

EWA MACHUT-MENDECKA

Intertextuality in the Dramas of Sa'd Allāh Wannūs

Abstract

The Syrian playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs has especially well-developed intertextualities in his works, that is why I would like to investigate their functions. The object of this study are some plays written by this dramatist due to their similar convention of the “theatre in the theatre”. I have presented the intertextualities covering the signs of: the world of theatre, current reality and old-time reality. Each of these systems is a frame or a marker signalling the intertextuality and separating it from the text. The plays enhance the role of the theatre in contemporary society, they contain social criticism in the light of problems of the Arab world. Finally, these works call attention to Arabic tradition by enhancing its wealth and diversity.

* * *

The contemporary Arab dramatists attach a particular importance to the intertext as they have been using it to destroy the dramatic illusion, which has been one of the main qualities of this dramaturgy until the 1960s. They introduce predetermined dissonance into the texts of their dramas by placing some incongruous signs. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Syrian author, Sa'd Allāh Wannūs, was regarded as one of the most prominent representatives of those writers.

Sa'd Allāh Wannūs (1941–1997), besides Yūsuf Idrīs (1927–1991) from Egypt inspired a radical change in the Arabic dramaturgy escaping from hitherto realism, neoclassicism and dramatic illusion towards “theatralisation” in the spirit of the old Arab traditions and developing political meaning of the theatre. In his works Brecht's traces

as well as influence of „theatre of the absurd” can be seen but above of all Wannūs’s dramaturgy is a highly original synthesis of Arabic and European thought.¹

Among his dramas, *Muğāmarāt ra’s al-mamlūk Ġābir*, *Haflat samar min aḡl ḥamsa Ḥazīrān and Sahra ma’a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī* seem to be particularly much alike and coherent as the author has used similar creative methods in them and as all the three plays are maintained in the convention of the “theatre in the theatre” and they deal with the problems of the theatre itself. Due to their well-developed intertexts, I have decided to examine their significance.

I am using here the concept of intertextuality after Julia Kristeva who defines this term as: “the specificity of different arrangements by placing them within general text (culture) of which they are part and which is, in turn, part of them”.² As Hans Plett comments: “Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality here resembles very closely a sociological theory of literature.”³

While remaining in the realm of structuralism and sociology of literature I would like to point to the role of the author, the sender of the message, and its receiver, that is, in the case of dramaturgy, the spectator or the reader. “Great importance must be accorded to the role of the author and the reader.”⁴

As Sa’d Allāh Wannūs is a well-known Arabic writer, I would rather focus on his reader. This, of course, is the virtual reader whose silhouette has been outlined in the contents of his dramas.

As Wannūs’s plays show, their receiver is well acquainted with the Arab reality, he has a good knowledge of culture and history of the region and even if he does not remember many developments and details. He is familiar with the characters in *Muğāmarāt ra’s al-mamlūk Ġābir*, he will not be discouraged by the name of caliph Ša’bān al-Muqtadir, who lived a dozen or so centuries ago. He will willingly watch *Sahra ma’a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī*, the play of the author of the contemporary Syrian theatre about Abū Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī. He will also feel or at least find justified the emotions connected with the Arab-Israeli conflict in *Haflat samar min aḡl ḥamsa Ḥazīrān*. In view of his presupposed knowledge and degree of development of his consciousness, we may

¹ Among the most important Wannūs’s plays there are such plays as: *Faṣḍ ad-damm* (The bloodletting, 1963), *Al-Maqhā az-zuḡāḡī* (Glass café, 1965), *Ġutta’ala ar-raṣīf* (The dead body on the pavement, 1965), *Ma’sat bā’r’ ad-dibs al-faqīr* (The tragedy of the poor seller of brown sugar, 1965), *Ar-Rasūl al-maḡhūl ilā ma’t’am Antiḡūna* (The unknown messenger to the tomb of Antigone, 1965), *Haflat samar min aḡl ḥamsa Ḥazīrān* (Evening of reflections devoted to the 5th of June, 1968), *‘Indama yal’ab ar-riḡāl* (While the men play, 1968), *Muğāmarāt ra’s al-mamlūk Ġābir* (The adventure of the head of a slave Ġābir, 1969), *Sahra ma’a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī* (The Evening with Abū Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī, 1973), *Al-Mālik huwa al-mālik* (The King is the king, 1977), *Al-Iḡtiṣāb* (The rape, 1990). after: E. Machut-Mendekka, *The absurdity of politics and the absurdity of existence. The case of the Syrian drama*, “Studia Arabistyczne i Islamistyczne” 1/1993, p. 41–54 and Z. Landoński, *Chronotopy w utworach Sa’d Allāha Wannūsa*, Ibidem, Łódź 2008, pp. 21–22.

