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Neoclassicism and the Return to Sources in the Egyptian Drama

The Arabic theatre originated a few centuries earlier than the Arabic drama. During the Middle Ages and up to the 19th century it was developing in the form of three basic types of performances: folk, court and Islamic ones. As the external influences were increasing the Arabic theatre became more and more isolated from its original sources and tradition, steering towards European patterns. At that time, i.e. the 19th century, when the long period of development of the traditional Arabic theatre came to an end, the drama appeared. Inspired by Europe it was an entirely new kind of literary creativity. The circumstances of its birth naturally raise the question about its relation to its own cultural tradition, and to the traditional theatre. Although this theatre did not inspire dramaturgic literature, it took an active part in the making of what is called today *turāt*, i.e. Arabic-Islamic heritage.

At the time when Arabic dramaturgy in Egypt came into being (ca. 1871) the influence of "traditional" theatre on drama was rather feeble. It was the European drama, that contributed immensely to the dynamic development of the theatre. Consequently, the Egyptian drama lacked native elements. Since its beginning up till now it has been mainly inspired by creative methods taken from European literature. This inspiration has led to the formation of the Egyptian variants of realism, neorealism, expressionism and surrealism. On the other hand such trends as neoclassicism and the "second neoclassicism" have no real counterpart in the European dramatic tradition. Both these trends show much similarity to the Egyptian and Arabic national tradition.

The neoclassist trend which developed between the beginning of 20th century and the 'A b d a n - N ā ṣ i r' revolution in 1952, did not include in its basic conceptions any European patterns. This does not mean, however, that it was absolutely free from foreign influence. Generally, the neoclassicist trend was inspired in its subject matters as well as its forms and language by the medieval Arabic and Islamic tradition on one

hand, and by the ancient Egypt on the other. These inspirations played a decisive role in the formation of the neoclassicism.

Formally, neoclassicism evolved within two genres: the poetic drama linked with the Arabic literary tradition and the legendary-historic prose drama. The subject matters and ideology of the two genres are referring to the Arabic and Egyptian (i.e. ancient Egypt) past. The well known legendary and historic motives recur: e.g. Bedouin ideal love, the motif of Cleopatra or Kambyses, fairytales about Arabic kings and princes. Even dramatized life story of the Prophet Muḥammad was shown¹. Neoclassical dramas are marked by specific ideology — rare in later Egyptian dramaturgy; the glorification of the Arabic-Islamic and Egyptian past. The tragical days in the history of both civilizations are depicted. The prevailing motif is that of the Arabic feeling of unity, which in the case of the Egyptians dates back as far as the ancient Egypt. Neoclassical writers constantly emphasize the necessity for cultural unity in the Arab world; while in fact during the first half of the 20th century its political split increased. Such an ideology influenced to a large extent the dramaturgical form of neoclassicism in spite of all the changes in the language. The poetical drama formed the first link in the chain of evolution of neoclassical drama. This achievement is mostly due to the first Egyptian authors of poetic drama: Aḥmad Š a u q ī (1868–1932) and ‘Azīz A b ā ḏ a (1898–1969). Their literary output was chiefly poetical, although they wrote a number of dramaturgical works. Aḥmad Š a u q ī and other poets of that period tried to adjust the classical Arabic poetry to the new conditions and to introduce to the traditional qaṣīda the modern content. Thus Aḥmad Š auqī became one of the founders of the new school in classical Arabic poetry; he transferred the result of his experiments into his own dramatic works. Moreover the content of his dramas had much more to do with ideology and the problems of the Arabic past, than with the neoclassical poetry, usually limited to the current subjects.

The same may be said of the second genre of neoclassicism which developed in the form of legendary-historic drama in prose. It was initiated by Taufīq a l - Ḥ a k ī m (born 1898), Maḥmūd T a y m ū r (1894–1973) and ‘Alī Aḥmad B a k ā ṭ ī r (1910–1969). Written in modern prose, this drama breaks with the classical literary tradition. The language of the plays is the modern literary Arabic. E.g. the language of Taufīq a l - Ḥ a k ī m and Maḥmūd T a y m ū r’s dramas differs only slightly from the language of their novels.

