Cairo: Dar al-m'arif. P. 85. Taha Hussein was a Francophone Scholar, novelist, poet, philosopher, and essayist. He was known in the Arab world as 'Ameed al adab al 'Araby (The Dean of Arabic Letters).

<sup>14</sup> One of the many *Ittihad* (Union) party Egyptian governments (under the premiership of Mohammed Tawfik Naseem Pasha) had attempted, in 1935, to improve the theatre situation due to an impassioned appeal by poet laureate Khalil Matran. The result was the formation of a national theatre troupe with a meagre budget. As mentioned in the introduction, the minister of Religious Endowments, Mohamed Helmy Eissa, using public morality as an excuse, soon effectively made funding for a government sponsored theatre troupe almost impossible.

House with its cultured and intellectual patrons. Badawi attests to the fact that, at least until the early years of the revolution, “a myth was born that Al-Hakim’s plays were not suitable, or even meant, for production on the actual stage, but were something called ‘the theatre of the mind’” (Badawi 1988, p. 27). In Al-Hakim’s preface to his *Pygmalion* (1942), he agrees with and propagates the myth as he recounts the effect of watching *Ahl al-Kahf* on opening night:

I witnessed that which I had feared; this piece is notactable... I left the theatre that night filled with doubts about my work. I believed people’s collective opinion. Theatre was created for audiences to witness conflicts that are compelling and that shakes their hearts. Conflicts that, on bloody stages, is between two shields, or between a man and a beast. In the theatre, the conflict is between two emotions... But what will an audience feel when they witness conflicts between man and time, man and space, and man and his own abilities. Aren’t these abstract concepts and vague thoughts less suitable for the stirring of emotions and more suitable for stimulating minds? This was the line of thought that caused me to appeal to the overseers of the National Troupe to cancel all the remaining performances of *Ahl al-Kahf* to this day (Al-Hakim 1942, pp. 13-4).

Despite Al-Hakim’s professed reticence, he constantly persevered to find a glamorous outlet for his plays. In 1941, for example, Al-Hakim expanded one of his twenty-one shorter plays, *Rasasa fi al Qalb* (*Bullet in the Heart*, 1931), into a full-length screenplay which was shot as a star-studded film featuring the Arab World’s top crooner at the time, Mohamed Abdel Wahab. Prior to the 1952 revolution, Al-Hakim had written six full-length plays and twenty-one shorter plays, most of them in classical Arabic and largely apolitical. Due to his long career, al-Hakeem will be revisited in the next section.

#### **1.4 Post-1952 theatre writing:**

So far, the form and content of most Egyptian plays had served to critique the structure of society in general and highly conservative terms without isolating cases and deconstructing them. There is also a near total absence of direct political engagement with the superstructures of the state, be they the British administration or the rubber-stamp Egyptian governments. With the advent of the 23 July 1952 revolution, the dam that had been holding back playwrights from

forthright political discourse was instantly, albeit temporarily, demolished during the transition between the occupied monarchy and the independent republic. An aura of freedom and relief tentatively hovered above the dramatic community. A State funded National Theatre Trust that was devoted to the cultural elevation and political education of the Egyptian people produced thirty-eight international, repertory, and new plays in its first season (1952-3) at the price of ten piasters (1 Egyptian pound = 100 piasters) per ticket (Rushdy, 1966, p. 256). By establishing a Ministry of Culture and what he called Culture Palaces in every governorate, Nasser made sure that the theatre spread to the largely illiterate countryside whose population was starving for culture, entertainment, and a feeling of finally belonging and contributing to the grand design that was the Egyptian renaissance. Actors, playwrights, directors, designers, and technicians finally had unions to represent them as well as minimum wages, all of which were objectives for which the dramatists had been fighting since the 1930s (Hamroush, 1998, p. 157).

On the playwriting front, the National Theatre reinstated a briefly enacted pre-revolutionary convention: play selections through a reading committee. The short-lived reading committee that selected texts for the National Troupe in the thirties included the acknowledged literary masters of the day: Khalil Matran, Ahmed Amin, and Taha Hussein, to name a few. Despite their names guaranteeing what Egyptian audiences would have regarded as refined texts, the committee was more oriented towards literature than theatre. This led to the selection of plays that may have had strong literary merit, but were not necessarily stage worthy oractable, as the aforementioned Tawfiq Al-Hakim incident with *The People of the Cave* demonstrated. The private sector troupes of the pre-revolutionary era, seasoned theatre professionals who knew their audiences well, were well attuned to the elements that made textsactable and entertaining, and did not prioritize literary merit unless they were performing to an educated elite. Fattouh

Nashaty, a foreign trained actor and director who worked for both the Ramsis private troupe and the National Troupe, recounts that his 1940 production of *Oedipus*, was praised by the King's Chamberlain, Ahmed Hassanien Pasha, MBE who said:

I have previously seen this play when it was directed by Mr. Abyad, and even though I cannot deny having enjoyed it, or that it was a success, I cannot claim to have felt it the way I felt this new direction and modern evolution. I especially admired the chorus, which I believe is the rediscovery and recreation of the National Troupe. But it is an innovation that must be cautiously preserved, since it adds awe, power, and beauty to the theatre (Nashaty, 1973, p. 158).

This rare kind of praise would predominantly be lavished by the educated elite who would attend opening night performances of the National troupe and special performances by private troupes. But neither the private sector nor the public sector could sustain their existence by relying on the small number of elite audiences who appreciated the text selections of the literary luminaries who guided the National Troupe. A new approach to text selection, aiming at both refinement and entertainment, was to be pursued by the reading committee of the National Theatre.

### **1.5 The relationship between theatre and the state:**

The newly established Ministry of Culture, which was initially founded under the suggestive name of "Ministry of National Guidance", appreciated the need for a reading committee and acted accordingly. The first culture minister, playwright Fathy Radwan (1911 – 1988) created the Theatre Institute, which in turn created *Al-firqa al-qawmeya al-haditha* (The Modern National Troupe), a 1956 rebranding of the pre-revolutionary *al-firqa al-masreya al-haditha* (The Modern Egyptian Troupe), which traced its routes to the National Troupe established in 1935. The new reading committee, like its pre-1952 predecessor, included esteemed luminaries too. These new members, however, were more involved in the world of the theatre than Taha Hussein and his colleagues. The new committee was chaired by the novelist Yehia Haqqy (1905 – 1992); linguistics professor, translator, and a pupil of Taha Hussein,

Mohamed Al-Qassas (1912 – 1987); critics and internationally acclaimed scholars, ‘Abdel Qadir Al-Qitt (1916 – 2002), Ali Al-Ra’i (1920 – 1999), and Mohamed Mandour (1907 – 1965); and French trained actors/directors Fattouh Nashaty (1901 – 1970) and Nabil Al-Alfy (1926 – 1999). Whereas the pre-revolutionary reading committee was against the concept of producing a play written in the colloquial, this committee was extremely supportive of what they saw as the realism afforded by the language of the common man. The first season under this new guidance, 1956/1957, and with a new artistic director, officer and polymath Ahmed Hamroush, the Modern National Troupe produced eight original Egyptian plays, four translated plays, and four adapted plays (Rushdy 1966, p. 259)<sup>15</sup>. Gone were the days of the National Troupe whose most prolific season, 1937/1938, produced two original Egyptian full-length plays, one original Egyptian one-act play, one adaptation, and four translations (Nashaty 1973, p. 154).

The Hamroush-led measures were the state’s tardy response to the disarray in which the theatre community found itself. It was a continuation of the chaos that prevailed prior to the revolution whereby three private sector troupes controlled the market and lured the up-and-coming talents that were trained by the National Troupe. The infighting amongst the three major private troupes resulted in contracts being breached and/or nullified by all collaborators who are offered better deals by rival troupes (Al Rihani, 1949, p. 185). This lack of respect for the law resulted in cancellation of performances, unstable employment for the backstage crew, and a reputation acquired among many strata of the public that the theatre was the realm of “chaos and indecency” (Hamroush, 1998, p. 26). The artistically inclined Free Officers who ran the country

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that this season was strongly affected by curfews, bombings, and street battles that accompanied the tripartite offensive launched by Britain, France, and Israel against Egypt. Needless to say, this invasion had negative effects on all entertainment venues, artistic moods, and creative output. Nu’mān Ashour takes us through his own personal journey of writing a play under these circumstances in his autobiography. Some of his dramaturgical considerations will be discussed in chapter three.

refused to countenance that reputation. Their leadership of the Pan-Arab movement was at stake; Egypt had to provide what they saw as the perfect role model in every walk of life, including the theatre.

The Modern National Troupe therefore had a political agenda that was dictated by the revolutionary government. The public sector theatre was charged with the following directive:

The theatre in Egypt must present refined art that transcends the realm of commercial competition. It is desired that the theatre in Egypt be of a high standard in every respect. The theatre should be endowed with conventions and protocols that demonstrate perfectionism and elocution, thereby ensuring that the theatre is the state's official artistic representative (26).

There is a symmetry to the arrival of Ahmed Hamrroush at the Azbakiah Theatre, the flagship of the Cairo trio of State theatres, on 27 October 1956, with the arrival of Khalil Matran in October 1935, and the Okasha brothers in 1920. In all three situations, the artistic directors were commissioned to elevate the standard of theatre in Egypt. All three of them were welcomed by two gold inscriptions, one on top of the main gate of the theatre, *sharikat tarqeyat al-tamthil al-arabi* (The Company for the Elevation of Arabic Acting) and another, a rhyming couplet from a poem by Arab Laureate Ahmed Shawqi, above the proscenium arch and spanning the length of the apron, *enama al-omam al-akhlaq ma baqeyat, fa en hom zahabat akhlaqohom zahabo* (Nations endowed with morals remain, once they lose their morals, they vanish). The inscriptions, coupled with the directives issued to the artistic directors by their superiors and/or sponsors, demonstrate the importance attached by influential Egyptians in positions of authority to the influence of the theatre and its ability to affect public morality. The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) led by Gamal Abdel Nasser seemed to continue this faith in the power of the theatre and, judging by the wording of the directive they issued to Ahmed Hamrroush, had every intention of utilizing the theatre as a socio-political and/or a propaganda tool.



## **1.6 Translation, adaptation, appropriation, and performance politics in the Egyptian struggle for cultural hegemony:**

Amid this blossoming of the state's support of the theatre, Nu'mān 'Ashour (1918 – 1987), a Marxist realist with a degree in English literature, introduced “a new note of harsh realism, of urgency and commitment . . . coupled with a bold use of the colloquial” (Badawi 1988, p. 143). 'Ashour, whose writings and impact will be discussed in depth in chapter three, ushered in a host of complex characters with shifting motivations and intentions unlike anything ever seen before on the Egyptian stage. But at their core, we still detect the empirical characterization inherited from Rihani, Sannu, and Ibn Daniyal. In terms of form and technique, the social critique, the repartee, and the farcical situations bequeathed by 'Ashour's predecessors, audiences were taken on new journeys that were encouraged by the playwright's political views as well as his frame of reference which showed the influences of Ibsen, Chekhov, Brecht, Osborne, Beckett, and Ionesco. Ashour's socio-political agenda largely harmonized with that of the state, while his knowledge of the theatre and exciting dialogue, which, through close reading, will be analysed in detail in chapter three, provided a model for actable Soviet-style *Otcherk* theatre to which many revolutionary playwrights aspired. Even the veteran Tawfiq Al-Hakim, eager to join the theatre revolution, reinvented himself in order to join the new young platoon of playwrights such as Sa'ad Eldin Wahba (1925 – 1997), Lotfy El-Kholy (1929 – 1999), Mikhail Roman (1924 – 1973), Alfred Farag (1929 – 2005), and Naguib Surur (1932 – 1978) among others. Apart from Al-Hakim, these young playwrights considered themselves to be the products of and in dialogue with the revolution.

The counter-revolutionary writers predominantly operated through the private sector and the Television Theatre troupes created in the 1960s. These writers continued the pre-

revolutionary private sector tradition of adapting western texts rather than taking risks with original Egyptian plays. The most active and commercially successful counter-revolutionary troupe was *El-fananin el-mottahedin* (The United Artists), established by writer and producer Samir Khafaga (1930 – 2018). The modus operandi of this troupe, as well as all the other private sector troupes, was adaptation and skilful “Egyptianizing” of established and highly successful western plays and films. Khafaga’s unique selling point was the deftness with which he and his co-writer Bahgat Qamar (1937 – 1989) transformed works such as Pagnol’s *Topaze*, Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (via Lerner and Loewe’s *My Fair Lady*), and Coward’s *Blithe Spirit* into entertaining Egyptian classics. One of the most influential Egyptian plays ever produced, watched live by over two million audience members, *Madraset al-moshaghebeen* (The School of Hooligans), was commissioned by Khafaga and adapted by Ali Salem (1936 – 2015) from the film version of E. R. Braithwaite’s *To Sir With Love* (1959). Khafaga also benefited from the acting talent of a gifted student of Naguib al-Rihani, Fouad al-Mohandes (1925 – 2006), whose reputation and charm attracted a host of other gifted character actors.

Al Rihani’s Troupe continued even after the death of their founder in 1949. This troupe mainly relied on Al-Rihani’s reputation as well as the revenue that came from the television recordings of the plays, where Adel Khairy, the son of Rihani’s co-writer Badie’ Khairy, stood in for the departed Rihani. Badie’ Khairy’s death in 1966 left the troupe bereft of a seasoned writer. Eventually, especially with the rising star of Fouad al-Mohandes and *El Fananin el-motahedin* troupe, Al-Rihani’s troupe was eclipsed and eventually was disbanded with their final production being *Ya helwa matel’abish bel kabrit* (Don’t play with matches, babe) in 1977.

Another influential private sector troupe that followed the pre-revolutionary path of adapting Western texts was formed by film superstar Ismail Yassine (1912 – 1972) and

playwright Abul Seoud Al-Ibiary (1910 – 1969). This duo was formed in the film studios in the forties and fifties, then founded the Ismail Yassine Troupe in 1954. After a strong and commercially successful run in the fifties, Yassine's output and energy started to wane due to health problems. The troupe was disbanded in 1966.

Adaptation of Western texts was not the only common factor that united the cause of these private-sector troupes, genre was a key uniting factor while being a paradoxical source of competition. These troupes were singularly specialized in comedy. At no point did any of the private sector troupes of the fifties and the sixties venture into melodrama or tragedy, which were conceded as the exclusive realms of the Modern National Troupe. Another unifying factor was the socio-political detachment of the scripts produced by these commercial troupes. Farouq Abdel Qadir labelled them as laughter-mongers who doled out belly-laughter through diluted Western scripts that were rendered safely devoid of substance or engagement with Egyptian reality (Abdel Qadir 2015, p. 105). To complicate matters for the revolutionary state, counter-revolutionary theatre was assisted by governmental structural strategies that are difficult to explain and which were tantamount to self-sabotage. For example, the state, through the Ministry of Information, created ten theatre-for-television troupes between 1962-4. These troupes had far greater funds at their disposal, due to the significantly greater revenues of television, and were repeatedly guilty of luring top actors away from the Modern National Troupe (111). *El fananin el motahedin* would capitalize on the infighting taking place amongst the various government troupes and poach the top actors in return for astronomical salaries. This consistent draining of the resources of the Modern National Troupe, coupled with the eventual subservience of the National Theatre to the Ministry of Information in 1968, demotivated the revolutionary playwrights, frequently resulting in an uncharacteristic slump in the quality of the writing. After

1968, the Modern National Troupe attempted to compete with the commercial theatre troupes on the latter's own terms: the box office. At that point, the reading committees of the state were disbanded, and the "competitive" plays were almost exclusively adaptations of foreign classics at the expense of original Egyptian plays (106).

Farouq Abdel Qadir and Fouad Dawara attribute the self-destruction of the state sector to a mixture of corruption, conspiracy, and mismanagement. Abdel Qadir adds to these the escapist mood of Egyptian audiences, a mood which caused the majority of theatregoers to flock to the more obvious sources of comedy available to them. It is more likely, however, that the "saboteurs are everywhere" (Debray, 1967, p. 40) and that the "revolution turned bourgeois" (33). In retrospect, the counter-revolution emerged victorious in the struggle for cultural hegemony.

During this struggle for the cultural soul of Egypt, the characteristics of a national playwright became crystalized, focused, and identifiable. My formulation of the Egyptian national playwright, rooted in my six criteria listed in the introduction, is angry, socio-politically engaged with the population, subversive, believes in civil disobedience, and treats their play as a political act rather than a tradable product. Chapters 2-4 will make the case for each of the three playwrights and demonstrate whether they satisfy the formula I have created.

## Chapter Two

### *Tawfiq Al-Hakim: A Man for all Seasons?*

The writer who has contributed the most to the development of drama as a genre in Egypt is undoubtedly Tawfiq Al-Hakim (Allen 1979, p. 99).

Whereas it is a fact that Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898 – 1987) is Egypt’s most prolific playwright on record with over seventy plays to his name, Roger Allen’s claim above regarding influence on the development of the genre requires further scrutiny. Allen is by no means alone in considering Al-Hakim to be the “doyen of the genre” (99)<sup>16</sup>. Most Egyptian scholars such as El-‘Alem, al-Ra’i, and Dawara, hold Al-Hakim in the highest esteem and attribute to him the popularity, respectability, and intellectuality with which they claim he has imbued the Egyptian theatre. In this chapter, I shall examine the polarised views (Dawara’s positive view versus the negative view of Farouk Abdel Qadir, for example) held by Egyptian and Western scholars of Al-Hakim’s role in the development of the dramaturgy of Egyptian plays. I shall then proceed to analyse *Al Safqa (The Deal)* (1956), the play Al-Hakim claims to address the most enduring problem of the Egyptian script: language. Finally, I shall evaluate Al-Hakim’s actual influence on the development of Egyptian dramaturgy. The evaluation shall involve contextualization that will examine writing styles and trends before Al-Hakim’s career began as well as an interrogation of claims he has made in various meta-theatrical writings such as his postscripts and prefaces. By the end of this chapter, I will demonstrate that Al-Hakim, while prolific in output and intellectually stimulating, is not a revolutionary dramaturgical force such as the playwrights who are the subjects of the subsequent two chapters. To support my classification of Al-Hakim as a counter-revolutionary and regressive dramatist, I shall subject his most

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Approaching Al-Hakim’s dramatic texts as literary rather than theatre scripts, Allen classifies the plays as drama as per the drama, narrative, poetry classification, itself an evolution of the classical lyric, drama epic, division.

purportedly revolutionary play, *The Deal*, (1956) to my critical test involving the criteria I have constructed in my critical framework.

### **2.1 Survey of Egyptian Criticism:**

Tawfiq Al-Hakim has been the subject of personal and professional criticism since his initially published then performed *Ahl al-Kahf* (*People of the Cave*, 1934) became the inaugural piece of the newly established National Theatre in 1934. *People of the Cave* immediately became a controversial play that engendered the debate about the multiple natures of Tawfiq Al-Hakim as a playwright as well as the nature of theatre in Egypt. Should Al-Hakim perform his written texts? Are these plays literature that should be read or theatre that should be performed? How do Al-Hakim's plays compare with those that came before them? Does Al-Hakim's voiced opinion about his work matter? How do Al-Hakim's plays interact with and interrogate the many forms of cultural hegemony to which the Egyptian audience may be subjected? Essentially, European educated Egyptian critics in 1934, spurred on by the performance of Al-Hakim's *Ahl al-Kahf*, were beginning to ask increasingly mature and pointedly critical questions. Al-Hakim's first contribution to the world of Egyptian theatre was not his play, but rather providing the stimulus to critics to ask mature questions and engage in critical colloquies rather than compose gossip and hearsay in the form of the customary tabloid pieces.

In his *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (1988), M. M. Badawi dedicates seventy-eight of the 230 pages of the study to Tawfiq Al-Hakim. Badawi further highlights Al-Hakim's influence on Egyptian drama by naming the chapter that tackles other influential playwrights who were contemporaries but started their careers after him, "Al-Hakim's Successors" (Badawi, 1988, p. 88). The structure of the study seems to situate Al-Hakim as the fulcrum of modern Egyptian drama, while the other playwrights are functions of his output. The content of Badawi's study,

however, is far more nuanced. In this critical study by Badawi, he refers to other significant writings about Al-Hakim in this short literature review where he clearly disagrees with what he sees as exaggerated praise:

Great claims have been made for Tawfiq Al-Hakim (b. 1898). [H. A. R.] Gibb<sup>17</sup> regarded him as the founder of drama in Arabic. Similarly, Louis 'Awad described him as 'the true founder of Egyptian drama in every serious sense' and Ghali Shukri called him 'the first pioneer of the dramatic art in Arabic'. His drama was claimed by the poet [Salah] Abd al-Sabur to have been 'born in a vacuum', and the author [William M. Hutchins] of the English translation of some of some of his plays gave his introduction the descriptive title 'A One-Man Egyptian Theatre Tradition'. Richard Long concluded his study *Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Playwright of Egypt* (1979) with the statement that Tawfiq Al-Hakim 'had virtually nothing that was indigenous onto which to graft his own historic achievements'. Despite Al-Hakim's achievements, and there are many, it is difficult to accept such judgements of his work knowing the valuable contribution made to Egyptian and Arabic drama by such writers as Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad Taymur and Antun Yazbak (8).

Badawi provides nuanced responses to many of the questions of this thesis. He provides conditional praise at times, such as his opinion that Al-Hakim's first produced play, *Ahl al Kahf* (*Sleepers of the Cave*) "[if] produced properly on the stage [,] it can afford an exciting dramatic spectacle" (35). At other times, such as with *Shahrazad*, he rejects the play because he sees it as "more of a dramatic prose poem in dialogue form than a drama proper" (40). Badawi's conception of "drama proper" tends to agree with the Aristotelian dramatic structure advocated by Rashad Rushdy and discussed in the introduction. Badawi agrees with Al-Hakim's own classification of some of his plays as "theatre of the mind" which is to be read rather than performed, much like the closet dramas with which the playwright became familiar during his years in France as a law student. Regarding the play which will be the subject of close reading in this chapter, *Al Safqa* (*The Deal*), Badawi praises it as possessing "an exciting story, in which our interest is not allowed to flag... Suspense is carefully maintained... the play is carefully

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<sup>17</sup> Gibb, H. A. R. and Kramers, J. H. (1965) *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: prepared by a number of leading orientalists*. Photomechan. repr edn. Leiden: Brill.

structured and makes good use of visual and aural effects” (8). Badawi barely disguises his irritation with Al-Hakim’s pronouncements and writings about his own works, all of which he finds to be misleading and historically inaccurate. Badawi cites one particular protest that Al-Hakim consistently launches in all his interviews, prefaces, and essays, namely that he exists in a vacuum since nobody before him has attempted to write dramatic literature in Egypt. Despite many esteemed Egyptian critics such as Dawara and ‘Awad adopting this belief, Badawi roundly dismisses it:

[N]othing can be further from the truth. Al-Hakim the dramatist belongs very much to his period and it is only when we place him in his context that we can reach a just appraisal of the extent of his contribution (8).

Badawi’s contextualization is absent from the critical writings of Dawara, ‘Awad, and el-Ra’i. Badawi is consistent and thorough in his examination of the writings and contributions of Al-Hakim’s predecessors such as Ya’qub Sannu’, Farah Antun, Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad Taymur, and Antun Yazbak<sup>18</sup>. These writers, as well as their Levantine contemporaries such as the Al-Naqqash and Qirdahi families and Ahmed Abu-Khalil Al-Qabbani (1833-1902), filled enough of what Al-Hakim claimed to be a vacuum, that Badawi was comfortable with the conclusion that “[I]t can safely be said that with the work of Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad Taymur, and Antun Yazbak Arabic drama reached its maturity” (Badawi, 1992, p. 356). By reaching this conclusion, Badawi emancipated Arabic drama from the absolute hegemony Al-Hakim had previously exercised over it in the minds of western critics, but not their Arab counterparts.

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<sup>18</sup> See also Badawi, M. M. (1992) “Arabic drama: early developments,” in Badawi, M. M. (ed.) *Modern Arabic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature), pp. 329–357. Badawi has a section in this chapter titled “The Search for Truly Egyptian Drama” where he assesses the contributions of Antun, Ramzi, Taymur, and Yazbak to the development of Egyptian drama as a genre decades prior to Al-Hakim’s career.



Al-Hakim had been placed on the highest possible Egyptian pedestal when, on attending the opening night of Al-Hakim's first major play on the grandest of all Egyptian theatres, Azbakiyya, the Egyptian Dean of Arabic letters, the Sorbonne educated Taha Hussein, proclaimed that

The story of *Ahl al Kahf* [(*People of the Cave*)] is a venerable event, not only in contemporary Arabic literature, but in all of Arabic literature. I say this without reservation or condition. I say this full of satisfaction and joy... A new art has been born. A new gate has been opened for authors, providing them with a refuge. A gate that can lead writers to great and refined goals that we have not hitherto expected them to conceive at this juncture... I confess that I unreservedly and without limitations admire the skill of the author and the realistic life inhabited by these ordinary characters (Hussein, 1966, p. 85)

Taha Hussein's praise, coming as it did at the beginning of his critique of Al-Hakim's first major play, immediately catapulted the budding playwright to a level beyond reproach. Hussein does, however, provide balanced criticism towards the end of his article about Al-Hakim's first foray into national-level theatre:

The story has two flaws: one of them injures me gravely... that is the errors in linguistics and grammar... I ask of the good sir to cancel the current fair edition and to reprint after having corrected all the errors. I would be happy to personally make the corrections on his behalf. Perchance the added expense of this reprint will teach him and force him to proofread his language prior to disseminating it amongst the public... The second flaw is in the acting (89).

The flaws that Hussein lists are entirely unrelated to Al-Hakim's skills as a playwright. Al-Hakim's perceived mastery and pioneer status are stated and expounded upon for the length of Hussein's article. Hussein's concerns are linguistic errors, which can be easily resolved by collaborators, and acting quality, which is generally beyond the domain of a playwright. The Dean of Arabic Letters has therefore presented Al-Hakim as the quintessential pioneer playwright, albeit with linguistic problems that would not be noticed by the largely illiterate

Egyptian population. Hussein's judgement is notable for emanating from his purely literary perspective rather than consideration for the local Egyptian culture.

In 1960, Mohammed Mandour, one of the most respected progressive critics of literature and theatre in the Arab world, still in print today despite his Marxist approach to criticism, and one of the earliest Egyptian proponents of reader-response theory, praised Al-Hakim's response to the post-1952 revolutionary spirit while noting that

Al-Hakim is one of the most intellectually flexible and open-minded amongst our great authors... He has obstinately and resolutely insisted on avoiding a total affiliation with any particular force along the political spectrum. That is because his core is more flexible than his exterior... This may be the reason for his eclectic theatrical and literary output. This broad range that encompasses the intellectual, psychological, and the symbolic aspects of society and from there to the popular and living reality (Mandour, 2020, p. 133).

The adjective "flexible" was not to be taken lightly in Nasserist Egypt of the 1960s. The word possessed negative connotations, especially vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict where the Arab population was galvanised by Nasser to be one unwavering and committed unit that does not accept compromise. Flexibility of stance, especially of ideology, was akin to surrender and loss of dignity. For Mandour to label Al-Hakim as "one of the most intellectually flexible", and considering that the readership was then highly discerning, is a subtle reprimand as well as a recommendation by the critic to the playwright. Mandour seems to be telling Al-Hakim to choose an ideology. This is a prescient observation by Mandour since, in the Sadat decade of the 1970s, Al-Hakim adopts a counter-revolutionary stance by penning potent attacks on President Nasser starting with *'Awdat al Wa'i (The Return of Consciousness)* in 1974. Mandour made this prescient observation at a time when Al-Hakim's writings possessed a non-committal revolutionary intellectualism. To Mandour's further credit, he was also the only prominent critic

to write about Al-Hakim's tendency to discuss hot topics such as women's rights, only after they had lost their controversial edge (8).

Ali al-Ra'i credits Al-Hakim with the era-defining triple achievement of making prose drama an acceptable form of Arabic literature, a recognized endeavour, and a respectable profession (Al Ra'i, 1992, p. 368). Prior to Al-Hakim's first performed play, *Ahl al Kahf (People of the Cave)*, theatre was viewed as a world of vagabonds and rogues of questionable character whose only function was to entertain their betters (El Lozy, 1986, p. 43; Badawi 1988, p. 12; Abdel Qadir, 2015, p. 28). In a book written exclusively for the sake of exploring Al-Hakim's methods, influences, and achievements, Al-Ra'i laments that one of the playwright's most famous and "refined high comedies", *Rasasah fi al qalb (Bullet in the Heart, 1931)* was rejected at first and only performed over a decade later because, according to al-Ra'i, the troupe to which it was offered could not agree on the casting of the protagonist (Al Ra'i 1969, p. 32, 39). Al-Ra'i makes extensive use of the two autobiographical tomes penned by Al-Hakim, *'Awdat al Roh (The Return of the Spirit, 1933)* and *Sign Al 'Omr (The Prison of Life, 1964)*, the latter classified as an autobiography by the author himself. Throughout *Fannan al Forga, Fannan al-fikr*, Ali al-Ra'i, armed with a PhD on Bernard Shaw from the University of Birmingham, draws parallels between Al-Hakim and Shaw in terms of both style and influence, an unavoidable comparison in some instances when Al-Hakim deliberately composes a play such as *Pygmalion (1942)* (56, 68, 110). Al-Ra'i draws other comparisons and identifies sources of influences such as Brecht (11, 38, 88, 92, 113), Aristophanes (47), Beckett and Cervantes (85), Shakespeare (93) and Lorca (94). Ali al-Rai's observations and conclusions are not entirely fawning expressions of awe and admiration, for he clearly realizes that critics tend "to believe what Tawfiq Al-Hakim says about

himself while donning one of his two masks [the intellectual mask and that of the performing artist]” (10).

Al-Ra’i writes approvingly of Fouad Dawara’s critiques of Al-Hakim where he has consistently attempted to eradicate the portrayal of the playwright as a recluse living in his ivory tower. Dawara wrote a three-part study of Al-Hakim’s plays between 1985-87: *Al Masrahiyaat al Maghula (The Unknown Plays, 1985)*, *Al Masrahiyaat al Siyasiya (The Political Plays, 1986)*, and *Al Masrahiyaat al Fikriya (The Intellectual Plays, 1987)*. In the second part devoted to the discussion of the political plays, Dawara explicitly clarifies his objective:

This part of the study hopes to... completely erase the image of the self-absorbed insular artist atop his ivory tower. The artist who is consumed with his intellectual reflections that are isolated from the realistic concerns of the lives of the people. This is the image that the tabloid press has affixed to Tawfiq Al-Hakim. This image should be replaced with one that portrays an author who is alert to and preoccupied with global and local political issues. Supremely concerned with the problems and the future of his country. Committed to the dedication of his mind and art to the criticism of and assault on corruption, while calling for reform and consolidating the principles of truth, justice, and equality inside his country and abroad (Dawara, 1986, p. 473).

This is a testament to what Dawara perceives to be Al-Hakim’s progressivism and revolutionary spirit. It also runs contrary to Al-Hakim’s self-crafted image as the ivory tower recluse who wears the odd beret and who composed plays which he classified as “Theatre of the Mind”.

Dawara’s portrayal of Al-Hakim may confuse readers when one considers that Dawara was a left of centre Nasserist and that, by 1986 when Dawara’s book was published, Al-Hakim had become a symbol of anti-Nasserist intellectualism. Dawara’s portrayal of Al-Hakim as a concerned and committed citizen who fights for the common man can be reconciled with the playwright’s attacks on Nasser if one subscribes to Al-Ra’i’s theory that Al-Hakim is wearing a mask at all times, this time the intellectual mask. Dawara cites Al-Ra’i’s *Fanaan al Forga wa Fanan al Fikr* in his preface to the second part of his study and agrees with Al-Ra’i’s arguments and premises

(11). Dawara was one of the few critics to be granted more than one formal interview with Al-Hakim, the first in June 1964, and the second in August 1970, both during the Nasser era<sup>19</sup>. Yet again in this instance Al-Hakim repeats his claim that his dramatic output appeared out of a vacuum and that he had no predecessors upon whose work he built (Dawara 1994, p. 46). It is difficult to understand why Dawara, who has written extensively on Egyptian theatre history, did not challenge Al-Hakim's claims by mentioning Yazbak, Antun, Taymour, or Ramzi. It is highly unlikely that Al-Hakim, who had worked with the same troupes who produced some of the works of his predecessors, was unaware of plays such as *Abtal al-Mansurah (Heroes of Al-Mansurah, 1915)* by Ibrahim Ramzi, *Misr al-jadidah wa Misr al-qadimah (New Egypt and Old Egypt, 1913)* by Farah Antun –the first play to tackle the debate on whether to use of colloquial or classical Arabic on stage, or *Al-Hawiya (The Abyss, 1921)* by Mohammed Taymour. Despite Dawara's encyclopaedic knowledge of Egyptian literature and theatre, and despite the obvious pioneering efforts of these earlier playwrights, Dawara did not challenge Al-Hakim's "vacuum" assertion.

Another scenario that may reconcile the Nasserist Dawara's accommodation of some of Al Hakim's anti-Nasserist writings may be found in the critic's acceptance of the playwright's contributions as valid and perhaps even healthy criticism of Nasser's revolution. Dawara sees a consistency in Al-Hakim's five political topics:

1. War and peace
2. Knowledge and politics
3. Systems of government
4. Democracy before the "revolution"
5. Symbolism of the "revolution" (Dawara 1986, pp. 14-5)

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<sup>19</sup> Both interviews can be found in Dawara, F. (1994) *'Asharat Odabaa' Yatahadathoon (Ten Authors Speak Out)*. Cairo: General Book Institute. PP. 26-66.

When unpacking the five topics, Dawara merges the fourth and fifth topics and summarises their role in Al-Hakim's corpus as follows:

The plays that focus on the fourth topic treat samples of the political corruption in Egypt from the late thirties until the 23 July [1952] revolution. They critique the various government agencies and the way they were managed, delivering that critique in a direct and realistic style, which is also what the plays that focus on the fifth topic do, albeit in an indirect style that is predominantly symbolic. (Dawara 1986, p. 15)

Dedicating a chapter for each of the topics, Dawara seems to accept Al Hakim's claim that the playwright was providing criticism "gently and from a distance" (428), couching his messages in symbolism that would help Nasser to successfully navigate the affairs of state (414). Dawara therefore viewed Al Hakim as an honest and well-meaning critic whose aim was to advance the aims of the revolution rather than a counterrevolutionary whose intended to subvert Nasser and his efforts. In the context of a nation in a state of revolutionary flux, there is a need for playwrights who contribute criticism that guides and perhaps even enlightens revolutionary efforts.

Farouk Abdel Qadir, a highly subversive Marxist Egyptian critic esteemed by his Egyptian peers on both sides of the political spectrum, was unyielding in his interrogation of Al-Hakim's contributions to the ideological discourses of Egyptian drama and literature (Abdel Qadir, 2015, p. 27). Abdel Qadir appreciates Al-Hakim's achievement of bridging the gap between the theatre and the socio-cultural elite who had previously shunned all things theatrical as the domain of vagabonds and commoners (28). Al-Hakim's tendency to be ideologically "adaptable", a trait we have seen to have been also noted by Mandour, complicates the playwright's political messaging and motivations in the eyes of Abdel Qadir (29). Consequently, Abdel Qadir finds it problematic to classify Al-Hakim as a revolutionary playwright, having established the worldview that underpins his play before the 1952 revolution (29). Abdel Qadir

supports his claim that Al-Hakim is fundamentally a pre-1952 counter-revolutionary by agreeing with Mohammed Mandour and reminding the reader that

[Al-Hakim] has not broached the topic of the national cause once in a single work. Instead, most of his criticism of the realities of the pre-1952 era –the realities of the rule of traitors and agents, the co-opted aristocracy that colluded with the occupying British forces, and the homeland that teemed with uprising energy and revolutionary fervour— did not exceed minor critiques of examples from the ranks of the petit-bourgeois. A stratum that at the time was oppressed and were offered up [in Al-Hakim’s plays] as subjects of ridicule, to entertain the higher strata along the social ladder. They were the ironic butt of every joke, mocked for their mannerisms and unrefined behaviour (33).

Abdel Qadir balances out this severe criticism by restating his acknowledgment of Al-Hakim’s bringing the elite to the theatre as well as opining that, along with the poetic dramas of Ahmed Shawqi (1870 – 1932), Al-Hakim has provided the most significant additions to Egyptian dramaturgy (34). Abdel Qadir subtly indicates that Al-Hakim was not a pioneer, but rather a playwright who was contributing additions to a realism oriented dramaturgical tradition that had started in 1913 at the hands of Farah Antun who was joined later by Ibrahim Ramzi, ‘Abbas ‘Allam, and Muhammad Taymur (20). Given his conception of Al-Hakim as an entertainer and appeaser of the elite, Abdel Qadir poignantly takes issue with the opinion of Muhammad Mandour that the playwright has a socialist or revolutionary agenda (28).

Mahmoud Amin El-‘Alem, the critic who I consider to have most perceptively gleaned Al-Hakim’s mid-career (1950s) struggles, both supports Al-Hakim’s experimental efforts and refutes the claim that the playwright has advanced the creative aspect of the Egyptian play. El-‘Alem accepts Al-Hakim into the ranks of the authors who possess an unwavering sense of aesthetics, one that is coupled with artistic and social missions (El ‘Alem 1973, p. 447). In a chapter dedicated to *The Deal (1956)*, El-‘Alem summarizes Al-Hakim’s theatre effort:

It is a reflection characterized by balance between polar opposites. It is a tense balance that lacks daring, vitality, and momentum. It is a balance that does not elevate the

conflicting concepts to a level conducive to creative insight necessary for the propulsion of life and art (448).

El-'Alem respects Al-Hakim's effort, but he circumnavigates the arena occupied by those who consider the playwright to be the pioneer and the creative genius leading the train of Egyptian drama. El-'Alem's criticism may seem ambivalent, but that is only because he uses the nuances of the Arabic language to both flatter and undercut. Fundamentally, El-'Alem appreciates Al-Hakim's dramatic output, but he does not consider him a pioneer.

As Mahmoud El Lozy observes, Al-Hakim was fortunate to launch his career when he did, which enabled him to portray himself as the mysterious ivory-tower intellectual. Al-Hakim derived his ability to cultivate this persona partly from the absence of what Arab critics and artistic directors regarded as legitimate dramatic criticism in Egypt at the time; this would have been understood as criticism by a qualified critic, preferably educated at Cairo University or the High Institute of Theatre, unmotivated by artistic or political agendas against the author. El Lozy points out that "the tools of dramatic criticism in Egypt had hardly existed at the time Al-Hakim set out to publish *Ahl al Kahf*... As a result, much of the early criticism tended to address the play as a philosophical treatise and not a dramatic text. (El Lozy, 1986, p. 38)". Whereas El Lozy finds it legitimate to describe most of Al-Hakim's dramatic output as parables, a tendency shared by most early critics such as Taha Hussain and Abbas El Aqqad in the 1930s and 1940s, he considers it a "critical fallacy" to treat the characters of those plays as mouthpieces for the playwright whereby all the characterization is ignored (39). El Lozy, himself an actor and a director as well as a critic, laments that directors are misled by the intellectual aspect of *Ahl al Kahf*, a play that has the historic significance of being Al-Hakim's first foray into serious theatre, and eventually either abandon the play as unstageable, or produce a performance that is pamphlet-like and uninspired (46). El Lozy is yet another critic who comments on Al-Hakim's



intellectual and ideological flexibility. Unlike other critics however, El Lozy seems to subtly hint at a grim possibility that is an established fact for many Egyptian dramatists:

With the students' uprising of 1972-73 and the ensuing "Declaration of Writers and Men of Letters" in support of the students' demands—a document which Tawfiq Al-Hakim signed under pressure of Egyptian intellectuals—his position in official literature was severely threatened. Although he was one of the few signers not to be arrested, his works were officially banned. Al-Hakim, however, was not to remain in disfavour long. He regained his place of honour with the publication of *'Awdat al-Wa'i (Awareness Regained, 1974)*, a political pamphlet in which he bitterly renounced the late president Nasser's policies. Since then, he has become a consistent supporter of the Sadat regime. As a result, his reputation as a thinker and a writer in Egypt and the Arab World has been severely compromised. To this day he is looked upon as a national traitor and renegade by many Egyptian and Arab intellectuals (18).

The implied meaning is that Al-Hakim paid for the removal of the ban on his works with a pledge of allegiance to the new regime. In doing so, Al-Hakim joined the ranks of many other converts and pretend converts from the fields of literature, theatre, and mass-media<sup>20</sup>. Al-Hakim's conversion to the crony capitalist camp of then new president Anwar Sadat, at the expense of the socialist camp of Nasser, enabled the former to establish a unique form of cultural hegemony over the Egyptian entertainment industry. 1974 was the year that unleashed the legislation of the open-door economic policy which in turn caused the creation of a newly rich class that lacked all discernment and whose tastes favoured private-sector, profit-motivated theatre at the expense of the culturally refined state-theatre. Al-Hakim's final dramatic work was a quartet of short plays known collectively as *El Hemeer (The Donkeys, 1975)*. Until his death in 1987, he had not written another play. By withdrawing from the world of theatre and depriving the public sector of a reputation as substantial as his, Al-Hakim passively helped the private sector theatres to sink their public sector counterparts.

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<sup>20</sup> Other notable converts include Nobel Laureate, Naguib Mahfouz, and playwright Ali Salem.

## **2.2 Critical Survey of non-Egyptian Criticism:**

Roger Allen, one of the most prolific Arabists writing out of the University of Pennsylvania, categorically states that Al-Hakim is undoubtedly “the writer who has contributed the most to the development of drama as a literary genre in Egypt” (Allen, 1979, p. 99). Allen mentions Sannu, Shawqi, and Mohammed Taymour in passing, but with hardly any details and no context. Antun and Ramzi find no place in Allen’s 1979 *Edebiyat* article. While discussing Al-Hakim’s role as one of the “dramatists who have tried to find solutions to the problems which the diglossia of the Arabic language presents within the medium” (99), Allen once again omits Antun with his innovative use of three levels of Arabic, and Ramzi who tempered the classical Arabic in a manner that made it more accessible to the less educated members of the audience while retaining the poeticism that delighted the more educated. Allen does mention that Mohammed Taymour created two different versions of each play he wrote, one in classical and one in colloquial, but it is Al-Hakim’s “middle language” that Allen identifies as the most successful (100). Allen incorrectly cites Al-Hakim as rejecting the class divide created by the education and language chasm that exist in Egypt, especially at a time when the leadership is advocating socialism and egalitarianism (100)<sup>21</sup>.

Marvin Carlson is of Badawi’s view that Al-Hakim had “presided over the period” that is generally agreed to have produced the most mature Egyptian drama, 1920s-1970s (Carlson, 2013a, p.529). While mentioning that Al-Hakim had Egyptian predecessors whom the playwright ignored, Carlson does not name them. Carlson sees Al-Hakim as a dramatist who partakes of European theatre but does not successfully engage with it as was his stated aim (530).

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<sup>21</sup> Roger Allen cites *al-Warta (The Deal, 1966)*. *Al-Warta* is *The Predicament*, while *The Deal* is *al-Safqa* (1956). Both plays contain postscripts by Al-Hakim that expound on the language difficulties and the choices that were made by the playwright.

Carlson argues that Al-Hakim's early modernism was more influenced by Pirandello than Shaw, Ibsen, or Chekhov (531). Carlson also identifies the "unmistakeable influence of Shaw" in Al-Hakim's collection of *Social Plays*. Carlson subscribes to the idea that *Ya Tali' al-Shagara (The Tree Climber, 1964)* was Al-Hakim's contribution to the theatre of the absurd resulting from the direct influence of Beckett and Ionesco (532).

It is naturally beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a full review of the scholars who have engaged with Al-Hakim and his dramatic output. The sheer volume of criticism is one of the glaring problems facing any scholar writing about the theatre of Egypt because, in comparison to Tawfiq Al-Hakim, all other modern Egyptian playwrights have been neglected, hence the need for the contribution of this thesis. As can be seen from the above survey, all the critics, be they laudatory, balanced, or accusatory, treat Al-Hakim as the name that is eponymous with modern Egyptian drama. The subsequent analysis of *Al Safqa (The Deal, 1956)* will demonstrate that, contrary to the progressive revolutionary spirit of modern Egyptian drama, Al-Hakim's writing is regressive and counter-revolutionary.

### **2.3 Textual Analysis of *Al Safqa (The Deal, 1956)*:**

On 9 September 1952, less than two months after the popularly supported July movement in Egypt carried out by the Free Officers of the Egyptian military, the RCC passed Law 178 which legislated for nationwide agrarian reform. Article 14 of the law read:

The land shall be granted to small farmers whose turn it is, free of debt or renters' rights, and registered without fees. The conditions of ownership are that the farmer tends to the land in person and that appropriate care and diligence be afforded to the task of farming (Al Waqaei' Al Misriya Staff, 1952, p. 3).

The land that influential families seized over hundreds of years was about to be returned to the farmers whose ancestors had owned it. The pre-revolutionary landowners who were accustomed to owning tens of thousands of feddans (1 feddan = 4200 Square metres = 1.04 Acres), were now

to be legally restricted to owning 200 feddans while the newly entitled farmers were to own five feddans each. This was one of the promises of redistribution of wealth that the RCC quickly implemented. By keeping this particular promise, the RCC's support base grew exponentially in Egypt's primarily agrarian society. Land and its ownership were strong and vital socio-economic and political symbols in 1950s Egypt, symbols that were imbued with a renewed potency among the formerly landless masses and were to be weaponized by the writers of the day. Al-Hakim's *The Deal* was but one of many plays and novels that addressed the question of land and the complexities of life in rural Egypt. As we shall see in Chapter Four with Sa'ad Eldin Wahba's *El Masameer (The Nails, 1967)*, the rural setting was to become a recurring symbol along with all of the trappings and conflicts of rural life. Egyptian rural cultural features include respecting and valuing elderly opinions, whims, and demands above the most critical needs of the young, colourful language, and conversations replete with land-related metaphors (Badawi, 1988, p. 67). Theatrically, the most practical feature of the specifically Egyptian rural culture is the centralization that enables a playwright such as Al-Hakim to contain all action in one village square. Al Hakim may be seen to be capitalising upon the notion that centralization continues to be a feature of Egyptian life in general rooted in Pharaonic hydraulic culture, with Pharaoh, or whomever the head of state may be, as the omnipotent central planner and the giver of the water (Wittfogel, 1983 p. 6, 25, 27, 45, 69, 93, 248, 250).

To follow the flow of the upcoming analysis, I will provide a guiding synopsis of the play. This play requires a nuanced translation that accounts for Al-Hakim's experiments with the various diction levels that he considered to be stageable, and which I will be addressing after the analysis. The lack of an accessible English translation of this play adds to the importance of the following synopsis.