² J. Kristeva, *The Bounded Text. Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Ed. Leon S. Roudiez, Oxford: B. Blackwell, 36–63, after: Hans-Peter Mai, *Bypassing Intertextuality* (in: Heinrich F. Plett (ed.), *Intertextuality. Research in Text Theory*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1991, p. 36.

³ H.F. Plett, *Preface* (in: H.F. Plett (ed.) *Intertextuality. Research in text theory*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

consider him to be a member of the Arabic educated middle class characterised by a wide cultural interest. The figure of the receiver affects the meaning and importance of dramas and I will resume the discussion on this as soon as I finish the analysis of the relations between texts and intertexts.

For the purpose of this analysis it will also be useful to make a distinction of the text which was introduced by Plett: "(...) it has a twofold coherence: an intratextual one which guarantees the immanent integrity of the text, and an intertextual one which creates structural relations between itself and other texts."⁵

In each play first I am going to describe its intratextual form; the description will include the simplest possible summary of the dramas' plots and will be deprived, as much as possible, of the emotional characteristics. Then I will go on to discuss the intertext. In the three selected dramas Wannūs creates intertexts in a similar manner by using similar methods, which may be termed as codes, systems or levels. These are the following systems of: 1. the signs of the world of theatre, 2. current reality, 3. old-time reality and tradition, 4. general signs, that is to say without any details pertinent to any cultural contents.

Next I am going to examine the functioning and relationships between the sign systems distinguished in the three plays written by Wannūs:

Muğāmarāt ra's al-mamlūk Ğābir

In *Muğāmarāt ra's al-mamlūk Ğābir* at the intratextual level, the author outlines a history of a slave named Ğābir who lived in the Mamlūk time and on whose shaved head the vizier wrote a letter which was taken obviously by the slave outside the walls of the besieged town and that exact letter was supposed to bring help. Ğābir awaits a great prize that would enable him to marry his beloved one. Instead, he is beheaded after he completes his mission; he carried the death sentence written on his head to the headsman. This story, which might have been told in different ways, gains life under the influence of the intertexts which enrich it.

The first of the above-mentioned intertexts, which comprises the world of theatre, plays the major part here since, as intended by the author, the plot owes its existence to it. It is recounted by the *Ḥakawātī*, a folk narrator in the Baghdad cafe. Apart from him there appear actors who are getting ready to perform the action and who explain its course, receivers and sometimes the cafe itself which provides a scene for the epic performance.

The next type of the intertext are the signs entering into the text from the current reality.

Another type of the intertext includes the signs "borrowed" by the text from the past and from the tradition. It comprises, above all, the figures known by their names, i.e.

⁵ Ibid.

the Mamlūk caliph Ša'bān al-Muqtadir and his vizier Muḥammad al-Aqlāmī, as well as the place of action, that is to say Baghdad.

The intertext which comprises the general signs is also well developed: they correspond with such widely accepted concepts as: bread, wife, wedding, wealth, letter, brother, tax, loss of job, prostitution, soldiers, tortures, head, death, woman, man, child dying of hunger, and starving people. Even without going into details of the depicted story these concepts prove how gloomy it is.

It is the intermingling of the intertexts that is of most importance distinguished. The theatre provokes the response of the spectators who are dissatisfied with the presented story and long for the epic form which is delivered by the narrators and which does not bring surprises. The drama warns us against the shallowing of the pictures of the past. It is the role of the theatre to counteract this: to shape the public opinion and put it on the guard and to oppose the “good” tradition with its richness of performance to the “bad” tradition – the one from the time of the decadent caliphs – presented in the play.

Haflat samar min aḡl ḥamsa Ḥazīrān

At the intratextual level of the second one of the chosen plays, i.e. *Haflat samar min aḡl ḥamsa Ḥazīrān*, the plot is simpler than in the previous drama: it tells us about the soldier dying of the enemy's bullets; then the action moves to the front line village to which the Israeli troops are coming and the villagers are divided into two camps: those who want to defend their village to the last drop of blood and those who want to leave it and save the lives of women and children.

Here, too, the theatre is the basic intertext, where the play is performed comprising the described plot, and where the Director, Poet-author, actors and spectators appear.

In this drama, the particular intertexts: of theatre, of reality, of the past as well as the general one are combined to form an almost inseparable entity, thus overwhelming the meagre plot. The notion of the Israeli troops mentioned here provides a combination of the past and the present to form one entity. The co-occurrence of all the intertexts is shown, perhaps most of all, by the memoirs of one of the spectators comprising the front line village, refugees, smell of grass, rifle, man dressed in green clothes, the ruling people, and the revenge. These memoirs which are being updated stand for both the past and the present, and – by reason of the place of action – also for the theatre.