The development of legendary-historic prose drama clearly indicates how feeble were the bonds between the neoclassical trend and the old Arabic tradition. Nevertheless the neoclassical trend formed a part of the Arabic cultural heritage — the *turāt*. And although it is of an epigonic character it belongs together with realism to the first two dramaturgical trends which decisively influenced the transformation of theatre into dramaturgical literature in Egypt between 1918–1952.

Neoclassicism and realism were developing parallelly. Taufīq a l - Ḥ a k ī m and Maḥmūd T a y m ū r wrote contemporary realistic dramas dealing with social and political matters. Later realism gradually began to prevail. Egyptian realism was

¹ Cf. Taufīq a l - Ḥ a k ī m’s drama *Muḥammad* (1936).

inspired by foreign examples and it coincided with European influences in the dramaturgy and increasing westernization of life in Egypt. Moreover the neoclassical drama was chiefly published for reading², while the realistic drama was intended for the stage and therefore it played a leading role in the development of new tendencies in the Egypt theatre. The theatre of that time usually followed the European fashion having only slight connection with Arabic heritage. Therefore since 1952 a gradual decline of the neoclassicist trend has been observed. It is significant that the history of drama in Egypt can be regarded as typical for the history of the Arabic drama because a similar situation was been observed in Iraq and Syria.

In Egypt after the 'A b d a n - N ā ṣ i r revolution of 1952 the already mentioned trends developed: realism, neorealism, expressionism and surrealism. Simultaneously a number of dramas were published which cannot be classified within the above trends. They display a wide range of a variety. It seems to indicate that the Egyptian playwrights did not fully conform to the European lines of development of the dramaturgy; that presumably the solutions proposed by them will be very different. The content of many dramas of that period reveal various Arabic and Egyptian reminiscences. E.g. 'Abd ar-Raḥmān a ṣ - Ṣ a r q ā w ī in his diptych *Al-Ḥusayn tā'iran* and *Al-Ḥusayn Ṣahīdan* (*Ḥusayn — Shi'ite Hero; Ḥusayn — the Martyr*, ca. 1969) presents a story of Al-Ḥusayn, depicting the atmosphere of the beginning of Islam. Alfred F a r a ḡ in a unique and original way adapted some of the tales of the Arabian Nights and other stories from the classical Arabic literature³. This principle applies to such plays as *Ḥallāq Baḡdād* (*The Barber from Bagdad*, ca. 1964) and *Baqbaq ik-Kaslān* (*Lazy Baqbaq*, published ca. 1965). Legends from the past and present, and portraying of the contemporary Egyptian village dominate in Ṣauqī 'A b d a l - Ḥ a k ī m's dramas which are expressionist in their content. In *Mūlīd il-Malik Ma'rūf* (*The Birth of King Ma'rūf*, staged 1975)⁴ however, he abandoned the expressionist principles and presented a kind of colourful dramaturgic fairy-tale, a unique phenomenon in Egyptian dramaturgy. Moreover, all the dramas mentioned here, as well as some works by Yūsuf I d r ī s, Ṣalāḥ 'A b d a ṣ - Ṣ a b ū r, Maḥmūd D i - y ā b and plays by Taufīq a l - Ḥ a k ī m written after 1952 can be considered as unique. The specific character of these dramas lies in the opposition of form and language. All of them derive their form, language and artistic expression from the contemporary Egypt, after the 1952 revolution. Those dramas reveal common features mostly in their content. They are related to one common source of inspiration which

² The Egyptian critic Muḥammad M a n d ū r (*Masrah Taufīq al-Ḥakīm*, Cairo n.d., p. 108) assumed that Taufīq a l - Ḥ a k ī m's social comedy is more suitable for theatre performances, than his so called "philosophical drama" — which in our opinion represents neoclassicism.

³ Alfred F a r a ḡ for instance, uses plots taken from *al-Maḥāsīn wa-al-Adḍād* by al-Ġāhiz.