1. Several peasants are nagging a cashier, Shenouda, to finish tallying the cash deposits he had received as their advance payment on a land plot that belongs to a European company.
2. The conclusion of the deal, initially resting on a complete accounting of the cash received by the cashier, is to be celebrated with revels and, most importantly, the slaughtering of a bull, the highest form of ritual sacrifice in Islamic countries.
3. Sa'dawy and 'Awadein are introduced as the de facto leaders of the peasants making the purchase.
4. Two lovers, Mabrouka ('Awadein's daughter) and Mahrous (Sa'dawy's son), overhear that their fathers have decided to sacrifice the money allocated for their marriage and dowry in order to raise the necessary funds for their stake in the deal.
5. Tohamy, one of the peasants, is discovered by Shenouda not to have paid his share of the money for his stake in the deal.
6. The village barber, who also customarily performs some emergency medical procedures, is unmasked as unsanitary. He uses a dirty and blunt blade as well as fertilizer in lieu of talcum powder.
7. Tohamy arrives and pays his share of the money. We shortly discover that he had stolen his grandmother's savings. These savings were earmarked for her funeral, coffin, and burial. She implores all those present to pressure Tohamy to return her money which he eventually does.

8. The Hajj (Pilgrim to Mecca) ‘Abdelmawgood is introduced as both the undertaker of the village and the money lender/usurer who can resolve the complication of the missing stake for which Tohamy can no longer pay. Under threat by ‘Awadein, who is aware of the Hajj’s moonlighting as a coffin thief, Hajj ‘Abdelmawgood provides the necessary funds and saves the deal.
9. Just as the villagers are about to slaughter the bull in celebration, Khamis, one of the European company’s assistant accountants, arrives with the news that the deal is now as good as dead because Hamed Bey<sup>22</sup> Abu Ragya was seen at the train station. This sighting was interpreted as a sign that Hamed Bey, known for his predatory instinct when it comes to land purchase, intends to buy the land of the village.
10. The villagers lament their luck and note that the European company is a more humane and just employer of peasants than Hamed and his agent, ‘Eleish Effendi<sup>23</sup>.
11. Tohamy offers to shoot Hamed while the village barber offers to achieve the same end by using a contaminated blade. The villagers reject both offers for fear of repercussions that would cause the European company to cancel the deal.

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<sup>22</sup> Turkish title of middle aristocracy. Bestowed by the sovereign or a representative of the crown. Roughly equivalent to “Sir”. The highest title is Basha/Pasha which is roughly equivalent to “Lord”.

<sup>23</sup> This is the lowest of the Turkish titles. It is not bestowed by an authority but is achieved through attaining a basic education and average respect in the community.

12. Khamis suggests paying off Hamed Bey who had previously accepted money in lieu of a stake in another deal.
13. Hajj 'Abdelmawgood is threatened anew, this time by Khamis, into loaning the villagers the needed money for the payoff. This loan is without collateral. People cheer for the Hajj.
14. Act One ends with the villagers, led by the Hajj, 'Awadein, and Sa'dawy, beginning a march to the train station where they intend to lure Hamed Bey into coming to the village with them where they hope to convince him to accept the payoff.
15. Act Two begins with the return of the villagers with a confused Hamed Bey who is mounted on a horse while his agent is given a donkey and the villagers are on foot.
16. We learn through exchanges between the Bey and his agent that their presence in the area is actually due to a car accident rather than a business agenda. The Bey is embarrassed by the villagers into accepting their persistent invitation. He is unwilling to stay any longer than necessary and is anxious to return to the train station as quickly as possible as he has urgent business in Cairo.
17. After an extended series of confused exchanges and misunderstandings, a unit of the play that lasts for twenty to thirty-five minutes depending on the tempo chosen by the director, Hamed Bey finally understands why the villagers are ingratiating themselves to him and willing to pay him off to the tune of 150

Egyptian pounds<sup>24</sup>. This figure rises to 200 pounds by the end of the agent's manoeuvres.

18. The agent obfuscates and takes the position that Hamed Bey understood the payoff to be only for a portion of the land. The agent is playing both sides in order to receive double his commission. The agent talks the Bey into giving up the land which would be a source of trouble if the villagers refuse to farm it or use any other form of resistance. The end result is that the already rich Bey is even richer simply because he accidentally crossed paths with a group of naïve villagers.
19. The Bey starts to ogle the village women who are preparing the celebratory feast and becomes uncontrollably obsessed with 'Awadein's daughter, Mabrouka, whom he was eying as she was watching a song and dance performed in Hamed Bey's honour. The Bey threatens to go back on his word unless Mabrouka goes to Cairo with him to ostensibly work as Nanny to the Bey's infant son. It is clear to all present that this transaction is veiled prostitution.
20. 'Awadein is guilted by Tohamy into accepting the offer of the Bey. The principal characters and stakeholders in the land deal agree that land is the true source of honour and that Mabrouka should go to Cairo. Boss Shenouda recommends that they ask Mabrouka.

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<sup>24</sup> 150 Egyptian pounds was roughly the equivalent of 160 Pounds Sterling (1945), 7,000 in 2020 (adjusted for inflation). The purchasing power of that amount of money was sufficient to buy a premium American luxury car in Egypt at that time.



21. Mabrouka arrives and resolutely agrees to go to Cairo. The Bey leaves with Mabrouka and his agent. The second act ends with the villagers lampooning the Bey with their songs.
22. The third and final act resumes with two nights having passed. Tohamy's grandmother is now dead. Mahrous, Mabrouka's fiancé, has disappeared, presumably to go and save her.
23. Hajj 'Abdelmawgood, entrusted with the funeral expenses of Tohamy's grandmother, has disappeared. Khamis tells Tohamy not to worry because the Hajj usually disappears during the day after a burial. In reality, the Hajj, a coffin thief, has gone to the town centre to sell the coffin of Tohamy's late grandmother.
24. Mabrouka returns, having executed a cunning plan. Knowing that the villagers needed a day to finalise the purchase of the land, she had to keep the Bey distracted for more than a day. She pretended to have contracted cholera, causing the health authorities to quarantine the Bey's house and all its residents until Mabrouka, now transferred to the local hospital, was declared healthy. Mahrous appears and reveals that he had indeed followed Mabrouka and that he had slept outside the hospital both nights she was there.
25. The Hajj reappears. He denies receipt of the funeral money. Khamis toys with him by exposing his theft of the coffins of the dead and then withdrawing his testimony after securing the Hajj's obedience. The Hajj agrees to expunge all the debts owed to him by the villagers as well as to give Mahrous a wedding gift and Mabrouka a trousseau.

26. The play ends with a festive song and dance celebrating the acquisition of the land.

Although Al-Hakim's "third language" may seem to be the subject matter for a linguistic study, it directly impacts directorial and acting choices during rehearsals and performances of the play as well as audience response. A cursory comparison of the language used in the plays of the other two playwrights in this study will set Al-Hakim's language apart as stilted and awkward, which would refute his claim that his dialogue would be easily spoken and natural. A further comparison with Al-Hakim's own plays written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic will further highlight this third language's forced and cumbersome nature. Al-Hakim was likely attempting to impose this experimental and unactable language to rein in the kind of language used by the school of leftist playwrights led by Nu'mān 'Ashour with his *Maghmatis (The Trickcyclist)*, Published in 1950 and performed in 1955). In the next chapter, I will review the impact of Ashour's first play on the language and sensibilities of the various stakeholders of the Egyptian theatre world. At this juncture, suffice it to say that there was a strong link between the authentic naturalism of 'Ashour's dialogue and the rhetoric of the socialist-minded *Otcherk*, a mode from which a conservative such as Al-Hakim would certainly want to distance himself.

*The Deal* premiered at the National Theatre on 9 January 1958, two years after its publication. The critical reception was highly enthusiastic and laudatory. Even when critics voiced a negative point, they enveloped it in paragraphs of praise. It is necessary here to point out a distinguishing characteristic of the Egyptian press: they generally do not go against the grain. Even the luminaries of the world of Egyptian criticism would not venture to antagonise an established figure such as Tawfiq Al-Hakim. Editors-in-chief would vet the contents of every article and column to ensure that individuals they regarded as beyond reproach would not be

offended or critiqued too harshly. A brief review of some of the play's Egyptian critiques will reveal the extent to which Egyptian critics overtly displayed their partiality towards Al-Hakim. In a relatively balanced review, El-'Alem refers to Al-Hakim's experiment with language as "inspired" (Nashaty, 1973, p. 128). Abdel Fattah al-Baroudi gives his column the title: "A Lucrative Deal for Tawfiq Al-Hakim" (128). Poet and fellow playwright Salah Abdel-Sabour describes Al-Hakim's dialogue as a "phenomenal treasure trove of imagination and fertile vision that should serve as useful instruction for our future playwrights" (129). After a detailed comparative point-by-point analysis of the play and its connection to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Mohamed Ali Hammad proclaims Al-Hakim to be "not merely a pioneer, but *the* pioneer (131 My Emphasis). These pronouncements lose a substantial amount of their impact and significance in translation, but they are rarely given except to those Egyptians affectionately refer to as the "fourth pyramid" in their field. That elevated position renders public criticism unacceptable while containing and often negating academic criticism.

These subtle forms of censorship, whereby a critic is compelled to flatter an established icon, and from which the playwright's reputation benefitted, ironically form the core of Al-Hakim's dialogue philosophy. Every unit of every scene of Al-Hakim's social or political plays revolves around the unspoken that may be revealed and subvert the status quo. Al-Hakim uses even the most empirical level of individual self-censorship to signify socio-political censorship. In *Bullet in the Heart*, Naguib dares not to confess his love. In *The Sultan's Dilemma*, the Condemned Man dares not speak out about his secret concerning the Sultan. In *Soft Hands*, Farid does not utter a word about his humbled status and lives a life of pretence. It is rare to find protagonists who speak their minds in Al-Hakim's social or political plays. Whereas subtext and the subtleties of the unspoken are a regular feature of modern western theatre, often being valued

as providing the most inspirational moments of acting, the convention of declamatory acting in Egypt before 1952 almost dictated that all meaning must be stated explicitly in the dialogue. The style of the dialogue is the one area where Al-Hakim embraces a truly naturalistic register which, in the case of *The Deal*, is undermined by his use of the hybrid “third language” which, when read, lends itself more to classical Arabic rather than the Egyptian vernacular. The vernacular that provides the naturalism is undercut by the classical which imbues the dialogue with magniloquence.

In terms of setting, the rural atmosphere was not unheard of on the Egyptian stage. Al-Hakim himself had previously and quite famously utilised the village scene and rural culture in *Oghneyat al Mawt (The Song of Death, 1950)*. As we have seen in chapter one, playwrights such as Badei' Khairi and Naguib al-Rihani fully exploited the rural setting and stereotypes of the simpleton villagers as far back as the first three decades of the twentieth century, even before Al-Hakim's *People of the Cave*<sup>25</sup>. In *The Deal*, Al-Hakim uses the land itself as the object of the central transaction around which the play revolves rather than as an agent of local colour or quaint mannerisms as was the custom in pre-1952 drama. Al-Hakim does not, however, as will be clarified shortly, play upon the Egyptian logic of land being synonymous with dignity (Fanon 2005, p. 9). Instead, the characters treat land as a transferrable possession whose ownership enables the peasants to transcend their status as hirelings; it represents the agency of social and economic mobility.

At the beginning of the play, large numbers of characters are discovered in a state of seething and tentative stasis. The finely balanced socioeconomic equilibrium is at the tipping point, with three focal areas in the village square. The main focal area, a bench of authority

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<sup>25</sup> These plays and the stereotypes have been discussed in detail in chapter one.

where a man, Boss Shenouda, the cashier, sits reading a long scroll of paper, is easily identified. One of the two secondary areas of action reveals the local barber squatting and providing his shaving services to one of the villagers. The final focal area is one where some villagers are mounting a wooden structure used in some Islamic regions for the public sacrifice of beasts. The mood of slowly rising tension and anticipation is indicated by the nagging persistent chanting of the villagers as they chorally ask the figure of authority sitting on the bench whether they should “slaughter the beast” (Al-Hakim, 1956b, p. 13).

Prior to the dialogue proper, the visual messaging indicates several power dynamics in a microcosm of hegemony. All the characters' attention is focused on the one character who is enjoying an elevated sitting position. The barber, squatting, has authority over the throat of his customer. The sacrifice crew is poised to sever the throat of the beast. This is a visually volatile state of affairs that, coupled with the incessant chanting, assails the audience's senses with a sense of impending doom, relief, or both. This type and level of tension are relatively new to the 1950s Egyptian stage where, with few exceptions that will be mentioned in the coming chapters, plays tended to begin with forced and awkward exposition that precluded any suggestive imagery apart from the scenery. In *The Deal*, the rudimentary scenery helps accentuate the visual and auditory signals to the audience.

The first exchange of dialogue provides audiences with the necessary exposition by identifying the hegemonic figure of M'alleem (Boss) Shenouda as the cashier of the Belgian company while cementing the power dynamic and establishing Shenouda as the figure of absolute authority in this opening unit of the play. Despite providing local colour and a measure

of authenticity to the character mix<sup>26</sup>, the Christian faith of Boss Shenouda is neither addressed nor followed up throughout the play. Al-Hakim delivers the required information deftly:

PEASANTS: (Nagging) Should we slaughter the beast, M' allem Shenouda?

SHENOUDA: (Absorbed in examining a long scroll of receipts) Patience!

Patience, I say!

PEASANTS: We've all paid, M' allem Shenouda.

SHENOUDA: (Shouting) Calm down! Calm down until I review the record of receipts!

PEASANTS: (Grumbling) The record! The review of the record!

SHENOUDA: Absolutely! Reviewing the record is a must! I must check all the names and add up all the sums paid. I warned you before: If one of you defaults on payment, the deal is off!

'AWADEIN: True. But you also told us that we have already paid more than the instalment due to the company. You ordered us to prepare the beast, to prepare the dancers and the musicians, and to make it a once-in-a-lifetime festive night.

SA'DAWI: (At the mercy of the barber, lather on face) Everything is ready! The dancers, the musicians, the bull, and the knife. We've even set up the meet hook right in front of you.

PEASANTS: Should we slaughter the beast? (Al-Hakim, 1956b, p. 13)

In a page and a half of dialogue that could be performed in ninety seconds, Al-Hakim provides the complete relationship and power dynamics for this unit of the opening scene. Again, with few exceptions, such a volume of exposition on the Egyptian stage was previously either provided clumsily or further along in the first act. We see that Shenouda is controlling the peasants with his “review” of the money paid to “the company” of which he is a representative and from which he derives his power. That company evidently holds sway over the peasants, but we still do not know what the company is selling and why that sale is worthy of a festive night full of music and dancing following the sacrifice of a bull. It is worth noting that such a sacrifice in Islamic countries is usually linked to a significant and highly challenging achievement. The sacrifice is intended as thanks to God for bringing about the desired result. Frequently, the

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<sup>26</sup> The percentage of Christians in Egypt is a highly debatable and volatile topic (Rugh, 2016; Iskander, 2012) but the rough estimate of the percentage has been anything between 5-10% of the population.

sacrifice is promised to God in advance in order to expedite the intended outcome. There seems to be a particular link between the Egyptian Islamic attitude to sacrifice and the attitudes of ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans toward the same practice ('Utman 1993, p. 260, 266-7; 'Awad 1960, pp. 3-5). This link to antiquity pervades Al-Hakim's writings and will be more pronounced dramaturgically once we arrive at the denouement of *The Deal*, where Al-Hakim employs an adapted form of *deus ex machina*.

We soon discover the object of "the deal" with the foreign company, whose Belgian nationality we only discover in the middle of Act Two: the purchase of a plot of land to be divided amongst the paying peasants. The nature of this deal in 1956 Egypt is sufficient to disturb the audience that had just witnessed the evacuation of the last vestiges of the occupying British forces. This postcolonial resentment, coupled with the RCC's recent redistribution of land, is sufficient to revive precolonial memories of injustice and hardship. Regardless of its nationality, the idea of a foreign company selling land to Egyptian peasants would provoke the audience and provide a compelling set of given circumstances and metatheatrical engagement.

However, this retrospective approach to the choice of topic is part of why Al-Hakim cannot be considered a revolutionary. As we have seen in Chapter one, ever since the late nineteenth century and Ya'qub Sannu, the theatre in Egypt was considered an influential medium that both artists and governments recognized as a force for socio-political change, a subversive art form whose power could be harnessed. For an Egyptian playwright to capitalize on the theatre's revolutionary influence, the topics must have immediacy and contemplate existing problems. If the intent is to suppress the theatre's subversive power, then Al-Hakim's approach of retrospectively reflecting on a settled issue would be the course of action prescribed by a counter-revolutionary intellectual.

*The Deal* characterizes Egyptian peasants as underdeveloped opportunists who want to venture above their station. This bourgeois view of peasants is yet another feature of Al-Hakim's writing, a view he shares with the pre-revolutionary upper-middle-class and aristocracy of Egypt. Al-Hakim portrays the peasants as tunnel-visioned, materialistic, and fundamentally dishonest individuals who, like a gang of criminals, work well together as a team to achieve their selfish goals. The peasants face a series of obstacles along the path to ownership of the land. The first obstacle, occurring barely five minutes into the play, is when one of the paying peasants, Tohamy, is discovered not to have paid his share, delinquency that can void the entire deal. Tohamy shortly arrives with the money and, just as the bull is about to be slaughtered to celebrate the conclusion of the deal, we discover the source of Tohamy's contribution. Tohamy had stolen the money his grandmother had set aside for her funeral and burial. In a heart-breaking scene, the grandmother appears and chastises her grandson:

I know the whole story. You've said it a thousand times. I still told you to stay away from my money. Don't you dare touch it. I'm an old woman with one foot in the grave. All the money I have is going for my coffin, my funeral service, and my burial... My afterlife is more important than your land. More important than anything. My afterlife. I've been saving up for my death all this time and you want to strip me of my afterlife and my funeral? Will you be happy, son, to degrade your grandmother at the end of her days? To deprive her of her coffin and her burial? To let my enemies gloat? To make me the laughing stock of old and young alike in the village? If you have any feelings or sense, give me back my money. By God that's all I have to say to you: my money (Al-Hakim, 1956b, p. 29)!

This calculated heartrending unit serves more than one purpose on stage. It comes right after seeing the two lovers, Mahrous and Mabrouka, exchange grievances as they realize that their marriage money set aside by their fathers, Sa'dawy and 'Awadein, has been redirected to help finance the purchase of the land. This symbolic sacrifice of the future in the form of the young couple is immediately juxtaposed with this older woman who symbolises the past but whose money is also earmarked for her morbid future. By the time the grandmother exits, the three



main hopeful purchasers of the land, Tohamy, Sa'dawy, and 'Awadein, are portrayed as men who do not hesitate to sacrifice others' future for the sake of their future, the land. From the perspective of some members of the audience who see the land as a worthy objective, the young couple and the grandmother are presented as selfish parties since they should be happy to contribute to the communal and dignified cause of land ownership. Al-Hakim does not allow the audience to come to a positive consensus about the villagers.

This near demonization of all the characters distracts the audience from the key culprit of the play, the foreign company that sells the land of the peasants back to them with interest. This Belgian company, an instrumental arm of imperialism, is never once seen as having committed any wrongdoing. This tacit exoneration of the representatives of foreign imperialist capitalism is a popular trope amongst counter-revolutionary intellectuals<sup>27</sup>. Al-Hakim also uses a problematic pre-revolutionary convention: the young woman of the piece is a symbol that represents Egypt and is always in danger of rape. Rape in this context signifies exploitation and in the specific case of Hamed Bey, it is the exploitation of the peasantry at the hands of an agent of colonialism. Al-Hakim had started using this at the outset of his career in *Al Mar'a al-Gadeeda* (*The New Woman*, 1926?). The counter-revolutionary stance on the part of Al-Hakim is well concealed and, having supplied a didactic pro-revolutionary red herring in the form of the Egyptian

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<sup>27</sup> For further reading, the writings of theatre critics Nehad Seleiha, Hazem Azmy, Rashad Rushdy, and Louis Awad tend to glorify the pre-1952 era. Such critics adopt the view that Egypt was a constitutional monarchy where liberal democracy was adopted. They also tend to ignore the 80,000 British soldiers that were garrisoned along the Suez Canal to ostensibly protect British interests and international freedom of passage through the vital waterway. This nostalgia for the so-called monarchy continues to this day. An easily searchable example is the Facebook group @king.farouk.faroukmisr where the late King Farouk is glorified. Among the recurring points of pride that are listed on this highly popular page is the extent of foreign influence on life in Egypt.

aristocrat who is exploiting the villagers and symbolically wants to rape Mabrouka, Al-Hakim can claim to be a progressive who is admonishing and exposing the real enemy within.

The demonization of the villagers is prominent in several key moments, the most striking of which is when 'Awadein essentially sells his daughter to the aristocrat, Hamed Bey, in order to secure the deal for the land. Mabrouka had by that point been established as the symbol for Egypt. It is necessary to pause here and note that Mabrouka can mean the blessed one, foreshadowing her eventual return from captivity unscathed and with her virginity intact, while Mahrous, her fiancé, means the protected one, foreshadowing his safe return despite his intentions to defy higher powers. This demonization of all the characters, especially the villagers, while explicitly and conveniently tacitly exonerating the foreign Belgian company is the bedrock upon which Al-Hakim's play rests. Al-Hakim has subtly embedded the idea that the villagers who now control the nation's land are mischievous tricksters who cannot be trusted. From a post-colonial perspective, it is possible to see Al-Hakim as the subaltern who yearns for the colonizer's return.

Al-Hakim uses the younger characters to demonstrate that the future will not be that much better than the present generation. Al-Hakim shows us that Mabrouka and Mahrous are spying on the villagers during their revels. Al-Hakim adds a footnote to expound on his stage directions. The stage directions alone position the young couple in a manner that incriminates them:

Silence reigns. Everyone awaits Shenouda and his review of the register. Meanwhile, the young man, Mahrous, appears from the rear. Mabrouka also appears and they both hide to watch and whisper (Al-Hakim 1956b, p. 18).

This stage direction, showing the young couple to be intrusive eavesdroppers, is sufficient to plant a negative impression of their characters in the mind of a conservative Egyptian audience.

Al-Hakim is unwilling to leave anything to chance and, like many playwrights who do not have faith in directors, inserts a footnote that clarifies his view of the younger generation. This footnote pre-empts any attempt by directors to shield the young couple from a negative appraisal:

This [stage direction] applies if the play is staged in the open air without scenery. If, however, it is performed in a theatre, it would be better if Mahrous and Mabrouka appeared on the roof of one of the houses where there is cover in the form of cotton and maize stems. This way they can hide and observe the events in the square (Al-Hakim, 1956b, p. 18).

Al-Hakim has calculated the placement of the two young lovers in a position from which they can judge and subsequently condemn the principal villagers, a move that enables the audience to judge and condemn the lovers themselves. The isolated and judgmental positioning of Mahrous and Mabrouka provides the following exchanges with an ominous subtext:

MAHROUS: Watch what's happening, Mabrouka. Watch!

MABROUKA: Your father's getting his beard shaven.

MAHROUS: As if it's his wedding night.

MABROUKA: They've shafted us, Mahrous!

MAHROUS: They've shafted us.

MABROUKA: This whole thing with the land came out of nowhere!

...

MAHROUS: The beast is ready. The drums and the pipes. The revels are set up all over the village.

MABROUKA: For the land!

MAHROUS: Your father is standing next to the barber. Waiting for his turn.

MABROUKA: I hope he's happy!

MAHROUS: I hope they're all happy... All of them. But not me and you. They all bought something. They all own something. But I lost my dowry, and you lost your trousseau.

...

MABROUKA: Brilliant! We are the only losers in the whole village, Mahrous (Al-Hakim, 1956b, 16-19).

The tone of the couple is unmistakably bitter. Mahrous and Mabrouka refuse to join in the festivities and instead hold the entire village, including both of their fathers, in contempt. They scorn the concept of land ownership, prized so highly by their parents' generation. In this

land purchase transaction, the young couple consider themselves to be robbed of their rights by their parents' generation. Mahrous and Mabrouka go on to label each of the principal villagers as thieves of one variety or another. The couple sardonically parades the villagers and their crimes: the village barber uses a rusty razor, Shenouda is guilty of accepting bribes, Abdelmawgood the undertaker is a usurer (Al-Hakim, 1956b, 16-18). Al-Hakim uses the bitterness of Mahrous and Mabrouka in their first appearance on stage to classify them as the rash and selfish youngsters conservative Egyptians customarily criticise and condemn. The characters portrayed by the young Ahmed Mazhar, Shoukri Sarhan, Ahmed Ramzi, Hassan Youssef and Youssef Fakhr Eldin were icons of Al-Hakim's perspective of youthful yet tragic indiscretion. In his 1950 play, *Law 'arif al shabab (If Only the Youth Knew)*, Al-Hakim employs the character of the Pasha to portray the elderly character who claims to regret his youthful carelessness, selfishness and cruelty, especially with women (Al-Hakim, 1956a, p. 646). This antipathy towards younger generations is consistent with Al-Hakim's anti-revolutionary attitude since the Egyptian revolution was the product of the efforts of an RCC whose members, except for General Naguib, were in their twenties and thirties.

Al-Hakim's counter-revolutionary tendency is clearest when he introduces the Egyptian aristocrat, Hamed Bey. Al-Hakim introduces the character of Hamed and makes him the pivotal personality for the full duration of twenty pages before his entrance at the start of Act Two. Hamed is so influential that the mere mention of his name throws all the principal villagers into a panic. The unit where Hamed's name is first mentioned reveals the raw terror associated with his character:

KHAMIS: Boss Shenouda! People of the village! The deal is gone! It is all over!  
ALL: (*Petrified*) Shut up, you!  
SHENOUDA: The deal is gone?  
KHAMIS: (*Dismounting from his donkey*) It is all over...

SHENOUDA: (*Eying him closely*) Are we sure you're not drunk?  
 KHAMIS: Haven't had a drink in two days. It is the end of the month.  
 SHENOUDA: I believe you. You look serious. But the deal—  
 KHAMIS: It's gone, I tell you. It is over!  
 SHENOUDA: How do you know?  
 KHAMIS: Hamed Bey Abu Ragia is at the train station.  
 ALL: (*Terrified*) Hamed Bey Abu Ragia?!  
 ...  
 SHENOUDA: He smelled it and showed up just in time! The fox has picked up the scent!  
 SA'ADAWY: What will we do, Boss Shenouda?  
 SHENOUDA: (*Despairing*) Now that Hamed Bey Abu Ragia is in the mix...  
 'AWADEIN: Why is Hamed Bey Abu Ragia always hounding us?!  
 TOHAMY: He's got it in for us. Every time he finds an acre, he pounces (Al-Hakim 1956b, 37-38).

The knowledgeable and educated Khamis jumped to the conclusion that Hamed's presence spells certain doom for the villagers' plans. Once he reveals his news to the villagers, terror becomes the prevailing and most palpable factor in the scene. Boss Shenouda's hegemony over the villagers is transferred to the still absent but influential Egyptian aristocrat. When Hamed Bey finally appears, he is mounting a grand steed and surrounded by the welcoming music of the villagers. Hamed is essentially welcomed in a manner befitting a Monarch, a messiah, a holy event, or the now suspended deal for the land. Al-Hakim crafts the entrance of this influential character in a way that demonstrates his power while subtly highlighting the fickle nature of the villagers. The same villagers who moments earlier had no qualms about murdering the aristocrat, are now embracing him and affording him their most lavish deference. This deference begins with

*[The] gathered masses, cheering Hamed Bey atop his steed, followed by his agent, 'Eleish Effendi, on a mule.*  
 SHENOUDA: (*Shouting*) Drape a cover over my bench.  
 SA'ADAWY: Get a pillow from your house, 'Awadein.  
 TOHAMY: Help the Bey dismount.  
*Frantic movement. Everyone is competing to help the Bey dismount. The rest advance on 'Eleish Effendi to help him off his mule. Some take the animals off the stage, while the Bey sits on the now covered bench (Al-Hakim, 1956b, pp. 57-8).*

The covering of Shenouda's bench, the town's seat of authority as Al-Hakim established at the beginning of the play, is striking in two ways. Firstly, it is Shenouda himself who issues the instruction to cover the bench for the Bey. Shenouda is therefore acknowledging that he is inferior and not as clean or worthy as the Bey, the local agent of colonial hegemony. Shenouda willingly chooses to be dominated by a more hegemonic figure. In this instance, Shenouda acknowledges the socioeconomic structure imposed by the British coloniser which dictates that this poor cashier who had been so dominant and influential in Act One is now to relinquish his authority and hegemony to the titled aristocrat. The covering of the bench is also striking because, while we know that 'Awadein is the provider of the pillow, the source of the bench cover is unknown. Depending on how the scene is performed, Al-Hakim leaves this important yet subtle symbol of socioeconomic stratification in the hands of the director. It is likely that an unnamed villager will be assigned this duty, indicating that the socioeconomic stratification is organic and naturally evolves from within the society and its market system. It is also equally likely that one of the influential principal villagers will drape the bench in a stylised ceremonial piece of blocking and business resulting in a set change since this is the only piece of furniture. The latter choice would indicate that the stratification is imposed by the hegemonic betters whose superior class and privilege provides upward mobility that the masses can never access. Either choice would be counter-revolutionary since the implication is that there is a hierarchy and stratification that must be observed. Al-Hakim's conservative streak is conversant with the image of the subaltern who has become "the outsider from elsewhere" (Fanon, 2005, p. 5) and Orientalist exteriority that produces a remote representative other (Said, 2003, 21).

Al-Hakim's portrayal of the villagers condemns their behaviour and intentions and is to be sharply contrasted with the sympathetic and pseudo satirical parody of the Bey. Whereas Al-

Hakim characterizes the villagers as mischievous, scheming, and fundamentally dishonest, he portrays Hamed Bey as a businessman who saw an opportunity and seized it. As a representative of the class that provides the colonizer with agency, Al-Hakim subtly characterizes Hamed Bey as an honest individual, a trait that the playwright consistently bestows upon aristocratic characters. The villagers had misunderstood the Bey's presence as a threat to buy the plot of land instead of them and had subsequently resolved to bribe the Bey. When Sa'dawy offers the bribe to Hamed Bey, the latter recoils:

BEY: Money?

SA'DAWY: A small compensation for your favours, sir.

BEY: (*Astonished, the money still in his hand*) Compensation?!

SA'DAWY: For your effort and presence.

BEY: My presence is my concern.

SA'DAWY: It concerns us all. No formalities, I beg you. The whole affair is simplicity itself. We do, after all, owe you a great deal.

BEY: A hundred-pound note? Are you mad?! Take your money... Compensation from you is unacceptable... Is your village rich? Do you have mountains of money?

...

SA'DAWY: Drink the coffee and then we will talk.

BEY: First, take your money! ... You are all mad. I! I accept a one-hundred-pound note from a bunch of madmen? Impossible! Inconceivable! ... Is it possible for us to accept large sums of money in return for nothing from a bunch of madmen? ... No. No. No... It is impossible for me to accept... I will accept on the condition that you accept an appropriate gift in return (Al-Hakim, 1956b, pp. 66-74).

Al-Hakim portrays the Bey as fickle, proud, and even petty, but the aristocrat's honesty is above reproach. Even when, in his moody and unprincipled fickleness, Hamed accepts the appeasement money, he still insists that it is not a matter of quid pro quo and that he will reciprocate with a gift <sup>28</sup>(74). Later, when Hamed shows his opportunistic side and asks for more money in return for letting the farmers buy the land, the money he accepts is ethically justified. Al-Hakim

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<sup>28</sup> The appropriate gift sentiment is more often than not a platitude in the parlance of the aristocrats of the pre-1952 period.

presents us with his portrait of the archetypal Bey, Hamed, who represents his class and therefore does not display any financial dishonesty unworthy of an aristocrat. Al-Hakim's bourgeois mentality may tolerate fickleness, opportunism, pride, and even adultery, all of which may be reprehensible human weaknesses, but financial dishonesty cannot be forgiven. A thief breaks the law and therefore an aristocrat charged with governing social order on behalf of the colonizer can never be a thief in Al-Hakim's plays.

Al-Hakim shares this pre-revolutionary elitism with Youssef Bey Wahby, the actor-manager discussed in chapter one. Abdel Qadir points out that, in *Bayoumi Effendi* (1949), Youssef Wahbi "clearly has nothing but contempt for the lower classes" (Abdel Qadir, 2015, p. 17). Abdel Qadir also stresses that Youssef Wahbi never falls into the trap of incriminating the upper classes (16-18). There is a clear continuity of messaging throughout Hamed's scenes telegraphing that the upper classes, due to what they perceive to be superior breeding, cannot stoop so low as to steal or be accused of any financial irregularity. Hamed refuses to accept the money of the villagers and indeed appears morally outraged at the suggestion until he can morally justify it as a business transaction. Al-Hakim keeps theft as the exclusive domain of those he views as the poorly bred lower classes such as Tohamy who steals his grandmother's money. Abdel Qadir asserts that Al-Hakim's principles were formed before the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and have had no reason to change, despite the playwright's propensity for adapting (30). Al-Hakim's elitism is what pushes critics such as Abdel Qadir to re-evaluate the ideology of the playwright, especially since some left-wing critics such as Mohamed Mandour (1907 – 1965), had died before witnessing Al-Hakim's full assault on Nasserism after Nasser's death in September 1970.



The play's climax, the acquisition of Mabrouka by Hamed Bey, is symbolic, personal, and tangential. The Aristocrat essentially purchases a peasant girl with her father's consent in a deal witnessed by all the principal villagers. This allegorically and visually mirrors the sale of Egypt's Suez Canal by the Albanian Viceroy, Khedive Ismail to the British and the French in order to settle his personal debts. Khedive Ismail had accrued substantial debts as a result of expanding Egyptian territory through expensive military campaigns and lavish spending on vanity projects such as the Cairo Opera House. The sale of the Canal did not stem the tide of Ismail's debts and, eventually, Britain used the insurmountable debt as an excuse to invade and colonize Egypt in 1882 until 23 July 1952. Unlike the historical narrative, where the Albanian Viceroy illegally sold Egyptian land to a geopolitically alien power, Al-Hakim presents us with a father who sold his daughter to Hamed Bey, a socioeconomically alien individual. In both cases, the seller had no right to sell. Al-Hakim, however, inverts the reality in his allegory; whereas Khedive Ismail, from his position at the apex of the socioeconomic and political hierarchy, is the guilty party, Al-Hakim instead incriminates 'Awadein, Mabrouka's father, a member of the downtrodden peasantry, and therefore the opposite of the historical narrative. The play's climax therefore witnesses a historiographical inversion that symbolically exonerates the elite and paints them in a better light than the proletariat and the peasantry. The climax also tangentially diverts attention from the public issue of land purchase and towards the personal issue of the sale of Mabrouka. Al-Hakim uses the climax to contrast the financially conscientious Bey with the ethically corrupt 'Awadein who is willing to sell his own surprisingly cooperative and equally deceptive daughter, further complicating his depiction of the moralities of the stakeholders of this aspect of the deal.

'AWADEIN: (*To his daughter*) Did he tell you about the journey?  
MABROUKA: (*Without hesitation*) I'm going.

'AWADEIN: You are...

MABROUKA: The moment he told me that the Bey threatened to reverse the deal and deprive the village, I decided to go.

'AWADEIN: Alone, my child? And with a complete stranger? A man?

MABROUKA: So? Am I a child?

'AWADEIN: He didn't stop staring at you for an instant when you were standing here earlier.

MABROUKA: God knows that you don't need to worry about Mabrouka from him or any other man!

'AWADEIN: And risk our reputation? Put ourselves in harm's way for the sake of others?

MABROUKA: For the sake of our town, no price is too high.

TOHAMY: Well said.

'AWADEIN: Will Mahrous agree to this?

MABROUKA: We'll just tell him that my aunt, Omm Ragab, is sick and needed me to go to her in Minya Ghattas.

'AWADEIN: And what if the Bey's intentions are not honourable?

MABROUKA: Then I'll—

KHAMIS: I'll tell you what to do. I'll give you the address of a relative of mine, an apothecary in the Husayn neighbourhood. All you have to do is leave the Bey's house, ask for my relative, he'll bring you back here to the village immediately.

MABROUKA: You can count on God and me! I'm not a kid and I'm not an idiot. I can easily handle this.

SHENOUDA: And the whole affair is a matter of two days. Just enough time to settle the legal matters with the company. We just need to keep Hamed Bey quiet for two days. After that, he will no longer be a threat to the deal. We will have our agreement with the company and that will be that (Al-Hakim, 1956b, pp. 107-8).

By the end of Act Two, and despite the depraved behaviour of the Bey, the audience can be in no doubt as to Al-Hakim's judgement of the Egyptian peasantry, a judgement that is further qualified in the resolution of the third act.

The resolution of *The Deal* confirms Al-Hakim's view that peasants, who by the time of performance had been entrusted by Nasser with the agricultural reins of the nation and are therefore no longer the weak and disenfranchised class of pre-1952, are wily and untrustworthy. Mabrouka escapes from the Bey's house after having provided the villagers with the two days needed to conclude the deal. Mabrouka's method of securing that time extension involved subterfuge, she pretended to suffer from cholera which entailed a quarantine of the Bey's

household until everyone was tested. The trickery that Mabrouka used could be seen to serve the nobler purpose of helping the subaltern villagers save their deal from a vindictive Bey who does not need the land. Another perspective, however, could interpret Mabrouka's actions as those of a daughter securing a transaction for her father and his friends. Al-Hakim does not provide a resolution regarding Mabrouka's intentions, but if the Egyptian audience interprets Mabrouka's character as the symbol for Egypt, then the noble intention will be assumed without hesitation. Al-Hakim did not, however, write solely for his theatre audience; as mentioned above, Al-Hakim was outspoken in considering himself a literary representative of the "theatre of the mind" and consistently published his plays in advance of the possibility of performance. Al-Hakim seems to have prized his readers above his audience and, as such, would intend to sustain the Mabrouka conundrum and avoid a resolution.

The situation at the end of the play is much more volatile than it may seem. The villagers concluded their deal and purchased the land from the foreign company. This is symbolically reminiscent of the Free Officers agreement regarding the total evacuation of all British military forces from Egypt in general and the Suez Canal in particular<sup>29</sup>. The principal villagers now own the land on which they toil, a situation reminiscent of the revolutionary land reforms enforced by law 178 (1952) which was discussed above. The bourgeois agents of colonialism have been placed in the losing category of the play's apparent central conflict, land acquisition. Al-Hakim, however, has not addressed the consequences of the deception exercised on the powerful Bey. The play is set before the revolution which abrogated all aristocratic titles; the Bey of the play is still powerful. The choice of chronological setting becomes more poignant when one considers

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<sup>29</sup> The agreement was signed on 19 October 1954 stipulating the evacuation of the British garrison within 20 months (18 June 1956). Ratifications of the agreement were exchanged on 6 December 1954.

that, in the world of the play, the Mabrouka deception will certainly have dire repercussions upon the entire village. As befits a true counter-revolutionary intellectual, Al-Hakim is telling the readers and to a lesser extent the audience, that any happiness for the villagers is premature and that the tide will imminently turn back in favour of the powerful aristocrat. Intertextually, an audience member might feel secure in the knowledge that the revolution has rendered the aristocracy impotent, but Al-Hakim's dramaturgy and the pseudo-resolution of *The Deal* demonstrates his confidence that the revolution itself is an action that will cause its perpetrators to suffer.

#### **2.4 Situating Al-Hakim:**

*The Deal* appears to engage with four of the six tenets of the 1952 revolution listed in Chapter one of this thesis. Al-Hakim seems to be advocating for an end to feudalism, colonialism, and capitalist supremacy. Feudalism is at the core of the play and tends to be the main antagonist. The oppression inflicted upon the peasant characters is palpable and, as we saw earlier in this chapter, enabled the aristocrat, Hamed Bey to unabashedly demand the body of Mabrouka from her own father. Despite the fact that the request is disturbing, an Egyptian audience would have been far more shocked at the father's compliance with the demand of the feudal lord. By implicating the peasant father in the transaction that objectified Mabrouka's body, Al-Hakim has negated his apparent advocacy for the end of feudalism. If feudalism ends, then the peasants will have to take over from the feudal lords. Al-Hakim's portrayal of the peasants disqualifies them from being trustworthy enough to control the agriculture of the nation. Al-Hakim pays lip service to the call to end colonialism, but at no point does he paint the colonial powers in a negative light. Agents of colonialism such as the Bey and his entourage are in evidence, but there are no British soldiers or even the immediate effect of British atrocities as

we shall see most strikingly in Sa'ad Eldin Wahba's *The Nails* (1967). The only foreign presence is the Belgian company that owned the land. As discussed earlier, that foreign entity is explicitly exonerated and may even be considered a victim since it was defrauded from receiving a cash payment from the Bey and had to settle for the monthly instalments paid by the peasants. Al-Hakim's purported anti-colonial stance is countered by a pro-colonial dramaturgy. The capitalist supremacy that Al-Hakim claims to combat in this play is morphed into a crony-capitalism. Al-Hakim has depicted a situation where a small group of peasants wants to replace a single feudal lord; a monopoly becomes an oligopoly. Furthermore, Al-Hakim does not show a team of peasants who are capable of forming a cooperative society that operates for the common good, but rather a fragmented group of devious and selfish individuals who can only be interested in their personal gain. Al-Hakim similarly can be said to promote an abbreviated form of social justice while undercutting it. Al-Hakim topples the tyrannical Hamed Bey, but he leaves a corrupt upper stratum of peasantry in the ascendancy. Mabrouka enabled the purchase of the land and yet has no share. Not only does the play deliver an anti-revolutionary and regressive message, it also warns against the tyranny of an elected body with a mandate from an exploited electorate.

Despite predating the 1962 National Charter, *The Deal* dramatises a specific disdain that Nasser's document discusses in its third chapter, "The Roots of the Egyptian Struggle":

[Pre-1952] revolutionary leaderships failed to learn from history. They also failed to learn from the enemy with whom they were fighting, and who had dealt with the entire Arab Nation, despite the differences that existed amongst them, according to the same strategy. . . The spies of the empires took over the control of the revolutionary Arab leaderships. . . These revolutionary leaderships could not match the methodology of their struggle with that of the imperial responses to revolutions at the time (Abdel Nasser, 1962, pp. 33-4).

Whereas Nasser's disdain for the ineffective, and occasionally treasonous, pre-1952 revolutionary forces is rooted in a desire to obtain Egyptian liberty at any cost, Al-Hakim appears to be ethically revolted by such forces represented by the villagers. Al-Hakim's life among peasants during the time he spent as a prosecutor seems to have exposed him to the worst side of country life. It is plausible that, having prosecuted peasants and farmers for four years, and having immortalised his perspective of the worst aspects of country life in *Yawmiyat Na'eb fil Aryaf (Diary of a Country Prosecutor, 1937)*, Al-Hakim returned to Cairo convinced that the working class and the peasantry are ill-fitted for self-governance. *The Deal* presents the audience with leadership in the form of 'Awadein, Sa'dawy and Tohamy. Such leadership would symbolise the emancipation from imperialism and eventually lead to self-governance. As I have shown above, Al-Hakim's negative portrayal of the villagers from every generation, be they Tohamy's grandmother, Tohamy or Mabrouka, attempts to indict the villagers by demonstrating that they are not to be trusted with the land or their own destiny. Also, despite Al-Hakim's choice to punish Hamed Bey for his exploitation of the villagers by depriving him of Mabrouka's body and the land he hadn't anticipated to own anyway, Hamed, representing the agent of colonialism, comes away from the situation relatively unscathed. Finally, not only does Al-Hakim not contemplate public sector ownership of the land, he appears to prefer private foreign ownership and administration. Al-Hakim's advocacy for foreign direct investment runs contrary to the Nasserist drive for public ownership, which may be seen as a critical economic perspective rather than outright counter-revolutionary thought. *The Deal* depicts a world whose principal characters would have critiqued the 1962 National Charter which, in turn, would have condemned them as traitors.

*The Deal* is a play whose structure conforms to the unities of action and place but not time –which is three days and therefore longer than one revolution of the sun. The contemporary audience would have been accustomed to seeing plays at the National Theatre that strictly conformed to the European classical unities. The National Theatre was accustomed to producing translated European classics and adaptations of recent successes on the European and American stages. Under the stewardship of revolutionary officer and polymath Ahmed Hamroush (1921 – 2011), the National Theatre presented Egyptian audiences with an eclectic selection of original plays by Egyptian playwrights, adapted or translated foreign plays, or reruns of critically acclaimed Egyptian plays from previous seasons. That last group of plays will be discussed in this thesis's conclusion as the building blocks of what might pass for an Egyptian repertoire. During the 1956/57 season, one year prior to the premiere of *The Deal*, the most attended play (12,178 spectators over 33 performances) was *Ibn Ezz (The Son of Privilege)* (Rushdy, 1966, p. 259) which was a loose adaptation of Jean Anouilh's *Ring Around the Moon*. That season witnessed the production of sixteen plays. Half those plays were Egyptian, while the other half were European or American. With the revolutionary nationalist Hamroush at the helm, the situation was to change radically the following season. The newly formed Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, to whom Hamroush answered, seemed to have been intent on capitalising on the strong nationalist feelings that swept Egypt after the Tripartite offensive during the last quarter of 1956 by Britain, France, and Israel (Hamroush, 1998, p. 31). This 1957/58 season witnessed thirteen productions. Nine were productions of original Egyptian plays, one adapted foreign play, and three were direct translations. During the 1957/58 season, *The Deal* was attended by 12,337 spectators over 37 performances, coming a close third behind *The Marriage of Figaro* (13,131 spectators over 33 performances and, like *The Deal*, directed by

Fattouh Nashaty) and Nu'mān Ashour's *El Nass Elli Foq* (*The People Upstairs*, 13,892 spectators over 39 performances) (Rushdy, 1966, 260). The structure of *The Deal* may seem to occupy the moderate lane between the Aristotelian foreigner, Beaumarchais, and the anti-Aristotelian Egyptian, 'Ashour; a hybrid structure that simultaneously conforms to the spirit of Aristotelian principles, especially the unities of time and place, while yielding to the emerging local trend of plot experimentation pioneered by 'Ashour who shall be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

Al-Hakim was occupying another moderate lane using what has come to be known as the "third language" (Al-Hakim 1956b, p. 161). In the aftermath of the British evacuation of Egypt in 1956, the playwright had encapsulated his understanding of moderation in revolutionary times by calling for a "jettisoning of all leftovers of foreign occupation within our souls such as feelings of inferiority that dwarf our self-image and arrogance that obstructs our learning from our predecessors" (Dawara 1986, p. 26). During the period of revolutionary flux, both before and after the 1952 Free Officers' movement, the two extremes of dialogue, conservative classical Arabic and progressive colloquial Arabic divided opinion as to which should be used, how, and why. Should playwrights succumb to what Al-Hakim refers to as "feeling of inferiority" and persist in using the safe classical dialogue, or should they instead be "arrogant", ignore it altogether as well as the lessons that may be acquired from classical writing predecessors and exclusively embrace the colloquial? This conundrum mirrors the undefined Egyptian political moderate stance: should an Egyptian moderate, during an era of revolutionary flux, reject every element of their pre-revolutionary past and focus on breaking new political ground moving forward, or should they instead absorb the positives of the past? Before writing *The Deal*, Al-Hakim had written plays in either classical Arabic (*People of the Cave*, *Scheherazade*, *Isis*,



*Pygmalion*) or the Egyptian colloquial (*Bullet in the Heart, Soft Hands*). He postulated that the classical was not as actable as the vernacular while the latter will soon be dated (161). He embarked on a

Third experiment in order to find a correct language that does not violate the rules of Arabic grammar while simultaneously remaining easily spoken and natural without affectation. A correct language that is comprehensible by every generation, in every realm, in every region. It must roll off the tongue in any circumstance. This is the language of the theatre. It may seem at first glance to have been written in the vernacular, but, upon a second reading, according to the rules of classical Arabic grammar, the reader will find that it works. Indeed, the reader will be able to read it in a dual mode... If I succeed in this experiment, this will lead to two results: First of all, there will be a path towards a unified language of theatre in our literature akin to the unified language of theatre in Europe. Second, and more important, bringing the strata of society closer together as well as bringing the peoples of the Arabic language closer together by means of unifying the medium of discourse as much as possible without compromising the essentials of art (161-2).

