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### **The Role of *The Arabian Nights* in the Formation of the Arabic Theatre**

Contemporary young artists, continuators of the culture of the Arab world, in carrying their search for the right path of its development, do not overlook as important area in the life of every society as the art of the theatre. In their concepts of changes aiming at the elimination of the European elements that have infiltrated Arabic art, they go back to the rich literary heritage which provides ample material for vernacular theatre plays. Speaking about the literary heritage one must not confine it to history alone; a theatre based upon history must satisfy the requirements of contemporary audience, it must also show concern with the problems of the present. As early as the 1930s, the famous Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim pointed out the fact that ancient Arabic literature abounds in elements that, with few exceptions, have not been really acknowledged and put to use in theatrical productions, despite the numerous qualities predisposing them to be so used.

The richest material is contained in *Arabian Nights*<sup>1</sup>, the best and the most typical example of the Arabic folk literary heritage. The characteristic trait of the tales is their timelessness. Alfred Farağ, a well-known theatre researcher, used one of the tales as a basis for an interesting monodrama entitled *A Lazy Prattler* (Baqbaq ik-kaslān; published and staged 1965). The script of the play is so constructed that, being a faithful transposition of the original text, it allows one to refer the plot and the message to all periods and communities. The play brings into relief human qualities that are as old as mankind, namely, laziness, loquacity, inquisitiveness. The tales touch upon a number of problems that are dramatic in their character and faithful in their rendering of the culture and the customs of the Arab world. Five among these deserve special attention:

<sup>1</sup> The *Arabian Nights* — the original title was *One Thousand Tales*. The archetypal version of the tales originates from Persia; they were transplanted to the Arabic ground at the turn of the 10th century.

- a community and the characteristic traits of the locality where it resides;
- the problem of divine justice and its consequences;
- wandering at an unspecified time and in an unspecified direction as a result of a "hunger for knowledge";
- the bazaar and its atmosphere;
- the world of the harem.

In the Arabic society the most characteristic community was that of merchants. They occupied the central position between the establishment (the caliphs) and the poor folk. Private business or, to use a more appropriate expression, commerce was very much in prevalence. Just as is the case today, there had always been a certain risk inherent in this occupation, as it could end up in a loss as well as in huge profits. Every merchant, however, aspired for an income as high as possible, exceeding even that of the caliphs. This happened rather often, which accounts for the fact that rich merchants would occasionally lend financial help to the rulers, most often by arranging a marriage between their children and those of the noble birth.

The merchants constituted a specific social group the everyday life and the behaviour of which were carefully watched by other people. They had worked out a system of values related to their position, they had become a pattern to follow. And this is where the dramatic quality of the situation comes in.

The ideal and the dream of every poor man was to become a merchant. The poor subordinated all their habits and their lifestyle to their aspiration to reach the community of merchants, to acquire wealth — in which they occasionally succeeded. As time went on, they were becoming slaves to their dreams, they lived at their mercy, tormented even in their sleep. An example of it can be found in a fairytale of a fisherman dreaming that he is a king, a wealthy ruler. The merchants have prompted the poor to cherish dreams, often utterly unrealistic, ones that were cherished likewise by the caliphs. These unrealistic dreams, fraught with dramatic elements, render the fairytales a superb material for the theatre.

Most of the characters occurring in the fairytales are people of a good and noble heart. A good man in trouble, fighting against evil, is always likely to find a good number of friends ready to lend him a hand. When the main hero is in tears, he meets with sympathy on the part of all secondary characters like jinns and other people who approach him with pity and love. This is true even of animals (e.g., the lion Uns al-Wuğūd, showing the harrassed hero how to reach the destination). This general kindness has its roots in the profound trust in divine justice, realized in the fairytales by Hārūn ar-Rašīd, the ideal ruler (between 763 and 809) and an almost legendary hero.

People believe that all those wicked and spiteful, all who are guilty of theft, will be punished for their wrongdoing; on the other hand, nobleness and kindness are bound to be rewarded. This approach to divine justice, its clarity, lucidity and simpleness reminiscent of Islamism, confirms the folk character of the fairytales and renders our hero a magnificent figure to appear in drama.

The third of the factors mentioned in the introduction thanks to which the fairy-



tales provide felicitous material for the stage, is the wandering at unspecified time and in an unspecified direction, wandering "towards the unknown". This problem is closely related to the community of merchants who, in pursuance of their commercial goals, often went on long journeys to other countries, either by surface, in a caravan of camels, or by sea, on board of a ship. Going on a journey was equivalent with incurring a certain risk. The typical merchant-and-sailor in the fairytales is Sindbad. The tales relate seven successive journeys of Sindbad. During each, there comes to a situation when Sindbad is in danger of death, yet each time he manages to return to Baghdad safe and sound. In the intervals between one journey and another he deals with family matters; he leaves all his gainings to his relatives and, aware of all the imminent danger, he sets off on another journey.