⁴ Initially the play was entitled *Malik Ma'rūf* (printed 1965). Cf., however its considerably changed version, staged under the title *Mūlīd il-Malik Ma'rūf* (Cairo 1976).

is an Arabic and Egyptian home tradition. 'Abd ar-Raḥmān a ṣ - Ṣ a r q ā w ī's diptych is inspired by the Islamic tradition and legends; some Alfred F a r a ḡ's plays are inspired by the classical Arabic literature, and the majority of Ṣ auqī 'A b d a l - Ḥ a k ī m's dramas derive from the old and contemporary Egyptian folklore. These three authors revive the essential elements of the Arabic heritage — the *turāt*. Ṣ auqī 'A b d a l - Ḥ a k ī m's dramas are of great importance, since they prove that sources of the Arabic cultural tradition are to be found not only in the past. In this sense the dramas do not only draw from the *turāt*, but also contribute to it in a creative way.

The return to tradition in the Egyptian dramaturgy of the 60s is in no relation to any definite literary or theatrical program. Yet Yūsuf I d r ī s entitled one volume of his dramas *Towards an Arabic Theatre (Naḥw Masraḥ 'Arabī*, Bayrūt 1974) and closed it with a note *Towards an Egyptian Theatre*. However, he wrote only about the general need for the return to sources in the Egyptian theatre. This need has its definite reasons in Egyptian conditions. First of all, the dramatists are aware of the European domination over their native creativity. There are also political reasons; the majority of dramas of traditional inspiration are critical about development processes in the post-revolutionary Egypt. The escape into the traditional plot aimed at concealing the contemporary content of the plays. A masterpiece of a such camouflage is Ṣ alāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣ abūr's fairy-tale drama *Ba'd an Yamūta Malik (After the King's Death*, ca. 1972) depicting the situation in Egypt after 'A b d a n - N ā ṣ i r's death.

As the Egyptian dramaturgy in the 60s was again inspired by the native tradition, we can refer it as the second neoclassicist trend in this period. Both variants of the neoclassical drama, that is the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary, reveal some considerable differences. First of all, in the neoclassical drama until 1952 old historic and legendary motives prevailed, while "the second neoclassicism" is chiefly interested in the contemporary problems and matters. The forms and language also differed. Nevertheless both variants of the neoclassicism are connected with the same Arabic and Egyptian tradition.

The initially dynamic formation of the second neoclassical trend in the 60s was gradually weakening in the 70s; and in fact it did not introduce new elements in the sense of "return to sources". The structure of "the second neoclassicism" is narrowly connected with the general changes in the Egyptian culture during the last decade. A gradual decline of dramaturgical activity can be observed; many intellectuals emigrated from Egypt and the theatre became increasingly commercial. However, the present Egyptian theatre — as an institution — makes definite attempts at exploiting tradition; this is particularly evident from the example of the at-Taḳāfa al-Ġamāhīriyya (Mass Culture) organization. Its stage managres, actors and organizers, mostly leftists, attempt at filling the repertory of their theatre along the lines of folk tradition. Dramas of "the second neoclassicism" are sometimes adapted towards performances of the Mass Culture. Most often, however, these plays are too difficult for the average Egyptian audience. It is a paradox that Ṣ auqī 'A b d a l - Ḥ a k ī m's

dramas based on the authentic folk tradition are frequently incomprehensible even for the intellectuals⁵.

Yet while the pre-revolutionary neoclassical trend strictly following the literary conception of drama, the works of "the second neoclassicism" were meant for the theatre. However, the question as to the type of this theatre comes to the fore: should it be westernized or more "Arabic", selective or intended for the masses. These criteria are to be defined. Their lack is responsible for the vagueness of "the second neoclassicism" as far as the form, language and kind of audience concerned. No doubt, however, that the authors of "the second neoclassicism" are inspired by the tradition and their plays are intended for the Egyptian stage and not — as pre-revolutionary neoclassical drama — for reading only. These playwrights often try to combine in their dramas high literary values with concealed social and political criticism. The artistic concepts and political objectives lead to a considerable stylization of traditional elements in the majority of those works. A variety of complicated relations between: drama and theatre themselves and their references towards the socio-cultural and political situation in Egypt decide about the place and role of tradition in the Egyptian drama.

⁵ Cf. Sa'd 'A b d al-'A z ī z, *Masrah 'Abd al-Hakim*, in: Šauqī 'A b d al-H a k ī m, *Il-A'yān*, Cairo 1968, p. 101.