There are several clear points of contention in Al-Hakim's pronouncements. A "correct" language that lacks affectation is a subjective metric and cannot be gauged according to just one person's sensibilities. The related assumption that there can be a "unified language of theatre" is a precursor to an overarching cultural hegemony that attempts to stifle talent, eliminate variety, and restrict modes of expression. The premise upon which Al-Hakim's theory rests that a corresponding "unified language of theatre in Europe" is inadequate in two respects. First: there is no such unified language of theatre in Europe in the literal sense to which Al-Hakim is alluding. The second problem with Al-Hakim's claim is that there is no record of an Egyptian or foreign critic refuting this fallacy. Instead, *The Deal* and the postscript in which the above pronouncements and claims appear are lauded as paragons of revolutionary experimentation (Mandour, 2020, pp. 137-41).

Despite Mabrouka's apparent heroism in volunteering to be given away to Hamed Bey, *The Deal* lacks a revolutionary character who may be seen to represent one or more of the aims

of the revolution. This lack of representation through characterisation may be due to Al Hakim's view of the nature of the revolutionary aims as sweeping and general, threatening to flatten any character into an unrealistic mouthpiece. The play also lacks any rhetoric that upholds or argues for any of the causes of the revolution. On the contrary, as I have repeatedly noted throughout this chapter, Al-Hakim depicts Imperial mandates, despite their apparent lack of fairness, as guarantees of safe and stable governance, order and stability. The agent of colonialism, Hamed Bey, is portrayed as a victim, albeit an immoral one. Awadein, Sa'dawy and Tohamy, the would be owners of the land, and by extension the symbols of potential self-governance in the play, would literally sell their children and sacrifice their families' dignity for the sake of the land, the symbol for national independence. Self-governance is thus seen to have too high a price, arguably too high for a conservative mentality to accept. Not only does Al-Hakim craft *The Deal* in a tone and with a dramaturgy that directly oppose the independence aim of the revolution, he also argues that average Egyptians do not possess the will to make sacrifices for the sake of their freedom. Whereas it is true that Al-Hakim was financially secure from the revenue of his published plays and novels, there is no evidence that he relied upon the performances to enrich himself. By both publishing and performing his plays, Al-Hakim's stance vis-à-vis the Leninist concept of self-enrichment is blurred. *The Deal* was published and then performed two years later, making it easier to argue that it was a play written for the purpose of generating income and therefore self-enrichment.

A further blurring occurs when considering Al-Hakim's following in the National Theatre. *The Deal's* delayed performance from its publication in 1956/7 to its performance in 1958 should not be interpreted as an absence of following for Al-Hakim's plays within the National Theatre circles. The same delay happened with Nu'mān Ashour's *The People Upstairs* (1957). Both

plays were scheduled for almost the same number of performances, 37 for *The Deal* and 38 for *Upstairs*. The popularity of both plays, as measured by number of tickets sold, placed both plays in the top three for the 1957/58 season, with Ashour's play in first place (13,892 tickets) and Al-Hakim's in third place (12,337 tickets) (Rushdy 1966, p. 260). Despite penning a play that does not adopt a clear and unambiguous revolutionary position, Al-Hakim was still supported by Hamroush, the reading committee of the National Theatre and that theatre's patrons. A stellar cast including Samiha Ayoub, Shafiq Noureddine, Mohamed Dafrawy and Abdullah Gheith (Ayoub, 2004, p. 592) was assigned to director Fattouh Nashaty's cast to demonstrate further support for the playwright and his play. Despite this support from the stars of the National Theatre, *The Deal*, unlike *Soft Hands* (1956), for example, is a play that alienates the proletariat of the state sector by not mentioning them at all and also by demonising the peasants. By doing so, the alliance that Gramsci prescribed as necessary for the hegemony of the proletariat, "the pillars of the workers' State and the revolution . . . is brought into question" (Gramsci, 1994, p. 311). It is difficult to categorically judge whether or not *The Deal* satisfies my fifth criterion since, on the one hand Al-Hakim is enjoying a substantial following in the state theatre and is therefore connecting with the masses, while on the other hand the play itself is hostile or dismissive toward the majority of those masses who were either workers or peasants. Judging by the strong performance of the play at the box office, the audience seems to have welcomed Al-Hakim's criticism, displaying a tolerance and deferment of latitude.

Whether by design or merely as a natural consequence of the alienation of the proletariat, an alienation augmented by the use of the "third language" of which Al-Hakim was the proud creator, *The Deal* almost entirely distorts and/or severs the communication of the structures of feeling of the period of the play. Al-Hakim's third language could have been uttered by any Arab

anywhere in the Arab world, not just Egypt. Not only is there an absence of regional specificity of language, this linguistic contrivance also lacks class, semiotic, or tonal specificities. By crafting this language that can be understood “anytime and anywhere” (Al-Hakim, 1956b, p.123), Al-Hakim has deprived his characters of any specific identity, while Nasser and the revolutionary movement were striving to highlight and at times even ingratiate the identity of Egyptian farmers and workers. This attempt at universality has in turn deprived *The Deal* of its potential to communicate “structures of feeling” or “continuity of experience” (Williams, 1987, p.17) that may preserve a historical period. The revolutionary spirit that linked dignity with land, as I mentioned earlier, despite being in evidence through the villagers’ willingness to do anything to acquire it, is compromised when Shenouda convinces the Belgian director of the company to allow the villagers to pay for the land (Al Hakim 1956b, p.14). Mahmoud Amin El ‘Alem questions this particular moment and displacement of resistance, since it is not in keeping with the spirit of revolution and conflict with capitalist monopolies that characterised the structure of feeling of the 1950s. El ‘Alem concedes that Al Hakim depicts the conflict with the feudalism represented by Hamed, he does, however question the justification for the abandonment of the resistance against the Belgian company:

There is no doubt that there is a difference between the feudal exploitation represented by Hamed Bey and the capitalist monopoly represented by the Belgian company. . . . But does this difference call for the abandonment of the struggle against that company? The real issue is our awareness of the true nature of the social struggle in our Egyptian countryside. The play has doubtlessly expressed the desire of the villagers to own their land and their struggle to achieve this, albeit in a limited scope resulting from the suppression of key aspects of that conflict . . . . In reality, Al Hakim is fully aware of the social circumstances of the countryside . . . . Had Al Hakim emphasised different aspects of the social struggle in our Egyptian countryside for the sake of the land, the play would have been richer, more varied, and truthful (El ‘Alem 1957, p. 7).

As El ‘Alem argues, the removal of the Belgian company from the depiction of the countryside’s conflict dilutes the fervour with which the peasantry struggled against both foreign and domestic

exploitation. Al Hakim depicts a situation where the villagers are content to buy the land, sending Shenouda as an emissary to advocate for them since they had earned the favour of the company by toiling over the land and serving the Belgians faithfully (El Hakim 1956b, p.14). But despite the absence of the specific feelings of resentment that Egyptians, and specifically the inhabitants of the countryside felt towards capitalist foreign exploitation, Al Hakim does demonstrate general resentment towards exploitation as a concept. As mentioned above, Tohamy, who along with the characters of 'Awadein and Sa'dawy represents the leadership of the villagers, is willing to kill Hamed Bey in order to avoid such exploitation. While this willingness to use violence is in keeping with the pre-1952 structures of feeling and lived experience of revolutionary Egyptians, the absence of a foreign entity such as that which we shall see in Wahba's *The Nails* (1967) strips the play of a colonial target and focuses revolutionary ire entirely on the local exploitations of Hamed Bey.

Al-Hakim does not, however, altogether jettison the structures of feeling of the British colonial period in *The Deal*. Hamed Bey is a faithful representation of the middle aristocracy of the period. Hamed's stratum occupied a linguistically nondescript position in society, belonging as Galal Amin would classify him, to a "relatively stable social class" who "felt secure about their social status and were not haunted by a past which they despised or were anxious to forget" (Amin, 2000, p. 89). Al-Hakim's third language rolls less awkwardly off the tongue of Hamed Bey than it does when we hear it coming from the villagers. The end result is that the villagers sound stilted and alien to an Egyptian ear, severing the semantic connection, while the aristocrat sounds preserved with a vocabulary and "feel" that simulates that of the pre-1952 aristocracy.

Tawfiq Al-Hakim's contribution to theatre in general and counter-revolutionary playwriting in particular envelops the entirety of the Nasserist era (1954-1970). Applying my six

criteria for revolutionary Egyptian plays demonstrates that, to a large extent, Al-Hakim's *The Deal*, the play that I believe encapsulates Al-Hakim's socio-political ideology, opposes the revolutionary premises, messaging and objectives of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Al-Hakim's use of the "third language" has been the subject of numerous studies, most notably by Louis 'Awad and Fouad Dawara, but its role in dramaturgically defying the 1952 revolution by opposing the colloquialisation of dialogue championed by Nu'mān Ashour, Lotfy Al Kholy, Alfred Farag, Sa'ad Wahba and Aly Salem. Al-Hakim's commentary about his use of the "third language" persists almost a decade after *The Deal* when he penned *Al Warta (The Predicament, 1966)*. In the afterword of that play, as he did with *The Deal*, Al-Hakim explores his use of the third language twelve years after the revolution. In that afterword, he expresses his dismay with the state of the language of theatrical dialogue:

It would be ideal to arrive at the consensus of the classicalisation of the colloquial. By using a simplified Arabic, what may be called a "conversational Arabic", by instilling that language into the peoples' taste, and its usage into the theatre. It is extraordinary that our theatre began with Classical Arabic since the time of Sheikh Salama Higazy and meets with overwhelming popular success in the city as well as the countryside that had little education at the time of the occupation, for it to end up with this tyrannical colloquial in the age of education and independence! It was rather our preservation of the classical in literature and art during the occupation that gave our Arab nations cohesion, despite being subjugated to the Ottomans, the French and the British. The Classical language . . . afforded us a true unity of spirit and thought that was stronger and deeper than any political union (Al-Hakim 1966, p. 182-3).

Al-Hakim uses sarcasm when comparing the state of Arabic dialogue before and after the revolution. He also avoids using the word "revolution" and opts for "independence", deepening the sarcasm by implying that this independence has only succeeded in degrading the language of the arts, ironically at the hands of the now educated audience. Al-Hakim adds a disparaging remark aimed at the "educated" audience and their now impoverished "taste" that compares unfavourably with the taste of the countryside audience who "had little education". Finally, there

is sharp criticism of Nasser's Pan Arabism and the dissolved union with Syria (1958-61) since Al-Hakim argues that the Classical Arabic language had provided the desired union before independence, a union that failed to last under Nasser. As we shall see in the next two chapters, the colloquial dialogue and the dramaturgy it enables, subtly gives rise to the revolutionary Egyptian plays penned by Nu'mān Ashour and Sa'ad Wahba.

## Chapter Three

### Nu'mān 'Ashour: The Ideological Revolution

“Art, literature, thought, reading, and writing are meaningless without a link to a political struggle and an associated movement” (‘Ashour 1974, p. 95).

#### **3.1 ‘Ashour’s Beginnings and Career Summary:**

In 1950, Nu'mān 'Ashour completed his first full-length play, the work that I shall demonstrate is the first revolutionary Egyptian play, *Al Maghmatis (The Trickcyclist)* (literally a mispronunciation of the Arabic word for magnet which is a reference to hypnotism). As discussed in the introduction, a revolutionary play needs to engage with the socio-political and economic context and aims of the 1952 revolution. With a degree in English literature from Cairo University, where undergraduates surveyed English and other western literatures, 'Ashour unashamedly emulated Chekhov, Ibsen, and Shaw while retaining a distinctive voice and style. For quarter of a century, 'Ashour's plays were the highest grossing performances at the box office of the Egyptian National Theatre and its affiliated private and state-run troupes. 'Ashour was the leader of the handful of revolutionary and politically engaged playwrights who made the fifties and the sixties the “halcyon days” (Allen, 1979, p. 97) of Egyptian theatre history. 'Ashour's overt Marxism caused his decline in popularity after 1974 and the fall of socialism in Egypt with the implementation of the Open-Door Economic Policy that year and the ensuing reversal of Gamal 'Abdel Nasser's socialist measures. It was not long before this new economic policy, the accompanying right-wing politics, and the hegemony of the capitalist profit motive, combined to position the new president, Anwar Sadat, in direct opposition to the values that shaped the Egyptian theatre of the fifties and sixties. That opposition to all things socialist, a form of de-Nasserization that continues to this day, would explain why the three volumes that comprised the complete works of Nu'mān 'Ashour spanning 1950 – 1974 are no longer in print.



The two plays written in 1975 (*Basheer el taqaddom/Signs of progress*) and 1985 (*Ithra hadeth aleem/Due to a painful accident*) were sold as individual volumes that are rarely mentioned or performed. Despite the steep decline in output and popularity after 1974, Nu'mān 'Ashour is considered by Roger Allen (1979), Mahmoud, El Lozy (1986), Farouq Abdel Qadir (2015), M. M. Badawi (1988) and many others to be the representative of the golden age of Egyptian theatre especially in its revolutionary dramaturgical trajectory.

Despite enjoying box-office success, 'Ashour's plays received mixed reviews in the fifties when he wrote arguably his most successful collection in terms of box-office receipts and contemporary critical reception. 'Ashour's plays did not follow the Aristotelian plot that his peers and critics expected. Ashour's first major critic was Dereiny Khashaba, Artistic Director of the National Theatre Troupe in 1950. 'Ashour had submitted his first play, *Al Maghmatīs (The Trickcyclist)* for production consideration. Having waited four months, 'Ashour was invited to Khashaba's office for coffee where the director smilingly rejected the play. Khashaba was of the opinion that the play "was not well formed" and that 'Ashour was "too young to start with the National Theatre." (Khashaba, as cited in Ashour, 1975, p. 112) On that day, Khashaba further informed 'Ashour that he had not read the third and final act of the play. This piece of information had a mild effect on 'Ashour, but it should reveal to scholars that the artistic director of the Egyptian National Theatre had not even skimmed through the play, which was actually a four-act play, ignoring the accepted practice at the National Theatre of reading plays as the step before submitting a text to the reading committee. At best, Khashaba had read half the play and passed judgment. Given that there were almost no new Egyptian script submissions to the National Theatre Troupe which had as the bulk of its repertoire adapted European and American plays and a few Al-Hakim plays, a thorough reading of 'Ashour's submission would have been

more appropriate. Furthermore, even though *Al Maghmatis* was ‘Ashour’s first stage play, he had already made a name for himself as a professional playwright specialising in radio plays. This encounter between ‘Ashour and Khashaba encapsulates the attitude of theatre managers and impresarios before the 1952 revolution and, specifically, before the success of *Al Maghmatis* on the stage of the Cairo Opera House on 14 October 1955. Prior to this date, the mindset of theatre producers and critics was intolerant of scripts that deviated from the received Aristotelian structure; they did not want to rock the profitable boat that embraced the European canon as the guaranteed “cash cow”<sup>30</sup>. This mindset is incompatible with the Nasserist approach to culture which, as explained in the introduction, supported revolutionary plays that may break the rules of Aristotelian structure as understood by Egyptian academics.

‘Ashour’s path to the performance of his first play was fraught with discouraging episodes. His dramaturgical structure was relatively untried in Egypt, even at the level of translated Chekhovian and Ibsenesque plays which preceded ‘Ashour to the non-Aristotelian forms. As late as 1954, *El Masrah El Horr* (The Free Theatre), the troupe which was to eventually premiere *Al Maghmatis* complained that the play “contained no drama . . . no exposition, no complication, not escalation, no climax, no resolution” (Ashour, 1975, p. 115; Kamal, Cited in Ashour 1975, p.135). This insistence on the part of the members of *El Masrah El Horr* on a conventional and safe Aristotelian template was both an echo of the stance of Khashaba (The Artistic director of the National Theatre) as well as an adherence to the established status quo of the pre-1952 revolutionary era. The Egyptian establishment may have changed politically, but socially and culturally, the pre-1952 regime still reigned supreme. An anti-colonial stimulus may have swept segments of the theatre establishment as a result of the

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<sup>30</sup> A cash cow is a product or sector of a business which provides a steady cash flow. (*OED*).

strong performance of Gamal Abdel Nasser who condemned the “colonial shackles” in the strongest terms at the Bandung conference in April 1955 (Morland, 1955, p. 2). Influential theatre critics such as Mohamed Mandour and leading actors such as Tawfiq al-Diqin started viewing the performance of adapted French and British well-made plays as regressive and pro-imperial, which made such plays the antithesis of Nasser’s revolutionary position. The theatre revolution can be said to have started with ‘Ashour’s *Al Maghmatis* at an appropriate historical moment when the entire country was in the grip of a revolutionary flux.

The genesis of *Al Maghmatis* is the only documented example of the rewriting and editing process of a canonical play in Egyptian theatre history. In his plays, essays and autobiography, ‘Ashour is transparent about his “cultural makeup, previous experiences of political activism and the opinions, ideas, beliefs, and principles” with which he is satiated and which all “revolve around his advocacy of the socialist message” (‘Ashour, 1975, p. 153). ‘Ashour is similarly forthcoming about the extent to which his view of the message of the theatre is influenced by the Shavian view that the theatre is the “best and strongest pulpit from which the writer can express a viewpoint and realise the desired political, social, cultural, and humanist visions” (153). This heightened awareness of self and medium helped ‘Ashour to be cognizant of and focus on his objective to deliver the Egyptian theatre from a stagnant apolitical apparatus that clones the European colonial theatre output, to a vibrant and politically engaged agent of revolutionary change and discourse. Ironically, ‘Ashour was instrumental in taking Egyptian public sector theatre from a colonial European approach to theatre to what resembles a post-1918 European approach.

*Al Maghmatis* is a play that engages with and participates in social debates rather than mount a frontal declarative or didactic assault on an idea or its advocates. Plays written before *Al*

*Maghmatis* generally tackled irrelevant issues that had no connection with contemporary life; to do so, characters would unleash a monologue that was highly declarative and didactic, frequently in rhyming verse that tends to be highly inaccessible to the general public where the playwright is generally more concerned with the skill of sustaining the rhyme rather than the rhetoric embedded in the structure of the speech or the actability of the lines. In *Almozayafoon (The Impostors, 1953)* by Mahmoud Taymour, one of the principal characters unleashes the expected summative monologue towards the end of the play:

KAMEL PASHA: It is of the utmost difficulty, 'Afifi, to serve the nation in a truly productive manner given the prevailing circumstances. I refer to our position in the regime and the social apparatus. These circumstances have encouraged the corrupt and the depraved to act more ambitiously. These same circumstances have stilled the efforts of the meritorious. As such, the nation has been bereft of their efficiency and loyalty. Our grandest measure was to ameliorate the situation with painkillers to treat the symptoms. Surgery and amputation was beyond us all given the circumstances which nobody could subvert. (Taymour 1953, 139)

Taymour's play is about corruption that pervaded the highest levels of the pre-1952 Free Officers revolution. Members of the aristocracy experience an epiphany, realizing that their services to the nation enabled the corrupt to hold sway. It is a retrospective play that addresses the shortcomings of a bygone era. Linguistically colourful monologues such as this, where the protagonist expounds upon their position and reaches a point of resolution, are characteristic of the comedy of manners and French farces upon which most pre-1952 plays are based. Such a speech does not add anything to the play and does not move the plot forward.

'Ashour could not influence all of his contemporaries to jettison the practice of declarative summation monologues and join his revolutionary theatre of subtlety as well as dramaturgically and psychologically motivated utterances. Tawfiq Al-Hakim, simultaneously a predecessor and a contemporary of 'Ashour, continued to use the long monologues, especially in the plays written in classical Arabic. In *Al Sultan al-Ha'ir (The Sultan's Dilemma, 1960)* a play

that seemed to criticise President Nasser's identity and cast him in the role of the rebel outlaw, Al-Hakim uses a didactic and declarative monologue both to appease the censor, who at that time was concerned with content as well as style and dramaturgy, and to conclude the play:

SULTAN: No, you have no right at all to do this. No right! This woman may be within her rights to scheme. She would not be blamed if she did. She may actually be forgiven for her intellect and ingenuity. But the Chief Justice... The personification of justice. The guardian of the legal sanctum. The faithful servant of due process. Such a person should be duty bound to preserve the purity, the incorruptibility, the dignity of the law... No matter the cost. It was you who opened my eyes, at the beginning of this affair, to the grace of the law, the respect it was owed, that it was the master to whom one owed obedience, and that even I must bow in deference to the law! And so I bowed and yielded till the end. But... Did it ever occur to me that you would skew the law in such a manner? To strip it of its holiest attire? To manipulate it in those hands of yours until it is nothing more than schemes, platitudes, innuendoes, and tricks? (Al-Hakim, 1960, 133)

Al-Hakim's depiction of his Sultan's disillusionment with his trusted legal advisor and Chief Justice, coupled with the monarch's now cemented acknowledgment of the supremacy of the rule of law tidily wraps up a play where the conundrum is between the hegemony of the legal code and that of the force of arms. The playwright easily avoided the possibility of censorship by showing that Nasser will always favour justice. The monologue above accomplishes this pre-emptive measure against the censor's content concerns. The didactic tone and declarative style of the speech harmonizes with Al-Hakim's other classical Arabic plays as well as the tone and style of pre-revolutionary drama. Eight years of revolutionary life and five years of box-office success achieved by 'Ashour's plays could not influence Al-Hakim to at least experiment with the new revolutionary style.

'Ashour's plays are not completely free of didactic tendencies, albeit in an increasingly subtle register as he grew in experience and influence. At no point in any of the socio-politically engaged plays is there any evidence of preaching monologues such as those used by Taymour or Al-Hakim. In *Al Maghmatis* there are moments when the protagonist advises his sister about her

life and career. Gharib, a Francophone psychoanalyst, who had recently returned from France where he had completed his PhD, alerts his sister, Qamar, a young teacher, that she is a woman surrounded by “a society of enemies, including all the other women.” (‘Ashour, 1974, 50). He further reminds her that a woman like her, with access to gainful employment, will find a husband more easily than other women (51). These alerts and reminders, pedantic and didactic as they may sound, are all in character and rarely uttered. Since Gharib’s lecturing moments are in-character, the subtlety of the new dramaturgy remains intact.

To fully explore the new revolutionary and socio-politically engaged dramaturgy and dialogue style that ‘Ashour created, I will analyse and contextualise three scenes from each of the following plays: *Al Maghmatis (The Trickcyclist, 1950)*, *El Nass Elli Taht (The People Below, 1956)* and *Seema Awanta (Give Us Our Money Back, 1958)*<sup>31</sup>. The innovations and topical explorations of these three plays will be shown to have laid the foundations for a revolutionary theatre that is socio-politically fully engaged with the most critical issues of the day and to have simultaneously paved the way for the experimental endeavours of the next two playwrights in this thesis. Side-lined as Nu’mān ‘Ashour has been so far by western and Arab critics alike, the analysis that follows will stake his claim as the Egyptian political theatre’s pioneering innovator and foundational enabler.

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<sup>31</sup> Unlike all the other plays in this thesis where I use my translation, in the case of *Seema Awanta* I will be using the translation by Mahmoud El Lozy who had translated it as *This Movie is Trash* in 1986 for his PhD Dissertation at the University of California Santa Barbara. El Lozy renamed it for commercial publication in 1994 as *Give Us Our Money Back*. The latter version is the one I shall use in this thesis. I am using El Lozy’s translation because it is one of those rare instances in Egyptian theatre history where the translator from Arabic treats the texts as a theatre performance script rather than a work of dramatic literature.

### **3.2 Analysis of *The Trickcyclist*:**

Written in 1950 and only performed in 1955, *Al Maghmatis* is the play that announced the arrival on the playwriting scene of a literature-trained, strong-willed, disciplined, and serious playwright who defined and identified himself as a writer of and for the 1952 revolution.

‘Ashour had been an anti-colonialist and anti-monarchist Marxist since the thirties and had been repeatedly arrested by El Qalam el Siyasi (Literally the Political Pen, the royal agency charged with the internal political security of the nation and effectively an extension of British Military Intelligence). The script of *Al Maghmatis* narrowly escaped confiscation by the authorities when ‘Ashour’s home was searched in 1951 during one of the routine crackdowns on Marxists (‘Ashour 1974, p.68). Unlike Tawfiq Al-Hakim, whose theatre education was acquired in the music halls and commercial theatres of Cairo and Paris and whose socio-political ideology was resolutely conservative, ‘Ashour learned his craft in the lecture halls of Cairo University (then Fuad the First University), the streets of the city where he found his characters, and the secret Marxist society meetings where his socio-political ideology evolved.

*Al Maghmatis* employs the trope of the returning expatriate who had been a recipient of a western higher education. This trope was familiar to the literate minority of Egyptians (literacy rate in 1950 was 20%) (UNESCO 1957, p. 178) who may have encountered it in novels such as *Al Ayyam (The Days)* by Taha Hussein (1929), *‘Osfoor min al Sharq (A Bird from the East)* by Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1938), or *Qandil Omm Hashim (The Lantern of St. Omm Hashim)* by Yehia Haqqi (1940). The four-act play affords us precious glimpses into the world to which the protagonist, Dr. Gharib al-Fakhouri, an upper middle-class psychoanalyst trained in France, returns, and with which he clashes and eventually adapts. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is no concrete Aristotelian plot here as understood by Egyptian scholars such as Rashad

Rushdy. Act One shows us Gharib's clash with his new impoverished reality and the war profiteers of his working-class neighbourhood who trade in government rationed goods on the black market. In Act Two Gharib joins forces with 'Atwa, a working class trickster, conman, and clerk, in order to set up a psychiatric practice in part of his flat which he shares with his younger sister and widowed mother. Act Three shows us how, after a disastrous start to the practice when Gharib attempts to apply western medical practices, with 'Atwa's assistance, he chances upon a happy marriage between local superstition and modern science; The final act presents us with a transformed and more assured Gharib who has now become a Maghmatis, a legend in the neighbourhood on his own terms and has also dealt a blow to his family's bourgeois values by marrying his sister's seamstress who is apparently beneath him in class terms.

This act-by-act summary is extremely abbreviated since I will be translating and exemplifying more of the text of 'Ashour's plays than Wahba's. I need to shed more light on 'Ashour's dialogue than Wahba's since that is the base of the former's revolutionary dramaturgy. 'Ashour embellishes this central line of action by giving every single character their moment in the sun and, for fifteen of the sixteen characters, the silent servant in the war profiteer's shop being the only exception, a unique storyline that links them to Gharib's family. At no point does 'Ashour grant Gharib absolute protagonist status; for the first half of the play, he is on the receiving end of successive blows to his beliefs and principles. For the duration of the second and the third acts, 'Ashour introduces a parade of characters whose function is to aggravate Gharib and mount further assaults on his beliefs.

The confrontation between Gharib and his sister, Qamar, in Act Two is one that a conservative Egyptian audience would have considered too private and scandalous to appear on an Egyptian stage before the revolution. The dialogue between the siblings is a candid *tranche de*



*vie* to which audiences know they should not be privy. For one thing, the siblings, having been members of the upper bourgeoisie, commonly referred to by the public as “welad el nas” or “welad el osool” (children of high but not noble birth) had special privileges in the eyes of Egyptian society, one of which is privacy. ‘Ashour diffuses any awkwardness on the part of the audience by sweeping this scene in at the end of the most hilarious scene of the play where Gharib and his new assistant, the illiterate Dabshouli, misunderstand each other for four pages during which Dabshouli’s catch phrase, “Gotcha, sir” is repeated six times in two pages, much to the doctor’s irritation and chagrin. Qamar is introduced to the audience by this clownish figure of hilarity. My translation of the scene is in the appendix.

This scene is of two opposing forces from within the same socioeconomic class. Dr. Gharib is the progressive, albeit ridiculed, voice of the socialism to which ‘Ashour aspires, while Qamar is the regressive product of the aspirational bourgeoisie of pre-1952 Egypt. Gharib is not concerned with his employee’s (‘Atwa) behaviour outside the workplace; Gharib is certainly against applying Qamar’s vocal petty bourgeois standards of morality and acceptable reputation. This contrast over the behaviour of Atwa, a drug user, adds to the provocative and revolutionary bent of ‘Ashour’s dramaturgy, especially the dialogue. Whereas pre-1952 playwrights such as Al-Hakim and Taymour would tentatively hint at subversive behaviour through the actions of villains or minor characters, ‘Ashour’s protagonist is the one who is defending the rights of an alcoholic drug user to gainful employment. Given that the play was commercially successful in both of its runs in Port Said and the Cairo Opera House, it would not be a stretch to assume that the 1955 audience welcomed this challenge to petty bourgeois morality. This creates a further schism between the world views of the two siblings by highlighting that Gharib is diligently trying to be productive in his field, while Qamar is comfortable enough waiting around for her

teaching post while attempting to sabotage her brother's efforts. Gharib wants to help people with the resources at his disposal, while Qamar wants him to do anything other than disturb the peace of the house. Once again, the audience is faced with productivity versus pettiness.

I will now apply the six criteria I have created to judge revolutionary plays to this scene. Regarding the first criterion, the scene should and does engage with and interrogate one or more of the six tenets of the 1952 revolution. The siblings are in the situation in which they find themselves, almost penniless and yet empowered with education, as a result of the socioeconomic mobility to which the revolution aspires in its tenets. No longer is the upper bourgeoisie able to hoard wealth in an attempt to join the upper classes. No longer is education the exclusive privilege of the rich, their entourage, and those who are deemed worthy of their charity. Education is now the tool of social justice that provides equal opportunity for all. Gharib wants to use his education industriously while Qamar acts as an obstacle to his efforts. This scene gains immediacy and relevance against the backdrop of the third tenet promising the end of capitalist supremacy and the sixth tenet with its advocacy for social justice.

When applying the second criterion to the scene, despite the fact that the play predates the national charter, it is easy to extrapolate the sentiments of Dr. Gharib and see how opposed he would be to the exploitation of the working class. This scene does feature a desire on the part of Dr. Gharib to start a private enterprise, but it is not of the anti-revolutionary variety that aims to accumulate wealth, but rather a productive and conscientious effort to serve the community with his medical training. In other parts of the play, we witness the opposing force of Qamar allying herself through marriage with the war profiteering millionaire and overindulging in the opulent decadence that restores her former elevated status before the family was stripped of its wealth ('Ashour 1974, p.90). Gharib, on the other hand, refuses to accept the financial assistance

of his new brother-in-law who offers him a luxurious flat in which he could start a new clinic, a dream clearly yearned for in this scene. Gharib infuriates his sister and mother at the end of the play by marrying Qamar's seamstress and staying in his makeshift clinic in the symbol of poverty, Darb 'Agour Lane. The two marriages of the two siblings, Gharib to a member of the proletariat and Qamar to a war profiteering neo-capitalist, are foreshadowed in this scene by the attitudes of the characters. These two marriages, whereby the two siblings embark on two opposing and irreconcilable trajectories along the volatile Egyptian socioeconomic ladder of the 1950s, fully engage with the challenges facing the world envisioned in the National Charter of 1962. The Charter imagines a cooperative world free of the counter-revolutionary regression and malice of the pre-1952 regime, but it realistically warns that the enemies within may easily find a way to reassert their dominance. The marriage of Qamar to the war profiteering Hajj Abul Mal in particular, is conversant with the warnings of the National Charter. The marriage of Gharib with 'Aziza, the seamstress, on the other hand, is a realization of the popular Nasserist slogan that encapsulated both the revolution and the charter: "the Alliance of the People's Labour Force."

When applying the third of my criteria, this scene, as with the entire play, the key components of a play through the Aristotelian lens as understood by contemporary Egyptian critics were either challenged or jettisoned. There is a marked absence of an overarching struggle (*αγών*) between the characters or between the protagonist and an antagonist. There is a struggle between the protagonist and society in general, but that is not acceptable to those who followed "the agreed upon principles of dramaturgy" (Khalil 1955; Kamal 1955 Cited in 'Ashour 1975, p. 135; Rushdy 2000, p. 11-13) and those who believed that there should only be "one central conflict" (Rushdy 2000, p. 18) following the teachings of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The absence of a clear and shocking reversal of fortune (*περιπέτεια*) for the protagonist; the lack of absolute

clarity regarding the temporal sequence of the play as a whole, casting doubts about the unity of time; the total absence of any revelations or sensational recognition or discovery (αναγνώρισης); and Dr. Gharib's lack of a tragic flaw that eventually leads to his downfall (Χαμάρτια), all lead many contemporary critics to voice their concern that "methods befitting Russia might not be appropriate in Egypt" (Khalil 1955). This concern might be rooted in the belief that Egyptian theatre is not at an advanced enough stage to emulate revolutionary theatre such as the *Otcherk*<sup>32</sup>. It might, on the other hand emanate from a conservative or even counter-revolutionary conviction that Egyptian theatre should not be revolutionary, especially not in a Marxist manner that socioeconomically and politically engages the public.

The fourth criterion necessitating that a revolutionary play furthers the aims of the revolution rather than personally financially enrich the playwright is evident in the rhetoric of the protagonist whose sole purpose is to defy the sensibilities of an audience in the process of being weaned off individualism. 'Ashour could have, and was indeed urged to by Ibrahim Sukkar, director of the Free Theatre Troupe, to shorten the play while increasing the jokes ('Ashour 1975, p. 115). 'Ashour could have avoided incendiary topics such as the financial emancipation of women in 1950s Egypt and adhered to the light comedy at which he is clearly adept. Instead, 'Ashour embarks upon the risky path of

Exposing the bygone society that the revolution rose to destroy along with its outdated principles, odious classism, decadent state and stagnant ideas... Deepening and precipitating the new concepts, values, thoughts and principles with all their facets and perspectives. ('Anbar, 1966, p. 223)

This seemingly tangential commentary on women's roles and the obstacles facing them in Egyptian society, like any controversial point upon which 'Ashour reflects, comes after a comic

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<sup>32</sup> Mohamed Mandour links 'Ashour's drama to the *Otcherk* and explains the form as a Russian sub-genre that takes the form of a dramatized and highly artistic case study of a certain issue. (Mandour 2017, p. 104)

altercation full of witty turns of phrase. Gharib jokes about his dire financial straits and then changes the topic to Qamar's employment and marriage. He seems to entertain rather traditional Egyptian views on the inevitability of women's marriage, and then shocks the audience with his belief in financial emancipation as a prerequisite to that inevitability. In the context of 1950s Egypt, the concept of a woman's financial independence is verging on taboo. Ihsan Abdel Qudus's novel, *Ana Horrah (I am Free)*, (1954), had broached the topic of women's education and assimilation into the workplace. Al-Hakim had penned *Al Mar'a al-Gadeeda (The Modern Woman)*, (1924) which was performed by the 'Okasha brothers as a musical and which the playwright was too ashamed to confess to writing until 1974 (Badawi 1988, 10). Neither Abdel Qudus nor Al-Hakim discussed the economic principle of financial emancipation, let alone suggest it as a prerequisite to marriage, an institution that is intrinsically linked to the cultural, political, religious and economic foundations of Egypt. 'Ashour's suggestion in this scene is revolutionary enough to anticipate and to out-revolution the National Charter's proclamation that

The woman must be equal to the man and the remaining shackles that obstruct her freedom must fall in order for her to participate actively and fully in the creation of life. (Abdel Nasser, 1962, p.108)

'Ashour's suggestion of financial emancipation is in the socialist and revolutionary spirit of Nasser's follow-up to the National Charter:

What we mean by socialism is development for the good of the people rather than development for the good of the minority that made all the gains of the past. What we find most prominent about the socialist spirit is that it is predicated upon the principle of social justice and equality in all fields of political, moral and material aspects of the lives of all people (Abdel Nasser, cited in Mohamed, 1993, p. 29).

Not only does this criterion serve to emphasise the revolutionary ideas explored by 'Ashour's scene, and by extension the play as a whole, but it is also evident that he has taken the lead in making a radical suggestion that even Nasser could not explicitly utter.

The fifth criterion is where ‘Ashour’s first play, produced as it was by a private theatre company, cannot satisfy Gramsci’s ideal situation whereby the play must generate a substantial following in the state-owned theatre (Gramsci and Forgacs 1988, p. 85, 562). ‘Ashour would not achieve this status with a play until his next play, *The People Below* (1957).

This confrontation scene between Gharib and Qamar satisfies the criterion addressing Williams’ “structures of feeling” regarding the conveyance of the continuity of experience and the semiotics of a period. Williams’ conceptualisation of structures of feeling as “social experiences *in solution*” (1977, p. 133) entails tensions, conflicts, and interactions that are felt by the audience while remaining imperceptible outside the “other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available” (1977, pp. 133-4). The fabric of the scenes must therefore be woven in such a way as to depict recognisable social structures such as the bourgeois sibling relationship while immersing the audience in the feelings of the characters and the situation that may conflict with the “precipitated” structures. After this conflict, one structure could yield to the other, in which case a new generational set of experiences and feelings, along with matching semiotics and cadences, will be in the ascendancy. ‘Ashour shows us, for example, how Qamar, a bourgeois young woman in the 1950s, would say that opium is eaten and would not necessarily be aware of the fact that it can be smoked. This same woman would show measured deference to her older brother but would have no problem politely reprimanding him or lightly pushing back, but when tensions rise, an older person, “mama”, is needed to adjudicate since it is not a younger sister’s place to fully chastise her older brother, let alone put him in his place. The mention of monthly rent conveys the desperate feeling experienced by this highly educated psychiatrist. The general feel and tonality of the altercation between the siblings, as well as semantics such as “odet goloos” (sitting room) rather

than the less formal “odet o’ad” or a foreign term such as “entrée”, communicate the feel of the period as well as the desire of Gharib to jettison all the remnants of the past in favour of a more modern, socialist and progressive set of semiotics, ideals and principles, all morphed into an Egyptian structure still influenced by centuries of cross-cultural colonial engagement.

Applying my six criteria to *The Trickcyclist* as a whole would demonstrate that, despite certain moments that will be discussed in two specific scenes, ‘Ashour, in October of 1955, presented the Egyptian theatre scene with a play that may be argued, in a more exhaustive study beyond the scope of this thesis, to have revolutionised playwriting and paved the way for a socio-politically engaged theatre such as that of Sa’ad Wahba. While scholars of the sixties and seventies such as Al-Rai, ‘Awad, Dawara, Allen, El-‘Alem, and others acknowledged ‘Ashour as an early pioneer of realism in the Egyptian theatre, only Mandour (2020, p.104; ‘Ashour 1974, p.221) hinted at the political input of plays such as *The Trickcyclist*. Even this unique perception by Mandour, describing ‘Ashour’s work as a variation on soviet-style *Otcherk*, and therefore more pamphleteering than theatre, seemed to diminish the social engagement of the plays. The *Otcherk* connection, as understood by many Egyptian scholars at the time, further highlighted *The Trickcyclist*’s lack of an Aristotelian-style plot. Mandour’s response therefore treated the play’s form as revolutionary while critiquing its form altogether. It was not until April of 1966 that Khairy Shalaby, a novelist, pioneering theatre historiographer and key contributor to *Al Masrah (The Theatre)* journal, reappraised ‘Ashour’s significance in Egyptian theatre history, noting the playwright’s pioneering influence in

. . . elevating social issues to the level of the theatre stage, perhaps for the first time in our contemporary theatre history. And there can be no doubt that, at the hands of the Free Theatre [Troupe], the theatre of our country has become more sober and akin to a popular parliament where the audience may debate their issues in a detailed, clear and objective manner (Shalaby, 1966, p. 65).

Shalaby has no doubt that ‘Ashour was a pioneering force in terms of bringing social engagement to the Egyptian stage, but perhaps just as critically, he has identified the moment in Egyptian theatre history when an ersatz parliament had become available to the Egyptian masses. This ersatz parliament is not to be confused with either the Boal/Freire theatre of the oppressed model or the Habermasian public sphere. While a ‘Ashour play engages with the audience’s perceived concerns, there is no actual give and take between actors and the “spectators” of the theatre of the oppressed. Also, while the public sphere of Habermas may have been a utopian objective towards which ‘Ashour probably strove, the Egyptian context, with its lack of political parties and complete condemnation of anything resembling party politics, makes the Habermasian given circumstances incompatible. Whereas the Habermas model requiring, as it does, that “the exercise of social power and political domination [be] subjected to the mandate of democratic publicity” (Habermas 1989, p. 244), may have been an innovative sphere or mass symposium, given the customary censorship risk and the absence of a democratic process, ‘Ashour’s ersatz parliament, as identified by Khairy Shalaby, would be the more revolutionary performance.

*The Trickcyclist*, as a standalone play, especially when compared to ‘Ashour’s later plays, is a play that invites the audience to ponder their socioeconomic circumstances with a critical eye. What the *Trickcyclist* lacks, and which the subsequent plays have in abundance, is a sense of activism. What this play contributes to the development of Egyptian dramaturgy is ‘Ashour’s ability to use his characters and situations to curate an array of social and political dilemmas that result in the most persistent and immediate problems faced by the majority of the Egyptian people (Ashour 1975, p. 79). Khairy Shalaby notes that ‘Ashour’s predecessors, including impresario Yusuf Wahby and comedian Naguib Al Rihani, aimed to distract their audiences from



the widespread pre-1952 poverty and lack of social mobility by providing comedy that alleviates pain or tragedy that incites gratitude (Shalaby 1966 p. 66-7). As previously noted in the introduction, and as an extrapolation of Shalaby's observation, 'Ashour's predecessors provided their audiences with performances that served to neutralise any potential revolutionary or subversive energy while 'Ashour's curation of volatile issues incited those energies in an unprecedented ersatz parliament.

### 3.3 **Situating *The Trickcyclist*:**

*The Trickcyclist*, existing as it did in various versions between 1950 and its first performance in October 1955, is a play that addressed a nation in a state of flux. In 1950, Egypt was a feudal agrarian monarchy under de-facto British occupation. By 1955, the country had undergone land reforms that redistributed the agrarian wealth amongst the peasantry while the new young leadership was about to embark on a campaign of rapid industrialisation and social restructuring. The 1952 revolution cancelled all titles of nobility and aristocracy as a measure that heralded the new order of equality. *The Trickcyclist* is unmistakably a pre-1952 play due to the presence of a millionaire war-profiteer, ration cards, men who wear a Turkish fez, and, most telling of all, an election campaigner who refers to political parties. The recently impoverished upper middle-class family of the protagonist was a common occurrence before and after the revolution. The elitism with which the members of that family treat their socially inferior neighbours was an identifying mannerism of pre-revolutionary bourgeois families, as witnessed by the trope of the affected snobs who obsequiously curried favour with the aristocracy. The young bourgeois girl who will do anything to marry into her economic class or higher even if it means that the husband is a war-profiteering criminal, is another identifier of pre-revolutionary bourgeois pragmatism which, after 1952, translates into counter-revolutionary nostalgia. 'Ashour engages

with the tenets of the revolution by creating a world that virtually compels the audience to reject all forms of pre-revolutionary nostalgia that is tantamount to servility and loss of dignity.

‘Ashour uses the protagonist’s temporary sidekick, ‘Atwa Effendi, in order to demonstrate the extent to which class exploitation had become an essential tool for survival in pre-revolutionary Egypt. ‘Atwa is exploited by the war profiteering Hajj Abul Mal (a name that literally translates into “father of the money”). ‘Atwa later exploits the patients he sends to Dr. Gharib by convincing them that the doctor is in fact a trickcyclist who will hypnotise them and/or perform exorcisms. As far as the first criterion is concerned, ‘Ashour engages with the spirit of the national charter by exploring the pre-revolutionary corruption, class conflicts and the exploitation of the poor by the rich. Abul Mal’s black-market profiteering, by going uncontested, is ‘Ashour’s condemnation of the exploitationist private sector and the absence of a strong public sector.

Whether Egyptian critics extolled the virtues of *The Trickcyclist* or condemned its deviance from their conception of the Aristotelian structure with its unities, plot cohesion, climax and resolution, there was what amounts to universal agreement that ‘Ashour’s first stage play was cut from a different cloth and that differently. The actors themselves initially objected to accepting the play since “it had no drama” (Ashour, 1975, p. 115). Mohamed Hammouda wrote in *Al Jumhuriya* that ‘Ashour had “supplied the first brick in the foundation of Egyptian theatre realism” (135). Mostafa Kamal conceded that “despite defying the conventional dramaturgy, the playwright has retained a cohesive structure, and we commend his efforts in creating a thriving purely Egyptian theatre” (135). The abbreviated plot of *The Trickcyclist* I have supplied at the beginning of this chapter shows clearly that the play dispenses with the three unities, that there is no moment of highest tension and that there isn’t a clear resolution since there isn’t a central

conflict. ‘Ashour achieved commercial and critical success with a play that defied the Egyptian purely literary understanding of the poetics and demonstrated the viability of a new form of dramaturgy that broke with pre-revolutionary almost sacrosanct conventions.

*The Trickcyclist's* first performance run was produced by The Free Theatre Troupe. This was a cooperative private troupe of amateurs that, despite its successful attempts to discover new theatre talents, had profit as one of its major aims. ‘Ashour knew this and had several altercations with Sa’ad Ardash, a key member/stakeholder of the troupe regarding his fee. Ardash was of the opinion that even the unexpected commercial success of *The Trickcyclist* did not warrant the 50 pounds fee demanded by ‘Ashour, of which the playwright had received only 20 by the time negotiations about the next play *The People Downstairs* had started (Ashour, 1975, p. 137). ‘Ashour was disgruntled with the financial posturing of the Free Theatre troupe in light of the fact that he was paid substantially more by the radio station where he wrote his 60-90 minutes radio plays, an activity he did not enjoy and yet was frustratingly more lucrative (137). Whereas it is true that ‘Ashour was keen to be paid well for *The Trickcyclist*, his considerable income from the radio would suggest that his demands were not a matter of self-enrichment as much as acknowledgement of his calibre of writing in the medium he truly enjoyed. Moreover, as we have seen earlier at the beginning of this chapter, ‘Ashour tried to offer his script to the National Theatre before going to private troupes, but it was Khashaba rather than ‘Ashour who stood between the playwright and the public sector. ‘Ashour qualifies as a revolutionary Egyptian playwright because his instinct was to engage with the public sector rather than achieve personal enrichment with the substantial resources of the private sector.

‘Ashour’s first foray into the theatre world has failed to cultivate the kind of public sector following and admiration attained by its successors. In this regard, *The Trickcyclist*, despite

premiering in Cairo at the Opera House, officially a public sector venue, was not realised at the National Theatre.

As I shall demonstrate through the two scenes which follow, ‘Ashour manages to capture the language, feel and semiotics of the early fifties. From the first moment to the last, the play can effortlessly be identified as an early fifties piece. Even the misanthropic tonality and lived experience of the protagonist is in keeping with the reality with which the audience would be familiar. By communicating the structures of feeling of this particularly transitory phase of Egyptian history from a post-transition perspective, ‘Ashour has ensured that future generations have a record of a realistic and high-fidelity slice of life in an otherwise deliberately marginalised quarter of Cairo inhabited by a neglected stratum of society.