All those wanderings are an attempt to find an answer to questions of life and death that are vital to mankind and, regrettably, cannot be answered. For all its power and magic, art is not able to provide the answer, but it moderates the pain inflicted upon man who faces these questions. The problem of travelling merchants, quite frequent in the fairytales, must not be reduced to that of striving for a commercial end, such as buying or selling, despite the huge profit earned (e.g. in the tales on Nūr ad-Dīn and 'Alā' ad-Dīn). Nūr ad-Dīn and 'Alā' ad-Dīn return home men of considerable wealth but it is the experience they have gathered and that will be theirs until the end of their life, that is the source of even greater happiness. The basic meaning inherent in the journeys is much more profound:

- They offer pleasure and satisfaction to those who participate in them.
- They satisfy man's longing for danger, as all people are anxious to run some sort of risk, though this quality may be more or less pronounced.
- Merchants have more opportunities to learn of the life of people living in other countries, to make new acquaintances, to deepen their knowledge, which enables them to find an answer to a number of poignant questions.
- Wanderings have caused people to develop and deepen such qualities as faithfulness and hospitality, kindness and nobleness towards others. From the historical point of view, they contributed significantly to great geographical discoveries.

The experience, and quite often fame, acquired stimulate further aspirations and it becomes difficult to revert from the path taken. This is the essence of the drama of the human soul, of man torn between fear and the mystery of the absolute. All these factors, still topical and vital, have been reflected in every period and every community. They may be used as material for contemporary plays.

Another problem is the bazaar, playing a highly important role in the fairytales. This was not only a place of purchase and sale but also a specific school of life. Merchants' everyday commercial contents, their relations with their clients abounded in situations permeated with an atmosphere of drama. This led to the emergence of a new category of people, intermediaries known as "mandūb", authorized by the king or the caliphs to purchase a woman slave on their behalf. Quite often, it came to a dramatic situation caused by the fact that, for reasons independent of himself, a master had to sell his slave despite the feeling of love they had for each other.

The world of the harem, in other words that of women slaves, very often misunderstood and misinterpreted, abounds as such in human tragedy. Very often an ardent affection arose between a slave and her buyer. This awoke general respect for the master and the slave since love was held in greater esteem than wealth. In a critical situation, when there was no other way out, the owner of the slave would sell her, which caused tragedy on both sides. Quite often she was sold only to whom she had chosen herself.

In the fairytales dealing with the problem of women slaves, quite often the rulers' perverseness is criticized, though among the rulers some are as noble as the aforementioned ar-Rašīd.

We have discussed so far only the dramatic elements present in the rich heritage of folk literature represented by the *Arabian Nights*, which elements can serve as fabric for the creation of a contemporary Arabic theatre. In order better to visualize the potentialities that the tales offer to young artists, one of the tales has been presented in the form of a ready-made script.

"The Story of Abū Nuwās<sup>2</sup>, Three Youths and Caliph Hārūn ar-Rašīd"

Characters: Abū Nuwās  
Three Youths  
The Caliph  
Ġa'far al-Barmakī

#### SCENE I

(Place: Baghdad, Abū Nuwās' household; time: afternoon)

One day Abū Nuwās felt lonely. Accordingly, he prepared a superb feast of a great many various dishes.

Abū Nuwās My God, my Lord and Sovereign, I beseech you to send me a boy worthy of the feast and of sharing the table with me tonight.

#### SCENE II

(Place: a street in Baghdad; time: soon after Abū Nuwās has left the house)

Abū Nuwās walks along the street, watching attentively the boys he passes. Out of a sudden he comes across three comely youths. He greets them, speaking in verse.

Abū Nuwās I met two lads and said to them:

"Oh, I love you!", to which they asked:

"Have you money?" — "Still I am famous for my generous hand."

To which they answered unanimously: "We like that."

(Abū Nuwās approaches the youths.)

"Come to me, to nowhere else but to me, come without fear.

In my home there are many delicious dishes,

Old wine, clear and beautifully coloured,

Pressed by a monk from a nearby convent.

<sup>2</sup> Abū Nuwās, one of the foremost Arabic poets.



There is also tender, most tasty lamb  
 And whatever poultry your heart may wish.  
 Eat, drink wine, unsated with delight,  
 And then rejoice, to your heart delight,  
 But let me share it the joy with you.

