Chapter Four

Hybridity of Al-Hakim’s Plays

Tawfiq al-Hakim’s plays are characterised as hybrid texts: they are construed within “a liminal space” (Bhabha, Location 5) or what Homi Bhabha terms the “Third Space” (Location 54). This chapter attempts to explore and evaluate the hybridity of al-Hakim’s plays and the ways in which al-Hakim interweaves the Eastern (Arabic-Islamic) tradition with the Western tradition(s). In al-Hakim’s plays, hybridity can be examined at three different levels: textual (or intertextual), stylistic and linguistic. Aware of the fact that drama as a literary genre is new to the Arabic literary tradition, and also of its significance and impact on the lives of the masses as a tool of change and amelioration, al-Hakim has successfully manipulated such aspects of hybridity to bring about improvement in Egyptian and Arabic drama. He dexterously welds Western forms with Arabic-Islamic issues in order to orient his views, criticism and ideas indirectly on the one hand, and to lend an invaluable hand to the growth of the much needed dramatic genre in Arabic literature on the other.

4.1 Bhabha’s Hybridity and the Third Space in Postcolonial Discourse

Hybridity refers in its most basic sense to mixture. The term originates from biology and was subsequently employed in linguistics and in racial theory in the nineteenth century. Its contemporary uses are scattered across numerous academic disciplines and is salient in popular culture. The history of hybridity has caused some to consider the employment of the concept as problematic, indeed, offensive (Mitchell 533-53). In colonial discourse, hybridity is a term of abuse for those who are products of miscegenation, mixed-breeds. It is imbued in nineteenth-century eugenicist and
scientific-racist thought (Meredith 2). Despite its historical past, Papastergiadis reminds us of the emancipative potential of negative terms. He poses the question “should we use only words with a pure and inoffensive history, or should we challenge essentialist models of identity by taking on and then subverting their own vocabulary?” (258)

Today the term ‘hybridity’ has become one of the most recurrent conceptual leitmotifs in postcolonial cultural criticism. It is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweeness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (Hoogvelt 158). Moreover, it commonly refers to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation” (Ashcroft, et al. *Postcolonial* 118). The term ‘hybridity’ has been most recently associated with Homi Bhabha. In his piece entitled ‘Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,’ Bhabha stresses the interdependence of coloniser and colonised. Bhabha argues that all cultural systems and statements are constructed in what he calls the ‘Third Space of Enunciation’ (*Location* 54). In accepting this argument, we begin to understand why claims to the inherent purity and originality of cultures are ‘untenable.’ Bhabha urges us into this space in an effort to open up the notion of an international culture “not based on exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (qtd in Ashcroft, et al. *Postcolonial* 209). In bringing this to the next stage, Bhabha hopes that it is in this space “that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this ‘Third Space,’ we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (209). So as Mudrooroo suggests, embracing the hybridised
nature of cultures steers us away from the problematic binarisms that have until now framed our notions of culture (Laragy, Internet).

This new mutation replaces the established pattern with a ‘mutual and mutable’ (Bhabha, ‘Frontlines’ 269-72) representation of cultural difference that is positioned in-between the coloniser and colonised. For Bhabha it is the indeterminate spaces in-between subject-positions that are lauded as the locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices (Meredith 3). Bhabha posits hybridity as such a form of liminal or in-between space, where the ‘cutting edge of translation and negotiation’ (Bhabha, “Cultures” 32) occurs and which he terms the third space. This is a space intrinsically critical of essentialist positions of identity and a conceptualisation of original culture:

… the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity … is the ‘Third Space,’ which enables other positions to emerge. (Rutherford 211)

Thus, the third space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibility. It is an ‘interruptive, interrogative,’ and ‘enunciative’ (Bhabha, Location 10) space of new forms of cultural meaning and production blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorisations of culture and identity. According to Bhabha, this hybrid third space is an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no ‘primordial unity or fixity’ (Bhabha, Location 55).

The concept of the third space is submitted as useful for analysing the enunciation, transgression and subversion of dualistic categories going beyond the realm
of colonial binary thinking and oppositional positioning (Meredith 3). Despite the exposure of the third space to contradictions and ambiguities, it provides a spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that “initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation” (Bhabha, Location 1). The hybrid identity is positioned within this third space, as ‘lubricant’ (Papastergiadis 257-81) in the conjunction of cultures. The hybrid’s potential is with their innate knowledge of ‘transculturation’ (Taylor 60-74), their ability to transverse both cultures and to translate, negotiate and mediate affinity and difference within a dynamic of exchange and inclusion. They have encoded within them a counter-hegemonic agency. At the point where the coloniser presents a normalising, hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy opens up a third space of/for re-articulation of negotiation and meaning. (Bhabha, “Cultures” 34).

4.2 Al-Hakim’s Hybridity and its Categorisation

In this sense, Al-Hakim’s hybrid plays are located in the ‘liminal’ ‘third space’ in which two different traditions are reflected: the Eastern (Arabic-Islamic) tradition as well as the Western tradition. It has been mentioned above that in al-Hakim’s plays, hybridity can be examined at three different levels: textual (or intertextual)\(^1\), stylistic and linguistic. Textual hybridity can be seen as the appropriation of a text or theme from the Western tradition and reshaping it into the Arabic-Islamic context, such as *Al-Malik Odib* (Oedipus the King, 1949), *Praxa aw Mushkilat al-Hukm* (Praxa or the Problem of the Government, 1939) and *Pygmalion* (1942). Textual hybridity is also related to intertextuality and how a text can lead or refer to some other texts. For al-Hakim, the past and the present are inseparable. He adopts the literary works of the past writers to reflect

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\(^1\) For more information on “intertextual” or “intertextuality” see Graham Allen’s *Intertextuality* 11-35.
upon Arabic and Egyptian contemporary life. Stylistic hybridity involves the employment of an Arabic or Islamic text or theme in a Western form or style as in *Ahl al-Kahf* (The Sleepers in the Cave, 1933), *Ughniyyat al-Mawt* (Song of Death, 1956), *al-Sultan al-Ha’ir* (The Sultan’s Dilemma, 1960), *Ya Tal’i al-Shajara* (Tree Climber, 1962) and *Bank al-Qalaq* (Bank of Anxiety, 1967). Linguistic hybridity shows al-Hakim’s artistic and linguistic talent in employing what is called “third language”: a combination of the standard Arabic and Egyptian dialect. *Al-Sqfqah* (The Deal, 1956) and *al-Wartah* (The Dead Trouble, 1966) are interesting examples of the use of the “third language.”

### 4.2.1 Textual (or Intertextual) hybridity

Textual (or intertextual) hybridity is explored in three plays: *Praxa aw Mushkilat al-Hukm* (Praxa or the Problem of the Government), *al-Malik Odib* (Oedipus the King) and *Pygmalion*. Al-Hakim’s *Praxa* is an adaptation of Aristophanes’ *The Ecclesiazusae*. It shows that Aristophanes’ comedies appeal to Arab audiences as they appeal to Western audiences; they deal with universal themes (political and moral) which address all men whether Arabs or Europeans. According to al-Hakim, the Greek play, *The Ecclesiazusae*, portrays a serious problem in the world, that of government. Obviously he has in mind the Arabic political situation as the following synopsis of the play demonstrates.