Having presented us with the distressed psychiatrist who wants to revolutionise everything around him in an uncompromising, albeit paradoxically European, manner and is consequently under attack from his own family, ‘Ashour proceeds in the following act to depict the consequences of a revolutionary pragmatism. In much the same way that Nasser and the Free Officers decided to shun both Communism and Capitalism in favour of non-alignment, Ashour uses Dr. Gharib to, anachronistically, provide a prototype for such a geopolitical move. Gharib adapts his previously western-style liberal approach to life and attempts to mix it with its seemingly antithetical Egyptian approach in order to synthesise his own distinctive practise. In a scene with an Egyptian patient who believes in superstition and Islamic flavoured exorcism, Gharib is seen struggling with the adaptation he had chosen for himself, but eventually finds his own voice. My translation of the scene is in the Appendix.

### **3.4 Criteria-based Analysis:**

This particular scene of the play does not engage directly with any of the tenets of the revolution. Indirectly, there are two tenets whose spirit may be discerned here. The scene deals with the idea of ending a key aspect of colonialism by introducing the concept of a trained professional who provides treatment locally rather than the pre-1952 customary need to travel to Europe for expert treatment. Additionally, Gharib addresses the tenet of social justice indirectly by ensuring that his treatments are affordable and realistic given the socioeconomic status of his patient. These engagements with the revolutionary tenets are, however, mired by the doctor's snobbery and hubris, afflictions that continue to characterise him in this scene as with the previously discussed confrontation with his sister.

This scene of the play complicates the character of Gharib by portraying him as a minor entrepreneur who has borrowed money from a rich war profiteer's brother in order to establish his medical practise. Furthermore, Gharib is willing to consult on a patient whom he hadn't examined, a situation fraught with ethical dilemmas. Finally, there is a strong sense of envy emanating from Gharib at the end of the scene when he mutters to himself about 'Atwa's ability to "get money from thin air." It is difficult to ignore the materialism that is slowly seeping through Gharib's dialogue and mannerisms. This materialism was accentuated at an earlier point when Gharib informed his nurse/secretary, Dabshouli, that there will be no salary during the early stages of the psychiatric practise.

Despite Gharib's hubris and hamartia, as well as the peripeteia revealed in the last line of the scene, all of which point to an Aristotelian-style protagonist, his behaviour and demeanour, both of which at times descend into extreme farce, extract him clearly from the classical template. When Gharib initially objects to the idea of treating a patient remotely, he bases his stance both

upon the ludicrousness of the proposition as well as the elitist repulsion with the concept of dealing with a person who believes in the idea of a “séance”. An Aristotelian protagonist would not change his stance within the same scene as Gharib does. Not only does Gharib eventually come to terms with treating those he sees as socially and intellectually beneath him, he later declines a gift of a luxury downtown flat in which to establish his practise in favour of staying put and marrying a seamstress from the alley of Darb Agour. The ending of this scene presents the audience with a transformation in the protagonist’s belief, a seemingly classical peripeteia, but ‘Ashour allows his protagonist to choose from several alternate paths beyond the turning point, options not available to a classical protagonist. Moreover, Gharib is more than one device in the play; he is a character, a parody and a commentary on both himself and society. M. M. Badawi finds Gharib to be so problematic he labels him as

more of a caricature, whose inconsistent behaviour is not always easy to account for, and whose function in the overall pattern of the play is questionable (Badawi, 1988, p. 144).

Badawi is certainly justified in questioning the role of this difficult character if we dismiss the role of the play as a subversive dramaturgical entry. This second scene seems to intend to confuse the audience as we witness a character whom we assumed we had fully comprehended. The 1955 audience was accustomed to a limited range of staple characters as discussed in Chapter 1. The collective mind of the audience may be said to have been trained to classify characters as they walked onto the stage into the accepted hero/villain binary, the religious dramatic representations of virtues and vices, the vaudevillian/musical or the stock characters of *commedia dell’arte*. During the first scene, Gharib may have been labelled as a stock character such as “Il Dottore”, for example, while ‘Atwa may have been perceived as a “Pantalone” and Qamar as the “Innamorata” and Dabshouli as the “Harlequin”. By the end of this scene, however,

it becomes difficult to reconcile the characters as they evolve with the limitations of the stock characters or any of the other types to which the 1955 audience members were accustomed. Gharib in particular, rather than being a straightforward caricature as Badawi opines, is engaging with and critiquing not only those around him and the status quo, but himself as well. This scene in particular marks the first departure of an Egyptian playwright from the accepted dramaturgical tools that Egyptian critics such as Badawi and Ishaq labelled as “Aristotelian”, commedia being accepted form under the Aristotelian umbrella.

This scene is historically a popular and hilarious scene. Audiences coming out of the 2007 production at the American University in Cairo were consistently reciting lines from this scene night after night. It is difficult to miss the comedy inherent in the situation of this scene where a stubborn westernised elitist psychiatrist is asked to treat a patient he had never met and who had already subscribed to the ideology of exorcism and seances. The premise of the cross-cultural encounter alone is a formula for hilarity. It is likely that ‘Ashour chose to introduce his new brand of dramaturgy using the palatable vehicle of comedy. The absence of a plot may be forgiven if there is a substantial amount of laughter. Based on his confessed hatred of his government post (‘Ashour 1975, p. 102), ‘Ashour was probably aiming at using his writing to guarantee a measure of financial enrichment, easily achieved in 1955 Egypt through comedy as established in Chapter 1. There is an argument to be made that ‘Ashour was financially secure enough through his government post and his work with the radio, precluding a reliance on his playwriting for financial gain. That argument however does not explain why there were considerable contentions over the financial compensation agreed upon with the Free Theatre Troupe, the first troupe to produce *The Trickcyclist*. According to this fourth criterion, this scene casts doubt upon the revolutionary nature of *The Trickcyclist*.

This scene from *The Trickcyclist*, veering as it does towards the style of the commercial theatre of the period, was probably the most likely reason that this play was not adopted by the National Theatre troupe. Despite the complexities and the subtle transitions of the scene and its effect on the overall trajectory of the play, it was unlikely to have met the intellectually demanding literary sombreness expected by a reading committee that comprised mostly literary minds. The episode with the artistic director, Dereini Khashaba, described at the beginning of this chapter, encapsulates the general attitude of literary luminaries such as Taha Hussein and Yehia Haqqy. There was a general rejection of the relatively plotless dramaturgy presented by ‘Ashour. Despite the commercial success enjoyed by the play as produced by the Free Theatre troupe, a feat that was unprecedented by an untested playwright at the time in Egypt, the National Theatre continues to ignore *The Trickcyclist* until the present day. In terms of this criterion, this scene of *The Trickcyclist* contributes to the play’s exclusion from the repertoire of the Egyptian National Theatre.

This central scene contains idioms that are now dated and are easily identifiable as patently lower-middle class Cairene vernacular. The problem that accompanies the popularity and hilarity of these idioms is that they have since been enshrined in a form of acceptable dramatic vernacular, one that over-indicates a working-class, semi-literate or illiterate stratum of society. This vernacular is used in lieu of the actual semantics of the Cairene proletariat. It continues to be used in Egyptian TV series, soap operas and gangster-themed films. The vernacular that entered the dramaturgical palette in 1955 in order to accurately and authentically communicate the semantics and linguistic reality of a specific stratum of Cairene society, eventually morphed into a tool that reduces all the inhabitants of lower income areas into a monolith that has no basis in reality. ‘Ashour also depicts the lived experience of 1955; an aristocratic family may be



impoverished and cohabit the same building as the proletariat while retaining their affectations and convictions. ‘Ashour further uses this scene to communicate the entitlement inherent in the behaviour of the aristocratic protagonist who feels within his rights to verbally abuse ‘Atwa by calling him a “Jackass.” ‘Atwa accepts this abuse and, rather than take offence, he praises the doctor’s miraculous perception and solution to the problem. Even Om Saneya concedes the superior status of the doctor by accepting a systemic overhaul of her social reality and the doctor’s dictate that she should “marry... off” her daughter. Without a play such as *The Trickcyclist*, and this transitional scene in particular, it would be difficult to believe that such a social mix, with these characteristics, semantics and tonality existed in Egypt in 1955.

### **3.5 The People Downstairs:**

Compared to *The Trickcyclist*, ‘Ashour’s second play, *The People Downstairs* (1956) was a more obvious and direct socio-political engagement with the reality that surrounded those living in postcolonial Egypt with its volatile and rapidly evolving set of circumstances. New social and economic classes and structures were being constructed and realigned with the emerging forces of the nascent republic. Closer inter-class relationships were formed after the 1952 revolution, relationships that were reflected in newly created hybrid classes as well as residential neighbourhoods. Rural Egyptians who were unable to commit to the expanding agricultural economy entertained dreams of joining the industrial revolution that was invariably connected to urban centres and entailed mass migration to the city (Mehrez 2008, p. 145; Amin 2000, p. 56). While examining the modern literary metaphors of Cairo, Samia Mehrez observes that

... the mega-city of Cairo has also experienced new patterns of geographic, economic, and social mobility: the influx of an immigrant rural population, the rise of professional and labour migration to the Gulf, new internal migration to the factories in satellite cities or coastal tourist developments, the emergence of new patterns of investment and

consumption, the disintegration of the “traditional” social fabric, and the emergence of new urban affiliations. The fragmentation of old familiar spaces and the encroachment of new unfamiliar ones led to a heightened sense of mobility and anonymity as well as an imminent sense of alienation and isolation. As the city transformed itself, so did the metaphors that came to represent it in literary texts. (Mehrez, 2008, p. 145)

As with many burgeoning cities around the world, post-1952 Cairo was experiencing a restructuring that affected all aspects of life. In keeping with the spirit of the tenets of the revolution, the feudal lords (Pashas) were dispossessed of substantial portions of their property. Spacious palaces were converted to government buildings, “cultural palaces” (discussed in Chapter 1) that were home to the latest theatre performance – especially theatre that the Ministry of Culture considered “experimental” or “Avant Garde”. Palaces and mansions that were not repurposed ended up being demolished for a substantial (10-stories or more) apartment building to replace them and provide housing for considerably less affluent tenants. This new population, supplanting the former aristocracy and creating the fragmented, alienating and isolating space described above by Mehrez, is essentially claiming the geographical location as well as the social reins that are navigating the “New Egypt”, the working title and later subtitle of Ashour’s second full-length play and, *El Nass Elli Taht (The People Downstairs)* (‘Ashour 1974, p.140). As shall be discussed later in this chapter, the working title and the motif of “new Egypt” and “old Egypt” in the dialogue of the play, there is a clear allusion to Farah Antun’s 1913 play, *Masr Al Gadida wa Masr al Qadima (The New Egypt and the Old Egypt)*.

Even though Fatma Yousef Mohamed, in her thorough and insightful study *Al Masrah wa al Solta fi Misr (The Theatre and Governance in Egypt, 1993)* may see *The People Downstairs* as a “reportage” (55) akin to the Soviet *Otcherk*, she still concedes that ‘Ashour is crafting a new kind of Egyptian play that is “connected to the social issues of the day” (54). By subscribing to Mandour’s classification of ‘Ashour’s dramaturgy as *Otcherk*/reportage,

Mohamed provides a more recent retrospective view of this post-1952 phenomenon. Going back to Khairy Shalaby's estimation that 'Ashour's plays were the first in Egypt to engage with social issues, *The People Downstairs* was the first Egyptian play to depict abject poverty and the clash of the working classes with the aspirations of the bourgeoisie in a manner that ends Egyptian theatre's "passivity towards social issues." (1966, PP. 65-6) Shalaby insists that 'Ashour's early plays were the first, the most impactful and influential socio-political Egyptian plays that were rooted in the reality of the proletariat (67). Shalaby, writing ten years after the composition and first performance of *The People Downstairs*, views the play as a "clear intellectual trajectory that sees the playwright ... falling in love with the proletariat family and adopting their cause and revolution" (67). Elsayed Hassan Eid, also writing in 1966, sees the play's form and structure as illustrative of a working class that "strives and is optimistic about a future that is founded upon work, productivity and self-confidence as opposed to the corrupt social benefits inherited by the idle upper classes" (223). Nabil Ragheb, writing in 1982, addresses the characterization of the representatives of the upper class in *The People Downstairs* and emphasizes the absence of the stereotypical portrayal of the aristocrats who had been customarily whining about their lost titles, privileges and wealth (19).

In the introduction to 'Ashour's *Belad Barra (Abroad, 1967)*, critic Ahmed 'Abbas Saleh charts the development of the playwright over the preceding ten years, commencing from *The People Downstairs* rather than *The Trickcyclist*. Saleh dismisses 'Ashour's first play and sees *The People Downstairs* as the true beginning of 'Ashour's "Chekhovian" style (343). Saleh attempts to paint the picture of a playwright who is paradoxically fortunate enough to be trapped in "plotless plays", untroubled by "Aristotle's traditional rule that there must be ... a beginning, a middle, and an end" (341). Saleh is both laudatory and condemning what he sees as 'Ashour's

choice to blindly follow a Chekhov who “breaks all the rules” and to whom he owes the freedom from restrictions he has enjoyed starting with *The People Downstairs* (341). The duality of thought and feeling that Saleh exhibits emphasizes ‘Ashour’s paradoxical approach to creating an indigenous Egyptian play using foreign, in this case Russian, structure. What Saleh does not explore is ‘Ashour’s comfort with being labelled an *Otcherk* playwright, as I have demonstrated through the playwright’s encounter with his teacher, Professor Mohammed Mandour (‘Ashour 1974, p. 221).

Writing in 1967, Professor Galal El ‘Ashry, Chair of the Higher Institute of Criticism at Cairo University, ‘Ashour’s Alma Mater, identifies the premier night of *The People Downstairs* as the moment when theatre critics and audiences “felt that a new form of theatre has started, and that an Egyptian playwright possesses great potential” (9). El ‘Ashry categorises the remainder of ‘Ashour’s plays—those written prior to 1967— as either reworkings of *The People Downstairs*, clever adaptations of Osborne or Chekhov, or as setbacks in the playwright’s corpus and the entire movement of modern Egyptian theatre (9).

Mandour being the one academic scholar who observed ‘Ashour—he was ‘Ashour’s professor at the Literature department of Cairo University— during his formative years and through the launching of his playwriting career, is the critic whose opinion I find to be the most nuanced and insightful. In an article titled “My Dissentious Pupil”, where Mandour reviewed *The People Downstairs*, the teacher observed that his former student had learned to channel his dissent effectively via the *Otcherk* medium. Mandour develops the *Otcherk* label he had previously bestowed upon the *Trickcyclist* a year before by propounding the theory that ‘Ashour has hit upon the form of comedic *piece a these* (problem play). Mandour observes that ‘Ashour’s humour

is not an end in itself, but rather has an objective. It is there to parody some of the psychological and social deficiencies that linger in our country and whose remains conflict with the new principles of life... [*The People Downstairs*] wants to demonstrate that the new Egypt, i.e. post-revolutionary Egypt, is better than the old Egypt... Despite the fact that theatre critics all over the world severely criticize this [*piece a these*] form of message play, this play has persuaded me to reconsider my perspective. That is because the “message” did not cause the play to be boring or lacking in action. It also did not transform the stage into an orator’s pulpit... The message was not conveyed via a sentimental or [melo]dramatic play, but rather via a light comedy. (1956, p.91)

Mandour is emphasising ‘Ashour’s challenge to the existing playwriting status quo in Egypt.

Mandour is also highlighting a link between ‘Ashour and the tradition of the problem play while also alerting his readers to what he sees as the innovation of using a European form and moulding it to suit his Egyptian purpose rather than merely mimicking the original. Mandour’s reassessment of his initial opinion of the problem play –as received from the West– as boring and sentimental didactic oratory helps his readers appreciate the extent of the transformative impact of *The People Downstairs*.

Mandour does not identify the message of the play in explicit terms, but he implies that the play, through the character mix, exhibits two main attitudes towards life after the 1952 revolution: a new Egypt attitude that is optimistic and progressive, and an old Egypt that is static and refusing what Mandour views as the post-revolutionary advance (90). Fatma Youssef Mohamed, having agreed with Mandour that *Downstairs* is an *Otcherk* play, uses this point to claim that ‘Ashour was merely reporting on the status quo and cannot be considered revolutionary since there is no critique of the post-revolutionary reality or prescience vis-à-vis the revolutionary ambitions of Nasser and his peers (76). Fatma Youssef Mohamed is of the opinion that all literature and drama, not just revolutionary works, must be prescient and “draw a roadmap” (76) of the future, an endeavour that would imperil authors and expose them to “oppression” (76). Mohamed would therefore appear to be denying ‘Ashour’s status as a literary

author and a dramatist, let alone a revolutionary playwright. Both Fatma Youssef and Mohamed Mandour identify the protagonist, Ragaei as the symbol for the fallen aristocracy, the former viewing the character as a chameleon-like parasite representative of a class who humorously doubles as the playwright's spokesperson (75), while the latter sees that protagonist as a symbol of a bygone era past which Egypt had already moved (90). Once I have analysed *Downstairs*, I shall engage with both of these assessments of the play and demonstrate how 'Ashour's second dramaturgical endeavour was not only revolutionary according to my six criteria, but also a unique entry in the Egyptian theatre canon in terms of its transformative impact on Egyptian dramaturgy.

*Downstairs* may be summarized as a play that charts the aftermath of the 1952 revolution four years on, dramatizing the impact of the regime change and independence upon the generational and socioeconomic strata as represented by the characters on stage. Despite the fact that there is a general critical consensus that 'Ashour does not provide the audience with what Egyptian scholars define as an Aristotelian plot –with exposition, escalation, climax, revelations, resolution– there is however, a linear temporal sequence of events that act as a series of expositions. This series of expositions sustains the attention and interest of the audience through calculated situational humour, accurate and true to life portrayals of characters, realistic depictions of settings and circumstances, daring satire, and nuanced prescience. Despite a strong resemblance in terms of character mix and some tragic situations between *Downstairs* and Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, 'Ashour's events, light comedy, optimism and lack of corpses, markedly set the two plays apart.

The play begins with a confrontation between a tough bourgeois landlady (Bahiga Hanem), accompanied by (Fatma), her ballanah (masseur), and her oddjob servant, Fikry. The

first act takes place in the basement which was divided into exceedingly small one-bedroom abodes. Bahiga Hanem is trying to find faults with the tenants in order to seize the property. Her first clash is with the furniture inherited by Ragaei Bey, the old, impoverished aristocrat, and with which he had furnished the common area of the basement. The other tenants, all absent from the first scene, are a tram conductor (Abdel Reheem); his daughter, a university student (Lotfia); a young artist in love with Lotfia, who reciprocates, (Ezzat). The remainder of the cast are Bahiga's entourage: Marzouk Bey, her husband and later on ex-husband; Monira, the maid who eventually abandons her and absconds with Fikry; Gabr Effendi, her lawyer's paralegal; the lawyer; and Abdel Khalek, her nephew. Bahiga concludes her first fight with Fikry with an ultimatum and leaves in a huff. Once Ragaei returns from the funeral of the deceased relative from whom he had inherited the furniture, he takes turns playing the young lovers' guide and confidante, taunting the constantly sleeping tram conductor, charming and eventually fending off Marzouk who has appeared to enforce his wife's ultimatum and evict the tenants from the basement in order to use the space as storage for a planned open-air cinema. Several altercations take place amongst Bahiga, the conductor, Ragaei and Marzouk culminating in Bahiga's determination to get an emergency court ruling to evict the tenants.

Act two, set in Bahiga's spacious apartment in the same building, commences after Bahiga had lost the law suit and is legally obligated to accommodate the tenants for as long as they please according to the old rental agreements law predating the 1952 revolution, dating back to 1941. By the middle of the act Bahiga discovers that Marzouk had absconded with substantial amounts of cash and precious belongings. The act introduces the audience to Bahiga's nephew, Abdel Khalek who allegedly embezzled money from her while charged with looking after her financial affairs prior to her marriage to Marzouk. Abdel Khalek now returns to gloat, clear his

name and prove his worth again to his aunt. In the process, Abdel Khalek make the acquaintance of Lotfia and a certain chemistry is evident between them. There is an impromptu tenants' meeting with Bahiga and her lawyer that fails to achieve any objectives and where we learn that Ezzat has travelled to Alexandria to participate in an art competition with some paintings. Bahiga explains to Fatma, the masseuse and quasi-counsellor of Bahiga at this juncture, that she needs a husband who can protect her and look after her properties and financial affairs, especially since she does not trust her opportunistic nephew or her lawyer who has never won her a case. Fatma, recommends that the powerful landlady replaces her treacherous husband with Ragaei. Bahiga admits that she had already tried to lure Ragaei and failed, whereupon Fatma commits to making the union between the bourgeois lady and the impoverished aristocrat a reality. Towards the end of the act, Abdel Khalek manoeuvres to declare his aunt mentally incapacitated in order to seize her possessions, causing Bahiga and Fatma to accelerate their plans to ensnare Ragaei.

The third act returns to the basement and begins a few months after the end of the second and it shows the aftermath of the marriage of Ragaei and Bahiga as well as the consequences of the vertical social movements of the working-class characters. Ragaei has returned to his pre-revolutionary ways of hard drinking and heavy spending while moving to the top floor with Bahiga in a miserable marriage where he is dominated and bereft of his free will, essentially a kept man. Fatma has moved into Ragaei's room in the basement in order to be close to her target, Abdel Reheem the conductor, whom she intends to marry. Lotfia is now employed by Bahiga's nephew, Abdel Khalek, causing a rift to develop between this working class conductor's daughter and Ezzat, the recently enriched—by winning the Art Prize— young working class painter who had just returned from Alexandria. Ragaei's drunkenness causes him to flirt with and try to seduce Monira, Bahiga's former maid who has decided to leave the life of servitude and seek an



education in order to become her own woman. Monira fends off Ragaei just as he is reunited with Ezzat. Ragaei feels ashamed of his flirting with Monira, his marriage to Bahiga and his inability to move forward with the times. This old aristocrat is the barometer by which the development of all the other characters is measured. He declares Fikry and Monira to be on their way to the new Egypt while praising the reunited Ezzat and Lotfia for being the guardians of that new Egypt. Ignoring the professional bourgeoisie in the form of the lawyer and Abdel Khalek, Ragaei condemns Bahiga and himself as the unchanging fossils of the old Egypt. The play ends with Ragaei announcing his position as “fallen” and moving back to Bahiga’s apartment in a mock military march as he takes his wife’s hand and exits the stage with her.

### **3.6 Criteria-based Analysis:**

As established earlier, revolutionary Egyptian plays must engage with and interrogate one or more of the six tenets of the 1952 revolution. By dramatizing the fortunes of the various socioeconomic classes in the aftermath of the 1952 revolution, *Downstairs* is directly engaging with the socioeconomic aspects of the tenets of the 1952 revolution. The crumbling aristocracy represented by the character of Ragaei is a revolutionary success story, albeit depicted with hilarity. Ragaei seems to revel in self-deprecating humour, an unmistakable coping mechanism. Ragaei’s entrance and first exchange of dialogue with Lotfia illustrates the extent to which this former aristocrat has been humbled:

RAGAEI (As he is entering): Where the devil did that moron Fikry go so early in the morning. (Noticing Lotfia) Hello, young Miss Lotfia, what a rosy morning, little one! (He is holding a bouquet of roses of various colours.)

LOTFIA: Good morning, Mr. Ragaei. (She turns to leave from the same door Ragaei used to enter).

RAGAEI: Where are you off to? Stay with us. You’re on holiday now. Here, have a rose.

LOTFIA: You brought roses, Mr. Ragaei?

RAGAEI: I bought them but then I didn’t feel that the departed’s grave was worth leaving them there.

LOTFIA: I see. So sorry, I completely forgot. So sorry for your loss.

RAGAEI: There was nothing left to lose. He left nothing behind except this salon furniture and that of two other lousy rooms. The furniture of the two rooms barely got me ninety pounds.

LOTFIA: I have to say this salon is rather posh.

RAGAEI: Do you like it? Take it. I mean it, take it if you like it.

LOTFIA: Your uncle was rich, right?

RAGAEI: Rich and stupid.

LOTFIA: They all say that from a really big family.

RAGAEI: Big? No, not big at all. Two Pashas and one Bey, all expired right on time. Nothing left of the family tree but this leafless branch. The dry twig standing before you. (He points at himself.)

LOTFIA: Did you not inherit anything, sir?

RAGAEI: Me? I'm thanking God that I wasn't auctioned off along with the old man's other possessions. Inherit? May he rest in peace... he finished off everything before his final adieu.

LOTFIA: Don't be sad, Mr. Ragaei. You can make up everything that was lost.

RAGAEI: For whom? ('Ashour 1956 pp.123-4)

This exchange, heralding the entrance of the representative of the aristocracy, situates Ragaei and his class in the new post-1952 order, new Egypt as Ragaei himself will eventually call it. The first thing we hear from this bombastic character is a demeaning insult levelled at Fikry, Bahiga's oddjob servant. The former Bey is still accustomed to affixing insults and profane epithets to the names of those lower than themselves on the social ladder. This negative aspect of Ragaei's personality is followed instantly by the cordial and paternal treatment of Lotfia, whom he respects as a university student on her way to joining the professional bourgeoisie class. Lotfia responds in a manner that would have had a mixed response from the 1956 audience, she refers to Ragaei, a former Bey, with the relatively neutral but revolutionary title of "*Ostaz*" (Literally meaning "professor", but in the Egyptian vernacular means "mister" and is used interchangeably with "sayed" which literally means "master"). *Ostaz* is a courteous term, but it is a significant fall from grace compared to the defunct "Bey" to which Ragaei had been accustomed until 1952. The 1956 audience was in a state of heightened revolutionary awareness given the events that had unfolded since 1952. Three months after the revolution and the

eradication of all aristocratic titles, the agrarian reform laws which took lands from the rich feudal lords to give to the poor peasants were enforced. 1953 saw the abrogation of the monarchy and the declaration of the republic after almost 7000 years of kings and queens. 1954 saw the election of the first president of the republic, Mohamed Naguib, his forced removal by his successor, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the attempted assassination of the latter who was considered globally to be the face of the revolution. 1955 was the year of the Bandung conference marking Egypt's commitment to non-alignment with either the Warsaw Pact or NATO. 23 July 1956 was the moment that shook the world when Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, was celebrated by the global south and condemned by the Britain and France to the extent of being labelled as "Hitler on the Nile" by the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror* urging parliament to ensure that there will be "no more Hitlers" (Richardson 1992, p. 380). This seemingly inconsequential form of address across repealed social boundaries would be welcomed and cherished by the pro-revolutionary members of the audience while the counter-revolutionaries would reject it and assume a defensive stance towards 'Ashour's messaging. Pictures from the 2013 production of *The People Downstairs*. Malak Gabr Theatre, American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt:



Image 1: Scene from Act 1 of *The People Downstairs*. American University in Cairo, Malak Gabr Theatre, December 2013.



Image 2: Scene from Act 1 of *The People Downstairs*. American University in Cairo, Malak Gabr Theatre, December 2013.



Image 3: Scene from Act 1 of *The People Downstairs*. American University in Cairo, Malak Gabr Theatre, December 2013.

The following beat of the unit imbues Ragaei with a nuanced attitude towards his new status in life. Not only does Ragaei not react to being called *Ostaz*, he symbolically rewards Lotfia by cordially offering her a rose. Ragaei has made his peace with the loss of his title and its privileges. As confirmation to Lotfia and anyone who may be eavesdropping of his contrition, Ragaei repeatedly indulges in humorous and self-deprecating turns of phrase, taking aim at his family and by extension, his entire class. The moment of pathos and heavy-handed symbolism that 'Ashour chooses to use in this unit, is Ragaei's reference to himself as a "dry twig standing before" Lotfia. This phrase symbolises the apparent end of the aristocratic line and, accompanied by the right body language and business, might move the audience to pity or gloating depending on their socio-political bent. This phrase is also laying a trap for those who are pro-revolution and yet feel pity, or worse, nostalgia, towards the abusive former aristocracy. This unit, which may be considered a French scene, addresses the tenet of ending feudalism as a positive development, an engagement that characterizes a revolutionary play. In the same vein, Ragaei's charismatic and alluring character represents a revolutionary warning that the former aristocracy can charm their way back into positions of power, as Ragaei does once he marries the affluent

Bahiga. The comic twist that ‘Ashour uses, however, is that Ragaei is just as powerless after the marriage as he was before since this symbol of a formerly hegemonic aristocracy becomes the subaltern being oppressed by the domineering bourgeois Bahiga.

Other engagements with the tenets of the 1952 revolution in *Downstairs* include ‘Ashour’s aspirations towards the social justice promised by the Free Officers. The conductor, Abdel Reheem is an active member of the union implying social security and perhaps healthcare security, but, apart from that hint, other features of a welfare state are conspicuous by their absence. A State maintained social security apparatus and instruments of social justice such as free education, powerful unions, just labour laws and progressive taxation are conspicuous by their absence. Fikry and Monira are servants in Bahiga’s employ without a contract. Abdel Reheem, despite his union membership, works longer hours than can be reasonably expected –a source of humour since his perpetual sleep is the butt of some of Ragaei’s jokes. Monira has to appeal to Lotfia to teach her how to read. The dishonest Abdel Khalek employs and attempts to seduce Lotfia. ‘Ashour has created a world in *Downstairs* that depicts the abuses and opportunism that habitually still occurred despite the revolution and criticises the state’s slow pace of achievement regarding social justice.

Despite predating the 1962 National Charter by six years, *Downstairs* may be considered a case study that illustrates life after occupation still retains the structures of colonialism. *Downstairs* makes the case for the brand of socialism to which Nasser, through the Charter, aspired. Despite the end of feudalism, the working class is still the victim of capitalist exploitation by the new accumulators of wealth and controllers of the factors of production: the upper bourgeoisie. Ezzat needs to rely on a fortuitous art prize rather than a regulated equal opportunity system in order to get a foothold within the new post-revolutionary order. Ragaei’s

late uncle was allowed to accumulate debt despite losing his titles and land, implying that a transfer of capital had taken place to a third party that is neither the state –which does not hold auctions but merely takes possession of feudal property– nor Ragaei who only managed to walk away with some useless furniture. A member of Bahiga’s class would have been the new inheritor of the feudal capital. Despite Fatma Youssef Mohammed’s perception of ‘Ashour’s play as lacking prescience, the manner in which the circumstances and situations of the play anticipate the Nasserist/Socialist blueprint of the 1962 National Charter would suggest that, despite the lack of any didactic proselytizing, ‘Ashour implied the prescription of the Charter. ‘Ashour is warning that the status quo, four years after the revolutionary movement, has yet to achieve the goals of the revolution. Fundamental change, such as the radical transformations listed in the framework that will eventually be prescribed by the National Charter, is needed in order to right the wrongs presented by *Downstairs*. Diagnosing the ills of the socioeconomic and political structures of Egyptian society in the spirit of the yet to be composed National Charter was not only unheard of on the Egyptian stage prior to *Downstairs*, it was also actively discouraged by the existing theatre troupes such as al-Rihani and Ramses who focused their efforts on adapting European and American drama that was completely disengaged from Egyptian circumstances, as discussed in chapter one.

As can be seen from the criticism of Saleh (1955), Khashaba (1955), and Youssef (1955) as well as the praise of Mandour (1958) and Shalaby (1966), Egyptian scholars and theatre practitioners alike agreed that Aristotelian plot and the unities as they interpreted them were either ignored or not a concern for Nu’mān ‘Ashour in most of his plays, especially *Downstairs*. Here I intend to depart slightly from that consensus and demonstrate that ‘Ashour’s unity of place is relatively intact. Whereas the critics are correct in pointing out that there is a scene

change because the second act is played out in Bahiga's apartment, nevertheless the entire play takes place within the building of Bahiga Hanem. The critics are correct about the unities of time and action. In terms of time, a month passes between Act One and Two and about three months pass between Two and Three. In terms of action, there isn't a central action that dominates the play, as can be seen from the earlier synopsis. The scholars above, from their disparate perspectives, agree that 'Ashour's plays are plotless and lacking in "Aristotelian structure" – Khashaba and Mandour, admonishing and praising respectively, dispensed with the adjective and judged the play to lack "structure" altogether– while I believe the play to still possess overlapping plots that are loosely connected. As Mandour and Salah concurred, the structure is a Chekhovian case study of several themes. The theme of interaction between those who control the factors of production and their socioeconomic subalterns presents the most sizeable conflict of the play and the primary trigger causing the first conflict of the play. Bahiga Hanem controls the living space of her tenants who occupy the space that represents part of her capital. The audience would know that, prior to the revolution, she would have won her eviction case either through bribery, coercion or threats. 1956 Egypt, four years after the revolution, sees the rich landlady losing her case, an event that even the royalists might have seen as shocking. The two young couples –Ezzat/Lotfia and Monira/Fikry– are to be contrasted with the older couples – Bahiga/Ragaei and potentially Fatma/Abdel Reheem). Ezzat and Lotfia are educated young professionals who intend to create the new Egypt's professional class while Fikry and Monira will join them to supply the working class. The older couples, literally staying behind, are the immovable representatives of old "Archaic" Egypt, as Ragaei refers to it, and its stagnant ways ('Ashour 1956, p. 235). Despite the occasional overlapping of these themes –Bahiga's nephew attempts to seduce Lotfia and ruin her relationship with Ezzat– it is difficult to assert that



removing a duo of characters, for example, would affect the structure of the play. Accusations of weak structural integrity were frequently the core of reviews of *Downstairs*, to which Nabil Ragheb eventually provided a scholarly response that complemented the *Otcherk* response of Mohamed Mandour:

Some have asked: "Where then is the artistic excitement in the play when it has no traditional plot that fires the curiosity of the audience?" My response is that the class struggles we see in the play differ from those we encounter in our everyday lives. The former is characterised by intensity, crystallization, focus, multifacetedness, interlocking factors, and live interactions. That which we see before us is a living being that moves, grows, and develops up to a resolution that is determined by its genesis despite the lack of a plot or a conflict that leads us to a climax. Had Nu'mān 'Ashour introduced a conventional conflict, it would have seemed intrusive since there is no rule that mandates the essential presence of a conflict. (Ragheb 1982, p. 44)

The tightly knit plots of Tawfiq Al-Hakim and the adaptations of European well-made plays did not seem to serve the socioeconomic and political messaging of 'Ashour's adaptation of the problem play. The pre-1952 dramaturgical formula is evidently more suitable for a bygone era and, after the revolution, for the nostalgic counter-revolutionary intellectuals such as Al-Hakim and Rashad Rushdy as well as troupes such as the Fananeen El Mottahedeen (United Artists) as discussed in Chapter One. Since Chekhov's famous plays (There were frequent sold-out performances at the National Theatre of *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*) and Ibsen's later plays (*Pillars onwards*) were seen as revolutionary dramaturgy that redefined playwriting in the west, studying and later adapting these two dramaturgical paradigms was seen as a revolutionary act that defied the Aristotelian rigidity as understood by the Egyptian academy (Ragheb 1982, p. 44)

'Ashour's playwriting style eventually proved to be a popular success at the box office. That success, however, is more indicative of the mood of the audience rather than the appeal of *Downstairs*. 'Ashour's journey of composing *Downstairs* started in October 1955, little over a

week after the Cairo premiere of *The Trickcyclist* ('Ashour 1975, p.136). Throughout the writing process, 'Ashour was negotiating the residuals of his first play and the fee for his next play with Al Masrah Al Horr (The Free Theatre) troupe (138). These negotiations were extremely frustrating for the playwright as the troupe's representative, actor/director Sa'ad Ardash, was ambivalent; he claimed that even though he himself appreciated 'Ashour, many members of the troupe wanted 'Ashour to give up his residuals for *The Trickcyclist* and accept a lower fee for the upcoming play. At this juncture, it is easy to see parallels between Ezzat, the artist in *Downstairs*, and 'Ashour. The playwright settled the artistic conundrum of whether he should rely on his art as a source of income. 'Ashour explains in his autobiography that

... When I started writing for the stage, it never occurred to me that this would be any source of income. Rather I had always lived, and still do, according to the principle of earning a stable income from a regular occupation... because I discovered early on that, in a society such as ours, literature is not an endeavour that can financially sustain an individual (138).

Ezzat, facing the same conundrum as 'Ashour, decides to go in the opposite direction:

LOTFIA: Ezzat, you are neither making money nor painting.

EZZAT: Because I am an artist. I could draw nothing for a month or two. Then in one week, I could draw something that might otherwise take a year to create.

LOTFIA: I understand, Ezzat. I know that you are preparing paintings for the Alexandria competition. But that shouldn't prevent you from—

EZZAT: Shouldn't prevent me from finding a stable job. Again.

LOTFIA: At least draw something useful.

EZZAT: You mean the ones that bring in money. Listen, Lotfia. I'll tell you something. It is indeed difficult for a person to live penniless for a week. But it is far more difficult to sell that person's ideas and hopes and perspective on life for the sake of a pound that'll keep us going for another week.

...

LOTFIA: There is nothing wrong with work, Ezzat.

EZZAT: Do you see me messing about, Lotfia?

LOTFIA: No, but you can do better. I know you can be better.

EZZAT: Not by myself, Lotfia. I can't be better all by myself. We all have to be better together.

LOTFIA: Can't you think of yourself for once?

EZZAT: I have never done so. Nor have I even thought of my own family. I must first think of the people... What am I? What are you? Your father. One? One? Two? Three? A million? Out of twenty million! Out of an entire world! ('Ashour 1974, pp. 119-21)

Whereas 'Ashour's playwright persona and Ezzat disagree about the prospect of keeping a regular occupation with a steady salary, they agree that the commoditization of their art is not their goal. 'Ashour sees selling his writing as unsustainable while Ezzat sees it as a betrayal of one's "ideas and hopes and perspective on life" (120). 'Ashour uses Ezzat as a symbol of Egypt's rebellious and talented revolutionary youth. Like many such youth at the time, and like 'Ashour himself, revolution was viewed through the Marxist lens to which Ezzat refers. 'Ashour, having instilled in Ezzat those Marxist qualities, advocates a new Egypt where revolutionaries do not need to sell their artistic talent to survive or to enrich themselves, but rather to serve the overall purpose of the revolution. 'Ashour himself, by refusing to rely on his writing talent for his livelihood or self-enrichment, is living the revolutionary principle he is advocating in *Downstairs*. As a committed Marxist, 'Ashour is evidently regarding the purpose of his art through the same lens Lenin, in 1908, viewed party literature. 'Ashour and Ezzat's actions are an application of Lenin's view of party literature and that it

cannot be a means for enriching individuals or groups; it cannot, in fact, be an individual undertaking, independent of the common cause of the proletariat. Down with non-partisan writers! Down with literary supermen! Literature must become *part* of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and a screw" of one great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organized, planned and integrated Social-Democratic party work. (Lenin 1970, p.23)

Ezzat's character, 'Ashour's symbol of optimism about the future, is echoing Lenin's view of literature and applying it to art. 'Ashour's contract negotiations additionally indicate that he strenuously objected to changes in the script that would make the play more popular. 'Ashour could have easily removed Ezzat's metaphors and anecdotes in order to intensify the humour of

the play. Instead, ‘Ashour alternates scenes of light comedy with those moments of political philosophy such as Ezzat’s commentary and optimistic prescience. At various stages in the play, Ezzat objects to copying copies of reality to make a living, insisting on painting a meaningful reality instead. ‘Ashour has personally and in terms of dramaturgy provided the revolution with *Downstairs*, a play that, from a Marxist/Leninist perspective, advances progressive and transformative aims rather than financially enrich him as a playwright.

*Downstairs* is a play that developed the assault mounted by *The Trickcyclist* upon the socioeconomic and political detachment of pre-revolutionary and competing contemporary plays. Despite, like *The Trickcyclist*, being produced by a predominantly amateur private troupe, *Downstairs* was not, as demonstrated in the previous point, written for enrichment. ‘Ashour wrote *Downstairs* with an eye on changing the way plays were written in general. As I have demonstrated in the introduction, pre-1952 plays were predominantly adaptations of western “hits” and deliberately disengaged from the reality of the Egyptian people, tackling issues that might never trouble the daily lives of audiences. Playwrights such as Al-Hakim deliberately distanced themselves from the reality of the Egyptian population, hence his creation of “the theatre of the mind” as a subgenre distinct from that which he titled “the theatre of society”. Even in the latter theatre, as we saw with *The Deal*, Al-Hakim still imposed a Brecht-style alienating device, the “third language”. At no point is the target audience of Al-Hakim encouraged to empathise with the characters before them on the stage. Al-Hakim was continuing his pre-revolutionary trajectory of being a more refined and entertaining form of theatre that, even if it accidentally addressed reality, promoted a regressive and counter-revolutionary world-view. From a Gramscian perspective, Al-Hakim, especially with a “third language” play such as *The Deal*, would have been considered a contributor of “the indigenous intellectual element

[that] is more foreign than the foreigners” (Gramsci, 1988, p. 368). ‘Ashour’s approach was diametrically opposed to that of Al-Hakim: he lifted his characters straight from the reality of bustling, hectic and highly eclectic downtown Cairo. The Cairo that was not only one of the most densely populated cities on earth, but also, as noted at the beginning of this section by Samia Mehrez and André Raymond, a city that was the melting pot to which Egyptians from all the provinces migrated and was legitimately the representative of the entire country. These inhabitants of Cairo, who may indeed have enjoyed and respected Al-Hakim and his plays, would have regarded the playwright and his peers as an extrapolation of an elitist intelligentsia who

... do not feel tied to them (rhetoric apart), they do not know and sense their needs, aspirations and feelings. In relation to the people, they are something detached, without foundation, a caste and not an articulation with organic functions of the people themselves. (367)

Therein lies another fundamental difference between Al-Hakim and ‘Ashour. The former announces to the world—explicitly in his prefaces as demonstrated in chapter two of this thesis as well as implicitly through his dramaturgy—that he resides in an ivory tower isolated from the common man, while the latter mines the streets of Cairo for common and uncommon characters and their given circumstances. And while Al-Hakim only sees his theatre through the lens of literature (Dawara 1986, p.7), ‘Ashour sees himself through the Gramscian lens, i.e. a member of

a whole series of playwrights of great literary value [who] can be enormously liked by the people as well. The people in the cities greatly enjoy Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* because the feelings depicted and the author’s moral tendency find a profound resonance in the popular psyche. And what should the so-called theatre of ideas be if not this, the representation of passions related to social behaviour, with dramatic solutions which can depict a ‘progressive’ catharsis, which can depict the drama of the most intellectually and morally advanced part of a society, that which expresses the historical growth immanent in present social behaviour itself? (Gramsci 1988, p. 372)

Gramsci's demand for a depicted "'progressive' catharsis" is exactly what 'Ashour provides through an *Otcherk* "theatre of ideas" engaging with the "popular psyche". At the end of the play, the fallen protagonist representing Egypt's past stands in stark contrast to the younger characters symbolising Egypt's future. Capitalising on the dual meaning of *Masr El Gedida* as both the new Egypt and the name of an upper-middle class neighbourhood in Cairo, designed by the Heliopolis Oasis Company to be the first of many "oases" that enjoyed "indisputable climatic advantages" (Raymond 2000, pp. 329-30), the comic nature of the final unit tends to have a cathartic effect on the audience:

RAGAEI: Come, I'll explain it all to you. Come, come. All of the houses of *Masr El Gedida* are going to be exactly like that: no money, no contracts, no courts.

BAHIGA: What's so special about *Masr El Gedida*?

RAGAEI: And El Monira and El Sayeda and Aswan, and... everywhere!

BAHIGA: Why are your words only sweet when you're drunk?

RAGAEI: If that's how you see it, then please let me stay drunk... please.

BAHIGA: You promise never to come back down here?

RAGAEI: You have two keys, right? Lock me up in my room and keep the two keys... Here... Here you go. (He hands her a key)

BAHIGA: What's this, Ragaei?

RAGAEI: One of the other keys I have been concealing. Go upstairs and I shall get you the rest. Voluntary prison. Voluntary prison!

BAHIGA: (Drunkenness is more evident on Ragaei) You're all over the place!

RAGAEI: Have no fear. We go upstairs... I shall walk straight. Straight... Like this.

BAHIGA: Wait, take me with you, Ragaei. Take care!

RAGAEI: (He does not stop. He walks on and suddenly falls into a static mock-military march after regaining his balance) Follow me... Follow me.

BAHIGA: This is my lot in life in my twilight years. My lot in life in my twilight years...

RAGAEI: (At the top door of the basement. The threshold. He rests his hand on the wall and talks in the direction of Ezzat's exit but addresses Bahiga). There is no such thing as "lot", my lady Bahiga. Each person makes their own lot! These are Ezzat's words. What a shame, Ezzat. What a shame. You left me to the world of lots and destiny!

BAHIGA: (Seeing his hand slip off the wall, the man himself swaying and almost falling to the floor) Watch yourself, Ragaei. Ragaei, you're gonna fall!

RAGAEI: Have I not fallen yet? Come... give me your hand. (The curtain falls as he holds her hand and drags her behind him out of the basement) ('Ashour 1974, pp. 234-5).

Not only does Ragaei admit his collapse, a fact that reflects the official collapse of the titled aristocracy— and which elicits a reaction from the audience one way or another whether supporting or condemning— and the possible refuge some of them have taken though a union with the mercantile bourgeoisie, he also points the audience in the direction of Ezzat and the younger characters whom he sees as Egypt’s future. Whereas the titled aristocrat in Al-Hakim’s *The Deal* loses his duel with the peasants at the end of the play, this victory is achieved through underhanded intrigue and deception. Here in *Downstairs*, however, the younger symbols of the future will build their new country with accumulated knowledge and education. ‘Ashour raises the banner of the post-revolutionary Egypt while Al-Hakim undermines its foundations and motivations.

In terms of language, semantics, tonality, and lived experience, the key components of Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling”, *Downstairs* captures the feel of the post-1952 Egyptian ambience in a nuanced manner that transports the audience to the period in question without the risk of making the performance feel dated. Despite the difference in levels of diction and vocabulary between *Downstairs* and a play written in the twenty-first century, the former still does not feel alien, dissonant, or distant when performed nowadays, as evinced by the absence of language obstacles encountered by actors during rehearsals as well as the engaged responses of audiences who watch revivals of the play. In December 2013, during one of the most turbulent and violent times in recent Egyptian history, audiences still filled the Malak Gabr Theatre in New Cairo to watch Mahmoud El Lozy’s revival of the play. Audiences were roaring with laughter in much the same way as their counterparts, recorded on video, did fifty-seven years earlier. My personal experience, having played the part of Ragaei in that production (December 2013, American University in Cairo, Malak Gabr Theatre), was an embodiment of

what Raymond Williams describes as “the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period.” (Williams 1987, p. 17) The audience and I were at once in 2013 and 1956 via a particular form that we all identified with a general form and thence an experience. When Ragaei and Ezzat hold their discourse on the New Egypt, the twenty-first century Egyptian can understand the rhetoric and its implications. That twenty-first century citizen can appreciate what it means to transform their present Egypt and, listening to the protagonists of *Downstairs*, can be transported to a time four years after the implementation of a seemingly impossible transformation had taken place. A certain level of critical caution needs to come into play here because another structure of feeling raised by Williams may be at work.

