

Contributions of Tawfiq al-Hakim in Arabic Drama: A Brief Discussion

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Abstract:

Tawfiq al-Hakim was a renowned scholar, hailed from Egypt, made enormous contributions to Modern Arabic Literature. His position in the domain of Arabic drama excelled all other individuals of Arabic literature in the modern period. In the Arab world he has been champion as a playwright. He wrote more than fifty plays, which helped cement his reputation as the founder of modern Arab drama.

Introduction:

Tawfiq al-Hakim is one of the major figures in modern Arabic literature. In the domain of Arabic drama, his efforts are considered as an important legacy of Arabic literature from the ground of literary genre that evolved in his expressive techniques and mode of language as well. In the particular realm of the theater, he fills an overarching role as the sole founder of an entire literary tradition. His overall contributions are noticed to deal with the matters related to contemporary Egyptian political and social life. ⁽¹⁾

The popular Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim is said to have been the founder and the pioneer of Arabic drama in the world. He was born in a landowning family in Alexandria, Egypt on October 9, 1898. His father was in the capacity of judge. Racially his mother belonged to a Turk family. At his childhood age, his mother generally used to tell him great tales from the Romance of Antar and Alf Layla wa Layla in his childhood. ⁽²⁾

He was also introduced to the theatre by his father as and when they enjoyed a performance of *Shuhada' al-Gharam* in the provincial town of Dustuq; in fact, it left an indelible mark on his impressionable mind that created an interest for him to trace out theatre and play since he was a schoolboy. ⁽³⁾

Here mention may be made that his interest for theatre was reinforced when he moved to Cairo in 1917 to obtain the School Intermediate Certificate. In the attendance of Jurj Abye's performances he got more interest and began improvising plays with friends. Accordingly he started writing plays himself in view of developing the theatre status of then

period and he was forced to write under the name ‘Husayn Tawfiq’, so that his family members could not know his interest and endeavour. ⁽⁴⁾

As al-Hakim started his career with writing plays, in the first phase we find his six contributions; two of which are mentionable for their combination of more serious elements of comedy and melodrama, full of national sentiment and social affairs. ⁽⁵⁾ He left Egypt for Paris in 1925 to complete a doctorate in law, but his stay during 1925 – 28 in France radically changed his interest to the western culture for the development of Egyptian drama. ⁽⁶⁾ There he neglected his main purpose of law study and “made a thorough study of European literature, both classical and contemporary.” ⁽⁷⁾ In fact, while studying in France his imaginative thought was boosted by the European scholars like Sophocles, Ibsen, Pirandello, Maeterlink, Bernard Shaw, Georges Pitoeff, Andre Gide, Wilde, Moliere, Chekov, Sehillers, Goethe etc. and found idea from them to compose philosophical plays which earn him distinction in the domain of modern Arabic drama. ⁽⁸⁾

In fact, Al-Hakim remained in Egypt holding a succession of posts in the legal service in different parts of the country. In 1929 he became Deputy Prosecutor and subsequently worked in Tanta, Damanhur, Dasuq, Far Sukur, Itay Barud and Kom Hamadah. In 1934 he was appointed director of the Inquiries Department of the Ministry of Education and in 1939 director of the Information Service of the Ministry of Social Affairs. In 1943 he started working for some time for the weekly magazine ‘Akhbar al-Yawm’ and in 1951 he became Director of the national Library Dar al-kutub al-misriyah. In 1945 he was appointed a member of the Academy of the Arabic language and in 1956 he became a member of the Superior Arts Council. Moreover, he worked some time as the Egyptian representative with UNESCO in Paris. ⁽⁹⁾ In such a way he had to pass his life in different capacities along with his urge and needs for the development of modern Arabic drama in particular.

Description:

If we look into all the dramas of Tawfiq al-Hakim, it appears that his dramas which are composed during the two world wars can be categorized into two types as follows:

- (1) Social plays which deal with condition in society or individuals; al-Hakim wrote forty five plays during his life time that fell between the periods from 1919 to 1951. In fact, these plays were published in two volumes namely *Masrah al-Mujtama* (The Theatre of Society in 1950) and *al-Masrah al-Munaww* ‘ (Varied Theatre in 1956).

(2) Abstract or Intellectual plays which deal with themes of universal rather than local interests. In this category we find *Ahl al-Kahf* (1933), *Shahrazad* (1934), *Pygmalion* (1942), *Sulaiman al-Hakim* (1943) etc. ⁽¹⁰⁾

Al-Hakim had a desire to replicate the European tradition of which testimony bears in his play, *Ahl al-Kahf* (The People of the Cave, 1933). It concerns the tale of the seven sleepers of Ephesus who, in order to escape the Roman persecution of Christians, take refuge in a cave. They sleep for three hundred years, and wake up in a completely different era. In fact, it is use of overarching themes - rebirth into a new world and a predilection for returning to the past - al-Hakim's play obviously touches upon some of the broad cultural topics that were of major concern to intellectuals at that time.

In fact, *Shahrazad* (Scheherazade, 1934) is one of his major plays that related to the story of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Now cured of his vicious anger against the female sex by the story-telling virtuosity of the woman who is now his wife, King Shahrayar abandons his previous ways and embarks on a journey in quest of knowledge, only to discover him caught in a dilemma whose focus is Shahrazad herself.