Clad in their husbands’ clothes, and led by Praxa, the women of Athens win the vote in the parliament. Praxa becomes the new leader of the state. She decides to be democratic and allows her people to do whatever they want. The state becomes chaotic as the rich want to eat up the poor, and vice versa. Therefore, she chooses two men as advisors: the philosopher Epicrat and the commander of the army Hironymus. However, the latter overthrows her.
Hironymus imprisons the Philosopher and makes the people worship him. He engages his country in war with the Macedonians. Later he puts Praxa in jail when he overhears her criticizing him. But things are not going well for Hironymus; his army is defeated, and he is threatened with execution. He decides to kill himself. However, before committing suicide, he seeks the advice of the Philosopher and Praxa. The Philosopher suggests that Blepyros, Praxa’s husband, be appointed king, for what the people want is a change of government. The trio can then rule the state using the stupid Blepyros as a stooge. Of course, Blepyros is surprised at this idea (he does not know that they are using him), and the people welcome this change.

But Blepyros uses his new power to revenge himself on his wife, who was false to him, the Philosopher, and Hironymus. Urged on by his confidante, Praxa’s former confidante, and Chremes, he imprisons the trio and later puts them on trial with Chremes serving as a judge. Chremes accuses Praxa of adultery, and Hironymus of wrecking the marriage of Blepyros. He does not accuse them of political corruption. The Philosopher tells the people that it is Chremes and Blepyros who exploit them. He suggests that the people should rule themselves. The play ends with the people applauding the Philosopher, and charging at the state palace shouting, “rule for the people” (165).

This summary indicates that al-Hakims’ play is similar to Aristophanes’ play in many aspects. In both plays, the women don men’s clothes and win the majority of the votes for women’s rule. Praxa leads them and gives the speech at the parliament. The first act of al-Hakim’s play is almost a free translation of Aristophanes’ play. For example, in al-Hakim’s play, Praxa rehearses the speech which she will deliver at the parliament. She scolds one of the women for not perfecting her role as a male. All these incidents appear
in the Greek play. In both plays, Blepyros wears his wife’s dress because she has sneaked out of his bed wearing his clothes. Chremes wears his wife’s dress for the same reason. The conversation of these two characters in al-Hakim’s play is a free translation of its counterpart in the Greek play.

Both plays demonstrate that a state run by women is an impossibility. Aristophanes’ play attacks an ideal state (Plato’s) in which women have equal rights with men, and communism flourishes (Al-Shetaiwi 102). The play also satirises the ascendance of women, and portrays the consequences when the ordinary conditions of society are reversed. The scene of the three hags quarrelling over a young man shows the lack of altruism necessary to make communism possible. In al-Hakim’s play, Praxa is democratic; she allows her people to do whatever they wish. But this idealistic democracy becomes chaotic because people lack altruism; they want to exploit each other. The merchants ask her to prosecute their debtors who refuse to pay their debts. The latter ask her to prosecute the merchants for asking for their credits.

Despite these similarities, al-Hakim’s play differs from Aristophanes’ comedy. The Greek play is full of indecency and sexual jokes which are not tolerated by Muslim audiences. Al-Hakim, in his play, eliminates what he views as offensive in the Greek play to the Arabic audience. All laws concerning sex such as common marriage and the safeguards to secure the sexual rights of ugly women disappear in the Arabic play. Moreover, al-Hakim not only uses the three main characters of Aristophanes’ play: Praxa, Blepyros and Chremes, but he also introduces new characters such as the philosopher, Epicrat, and the military leader, Hironymus. While the Greek play presents a communist
state run by women, al-Hakim’s play uses the same plot to raise a delicate issue; who should rule the state?

Praxa and Hironymus represent different political ideologies: democracy and dictatorship, respectively. Neither of these political systems succeeds. When Praxa rules, she follows democracy. But she fails because her people are not satisfied with each other. She also fails because she falls in love with Hironymus (thus she becomes unfaithful to her husband), who exploits her love to take over the state. When he succeeds he imprisons the philosopher for criticising him, and later sends Praxa to prison for censoring him. Hironymus fails too. He engages his country in war and uses the resources of the people to achieve victory. When his army is defeated, he seeks the advice of the Philosopher and Praxa. Thus the play seems to suggest that dictatorship does not work either.

Furthermore, al-Hakim’s play seems to suggest that not every political ideology can give social justice to every individual. He sees a “possible” solution in socialism (Al-Shetaiwi 103). For instance, while Praxa, Hironymus and the Philosopher are on trial, the Philosopher tells the people that Blebyros and Chremes are corrupt; they do not care about the welfare of the people. The people realise the corruption of their government and ask the Philosopher to advise them. He tells them to seize the state and rule themselves by themselves. The play ends with the people charging at the palace chanting “rule for the people” (165). The play seems to suggest that socialism is the appropriate form of the governance. Yet the play ends in chaos: the people rush to the palace without guidance.
Al-Hakim adapts the Greek play to deal with an issue central to Arabic political life; what kind of political system is appropriate for the Arabs. For many years, Arab countries have been plagued with ruthless regimes and coups d’état. Each leader promises major political and economical reformation but proves to be worse than his predecessors. The play also introduces several characters that represent specific moral powers that are engaged in a constant dialogue and conflict throughout the play (Khoury 199). These powers can be classified into two categories: the power of executive work and the power of the intellect. The power of work is represented by the politicians who take over the government, headed by Praxa (as a symbol of beautiful freedom) and then Hironymus (as a symbol of tyranny and oppression). The power of the intellect is represented by the character of the Philosopher. The power of work and action tries to destroy the power of the intellect by drawing it and including it into its ‘lines’ once, or suppressing it, imprisoning it, and isolating it from society. Whereas the power of the intellect directs the people to revolt against the tyranny and oppression. It is no wonder then that al-Hakim’s play was censored in 1939. It was not allowed to be staged or published in its entirety until 1960.

Thus, al-Hakim’s play is hybrid in the sense that it captures the spirit of its Greek model and the Arabic political dilemma. Although al-Hakim’s play is not as great a comedy as Aristophanes’ play, it is, nonetheless, a good political treatise which exposes modern Arabic politics. Al-Hakim has successfully integrated elements from the Greek comedy to serve his purpose. By eluding to the Greeks (hence the Romans), a symbol of democracy in the Western tradition, al-Hakim dexterously attacks democracy, and manages to use the ‘ambivalent’ nature of his play as a strategy of ‘resistance’ to debunk
the hegemonic political regime prevalent at a specific moment of Arabic political history. Historicism, here, is also seen as a strategy of resistance. Therefore, the elements of ambivalence and historicism turn al-Hakim’s play into a hybridised form of resistance, acquainting the Arab audience with the intrigues of politics and the ruthless nature of their rulers.

In *al-Malik Odib* (Oedipus the King, 1949), al-Hakim presents a new interpretation of the Western model. In the introduction to his version of *Oedipus Rex*, al-Hakim explains that he rewrote the Greek play in order to bring it into line with Islamic thinking and to explore his metaphysical theme of “truth” versus “reality” (42-52). The play follows Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* except in these points: first, Oedipus has never been destined to kill his father and marry his mother; second, Tiresias is coincidentally responsible for the downfall of Oedipus; third, Oedipus asks his wife-mother to remain in wedlock with him even after he has known the terrible facts about his parenthood; fourth, there is no Sphinx. Tiresias made up the story of the Sphinx in order to frighten the Thebans. Oedipus killed a lion but he is made to tell the Thebans that he killed the Sphinx.