That imagined twenty-first century audience member may be retrospectively, and perhaps even nostalgically, realising the gravity of the shift that had taken place during the period of the play. Every element of *Downstairs* –whether it is the setting, character mix, language, context, or even costumes– is the direct result of the events of 23 July, 1952. One of the reasons many commentators and historians, such as Salah ‘Atiyah (2012), Joel Gordon (2016), and Mohamed Jalal Kishk (1989; 1992), and especially the aristocratic among them, regard the Free Officers Movement as a coup is that the concept of “revolution” was regarded by these commentators and historians as a social movement that would have been out of character for the average Egyptian. Analysing there-1952 Rihani hero, as I have done in Chapter one, Galal Amin addresses the sense of security of aristocrats as portrayed in *Ghazal al-Banat (Girls’ Flirtation, 1949)*:

One problem, for example, faced by one al-Rihani hero is that the pasha he works for can never remember his name. As much as the hero repeats that his name is Hamam (meaning pigeon), the pasha continues to forget it, using the name of every other bird instead. But the pasha does not have any feelings of fear or antipathy toward the poor fellow, for he feels secure, sees no threat to his social status and regards this social differentiation as part of the natural order of things. (Amin 2001, pp.142 - 143)



The rebellious tone permeating ‘Ashour’s works, especially *Downstairs* through Ezzat and Ragai, the latter speaking out vehemently yet sardonically against his own disenfranchised class, is a direct contrast to the placating efforts of pre-1952 drama classified by Galal Amin as “social dualism” (2001, p. 143). At a time when Egypt was going through tumultuous times characterised by the students’ and workers’ movements and strikes catalogued in Chapter 1—themselves growing out of the series of nationwide demonstrations ignited by the 1919 revolution—the conciliatory tone and “feel” of the most popular pre-1952 dramatic writings failed to harmonise with the spirit of the public despite their box-office success. In direct counterpoint to their predecessors, the post-1952 dramas of Ashour and Wahba took their cues from the revolutionary spirit of their time and ensured that the “feel” of the period was woven into a play such as *Downstairs* in a manner that conveys the continuity of experience Williams describes above.

As an active participant, and indeed a product of the revolutionary activities of post-World War II Egypt, ‘Ashour embodies the spirit of change that was demanded by university students and factory workers of his youth. Having been repeatedly placed in political detention by the British controlled “Royal Political Branch”, Ashour’s writing in general, and *Downstairs* in particular, communicates a yearning for a transformed Egypt where the new generations create a new world distinct from the old in every way. Every exploited character in *Downstairs*, from the highly educated Ezzat to the illiterate Fatma and Fikry, embark on trajectories of separation from their hegemonic tormentors who are themselves rooted in the conventions and heritage of the past. Even Ragai, the representative of the defunct aristocracy, resents and ridicules the past as I explored above. Ashour’s usage of the characters’ attitudes towards the past, as well as their tonality and semantics, demonstrate the inevitably intense friction between the conventions of a

regressive past and the structures of feeling of a revolutionary period. Raymond Williams identifies this clash between conventions and structures of feeling in general, be they revolutionary or otherwise, but he posits that this conflict can only be discerned in retrospect:

It seems probable, when we look back into the history of drama, that the effective changes took place when there was already a latent willingness to accept them, at least among certain groups in society, from whom the artist drew his support. But while it is possible to see this in retrospect, it could never have been easy, and it is not easy now, to see such a situation, with sufficient clarity, in the flux of present experience. It is here that we find ourselves considering the very difficult relations between conventions and structures of feeling. (Williams, pp. 18-19)

Indeed there was a “latent willingness to accept” the changes both within *Downstairs* as well as within the contemporaneous Egyptian society. F. R. C Bagley, writing shortly after the ratification of the first Egyptian constitution after the Free Officers movement, notes that poets such as Lotfy El Sayed refused to participate in the political apparatus and that feminist groups were dissatisfied with the latent chauvinism of the new document that made voting compulsory for males while not mentioning females (1956, 195-6). This was resistance on the progressive flank. The conservative and at times outright regressive wing of Egyptian politics was both more active and potentially lethal. Attempts to assassinate Nasser and demonstrations against his rule reached a notorious peak in 1954 when an Islamist radical emptied his pistol’s magazine at the president in the middle of an assembled crowd of thousands attending a political rally. The crowd had been reticent and inattentive to Nasser’s speech, unwilling to engage with the young untested revolutionary. Once the shots were fired, the gravity of the situation seemed to alter the attitude of those assembled and the threat of the Israelis on the Eastern border appeared to unite public opinion behind the defiant young colonel who optically scorned the bullets fired in his direction (Bagley 1956, p. 196).

Despite the apparent conformity of *Downstairs* with my six criteria for a revolutionary play, there is still the question of socio-political antagonism and subversiveness expected of a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary such as Nu'mān Ashour. The playwright may have been hindered in his anti-capitalist rhetoric by the private theatre company, *Al Masrah Al Hurr* (The Free Theatre), a private company with an eye on profits and ticket sales, a situation which ended the following year when Ashour became a regular playwright for the state-run National Theatre Company. Ideologically, Ashour does not deploy the key tactic prescribed by Lenin, i.e. “pouring of vinegar and bile into the sweet water of revolutionary-democratic phraseology” (Lenin 1974, p.63). Even though Ashour’s characters, especially the idealistic Ezzat and the disillusioned Ragaei, utter didactic and prescriptive statements about the New Egypt and the distance needed from the Old Egypt, there is still a measure of tentativeness that softens the blow of the subversive message. As an intellectual who went to prison eight times in the British Occupation era because of his communist leanings and someone who had memorized The Communist Manifesto, Ashour does not “disdain to conceal [his] views and aims” (Marx and Engels 1848, p. 34). This relative socio-political bashfulness will be noticeably absent from *Seema Awanta* (*This Movie is Trash*, 1958).

### **3.7 Seema Awanta:**

Months before his death in 1987, Nu'mān Ashour was invited to watch an American University in Cairo production of *Trash*. Writing about the incident in 1994, the director, professor of theatre history and dramatic theory, Dr. Mahmoud El Lozy, narrates Ashour’s astonishment at the choice of script:

When I directed [*Seema Awanta*] in 1987 for the Theatre Company of the American University in Cairo, [Ashour] expressed his surprise at my choice of text. “How in the world did you find out about this play,” he asked me. My answer was quite damning. I had come across a copy of it a few years earlier while conducting research for my

doctoral dissertation at the Research Library of the University of California at Los Angeles. (El Lozy 1994, p.10)

So buried and practically eliminated from Ashour's performance repertoire was *Trash*, that any engagement with the play and its history is akin to a post-mortem. Most aspects of this text and its performance history present multiple reasons for its seemingly deliberate expungement from Ashour's corpus. In his introduction to his translation of the play, El Lozy attributes the "disappearance" of the play from "the Egyptian theatrical repertory" to "the circumstances that surrounded its first production." I will expound on these circumstances, which could explain the surprising lack of credit this play receives, but I will also demonstrate how the play's revolutionary agenda and remarkably accurate prescience combined to threaten the very existence of capitalism in Egypt. That level of influence, previously unimaginable for an Egyptian play or its performance, paradoxically ensured its almost anonymous status in Egyptian theatre history.

Ashour's account of the genesis of *Trash* portrays a playwright who had been deeply concerned about the flagging pace of the revolutionary endeavours. He relates that he had felt that the Free Officers seemed to be content with having ended the monarchy, feudalism and colonialism (Ashour 1975, p.219). Ashour's main concern was that there was a purge of left-wing intellectuals and artists in 1958 under the guise of "counter-communism". Coupled with that purge, all royalist artists withdrew their participation from all cultural activities in Egypt. These two developments left a cultural vacuum that alarmed Ashour and his fellow playwrights. A personal development placed Ashour in the privileged position of being privy to realities that are hidden from the public while being protected from the purge conducted by the security forces; in 1958, Ashour, along with luminaries such as Naguib Mahfouz, became the state's literary and cultural censor. From that vantage point, Ashour saw first-hand the innermost

workings of the cinema industry. The corrupt nature of the counter-revolutionary culture machine that controlled the entirety of the motion picture industry of the country, and which shut out unquestionable talents such as Ashour's French trained friend, director Tawfiq Saleh, enraged the playwright. The cheap imitations of western films and the total absence of any meaningful culture-building initiative while adapting relatively inoffensive Hollywood classics into soft pornography was a combination that further alarmed and disgusted Ashour who described his final push to writing *Trash* in unambivalent terms:

Given these circumstances, my interaction with the stagnant [cultural] reality was limited to the cinema industry. All the elements of writing were available and ready. I was living the topic, whether at the censorship bureau or with the real-life protagonist, Tawfiq Saleh. This was an exciting topic that needed to be addressed... Tawfiq was facing ever-increasing resistance from those who had the industry in the palm of their hands, an attitude which reignited my fury. (Ashour 1975, p.221)

And so was born the play that transformed Ashour into a pariah, physically and intellectually assaulted by the collaborators of the Egyptian cinema industry he exposed in *Trash*. The title is derived from the Egyptian chant "seema awanta hato flossna" (This movie is a con/trash, give us our money back) that greets any film that fails to please the spectators in a movie theatre. Once again, as Ashour had by 1958 trained his audience to expect, the plot is rudimentary and hardly the purpose of the three-act play. A French trained film director, Ragui, refuses to compromise his artistic integrity when asked to substitute the lead actress of one of the cheap films he is directing for producer, Samir Fakhri. Ragui had been directing questionable films for Samir's company since the former's return from France five years earlier. Having reached the end of his tether with the outrageous circumstances permeating the film industry, Ragui finally decides to wait three years until the state intervenes politically and nationalizes cinema production and distribution.

Through a series of satirical and almost farcical scenes, Ashour exposes the key players at every level of the commercial cinema hierarchy. Samir is a producer/talent agent who also runs a fleet of taxis. The corrupt movie critic is also a (female) talent recruiter, i.e., pimp. Adel Zoheir poses as a professional screenwriter, a lawyer by trade, is adept at adapting the lesser-known films of the west in record time and editing scripts on the spot without regard to plot or ethics. Nagwa Hussein is a box-office star who lacks talent and ethics but possesses the financial wherewithal and socioeconomic connections to impose her will on those around her. Shehata Mohammad is a former studio janitor who, through dubious means, is now a producer rivalling Samir Fakhri. At the opposite end of the power dynamic, Shaldam, a supervisor and minor talent agent at Samir's company, Silver Moon, is an aspiring producer who is constantly humiliated by his abusive employer. Shaffei, the elderly administrator of Silver Moon, wants nothing except to stay out of trouble and away from the customary humiliation doled upon the poor by the counter-revolutionary parvenus of Egyptian society. Fathia, Shaffei's niece, is a debutante actress who, not having any real experience with the workings of the industry, believes she has what it takes to succeed and that she would sacrifice anything for celebrity status. Mrs. Shaldam, a tough woman who tries her best to support her husband's ambition, Sohad an aspiring but talentless singer and Amin, her composer husband, round off the subaltern/oppressed layer of society portrayed in the play. Every scene is an abuse transaction where characters vie for hegemony over each other's lives and destinies. By the end of the play, Ragui is alone against the entire filmmaking industry in his desire for nationalisation and state control. Despite cinema being a seemingly narrow topic, Ashour saw it as synecdochally indicative of the entire nation's state of affairs. Ashour felt that the cinema industry "presented a clear danger to Egyptian cultural life

and by extension, the political and intellectual struggle.” (222) Ashour had a nuanced understanding of the status of Egyptian cinema:

Cinema as a popular art form was one of the most penetrating and widespread arts . . . but society still views the cinema merely as a venue for distraction and leisure whereas it is an entrenched industry that empowers the enemies of nations in order to win them over along with their loyalty and submissiveness. It is the same harm and danger that with which arms manufacturing is endowed. (222-3)

*Trash* is a play that was met with the most vicious attacks from the moment it premiered in October 1958. Ashour was physically assaulted outside the theatre by thugs who heckled him and accused him of jealousy and malice directed towards filmmakers who wouldn't hire Ashour as a scriptwriter. (230) Film directors such as Romance specialist, Ezzedine Zulfakar voiced his concern that the theatre has a film complex after making the former obsolete, he mused how

Censors would permit an attack upon an art that is acknowledged by the state at a time when the Arab cinema is a martyr being slandered and defamed by all? The theatre was the last culprit one would have expected to attack this art form. Let the playwright know that the cinema has been strengthened of late and that nobody can harm her. Cinema is alive and well and will not be affected by a play that will not be seen except by a handful, seeing as it is only performed in a single theatre. A film, on the other hand is shown in hundreds, no thousands of movie theatres and thus can prove to the people the lies and injustices of this play. (231)

Another A-list director, Kamal Al-Shaikh, publicly called for the play to be banned immediately since it depicts a cinema industry that is base and corrupt, harbouring a workforce that is deviant and ridiculous. (232) Critic Zaki Abdel Qadir was quick to defend the play:

Are those who are up in arms against *Seema Awanta* (*This Movie is Trash*) justified in their attack? [Producer] Ramses Naguib has demanded that the playwright Nu'mān Ashour be put on trial. Ezzedin Zulfakar has claimed that the theatre is suffering from a “film complex”. Atef Salem and Kamal Al-Shaikh have towed that same party line. So have many others. Are they right or not? . . . If the play did in fact critique the cinema and expose its flaws in the eyes of those disgruntled people, that means the depiction was faithful to reality. (232)

Zaki Abdel Qadir's piece in *Akhbar Al Yawm* (a new Egyptian state-owned newspaper) was drowned out by the scathing attacks that, ironically, did nothing but bolster the play's box-office success. One of Ashour's most cherished forms of success was a visit from one of his playwriting idols, Naguib Al-Rihani's co-writer, Badei' Khairy. Khairy, then in advancing years and barely able to walk, insisted upon watching the play despite Ashour's offer to send him a script. Khairy, a veteran playwright, knowing the difference between a script and a performance insisted upon the immersive experience despite the physical exertion, further adding to Ashour's joy at the visit.

Theatre history has generally not been attentive to *Trash*. Mohamed Mandour, Ali Al-Rai, and Abdel Qadir Al Qitt, despite discussing the play with Ashour as colleagues in the ministry of culture where Ashour worked as a censor, have not written anything about the play. These influential critics had written extensively, as we have seen above, about Ashour's first three plays, but *Trash* was conspicuously ignored even in their retrospective writings. Mostafa Badawi, in his chapter about Ashour and his peers, dedicates several long paragraphs to each of Ashour's first three plays as well as *The Doughry Family* (1962), but the following is all he has to say about *Trash*:

In 1958 he produced probably his best constructed play, *Sima Awanta* (*The Film Racket*), a scathing attack on the malpractices prevalent in the lucrative Egyptian film industry. Films are made primarily for material gain by ignorant and vulgar people, devoid of all training and taste; young women are pressurized to sell their bodies in order to be given leading parts. The only properly trained and educated film director, Ragui Hammud, remains without work for refusing to compromise his art and is reduced by poverty to selling even his furniture. The remedy for this intolerable state of affairs, the author suggests, is to nationalize the film industry. We may recall that in *The Peaceful Nest* Al-Hakim has already satirized the Egyptian film industry, but, in comparison, 'Ashour's criticism is much more savage and crude. (Badawi 1987, 146)



Despite the praise Badawi bestows upon the structure of the play, the brevity of this section of a paragraph, stripped of the in-depth analysis Badawi had already bestowed upon Ashour's first three plays and *The Doughry Family*, seems to belie the positive tone. Badawi did not even refer to another scholar's analysis of the play that would make it redundant to offer his own. Roger Allen, in his survey of Egyptian theatre history, barely acknowledges the play as one of "two other plays of social import, *Sima Awanta (The Movie's a Mess, 1958)*, a searing and apparently unwise attack on one of the sacred cows of the Egyptian cultural establishment, the cinema (which led to [Ashour] being fired from his [censorship] job and essentially ostracized for a time.)" (Allen 1979, 103)

Egyptian theatre scholars have also largely ignored *Trash* in favour of Ashour's other "safer" and seemingly less controversial plays. One of the rare exceptions to this exclusionary attitude is Nabil Ragheb's *El Drama Al Waqi'iyya 'inda Nu'mān 'Ashour (The Realistic Drama of Nu'mān Ashour, 1982)*, a close reading of the majority of Ashour's plays. Ragheb attempted to separate Ashour from the remaining successful writers who shaped the post 1952 theatre and to identify him as the Egyptian realism pioneer par excellence, emphasising that

The theatre of Nu'mān Ashour is the closest of all contemporary theatre to the Egyptian soil and the most engaged with contemporary reality. Consequently, [Ashour] offers the most fertile subject matter for that foreign scholar who would be interested in analysing the extent to which social harbingers of change found their way into contemporary Egyptian theatre. [Ashour]'s characters are all derived from daily life, and yet they do not remain stagnant, but rather succumb to their role in the dramatic text, as opposed to their usual naïve photographic portrayal [in other plays]. (Ragheb 1982, 246)

But even Ragheb's in-depth analysis of *Trash* omits its revolutionary function as a play that depicted, critiqued and eradicated a counter-revolutionary situation that threatened the post-1952 cultural scene and, by extension, Ashour's vision of the revolution as a whole. Only Mahmoud

El Lozy's doctoral thesis, part of which he used to introduce his translation of *Trash*, paints the accurate picture of Ashour falling on his sword to deliver his recommendation:

[Ashour] was summoned to appear before the Minister of Culture, Sarwat 'Okasha, who requested the [Artistic] Director of the National Theatre, Ahmad Hamroush, to stop performances of the play. Hamroush refused to abide by the Minister's request and decided to go on with the scheduled performances. Nevertheless, these were forcibly halted by official decree, and Ashour was simultaneously fired from his position in the Ministry of Culture. He was banned from publishing his writings or from occupying any government position. (Ashour and El Lozy 1994, 10)

Accurate as El Lozy's depiction is, and thorough as his analysis of the entire play was in his doctoral thesis, he does not attempt to ascribe any revolutionary attributes to the play. El Lozy specifically says in his thesis that "[although] Ashour proposes *in passing* a solution to [the cinema's] problems –nationalization—it is clear that the play itself does not aspire to achieve a solution within its dramatic structure." (El Lozy 1986, 205, my emphasis) El Lozy further casts doubt about any potential radical change occurring under the Nasser regime as a whole "by virtue of its class nature." (208)

### **3.8 Criteria-based Analysis:**

Ashour's *Trash* engages directly and prescriptively with the revolutionary tenet of ending capitalist supremacy. There is an early moment, barely two minutes into the play, where Shaldam, the aspirational agent/producer, is chastised by his boss, Samir Fakhri:

SAMIR: . . . And what is your excellency reading?

SHALDAM: It is a cinema magazine, sir.

SAMIR: Can't you find something better to do than read? Lock the outside door!! If the bell rings, we'll know he's come.

SHALDAM: It's locked, sir.

SAMIR: Too lazy to walk to the door!! Afraid of losing weight, or what?! Go bolt the door. Bolt it! And get rid of that magazine.

SHALDAM: It's mine, sir. I bought it with my own money; it doesn't belong to the office.

SAMIR: Do what I tell you, boy, and get rid of it. Put it with the other magazines. Now!

SHALDAM: Yes, sir.

SAMIR: And bolt the door.

SHALDAM: (*Going to the door*): Yes, sir. (Ashour and El Lozy 1994, 15)

The violence with which Samir responds to Shaldam's apparent intention to better himself by becoming more educated about cinema indicates an extremist capitalist refusal to allow those less affluent in the economy to be empowered in any way. Reading is a key visual symbol of education and self-improvement, revealing Shaldam's aspirations. Ashour shows the audience that the mere sight of that aspirational visual cue is an anathema to Samir, who proceeds not only to deny Shaldam his educational opportunity, but also to symbolically seize it and add it to the other magazines of the office. The archetypal capitalist figure of the play has subjugated one of his economic dependents and unjustly seized his possessions. Ashour has crafted this moment in a manner that establishes Samir as the archetypal vicious capitalist *nouveau-riche* who will seize whatever he can without any moral qualms while knocking others off the metaphorical ladder of economic mobility that he himself had probably used. Samir's economic hegemony over others is tested shortly afterwards during the confrontation between Ragui and Samir; the economic supremacy of the latter is rejected and scorned by the former in the following subtle scene:

SAMIR: What did you decide, Ragui?

RAGUI: Here's the screenplay, and there's no need to play games, Samir. I cannot shoot one fourth of a film and then change the whole story in order to replace my leading actress with another one. That's one thing . . .

SAMIR: What's the other?!

RAGUI: I met a dancer called Raifa Salah in Abu-Rakaba's office. Is she his mistress?

SAMIR: To be candid, she is going to finance the film.

RAGUI: In that case, find yourself another director. Here's our contract. Cancel it. Tear it up. I don't care.

SAMIR: So you met Abu-Rakaba! Now you come here to intimidate me?! And the money you took?!

RAGUI: The amount you paid me was an advance on the contract. It barely covers the part of the film I directed.

SAMIR: Listen to me! You'll be sorry!

RAGUI: I regret the day I accepted this contract of yours.

SAMIR: I deserve this!! I am the only producer in all of Egypt who was willing to give you a job. No one else would have taken you in when you showed up—a novice fresh from France! (Ashour and El Lozy 1994, 17)

The mention of money and the true source of finance for the hapless film provokes Samir, but the real fury is unleashed when he realizes that his money does not buy him leverage over the young director. It is at this point that Ashour hints that he is presenting the audience with a seemingly incorruptible specimen—the only hope against the veritable film, and by extension culture, mafia. Later in the play, Ashour links the incorruptible nature of the young Ragui to the key solution to the threat of the cultural malaise pervading Egyptian cinema: nationalisation. Ashour offers the wrecking-ball of nationalisation in Act Two where the setting is Ragui's bare apartment—he had sold all his belongings by this point—and after a scene where he doesn't use the last of his money to exploit Mr. and Mrs. Shaldam, but rather shares his meagre resources:

RAGUI: You see, Madam, I didn't forget the meal I had at your house . . . and today, I feel like eating at home. Wait a minute . . . I'll get you money, and you can fix us a home meal just like it!

SAHLDAM: Are things brightening up?

RAGUI: (*Going into his bedroom*) Just a minute. Muhammad . . .

SHALDAM: (*To his wife*) Where did he get the money from? He must have sold a story or a screenplay! He doesn't stop writing them! What do you think?

MRS. SHALDAM: What do I know about stories?

SHALDAM: Look, about the lunch . . . cook it for my sake!

MRS. SHALDAM: You want to make me work as a maid?

SHALDAM: Excuse me, Countess de Shaldam! The man's been good to us. We must help him like he helps us. He considers us his family. . . the only family he's got . . .

(*Ragui comes out of his bedroom*)

RAGUI: Here are five pounds, madam. . . Get us a duck, and cook it with spicy rice. . . the same meal we had over at your house . . .

SHALDAM: It only costs a pound . . .

RAGUI: Never mind, Shaldam. Come on, take it, madam . . . keep the four pounds for now. (*She takes the money from him.*) And every other day or so you can cook us a meal, and we'll eat together . . . You, your wife, and myself . . . agreed?

SHALDAM: Why don't we prepare you several meals and keep them in the fridge . . . for the future?

RAGUI: We'll handle eating and drinking on a daily basis, Muhammad.

SHALDAM: You must have sold the fridge . . .

RAGUI: Nothing escapes you, pal! (Ashour and El Lozy 1994, 57-8)

To better understand this scene, briefly revisiting the socioeconomic context is necessary. In 1958, Egyptian society is only six years clear of the rigidly stratified class structure of the pre-1952 monarchy and there are still the remains of socioeconomic class deference that would have erected behavioural barriers between the well-educated bourgeois Ragui and the almost illiterate working-class Shaldams. Muhammad Shaldam's feeling that he and his wife are "the only family [Ragui]'s got" can be linked with the efforts of self-improvement that we saw earlier in Act One. Mrs. Shaldam's indignant protest that she is not a "maid" could also be attributed to the post-1952 feeling that the working class are no longer servants. The key challenge to the status quo is Ragui's sale of his fridge in order to feed them all. He could have used the sale of his capital to feed himself, an action for which nobody would have blamed him. Ragui, however, chooses a communal sharing of resources, an approach to distribution of wealth that the pre-1952 capitalists of Egypt would have probably railed against if not condemned. Ashour uses the fridge sale revelation scene to pave the way for the extreme left-wing call for nationalisation:

RAGUI: Do you think I made a mistake by signing these contracts?

SHALDAM: Who knows? It's not unlikely that Shehata Muhammad will hit the jackpot and land himself a big fat distributor! The biggest! That's what the con game is all about! It's one big swindle! And the public pays up! The tragedy is that the public pays up and goes to their movies!

RAGUI: When will it all end, Muhammad?

SHALDAM: It won't end, sir! It has no end! There's no remedy!

RAGUI: The only remedy is nationalisation! I say they should nationalise it! (80)

The call, by Ragui, a director and writer, for state ownership of the film industry satisfies my first criterion with the second; the play now directly and explicitly engages with the feudalism

tenet of the revolution while demonstrating that the purpose of its performance is in keeping with the spirit of the 1962 National Charter—which had yet to be written. By the end of the play, Ragui is no longer a solitary voice calling for nationalisation and the clean-up of what he sees to be cheap and culturally destructive commercial cinema, he is now joined by Fathia, Shaldam, and Shaffei, the majority of the downtrodden of the play. Ashour's final scene of the play is a micro-revolution that begins with Ragui echoing his prophecy from the beginning of the play:

RAGUI: The market is beginning to change . . . I'm giving the movie business three more years! Three seasons! And then, there will be a new public . . .  
SHALDAM: I hope so, Sir. (117)

After a series of revelations which result in the exploited working class siding with Ragui, they are all held at gunpoint by Samir as they defiantly end the play with the same role reversal that started it:

FATHIA: (*Rushing to the posters after taking a good look at them*) They are all trash! Absurd, empty, futile! . . .  
SAMIR: (*Trying to stop her*) Get back, don't tear anything!  
FATHIA: This isn't cinema! Give us our money back!  
SHALDAM: (*Encouraging her*) Trash! Tear them! Tear them!  
FATHIA: (*Tearing a poster*) Trash!!  
SHALDAM: I'll join you. (*He goes to the poster of the film that was identified in Act One as the one Ragui directed.*)  
FATHIA: Stop! That's Mr. Ragui's film!!  
SHALDAM: Give us our money back!  
SAMIR: (*after he's watched them tear off all his posters, running out of patience*) All right! You've done enough! Now get out, all of you!! Leave me alone, and get out! (*He walks back to his office.*)  
FATHIA: Forgive me, Uncle! I'm sorry, Ragui!  
SHALDAM: Come on, sir! Come on Mr. Shaffei!!  
SHAFFEI: Let me fetch you the story you're going to direct!  
FATHIA: You're going to direct, Ragui?  
RAGUI: No, I'm going to leave! (*She exits after him.*) (122-3)

Unlike the beginning of the play, Samir's economic supremacy is not the only weapon that is scorned by Ragui, now bolstered by his new working-class allies, capitalist military supremacy,

in the form of Samir's gun, is similarly scorned by the oppressed. The tearing down of the "trash" film posters is accompanied by the chant "The movie is trash! Give us our money back!" This rallying cry in opposition to economic and military threats has the potential to transport the audience out of their local theatre mindset and to the political and socioeconomic context surrounding them in 1958. Ashour's play was performed, as I foregrounded in Chapter One and earlier in this chapter, at a time when Nasser was implementing his strategy of non-alignment with either superpower during the cold war. Having practiced the highly Marxist concept of land redistribution, large-scale nationalisation and the creation of a strong public sector risked a global classification of Egypt as a socialist country in all but membership in the Warsaw Pact. *Trash*, predating the National Charter and the mass nationalisation movement by three years, by calling for the nationalisation of the film industry, is applying pressure on the state to publicly endorse state ownership as a model. Given the prominent position of Egyptian films at international festivals as well as Egyptian Arabic being the lingua franca of all Arab Cinema of the period (Shafiq 2007, 86), state control over this highly exposed medium would cement the Egyptian regime's position along the geopolitical spectrum as socialist minded.

*Trash* is a play that does not obey the unities of action, time, or place, and therefore satisfies my third criterion for a revolutionary Egyptian play. In terms of action, there are four main plotlines that run through the play: Samir's attempts to finish the film *Ragui* began, *Ragui*'s attempts to survive while following his principles, Fathia's attempts to become a star and Shaldam's attempts to become an independent producer. These plotlines intersect and feed into each other, but not one of them dominates the play as its main unifying action. As mentioned earlier in the contemporary criticism section, critics regarded this as a lack of cohesion which translated into *Otcherk* in the eyes of Ashour's supporters such as Mandour and "technical"

detractors of the play such as Mohamed Dawara who judged the play to be “free of plots and dramatic structure” (Ashour 1975, 243). The revolutionary significance of this lack of what Aristotle calls a “truncated” plot (Butcher 2008, 33), is the mirroring of the revolutionary reality and significance of the subject matter. *Trash* is not a play whose discourse may be reduced to a single overriding issue, but rather an array of critical socio-political concerns all vying for attention and dedication of scarce national resources. The state of the Egyptian motion picture industry as depicted by Ashour is one that may be considered a microcosm of the state of post-1952 Egypt before the publication and implementation of the National Charter of 1962. During that decade, Egypt had three constitutions ratified in 1953, 1956 and 1958, each attempting to legislate for a revolutionary government with an increasingly expansive social security safety net for the people while simultaneously grappling with the issues of private versus public ownership, national identity, intellectual property, individual freedoms, banking laws, and national security. Just as this new republic was trying to understand itself, its purpose and identity in a manner that rendered it impossible to articulate in an abbreviated form, Ashour’s *Trash* reflected that Egypt that similarly attempted to decipher itself. The absence of a single overriding plot and the prominence of each individual plot, thus violating Aristotle’s unity of action, was a dramaturgical manifestation of Ashour’s revolutionary contribution to Egyptian theatre.

In terms of time, *Trash* is a linear play that spans one or two months. Early in Act Two, Shaldam tells us that he was fired a month earlier (Ashour and El Lozy 1994, p. 56) and the stage directions at the beginning of Act Three reveal that “[a] month or two have passed since the events in Act One” (83). As has become customary with Ashour’s plays, Aristotle’s single revolution of the sun (Butcher 2008, p. 7) is ignored. There is nothing particularly revolutionary in a lack of commitment to Aristotle’s unity of time since Egyptian critics tended to find in



western classics such as Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Chekhov a licence that made it “acceptable” for a playwright to extend the events of plays beyond a single day.

The same licence was applied to the unity of place. In *Trash*, Ashour uses two separate locations: Samir’s office and Ragui’s flat. Once again there is nothing revolutionary by Egyptian standards about dispensing with Aristotle’s unity of place since, just as with the unity of time, Shakespeare and Ibsen offered precedents that permitted Egyptian playwrights to be flexible with and even ignore Aristotelian concepts about setting altogether. According to my criterion where an Egyptian revolutionary play must break free from the Egyptian understanding of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, *Trash*’s plot jettisons the unity of action, the most cherished of Aristotelian dramatic principles in the eyes of 1950s Egyptian critics.

As the events following the production of the play have shown, *Trash* is not an entry in Ashour’s corpus that could have reasonably been expected to further the rebellious young playwright/censor’s career as a writer. Antagonising and alienating as it did, and as we have seen above from the reactions to the play, the overwhelming majority of film directors and producers, this play aborted the natural progression of the time from writing for the stage to writing for the screen. Tawfiq Al-Hakim and Badei’ Khairy had already written commercially successful films such as *Rosasa fil Qalb* (*Bullet in the heart*, 1944) for the former and *Si Omar* (*Master Omar*, 1941) for the latter. Prior to *Trash*, and following the success of his first three plays, Ashour was becoming a household name and eventually would have been approached by one of the major film producers. Some critics and film writers made the link between Ashour and the film industry by claiming that the playwright’s criticism is a matter of bitterness and spite. Film historian and screenwriter Hassan Imam Omar wrote an entire column in Egyptian daily *Al*

*Jumhuriyya* titled “Al Cinema bayn al naqd wal awanta” (“The Cinema between criticism and trash”), a direct reference to Ashour’s play:

Following on from the success of the writer with his initial direction, it was expected that his fourth work would be elevated above its predecessors . . . regretfully, the author with this play has lost his past, has wilfully wasted it. This play before us is farce sans farcical foundations in terms of structure and has transformed the theatre into a forum that is the exclusive destination of the idle folk whose life has lost all meaning and seriousness . . . This play delivers unjust criticism since it comes from a playwright who has never written for the screen . . . He is attacking all those who had worked and are working in the cinematic professions because they hadn’t felt his presence, *they were blind* . . . This is a play born out of spite. I possess evidence about the playwright’s spite since he has lived his entire life complaining that the cinema ignores him. (Omar cited in Ashour 1975, 238)

Omar, making the link between Ashour’s theatre career, statistically the most successful playwright up until 1958, and his seemingly pre-empted career as a screenwriter, was as prescient as *Trash*’s prediction of nationalisation. Ashour would write a solitary film adaptation of *Downstairs* in 1960 and nothing more. Like his review of *Trash*, Omar’s prescience was not unique and was predicted by the others such as film director Atef Salem (231) the cast of *Trash*, the director, the artistic director of the national theatre, as well as Ashour himself (229-30). It is difficult to imagine Ashour thinking that *Trash* would endear him to the film industry or that his fixed salary and potential bonus from the national theatre were the main drive for writing the play. *Trash* was a protest against corruption and cultural counter-revolution that carried across Ashour’s prescription for the ultimate solution: nationalisation. That prescription was also conveyed without being didactic, carefully maintaining the entertainment value and avoiding the then common error of proselytising and possibly boring or losing the attention of the audience.

Since the National Theatre was given a cultural non-profit making mission by the ministry of culture in 1956 (Hamroush 1998, p. 26), the successive ministers, from Fathi Radwan (1911 – 1988) till Tharwat Okasha (1921 – 2012), spared neither budgetary nor promotional

expense to support the theatre productions in general and new Egyptian plays in particular, including Ashour's annual contributions. Even after Ashour was fired from the Ministry of Culture in the aftermath of *Trash*, his plays were still produced by the ministry at the National Theatre. Immediately after his dismissal from the Ministry of Culture, Ashour's *Gens el hareem* (*The Female Sex*, 1959) was produced despite mounting a vicious assault on the culturally and religiously supported social institution of polygamy. The choice of subject matter is revolutionary on the part of the writer, but its acceptance by the ministry and the National Theatre is indicative of continued support for the mission of the author. As my fifth criterion demands, this is practical evidence that Ashour, despite formal severance from the ministry of culture, produced plays, especially *Trash*, that generated a substantial following in the state-owned theatre.

*Trash* is a play that uses both subject and medium to authentically depict the motion picture industry. The dramatis personae of filmmakers, actors, directors, and even the administrators in both the play and the film industry are a genuinely broad church. Ashour presents the audience with taxi drivers, prostitutes, servants, actors, students, secretaries, singers, musicians, belly-dancers, merchants and janitors. *Trash* is not a play that exclusively portrays film professionals and therefore does not become a niche play, but rather a representative slice of life that rings true with every word. Production houses such as Samir's Silver Moon Company still exist today in Downtown Cairo and permeate the meta-film world represented in films to this day in 2022. The 1950s semantics combine to transport a twenty-first century audience back to the epoch of the play where a casting agent is sitting reading a magazine as Shaldam does in Act One. *Trash* shows a character with a simple education such as Shaldam using terms such as *Mazbaha* (*Massacre*, p. 16), a term his counterparts today would most likely replace with much

more profane language. *Trash* also offers lived experiences that are completely alien to a 2022 audience such as Fathia's ability to present herself to a producer in his own office without an introduction in Act One or Ragui's ability to pay his rent a day or a week at a time while remaining in arrears for several months as we are constantly reminded in Act Two. *Trash* indicates the threats posed by the residual presence of the pre-1952 –Samir's entire fortune was created before 1952— era by exposing the corrupt cultural continuity that is in direct conflict with the objectives of the independence brought about by the Free Officers' movement. *Trash's* "feel" is one of extreme oppression of the powerless to the extent that the radical measures of the upcoming 1960s would appear to be logical and humane if such injustices were to be lifted and for the threat of counter-revolution to be pre-empted. *Trash* therefore satisfies my last criterion regarding structures of feeling that should be communicated by an Egyptian revolutionary play.

The three plays by Nu'mān Ashour that I have analysed offer increasingly radical dramaturgical options and responses to the theoretical interrogation regarding the role of Egyptian plays during volatile socioeconomic and political upheaval. Writing during the build-up to and in the immediate aftermath of the 1952 coup/revolution, Ashour launched his career with *Maghmatis* (1950), a play that revolutionised the style of writing in every way as I have demonstrated, but that did not directly tackle content that troubled the Egyptian public in a subversive manner. Riding the revolutionary wave following the sweeping land reforms of September 1952 and the Nationalisation of the Suez Canal in July 1956, Ashour continued to revolutionise the technical form of his writing while consolidating *Downstairs* (1957) with subversive content that attacked the counterrevolution threatening Egypt from within and promoting a generational schism that would build a "new Egypt". By 1958, Ashour as a film censor had observed for himself the magnitude of the threat posed by the cultural

counterrevolution spearheaded by the film industry and decided to use *Trash* to directly confront the corruption of the industry that symbolised the threats posed by counterrevolutionary forces throughout society. The immediate response, one which would seem unwarranted and disproportionate for a play, was so violent, that ‘Ashour eventually lost his governmental post and the play’s performances were suspended. That response from those who felt attacked by the play was in itself revolutionary since, as they themselves argued, only a few thousand people would see it (Ashour 1975, 231). Whereas Tawfiq Al-Hakim offered an experiment in language through *The Deal* (1956), a play that his contemporaries regarded as revolutionary, ‘Ashour transformed the language of theatre altogether. Whereas Al-Hakim presented revolutionary characters as ignorant and mischievous saboteurs, Ashour presented them as wronged altruistic pioneers at the end of their tether, unable to tolerate corruption or the sins of the past. ‘Ashour’s plays suggest that the function of the revolutionary playwright, especially during times of upheaval, is to directly and completely engage the thorniest of issues through an authentic and subversive revisiting of the approach to creating the content and the form.

## Chapter Four: Sa'ad Eldin Wahba

Forty-eight days before the fifteenth anniversary of the 1952 Revolution, Israel launched a military offensive against Egypt, Syria, Jordan and the West Bank. On 26 May 1967, Gamal Abdel Nasser had set out his objective to “destroy Israel” (Eban, 359), ten days later, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) destroyed its Arab counterparts in three states, while the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) defeated its counterparts and occupied territory “four times its original size” (Cohen). As I mentioned in Chapter 1, 1967 is seen by historians such as Roger Allen (1979, p. 101) and M. M. Badawi (1988, p. 142) as the year that marks the end of the golden age of Egyptian theatre. It is from this point onwards, however, and using the factors upon which the 1967 defeat was predicated, when Sa'ad Eldin Wahba, the second pillar of revolutionary Egyptian theatre, seems to have found his revolutionary voice and stride. Through a close reading of *Al Masamir (The Nails)*, 1968) and *El Ostaz (The Professor)*, 1969), I will demonstrate that Wahba's writing possesses traits that qualify his dramaturgy as revolutionary Egyptian constructs according to my six criteria.

### **4.1 Wahba's Life: The Source Material of the Plays**

Wahba's playwriting used his life as source material. Wahba was born on 4 February 1925 in the rural governorate of Daqahliyya to a middle-class family who later moved to live on the estate of Prince Omar Toson in the Beheira governorate's capital city of Damanhour (Abd al-Majid 1997, p. 236). Thanks to his primary school's library, Wahba became an avid reader and inquirer while the municipality's theatre and cinema introduced the young Wahba to theatre Impresario Youssef Wahby (mentioned in Chapter One) as well as Egyptian and foreign cinema (236-7). Wahba attended El Raml secondary school in nearby Alexandria where he was exposed

to western theatre productions at the Luna Park Theatre in the Ibrahimiyya district (236). He started his writing career during his secondary school years as a freelance journalist for an independent newspaper called *Manbar Al Sharq (The Pulpit of the East)* which powered Wahba's ability to edit and release two issues of a school magazine (236). In the first of many censorship episodes, the school's headmaster banned the school magazine after the second issue citing Wahba's insolent mockery directed at some staff members (236). In 1944, Wahba led a demonstration out of his school to reject the arrest of Levantine independence activists by the French occupation forces in Syria and Lebanon (237). In 1945, despite his desire to study journalism at the American University in Cairo, the only academic outlet for a journalism degree at the time, Wahba's father forced him to enrol at the Police Academy, located in the theatre district of Azbakiyya –home of the National Theatre (237). In 1951, During one of his police posts in Alexandria, Wahba enrolled in a part-time Philosophy degree at Alexandria University which before the 1952 revolution was called Farouk I University. Wahba was one of the signatories to the first telegram to support the revolution against King Farouk (237). While working as a police officer, Wahba, a member of the officer's club, edited and issued the club's first magazine, *The Police* in 1955 (238). Once Wahba received his Philosophy degree, he resigned from the police force and took up journalism professionally, having previously written for highly reputable daily and weekly publications on a freelance basis (238). Wahba's writing in the 1950s were mainly short stories, literary criticism and political commentaries. The first links with the theatre world were established in March 1958 when Wahba inaugurated *El Shahr (The Month)*, a monthly literary journal of which he was editor-in-chief. The monthly attracted the contributions of some of Egypt's, and later the Arab world's, literary and theatre luminaries such as Abbas Al Aqqad, Mohamed Mandour, Rashad Rushdy and Mahmoud Amin El 'Alem (238).

Prior to the publication and subsequent premier of his first play *El Mahrousa* in the Autumn of 1961, Wahba had been re-appointed as the editor-in-chief of *Al Jumhuriyya (The Republic)*, one of the three most circulated daily newspapers in Egypt (238). In 1963, Wahba married “the first lady of the Arab Theatre” (Mikkawy, 2022), Samiha Ayyoub, the actress who played the female leads in most of his plays (Ayyoub, 144). Running parallel to Wahba’s playwriting career was a journalistic and political career during which he served as undersecretary of state and deputy minister of culture, cultural attaché, municipal counsellor, and member of parliament. Wahba was also president of the cinema guild for two consecutive terms from 1979 – 1988 (Abd al-Majid 1997, p. 239). Regionally, Wahba was elected as the President of the Union of Arab Artists in December 1986 (239). Wahba consistently and vocally criticised Nasser and, more forcefully, Sadat, leading to the latter’s attempt to force Wahba into early retirement, a decision that was overturned by the Supreme Administrative Court (234). Sa’ad El Din Wahba died on 11 November 1997.

#### **4.2 Wahba’s Writing Career:**

Sa’ad Wahba’s writing career was a considerable shift from his first profession, that of a police officer. It was a shift that hinted at the uncompromising and confrontational stances that contoured Wahba’s writing choices as we shall see in this chapter. Like Ashour, Wahba started by writing short stories and then switched to drama with his first play, *El Mahrousa* (A folkloric and colloquial name for Egypt as well as the name of the Royal Yacht that transported King Farouk to his European exile on 26 July) being produced during the 1961/62 season at the National Theatre, opening on 1 December 1961. The play is set in a village called El Mahrousa and depicts the corruption of the pre-1952 establishment and its seizure of agricultural lands through various illegal means. *El Mahrousa* explores the resistance and optimism of the abused



peasants and junior police officers as well as the greed and in-fighting of the establishment as represented by the Crown and local authorities. *El Mahrousa* ran for 39 nights, the highest that season, to 10,879 spectators, also the highest of the season (Rushdy 1966, p. 265). From that point onwards, Wahba's plays, along with those written by Al-Hakim and Ashour, were a staple of the National Theatre seasons. El Lozy notes that:

Wahba stands out as one of the most prolific playwrights of the sixties in Egypt. From 1961, when he started writing for the theatre, until 1972, not a season went by without one of his plays being presented at [The National Theatre]. . . The Egyptian theatre-going public grew accustomed to seeing at least one new play by [Wahba] every season . . . [Wahba] supplied the [National Theatre] with a repertory of plays which were often rerun to the great delight of the theatre's patrons. (El Lozy 1986, p. 368)

This retrospective description of a highly prolific and crowd-pleasing playwright is complemented by critical acclaim on the part of Wahba's contemporaries. Mohamed Mandour describes Wahba's first play as a social satire (231) that "is well structured", enjoys "clear-cut character dimensions" and demonstrates Wahba's "mastery over well motivated and natural dialogue" (233). Mandour balances his praise with concerns over some tangents in the plot of *El Mahrousa*, the same concern shared by Roger Allen who judged Wahba not to be "content to focus on the dynamics of authority in pre-revolutionary Egypt", condemning all of Wahba's plays by concluding that "the sequencing and the unity of the drama is thereby destroyed" (104). Ragaa Al Naqash, reviewing the premier of *El Mahrousa*, links Wahba's "great ability to identify the appropriate perspective" to his experiences as a police officer in the countryside (Wahba 1997, 25). Despite the quality of the dialogue and the characterization, *El Mahrousa* does not speak truth to power as the main villain of the piece, King Farouk, was by that point exiled in Switzerland. The play's subtitle, *Misr qabl 23 yolio 1952 (Egypt before 23 July 1952)*, ensures that the potential audience members are aware that this play will address a world

governed by a regime that no longer held power. Rather than paint a nostalgic or even neutral picture of the past as a critical or counter-revolutionary playwright would, the play taps into the revolutionary fervour of the period, especially the second major wave of nationalization and agrarian reform initiated and later explicated by Nasser in the National Charter of May 1962. *El Mahrousa* may even be seen as a theatre mobilizer of the newly formed professional bourgeoisie whose opinions were strongly influenced by the socially engaged theatre introduced by Nu'mān Ashour in the 1950s. As *El Mahrousa* seems to be towing the party line by rallying support for increased agrarian reform, it is not a play that may be considered revolutionary.

Wahba's second play, *Kafr Al Bateekh* (*Watermelon Town*, 1962) opened on the tenth anniversary of the revolution and used satire to critically analyse the immediate effect of the Free Officers' movement on 23 July 1952. Set in 1953, the year of the abolition of the Monarchy and declaration of the republic, *Kafr Al Bateekh* presents the audience with the ironic situation in which the people of a village found themselves when they broke the law by bribing an official to build a bridge that the government had decided to build anyway. Like *El Mahrousa*, *Kafr Al Bateekh* depicts the seemingly irreconcilable opposition and class warfare between the peasant class and the landed aristocracy, the latter supported by the bureaucracy of the now deposed state. M. M. Badawi considers the play to "clearly [betray] the influence of Al-Hakims' *The Deal*" (150), an impression that paradoxically places Wahba at best in the midst of the revolutionary sceptics, at worst in the counter-revolutionary camp. Badawi seems to think of Wahba as a sceptic since he concludes that "the author shows the persistence of some of the old ways of rural life, despite the new revolutionary regime" (151). Despite being Wahba's first, albeit faint, scepticism vis-à-vis the 1952 revolution, *Kafr Al Bateekh* is a play that critics often

overlook or reduce to the status of the play that came after *Al Mahrousa* as Prof. Amin El

‘Ayyouty observes in *Al Masrah*:

There is no doubt that the superficiality that can be felt in *El Mahrousa* and *Kafir Al Bateekh* is deliberate. What is the final image of *El Mahrousa*, for example? It gives us one of the many images of injustice prevalent during the epochs preceding the revolution of 1952. . . The play creates this final image by way of a procession of scenes that depict how the Chief of Police and the Mayor exploit the people to serve the interests of the Crown Estates. This is more of a record of a phenomenon than an artistic interpretation. (1966, p. 182)

‘Ayouty’s criticism of the two plays is legitimate and Wahba will eventually alter this dramaturgical technique starting with his third play. Despite this criticism, however, Wahba comes close to Ashour’s *Otcherk* style, which I have analysed in the previous chapter, in *Kafir Al Bateekh*. The reporting that Ashour used to warn of the dangers of counter-revolution is akin to the panel effect that Wahba employs in *Kafir Al Bateekh*. The play performed modestly at the box office, running for only ten nights and watched by 1,134 spectators. The repetition of setting and themes along with the July performances –Cairo theatre customarily goes dark in the summer, giving way to theatres in the coastal second capital of Alexandria– may have contributed to the lower attendance.