The signs of general character, that is to say non-concrete signs, in turn, cannot be separated from the intertexts of theatre and current reality. They include outstanding personalities sitting in the audience, as well as the President, head of state, who is however deprived of any Arabic features, just like the Officer or the Official, as well as supposed men with pistols, that must be the policemen, who guard the theatre exit.

In the semantic field of the play resulting from the intermingling of its intertexts its basic message has been outlined: the struggle with Israel lasts and lives in people's awareness, even though it would not be approved by the authority and would be brutally

suppressed by the latter. Without going into details, the author leaves the receiver with the freedom of decision and choice of concepts or signs which he deems necessary to insert in this place. At the same time, just as in *Muğāmarat ra's al-mamlūk Ġābir*, Wannūs exposes the mission of the theatre as a form which is used to shape the public opinion.

Sahra ma'a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī

In *Sahra ma'a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī* it is even more difficult to distinguish the signs of the intratext and intertext than in the previous drama. A considerable part of the play constitutes the quotation, that is the contents of the original play by Abū Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī entitled *Qūt al-Qulūb*. Then goes the story of this dramatist, author of the Syrian theatre starting with the first performance in his own home in 1865, next the opening of the theatre and finally his departure from Syria and his activity in Egypt.

The signs of the theatre, i.e. a herald calling people to attend the performance, audience and Al-Qabbānī himself, are an intertext for the produced play *Qūt al-Qulūb* by this author, who is walking round the audience. They form at the same time the frame for the reality presented.

Also, the plan of the past mingles here and there with Al-Qabbānī being author of the play at one time and acting the protagonist of the play some other time.

The intertext which can be traced back to a more remote past is the plot in *Qūt al-Qulūb* derived from the "Book of a Thousand and One Nights", and – along with the title story – the time of Hārūn ar-Raṣīd and the caliph himself as one of the protagonists.

When it comes to the scene when the merchant takes the caliph's beautiful female slave *Qūt al-Qulūb* to his place to save her life, the public protests as they consider this idea to be immoral; thus the audience supports with the conservative ulamas who are opposed to Al-Qabbānī and his theatre.

Those spectators who are opposed to *Qūt al-Qulūb* on the stage, on one hand reject tradition, and, on the other hand, the prospects of free development of which the synonym is the modern theatre with its ingenuity and inventiveness. They are the symbol of stagnancy permeating the reality presented as the current one. Once again, the author enhances here the role of the theatre as an avantgarde of culture and offers the critique of moral conservatism.

The role of the theatre is unquestionable in all of the three plays. Wannūs puts emphasis on the involvement of this institution in the most ardent problems of reality, above all as a forum for discussion and as an instrument used to shape the public opinion. The theatre is not only a scene presenting illusion but also the place of events of social, political or national significance are shown.

This clear announcement coming from the three Wannūs' plays is irresistibly associated with the Brecht dramaturgy. Like Brecht, Wannūs destroys the dramatic illusion by using the equivalent of the Brecht-type alienation effect, which

can be seen in the actor-spectator dialogue which occurs in each of the three plays under discussion. Like Brecht, he wants to move the public and make them think over the contents of the performances.

However, I do not consider the Brecht theatre as the intertext of Wannūs' dramaturgy. I would only point to the place of the didactic theatre in the plays of the Syrian dramatist; this theatre is similar in its expression to the one created by Brecht. I do not seek Brecht's influence upon Wannūs here and neither do I intend to draw a closer comparison of their writings, yet I would like to signal the conspicuous parallelisms.

I think it is necessary to deal with the titles. As Wolfgang Karrer writes: "Research on titles, especially in literature, has grown to a respectable body of finding the last thirty years"; and: "a text title overcodes the whole text."⁶

The analysis of the titles proves that here, too, just as in the case of the composition of the plays, the author stuck to similar concepts. All the three titles help Wannūs to classify the presented play as a certain entity lasting in time: *Muḡamarat ra's al-mamlūk Ġābir* as an adventure, *Haflat samar min aḡl ḥamsa Ḥazīrān* as an evening ceremony, a kind of a traditional festival (the difficulties with translation due to the specificity of the word *samar* are significant and I will talk about them further on) – and finally the third title *Sahra ma'a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī* may be rendered also as an evening ceremony. The communication function of these titles is indisputable, although we can see immediately that these are specific announcements, permeated with meaning which stems from both their form and contents as well as relationships with the message of the dramas.