After seventeen years of ruling Thebes, and after having four children by Jocasta, al-Hakim’s Oedipus now seems to feel conscious-stricken at deceiving his people, and accepting the machinations of Tiresias. At the same time, he is worried about the plague which is devastating his city. In an encounter with Tiresias, Oedipus threatens to reveal how he deceived the Thebans; Tiresias has convinced them that a Sphinx killed the passers-by whereas in fact it was a lion which Oedipus killed.
Creon and the High Priest have just returned from consulting the Delphic oracle. They tell Oedipus that he is the murderer of Laius, and unless he is removed from the city the plague will continue. Oedipus becomes angry with them and decides to put them on trial, accusing them of conspiring with Tiresias in order to overthrow him and appoint Creon in his place. Jocasta interferes on behalf of her brother. She says that the oracles are wrong, for Laius was killed by a group of bandits at a three-way intersection in Phocis, and not by his own son as the oracles predicted. Oedipus is shocked when he learns the place where the murder took place. He admits that he killed an old man at that place at about the same time when Laius was reported to be killed.

Oedipus pursues his investigation, and forces the only survivor of Laius’ guard to tell the truth. He confesses that it was Oedipus who killed the late king. At the same time, a messenger comes from Corinth informing Oedipus that he should go back to take over the throne of Polybus, who has just died. He says that he never imagined that Oedipus would become a king in his native place Thebes, from which he was banished as an infant. Oedipus decides to investigate this matter to the end despite Jocasta’s scepticism and protestations. He forces the old shepherd, who originally was commissioned to leave Oedipus on the mountain, to tell the truth. The shepherd admits that Laius was forewarned by Tiresias against a son who would kill him and marry Jocasta. Therefore, he decides to destroy his male children. When the truth is revealed, Oedipus tries to convince Jocasta to accept the situation as such and leave with him and his children to live in another city. She hangs herself instead. Oedipus gouges out his eyes with her brooch in order to mourn her and not to lament his fate. He leaves Thebes guided by his daughter, Antigone.
According to al-Hakim, man is not predestined to suffer. That Oedipus should be punished for a crime he never planned to commit but was predetermined to commit seems inhuman and foreign to Islamic thinking (Al-Shetaiwi 108). To humanise the struggle in the play, al-Hakim gets rid of the element of divine interventions, the Delphic oracles, in Oedipus’ fate, and replaces it with the struggle between Oedipus and other human beings. Removing the ‘un-Islamic’ element from the play does not, however, mean that Arab playwrights cannot stage plays that are incompatible with Islam. In fact, what al-Hakim means by bringing the Greek myth in line with Islamic thinking is that removal of divine interventions can help him better portray Oedipus, Creon, Tiresias and the High Priest as human beings involved in political strife.

Sophocles’ play, al-Hakim thinks, suggests that Oedipus is not to blame of his crimes. He has to struggle against a fate which had already predestined him to kill his father and marry his mother. However, al-Hakim wants to portray Oedipus as free and God as innocent of determining the course of Oedipus’ life. That is according to Islamic philosophy: man is free and should be well aware of his actions. God does not trap man into committing a crime or a sin for His pleasure (108). Al-Hakim’s Oedipus killed his father coincidently, and not as a result of a divine oracle. Hence, there is no struggle between Oedipus and the divine fate.

Moreover, al-Hakim’s play seems to suggest that it is man who tends to hurt his fellow men for one reason or another. In al-Hakim’s play Tiresias is responsible for the tragedy of Oedipus. He exploits the Thebans’ veneration for him to make them believe that he receives the oracle from God. He fabricates the story of the oracle in order to make Laius get rid of his son because he wants to finish off Laius’ dynasty in Thebes.
Therefore, he uses his power and prestige as a religious seer to inform Laius that the gods warned him against a forthcoming son who would kill him and marry Jocasta. To avert such disaster, Laius orders his shepherd to expose Oedipus on the mountains. Thus al-Hakim’s play shows that the evil-minded Tiresias assumes the role of Fate to meddle with the destiny of human beings.

In order to control the Thebans, Tiresias made up the story of the Sphinx which kills any passer-by who fails to answer her riddles correctly. (The riddle is the same as that of Sophocles’ play.) Actually, the Sphinx is a lion which attacks the travellers at night. Oedipus kills the lion, but is made to tell the Thebans that he has killed the Sphinx by answering her riddle. Oedipus lies to the Thebans in accordance with the instructions of Tiresias, who wants to help him ascend the throne of the recently murdered Laius and to marry Jocasta. Tiresias, however, does not know that Oedipus is the son of Laius. He wants to give the throne to a non-Theban so that he can control him as well.

Obviously, the play depicts Oedipus as an ambitious man who wants to be a king by any means. Therefore, he collaborated with the evil-minded Tiresias. This is contradictory to the Greek myth which depicts Oedipus as demigod who rescues the Thebans from the Sphinx. When Sophocles’ play opens we see the Thebans imploring Oedipus to help them get rid of the plague. In al-Hakim’s play Oedipus allows himself to be regarded as a hero for a deed he never did. In order to become a king and marry the widowed queen, he agrees to share Tiresias deception of the Thebans.

Also in the Greek play, Oedipus has never been in doubt of his greatness until the truth dawns on him. His pride appears when he insists on finding the killers of Laius and insults Tiresias. Al-Hakim strips Oedipus of all his majestic characteristics and presents
him as a man torn between his love for his family and his search for truth. Oedipus, after seventeen years of ruling Thebes, regrets that he lied to the Thebans and to his family about the story of the Sphinx. He feels pain whenever his children boast of his heroic fight with the Sphinx. He, however, succumbs to Tiresias because he wants to keep his family happy. The play seems to suggest that Oedipus agreed to collaborate with Tiresias and live in deception despite his love for truth (in fact he left Corinth in search of his identity) because as a young man full of fire and ambition, he might be justified in collaborating with Tiresias in order to achieve his personal ambition to become a king. But why does he agree to live in deception for seventeen years? The play seems to suggest that though Oedipus is aware of his hypocrisy and deception to his people and family, he accepts his situation because he does not want to break the happiness of his family, for if the truth is known that he is not a hero after all, his family will be greatly disappointed and may become resentful of his action. In fact, al-Hakim focuses on Oedipus as a family man who loves his wife and children in order to explain his behaviour and to justify the ending of the play.

Some Arab critics note that the end of the play fails to comply with Islamic thinking. For example, Hasan Muhsin argues that the ending of the play is incompatible with Islamic philosophy (181-85). He adds that the audience would treat Oedipus with disgust rather than sympathise with him. Al-Hakim divests the Greek play of its mythological background, but fails to make the ending acceptable to Islamic and Arabic tradition when he makes Oedipus insist on remaining in wedlock with his mother (185-90). After knowing that he is guilty of incest and patricide, Oedipus is supposed to break
off his incestuous relationship with his mother or to harm himself as Sophocles’ Oedipus does.