That same season (1962/63), Wahba’s third play, *El Sebensa* (*The Caboose*, 1963) premiered in February 1963 and, while garnering the second highest number of spectators – 12,805– (Rushdy 1966, p. 266), introduced the playwright’s most aggressive use of symbolism up to that point. *El Sebensa*’s plot, again set in pre-revolutionary Egypt, revolves around a bomb discovered in a village that subsequently disappears. The appearance and disappearance of the bomb causes confusion, acts of deception, conflicts between villagers and city dwellers, wrongful imprisonment and the female protagonist using her body to save her husband who consequently deserts her in disgust. Badawi judges *El Sebensa* to be a

well-constructed play which paints a disturbing picture of a harsh reality of a typical Egyptian village . . . Moreover, in it Wahba begins to make use of the kind of symbolism which will be a feature of several of his later plays: he uses symbolically not only the ‘bomb’ that has mysteriously appeared and equally mysteriously disappeared and is bound to explode, indicating the imminent revolution, but the name of the village and the title of the play have an obvious further significance. (Badawi 1988, 151)

Badawi’s praise of the play’s construction, as we have seen with his commentary about Al-Hakim and Ashour, is rooted in Arab literary interpretations of Aristotle since his premise is that Arabic Drama is “borrowed from the West” (1) and must therefore be evaluated using Western theory. Badawi’s observations about Wahba’s use of symbolism, despite being framed in literary terminology, tend to carry significant cultural weight for Egyptian scholars of both literature and theatre. Badawi interprets the bomb, the central prop of the play, as a symbol for the “imminent revolution”, an interpretation that is most likely to have been blatantly obvious in 1963. This use of symbolism as interpreted by Badawi, and the expectation on Wahba’s part that this literary device is part of a shared frame of reference with the audience seems to point to the playwright’s increased confidence that he had successfully read the mood of the theatre-going public. This confident tone may be considered a step along Wahba’s revolutionary dramaturgical path.

Mohamed Mandour’s review of the play at the time, titled “*El Sebensa* between realism and symbolism” (2022, p. 165), identifies *El Sebensa* as Wahba’s “new milestone in the annals of dramatic art”. Mandour’s article, important in and of itself, demonstrates the efficacy and acceptance by the Egyptian academy at the time of Wahba’s use of symbolism on stage. Apart from Mandour’s thorough review of the performance at the National Theatre, he crucially provides the following testimony:

The playwright has left the symbolic angle to the perspicacity of the audience and the critics, seeing as he has only employed deft hints. He may have benefitted from stressing the symbolism a little more so that the audience and critics do not fail to pick up on it. From what I have read so far about the play, critics have only highlighted the realism of the piece, despite that aspect not being the deepest nor the most beautiful angle. (169)

Mandour's testimony indicates that Wahba was confident of his subtextual symbolism to the extent that he was satisfied with deftness rather than heavy-handedness. Mandour also shows us that the academy, despite being separate from the journalistic reviewers of the time, did not disparage journalists but rather made allowance for their opinions. Moreover, Mandour hints that Wahba's confidence in the accessibility of the symbolism may not have been justified, as not all members of the audience, who included the journalists who missed the symbolism, fully digested that aspect of the play. Holistically, Mandour's review of the play identifies it as Wahba's second phase of development as a playwright.

Arguing that, despite "capricious disregard for civil liberties" (Allen 1979, 129) under Nasser's regime, "the theatre was allowed to serve as a 'popular parliament' or safety valve", Roger Allen used *El Sebensa* as one of four case studies that exemplified Egyptian theatre at its most experimental. Allen refers to the play as Wahba's "most successful from the various perspectives of dramatic production" (114). Whereas Mandour describes *El Sebensa's* symbolism as deft, Allen concedes that the symbolism "is skilfully woven into the essentially realistic treatment of a provincial village" with the caveat that there is a speech that "points up the real import of the play" and "may perhaps underscore too heavily the purpose of the play" (115). Allen has a strong case for pointing to *El Sebensa* as Wahba's experimental peak, but he seems to agree with detractors of Wahba's first three plays that these experiments with structure and form are still confined to content that critiques a bygone era before the 1952 revolution.

Farouq Abdel Qadir is one such critic, labelling Wahba's first three plays as lacking in revolutionary fervour. Abdel Qadir refers to Wahba's early period as "safe theatre that calls for nothing, prophesies nothing. It foretells a future that has already become a present" (Abdel Qadir 2015, 54). Abdel Qadir does not entirely condemn Wahba's early stage, for he sees those first plays as "serving a dual purpose: referring to the past to emphasise the inevitability of the events of 1952. That there was corruption in the administration –on every level– that had reached its zenith" (54). As such, these three plays have a place in the canon, if only to theatrically and realistically affirm the cause of the revolution while creatively exemplifying the case against the monarchy which audience members may have felt but may not have been able to articulate.

Wahba's fourth play demonstrates an elevation in the aggression of the content as well as the form. *Kobry El Namoos (Mosquito Bridge, 1964)* is once again a play with a rural setting that employs symbolism to transport the audience to the previous decade, the 1940s, when political assassinations were the norm within the context of student activism. The bridge in the title, connecting a village to a town, a possible reference to the chasm that existed between the rural and urban settings of pre-revolutionary Egypt. Badawi finds that the "exact significance of the bridge is not easy to determine", deferring to the opinion of Abd El Mone'm Ismail, who observes that the bridge

joining, as it does, actually existent, known localities with the unknown unexplored desert, the bridge may stand for the link between the present and the future. Or else it may join –or divide– this world from the next, the temporal from the spiritual. The play is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in that one sees people waiting hopelessly for something and no one knows definitely why they are waiting and what they are really waiting for, though one occasionally finds that every one of them believes strongly in what he is waiting for. (Ismail 1967, as cited in Badawi 1988, 151)

This lack of certainty about the meaning of the symbols used in *Mosquito Bridge* on the part of Badawi and Ismail tends to add to the engaging nature of Wahba's use of symbolism. The

comparison with Beckett, on the other hand, may be considered a flaw in the interpretation, the dramaturgy, or both. In the 1960s, the theatre of the absurd, as represented by the works of Ionesco and Beckett, was considered fashionable amongst the intellectual elite of Cairo and Alexandria, as evinced by Tawfiq Al-Hakim's foray into the absurd through *Ya Talei' Al Shagara (O Tree Climber, 1962)*, Yusuf Idriss's *El Farafir (The Wimps, 1964)* and the majority of the corpus of Dr. Rashad Rushdy (1912 - 1983)<sup>33</sup>. This appeal to trends, though ridiculed by Wahba himself four years after *Mosquito Bridge in Saba' Sawaqi (Seven Waterwheels, 1968)*, would defy the premises I have adopted for most of my criteria for a revolutionary Egyptian play. Scholar, translator and journalist Galal al-'Ashry, who generally holds Wahba and 'Ashour in low esteem, praises *Mosquito Bridge* as the concluding movement of a "bizarrely successful . . . 'rural trilogy' akin to a complete symphony" (Al-'Ashry 1988, 9). Al-'Ashry's praise is predicated upon a conservative Egyptian understanding of what he calls "artistic completeness" (9) which, once again, specifically runs contrary to my criteria regarding Aristotle, state-theatre following and structures of feeling. State-theatre following is numerically questionable given that *Mosquito Bridge* was performed before 7,326 spectators over a run of 42 performances during the 1963-64 season. This placed it in third place behind Yussuf Idriss's *El Farafir* (10,249 spectators over 38 performances) and Alfred Farag's *Hallaq Baghdad (Barber of Baghdad [11,922 spectators over 45 performances])* (Rushdy 1966, p. 267). This first stage of Wahba's career, one exclusively dedicated to rural life before the revolution, established the playwright as

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<sup>33</sup> Despite the questionable stageability of Dr. Rashad Rushdy's plays, especially those that venture into the world of the theatre of the absurd, his impact on the theatre of the 1960s through his well-attended plays at the National Theatre and theatre criticism and historicization through his editorship of *Al Masrah*, the Arab World's most influential theatre journal in the 1960s, cannot be underestimated. Dr. Rashad Rushdy was also the longest serving Chairperson of the English literature at Cairo University to date.

a leading name in the socio-politically engaged theatre landscape while affixing an asterisk to his name that indicated his single-minded focus on life before the 1952 revolution.

*Sekket El Salama* (*The Road to Safety*, 1965), which premiered on 19 January 1965 at the National Theatre and ran for 43 performances to 20,736 spectators, is probably the most likely play to be named when Wahba's name is mentioned. Accounting for 45% of the 1964-65 season's viewership (the total was 45,923) (Rushdy 1966, p. 268), *Sekket el Salama* was the first original Egyptian play to exceed 15,000 spectators. It was also the most viewed performance of any kind at the National Theatre since Fattouh Nashaty's adaptation of a monologue by Jean Cocteau, *La farce du château* conflated with *Orphée* with the title *Bayt min zogag* (*House of Glass*)<sup>34</sup> (18,687 spectators). *Sekket el Salama* was also Wahba's first play without a countryside setting and yet still not in the city but rather in the desert. It is also Wahba's first post-1952 play. To round off the series of firsts, *Sekket el Salama* is also Wahba's first ensemble play. The plot is linear and straightforward: a group of strangers are lost in the desert when their bus breaks down and, destitute, promise to reform their corrupt lives if they are saved. Once they are saved at the end of the play, they generally revert to their former selves. Badawi sees the play as a "didactic play which preaches moral and social virtues" (Badawi 1988, 152). El Lozy, in a chapter dedicated entirely to the play, identifies the majority of the characters as "representative of that 'new class' of old and new opportunists" (El Lozy 1986, 374) who reflect the internal struggles and conflicts within the newly empowered middle classes. Galal al-'Ashry sees the play as the point where Wahba's talent failed to disguise the playwright's limited culture (Al-'Ashry 1988, 10). Amin al-'Ayyouty sees *Sekket el Salama* as the summit where Wahba has attained the ability to transcend "the mere reflection or depiction of an image, or the mere imitation of reality.

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<sup>34</sup> The title itself was inspired by the mirrors of *Orphée*.



He now imbues his images with layers of meaning that artistically enrich the work” (‘Ayyouty 1966, 182). Nabil Ragheb, identifying Wahba as a revolutionary playwright, interprets the play as a warning against excessive optimism which might be the downfall of a revolutionary and developing society (Ragheb 1990, 41). Fellow revolutionary playwright, Nu’mān ‘Ashour found that *Sekket El Salama* “abandoned the stereotypical characterisation to which we have grown accustomed in other plays . . . this play also contains evidence of the foundational ability to craft the dramatic atmosphere surrounding the events in a clear structure and natural consistency that is far from contrivance (Abdel Meguid 1997, 40). Despite addressing contemporary issues and symbolically warning against complacency and self-deception, *Sekket el Salama* is a play that emanates from a revolutionary playwright without engaging positively with all six of my criteria. Specifically, *Sekket el Salama* does not address cultural hegemony of the period, does not address or engage with the tenets of the 1952 revolution and to a large extent adheres to the Egyptian understanding of Aristotelian structure. While *Sekket el Salama* does not meet my criteria for a revolutionary Egyptian play, it is a thoroughly enjoyable, thought provoking and prescient play that may be said to intellectually galvanise the audience and prepare them for eradicating the social malaise that accompanied the defeat against Israel in the 1967 Six-Day-War.

#### **4.3 Wahba’s response to defeat: revisiting the lessons of the past:**

Egypt’s defeat in 1967 during the Six-Day-War transformed the previously optional playwriting use of symbolism into a pre-requisite that can mean the difference between an authorised or cancelled performance. Fatma Youssef Mohamed mentions Sa’ad Eldin Wahba’s stance vis-à-vis symbolism in her chapter on post-1967 theatre:

With the advent of the July 1952 revolution, and the rise of the Egyptian theatre in the late 1950s at the hands of the group that opened itself to the contemporary global theatre, an increased awareness of the use of symbolism took hold. Especially when some of them attempted to critique the ruler in a manner that might otherwise have severe consequences. Consequently, symbolism took a step closer towards periphrasis and the avoidance of responsibility to the extent that Sa'ad Eldin Wahba, in his play *Kawabis* [*Fil Kawalis*] (*Backstage Nightmares*, 1967) admitted through one of the characters that a symbol can enable a writer to speak and not to speak at the same time. If what he says happens, then the writer becomes a hero when he reminds people that he had warned and alerted them. If his words do not materialise, he merely lets the symbol remain a mystery for the sake of his personal safety. (Mohamed 1993, 152)

Mohammed's cynicism aside, there is a concession that there was a rise in the Egyptian theatre during the Nasser years and that Wahba was a part of that rise. This is important because, among the many accusations that are levelled against the state sponsorship of theatre by Mohamed and others (Mohamed Citation), is that it was motivated by the need to distract the public from the socio-political failures of the Nasser regime. If that were so, then it would seem unlikely that the writer can ever become the prescient hero who hid behind symbols or periphrases. Writing in 1993, while Wahba was still alive and serving as the president of the Egyptian Film Festival, Mohamed named Alfred Farag and Mikhail Roman as playwrights who fit her criteria for prescient symbolists who wrote about the 1967 defeat and chose not to include Wahba even in passing. Wahba, who had by 1967 developed his use of symbolism into a signature technique, optimistically returned to the pre-revolutionary past he had left since *Mosquito Bridge* in 1964.

#### **4.4 Synopsis and specific background of *El Masamir (The Nails)*:**

Setting: The play is set against the backdrop of the 1919 Egyptian uprising against the British occupation of Egypt. As outlined in Chapter 1, Britain had occupied Egypt since 1882 and had promised independence should the Egyptian political forces and population support Britain against the Ottoman Empire and the Central Powers in World War I. Wahba specifies the

time as March - April 1919 and the place as a small fictional village called Kafr (literally meaning hamlet) in the municipality of Itay al-Baroud (The spring/source/bringer of gunpowder) which is part of the county, later governorate, of Beheira, west of the Nile Delta.

Wahba Introduces the play using two excerpts from Abdel Rahman Al-Rafii's *Thawrat sanat 1919 (The Revolution of 1919, 1946)* where the historian recounts incidents of British atrocities committed against the peasant populations. These same techniques will be performed by the British characters with the help of their Egyptian collaborators. Among the atrocities, Rafi'i relates the following:

The British soldiers arrested one of the village elders, Sheikh Abdel Ghani Ibrahim Tolba, his brother Abdel Rehim, his son Saeid and Khafaga Marzouk, another villager. They buried them up to their waists –ostensibly to interrogate them– and proceeded to shoot them in that position (Rafi'i, as quoted in Wahba 1967, 9).

The play opens with one of the main characters, Fatma, delivering a soliloquy in which she provides exposition about herself, her village, the villagers, her husband Abdullah, and the most recent British atrocities. The British occupation troops had stolen livestock, appropriated agricultural land upon which they set up a camp, and killed several civilians. Abdullah conducts a night raid upon the British soldiers which causes them to become more aggressive. Once Fatma's prelude/soliloquy ends, Act One begins.

The first act, set in a piece of land just outside the village amid the camphorwood, reveals that the British are demanding that their Egyptian collaborators deliver twenty-five able-bodied peasants every day to be flogged as a punishment for the nightly raid led by Abdullah. The only exceptions are the civil servants, the landowners and the educated. News of this new levy is delivered by the village teacher, Ramzi, who is seen as a collaborator and a borderline traitor by those who are willing to resist the British. The villagers are polarised: some support Abdullah

while others condemn him for provoking the British. Fatma tries to make the case that the British are a belligerent force and that they must be resisted while two villagers, Mansour and 'Elwan, insist that the British just want to be left alone and should not be provoked since they are too powerful and cannot be repulsed. Abdullah eventually shows up and inspires the majority of the villagers to prepare to attack the British once again. The land-owner, Zidan Bey, instructs his steward to prepare the twenty-five men demanded by the British to be tied up and delivered to the central municipality jail. The British commander, George, arrives to oversee the proceedings and, in the process, ridicule and demean Zidan Bey as a show of force to demonstrate that the British are masters of all they survey. At the end of the act, the British commander changes the rules and takes Fatma, a woman, instead of her husband Abdullah while hinting that she will be used for "maskhara" (Lewdness). As the procession is leaving the stage, a village child mockingly chases them chanting a the popular "ya Aziz, ya Aziz, kobba takhod el ingeleez" (Oh Aziz, Oh Aziz, a plague upon the English), a reference to the nationalist Egyptian officer, Aziz Bey Al Masry.

The second act takes place outside the county hall and jail. The officers and soldiers, British and Egyptians, take turns leading in the villagers for the flogging. After Fatma gloats that the British are equating Zidan Bey, the landlord with his own peasants and similarly awaits a flogging, Zidan is led to the commander's office instead of the jail. Ramzi, the teacher, arrives to protest that the British have converted the school into a stable for their horses. Fatma chastises him since he is unwilling to resist the British and is in favour of compromise and negotiation given the overwhelming strength of the occupation forces. As Ramzi waits for his turn to negotiate, Rashwan, Zidan Bey's own steward, emerges broken and repentant from the jail where he was being flogged by his former masters. Zidan Bey then emerges, his dignity restored by the

British commander and once again assuming the air of the high and mighty feudal lord. Ramzi, the teacher, emerges, chased and beaten by George, the British commander who orders the guards to put Ramzi in prison. One of the Egyptian guards reveals that, in order for the sick and the infirm to be flogged more gently, the villagers will need to bribe the specific supervising British officer since each Egyptian doing the flogging is monitored by a British officer who would, in case of leniency, strip the Egyptian of rank and uniform and hand him over to the commander who would personally deliver the penalising torture. George orders the Egyptian guard to bring him Fatma, who refuses and insists on remaining in the courtyard or to go to the flogging room of the jail. Sheikh Abdel Samad, the religious symbol of the village, passive and submissive, is taken to the flogging room. George appears in the company of three British soldiers and forcibly leads Fatma into his office. When Sheikh Abdel Samad returns, he offers solace to the gathered peasants who are frightened, bloodied and concerned about Fatma's virtue. Salem, Fatma's uncle, reassures all those present that Fatma is tough and knows how to take care of herself. Ramzi, having been thrown into jail earlier, emerges with others whom he introduces to the peasants as honourable Egyptians who resisted British tyranny by following their conscience in their posts. Abdullah suddenly appears and is about to attack the office where Fatma was taken when she comes out, beaten, bloodied with her clothes ripped and torn. Abdullah assumes that she had been raped, but she holds him back and assures him that she would have killed herself rather than be sexually violated. The first scene of the second act ends with the procession of peasants being led back to their village. Though exhausted from the torture they had experienced, they weakly chant "ya Aziz, ya Aziz, kobba takhod el ingeleez" (Oh Aziz, Oh Aziz, a plague upon the English) as they exit the stage.

The second scene of the second act depicts the villagers, armed and energised, in a state of readiness in anticipation of an imminent British attack on their village. The sceptical Elwan appears to be willing to defend his village under Abdulla's leadership, but continues to voice his concerns about preparedness and realistic chances against the well-armed British troops. His fellow sceptic, Mansour, is taken away from the line of fire by his Wailing mother, Labiba. The teacher, Ramzi, also voices concerns about battle readiness and shortage of weaponry, and is instantly silenced by Abdullah's rhetoric. Zidan Bey appears and offers the villagers a way out of the conflict if they just return to the fields and their farming duties, an offer instantly rejected by Abdullah and the majority of the villagers. The scene ends with the British attack and Abdullah's battle cries.

The third act is also made up of two scenes. The first scene shows us the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the villagers at the hands of the local British garrison. The local sceptics, Elwan and Mansour, are initially joined by Abdullah's uncle in law, Fatma's uncle, Salem. The three men blame Abdullah and his provocation of the British for the defeat and the men who fell in battle. Sheikh Abdel Samad defends Abdullah and argues that the British were inevitably going to attack the village whether or not Abdullah had mobilised the villagers. All the villagers are in shock at the might of the British and are angry that Abdullah had not appraised them of the abilities of the enemy. Abdullah appears and, seriously injured, claims responsibility but vows to continue the resistance despite the defeat. The village idiot, Sab'awi, and the Sheikh's guide, Za'zouq, narrate the heroic exploits of Fatma who then appears to support Abdullah. Abdullah offers to relinquish leadership of the village resistance and become an obedient follower. Elwan and Mansour continue to verbally attack Abdullah and are then in turn

chastised by a furious and indignant Fatma. The sceptic duo exit and the British immediately descend upon the gathered villagers and arrest all those who do not manage to escape.

The second scene of the third act depicts the punishment inflicted upon the rebellious villagers, including the sceptics, by the British with the help of the empowered collaborator, Zidan Bey. The scene is set a short distance from the village. The British stage mock trials where the defendants are tried while standing in vertical holes they had dug for themselves as ordered by the British commander, George. The defendants are found guilty of attacking the British soldiers and, at sunrise, are shot to death in their graves. Abdullah does not appear in this scene.

The play ends cyclically as it began with Fatma delivering a soliloquy that begins as a lament and ends as a motivational Eulogy. Fatma remembers her uncle's care for her as a young orphan, and the moment of his death. She promises to similarly care for the orphaned children and families of the sceptics, Elwan and Mansour. Fatma then imagines that she sees her husband, Abdullah, whom she proceeds to incite to avenge the dead and free the land of the nails that should have been melted by the blood of the martyrs. She then hears actual gunfire and catalogues the victims of British atrocities and the virtues of fighting for independence and the inevitability of emancipating the land of all the nails planted by the occupier.

#### **4.5 Criticism written for an English-speaking audience:**

Wahba's *El Masamir (The Nails, 1967)*, by far one of the least academically discussed of his plays, marks the playwright's return to crafting symbols within the setting of village life but in a manner that demonstrates significant technical divergence from his previous rural constructs. Badawi's solitary sentence about the play is, however, dismissive:

His later work tends to be more directly didactic, to the loss of its dramatic quality. It is doubtful whether *al-Masamir* (*Nails*, 1967), for instance, a play written soon after the June War defeat about the Egyptian nationalist struggle against the British imperialists in 1919, but with obvious topical allusions and designed to raise the sinking morale of the Egyptians, has much value as drama (Badawi 1988, p. 153).

Badawi's criticism of Wahba's post-Six-Day-War plays as "directly didactic" is contradicted by his own interpretation of the allusions in the play as "topical". More significantly, Badawi supports the idea that Wahba's latest foray into village life is markedly different from his previous exploits in that setting where he regarded the playwright's symbolism as conducive to a "well-constructed" piece (151). El Lozy does not evaluate the play, but rather classifies it as one of the many post-1967 plays that addressed "specific national problems . . . It addresses itself indirectly to contemporary, social, political, and national issues" (El Lozy 1986, 391). In Roger Allen's survey of Wahba's plays, *Nails* is conspicuous by its absence. This omission may have been due to the play's lack of popularity by the time Allen was writing in 1979. In an email correspondence with Prof. Allen, he speculated, while maintaining that it is difficult for him to be certain after four decades, that he only analysed plays that he had seen performed and/or discussed with the playwrights (Email to author, 28 February 2023). Badawi and El Lozy only hint at how *Nails* addresses or alludes to topical socio-political concerns of the period, but they do not provide the level of deep analysis they afford *Sekket El Salama* or the earlier plays.

#### **4.6 Criticism written for Arab Audiences:**

Nabil Ragheb, having previously labelled Wahba as a revolutionary playwright, regards *Nails* as Wahba's return to symbolism but in a manner more effective than that seen in the plays preceding *Sekket El Salama*. As opposed to the early plays, Ragheb sees Wahba's evolved use of symbolism in *Nails* as a tool that enables "the realistic aspect of the play to interact with the



symbolic within the characters so as to enable both aspects to enrich each other . . . for the nails are symbolic of the stabs and wounds from which the people have suffered after the [1967] defeat.” (Ragheb 1990, p. 99) Ragheb also interprets the nails as the collaborators who caused the 1967 defeat (100) while maintaining that the symbol also operates as a sustained and orchestrated motif that punctuates the social backdrop of the play (100). Ragheb’s view of the characters forming the society of the play, and by extension the society of 1967 Egypt, as victims of self-deception since they see the defeat as being the result of enemy action rather than realizing that “this society defeated itself” (100). Crucial to a full understanding of the scholarly Egyptian reading of the play is that Ragheb, like all the Egyptian scholars whose readings I will explore, views the main female leads in Wahba’s plays, including Fatma in *Nails*, as symbols for Egypt. Ragheb is unique among the scholars who have commented on *Nails* in that he addresses the humour that tends to pervade Wahba’s plays. Ragheb observes that “all attempts to revitalise the spirit of comedy in this script have died. That is despite introducing the character of the village idiot . . . who is used by the playwright much the same way Shakespeare uses his fools” (140). Ragheb views the few moments of dark comedy, as devices that focus the audience’s sense of the intensity of the tragedy (140). Ragheb exemplifies the dark comedy with moments such as when a peasant accepts getting flogged instead of a more affluent villager, and, when questioned about his motivation, responds that it is less laborious to be flogged than work for the local landlord (140). Viewing this type of humour as a favourable departure from the verbal and slapstick humour of other dramatists, Ragheb praises Wahba’s use of situational comedy. Ragheb’s concern was that the play would be viewed as a historical record rather than the topical rallying cry that he saw it as.

Ezzat el Amir's review of *Nails* interrogated the notion that the play was "limited to a specific period of our struggle or does it actually reach beyond these limitations?" (Amir cited in Abdel Medguid 1997, p. 64) Amir proposes that Wahba's aim is to offer an opportunity for self-reflection that will enable the audience to identify the underlying problems that may have had a greater bearing on the 1967 defeat. Amir highlights that

Sa'ad Eldin Wahba has described, through one of his central characters, the occupation soldiers as nails spread throughout our lands, bleeding our feet. But the plot of play has more to say. There are other nails that bleed our feet and make us stumble. It is the cowardice of those who fear the moment of struggle. It is the tentativeness of the philosophers when times are tough. The concern of the property and landowners for their lands and estates. Perhaps the most dangerous revelation of the play is that the downtrodden peasants have sacrificed themselves for their freedom while the landlords have sacrificed the peasants for their possessions. It is a simple and profound depiction of the only alternative to socialism, the exploitation and humiliation of feudalism and capitalism (64).

Not only does Amir dismiss the solitary objective of *Nails* as a historical record, he also emphasizes the Marxist aspect of the play's characterizations, specifically the tentativeness of the bourgeoisie philosophers. The upper classes, represented by Zidan Bey, are clear collaborators in the eyes of the 1967 audience who have been watching plays and films where the pre-1952 aristocrats had been demonised and watching that class nationalised and dispossessed. The Bourgeoisie, on the other hand, continued to thrive after 1952. They encompassed the entire political spectrum and include playwrights such as Sa'ad Wahba and journalists such as Ezzat El Amir, intellectuals who support the revolution and the socialist approach. The bourgeoisie also, in 1967, included counter-revolutionaries such as pro-monarchy intellectuals and white-collar workers. Amir's interpretation of the play cautions the audience against surrender since that would cause Egypt to abandon socialism and revert to capitalism.

One of the products of the socialist “Al thaqafa al gamahiriya” (Popular culture) program of the Ministry of Culture was the publicly funded theatre troupes, one of which, El Gharbeya Troupe, impressed critic Ahmed Abdel Hamid with their handling of a problematic play (Abdel Hamid 1968). Abdel Hamid was one of the critics who did not see *Nails* as a “historical play where the playwright dons the garb of history in order to critique the present through a treatment of past historical events” (1968). The crux of the play, according to Abdel Hamid, was “whether the cause of the village’s defeat was Abdullah Abu Hussain through his rash behaviour and his concealment of the truth about the enemy on the one hand or was it the ruthlessness of the occupier and the superiority of their forces coupled with the villagers’ disunity, lack of resilience and faith” (1968). Abdel Hamid’s view of the conundrum, though binary, places an emphasis on the topicality of the play despite its historical setting and dismisses historicism as mere “reportage” (1968).

Farouk Abdel Qadir, writing twelve years after the 1967 defeat and the premier of *Nails*, views the play as the best communicator of the catastrophe to ever grace the stage (Abdel Qadir 2015, p. 127). Abdel Qadir praises the play and Wahba for “saying everything without falling into the abyss of the crudely explicit” (126). A staunch socialist, Abdel Qadir sees the play as a communal field where Wahba urged

The necessity for continued social and political revolutions to achieve victory. The necessity for the destruction of the fraudulent alliance between parties with conflicting interests. The necessity for ending the occupation and liberating the land in order to achieve life and growth (126).

Abdel Qadir’s argument here does not revolve around the military mission with which the public and intelligentsia are exclusively preoccupied, but rather the socio-political framework that Wahba explores and recommends a revolution against in *Nails*.

Another critic, Mahmoud Amin El 'Alem, delves into the socioeconomic symbols and imagery Wahba has crafted in *Nails*. El 'Alem writes the foreword to the published play, a piece which was frequently used as a programme note not only in Cairo's National theatre run, but also in the provincial runs across the country. Regarding *Nails* as a "direct artistic response to the realities of the military setback our nation is reeling from" (Wahba 1967, page e), El 'Alem uses the play as a defence against the frequent claims that Wahba only critiques pre-1952 events (page f). El 'Alem also claims that even if the play was a historicization of a pre-1952 event, then its text and performances remain relevant to the present and beyond (Page g). To support his claim, El 'Alem uses the following understanding of historical compositions:

The correct recording of history, the honest literary expression of history, entails a comprehensive and connected aspect of human destiny. For every honest and authentic moment in history does not solely convey the logic of a that moment as much as it carries the logic of the general canon of history. (f-g)

El 'Alem's concept of artistic and literary historical records is predicated upon a shared "human destiny" which can be understood to address the exploitation of the proletariat by the classes above them. This almost Trotsky-esque/Leninist understanding of united working classes may appear to conflict with the nationalist plot that Wahba has created, but the class struggle within the play among Egyptian aristocrats, bourgeoisie and peasants can be seen as transcending nationalist messaging. El 'Alem's focus in his foreword is exclusively on the class struggle and placing the proletariat of the play in direct opposition to both the occupiers and their collaborators in the middle and upper classes, the latter duo being labelled as enemies of liberty and the people (page h). El 'Alem further claims that the play is "cathartic in the general and Aristotelian sense" (h). El 'Alem explains that

It is a purge of the nightmarish crisis from which [Wahba] suffered in his artistic life and which he expressed in [*Nails*]. A crisis of doubt vis-à-vis criticism specifically and the

literary movement in general. The crisis of bitterness that imbues this play with dark pessimism and sadness (h).

El 'Alem here clarifies what he sees as the factor setting Wahba apart from other playwrights within what he calls the “literary movement” of the 1960s: class warfare. The “nightmarish crisis”, as far as El 'Alem is concerned, is that while critics and playwrights of the period see class struggle as a pre-1952 matter, Wahba sees clear class distinctions prevailing and, most critically, crippling enough to have caused the 1967 defeat. El 'Alem sees *Nails* as the announcement that Wahba has finally purged himself of the doubt he had about his relationship with his community and that he has finally “crystalised the concrete theatre philosophy at which he had hinted in the majority of his previous plays” (i). In terms of the Aristotelian catharsis, El 'Alem finds that *Nails* “purifies us all as it possesses the pulse of the catastrophe that detonates in the soul all manner of potent reactions” (i). El 'Alem agrees with the majority of the critics I have discussed above about the play’s symbolism and its ability to transport the audience to 1919 while still interrogating 1967, but El 'Alem persists in highlighting that Wahba has essentialised the then future struggle to liberate the occupied Sinai Peninsula into a social struggle rather than a military or a political one (j). Contextually, El 'Alem sees the play as an effective participant in the ongoing intellectual discourse and struggle. Additionally, El 'Alem praises what he sees as the play’s “insight into the human psyche in a manner that weaves, out of the minor events and private emotions, a vibrant and genuine humane world” (k) which provides a refuge from harsh reality and an optimistic model for the future. El 'Alem’s interpretation of Fatma’s character is that she is the extrapolation of Khadra’s character in *Mosquito Bridge* (1964) and, as such, a direct symbol of Egypt. In that regard, El 'Alem is in agreement with the majority of the critics writing for Arab audiences.

Both sets of critics I have outlined, those writing for Arab and non-Arab audiences, have focused on the symbolic nature of *Nails* while either condemning or ignoring the structure of the play altogether. Furthermore, there is a total absence, even on the part of the critics writing decades later, of regard to the transmission of the structures of feeling of the period by the play to future generations. The critics above have also not commented on the social engagement of the play's dramaturgy in terms of language, messaging, characterization and plot structure. Most noteworthy of all is that there is a dearth of critical engagement with this play despite it being written in what is arguably the transition point between two periods in Egyptian history in general and theatre history in particular.

#### **4.7 *Nails*: The Vitriolic Harshness of Reality:**

*Nails* is a play that explicitly engages with both the spirit of and five of the six tenets of the 1952 revolution. The end of feudalism is repeatedly called for through the demonisation of Zidan Bey, the feudal lord who organizes and supervises the delivery of men condemned for flogging by the British occupation forces. Zidan Bey also represents the capitalist exploitation that was condemned in the third tenet of the revolution. Wahba portrays Zidan Bey as the chief collaborator with the British. The moment of his introduction demonstrates the Egyptian feudal approach to dealing with the peasantry:

*Enter Zidan who heads to Rashwan [The Steward].*

ZIDAN: Do we have the required number, Rashwan?

RASHWAN: I haven't counted them yet, your honour.

ZIDAN: Then why the hell are you just standing here? Mister George is on the way and we'll all be bugged!

RASHWAN: They kept chatting about a thousand different stories.

ZIDAN: Line up! All of you! Single file! (Wahba 1967, p. 50)

This unit shows how Zidan does not even utter the traditional greeting or address the villagers as he enters. This is a man who treats the villagers as inventory rather than people, hence his single-minded concern for the numbers. Even when Zidan addresses the villagers chosen for the day's flogging, he snaps and orders them as he would a herd of cattle. The only individuals he names in this key moment of character introduction, are his enforcer/steward, Rashwan, and George, the British officer. Moments later, Wahba adds to Zidan's negative image in the eyes of the audience by placing him in opposition to Abdullah, the hero of the piece, through Fatma:

FATMA: You know, don't you, Zidan Bey, that Abdullah, God Bless him, is bedridden?

ZIDAN: (Defiantly) Yes, I know.

FATMA: So how come you want him to get flogged today?

ZIDAN: Like all the other men.

FATMA: Have some fear of God, man. And even if you don't fear God, you should fear the day when all these people will pounce on your fat belly!

ZIDAN: Enough of your impertinence and go get your husband or I'll have him dragged here.

FATMA: Sure, Zidan Bey. Sure. (Wahba 1967, pp. 50-1)

By this point, Wahba has firmly placed Zidan in the villain category. In a play that dramatises resistance to foreign occupation, a collaborator will probably be more hated by the audience than the coloniser. Agreeing with El 'Alem and most of the critics outlined above, I see Fatma as a symbol for Egypt. I would go further, however, and claim that Fatma's husband, Abdullah, represents Gamal Abdel Nasser, an interpretation I will explain shortly. By portraying Zidan as Abdullah and Fatma's tormentor, the audience of post-1967 defeat would have yet another reason to despise the character of Zidan, along with the capitalist and feudal exploitation of his entire class.

Abdullah's resistance to Zidan and the British engages specifically with the fourth and fifth tenets of the revolution, enforcing the fifth and opposing the fourth. Wahba's view of his

male protagonist is nuanced and avoids dogmatic or romantic views of the heroic leader. Abdullah is neither perfect nor does he even achieve a victory against the British and Zidan. Abdullah does, however, dedicate himself to the establishment of a fighting force that may defend the village, easily interpreted by the audience of 1967 as Nasser's call to arms against Western Imperialism and exploitation. Abdullah's first speech is reminiscent of Nasser's motivational live speeches to the Nation:

ABDULLAH: Should we be silent against this ignominious state? How? Let them roam our lands, feasting and throwing us scraps as if we were dogs? You think they can't see what has happened to our country? Their bullets have chased away the pigeons from the dovecotes. Their boots have trampled the seeds in the fields. Their smoke has suffocated the livestock and their fires have burned the mills. Every beautiful thing in our country is either lost or is about to be lost. The vegetation. The green vegetation that used to paint the earth green... is gone. They planted nails. Our land has been planted with nails, men. Nails. If we want to walk, we will have to step on nails. If we eat, we have to eat nails. If we breathe, the nails will be stuck in each of our throats and choke us to death. If we join hands, we'll pry the nails out of the land, and it'll turn green again. We'll silence the gunfire so the pigeons can return to their dovecotes and the doves go back to their nests. Let's join hands! (Wahba 1967, 24).

Many of the phrases Abdullah uses in this monologue are symbolic derivatives of phrases used by Nasser, especially in International Labour Day Addresses to workers and trade unions. Nasser repeatedly referred to "those who exploited the whole person, not just the person's sweat . . . managed to live like kings" and represented "parasitic exploitationist growth" (Abdel Nasser, 1967). But Abdullah controversially engages with the democracy tenet of the revolution by bypassing democracy altogether, just as Nasser had done when he declared the dissolution of all political parties on 16 January 1953 and instituted the National Union on 3 November 1957 which was followed by the Arab Socialist Union on 4 July 1962, these unions installing a single-party system. Elwan and Mansour may be seen as the partisan dissidents such as the Egyptian Communist Party (led by Salama Moussa and discussed in Chapter One), the Muslim



Brotherhood, or the Wafd Party. Wahba justifies Abdullah's, and by extension Nasser's jettisoning of democracy through exchanges with 'Elwan and Mansour that Abdullah clearly wins:

ELWAN: Listen, Abdullah, you have things on your mind that are clearly no good for us. If the men of this land follow you, they will march into hell. I will have nothing to do with your decision.

ABDULLAH: Then what will you have something to do with?

SALEM: Elwan! What would you do if those English at our borders beat up your brother or your cousin?

ABDULLAH: Or if an English soldier grabs your wife by force?

ELWAN: My wife?

ABDULLAH: Yes. Just as they did to Aziza and Hosniyya and Sitt Ekhwatha!

SALEM: Pardon me, but are you saying that your wife is somehow better than these women?

ELWAN: My wife doesn't go to them. Whoever goes to them deserves what happens to them!

ABDULLAH: You want to deny people the right to walk in their own lands? Is that fair, men?

MANSOUR: And what is to be done, Abdullah?

ABDULLAH: Not much. They kill one of ours, we kill two. They steal, we steal double. And so on until judgement day!

ELWAN: And when will that judgement day come?

ABDULLAH: Soon, Elwan. Soon. (Wahba 1967, 18-19)

The decision to fight the British seems to be a forgone conclusion and the two opposing voices are heard while being ridiculed and eventually dismissed. Wahba depicts a debate that pits Abdullah and his uncle-in-law, Salem, against the sceptics, Mansour and Elwan as a one-sided affair where the opposition stand no chance against Abdulla's rhetoric and force of character. Elwan does not seem to object to the presence of the British military occupation and Abdullah's activism is a direct contrast to his approach whereby he will keep his wife from going to the British soldiers. Abdullah's activism is supported by his followers and Fatma, but Wahba does not show us how he acquired those followers, how many they are, and whether or not they are

representative of the village. Wahba complicates the question of democracy even further when the wife of one of Abdullah's followers arrives to blame him for the death of her husband:

*Enter Aisha, the wife of Abul Magd, screaming.*

AISHA: Where is Abul Magd, Abdullah?

ABDULLAH: Abul Magd died, Aisha. He died the way all men die.

AISHA: Abul Magd died and left behind children dying of hunger!

ABDULLAH: Abul Magd lived like a man and died like a man. All of us will care for his children like our own.

AISHA: And why him? Why didn't you go instead of him?

ABDULLAH: We all went and we all go, Aisha! Life is in the hands of God.

AISHA: God also told you not to send people to their doom!

ABDULLAH: I didn't send anyone, Aisha. Are you happy leaving the English on our land?

AISHA: You think Abul Magd can get them out by himself, Abdullah? Well he's dead now! Can you bring him back? Can you bring my husband back to me? God damn you!  
*Salem rises and moves her away.*

AISHA: Leave me, father Salem, I want to hear what Abdullah Abu Husain wants to do to the men!

SALEM: It is over, Aisha. Abul Magd is now in heaven. Stop making him roll in his grave.

AISHA: Abul Magd died for nothing, father Salem!

SALEM: Never say that!

*Salem walks her out as she cries and wails. She exits vocally lamenting the loss of her husband.* (Wahba 1967, pp. 20-1)

Despite the leading position of Fatma, Aisha is an example of the village's patriarchal dismissal of women. Not only is Fatma the only woman making decisions in the play, we also hear Abdullah discussing freedom fighting in purely masculine terms. When Aisha accuses Abdullah of "sending" fighters to their death, he denies and then deflects the attack using the English presence. I read this recoil on Abdullah's part and his subsequent silence as a concession that he feels a certain measure of guilt. Salem's manhandling and silencing of Aisha further weakens Abdullah's stance and makes him seem unable to respond to the bereft Aisha. Wahba shows us a

democracy that at best does not exist and at worst undermines opposition forces. The extensive engagement of *Nails* satisfies my first criterion for a revolutionary Egyptian play.

Whereas Nu'mān Ashour's 1950s plays predated the National Charter (1962), admittedly having anticipated it in all but language, Wahba's playwriting career began in the wake of the National Charter and the ensuing wave of socialist reforms. The spirit of the National Charter was one of unification and mobilization, objectives that are shared by Abdullah and his followers in *Nails*. It is also the spirit that was found lacking in the village, symbolically referring to the fragmented disunity that El 'Alem and the critics I have surveyed agreed characterised Egypt on the eve of the 1967 defeat. The National Charter's unmet objective had the following foundations:

It suffices that the Arab Nation possesses the unity of language, bringing about the unity of thought and mind. It suffices that the Arab Nation possesses the unity of history, bringing about the unity of conscience and being. It suffices that the Arab Nation possesses the unity of hope, bringing about the unity of future and destiny. (Abdel Nasser 1962, p. 131).

These unities are symbolically evident in the manner with which all the villagers in *Nails* talk about and to each other. There is familiarity between Salem and Aisha that allows him, despite the conservative nature of rural Egypt, to verbally silence her and then physically lead her off. Aisha also exhibits the familiarity, albeit mixed with a submission to the patriarchy, when she addresses Salem as "father Salem". The National Charter also allows for disagreement and debate:

The mere existence of dispute is in itself evidence of unity. These disputes are rooted in the social struggle within the Arab reality. The convening of the popular progressive forces in every part of the Arab world and the congregation of the regressive opportunistic elements in the Arab world is evidence of the unity of social currents that buffet the Arab Nation, guide its steps and provide synergy across the artificial borders (132).

The village in *Nails* shares the hope of expelling the occupation, the history of suffering under the yoke of colonialism and the language that expresses the extremes of resistance and pacifism. *Nails* also directly refers to the National Charter where the premise of the play is explicitly stated:

The peasant revolts against the tyranny of feudalism reached the point of armed engagement between those who rebelled against servitude and the landlords who controlled the land and the destinies of those whose lives had been linked with that land since time immemorial despite being denied that land for just as long (43).

Abdullah and his followers perform the above situation in the National Charter through their armed conflict with Zidan Bey and the British occupation forces. Zidan, representing the Feudal lords referred to in the National Charter, is not just seen as an exploitationist landlord, demonised upon introduction to the audience, he is also seen as the defender of the coloniser. Wahba creates several scenes where Zidan Bey fends off attacks by the villagers against the British. One such attack is by the recently widowed Aisha:

GEORGE: Is everything in order, Zidan Bey?

ZIDAN: Everything is in order, Governor General.

*Some guards rush to sort the [condemned] villagers into two columns. George stands at their head and suddenly Aisha enters, heads for George and grabs hold of him.*

AISHA: [In Arabic] You are the foreigner who killed my husband.

GEORGE: [In broken Arabic] I not kill somebody.

AISHA: No! It was you! Abul Magd was a man's man. You killed him and now I will drink from your blood!

*She pulls him towards her. Zidan and [his steward] Rashwan push her away but she resists.*

GEORGE: You are mad.

AISHA: Stay away from me, Zidan Bey! Stay away! Let me have it out with this son-of-a-bitch who's killing our men.

ZIDAN: Your husband is the one who went to them of his own accord. You want them to let him go after he killed an Englishman?

AISHA: All I know is that this is the beast that killed him.

ZIDAN: Cut it out, girl!

AISHA: Have you become an Englishman too, Zidan Bey?

*The guards overwhelm Aisha and drag her off screaming. (Wahba 1967, 53-4)*

Zidan in the above seen is behaving in a servile manner that transcends mere deference towards Governor General George. Under normal circumstances, Zidan would never talk directly to a mere peasant's widow. His service to the Governor General, however, forces him to join in the demeaning physical defence of the British commander. Aisha summarises the situation with her final interrogative, almost paraphrasing Fanon's concept of the agent of colonisation who is "the outsider from elsewhere" (Fanon 1961, 5). By simultaneously representing capitalism and feudalism, Zidan Bey is Wahba's dramatization of the National Charter's image of the pre-revolutionary profiteering and treasonous private sector that does not yield to public oversight. Wahba also addresses the economic exploitation that accompanies colonisation. Wahba exposes the depth of exploitation that can condition the subaltern to accept the hegemony of the coloniser. The sceptics, Elwan and Mansour preach defeatism before the British invasion of the village:

ELWAN: If we leave them alone, they will leave us alone.

ABDULLAH: How so?

MANSOUR: None of your men should go and make their lives miserable day in day out!

ABDULLAH: Are we making their lives miserable or is it the other way around?

ELWAN: You are the one who keeps sending a man or two to snatch or kill one of them!

MANSOUR: You're the one who provokes them.

ABDULLAH: I provoke them? Say something, father Salem! Speak, Megahed!

MEGAHED: I told them!

SALEM: They are the ones who provoke us and more!

ABDULLAH: First of all, are we the ones who left our country to go to their country, or are they the ones who came to us? Are we the ones who violated their land, or are they the violators? Second of all, are we the ones who evicted farmers off their land, or were they the ones who did that? Speak, men!

ELWAN: What they did is over and done with. Now they're minding their own business.

SALEM: Minding their own business? They're suffocating us!

ABDULLAH: You are forgetful. Not a day goes by without them shooting one of us down. Not to mention the looting and the dispossession that happens every day. (Wahba 1967, 14-15)

Wahba portrays Elwan and Mansour as victims of an inverted “colonial fatigue”, a state usually experienced by repeatedly frustrated and disappointed colonisers as was the case with the Germans in Africa (*Kolonialmüdigkeit*) (Grimmer-Solem 2019, p. 406). They have surrendered to the overwhelming might of the coloniser to the extent that they appear to have relinquished their dignity. Abdullah provides exposition that characterises the occupation troops as looters and bullies who commit daily atrocities. The looting and land appropriation in particular depict an unsustainable situation that the National Charter repeatedly condemns:

Millions of agricultural workers have lived in circumstances that were closer to serfdom than anything else while earning starvation wages. They were also employed without any guarantees about their future. They were powerless to live their lives except in a state of hourly misery and the horrific harshness that comes with that apprehension. (Nasser 1962, 58).