1. The aesthetics of the titles is particularly remarkable; the author highlights their ornamental function, which has an intertextual character. This is the sign of a different reality, namely it belongs to Arabic poetics of the classical Arabic literature sparkling with "jewels", "pearls" and "necklaces" embellishing the titles of literary and scientific works. This causes that the reader directs his attention to tradition.

2. The titles have a feature character as they comprise a short tale: the title *Muḡamarāt ra's al-mamlūk Ġābir* may be transformed into the following sentence: the slave Ġābir experiences an adventure, *Haflat samar min aḡl ḥamsa Ḥazīrān*: an evening ceremony on the occasion of the 5th of June is going on, and the title *Sahra ma'a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī*: an evening with Abū Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī is underway. In the plays' contents the theatre plays the major role but we can always see a directing figure: the narrator in *Muḡamarat ra's al-mamlūk Ġābir*, the director in *Haflat samar min aḡl ḥamsa Ḥazīrān* and the dramatist-stage manager Al-Qabbānī in *Sahra ma'a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī*. The titles through their story thus signal the rule governing the contents: the presented theatre, shown as the word of its author, is epic in character.

Since the titles turn to the narrative tradition, it would be worthwhile considering the effect of tradition on this epic theatre presented in the contents of the plays. Although in the title *Muḡamarāt ra's al-mamlūk Ġābir* there is no word connected with the theatre, the

⁶ Wolfgang Karrer, *Titles and Mottoes as Intertextual Devices* (in:) H.F. Plett (ed.), *Intertextuality. Research in Text Theory*, op. cit., pp. 122–125.

character of the *Hakawātī* links the play with the most traditional theatrical form, that is the epic performance, called *ḥalqa*, in which the public encircles the narrator who enriches his plots with gestures and pantomime. In *Sahra ma'a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī* the theatre level mingles with the level of current reality and of the recent past filled with struggle which is stimulated by the theatre and its didactic mission. And yet its aesthetics, that is artistic achievements, which play such a significant role in the other two plays, remain almost invisible. The more important is the title referring to tradition in one word: *samar*. This word has a profound meaning since it displays the pictures of evening meetings during which diverse amusement and performance forms have appeared for centuries – from a simple tale to sophisticated oratorical spectacles, numerous presentations of physical and mental culture including the art of acting and performing. Thus the age-long tradition can be seen against a background of the events of the current day. The links of the theatre presented in *Sahra ma'a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī* with tradition are evident in the light of *Al-Qabbānī's* play based upon the idea derived from the "Book of a Thousand and One Nights".

In all of the three plays the titles allow us to establish an indisputable relationship between the contents and the Arab tradition of the Middle Ages – with their rich cultural heritage. They emphasise the importance of tradition stemming from the plays' contents, even though it is overwhelmed by other messages, first of all of didactic character.

Nevertheless, tradition is not a notion. How does *Wannūs* make us perceive tradition in his three dramas by putting it to a prominent place?

At this level, as it seems, it is not possible to distinguish the intertexts from the texts because an expected more profound announcement is likely to be shaped. Its construction starts with other questions: what does tradition mean, what associations and consequences does it carry for the expression of a more profound message of the dramas. Let us follow *Wannūs* in whose dramas, that are didactic by definition, an important part is played by the schematic contradistinction of good and evil. And let us look from this perspective at the notions of tradition and the past. In their semantic field on the side of good there is certainly theatre, song, lively tale of the phenomena of reality, classical literature, artist or author, and a noble caliph. Evil is associated with both notions and is represented by: a decadent caliph, fraud, murder, repression, violence. At the level of current reality, a powerful sign of the contents, such as the theatre, is an embodiment of this good tradition which is so much enhanced in *Wannūs's* plays as a living value that has not only the power of survival but also of influence. The signs of the ominous past mingle with the dark signs of the present which are of the same nature, thus forming one row of depressing and tragic phenomena.

It is worthwhile recalling that the addressee of this message is the contemporary educated (or having some knowledge at least) receiver whose figure has been outlined in the introduction, since it is only himself – thanks to his erudition, knowledge and interests – that is able to penetrate the diverse nuances in *Wannūs's* dramas. Obviously, everybody, according to one's own sensitivity and experience, will find out slightly different aspects of the dramas he has seen or read. Nonetheless, a model receiver will be

capable of reaching the most important meanings of the dramas and drawing conclusions from them. Since Wannūs' plays have a didactic character, which is quite conspicuous in its surface layer, they also instruct people how to carry on an unyielding struggle in the social and political field, as well as how to preserve identity by realizing own living cultural tradition.