However, critics who claim that *al-Malik Odib* does not follow Islamic ideology and Arabic tradition see in the play a religious treatise, which is not the intention of the author (Al-Shetaiwi 111). When al-Hakim says that he wants to make the play agree with the Islamic thinking, he means that Oedipus should become a simple man, not a mythical hero as in the Greek play. Besides, Oedipus is free to choose and determine his fate. That man is free is the very essence of Islam. In fact, Oedipus’ insistence on remaining in wedlock with his mother comes at the very end of the play. Al-Hakim could have ended the play the way Sophocles did and saved himself the trouble of being misunderstood. But he ends the play the way he does intentionally because he wants to explore his theme of “truth” and “reality.” Al-Hakim indicates that he sees in the Greek myth a conflict between “truth” and “reality.” He means by “truth” the fact that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother. The “reality” of Oedipus means that he is living happily with his mother-wife and his children.

The idea that truth may be destructive is manifested in Sophocles’ play. Oedipus, who thinks of himself as a man of truth, realises too late that he is the man being hunted. At first he refuses to accept this truth, and accuses Tiresias and Creon of conspiracy against him. As a proud king he never imagines that he could be a killer. Oedipus finds out that truth, if known, may become harmful. Al-Hakim also reiterates the same theme. As Starkey indicates, “al-Hakim seems to imply that looking for the truth is not only a waste of time but is actually positively dangerous” (‘Philosophical’ 144). To accept “truth,” al-Hakim’s Oedipus has to destroy “reality,” his happiness and his family.
Thus by divesting the Greek myth of the divine interference in the life of the protagonist, the Sphinx and divinity of Oedipus, al-Hakim produces, or rather creates an Arabic-Islamic play. He depicts a man torn between “truth” and “reality”; the truth that he did not kill the Sphinx because it never existed, and the reality that he does not want to destroy the ideals of his family; the truth that he has coincidently killed his father and married his mother, and the reality that he is having a happy marriage. The truth that he should break the wedlock of incest and follow the dictates of ‘reasonable thinking,’ and the reality of his wanting to remain in marriage with the one who is his mother and thus maintains free will. Al-Hakim’s play raises concerns about truth and reality. By revealing the tension between Oedipus’ attempt to maintain a happy family and his implacable pursuit of truth, al-Hakim raises a fundamental question: why should one run after truth if it can be destructive? Is it worth sometimes pursuing truth at any cost? Al-Hakim, though diverted somehow from the purpose and techniques of the original play, has managed to hybridise the play to suit the Arabic, Islamic milieu, in his own way, stressing mainly on man’s freedom of choice and the value of truth vis-à-vis reality.

Similarly, al-Hakim’s *Pygmalion* (1949) is a hybrid play which is an adaptation of the original myth. Taking the plot of *Pygmalion* from both Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and Virgil’s *Aeniad*, al-Hakim develops a play that thematises the struggle between art and life. The plot is fairly straightforward: it is based on the Greek legend of Pygmalion of Cyprus, who fell in love with a statue, later to be known as Galatea (according to Ovid, made by himself). In response to his prayers to Aphrodite to bring life to his statue, the goddess gave the statue life and Pygmalion married it. Al-Hakim’s interest in the legend, he says, was first aroused by Jean Roux’s painting ‘Pygmalion et Galatea’ at the Louvre,
and was later revived by a film based on Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (*Pygmalion*, Introduction 15). Unlike Shaw, al-Hakim did not choose a modern setting for his play but placed it within the framework of the original legend. He did, however, depart from the traditional story in certain important aspects in order to give expression to his own main preoccupations and to produce his play in a new dramatic form.

The play begins at a climactic moment in Pygmalion’s life. Pygmalion has just finished an artwork of absolute beauty that even arouses the wonder of the gods themselves, Apollo and Venus, who are omniscient voyeurs in the play:

APOLLO. What you behold now is much more beautiful than a woman, and much more perfect than a woman....

VENUS. I cannot believe that this is a work of a mortal! (34-35)

The reference to Pygmalion as possessing a godly gift is stressed over and over throughout the play. Sometimes, too, he surpasses the gods. At least Pygmalion is able to transcend his human confines and go beyond the prison-house of the body through art, whereas the gods by virtue of their end-point divinity cannot over-step their own transcendence. Art to al-Hakim is thus an uplifting of human condition. Pygmalion in al-Hakim’s version falls in love with his own creation and makes a passionate plea to Venus to breathe life into his statue so that he might consummate his love to Galatea. To this Venus responds by breathing life into Galatea’s body, and both creator and created, artist and his work, enjoy each other’s company for some time.

Not for long after Galatea is ‘womanned’ by Venus that she escapes to the forest with Narcissus, Pygmalion’s handsome attendant. Pygmalion, shocked at this act of betrayal, goes back to Venus and begs her to give him back his work of art and take away
the woman. After a thoughtful deliberation, both Venus and Apollo decide to bring Galatea back to him. Now Galatea appreciates the accomplishments of her husband and worships him. She has become an obedient and grateful servant of her creator. Pygmalion, pleased with the change, enjoys a life of conjugal fidelity for a while until he sees Galatea holding a broom in her hands and sweeping the floor. Only then does he come to realise his loss: “You are not my work of art…. I did not create a woman with a broom in her hand” (115). Saddened by the image of Galatea’s decaying beauty, and the thought that his perfect immortal achievement has been replaced by a decaying body, Pygmalion calls upon the gods to take away his wife and bring back his statue instead.

Once more, his prayer is answered and Galatea is changed back into a lifeless statue. Far from being satisfied, however, Pygmalion misses the warmth and affection of his wife, neglects the statue, nightly visits the hut where he made love to his wife, and is generally full of remorse for having killed her. Feeling sorry for him, Venus suggests bringing Galatea back to life, but Apollo advises her not to do so because that would only lead to the same result as before. Pygmalion goes up to the statue, places a broom in its hand, then snatches it and in a frenzy smashes its head and is only stopped by Narcissus, who immediately puts him to bed and to whom he explains that he has destroyed the statue because it no longer represents what he ought to make and that he will soon make a better one. Narcissus is unconvinced and tells Pygmalion that he is no longer capable of anything. Soon after, Pygmalion dies.

Apart from the different ending he has introduced to the story, al-Hakim brings in a subplot, consisting of the love Ismene bears for Narcissus, Pygmalion’s young companion whom he found in his infancy in the woods and brought up as his child. We
are shown how Ismene managed to ‘create’ Narcissus, to turn him into feeling and thinking human being by the sheer force of love for him, just as Pygmalion created Galatea by his art (108-111). However, the happiness enjoyed by Ismene and Narcissus proves to be short-lived and in Act IV we find that they have quarrelled and no longer live together. Obviously, the subplot here echoes the equally short-lived happiness of the married Pygmalion and Galatea in the main plot, thus universalising the idea that sexual love is bound to come to an end. There are moments, however, when Narcissus seems to be a separate character, but, as his name suggests, he is an aspect of Pygmalion, standing for the artist’s self-love and egoism while at times he seems to represent Pygmalion’s alter ego (Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama* 45).