Wahba created characters who embodied the misery and lack of dignity that prevailed during the years of the British occupation of Egypt. That characterisation was both a presentation of a reality as well as a suggestion that the source of the undignified life was the fragmentation and co-opted unity that weakened any potential resistance. *Nails* engages with the National Charter in scenes that argue for uncompromising resistance to unregulated capitalism, “parasitic” (Nasser 1967) feudalism, “piracy” (Nasser 1962, 71) colonialism and, fundamentally, all forms of internal or external exploitation of the working class.

Despite the revolutionary engagement and commitment to the socialist founding documents of post-1952 Egypt, Wahba appears to be equally committed to what Ashour would have labelled a regressive and ultra-conservative Aristotelian structure. Rashad Rushdy was a proponent of a strictly literal interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Rushdy’s translation of Aristotle’s view of plot reads as follows:

The most important of these elements is the plot, the interconnectedness of the events. Tragedy is the mimesis [not] of individuals, but of actions. Of happiness or misery. Because happiness resides in action. And absolute good itself, the purpose of life, is a certain kind of action, not just a characteristic of the doer. (Rushdy 2000, p. 12)

*Nails* is a play that adheres to the interconnectedness doctrine. Every moment seamlessly leads to the next. The British occupation soldiers are retaliating for the killing of one of their own by killing a villager and ordering the flogging of the entire village in groups of twenty-five, the villagers prepare to counter-attack, the British pre-empt the counterattack and execute more men. Wahba's mimesis is more concerned with the events than with the characterisation. In terms of plot, Wahba adopts the arc which Ashour seems to consciously avoid: a beginning, a middle and an end. Wahba also writes two types of scenes: reversals such as when the collaborators are suddenly betrayed by the British (peripeteia) and discoveries such as when the villagers witness with their own eyes the true military ruthlessness of the British (anagnorisis). Aristotle, whether we are reading an English translation or Rushdy's Arabic, starts by dismissing moral character as a domain mastered by novices (Aristotle 2013, 1450a and Rushdy 2000, p. 13) and then later ranks the same element of tragedy as second only to plot. Wahba similarly relegates character to a lower position than plot, especially with the characters of the pacifists and the collaborators. If we re-examine the above scene (Wahba 1967, pp. 14-15) where the pacifists Elwan and Mansour confront Abdullah, it is easy to imagine those two proto-counterrevolutionaries as interchangeably saying each other's lines. It is also quite easy to remove Abdullah's character altogether and only talk about him since the fully developed Fatma says the same things, albeit more forcefully. In terms of the other four elements of tragedy –style, ideas, staging and music– Rushdy only mentions these in passing and does not expound upon them at all in his book. The element of ideas is arguably where Wahba strays from the path of the Egyptian Aristotelians

since, particularly in *Nails*, there is one overriding idea that pervades the entire play: internal division is the enemy. Unlike the right-wing Rushdy, the left-wing Wahba, now in his prime and with his own voice and style, would be unlikely to write a play that is not underpinned by a revolutionary or provocative idea. After Aristotle refers us (or his students/audience) to his *Rhetoric*, he rapidly summarises the aims of ideas as follows:

Under the head of ideas come all the effects that can be produced by reason: proof, refutation, the evocation of emotions (pity, fear, anger, and so on) and also the placing or removal of emphasis. (Aristotle 2013, 1456a and b)

A *Nails* audience member may indeed experience any or all of Aristotle's stated aims of the ideas that should exist in a tragedy, but Wahba's optimism about overcoming internal division would most likely have been the dominant thought by the end of the performance. This optimism is punctuated by the epilogue spoken by the violated Fatma who envisions a

Land smooth as silk, free of nails. The sky is protecting you, clear of vultures now. Your hands and hearts like iron. Strike. The world is watching you. Watching and listening. There are no longer any whips. No more nails. Our land is ours. Ours alone! (Wahba 1967, 178)

This final soliloquy by Fatma, despite being wishful thinking, is far too optimistic for an Aristotelian tragedy. Fatma is prophesying an event that had happened in the history after the events of the play, but symbolically a corresponding event had yet to happen after the Israeli occupation of the Sinai. The inference on the part of the audience would be that Egyptian land was liberated before and would eventually be liberated again. The play is not about the defeat itself, however, but about the causes of that defeat. *Nails* does not, therefore, need to stage the battles since the focus is not the tactical or strategic elements of warfare, but rather the socio-political fragmentation that brought about the defeat before a shot was fired. Despite Wahba's Aristotelian structure and characterisation, his revolutionary ideas and mobilising rhetoric



manage to avoid the defeatism and regressive ideological messaging of counter-revolutionary playwrights of the period.

*Nails* is a play that didactically and directly confronts the Egyptian establishment and society with their failings. Having already mastered the art of crafting crowd-pleasing yet intellectually stimulating plays, Wahba has distanced himself from the sensationalism and suspense that coloured his previous plays. Whereas in *Road to Salvation* (1965) Wahba keeps the audience in suspense throughout the play regarding the fate of the characters, in *Nails* he has chosen a historical moment where the events and the ending are known in advance. By 1967, every Egyptian had studied and/or experienced the 1919 revolution, the encounter with the Milner Commission (discussed in the Introduction of the thesis) and the atrocities of the British occupation forces. The narrative studied at elementary schools may have been exaggerated beyond the reality that took place on the ground, particularly when school textbooks depicted British cruelty and abuse of power during the 1919 revolution. Egyptian school textbooks continue to use factual evidence to ingrain young Egyptians and cultivate in them a fundamental hatred of British imperialism. Under the heading of “Egypt under British Occupation”, one Year Nine government textbook provides students with the following list:

- Governance and Administration: Real authority rested in the hands of the British Special Envoy while the Khedive’s authority was limited to rubber-stamping the decrees of the occupying forces.
- The Military: The Egyptian military must not exceed six-thousand soldiers under the command of an English officer whose mission is the maintenance of security and order.
- Parliamentary life: The dissolution of the parliament elected in 1881 and the establishment of sham councils that had no real authority. . .
- The Economy: The imposition of economic policies that served British interests that entailed the expansion of cotton production needed to supply British factories as well as crippling local Egyptian production. . .
- Education: Education was neglected and prohibitively expensive. Education was restricted to a small stratum with the intention of graduating bureaucrats needed for administration and government facilities (Mahsoub et al., 2023, p. 79).

Having studied and/or experienced the above set of circumstances, an Egyptian audience watching *Nails*, a play set against the backdrop of the 1919 revolution, would be fully aware of the events and the ending of the play. Wahba may have chosen such a predictable plot that lacked any surprise value for the purpose of mobilising the spirit of the audience, particularly the sceptics, represented by Mansour and Elwan as well as the demotivated intellectual elite, represented by Ramzi, the schoolteacher. Had self-enrichment been Wahba's aim with *Nails*, he would have adhered to his commercially successful 1962-1967 formula of purely symbolic writing. *Nails* was penned for the purpose of mobilisation and motivation, a Leninist furthering of the aims of the 1952 revolution rather than an attempt to financially enrich the author. *Nails* is a play that satisfies my fourth criterion for a revolutionary Egyptian play.

The following garnered by *Nails* in the state theatre confuses critics to this day. On the one hand, the play's first Cairo run at the National Theatre was the fifth most watched play of the 1967/68 season, having been attended by 12,512 spectators, including Gamal Abdel Nasser who is reported to have watched the play several times (Heshmat 2020, p.160). Fathi Al Ashry reports that the audience applauded "hysterically" (1973, p.8) with every motivational speech by Fatma, played by the playwright's wife Samiha Ayyoub, who, as I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, was the top billed actress of the Egyptian theatre and a former director of the National Theatre. The National Theatre had cast some of their most popular actors and assigned veteran Wahba and 'Ashour director Sa'ad Ardash to execute the project. Despite all this apparent support, several factors indicate a cooling of the usual privilege and enthusiasm afforded to Wahba's plays. The script was ready, including a foreword by El 'Alem, by August 1967, copyrighted and published by the Ministry of Culture in September. Yet the play was only

scheduled to be performed in March of 1968, an unusual delay for a Wahba play, even when we account for the six weeks of rehearsal that the National Theatre company customarily allocates to full length plays (Nashaty 1973, p.135). Furthermore, the play was not given a performance slot at the Cairo Opera House or the Azbakiyya theatre, the two main venues of the National Theatre. Instead, *Nails* was assigned to Mohamed Farid theatre, a small venue with less than half the capacity (350 seats compared to the 750 of Azbakiyya and the 850 of the Opera), equipment and stage area (Al Ahram, 1968). This relegation in the status of the latest Wahba play, if it was indeed intended, was followed up by the absence of a rerun in Cairo or Alexandria, a convention of the state theatre whenever a play succeeds in its first run. *Nails* was performed simultaneously at the state theatre in Tanta, a major city, but not one of the top two (Al Gumhuriya, 1968). The lack of follow up may be explained by the new reality of a post-1967 defeat: reprioritisation. That explanation, however, is inconsistent with the mobilisation tone of the play and its pro-resistance to colonisation stance. It is difficult to deliver a final verdict as to whether *Nails* had the following in the annals of the state theatre that its Wahba predecessors had attained. Gramsci's stipulation that a linguistic "diffusion from above" (Gramsci, 536) must be truthfully regulated and intensified in a manner that creates a conversation between "the more educated and less educated strata of the population" seems, in 1967, to be challenged by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the National Theatre troupe. Given the circumstances of the 1967 defeat, it is ironic that, despite *Nails* appearing not to satisfy my fifth criterion of a revolutionary play due to what seems to be a lack of a strong following by the state theatre, that resistance by the authorities could be the claim to revolutionism that its Wahba predecessors lacked.

*Nails* stands out from Wahba's corpus by delivering the structures of feeling of an era that was 50 years removed from the 1967 audience and yet retained a connection that compelled

that audience to engage and respond. Despite the differences in language and diction that pervade the play, the socio-political states of the characters correspond with those of the post-1967 defeat audience. Both sets of Egyptians, whether actively resisting colonisation, resigned in defeat or colluding with the coloniser are responding to the intrusion of a foreign entity. This shared experience between the recently defeated audience and their ancestors of 50 years earlier is sufficient to provide a “continuity of experience” that not only provides “recognition” and eventually “relation of this general form to a period,” it transcends this “relation” and establishes a necessary equation of the two chronologically separate periods (Williams 1987, p.17). Wahba holds up a mirror to his 1967 audience, encouraging and mobilising them by showing them that they themselves, not merely their ancestors, have actually overcome the same adversity from which they are suffering. What Wahba achieves in *Nails* is a practical application of Williams’ prescription of a “structure of feeling”. Williams theorises that “the first study of a structure of feeling is then always local, particular, unique” (19). The village in *Nails* that Wahba borrowed from Raf’i focuses that locality, particularity and uniqueness, eventually going beyond Williams’ ambition of converting the drama into a history (20); Wahba morphs the dramatic experience into the present experience, providing an optimistic continuity that can mobilise the audience. *Nails* bypasses the “complexity of historical change” that Williams identifies as the “most persistent difficulty in the analysis of structures of feeling” (20) through the narration of a historical moment that almost identically mirrors the post-1967 defeat present of Wahba’s audience. The two moments are so alike that they both contain the same set of “alternative structures” (20). Both moments have activists who face overwhelming odds, pacifists defying the popular leaders, self-serving traitors who facilitate the entrenchment of the coloniser, detached members of the middle class who ridicule the popular leaders and identify with the culture of the

coloniser and a coloniser who implements an unjust justice that would never be tolerated in their home country. Wahba's form in *Nails*, while predating Williams' theory, crafts the latter's understanding of "conventions" and "structures of feeling", thereby satisfying my sixth and final criterion for a revolutionary Egyptian play.

In a volume of three plays titled *Masrahiyyat Mamnooaa (Banned Plays, 1996)*, Wahba prefaces each play with an account of the events that banned it (Wahba 1996). Each account is supported by official documents and, in the case of *The Professor*, statements by the officials involved. The second entry in that volume, *Al Ostaz (The Professor, 1969)*, is the work I consider Wahba's most revolutionary play due to its ideological and dramaturgical departure from all of his previous works. *The Professor* was scheduled for performance during the National Theatre 1969/70 season but was banned by the state censor until 1980 when it was successfully performed in Cairo and Alexandria before being banned by Egyptian President Sadat himself (103, 107). Sadat's ban remains in force today (111). Samiha Ayoub, the Artistic Director of the National Theatre, wrote a foreword to the play's published script that communicates a mixture of frustration and relief at the censorship struggle that *The Professor* faced:

In 1969, Sa'ad Eldin Wahba wrote *The Professor* in an attempt to search for the roots of the disastrous events that swept Egypt and the Arab world in June of 1967. The National Theatre added *The Professor* to the 1970 season after securing the approval of the reading committees of the troupe and the [theatre] institute. The censorship bureau refused to grant the needed permission to perform the play. This caused the matter to be escalated to the highest levels at the Ministry of Culture, whose stance was that of categorical rejection! Now that the era of democracy and freedom has been attained, it became the duty of the National Theatre to revive a work that has yearned for freedom and democracy. After a full ten years, the National Theatre now presents *The Professor*, confirming [The Theatre's] role in the service of the theatre, serving both the audience and the playwrights. A cause that the [National Theatre] has championed for over forty years. (Ayoub cited in Wahba 1996, p.103)

This note condemns the Nasser era during which the censor refused to grant performance permission to *The Professor* in 1969 and praises Sadat's era of "freedom and democracy". This condemnation and praise may be interpreted as a matter of political pragmatism, especially given that Ayoub was and remains a Nasserist advocate *par excellence*<sup>35</sup>. The note diplomatically laments the ten years during which the play "yearned for freedom" but seeks solace in the belief that the National Theatre's patience has been rewarded and that the institution's "service of the theatre" is ongoing. After the commercially successful runs of the play in Cairo and Alexandria (107), the solace indicated in the note proves to be a temporary respite since Sadat would ban the play on 31 August 1981 based on a false reporting of the plot by an influential journalist who had the ear of the President (110). The following account, related by Mansour Hassan, the then Minister of Culture and Information, demonstrates the significance the President of the Republic attached to the potential impact of a play on the audience:

Yesterday, during a meeting with President Sadat, attended by Vice President Hosni Mubarak, Minister of Interior (Home Secretary) Elnabawy Ismail, myself, and the CEOs of the nation's newspapers, the lists of names of journalists and writers who were to be arrested or suspended were put on display. Suddenly, one of the CEOs addressed President Sadat:

"Your excellency is upset with journalism? Why don't you take a look at what the theatre has to say?"

President Sadat asked: "What are you saying?"

And so the journalist, author, and former patriotic activist launched the following tirade:

"I was with a Sudanese delegation at a theatre here in Alexandria where we watched a play called *The Professor* written by Sa'ad Eldin Wahba. The play says that half the Egyptian people talk and don't listen while the other half listen and do not talk. So one half of the Egyptian people are mute and the other half are deaf."

President Sadat went pale and looked at [me], asking aggressively:

"Is there a play that says these things, Mansour?"

[I] answered calmly:

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<sup>35</sup> Reference should be made here to Samiha Ayoub's autobiography (Ayoub, Samiha. *Thikrayaty (My Memories*. Maktabat al Osra (Family Library) 2003) as well as her numerous interviews during which she educates her interviewers about Nasserism now that it is considered unfashionable ([الفنانة الكبيرة سميحة أيوب | فقرة كاملة](#) (سيادة المسرح العربي في ضيافة "من مصر" | فقرة كاملة).

“I have seen the play, Mr. President, and it does not say that. And even if it did, the play was written ten years ago and does not address your era.”

Nevertheless, President Sadat addressed his Vice President Hosni Mubarak:

“Hosni, call Fuad Serag Eldin in Cairo and instruct him to ban the performance of this play.” (Wahba 1996, p.111)

This account sheds light on the perceived impact of drama on the audience by officials at the highest levels of the political apparatus in Egypt. A play’s performance was elevated as a topic of discussion alongside the fate of thousands of future political prisoners and resulted in an infuriated president making an immediate executive decision in light of his appreciation of the subversive and perhaps even revolutionary potential of a play in performance. Additionally, The journalist CEO manipulated Sadat’s understanding of the power of a play through a carefully worded synopsis to divert some of Sadat’s ire away from his journalists. Sadat’s estimation of *The Professor* may be seen as justifiable since the play was of such significance, probably by virtue of having been written by Wahba, that foreign delegates were invited to watch it, and the Minister of Culture and Information had also seen it before the ban. The above account is also significant in that none of the attendees commented about the ten-year delay in the performance of a Wahba play, which may be understood as a tacit concession that the playwright’s increasingly incendiary writings had become less tolerable in the eyes of the authorities since 1969. *The Professor* is the play that announced to the Egyptian political class that Wahba’s revolutionary fervour had diverted him from the acceptable, conciliatory and mobilising agenda of his 1962-67 works.

Whereas *Nails* was an attempt to mobilise and rally Egyptians to fight the latest version of colonialism while addressing the internal sources of weakness on the home front, *The Professor* was a more forensic analysis of the internal corruption of the state and the people. The 1967 defeat was probably not fully absorbed by Wahba when he wrote *Nails* a few weeks later.

As I have discussed above, *Nails* identifies internal fragmentation as the single cause behind the defeat in 1967. As convincing as that assignation of blame may have been to the audience, it brings with it an inevitable lack of nuance. *The Professor*, written a year later against the backdrop of the War of Attrition along the Suez Canal and multiple mass student and worker protests in Cairo and other major cities, was the beneficiary of the playwright's retrospective view of the war. Trials of senior military and intelligence officials such as Generals Sedqy Mahmoud (15 years in prison) and Ismail Labib (10 years) shed light on the extent of lack of preparation for war (Abubakr, 2012). The exposure of the inner workings of the internal security branch through the specific case of the torture of Dr. Al Sharqawy<sup>36</sup> (Haykal, 1968) elucidated the public vis-à-vis the contempt with which the average Egyptian and the entire 1952 revolutionary spirit were held by the top echelons of the Intelligence officer class. The *Al Ahrām* exposé and the preceding Cabinet meeting (17 September 1967) negatively reframed the Egyptian General Intelligence Bureau in the imagination of the Egyptian public and the Egyptian president respectively.<sup>37</sup> *The Professor*, analysing the lack of communication between the government and the governed, delivers a revolutionary approach to Egyptian theatre's political discourse.

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<sup>36</sup> Dr. Abdel Moneim Al Sharqawi was a lawyer who was detained for eighteen months by the internal security branch of the Egyptian General Intelligence Bureau. During that period, Dr. Al Sharqawi was continuously tortured until he signed a fabricated confession in which he supplied incriminating evidence against members of his immediate family. *Al Ahrām*, Egypt's most highly circulated daily newspaper, released an expose of the case on 7 January 1968. The expose revealed that the military court had simultaneously released Al Sharqawi and arrested the officer who oversaw the torture, Hassan Eleish.

<sup>37</sup> The declassified transcript of the 17 September meeting shows Nasser exhibiting profound shock and disgust at the practices of the Intelligence Bureau against the Egyptian public. Specifically, Nasser was appalled at the misuse of the "control" unit that specialised in ensuring that the bureau possessed sexual evidence against all those considered "persons of interest". Nasser is quoted in the transcript as saying that the bureau's "activities were focused almost entirely on these [sexual] issues." (Bibalex, 67 Files, p.10)



#### 4.8 The Plot of *The Professor*:

Wahba wrote this play in a prologue and three acts. The prologue introduces us to the Professor, a surgeon who has to make a choice between depriving a patient of speech or hearing. We see him agitatedly debating the issue with his wife:

PROF: Would you prefer to not hear but speak or would you prefer not to [speak] but [hear]?

WIFE: Naturally I'd prefer to hear and speak.

PROF: And should that not be possible?

WIFE: (Thinks) If not, then I'd prefer to speak... No, I'd prefer to hear... No... Oh! How am I supposed to know?

PROF: Now you see my dilemma! You couldn't choose. That's the problem.

WIFE: What does the guy himself think?

PROF: He's in a coma since the accident and he won't come out of it until after the operation. Which mean that we have to make the choice for him. (Wahba 1996, p.114)

The wife then leaves the Professor to his quandary whereupon, having exhausted all the medical books, he then searches for his answer in the history books since he believes that "history repeats itself" (115). His first port of call is the history of Ancient Sumer in Mesopotamia. Sumerian guards immediately knock on his door and inform the Professor that they have visited him from the Straw Age of Ancient Sumer and that they are under orders from the Queen of Samalah to arrest him. The Sumerian guards carry off the Professor as he screams in protest that he has a problem that must be solved in his present and that 3000 BC is too far.

Act One is set in the main city square with the royal palace's main gate and balcony as the background. The act begins while the people are asleep and they stir as the events of the act progress. Wahba specifies that the leader of the guards who had carried off the Professor is now dressed as the town crier who sets the tone of the act by addressing the people in terms that do not benefit his function:

People of the city. Citizens of Sumer. (He strikes his skin drum). Wake up! A new day has dawned. A new sun has risen upon you and will add yet another miserable day to your lives. You will carry a new burden when you can't even carry yourselves. Wake up, God damn you! Wake up, you're wearing me out! (He strikes the drum). Citizens of the city, rise and see the wretchedness of your state. Rise and face your miserable lot in life. Rise, you and you, have you no shame? Aren't your nocturnal activities enough? People are starving because of your nightly acts. The city is exploding from overpopulation. Enough. Wake up and look out for your lives (119).

The town crier's words and attitude arouse curiosity about his station in society and the apparent misery he describes. How can such a modest representative of the state insult his audience in such a manner? How can anyone be forgiven for mentioning, mocking and condemning the sexual activities of the populace so publicly? How is it possible that nobody is responding to or engaging with this impertinent town crier? Moments later, the Queen's Lady-in-waiting solves the riddle by revealing that the population has lost its sense of hearing. As the scene progresses, we learn that the entire population of Sumer, with the exception of six individuals, lost its hearing one night. The six people who were outside the city, a beggar and his helper, a prostitute/belly dancer and her assistant, and two thieves who, being the only people with full physical abilities, became the finance minister, town crier, Queen, Lady-in-waiting, Vizier and Chief Justice respectively. Wahba empowers those at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid and provides them with the literal and metaphorical keys of Sumer. The six individuals who have the ability to hear include the Chief Justice who panics the moment he realises that the Professor is capable of hearing. Once they realise that the Professor is a foreigner, they explain the status quo in a manner that demonstrates cognizance and acceptance of socio-political distinctions:

CHIEF JUSTICE: We are the apprentices of the rulers. I was the apprentice of the Vizier, so I am now the Chief Justice. This lady was the apprentice of the Queen and is now her Lady-in Waiting. And there's a kid who was the apprentice of the Finance Minister whom they appointed a General Prosecutor. He resigned and is now the Town Crier (127).

While affording their superiors deference by omitting their original and, by his standards, disreputable occupations, the Chief Justice emphasises to the Professor and the Lady in Waiting that the new order is to be respected. He also situates himself and the Vizier ahead of the other four characters who remain endowed with hearing. There is an indication of tension between the three duos which will complicate the mechanics of this ruling class as the act progresses. Wahba is depicting infighting within an isolated and formerly disenfranchised ruling class that has risen to power. When the Chief Justice learns that the Queen has summoned the Professor to study the population of Sumer and cure them, he is visibly irritated:

CHIEF JUSTICE (CJ): If you don't mind me asking, why are you here?

PROF: I am studying this phenomenon in order to cure the people.

CJ: Cure them so that they can hear again?

PROF: We will try.

CJ: Who brought you here?

PROF: Her grand majesty, the Queen.

CJ: I knew she'd ruin us all. This is what happens when people let a damn woman run the show. (127)

The Professor is next introduced to the Queen who narrates the key events that led up to the hearing-loss calamity that struck the city. The Queen conducts a show-and-tell style presentation that I will further analyse later when I apply my criteria to the play. The queen shows the Professor that the citizens have reached a point where their language is divorced from its meaning. To exemplify that, the Queen presents the Professor with the city's "most loving married couple":

QUEEN: This is a husband and this is his wife. Come. (*The Professor hesitates*) Come, have no fear. The people have lost their sense of shame along with their hearing.

PROF: Strange.

*The Professor draws closer.*

HUSBAND: (*Smiling flirtatiously as he speaks*) I have no idea what was going through my mind when I married you. I was insane. Out of my mind.

WIFE: You, of all people, are my lot in life?

*They kiss passionately.*

HUSBAND: Our neighbour's wife is better than you. More artful.

WIFE: Never in our married life did I feel that I was married to a human being. This morning, after you left, our neighbour came as usual. We agreed when we married to tell each other everything. Here I am telling you, you low-life loser.

HUSBAND: You nightmare of a woman! Why didn't I marry our neighbour's wife? Hot and naughty and... Oh my days!

*They kiss each other ecstatically.* (133)

The Queen provides post-scene commentary that underscores how mundane this otherwise shocking example has become as well as how repugnant she finds the entire situation. The Professor had already observed that the Queen's dilemma is every ruler's dream (132).

At the end of the first act, after a passionate speech by the Queen who vows to end this "jungle world" (144), Wahba introduces the Vizier as the villain of the piece. As the people cheer for the Queen who used sign language to communicate her meaning to the deaf populace, the Vizier enters and silences the city by imperiously raising his hand. Wahba does not give the Vizier any lines to speak, ends the act, and begins the second act in the throne room with the lady-in-waiting informing the Queen that she had seen a child born without ears. The Vizier then storms the throne room and confronts the Queen, his main concern is the presence of the Professor. The Vizier states that the Professor may "investigate and observe . . . but changing the nature of the people is intervention in God's will." (146) During this confrontation, Wahba reveals that the Vizier had raped the Queen before they both rose to power, explaining her rejection of all his romantic overtures that run parallel to his tyrannical rhetoric. During this exchange, Wahba hints at what shall be confirmed at the end of the play: the Vizier has become sexually impotent. At the end of the confrontation, the Vizier informs the Queen that the reason for his presence is that he needs her to ratify judicial sentences arrived at by himself and the Chief Justice.

At this point, Wahba introduces the Professor again as he comments on the latest development of infants born without ears. The Professor is concerned that the absence of ears is a devolution that will eventually lead to a race that cannot wear spectacles and will therefore lack scientists which he is certain will lead to a doomed and “unscientific” species. (151) The Queen presses the Professor until he reveals that he has created a drug extracted from the hearing neurons of animals which has proved successful at the animal trials stage. Once the Professor leaves to introduce the drug into the air, water and crops, the Queen prays to the Sumerian goddess Inanna, the deity responsible for love, war, divine law, politics and fertility. The Finance Minister then comes in and, after a brief humorous unit where he objects to the Queen’s ruling to place his right hand in a cast, in an effort to stop him from begging for alms –he was formerly a professional beggar– from all and sundry, the Queen interrogates him regarding his latest tax laws. The Finance Minister has imposed a “hearing tax” to be levied upon all deaf citizens and another tax on sex. The justification for the hearing tax is that “those who cannot hear create a lot of cacophony which disturbs the sleep of those who can hear.” (155) When the Queen objects because the entire city cannot hear anything, the Finance Minister believes his logic to be unassailable when he uses this rebuttal, setting the tone for the logic used by the three males of the ruling class, himself, the Vizier and the Chief Justice: “Did I tell them not to hear anything? Those who want to hear may hear and those who don’t don’t! What does that have to do with me? . . . The entire populace must pay. This is justice. The law knows no exceptions!” (155) The Queen then inquires about the sex tax and, once the Finance Minister explains that it is the best way to impose birth control, the Queen demands to know how the tax will be calculated. The Finance Minister says that the matter is in the hands of the Vizier who has installed a meter that calculates the number of times a man sleeps with a woman. The Queen then asks the Finance

Minister about the tax that he had abolished, the erotic dance tax. When the minister obfuscates, the Queen asks whether the minister abolished the tax because the powerful member of society are the ones who are dancing the most. (156) The meeting with the minister concludes with a prolonged offer of marriage and a comic revelation by the minister that, back when he was still a beggar, he once prayed to God that the people of the city would lose their hearing since they do not listen to his begging. (158).

The following unit of this second act is a trial scene that builds upon the faulty logic established during the Queen's meeting with the Finance Minister. The trial scene itself consists of a docket of three prisoners who are being tried on the basis of their dreams and how these dreams are interpreted by the Vizier and the Chief Justice. The Chief Justice (CJ) introduces the case as follows:

CJ: These people have been silent for over a month . . . When we observed that they have been silent for such a long time, we became suspicious and decided to arrest them in order to place them under surveillance. They remained silent . . . We sent them to the doctor who determined that each prisoner possessed a tongue inside their mouth . . . We were worried that their tongues may have disappeared, we did not want to be unfair. (160-1)

Wahba, having expounded on a situation where crimes are assumed through an illogical process of deduction and guesswork, then introduces the legal counsel, who is none other than the Town Crier/Guard who brought the Professor to Sumer at the beginning of the play. At this point the CJ informs the Queen, and by extension the audience, that he had recorded the dreams of the prisoners since "the stars" told him that dreams reveal the true intentions and desires of people. In an increasingly absurd sequence of dream interpretations, each prisoner is judged to have harboured the intention to, in turn, assassinate the Vizier, execute a coup and fornicate with the Queen, each charge tantamount to treason according to the Vizier and the CJ. Throughout this

unit, the Wahba portrays the Queen as the sympathetic co-counsel alongside the Town-crier. Incredulous from the beginning of the trials to the end, the Queen's connection to similarly minded members of the audience grows more intense. The Queen's rejection of the CJ's and Vizier's justice is clearest during the trial of the third prisoner who dreamed of eating a flower in the royal palace, interpreted by the CJ as sleeping with the Queen:

QUEEN: Before charging the man, don't you think you should have asked for my opinion?

CJ: Your Majesty's opinion is obvious, of course.

QUEEN: How would you know?

CJ: The matter is clear. Are you telling me that your Majesty would agree that this man may eat your Majesty?

QUEEN: Yes, I would agree.

CJ: Sexually? Sexually, O Queen?

QUEEN: That is exactly what I mean. He doesn't look half bad. (167)

Wahba has here created a situation where the Queen has subscribed to the absurd dream interpretation and used that to subvert the CJ's judgment. By championing the clearly innocent prisoners, Wahba is presenting his audience with an unmistakable portrait of a figure of authority combatting corruption from within. The trial and the second act end with the Professor announcing that his drug worked, only for those present to realise that the people now can hear but have lost their ability to speak. The curtain falls as the Vizier laughs with joy and the Queen faints.

The third act begins with the Queen and her lady-in-waiting observing the newly silent population from the balcony of the palace. The Queen summarizes the new situation:

QUEEN: Logs no longer make a sound when they're chopped. When a rock falls upon another rock, it sounds like a gust of wind just fell upon another. The waterfall no longer burbles. The birds seem like they found out about the tragedy of man and are participating in it. Birds no longer sing on the trees. The animals. The dogs we grew accustomed to hear at dawn and throughout the night have lost their ability to bark. A city of the dead. Only these dead eat and sleep and obey the orders of the Vizier. (171)

The Queen's depiction of the new status of the city as tragic is not shared by her lady-in waiting, who finds the Queen's attitude to be exaggerated. Panicking as a result of the sudden changes, the Finance Minister (FM) decides to resign and return to his profession of begging. Contemplating his future, he asks the Queen how she feels he will be treated by the population:

FM: Do you think, once I return to begging, the people will be kind to me and keep me fed?

QUEEN: That depends on how kind you were to them when you were finance minister.

FM: That is a separate issue. When people are kind to me, they are doing so with their money, which they are free to spend as they please. But, as an official, I am responsible for public monies. How could I have been generous with those funds?

QUEEN: Responsible for whose money?

FM: The city's money. The people's money.

QUEEN: Did the people tell you to impose all of these taxes upon them?

FM: It is for their own good. For the good of the people.

QUEEN: Stop lying! For the good of the people? Or for your own good and the good of your cronies?

FM: I took nothing for myself. As you can see, I am leaving with the same garment. Unchanged by time!

*(The Queen approaches him and feels the patches on his clothes.)*

QUEEN: And what's inside these patches? (174)

This exchange exposes the corruption of the FM in financial terms, his abuse of power and the embezzlement of public funds. The FM repeats his marriage proposal to the Queen and tries to persuade her to return to prostitution. The FM advises the Queen that her asking price will now be higher than before as she will charge customers as a former Queen. The Professor then enters with his scientific findings, all of which indicate that the city is in the most unfavourable chemical, botanical, geological, and topographical context for a city. Nevertheless, the Professor insists that the reason for the affliction of the city lies in its history. Wahba alludes to the Quran and anachronistic Abrahamic scripture in general when the Professor explains his theory:

PROF: The matter is quite simple. A few years ago, God sent an expedition of prophets to visit the world and observe the circumstances of the people. This expedition came to your city and spent some time. The expedition discovered that the people of the city, overwhelmingly, did not use their sense of hearing. Everyone talks and nobody listens.



The prophets preached. Nobody listened. They offered advice. Nobody listened. They warned the people. Nobody listened. When the prophets returned, they submitted a report stating that the people have relinquished their sense of hearing in this city. A divine decree was issued that these people should only have four senses from that point onwards since they are shunning the fifth sense. That's all. (176)

As I shall argue during the application of my criteria, this explanation, antagonizing as it does both those in power as well as the people, demonstrates Wahba's avoidance of exonerating any segment of society from the blame for the 1967 defeat. Wahba deftly even incriminates the Professor himself through this theory. To confirm the Professor's culpability, despite arriving at the city after the fact, Wahba shows us how this expert's flawed logic is compounded by solution he suggests and the prevarication he later employs:

QUEEN: So this is not a plague?

PROF: This is a divine decree.

QUEEN: And what can cancel this decree? What can restore people's hearing without losing anything?

PROF: Another divine decree repeals the first decree.

QUEEN: And how do we get that second decree?

PROF: He who issued the first decree must issue the second decree.

QUEEN: And how do we get God to issue the second decree.

PROF: That is not in the history books. But logically, it is all in the hands of the people.

QUEEN: Meaning?

PROF: People's actions caused God's first decree. They must perform different action for God to issue a different decree. (176-7)

The Professor is offering a theory predicated upon his reading of the city's history once he had exhausted all the natural sciences. Even if the audience suspends their disbelief altogether, it is difficult to accept the Professor's polymath expertise in light of the critical condition of Sumer's population. The Queen may be excused for relying upon the Professor's judgment, even though her knowledge of his existence and qualifications is not revealed throughout the play. The Professor then repeats his earlier question and demands to understand why the Queen wants the people to be cured. The Queen protests that she loathes the tyranny of the Vizier and the

corruption of the FM and CJ, but the Professor presses further, reminding her that tyranny and Viziers such as the present one have always existed, to which the Queen responds:

QUEEN: At least those used to pretend to be just. They feared public opinion. But tyrants now don't care. They boast of their tyranny. They are safe in the knowledge that there is no one to hear them. Even those who hear them can't do anything because they can no longer make a sound . . . I prefer to be a prostitute in a country that hears and speaks than to be a Queen over a country that cannot hear or speak. (177-8)

The Vizier enters to interrupt the Queen's frustration. Despite being ill at ease with the presence of the Professor in Act Two, the Vizier now expresses, in religious terms (179) his pleasure with the results of the drug. The Vizier's source of happiness is the status of being the recipient of absolute obedience without the inconvenience of having to listen to the people. The Vizier infuriates the Queen with his repeated claim that he does not need to listen to the people because he knows what is good for these "children" (179) better than they do. The Vizier displays his power and wiles by ushering in a group of his supporters who could still speak and chant their support for him. He had prohibited these particular supporters from taking the Professor's drug. As the third and last act draws to an end, Sumer's population is split into a mute faction and a deaf faction. The Professor creates a new drug that restores the speech and deprives of hearing, reverting the population to its former state. The Queen is forced to choose for her people which sense they should forfeit, a choice she compares to murder by poison or stabbing. The split factions in the city lead to fights breaking out and ten deaths (184), a situation that pressures the Queen to make a decision faster. The Vizier insults the citizens, who, since they can now hear the insults, try to attack the Vizier who changes his mind and decides that he would benefit more from a deaf population. The Town Crier is brought in charged with rousing the population. He admits that he was narrating the true events of the past years, exposing the corruption and abuse of power at the top of the political hierarchy. The Vizier and the FM ratify the death sentence for

the Town Crier while the Queen cancels that decision. The Vizier instructs the Professor to make the population deaf again in order to retain his ability to insult the people as he pleases. The Professor stipulates that he will only administer the drug if the Vizier resigns. News arrives that the hearing population has amassed in the streets and are silently heading towards the Palace with fury in their eyes (192). The people silently and angrily encircle the Vizier, the FM and the CJ. Suddenly the people get their voices back and explode in chants of condemnation of the three men. The Professor takes back the Queen and her Lady-in waiting to the present and the Town Crier stays behind to “tell the story to those who are yet to be born (195).

#### **4.9 Criticism of *The Professor*:**

A short paragraph by Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt’s Nobel Laureate, in the state run daily, *Al Ahrām* is the only piece of critical writing I was able to find about *The Professor*. In this short opinion box, titled “A Bright Light in a Dark Night”, Mahfouz, mainly concerned with the script and its ideas, urges the theatre community to emulate *The Professor* after studying the elements that made it successful. I shall translate the entirety of the paragraph here:

I have been told that *The Professor*, by Mr Sa’ad Eldin Wahba, has achieved popular success, in addition to its artistic success, and in so doing, has demolished the barrier of failure that has long surrounded serious theatre. Failure which we grew accustomed to attributing to the economic difficulties that afflicted the “serious theatre” audience and restricted their evening entertainment to sitting in front of the television set, in addition to the decline in artistic education of the new generations. But the success of *The Professor* categorically demonstrates that there is still amongst the audience that which may support the success of a play –or more– if that play excites their interests and addresses their mind and soul. Consequently, critics and thinkers must study this play and identify the reasons for its success. Perhaps the reasons for the recent decline in theatre activity about which we complained are not those we imagined, or maybe not those reasons alone, but rather reasons related to a change in taste and vision as well as the need for a new voice and tone. We are now waiting for the contemporaries of Sa’ad Eldin Wahba, those who shared a former wave of success with him, to try their luck once again alongside the new

generations of writers in order to reinstate the serious theatre and re-establish the balance between the arts theatre and the popular theatre. That balance does not entail talking down to the audience, but rather by presenting the comedy that the masses love, perhaps by injecting doses of farce in order to make the subject more palatable. Charlie Chaplin's later works achieved this as did Naguib al-Rihani. In return for these legitimate [comic] concessions, [writers] will supply thoughts and a vision, performing a glorious role in developing and elevating [the audience], ultimately ending this sharp theatre duality or at least bringing the two poles closer. Is that not a mission worthy of a group of people who emerged from the public and have given up their lives for the public? (Mahfouz, 1981)

Focusing on popular and artistic success, Mahfouz attributes those successes to the script, since he is addressing playwrights and critics, on whose shoulders he places the burden of reviving what he calls "serious theatre". Performance collaborators such as actors, directors and producers are conspicuously absent from the formula of success that Mahfouz envisions. Even when he mentions Charlie Chaplin and Naguib al-Rihani, it is in their capacity as writers. There is no particular focus on the script of *The Professor*, but rather the broad dramaturgical approach that Wahba employed. Mahfouz mentions "farce", which is a fundamental element of the dramaturgy of *The Professor*, but he recommends it to playwrights as a sugar-coating that makes a difficult or thorny topic more "palatable". As I shall argue, that is only one of the ways that Wahba uses farce. Mahfouz's allusion to Chaplin and al-Rihani, and particularly al-Rihani, is a complex anti-revolutionary suggestion. As I argued in Chapter 1, al-Rihani, despite playing a substantial role in popularising theatre alongside Tawfiq Al-Hakim, he similarly played a prominent role in disengaging theatre from the political and socioeconomic realities of the Egyptian population. Whereas it is true that Mahfouz is only mentioning al-Rihani in the context of his use of farce, he could have used a revolutionary Marxist such as Ashour, whose dramaturgical technique and subject matter are progressive. Despite his caveat that writers should not talk down to the audience, Mahfouz sees the audience as students who need to be taught, patients who need the medicine to be "palatable". Mahfouz also sees popular success as a measure of a play's

performance, a commercial perspective that conflicts directly with my criteria for a revolutionary play. This Mahfouz uses a tone and approach that are fundamentally anti-revolutionary.

Mahfouz's piece is extremely valuable in providing a perspective on the state of what he calls "serious" theatre in 1980. Mahfouz, one of the most prolific screenwriters and by far the most prolific novelist in Egyptian history, with eight plays to his name, all written after the 1967 defeat, possesses a strong vantage point and access to information which enable him to supply his readers with an informed judgement on the state of theatre in general. While Mahfouz does not define "serious" theatre, he does contrast it with theatre that does not "excite the interests of the audience" and does not possess "thoughts and a vision" that does not play a role in "developing and elevating" the audience. Mahfouz, like Sadat and the political figures mentioned earlier in this section, believes that the theatre is a highly influential tool of social change. As far as Mahfouz is concerned, *The Professor* is an example of a return to "successful" socially engaged theatre.

#### **4.10 Applying the six criteria:**

*The Professor*'s framing prologue suggests to the audience that the answers to the most paradoxical questions may be found in history. This prologue structurally mirrors Communiqué number 1, the preamble to the six tenets of the 1952 revolution. The prologue is to the play what Communiqué number 1 is to the tenets of the revolution. As such, *The Professor* immediately satisfies my first criterion in a deft and nuanced manner. In that communiqué, read by Anwar Sadat and signed by General Mohammed Naguib, the RCC depicts the revolution as a response to corruption in the military high command, which had caused the 1948 defeat against Israel (Sadat and Naguib, 1952). The revolutionary act is formulated as a purely military act of "self-

purgation” from an elite that is described as being replete with individuals who are “ignorant, corrupt, or traitors” (Sadat and Naguib, 1952). This communique, so narrow in its focus, unfolds and leads to the comprehensive six tenets of the revolution. The prologue of *The Professor* follows the same trajectory by starting with a patient who will eventually be either mute or deaf and unfolding into the play’s full-scale analysis of the socioeconomic and political dilemmas of Ancient Sumer. Wahba’s dramaturgical emulation of the revolution’s first communique subliminally transitions the audience into interrogating the socio-political aspects of the revolutionary tenets using a trauma as a springboard. As Wahba has previously done in the majority of his plays, the political symbolism mirrors a reality that is accessible to the audience. The patient who has suffered the traumatic shock necessitating a surgical procedure (Wahba 1996, p. 114) represents the Egyptian people. The trauma represents the defeat of the Six-Day War, commonly known in the Arab world as *El Naksa (The Relapse)*. The operation that the Professor needs to perform represents the opportunity cost and the sacrifice needed if resurgence is to happen. In the absence of a democratic process, everyone makes decisions for the comatose patient. The Professor, a foreigner sought out to help with a domestic catastrophe, could be an allusion to Swedish UN Envoy Gunnar Jarring or the Soviet military personnel who arrived in Egypt to retrain the Egyptian military after the 1967 defeat. The Professor’s immediate abduction to the first historical period to which he appeals, ancient Sumer, is not an obvious choice for an Egyptian play, but the professor chooses it since it is older than the earliest period of the Pharaohs (116). The choice of Sumer may also reflect the pressing need for new paradigms, a need that reflects Egypt’s need to go beyond the pan-Arab and/or nationalist rhetoric that paradoxically coexisted and pervaded the socio-political landscape of Egypt before the 1967 defeat. *The Professor* is not, however, a precise allegorical drama where every element mirrors a

corresponding reality. Wahba conflates the transformative announcements that shaped post-1952 Egyptian life and parodies them in the form of the announcements by the Vizier, the Chief Justice and the finance minister. Throughout the play, Wahba shows us how the people of Sumer are merely recipients of orders from above which they silently follow and, being deaf, cannot hear each other's protestations if they have any, a state that elates the de facto ruling trio of men. In Act One, for example, as the Queen walks the Professor through the city, Wahba sketches a state where all the arts have disappeared except for erotic dancing (131), where religious preachers have become street performing fire eaters (135), where the people cheer for unjust taxes (137) and unfair court sentences and where prisoners no longer make a sound when flogged because there is nobody to hear their screams. (141) Not only is Wahba engaging with the tenets of the 1952 revolution structurally, by parodying the decrees that shaped the lives of the people of Egypt, he is also interrogating the fourth and sixth tenets that had promised democracy and social justice (Sadat, 23 July, 1952). Throughout the first act in particular, *The Professor* is a play that symbolically portrays the Egyptian population as one that had been stripped of the democratic right to listen to itself, as had been promised in the fourth tenet, a political disability that deprives the people of the social justice that had been promised in the sixth tenet.

*The Professor* depicts the exploitation of the entire population's weaknesses, going beyond the concern for the working class highlighted in the 1962 National Charter. In every scene of the play, there is a transaction that results in the exploitation of the masses by the ruling elite. The most surprising exploitation, both in terms of the play's plot and its symbolism, is Wahba's revelation that the Queen had initially agreed to the tyrannical rule of the people by abusing their hearing disability, but that her change of heart was a recent matter (146). The

surprising element of that exploitation is that the Queen is portrayed as the defender of the people and, symbolically, Gamal Abdel Nasser. This added layer of fallibility on the part of the Queen and Nasser further distances *The Professor* from its predecessors, especially those written before the 1967 defeat, and imbues the messaging with a tone of awakening on the part of Wahba. Wahba is holding Nasser accountable to the people on the terms of Nasser's own National Charter. Within that Charter, Nasser describes the two characteristics of the revolutionary act, popularity and progressivism, in the following terms:

The true value of revolution is measured in terms of its popularity, the extent to which it represents the wider populace. The extent to which it can mobilise the masses to recreate the future. And the extent to which it can provide the masses with the ability to impose their will upon life itself. . . Progressivism is the objective of revolution. Material and social repressiveness are the true instigators of the will to change and the full-powered and resolute transition from the status quo ante to the desired status quo fuelled by hope. (Nasser 1962, p.49)

The Queen's prayer for her people echoes the above excerpt from the National Charter:

QUEEN: My love. My goddess. Inanna. Help me. So that the people can get their hearing back. So that they can be people again. So that they can love each other. And fear for each other. So that they can plant the fields green again. So that they can dig wells and strike water. So that they can hear the sparrows and the bulbuls. So that they feel the life that praises you. O Inanna, most knowledgeable of all the deities, goddess of love and care and kindness and beauty. Make them worship you with their hearts and senses, my beloved Inanna. In the name of your glory and people's love, let people love each other as much as they love you. (Wahba 1996, p.152)

The Queen's prayer, revealing her to be either a true believer in the Sumerian divine power, or an intensely desperate supplicant to abstract destiny, is a tool by which Wahba places this character in a category unto herself. She is the only character, apart from the Professor in the prologue, to whom Wahba affords a soliloquy. This vulnerability with which Wahba imbues the Queen, along with the oddity that she prays for others and does not ask for anything for herself, portray the Queen as a virtuous ruler, a characterization Wahba permanently attributed to Nasser



(Abdel Meguid 1997, p.228). The Queen's prayer, where restored hearing may be understood to represent restored dignity and freedom, also echoes Nasser's 1962 optimism about the future and belief in the ability of the masses to emancipate themselves and combat imperial hegemony. Despite not addressing the administrative economics of public versus private sector, *The Professor's* treatment of the exploitation of the working class demonstrates that the purpose of its performance is in keeping with the spirit of the 1962 National Charter.