Youth I

We are obedient to you.

(Abū Nuwās goes home, accompanied by the youths.)

### SCENE III

(Place: Abū Nuwās' house; time: evening)

(The youths partake of the meal.)

Youth II

Tell us, Abū Nuwās, which of us surpasses the other two in charm and grace, which of us is the slimmest and the most shapely?

Abū Nuwās

I could give my life for the mark on his cheek —

How could I pay money for it?

Glory to him who vests the young with comely faces,

Who adds charm to a dark mark on the face.

(Abū Nuwās points out to another boy.)

My dear, the big mole on your face

Is like musk that has fallen on pure camphor!

I was surprised to glance at it

For the mole said: "Rise and pray to the Prophet!"

(Pointing out at the third youth)

A youth was drowing ash in a silver goblet,

His hands looked as if wine had coloured them.

He bustled about with the taverners, carrying a goblet of wine,

The pupils of his eyes offering me another couple.

The beautiful son of Turkey has enchanted me like a hart.

His waist is like a mountain pass.

My breast is a poor house for my soul,

But my mind is torn between two temptations,

One is the luring country of Diyār al-Bakr,

The other, the enticing country of two mosques.

(Each of the youths has tossed two goblets of wine,

As it is now Abū Nuwās' turn, he has grasped a goblet.)

Take your wine from the hands of one whose face is fair.

Speak fairly to one another whenever you can,

When the one who drinks is not able to enjoy the drink,

When the taverner's face does not beam with joy.

(All present drink another goblet of wine each.)

Drink old wine to your friend's health,

Then may the joy come from your friend's hand,

Beauty adorns his lips with magnificent red,

As if the charm came from an apple and musk together,

May the ysterious hart pour wine for you,  
His lips are sweeter than the wine.

(When the wine has produced an effect, Abū Nuwās is no longer able, to control himself and begins to make love to the boys.)

You may expect utmost delight of that boy  
Who drinks at a feast among handsome guests.  
This one sings a song, that one treats to sweets  
And refreshments, and pours wine and wishes good luck.  
And whenever you feel like kissing,  
Your beautiful companion will not grudge you his mouth.  
May Allah bless them! Let us praise  
The magnificent day of the feast!

Hence let us drink wine together, whether blended or not,  
And he who drops off, will become our prey!

(Somebody knocks at the door. Abū Nuwās opens and sees  
caliph Hārūn ar-Rašīd. All start up from their seats  
and kiss the ground in front of him. Abū Nuwās has sobered  
immediately, frightened at the sight of the caliph.)

Caliph Take care, Abū Nuwās.

Abū Nuwās At your service, Ruler of the Faithful. May Allah bless you with  
never ceasing power.

Caliph What is going on here?

Abū Nuwās Lord of the Faithful, it is beyond my power to answer your question,  
there is no doubt about it.

Caliph Abū Nuwās, I have asked Allah the Supreme for justice and for that  
reason have nominated you cadi of the pimps.

Abū Nuwās Do you wish me to take the office?

Caliph Yes.

Abū Nuwās Lord of the Faithful, is there anything you wish me to do?

(Exit Caliph, angry because of Abū Nuwās' conduct.

The festivities go on until the next morning. At dawn,  
Abū Nuwās lets the youths out.)

#### SCENE IV

(Place: the Caliph's Palace in Baghdad; the poets' room;  
Time: morning.)

(The Caliph sits in the company of the poets. Each of them occupies  
an appointed place. Enter Abū Nuwās, proceeds to his place, yet the  
Caliph forbids him. The Caliph summons Masrūr, the sword-bearer.)

Caliph Masrūr, strip Abū Nuwās of his clothes, attach a donkey's pack-saddle  
to his back, put a bridle on his head and a crupper on his bottom, and  
thus attired, take him round the rooms of the slaves, through the harem  
and all other rooms. Then cut his head off and bring it to me.



- Masrūr I am at your command.  
 (Masrūr takes the poet round the rooms. People look at him, laugh, and give him money. When he is brought back to the caliph, he has a good deal of money. He meets the caliph's vizier, Ġa'far al-Barmakī.)
- Ġa'far (On seeing Abū Nuwās): How now, Abū Nuwās!
- Abū Nuwās At your service, my lord!
- Ġa'far What was your offence that you have been thus punished?
- Abū Nuwās I am guilty of no offence. I only brought the caliph my most beautiful poems, for which he has presented me with his most beautiful attire. (All people present, Ġa'far and the caliph, though angry, burst with laughter.)
- Caliph Abū Nuwās, I forgive you and here is ten thousand dirhems for you.