Clearly the theme of the play is twofold: the relative importance of art and life and the need to choose between them. The play reflects Pygmalion’s constant indecision, his inability to come down once and for all either on the side of life or of art. The result is that he both smashes his work of art and destroys his life. In fact, the play projects al-Hakim’s internal conflict; he did not get married till late stage in his life. His personal conviction that there is a sharp opposition between art and life, and that in order for art to survive, serious artists must do away with women – agents of dissuasion – so as not to be distracted from their works (Salama 231). The other related theme is the Pirandello-like confusion of art and reality. Did Pygmalion kill his wife or, as Narcissus tells him, was it all in his imagination? (al-Hakim, *Pygmalion* 152)

Another observation on *Pygmalion* relates to the way al-Hakim makes the gods not only watch the actions of the mortals but intervene at certain crucial moments to direct the course of events. While this at times provides amusing scenes in which the god
and goddess squabble and taunt each other in a pretty fashion reminiscent of human sex war at which al-Hakim is adept, and no doubt symbolising the quarrel between art and life. It robs the human agent of a certain measure of his willpower or stature, reducing him to something approaching a pawn on a chessboard (Badawi, *Modern Arabic Dram.* 46), although it must be admitted that on the two occasions when they actively intervene the gods did no more than respond to Pygmalion’s own express wishes.

Al-Hakim’s *Pygmalion* is a hybrid play in terms of intertextuality. Al-Hakim has appropriated the plot from the original Greek myth and reshaped it in his own way. Here al-Hakim produces this hybrid play in order to show the inseparability of the past and the present. He adopts the story of the past in order to reflect upon an issue of the present. The dramatist presents an issue that deals with the conflict of art and life and the need to choose between the two. He expresses his anxiety about the artist’s creativity and about the death of his art as a result of its attachment to real life. However at the end of the play, there is a glimpse of hope that a reconciliation of the two sides could be the ideal solution.

Thus, by writing intertextual hybrid plays, such as *al-Malik Odib, Praxa, Pygmalion* and other historical plays such as *Ahl al-Kahf* and *The Sultan’s Dilemma* which will be discussed in the next section, al-Hakim establishes “counter-narratives” and “counter contexts” which refute ‘the misguided belief that colonised people do/did not have a history [or drama] of their own’ (Gilbert and Tompkins 110). In their *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, Gilbert and Tompkins argue that:

Many plays [of colonised people] stage aspects of the pre-contact past in order to re-establish traditions, to lay claim to a heritage or territory, and
to recuperate various forms of cultural expression … By establishing counter-narratives and counter contexts which refute, or at least decentralise, orthodox versions of history, marginalised cultures insist on a more equitable and representative starting point from which to negotiate a post-colonial identity. (111)

4.2.2 Stylistic Hybridity

Stylistic hybridity involves the employment of an Arabic or Islamic text or theme in a Western form or style. With this in mind, three plays by al-Hakim are explored here – *Ahl al-Kahf* (The Sleepers in the Cave, 1949) *al-Sultan al-Ha’ir* (The Sultan’s Dilemma, 1960) and *Ya Tal’i al-Shajara* (Tree Climber, 1962). Though the plots of many of his plays are derived from Eastern culture (Arabic or Islamic), al-Hakim employs several Western styles and techniques ranging from naturalistic and realistic, to the romantic, the symbolic and the surrealistic. The Shavian concept of a utilitarian drama of ideas of social relevance applies to many of his plays. Some of these plays even assume the Shavian formula of exposition, problem and discussion. This is evident in the elaborate discussions of the issues raised: conflicts between man and time in *The Sleepers in the Cave*, the use or abuse of power in *The Sultan’s Dilemma* and the tradition of family or tribal revenge in *Song of Death*.

*The Sleepers in the Cave* reflects an influence of the Western “tradition of intellectual drama” along with the Eastern culture. *The Sleepers in the Cave*, al-Hakim claims, is intended to mix the Greek dramatic tradition (characteristic of ancient Greek myth of man’s confrontation with higher powers) with an Islamic plot: “I made sure,” he says, “that my source would be the Koran instead of the Greek myth” (qtd in A. Said 35).
However, al-Hakim’s play appears in a completely new form so that “the source’s influence is almost forgotten” (36). This was al-Hakim’s technique in all his plays derived from other Eastern or Western sources.

Obviously, al-Hakim makes significant modifications to the Koranic version of the Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus: young Christian men who seek refuge from the persecution by the pagan Emperor Decius in a cave and who miraculously sleep for three centuries, waking up in the reign of the Christian Emperor Theodosius II. Al-Hakim places the events in Tarsus and, following the Koran, he makes the period of their sleep last three hundred years. Whereas the original legend had seven characters, for reasons of dramatic economy al-Hakim has limited his characters to three (and a dog): the Emperor’s (King’s) two ministers: Marnush, secretly married, with a son by a Christian woman who was the cause of his conversion; Mishlinya, a younger man in love with the King’s daughter, Prisca, who under his influence had undergone a clandestine conversion to Christianity; and the shepherd Yamlikha, who had helped them to find the cave and who was accompanied by his dog Qatmir.

The story begins with Marnush, Mishlinya and Yamlikha, who hide themselves in a cave to escape the persecution of a pagan king called Decius. They fall asleep and three centuries pass before they awaken in their hiding place. They resurrect in a future Tarsus where Christianity has been firmly established. From the moment they contact with the world outside the cave, it is only Yamlikha who realises that they have awoken at a time to which they do not belong. Marnush and Mishlinya, on the other hand, decide to adjust to the new age by changing their appearances. Both try in vain to relive the lives they had known in the past; Marnush searches for his family, only to find their torn down
tombstones, while Mishlinya sees in the King’s daughter, Princess Prisca, the image of his ex-lover, with whom he hopes to reunite. Actually, the Princess happens to be her descendent who has inherited her name, spirit and looks. Upon realising that they cannot live in the new world, both Marnush and Mishlinya rejoin Yamlikha in the cave, and strangely enough, having fallen in love with Mishlinya, the Princess follows them into the cave and dies with them.

Al-Hakim shifts to the Eastern myth in his play in order to charge it with symbolic significance. In the introduction to his play, Pygmalion, al-Hakim states that myth allowed him to transform “actors into ideas moving in the absolute, dressed in nothing but symbols” (10). Myth, Ahmed al-Haggi argues, has always provided Arab dramatists with a means to deal symbolically with social and political issues in periods when freedom of expression was not allowed. In his book, Myth in the Contemporary Egyptian Theatre, al-Haggi discusses symbolism in al-Hakim’s The Sleepers in the Cave. He argues that Tarsus (Ephesus) is symbolic of Egypt (303). The play’s two main themes as well, man’s struggle with time and resurrection, are symbolic of Egypt’s continuous struggle with different forces throughout history. Al-Hakim’s ‘message,’ we are told, is ‘to lift the people of Egypt out of their disastrous habit of dwelling in the past’ and Prisca ‘the girl who buried herself alive with Mishlinya, the man from the past whom she loved’ is meant to be ‘a symbol of the fruitlessness of the mood from which his compatriots were suffering’ (Isma’il 55). However, this was dismissed by Paul Starkey, who sees that ‘the essence of the play is in the sleepers’ inability to adapt, not Prisca’s’ (‘Theme’ 60). However, Starkey himself has no doubt that al-Hakim ‘intended the play to relate to
Egypt’s current situation, as the country awoke from centuries of stagnation to face the challenge of the twentieth century and Western civilisation’ (63).