Wahba uses the concept of time and space displacement to remove the eponymous character from the restrictions of action, time and place customarily placed upon Egyptian playwrights by critics such as Rashad Rushdy. As we have seen before, this is not the first time for Wahba to violate the Egyptian understanding of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The transition from the prologue to the first act displaces the Professor from his time to thousands of years earlier; from his place in Egypt to Ancient Sumer; and from his microcosm action of treating the patient to the macrocosm mission of treating an entire population. As he did with *Nails*, Wahba also ends *The Professor* on a positive and optimistic note, a clear violation of the Egyptian interpretation of the requirements of a tragic plot. Wahba seems content to problematise the generic classification of his plays, especially his later works. Rashad Rushdy's view of the prologue of a play stipulates that

The dramatic beginning then is an inevitable stage. In modern criticism, we call it "the situation", or the set of circumstances that make it inevitable for a certain action to happen and, it is therefore unavoidable for us to begin before it. (Rushdy 2000, p. 18-19)

Wahba's prologue is not structurally indispensable from Rushdy's perspective. It explains the identity of the Professor and links the Wahba's present to the timeline of the play, but that prologue can be cut without any structural consequences to the play. Should the play be set entirely in Ancient Sumer, Rushdy and the Egyptian Aristotelians would have praised it for

conforming to their understanding of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Those same critics, however, would have made the case that Wahba at least used their understanding of an Aristotelian plot with a beginning, middle and end along with flawed main characters. In terms of my third criterion for an Egyptian revolutionary play, Wahba broke the rules that guided his Egyptian contemporaries' understanding of a fair portion of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a trend he began with *Nails* and developed in *The Professor*.

Wahba's insistence on performing his plays at the National Theatre under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture indicates his steadfast commitment to the modest paying public sector rather than the vastly more lucrative private sector. With *The Professor*, Wahba is continuing another trend he began with *Nails*, that of distancing himself from the formula of his 1962-67 plays that retrospectively critiqued the past, and instead continued the trajectory of challenging and interrogating the present. As with *Nails*, and in what appears to be the intellectual symptom of the trauma caused by the 1967 defeat, Wahba is using *The Professor* to intellectually mobilise the society, inciting them to look into their history for solutions to their contemporary problems. *The Professor* is not the light comedy of Samir Khafagy's United Artists Troupe, adapting and diluting the works of Shaw and Coward through box-office redefining musicals. *The Professor* avoids simple symbols and reductionist reasoning about the state of contemporary socio-politics. The trial scene in Act Two, for example, is presaged by an exchange that confirms the absurd tone of the upcoming sequence:

QUEEN: Let us proceed. The demands of the people come first. Any objections?

VIZIER: I object. The people are extremely happy and haven't got any demands. We should look at our demands of the people.

QUEEN: How is it possible for the people not to have any demands?

VIZIER: They are greedy and avaricious people who are impossible to satisfy. They have enormous bellies that can never be filled. Our duty is not to go along with their whims but to teach them the virtue of contentedness.

MINISTER OF FINANCE: Contentedness is a gift that keeps on giving. (Wahba 1996, p. 159)

The role reversal and inverted logic that permeates this exchange depicts a situation where the ruling class see themselves as holding the moral high ground as well as the elevated position of teachers of the population. Given that Wahba wrote *The Professor* in Nasser's time, this perspective is both brave and ambitious since there was nothing to stop the security forces from politically detaining the playwright along with scores of his peers who had been already detained for far less obvious symbolism.<sup>38</sup> The paternalistic perspective depicted in the above exchange may have been acceptable to a pre-1967 defeat audience that might have had faith in the ruling class whom they saw as better informed, but a 1969 audience whose students and factory workers spent 1968 in mass protests would be sceptical. Wahba also portrays the Queen as a sceptic in the midst of the ruling class. Yet again Wahba consolidates the link between the dissenting Queen and the potentially subversive members of the audience, this time through their shared doubt of the omniscience of those in power. This level of complexity and political post-mortem, whereby the symbolism may be understood in a variety of ways, especially vis-à-vis the position of Gamal Abdel Nasser, is consistent with the spirit of texts such as the National Charter as well as Lenin's denouncement of Bourgeois intellectual individualism and profiteering (Lenin 1967, cited in Dukore 1974, p.928). By remaining faithful to the National Theatre and shunning the path to profit adopted by many of the luminaries of the National Theatre Troupe, Wahba breathes life into Lenin's words:

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<sup>38</sup> Political detention for writers, artists and intellectuals was rampant after 1952 and usually came in waves. In the late 1950s, the main targets were Marxist writers such as Alfred Farag and Yusuf Idris. In the 1960s, the arrests targeted dissenters in general, including Naguib Surur and Ahmed Fuad Nigm.

Today literature, even that published “legally,” can be nine-tenths party literature. It must become party literature. In contradistinction to bourgeois customs, to the profit-making, commercialised bourgeois press, to bourgeois literary careerism and individualism, “aristocratic anarchism and drive for profit, the socialist proletariat must put forward the principle of *party literature* . . . Literature must become *part* of the common cause of the proletariat . . . a component of organized, planned and integrated social-democratic party work . . . Everyone is free to write and say whatever he likes, without any restrictions. But every voluntary association (including the party) is also free to expel members who use the name of the party to advocate antiparty views. (928-9)

By using symbolism to brand the Nasser regime as corrupt former bandits, prostitutes and beggars, Wahba is mounting a challenge to the state censor. Wahba’s choice of symbolism distances him from Lenin’s “careerism”. Additionally, as a member of the Arab Socialist Union, Egypt’s sole active political structure at the time, and an Undersecretary of Culture, Wahba is challenging the status quo from within. Predictably, once *The Professor* was finally performed and subsequently banned, Sadat transferred Wahba away from the Ministry of Culture and to the lower profile department of Local Councils, whereupon the playwright promptly resigned his governmental post (Abdel Majid 1997, p. 238). *The Professor* satisfies my fourth criterion by providing, albeit eleven years after Wahba had originally intended, a play that exists to eradicate the course of the revolution and eventually further its aims.



Image 4: Picture from The Caption reads: “Shaaban Hafez, President of the Republic’s Student Union, delivers a speech in the presence of the President [of Egypt] (Bibalex, 2014).





Image 5: Centre Heading Reads: “The President of the Student Union apologizes to Sadat”. Left Heading reads: “A father’s advice to the President [of the Republic] to his sons, the students”. (Bibalex, 2014).





Image 6: Headline reads: “In 1974, we could not afford the price of a loaf of bread. Abdel Nasser told me: ‘this country is governed by the power centres’”. Caption reads: “The President displays to the students a political pamphlet by the Nasserists of Ain Shams University and tells them ‘There is no contradiction between me and Abdel Nasser.’”. (Bibalex, 2014)

The eleven-year gap that separated the penning of *The Professor* from its eventual performance at the National Theatre demonstrates that, even as late as 1980, Wahba still enjoyed an esteemed position in the state-owned theatre. The plot, themes and political symbolism of the play may be viewed as seditious, especially by Sadat, a President not known for accepting even subtle criticism. The snippets from Egyptian Daily Newspapers *Al Akhbar* (Bibalex.org, 2014) show a president who not only urges students to avoid party politics and political activity, but also engages in public chastisement of the representatives of Egypt’s student unions, eventually attempting to soften his tone by referring to himself in the third person as the father of all students. Wahba portrays Sadat’s paternalistic attitude, albeit eight years before the event,

through the Vizier's declaration that "the people are like children who need an elder to look after their affairs" (179). As Wahba was challenging the censor when he wrote the play in 1969, so is the National Theatre challenging Sadat by producing a play that represents the ruling class as corrupt embezzlers and tyrants. As we saw earlier, Sadat refused to listen when told by his Minister of Culture that the play was written before his presidency. The National Theatre's reading committee would not have been surprised by Sadat's aggressive reaction of banning the play since this was the same president who engaged in public harangues such as the one reported on above in February 1977 (Bibalex.org, 2014). Such was the loyalty and following Wahba and his revolutionary writing had generated in the Egyptian National Theatre.

Despite the remote symbolic setting of Ancient Sumer Wahba chose for *The Professor*, the play still manages to communicate the structures of feeling of the post-1967 period in Egypt. As Wahba had done with *Nails*, he keeps the subaltern and their strife as a constant that he probes, exposing the relationship between the ruling elite and the oppressed. The hegemony of the rulers is so complete in the play that they can observe the private lives of the citizens at will. The Queen's walk with the Professor begins with the most intimate invasion of privacy, a voyeuristic intrusion that is taken for granted by all the characters. This allusion to the voyeuristic surveillance state that Nasser had declared to have fallen after the defeat of 1967 communicates the feeling of the time in Egypt that surveillance is acceptable if used by the virtuous to help resolve a crisis. This issue of surveillance is so deft and subtle that it is difficult to discern Wahba's stance just by analysing the play. The consequence of the surveillance is that the Professor is able to gather the data needed to make the cure that eventually resolves the crisis at the end of the play and liberates the citizens of Sumer. This favourable outcome of an invasion of privacy might be a reflection of the celebration by many sectors of Egyptian society until

today of the role of the General Intelligence Service in Egyptian life.<sup>39</sup> Also using the same technique used in *Nails*, Wahba presents his audience with the duality with which they seem to be facing their post-1967 realities; the citizens of Sumer are vocally miserable yet optically elated. The vocal misery is inconsequential in their daily lives since they cannot hear each other, yet, audible to the Professor, is instrumental to overcoming the catastrophe. The apparent elation, a symptom of duplicity intended to ameliorate the catastrophe, is behaviour that Wahba condemns since it delays the cure. By dramatising the duality of the citizens, albeit in an Ancient Sumerian guise, Wahba provides future audiences with a “continuity of experience” (Williams 1987, p.17) that communicates the attitude of the post-1967 defeat. Wahba is warning his audience that their ambivalence about the causes of the 1967 defeat will be counterproductive while simultaneously communicating to future generations the “feel” (19) of the period. That feel is not distorted by the Sumerian setting since Wahba retains a distinct and easily identifiable colloquial Egyptian dialect throughout the play. Even in moments when some characters use Classical Arabic, such as the judgements of the Minister of Justice (160) or the announcements of the finance minister (137), there is an awkwardness that is characteristic of uneducated Egyptians who attempt to speak the elevated language. That linguistic consistency, anchoring the audience as it does, along with the structure of *The Professor*’s plot and themes, help the play to emulate *Nails* and avoid the “complexity of historical change” (Williams 1987, p.20). By setting the play in Ancient Sumer, Wahba has exploited the concepts of anachronism and defamiliarisation to the extent that it becomes unavoidable to see the play as anything other than

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<sup>39</sup> Until today, the most watched Egyptian television series include multi-season sagas such as *Raafat al-Haggan* (1987 - 1992) and *Dumoo’ fi ‘oyoon Waqeha* (1980). Both series have generated countless nationalistic and comic memes and are memorised, soundtracks included, by Egyptians of all ages. Both successful transmitters of the “continuity of experience” of their settings, these series gain their legitimacy by stressing that their plots are faithfully narrated “min malaffat al mokhabarat al ‘aama” (“From the files of the General Intelligence Service”).



an allegory mirroring Egypt's psychological and socio-political realities in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat. *The Professor's* transmission of Egypt's post-1967 structures of feeling satisfies my sixth and final criterion for a revolutionary Egyptian play.

Despite beginning his playwriting career with safe texts that critiqued the past and did not antagonize anyone in a position of power, Wahba emerged from the 1967 defeat with a pen that revolutionised him as a writer and revived the critical spirit Ashour had represented in the 1950s. Willing to trade in fame, influence and box-office success for a revolutionary voice and the ire of the state, Wahba accepted the censorship of his plays and, rather than revert to his safe voice, persevered and wrote even more daring plays. *Nails* appeared to be more of the same safe dramaturgy, but its symbolic engagement with Wahba's present demonstrated his willingness to violate the boundaries set by the state. *The Professor* provokes the establishment in the form of the President into the position of defending the boundaries placed on playwrights to the extent of imposing an outright ban on the play that is still in force today. Like Ashour, Wahba was criticising the practices of the state from within its bureaucracy. This insider's vantage point imbues Wahba's writing with a revolutionary quality that may be mistaken for seditious subliminal telegraphing, but it may also have been the position that kept him out of prison. The two revolutionary plays I have analysed, symbolic and disguised as they were, began the decline of Wahba's playwriting career; by the mid-1970s, Wahba had shifted his efforts from writing to activism and the representation of artists in the form of presiding over cinema, theatre and arts councils and representative bodies. While not being as direct as Ashour, Wahba's structural contribution to the revolutionary form is significant and, as with Ashour, provides opposition to the counterrevolutionary dramaturgy of Tawfiq Al-Hakim.

## Conclusion

The research effort upon which this thesis is based intended to explore the functions that were ascribed to Egyptian plays that were written in the post-July 1952 era of socio-political transition and revolutionary flux. My hypothesis was that an Egyptian play composed after the Free Officers' movement of 1952 must engage, entertain and educate audiences, subvert and expose anti-revolutionary efforts while sustaining recognisably indigenous structures of feeling that help deliver the culture from the hegemony of the former colonisers. Before choosing a sample of plays that would represent disparate approaches to post-1952 playwriting, I needed to create a method of exploring texts that would reveal the extent to which an Egyptian play interacted with the revolutionary structures, moods and political currents of the period (1952-1974). At the most fundamental level, I had to create a theory of revolutionary Egyptian playwriting. I defined revolutionary writing in terms of foundational texts of the 1952 movement and the Marxist texts that shaped my own understanding of revolutionary playwriting alongside the 1962 Egyptian National Charter. I used these texts to create six criteria that helped me to gauge the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary intensity of Egyptian plays.

The need for this study, as I explained in the Introduction, is rooted in the absence of state support for theatre activities which, in turn, caused a dearth of new local playwrights, archiving, and theory. State funding, drastically cut after the 1974 Open Door Economic Policy, was the pillar that supported the National Theatre and its troupe. In this thesis, I critically surveyed the history of Egyptian theatre from the mid-nineteenth century till the middle of the 1970s. I demonstrated that the various currents that buffeted the activities of the various public and private troupes were either progressive or regressive currents. I showed that revolutionary

playwrights were not only progressive, but also concerned with Egyptian socioeconomic and political issues. Conversely, counter-revolutionary playwrights were regressive and, even when they tackled socioeconomic and political issues, they did so with nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary past. My analysis and contextualisation showed that both progressive revolutionary and regressive counter-revolutionary playwrights received state support, transforming the state theatre into an ersatz parliament where both perspectives about the Nasserist world used the theatre as a platform.

In the introduction, I critically surveyed the biographies and reasons for choosing the three playwrights whose works and politics I would go on to discuss. I chose Al-Hakim because of his reputational dominance through his 70 plays and ubiquitousness as well as the ambivalence of his stance towards the 1952 movement. I chose ‘Ashour as the first Egyptian playwright to break the structural, thematic and semiotic rules of playwriting by jettisoning the Aristotelian structure, exploring controversial socioeconomic as well as political problems and crafting dialogue that mirrored the language of the people. Finally, I chose Wahba as the representative of evolving revolutionary dramaturgy. Wahba went from being a playwright who conformed to the successful dramaturgy and topics of his time to a controversial and contemporaneously engaged author whose work was banned by the Egyptian president.

Later in the introduction, I used the Nasserist and Marxist texts that informed my positionality to craft the theoretical lens with which I would analyse the works of the three playwrights in the subsequent chapters. I used the six tenets of the 1952 Free Officers movement as the base of my framework, providing the roots of the announced 1952 revolutionary intentions. Those six tenets, led me to use their chronological extension, the 1962 National Charter. The Charter, behaving as a Nasserist manifesto and detailing the revolutionary, anti-

imperial and Arab-socialist initiatives that Nasser intended to permeate and transform Egyptian society. The Marxist texts included Antonio Gramsci's writings about cultural hegemony, especially the role of the state in disseminating cultural messaging. I demonstrated that a revolutionary Egyptian play and playwright could only play transformative cultural roles if they generated a substantial and sustained following in the state-owned theatre. I also added the writings of Lenin about party literature and the twin requirements that cultural output and works of art must, in a revolutionary context, further the aims of the revolution rather than personally financially enrich the author (Lenin 1938). The final Marxist element came from Raymond Williams and addressed the need for a revolutionary play to communicate the "structures of feeling", "lived experience", "semantics" or "tonality" of its period (Williams 1987). To these Marxist and Nasserist components of my theoretical lens, I added, through Rashad Rushdy's writings (1976), the Egyptian understanding of Aristotle's *Poetics* as they were applied in the 1950s and 1960s. The three Egyptian playwrights had a definite attitude towards the *Poetics* and I asserted that a revolutionary Egyptian playwright would reject the pre-1952 conformity to key aspects of the *Poetics* such as the unities and linear plot structure.

Chapter one was a critical survey of the history of Egyptian theatre that contextualised the three playwrights of this thesis. I chose to start from the earliest recorded beginnings of Ibn Daniyal's plays in the 13th century and stopped immediately before the 1952 Free Officers movement. The survey demonstrated that, due to censorship and emulation of foreign dramatists, the act of playwriting in Egypt was consistently socio-politically disengaged from the realities of the people. The 19th and early 20th centuries in particular were periods that witnessed the dominance of translated and adapted European plays over the few indigenous Egyptian texts that treated Egyptian issues. Chapter one contextualised the theoretical and performance histories of

Egyptian theatre while exemplifying the impact of these histories on playwriting. Using the examples of playwrights such as Farah Antun, Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad Taymour and Mahmud Taymur, this chapter demonstrated that a proto-revolutionary spirit existed before 1952. These playwrights, writing as they did about topics lifted out of the average person's reality and in a language that approached the everyday vernacular, stood out from the world of adapted European texts that provided audiences with escapism. The chapter does not depict the realism of Ramzi and Antun as superior to the adapted texts produced by the Naguib al-Rihani, Ali al-Kassar and Yousuf Wahbi troupes but rather as the rare progressive alternatives that I would view as proto-revolutionary.

Part of the theoretical contextualisation was the distinction I emphasised between the two main schools of Egyptian theatre history: the *Samer* school that insists that Egypt had known theatre since Ibn Daniyal, and the European import school that traces the beginnings of Egyptian theatre back to Francophone theatre imported from the Levant region. The distinction between those two schools is significant because, as I would go on to show in the subsequent chapters, each of the playwrights interacted with Egypt's theatrical past in a manner that mirrored their attitudes towards the revolution.

Chapter one then introduces the post-1952 theatre scene in general and playwriting in particular as a world in which newfound freedoms and financial support gave rise to texts that indulged in socio-political discourse. The argument is that state sponsorship of the theatre through the newly formed Ministry of Culture paved the way for revolutionary writing in terms of content and form. The Ahmed Hamroush era of the National Theatre revived reading committees with more realistic and theatre-minded objectives replacing the literary objectives of the committees of the 1930s. The chapter demonstrates the extent to which the Nasserist era state

theatre transitioned from relying on translations and adaptations of the European classics to becoming the home of a growing repertoire of new original Egyptian plays penned by a new breed of Egyptian playwrights.

Chapter two posits my theory that Al-Hakim, despite his prolific output and his attempts at creating a “third language” and a “template” for the Egyptian theatre, has created counter-revolutionary texts as exemplified by *The Deal* (1956). I foreground my argument with a critical review of favourable and unfavourable scholarship about Al-Hakim’s oeuvre in general and *The Deal* in particular. Using the existing criticism of Al-Hakim, I demonstrated that he invested a considerable amount of effort to appear as an ivory-tower intellectual whose dramatic output was unprecedented in Egyptian theatre history and not necessarily made for the stage. This attitude, which Al-Hakim compared to European closet dramas, implied a revolutionary attitude towards playwriting in Egypt in terms of his pioneer status, purpose and form. The critics I have surveyed have, despite the respect and esteem they retain for Al-Hakim’s work, rejected his claim to pioneer status, and held disparate views regarding the playwright’s purpose and form. I next used close reading and historical contextualisation to analyse *The Deal*. The analysis of *The Deal* factored in the rural setting and the significance of Law 178 and its sweeping land redistribution and reform. I argued that Al-Hakim’s play depicted peasant ownership of land as a negative, a stance that ran contrary to that of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). I also used my close reading to demonstrate that Al-Hakim portrayed the peasantry as mischievous and not to be trusted, yet another perspective that contradicted every pronouncement and initiative of the Free Officers. The third element of the play that reveals Al-Hakim’s antipathy towards the post-1952 revolutionary ethos is his exoneration of the Belgian company that owns the land. Al-Hakim absolves this symbol of colonialism of all wrongdoing while assigning all blame to the young

woman who represented Egypt. Furthermore, Al-Hakim portrays the young couple as equally mischievous to their parents, a pessimistic view of the future that contradicts the optimism driving the Free Officers and their movement. *The Deal*, set before 1952, presents us with a situation where the peasant class is victorious, albeit temporarily. Al-Hakim's readers and audience were aware that, despite the victory, the aristocracy will eventually restore the status quo and most likely punish the peasants for their temerity. *The Deal* is an example of how Al-Hakim simultaneously addresses post-1952 issues while promoting the restoration of the pre-1952 counter-revolutionary view of the social, political and economic systems that had governed Egypt. Intertextually, and a key reason for which I chose *The Deal* as the representative Al-Hakim play, the playwright is implying that the 1952 revolution is as temporary as the victory of the peasants over the Bey.

I conclude chapter two by applying my six criteria to *The Deal* and demonstrating that despite appearing to satisfy many of them, it is a counter-revolutionary text. The play's engagement with four of the six tenets of the 1952 revolution compromises the integrity of the subaltern and victimises the colonial powers and their agents. By demonising the peasantry and their actions, Al-Hakim directly clashes with the revolutionary spirit of the Free Officers and later, the 1962 National charter in which Nasser had praised the efforts of the pre-1952 revolutionary leaderships. Al-Hakim specifically uses *The Deal* to target revolutionaries who display the desire to obtain liberty at any cost. The figures of authority of *The Deal*, such as the Bey, and Al-Hakim's preference for foreign and private ownership of land also run contrary to the spirit of the 1962 National Charter. Regarding the need for a revolutionary Egyptian play to break the rules of Aristotle's *Poetics* as understood by Egyptian scholars, Al-Hakim neither conforms to those rules nor does he break them. Instead, Al-Hakim creates a hybrid template

using the vehicle of his “third language” (Al-Hakim 1956b, p.161). *The Deal* may at first appear to further the aims of the revolution, but my analysis shows that it argues for prolonging colonialism and keeping Egyptians, especially the peasantry, disenfranchised. Furthermore, contrary to my Leninist criterion, Al-Hakim habitually published his plays and then allowed them to be performed, thus blurring his stance on personal financial enrichment. Al-Hakim blurs his stance further by writing a play that antagonises many of the audience members who watched his plays. This antagonism takes the form of ignoring the proletariat and demonising the peasantry. Finally, Al-Hakim’s “third language” deprives the play of the ability to communicate “structures of feeling” or “continuity of experience” (Williams 1987, p.17) that may have participated in the preservation of this historical period. I conclude chapter two by noting that Al-Hakim’s contempt for colloquial Arabic sees him blaming it for destroying the unity of the Arab world; a unity Arabs had enjoyed through classical Arabic. Al-Hakim’s separation of the unity of “spirit and thought” that classical Arabic afforded, and the “political union” attempted by Nasser (Al-Hakim 1966, p. 183), separates him from the Nasserist and colloquial-writing Ashour and Wahba.

In chapter three I introduced Nu’mān ‘Ashour as the pioneer of revolutionary Egyptian dramaturgy. I supported my claim by analysing three plays that exhibit the playwright’s socio-political engagement with contemporary Egyptian life and the development of that engagement over time. I foregrounded my analysis with a history of the playwright’s writing career and his interaction with the leadership of the National theatre. I also provided, before the analysis of each of the three plays I chose, a critical literature review of the scholarly and journalistic writings about ‘Ashour and his plays. After emphasising the uphill struggle and the obstacles with which ‘Ashour had to contend, I used close reading and contextualisation to analyse *Al*



*Maghmatis* (*The Trickcyclist*, 1950). After a summary of the play, I analysed three scenes that, along with the form and content of the play as a whole, demonstrated how ‘Ashour presented the theatre scene with a play that revolutionised playwriting and paved the way for a socio-politically engaged theatre such as that of Sa’ad Wahba.

I applied my six criteria to the play as a whole as well as to each of the three scenes. *Downstairs* (1957), ‘Ashour’s most commercially successful play, was the second play I analysed in this chapter. Whereas *The Trickcyclist* hinted at ‘Ashour’s revolutionary dramaturgy and subject matter, *Downstairs* was the play that saw him fully engage with the socio-political realities of post-1952 Egypt. This second full-length play by ‘Ashour, initially titled *Masr al-Gadida* (*The New Egypt*), sees ‘Ashour directly tackle social and economic stratification of the pre-1952 era persisting even after the Free Officers’ movement and its promise to eradicate inequality. ‘Ashour also uses this play to sharpen his revolutionary tone when engaging with class struggles, a tone that opposes the “social dualism” (Amin 2001, p. 143) employed by dramatists of the pre-1952 theatre such as Tawfiq Al-Hakim. *Downstairs* engages with my six criteria and represents a leap in ‘Ashour’s revolutionary dramaturgy when compared to *The Trickcyclist*, but it still lacked the revolutionary altruism and radical solutions that he was to provide in *Seema Awanta* (*This Movie is Trash*, 1958). With *Trash*, ‘Ashour met the Leninist criterion of selfless pro-revolutionary writing, the aim of which is purely the furthering the aims of the revolution as well as the Gramscian criterion that entailed the “progressive catharsis” and “historical growth” expected of a “theatre of ideas” that presents “dramatic solutions” (Gramsci 1988, p. 372). The radical solution of nationalising the cinema industry, despite being the target of attacks by capitalist industry leaders, harmonised with the spirit of Nasserism and the wave of nationalisation that started in 1961. I refer repeatedly in Chapter Four to the political pamphlet-

like *Otcherk* style that ‘Ashour employs in his plays, in itself an anti-Aristotelian element of the dramaturgy that further distances him from his predecessors. ‘Ashour’s approach to the role of plays during times of upheaval was to adopt an increasingly radical stance and dramaturgy with the radicalism matching what he judged to be the volatility of the political moment.

My chapter on Sa’ad Wahba posited that his revolutionary playwriting began when he directly confronted his contemporary issues after Egypt’s military defeat against Israel in 1967. I critically surveyed that, up to that point, Wahba had been employing symbolism to critique Egypt’s historical tragedies featuring corrupt foreign occupiers and their agents within the local population. I provided a brief intellectual biography that contextualised Wahba’s writing in terms of his education and literary endeavours. I then provided a critical survey of the plays Wahba had written before the 1967 defeat and interlaced the review of the plays with a review of their critical reception. I then used close reading and contextualisation to analyse *Nails* (1967) and *The Professor* (1969). Both plays, connected as they were to their contemporary post-1967 defeat reality, were the beginning of Wahba’s confrontations with the state censor. I provided a critical narrative of an account of President Anwar Sadat’s banning of *Nails* in particular.

Chapter Four presents *Nails* as the play that directly confronts society and the Nasser regime with their failings. In *Nails*, Wahba jettisons the sensationalism and complicated symbolism of his earlier plays and instead identifies the socio-political fragmentation that he believes to have brought about the 1967. The dramaturgy of *Nails*, revolutionary in both the Egyptian theatre landscape as well as in Wahba’s own trajectory as a playwright, delivers mobilising rhetoric and optimism in the aftermath of the 1967 military defeat. After using close reading and contextualisation to analyse *Nails*, I applied my six criteria. While *Nails* exceeds Wahba’s previous plays in its direct criticism of contemporary characters and society, the

relatively reduced support for the play by the state reduces its impact and subversive force. Moreover, the Aristotelian structure of the plot means that *Nails* is straddling the divide between the world of ‘Ashour and Al-Hakim, thus complicating its role as a revolutionary Egyptian play when Egypt is in a time of socio-political transition and revolutionary flux. The second of Wahba’s plays that I analysed, *The Professor* (1969), was an even more complicated entry into the Egyptian theatre canon. I contextualised the play and the difficulties that Wahba faced until the National Theatre produced it and the eventual censorship by President Sadat. I analysed the play using close reading and then applied my six criteria. I demonstrated that the play exceeds the parameters of most of my criteria. The one criterion where Wahba’s text loses revolutionary intensity is the Gramscian need for a popular following in the state theatre. Despite the initial box-office success and full-house attendance of the first runs of *The Professor* in Cairo and Alexandria, the ban imposed on the play, and which remains in effect today has curtailed any revolutionary or subversive impact, especially among the working class of Egyptian society.

*The Professor* deploys Wahba’s symbolism without hiding the signified. The play attacks the corruption of the state and the people in an attempt to understand and respond to the 1967 defeat in a more nuanced manner than that exhibited in *Nails* two years earlier. My review of the criticism of *The Professor* is by far the shortest in this thesis due to the shortage of scholarly criticism at the time of production. Moreover, with the exception of a short entry by Dina Heshmat (2020) in her book about the 1919 uprising, the play has largely been ignored by academics.

Despite the difficulty in finding credible academic sources, a persistent problem with scholarly theatre in Egypt, this study has been an enlightening experience that has changed my perspective about the three playwrights I have discussed. Starting from a negative view of

Tawfiq Al-Hakim and his work, I have learned to appreciate his metatheatrical role in raising the status of theatre in Egypt to a level of intellectual and cultural respectability and refinement that would have been almost unattainable without his plays. Despite my estimation of Al-Hakim's writings as counter-revolutionary and regressive in their politics, they still elegantly entertain and enthrall. This study has also added nuance to my admiration for Nu'mān 'Ashour and Sa'ad Wahba in terms of their plays and the revolutionary fervour that emanates from every scene. At this juncture, I have adjusted my understanding of the concept of a revolutionary Egyptian play and now realise that such a text participates in a moment of revolutionary and socio-political flux. This participation may culturally take the form of engaging, entertaining, educating audiences or all three. Politically, the participation should subvert and expose anti-revolutionary efforts while sustaining recognisably indigenous structures of feeling that help deliver Egyptian culture from the cultural hegemony of the former colonisers. It follows that, as I have argued, Al-Hakim, as entertaining and engaging as his plays are, is a counter-revolutionary while 'Ashour and Wahba's plays represent the revolutionary playwriting that characterised the Nasserist era and was aborted after the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser. This study has also reminded me of and helped me discover other forgotten and/or underrepresented revolutionary playwrights such as Lotfy El Kholy (1929 – 1999), Mikhail Roman (1924 – 1973), Mahmoud Diab (1932 – 1983), Naguib Surur (1932 – 1978) and Alfred Farag (1929 – 2005).

This study should persuade future scholars to delve into the untapped wealth offered by the lesser-translated duo of Ashour and Wahba. Egyptian plays are also worthy of substantially increased scrutiny by non-Arab scholars just as Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde, Osborne, Miller, and many other Western playwrights are studied in the Arab world. It is precisely this intercultural exchange that will enrich future playwriting in a more global and diverse manner that truly

reflects how the world has evolved, especially in the more cosmopolitan areas. This exchange would promote greater understanding between people by providing an education to theatregoers that transcends classroom boundaries and perhaps furnish the path to conflict resolution and harmony.

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Appendix:

First Analysed Scene of *The Trickcyclist*:

DABSHOULI: It is a woman, sir!

DOCTOR: (Motions Dabshouli to keep the woman where she is until he takes his seat at his desk) Don't move!

DABSHOULI: Hang on ma'am. Wait there a moment. (He gestures to the doctor, intimating readiness)

DOCTOR: (Putting on his spectacles) Show her in... *Entrée*. Oh, God, it's my sister, Qamar, you moron. (To Qamar) Bonjour Qamoura. (To Dabshouli) Go get the banners. (To Qamar) Hey there. You're just in time.

QAMAR: Everything is "just in time" in your world. I'm here to warn you, Gharib.

DOCTOR: Warn me? Am I a quack? A con artist? Am I deceiving anyone? This is the profession for which I have been trained. Am I to blame that this country does not value psychiatrists? Does not value science? Am I to be blamed for this? I can't be blamed for finding myself in an environment such as this. I need to support myself through my profession. It is true we now live in a common neighbourhood where the populace regard me as a mere hypnotist or a sham magician, but what do I care?

QAMAR: I'm not talking about that. You are a doctor. You have an accredited degree. My warning is about this 'Atwa person. Everybody says that he's a drunk and no good at all.

DOCTOR: If he's a drunk, that's his problem. A purely personal issue. A drunk! Doesn't everybody drink these days? That's life. It won't just force you to drink, it'll also push you to smoke hash!

QAMAR: He smokes hash, and he eats opium too!

DOCTOR: Let him eat. Let him eat whatever he can. Do you think it is that easy to find something to eat these days?

QAMAR: How could you say that? I'm telling you he eats opium. Is this your therapy? A drunk who eats opium?

DOCTOR: I told you this is his personal issue, my dear. Something that concerns him alone. Why should it concern me if he drinks alcohol, eats opium, inhales dust, swallows gravel? His stomach. His formidable lungs. He is only bound to me professionally. As long as he is doing his job and we are both on the same page, what else could I ask for? Let him eat and drink whatever he pleases. Opium, hash, garbage.

QAMAR: Gharib! You want to let a drunk junkie into our house?

DOCTOR: Who said anything about letting him into the house? He will work as a secretary here in the clinic. Like a nurse. But he can't be considered a nurse. How will he have anything to do with the house?

QAMAR: Isn't the clinic in the house? Where are we right now?

DOCTOR: (Heads towards the door behind the chaise longue) In the clinic, Qamar. The house is another matter. Up until this point is the clinic. The house starts beyond. Here is my kingdom. My state. I hire whomever I please. 'Atwa Effendi is a drunkard, that's his choice. 'Atwa Effendi is a junkie, that is also his choice. That is a matter between him and the government that is responsible for arresting opium and hashish users. But, while 'Atwa Effendi is my secretary, in those moments he is not free. During those moments, he is bound by his professional duty towards me. You need to differentiate between public and private life, Qamar. That is how people in Europe live.

QAMAR: Are we in Europe now, Gharib? We are in Egypt. We are in Darb ‘Aagoor Lane!

DOCTOR: Darb ‘Aagoor, Yemen, Bahrain, Twin Peaks, Hadramout... we are in the twentieth century and nothing else matters. What do you expect me to do? Starve? Because this country does not believe in psychiatry? Because psychoanalysis does not exist here? Would you like me to sell lottery tickets instead like the thousands on every street? You want me to become a Dabshouly? A creature who does everything and nothing?

QAMAR: Teach French. You lived in France for seven years.

DOCTOR: I am a practitioner. I am a doctor. I must apply that which I have learned to life. Why else did I get this degree?

QAMAR: What if there is no opportunity? Besides, we need to keep up appearances. A psychiatrist in a common, dingy little lane simply doesn't look right. Why not have your clinic downtown, for example?

DOCTOR: Easy. Open a downtown clinic. So easy. I'll open it without money. I'll open it without expenses. I can't even open a pack of cigarettes! You're talking nonsense. How are you going to be a teacher? Let's focus on your issue instead.

QAMAR: What issue?

DOCTOR: Your marriage, your job, your career, your future. Anything that concerns you. Forget about me. I know how to take care of myself. You are the problem. You are a woman surrounded by a society of enemies, including all of womankind.

QAMAR: I got a post at the local primary school here in the neighbourhood. I'll start as soon as schools reopen. But that's not important right now.

DOCTOR: What else can be important? Nothing can be more important... Except maybe marriage.

QAMAR: Marriage?

DOCTOR: Yes marriage. Aren't you supposed to marry? Every woman must get married. That's natural. And in the case of someone like you who has a guaranteed job, then marrying her off would be simple.

QAMAR: I haven't started work yet!

DOCTOR: Yes! Wait until you start. I agree. I am against marriage before employment. Employment, Qamar, is your only weapon. Especially in a society that has decided to declare the most ferocious war upon women. You must be economically emancipated first. Subsequently, your marriage will be built on sound foundations.

QAMAR: Oh no, you're not going to lecture me about marriage and ignore this fiasco you've created for us here.

DOCTOR: Fiasco?

QAMAR: You've turned the room upside down! Now we have a flat with no living room!

DOCTOR: Do you have the money needed to start up an independent practice? Will I ever be able to find a two or three-room flat for less than eight pounds a month? In these glorious times? Does mother have the finances to open up a clinic for me? What else do you expect me to do?

QAMAR: So you seize the living room?

DOCTOR: Why have a living room? Better yet, why not use the clinic as a living room during non-working hours. Everything is possible, Qamar.

QAMAR: Within reason.

DOCTOR: Human reason has no limits. We have split the atom. The mind that has split the atom is capable of anything. Take me, for example—

QAMAR: You've destroyed the room.

DOCTOR: I will destroy the room! I need a waiting room here. I need a place for my clientele to wait. Do you think that the mind that has managed to subjugate nature will struggle to create a waiting room?

QAMAR: And where will you get the space for that?

DOCTOR: From the guest room, Qamar. The guest room. Half the guest room will be a waiting room, part of the clinic, while the other half will remain a part of the house.

Elementary. A product of the mind. This, I'll have you know, is 'Atwa Effendi's idea.

Yes, he's a junkie, but he has brains. What do I care if he uses opium? He has brains,

Qamar. And if he had money, he'd build his own universe.

QAMAR: No... No... This is a load of garbage. This 'Atwa creature will drive us out of our own home. Mamma!!! Mamma!!! There's a twist in the plot, Mamma!!! ('Ashour 1974, pp. 48-52)

Second Analysed Scene of *The Trickcyclist*:

DABSHOULI (Cockney<sup>40</sup>) – OM SANEYYA (Light cockney) – DOCTOR

OM SANEYYA: Dabshouli! What's with this doctor of yours? Am I just going to sit here?

Does he think I'm the sick one or what? Huh?

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<sup>40</sup> I have taken some license with my choice of cockney here since certain quarters of Cairo (Gamaleyya, Ghoureyya, Sanadiqiyya, Abbasiyya), a city as diverse and cosmopolitan as London, had their own distinct dialect that distinguished between them and those who lived in areas closer to the Nile such as Zamalek, Garden City, or Manyal. The connection between cockneys and people such as Dabshouli and Om Saneya is not merely a matter of geographical correspondence, but also one of socioeconomic class.



DABSHOULI: He's your kind of doctor! He did his learnin' in Europe. Oh he's a great one! He'll be right in Mrs. Om Saneya.

OM SANEYA: No, he think I'm the one who's sick. I'm in tip-top shape, thank heavens. Do me a favour and explain it to him cuz he keeps yelling and snapping for no reason!

DABSHOULI: How am I to explain this to him? Am I the patient? Am I the customer?

OM SANEYA: Do you think I'm the sick one? Does he think I'm the sick one?

DABSHOULI: Cop well soon, Mrs. Om Saneya. You explain it to him. He right is quite clever. The bloomin' moment yer tell him the situation, he'll give yer the cure. Not one bint came ter him and left wivout an 'uge smile on 'er Nanny Goat Race.

OM SANEYA: He keeps yelling and snapping like a real doctor! You know how them folk are always cross. I couldn't explain nothing to him. I kept telling him that Saneya is the one who's sick, not me. I'm not sick, I tell you. My daughter, Saneya, God bless her, is the one who's sick Dabshouli.

DABSHOULI: Your daughter? Where is she? Why didn't yer brin' 'er ter get cured?

OM SANEYA: Bite your tongue! She's a cherry, isn't she? You want me to leave her alone with him? When God closes a door, somewhere he opens a window. I sorted it out with 'Atwa Effendi. He told me just go and tell the Doc the story... By the time I went in the doc left the room!

DABSHOULI: I'll holler at him for you. Sir! Doc! Doc Sir!

DOCTOR: (As he enters) What's the matter you lunatic! Isn't one call enough? Am I deaf in your estimation? What do you want?

DABSHOULI: Lady's been waiting for ages. She's not sick. She's not the patient.

DOCTOR: How do you know, have you examined her?

OM SANEYA: Shame! Examine me, isit! That'll be the bleedin' day!

DOCTOR: What's all this nonsense? You, get out. Madam, lie down on the Chaise longue. (*Dabshouli takes his time to make his exit. When he hears the doctor's instructions, he stops in his tracks. The doctor sees him.*) Why are you standing there like that you idiot? Get out! Undress please, ma'am. (*Dabshouli leaves*).

OM SANEYA: Lie down? Oh my God! Undress! Heavens help me!

DOCTOR: Do you expect me to undress instead? Am I to examine myself? You think I am the one to lie down? Make yourself comfortable. Have you never been to a psychiatrist? Lie down on the chaise longue. Relax... Relax.

OM SANEYA: Relax? Oh my! Look luv, I'm not the one who's sick. Bless you. Relax? Doc, please, anything but that!

DOCTOR: What do you mean "Anything but that"? There is no menu and I am not selling snacks! Do you want treatment or not?

OM SANEYA: I'm not sick, luv! Can't you see?

DOCTOR: I'm not sick either! I'm the doctor, not the patient ma'am!

OM SANEYA: My daughter, Saneya, God bless you... She's outside. Mr. 'Atwa told me "go in to the Doctor". A twenty-five piasters consultation.

DOCTOR: I don't understand. What consultation?

OM SANEYA: So I tell you what's happening and you write the cure. That's how we simple folk understand these things. She's too young, Doc. A spring chicken!

DOCTOR: A spring chicken!

OM SANEYA: My daughter, Saneya is very sick, Doc. Please hear me out! Two months now, the little darling's been without sleep. Talk to her about something today and she'll

have forgotten all about it by tomorrow. Just can't make heads or tails of it! Her mind's just not there anymore. She used to sing and be happy and laugh all the time. Her laugh used to wake up the whole neighbourhood. Now my poor baby can't laugh or think.

Always lost and picking a fight every minute!

DOCTOR: And what exactly do you expect me to do for her?

OM SANEYA: Cure her, Doc!

DOCTOR: Cure her with her being present. In absentia? Maybe I should start a correspondence clinic! Why not? How am I supposed to treat a case like that of your daughter's? The customers referred by 'Atwa Effendi will drive me mad! Where the devil does he find them? (*He rings the bell and eventually Dabshouli enters*). Please sit down.

DABSHOULI: Yes, Doctor Sir!

DOCTOR: I told you not to use titles of nobility! Fetch me that trash Effendi, Mr. 'Atwa!  
*Dabshouli leaves.*

DOCTOR: Forgetful. Sleepless. Stopped laughing and singing.

OM SANEYA: Exactly, Doc. The little darling is going round like she's possessed by the devil. I took her to a séance. Didn't work. Worse than ever, if you ask me.

DOCTOR: A séance! You actually took her to a séance?

OM SANEYA: Couldn't do much else now, could I? You'd not opened up your clinic!  
Was I wrong?

DOCTOR: Completely wrong! Corruptly wrong! This is an atrocious crime! Ignorance! The epitome of ignorance! (*'Atwa Enters*) Enter 'Atwa Effendi! Witness your handiwork you Genie! You sent me a séance believer for me to treat? And in absentia? I'm expected to treat an absent patient? To work with demons? These are you "customers"? These are

the fruits of your advertisements and promotions? Twenty pounds worth of advertisements and promotion yield patients from a séance?

‘ATWA: Take it easy, Doc. She paid for a consult, not a treatment. Didn’t the good lady describe the case?

OM SANEYA: I did. And he guessed what I was about to say! You want me to tell it again?

‘ATWA: Let it slide! Let her describe it again. I have other customers. They’re bored of waiting and the waiting room is cramped. This is a clear-cut case.

DOCTOR: I can’t just plod through things. I need all the details. Come closer, you. How old is your daughter?

OM SANEYA: Seventeen, God bless you. Her brother, Abdo, was called up for military service this year and he’s two years older than her!

DOCTOR: (Looking up from his notes) The details do not include the entire family. I am going to treat her, not her brother, Abdo. Where does your daughter sleep and with whom?

OM SANEYA: She sleeps at home with her brothers and sisters! Shame! What kind of question is that? “Where’d she sleep and with who?”

‘ATWA: Om Saneya, please give the man the answers he needs!

DOCTOR: Do you and your husband sleep with them in the same room?

OM SANEYA: Oh, heavens, no! We sleep alone! Shame! Sleep with the kids?

DOCTOR: How many bedrooms do you have in the house?

OM SANEYA: Two! Old rental, you know. One bedroom for me and the boss and the other for the kids.

DOCTOR: Fine. Let us suppose you had some guests staying over, where would your daughter sleep?

OM SANEYA: With us in the room. Mine and her father's room! Are you grillin' me, or what? We's at a police station or a clinic? Is he Police constable or a doctor, Mr. 'Atwa?  
'ATWA: I told you to answer the questions! When you have guests, where does your daughter sleep?

OM SANEYA: I just told you, with us in our room!

'ATWA: And who sleeps with the guests?

OM SANEYA: Bloody hell, you want her to sleep with the guests?

DOCTOR: (Visibly aggravated) I don't want her to sleep with anyone at all. Not with her siblings, not with the guest, and not with you and your stud! I want her to sleep alone!

OM SANEYA: And what does sleep have to do with anything?

DOCTOR: Your daughter has *Complex D'Edipe*. Oedipus complex. General Oedipus Complex. Caused by you and your husband! And her siblings. And your guests. Her only treatment is isolation. Separation. She must sleep alone. She must avoid sources of direct light. Do not allow her to sleep with you and your husband otherwise she will kill you!

OM SANEYA: Good God!

DOCTOR: Killing you would actually be the lesser of two evils.

OM SANEYA: God have mercy!

DOCTOR: That is the level of mercy you will need. Don't you feel that she hates you these days? At the very least, don't you feel that her attitude towards you has changed recently?

OM SANEYA: God, you're right. The little darling is treating me like I'm keeping something from her!

DOCTOR: That's it! Precisely. An accurate diagnosis based on clear symptoms. What are you keeping from her? Her father!

'ATWA: And the cure, Doc? The cure is not all there!

DOCTOR: How would you know? How would you know about treatment? Do you happen to be a psychoanalysis expert as well?

'ATWA: I'm sorry, but this doesn't make any sense. These folks only have two rooms. How is she not supposed to sleep with them? Where should she sleep? Throw her into the street?

DOCTOR: No, you Jackass! Not throw her! Marry her off! Marriage is the quick fix! Get it? Do you get me, madam? Nothing will save her from you and her father except marriage!

OM SANEYA: Now this is doctoring, all right! Blimey, you got it! The poor nipper wants to get married. You a soofsayer? How'd you know? You see things, don't you? The girl wants a husband! That's what's driving her up the wall! (Addressing her absent husband) Bob's your uncle, my beautiful stud! You'll get married in a jiffy, Saneya! Hip Hip! Here's another twenty piasters, Mr. 'Atwa! (She exits, cheering ecstatically.)

'ATWA: What took you so long? You have the cure! Why are you dawdling and wasting our time? I have five more customers outside! You don't have to make it stick to that extent! And what's with all that talk about complex? Just tell her the marriage thing and we're done!

DOCTOR: That's the difference between us, 'Atwa. This is science. This is science. Send in the next one!

'ATWA: (*As he leaves*) Pop them. Pop pop pop! I'll line them up around the block for you! Ten minutes a pop at the most! Quick scan, ok?

DOCTOR: (*Alone*) An ignoramus. A blind ignoramus! But one who knows how to get money from thin air.