(c u r t a i n)

The play, comic in its character, deals with the problems of morals and an ability to do the right thing in every situation. Despite the critical circumstances in which our hero has found himself through a fault of his own, he is able to display all his wit, wisdom and presence of mind. A. F a r a ġ's play of which we spoke earlier, namely, "A Lazy Prattler", based on "The Barber's Tales of the Fifth Brother", is quite different in character.

Alfred F a r a ġ gave the story the form of a monodrama. This is the first such example in contemporary Arabic literature; the form is very intelligible for the Arabs, for the monologue has been known for a very long time. This is evidenced by the monologues occurring in the "Tales of the Thousand and One Nights". F a r a ġ, however, enriched them, which gave rise to the monodramatic form of his play. The main character in the story is the Prattler willing to sell glass articles, produced in three beautiful colours. One day he goes to the suk (bazaar) to sell his goods. The suk is divided into two parts: one with the shops and the stalls of rich merchants, the other intended for poor vendors, in that number our hero. Yet his pride does not allow him to join the poor, his ambition is to sell glass among the rich. He considers his goods very noble, he wants to sell them only to those able to appreciate their beauty — i.e. to the rich whom he loves, admires and whom he envies their palaces, their attire, beautiful women and wealth. He suffers that it is his lot to sell his glass to the poor who are not likely to appreciate the beauty they are offered. The Prattler sits down on the ground in a casual pose and begins to call upon his would-be clients who, offended by his nonchalance, refuse to buy his goods. The Prattler despises the crowd, he does not make much of people who surround him and readily enters the world of dreams of a prosperous life. He is attracted in particular to three things: food, women, and dancing and singing. Thinking about food, the Prattler says: "Oh, the rich and their food! How very much I wish I could taste the dishes that appear on their tables: barbecued lamb in gravy, roast chicken, stuffed pidgeon and the superb *harīsa*. But food is not the only thing that occupies the Prattler's thoughts. He dreams about slaves, he wants to have women of various nationalities. He dreams about women



of a fair complexion, about ones whose bodies are slender and tawny, he imagines the eyes of each being of a different colour. He likewise appreciates the role of singing and dance in life. Lost in dreams, he begins to sing and dance himself, heedless of the circumstances. All of a sudden, his dreams are discontinued by the voices of people, irritated by a fool disturbing the quiet of the afternoon. The Prattler leaves, yet deep in his heart he still cherishes warm feelings to those who did not want to listen to his song.

The play speaks about the tragedy of a hero unable to draw the line between the world of dreams and the reality in which he lives. The Prattler does not understand that all dreams do not come true, he is unaware of the barrier forbidding his entrance to the world of which he dreams. There are obstacles that will not allow him to reach the goal intended. We sympathize with the hero. Though we do not accept his attitude, we like him because he is much like ourselves — we, too, fail in putting our plans into practice although our thinking is rational. The Prattler wants to be rich. His dreams make evident the distance between the two social strata: of the poor and the rich. In his dreams, the Prattler sees himself as one of the rich, he considers himself their equal. He is daring enough to criticize them. He often repeats that in their position, he would behave differently. He says that they must be insane for they walk without clothes in their beautiful palaces. Our hero is shocked; in their place he would wear only garments interwoven with gold and silver, adorned with diamonds. This is what he regards as utmost pleasure and happiness. The Prattler represents here the dreams of the poor; it is owing to these dreams that they are able to forget their misery, which brings them calmness and joy, though only for a passing moment.

Thanks to the Prattler's monologue, we learn of the world of "The Arabian Nights". It offers a very plastic description of the architecture, the clothes and the customs; we feel the rhythm of life in the world presented. The time is Baghdad's golden age (the 9th century).

Alfred F a r a ğ used a story of a folk artist without changing anything in the plot, in order not to lose a single detail of the superb atmosphere. His play, written in the very mature form of a monodrama, is one of the best examples of the Arab comedy.

Two examples have been presented of how to adapt fairytales for the modern Arab theatre. The artistic value of the tables varies, ranging from strikingly high to correct as regards the quality of the language; some of the tales are written in rhymed prose.

It can be seen from the examples given that relatively little alteration and adaptation, the elimination of less significant elements and the re-writing of the stories in the form of dialogue leads to ready-made theatre plays. The tales here discussed as well as a number of other tales that can be presented in the form of comedy, monodrama or philosophic tragedy evidence the wealth and the timeless quality of the literary heritage of the Arabs. The value of this heritage has not been yet put to use as it should, but it is likely to continue as an inspiration to those willing to create vernacular Arabic theatre.