The play belongs to al-Hakim’s ‘theatre of the mind’ for its intellectual quality. Influenced by Pirandello’s dramas, al-Hakim chooses for his theme the idea of man’s struggle with time. Thus, the play reflects a strong Pirandellian influence both in theme and technique. It dramatises Pirandello’s conflict between dream and reality, fact and fantasy, sanity and madness, and intellect and heart. In Act IV, when Marnush, Mishlinya and Yamlikha return to the cave, they all lie dying. Mishlinya tells Marnush he has had bad dreams in which he saw the cave stormed by people in strange costumes who took them to the palace, where everything has changed. Decius was no longer reigning and Tarsus was so much altered that even Prisca no longer recognised him. When Marnush tells him it is not a dream but a fact, they turn to Yamlikha for confirmation. Reluctant to face reality they are all unable to decide whether or not they had the same dream. Even Yamlikha, who is the first to die from weakness and exhaustion, admits that he is dying not knowing whether his life has been a dream or reality (al-Hakim, Ahl 141).

In The Sleepers in the Cave various time dimensions develop through such dramatic devices such as characterisation, setting, dialogue, properties, and sound effects. Although the play takes place in the present, the past dominates the action. The action of the play’s four acts dwells on the past, three centuries ago. On a few occasions, however, the present time interrupts the world of the past. Since there are hardly any stage directions in the play, al-Hakim relies on the dialogue as a means of suggesting staging. The present and past events, the portrayal of characters and their relationships are mainly
revealed through al-Hakim’s successful dramatic dialogue. In Act I, for example, the conversation in the play’s opening scene indicates a time lapse:

MISHLINYA. Marnush.

MARNUSH. Are you awake? What do you want?

MISHLINYA. Where are you? I can hear your troubled voice but I can’t see you. Oh! My back hurts.

MARNUSH. Let me be. My body hurts too as if I slept for a whole year.

(13)

Mishlinya’s constant questions as well indicate their uncertainty about their situation:

MISHLINYA. How long have we stayed here Marnush?

MARNUSH. You are bothering me with your questions.

MISHLINYA. I’m as nervous as you are. Marnush, how long has it been since we’ve been here?

MARNUSH. A day or two.

MISHLINYA. How do you know that?

MARNUSH. Can we sleep more than that?

MISHLINYA. You’re right. [silence, then suddenly] I want to get out of this place. (13-14)

In *The Sleepers in the Cave*, al-Hakim introduces a few elements of Greek and Oriental mythology. The oracle, which predicted the young Princess’ birth as well as her dream which comes true in Act IV, is reminiscent of Greek drama. Prisca’s announcement of her dream that she was buried alive in the beginning of Act II prefigures her sacrifice for Mishlinya in Act IV. This early connection between
Mishlinya and Prisca is also suggested as Gallius, just after she narrates her dream, gives his news about the treasure found in the cave. Although Prisca’s link with the past strengthens as she gradually falls in love with Mishlinya, for a moment in Act IV she also represents the future (eternity) as she promises Mishlinya to love him “for thousands of years to come” (175). Al-Hakim, furthermore, employs the Japanese myth of Urashima to serve his “love for eternity” theme (qtd in A. Said 46). He presents Prisca recounting the legend of the fisherman Urashima’s return from the island of eternity as parallel to her circumstances. Urashima disappears for four centuries during which he was married to the daughter of the King of Oceans. As Urashima decides to go back home to visit his family, his wife gives him a box on condition he should not open it until he comes back to the island. Out of curiosity, Urashima opens the box only to let out white smoke which vanishes slowly towards the sea. At this moment, Urashima turns into a dying four-century old man.

As in other plays based on myth, al-Hakim wrote *The Sleepers in the Cave* in Classical Arabic. Thus, he could use some quotations from the Koran (written in Classical Arabic) for the dialogue especially in Act I. In spite of al-Haggi’s criticism of a few speeches in the play such as Prisca’s long narration of Urashima’s story, and Marnush’s speech on Egypt and eternity, still he praises the play as a whole. He also praises al-Hakim’s artistic skill in creating dramatic dialogue. Similarly, Jaroslav Stetkevych states that the play is:

… unmistakably a work where for the first time in the history of Arabic dramatic literature conceived and executed in the *fusha* [Classical Arabic], an effective fusion of dramatic action and language takes place. (159)
Some of the plays of this category, stylistic hybridity, are representational: naturalistic, as *Ughniyyat al-Mawt* (Song of Death), or realistic, as *al-Sultan al-Ha‘ir* (The Sultan’s Dilemma). Both the plays elaborately discuss social or political issues which reflect the influence of Shaw’s drama of ideas on al-Hakim. Like Brecht and Shaw before him, al-Hakim believed in theatre as an instruction medium whose function is to raise the audience’s awareness of the world in which they live by appealing to their critical faculties. Shaw’s concept of the utilitarian drama is therefore evident in al-Hakim’s plays depicting contemporary reality. The Shavian influence is also reflected in al-Hakim’s definition of the role of the author in his book *Fan n al-Adab* (The Art of Literature, 1952) in which he argues that:

*The duty of the author is not to convince the reader. His duty is to think with him…. Literature is a means to raise ideas…. Thus the reader’s role should be complementary to that of the author…. The author who does not raise the thoughts of his readers in order to enhance the process of their development, is one who hinders the growth and betterment of his society.*

(181)

*Song of Death* (1960) is a one-act tragedy which thematises a serious Egyptian and Arabic issue: the perpetuation of blood revenge. This endless cycle of revenge controls and threatens the lives of the peasants in the rural areas in Upper Egypt. The play’s setting is therefore representative of a southern village where poverty and ignorance prevail. The villagers in these areas are often blindly driven by what Andrew Parkin describes as “ancient codes of honour and revenge” (qtd in A. Said 76). The play is a call for repudiating such traditional habits for healthier modern concepts. To stress
this sharp contrast between the tradition and the modern, al-Hakim sets the village and
the villagers against Cairo, and its ‘educated’ inhabitants. He therefore constructs his play
on a repeated pattern of dualities which re-enforce the conflict between “tradition and
modernity.” All dramatic elements of the play, its structure, theme, character portrayal
and setting emphasise this conflict. Al-Hakim uses the Shavian technique of raising
social awareness to that issue.

This play is a well-constructed, one-act naturalistic play. It is divided into four
French scenes grouped in pairs, each dealing with different tension. The tension in first
two scenes arises at the opening moments of the first Scene and climaxes at the end of the
second Scene. The second tension arises by the middle of the third Scene and snaps at the
final moment of the play. Both tensions are connected, however, with the play’s theme of
revenge. Al-Hakim employs the naturalistic fourth wall; action is confined to a small
room in the house of the play’s heroine, Asakir. The opening scene between Asakir and
her sister-in-law, Mabrouka, serves as exposition, providing background for the play’s
theme and characterisation. Conforming to the play’s pattern of dualities, al-Hakim
restricts his cast to four, with only two characters in each scene. The play’s four
characters are: the heroine, Asakir, her son, Alwan, a theology student at Al-Azhar
University, his aunt, Mabrouka, and her son, Sumeida, Alwan’s cousin.