Despite many controversies, he continued to write plays with philosophical themes culled from a variety of cultural sources; in this connection, we see his play entitled *Pygmalion* (1942). This play visualizes an interesting blend of the legends of Pygmalion and Narcissus; further his plays *Sulayman al-hakim* (Solomon the Wise, 1943) and *Al-Malik Udib* (King Oedipus, 1949) are of his popular drama works.

Some of al-Hakim's frustrations with the performance aspect were diverted by an invitation in 1945 to write a series of short plays for publication in newspaper article form. These works were gathered together into two collections, *Masrah al-mujtama* (Theatre of Society, 1950) and *al-Masrah al-munawwa`* (Theatre Miscellany, 1956). The most memorable of these plays is *Ughniyyat al-mawt* (Death Song), a one-act play that with masterly economy depicts the fraught atmosphere in Upper Egypt as a family awaits the return of the eldest son, a student in Cairo, in order that he may carry out a murder in response to the expectations of a blood feud.

Al-Hakim's response to the social transformations brought about by the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 was the play *Al-Aydi al-na'imah* (Soft Hands, 1954) referring to those of a prince of the former royal family who finds himself without a meaningful role in the new society. The play clearly illustrates in the context of al-Hakim's development as a playwright the way in which he had developed his technique in order to broach topics of

contemporary interest, not least through a closer linkage between the pacing of dialogue and actions on stage. In 1960 al-Hakim was to provide further illustration of this development in technique with another play set in an earlier period of Egyptian history, *al-Sultan al-ha'ir* (The Sultan Perplexed). The play explores in a most effective manner the issue of the legitimating of power. In such a historical context al-Hakim's play can be seen as a somewhat courageous statement of the need for even the mightiest to adhere to the laws of the land and specifically a plea to the ruling military regime to eschew the use of violence and instead seek legitimacy through application of the law.

It has been noticed that al-Hakim's earlier plays were all composed in the literary language; he was to conduct a number of experiments with different levels of dramatic language. In the play, *al-Safqah* (The Deal, 1956), he couched the dialogue in something he termed 'a third language', one that could be read as a text in the standard written language of literature, but that could also be performed on stage in a way which, while not exactly the idiom of the colloquial dialect, was certainly comprehensible to a larger population than the literate elite of the city. In fact, his another play entitled *Ya tali' al-shajarah* (1962; The Tree Climber, 1966), was one of his most successful works from this point of view, precisely because its use of the literary language in the dialogue was a major contributor to the non-reality of the atmosphere in this absurdist drama involving extensive passages of non-communication between husband and wife. Al-Hakim continued to write plays during the 1960s, among the most popular of which were *Masir sarsar* (The Fate of a Cockroach, 1966) and *Bank al-qalaq* (Anxiety Bank, 1967).⁽¹¹⁾

Discussion:

There is no doubt that his earlier writings had influenced the young officers and the revolution. Some of the plays of Tawfiq al-Hakim find to point out the principles of Nasser's 1952 revolution and in the process lost their political consciousness and discovered too late that its charismatic leader had turned into a tyrant and that his policies, both domestic and foreign had basically failed. In addition, his some of his early plays also touched on the questions surrounding the emancipation of women. His controversial play *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* (*The New Woman*) was more of a spoof of the growing movement that had been spearheaded by the great champion of women's emancipation, Qasim Amin. Al-Hakim came to be known as the enemy of women ('Aduw *al-Mar'a*) after writing this play that attacked the unveiling of women. He lived all his life trying to undo this attitude of misogyny that came to be one of

his hallmarks. Interestingly enough, despite this one area of dissent, al-Hakim remained a revered and beloved author and persona throughout the Arab world. His far-reaching influence on Arabic drama is felt to this day.

Al-Hakim also was a pioneer in modern Egyptian theater. Until the 1920s Egyptian theater concentrated on melodramas, which were often presented as what we would today consider musicals. The thorny question of whether to use classical (modern standard Arabic) or colloquial Arabic remained a matter of great debate. Early on such writers as Farah Antun, and especially Muhammad Taymur whose dramas dealt with contemporary social themes, found tough competition from the popular plays of the great comedian Najib al-Rihani. But it was Tawfiq al-Hakim who dominated the next phase in the development of the Egyptian theater. ⁽¹²⁾ In fact, it was Tawfiq al-Hakim who made the chapter of Arabic drama familiar in greater way with the Arab World and excelled all other individuals who worked in the realm of Arabic plays and dramas.

Conclusion:

Here, it may be concluded with the commemoration of Tawfiq al-Hakim that he established himself in the Arab World as the greatest playwright. In fact, his towering position in Arabic drama has been unparalleled to any other individuals who specially worked in the field of Arabic drama. As such he is remembered as one of the major pioneer figures in modern Arabic literature. In the particular realm of theatre, he fulfils an overarching role as the sole founder of an entire literary tradition. His struggles on behalf of Arabic drama as a literary genre, its techniques, and its language, are coterminous with the achievement of a central role in contemporary Arab political and social life. Giving a tremendous fillip to the development of Arabic drama up to the level marks, Tawfiq al-Hakim died in Cairo on 26 July 1987.

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