In the first Scene Asakir places herself and her educated son aloof from Mabrouka
and her peasant son. Ironically in the next scene, Asakir’s passionate loyalty to tradition
sets her world in contrast to her own son’s. In the third Scene, Asakir and Sumeida, both
belonging to the same world of the village, side together against Alwan, now considered
an outsider. The last Scene, however, centres on Asakir’s struggle, which is torn between
her loyalty to tradition and her feelings as mother. As usual in al-Hakim’s plays, the exposition develops primarily through dialogue. Past events and the present circumstance in the life of Asakir emerge out of the conversation between Asakir and Mabrouka, laying the ground for the play’s action. The opening sentences of the first Scene set the play’s theme:

ASAKIR. I hope, Mabrouka, you haven’t told anyone he’s my son.

MABROUKA. Am I crazy? Your son Alwan was drowned in the well at the water-wheel when a child of only two years. The whole village knows that.

ASAKIR. But they still can’t swallow that story.

MABROUKA. Who are they? The Tahawis?

ASAKIR. Let them learn today that the son of the murdered man is still alive. There is no reason to fear for him now that he has attained manhood…. Bring him quickly, train, quickly, for I have waited so long!

Seventeen years! I have counted them up hour by hour. (78)

The tension in this scene begins to arise as Asakir’s confidence in her son’s ability to avenge his father’s death is shaken by Mabrouka’s doubt. Since her son has been away for so long time, Mabrouka believes he could not possibly be interested in their affairs. She claims also that he might not be the right person to “know how to use the knife,” for in his childhood when he had been sent as an apprentice to a butcher shop in Cairo, he rebelled and fled to Al-Azhar to get education. Mabrouka’s observation shakes Asakir’s firm belief in her son and she asks, “Do you think he won’t come?” (81) This change in
her attitude introduces the play’s first tension. However, the moment Sumeida’s song is heard, announcing Alwan’s arrival, Asakir’s dying hopes are revived. Ironically, the opening moments of the following scene foreshadow the loss of these revived hopes.

In this Scene, both mother and her son appear to be speaking two different languages belonging to two different worlds. This lack of communication dominates the whole scene and foreshadows their final failure to reach each other. Each had a different dream, neither is realised. Where Asakir dreams of avenging her husband’s murder, Alwan arrives in the village with a dream of social reform. He confronts his uncomprehending mother:

I shall tell them (the villagers) what I have come to tell them … when will our people in the countryside live like human beings in clean houses?… When will their roofs be covered with something other than twigs from cotton and maize stalks, and their walls be painted with something other than mud and animal dung? When will the water jar be replaced by running water, and electricity take the place of lanterns? (86-87)

Unwilling to listen to his plan, Asakir remarks, “This bookish talk is something to chat about later on with Sheikh Mohammed al-Isnawi, who will understand it” (87). This is a reminder of the gap separating their worlds. Their failure to communicate is indicated in Alwan’s constant evasions of his mother’s pleas for hastening revenge and her recurrent misinterpretations of his remarks.

Alwan’s reluctance to carry out his mother’s commands and his questioning her about his father’s murder rekindle Asakir’s fears. Until this point in the scene, Alwan has kept his image as pacifist, a quality expected from a student of theology. The scene in
which he questions his mother about the murder is an attempt to dissuade her from her revenge, and stresses his balanced nature; it shows the rational in him:

ALWAN. Who did all this?

ASAKIR. Suweilam Tahawi.

ALWAN. How did you know?

ASAKIR. The whole village knows.

ALWAN. Yes you told me that. You mentioned his name to me dozens of times whenever you came to visit me in Cairo…. What proof is there? Was the crime investigated?

ASAKIR. Investigated?

ALWAN. Yes. What did the district attorney’s office say?

ASAKIR. District attorney? For shame! Would we say anything to the district attorney’s office? Would the Azizis do such a thing? Did ever the Tahawis do such a thing?

ALWAN. Didn’t the district attorney’s office question you?

ASAKIR. They asked us and we said we knew nothing and had not seen a body. We buried your father’s (corpse) secretly at night.

ALWAN (as though talking to himself). So that we might take vengeance into our hands. (83-84)

Their confrontation climaxes in the final moment of the scene with Alwan’s announcement, “I won’t kill.” The emotional outburst of Asakir which follows contrasts sharply with Alwan’s attitude as he calmly tries to appease his mother’s rage. The scene
is a culmination of their failed attempt to communicate. It emphasises their inevitable separation:

ALWAN. Try to understand, mother.

ASAKIR. Get out of my house. God’s curse be on you until the Day of Judgment. Get out of my house.

ALWAN. Mother!

ASAKIR [Shouting]. Get out of my house or I shall call the men to put you out. We have our men, there are still men amongst Azizis, but you are not one of them… (88)

Asakir then disowns Alwan, producing the play’s second tension which dominates the following two scenes. In the second and third Scenes, tension centres on Asakir’s decision to get rid of her son in an attempt to regain the family’s honour. Now, Asakir, Sumeida and Mabrouka represent a unified force against Alwan. In fact, the play’s structure also fulfils this imbalance of the three characters against one. Only in the scene does the world of the city, represented in Alwan, intrude on the world of the village. The play’s three other scenes are totally dominated by the villagers and their codes. This new relationship highlights the play’s duality; however, in the third and fourth Scenes Sumeida stands as an opposite extreme to Alwan. Unlike his cousin, Sumeida shows readiness to act once Asakir asks for his help, as the nearest of kin, to regain the family’s honour:

ASAKIR [taking up the knife from the saddlebag]. Kill him with this knife!

SUMEIDA. Kill who?
ASAKIR. Alwan. Plunge this knife into his chest!

SUMEIDA. Kill Alwan? Your son?

.............................

ASAKIR. If you are a man, Sumeida, don’t let him dishonour the Azizis!

After today you will not be able to walk like a man amongst people; they will whisper about you, will laugh up their sleeves at you, will point to you in the market places saying: “A woman hiding behind a woman!”

SUMEIDA [as though talking to himself]. A woman?

.............................

SUMEIDA [stretched out his hand resolutely]. Give me the knife! (90)

The play’s second tension builds up to its climax in the final Scene as Asakir, now conscious of the gravity of the matter, fights against her fears for her son and hopes for his escape from Sumeida’s knife. Asakir’s psychological struggle in the fourth Scene sets the whole scene in contrast with the first Scene. While the first Scene reflects the great hopes she places in Alwan’s arrival, which is only disturbed for a few moments by Mabrouka’s doubts, the fourth Scene emphasises her growing fears mixed with a faint hope for her son’s escape. But whereas her hopes are renewed at the end of the first Scene when she hears Sumeida’s song announcing Alawn’s arrival, in the fourth Scene, the same song which announces his death crushes her hopes. The train’s whistle heard from the station has the same connotations of Sumeida’s song off-stage. Thus, al-Hakim employs off-stage sounds to symbolise states of life and death. Sounds off-stage in the first Scene indicate the arrival of Alwan from Cairo and hence the revival of Asakir’s hope for a new life. While the same sound in the last scene implies death of her son as
well as of her hopes: Asakir’s last “fainted suppressed cry” then, contrasts sharply with her cry of joy, “Today I’ll rend the garment of shame and put on the robes of self respect” (81) on hearing the song in the first Scene. In the final Scene, Asakir appears as both “victim and victimiser.” It is the only scene in which she is endowed with a sympathetic humane touch and her struggle becomes the main emphasis of the whole scene.

The play’s settings are also indicative of the play’s duality. The fourth wall principle gives off-stage domains important roles in the development of the play’s tensions. The room in Asakir’s house in which all action takes place is symbolic of the hardness of the world of the village. It is in this room that decisions and plans to carry out murders are made. Cairo, on the other hand, is the opposite extreme. It stands for enlightenment reinforced by the education of its institutions, represented in the play by Al-Azhar University. This obvious contrast between the village and Cairo is implied in Mabrouka’s statement: “How far our village is from Cairo! Can the voice of blood reach to the capital?” (80) The train station in itself has a dual nature of its own: in the first Scene, it symbolises birth and renewal of hope, while in the final Scene it symbolises death and the end of that hope.

In like manner, costumes reflect the same relationship of opposites. The peasant’s costumes are set in contrast with those of the sheikhs at al-Azhar, which are “symbol of status in a traditional village” (Badawi, Modern Arabic Drama 56). This is referred to in the first scene as Asakir confronts Mabrouka: “It hurts you that my son puts on a turban and gibba while yours goes on wearing skullcap and rough peasant gown” (79). Ironically, this placement of Asakir and her son against Mabrouka and Sumeida does not extend beyond this first Scene. The fragility of Asakir’s association with her son is
evident from the opening moments of the second Scene. By the end of this scene their separation becomes complete.

The same idea of sharp contrast between the mother and son more generally between the villagers’ world and his, also appears in the symbolic use of the names of the play’s four characters. Alwan’s name indicates sublimity reflected in his high aspirations and his refined mental and moral concepts. Asakir’s and Sumeida’s names, on the other hand, imply toughness of nature. Literally, Asakir means soldiering or soldiery – the name thus refers to her unrelenting, military nature. Her presence in the four scenes sustains the mood of rivalry throughout the play. Likewise, Sumeida’s name implies firmness. His determination to get Alwan at the end of the third Scene emphasises this quality in him:

SUMEIDA [stretching out his hand resolutely]. Give me the knife!

ASAKIR [giving him the knife]. Take it – no, wait, I’ll wash the rust and blood.

SUMEIDA. Give it here – before he makes his escape on the evening train. (90-91)

Mabrouka’s name, on the other hand, means “a blessed one.” Al-Hakim seems to be ironically referring to the villagers’ view of Mabrouka as being one blessed with the son who is to regain the family’s honour. This idea is argued by Badawi in his book *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* in which he states that:

Asakir denotes soldiering, with the connotations of vigilance and endurance, while Mabrouka means ‘blessed’ in the sense that, unlike
Asakir, she has been blessed with a son who restores honour to family.

(57)

In *Song of Death*, al-Hakim deliberately avoids the use of the usual humour characteristic of most of his plays in order to stress the gravity of the issue he is dealing with. Badawi supports this view and hints that using humour would have been unsuitable to “the intensity and the height of emotional pitch which characterise it (the play) from beginning to end” (56). The play’s tragic tone and imagery are therefore intended to make the viewer aware of the seriousness of the issue. The play’s structure and mood, Badawi argues, give it some affinity to the plays of Synge and Lorca. Al-Hakim’s play, he indicates, has

... the tragic intensity of J. M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*, with which it has other features in common, such as its timelessness, its primitive atmosphere, its force of elemental passion and its depiction of the utter powerlessness of the individual in relation to a deeply entrenched age-old way of life – features which are reminiscent of the work of Lorca. (53)

In general, *Song of Death* is a highly esteemed play. In his article “Tawfiq al-Hakim: Leading Playwright of the Arab World,” Paul Starkey claims that it is “the most successful” of the plays of the collection of plays entitled *The Theatre of Society*. Likewise, Badawi argues that it is the “best constructed play in the corpus of al-Hakim’s works” and praises the “masterly economy” in which it is written which makes every detail “functional” (53).

Similarly, *The Sultan’s Dilemma* (1960) is a hybrid play that amalgamates Eastern and Western elements. It is a comedy in which al-Hakim follows the formula Shaw
distilled from Ibsen’s work of exposition, problem and discussion to deal with two major
issues: first, the power of the law versus that of the sword and, second, the ideal notion of
the law as a means for justice versus the twisted practices of the law in our daily lives.
Having worked as a judge himself, al-Hakim was naturally aware of the various practices
of the judicial system. This knowledge must have inspired him with the play’s two
themes. Al-Hakim adds to the Shavian formula the alienation device developed by
Brecht, a playwright also very concerned with issues of justice. Al-Hakim uses various
distancing devices to raise the audience’s awareness of the two major problems, thus
prodding them to consider the issues involved and to work to eliminate them from their
society. Al-Hakim’s recurrent distancing device in his work is historification. He sets his
play, *The Sultan’s Dilemma*, in a fairy tale-like atmosphere similar to that of the world of
the *Arabian Nights*. Action takes place in an undefined period in the thirteenth century
during the rule of the Mameluke Sultans in Egypt. This setting fulfils the epic quality of
Brechtian theatre as well. The play’s plot is believed to be based on an actual occurrence
during this period in Egypt in which a sultan was put up for sale at an auction (Badawi,
*Modern Arabic Drama* 70). The audience is thus aware that they are watching a story
over and done with. *The Sultan’s Dilemma* was written during al-Hakim’s second sojourn
in France in 1959. It was inspired by the cold war and the threat of atomic annihilation
and by the,

Great tension in the international situation, the fear and anxiety caused by
the inability of world leaders to decide whether the solution to world
problems is to be sought in arbitration by the sword or the law, in resorting
to the atom and to hydrogen bombs or to the United Nations. (70)
Though in his introduction to the play al-Hakim claims the universality of the play’s theme, still several parallels could be drawn between the world of the play and the political conditions in Egypt when ruled by the military junta following the revolution in 1952. In his book *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, Badawi argues that the play was obviously “al-Hakim’s call to Abd al-Nasser and his army to return to the barracks and seek legitimacy by resort to the rule of law, constitutional and parliamentary life” (72).

This issue is raised in the first Act of the play which combines a Brechtian, a Shavian, and a touch of the absurdist styles. In what seems to be a historical play, al-Hakim employs the technique of the drama of ideas by fully exposing and elaborately discussing the play’s major theme. By the third part of the first Act, all characters have been introduced; the problem has been raised, and discussed. Exposition occurs gradually through the three parts of Act I. It starts in the “surrealistic topsy-turvy world” of the opening farcical scene, which Badawi claims is probably an influence of the theatre of the absurd (74). He also argues that al-Hakim uses this comic scene as a distancing device to prevent the emotional engagement of the audience with the Sultan’s predicament in the third part of Act I.

The scene is an encounter between a condemned man and his executioner. Both are awaiting the call for dawn prayer, the assigned moment for carrying out the death sentence. Ironically, it is the Executioner who seems to be in a bad mood. He occasionally asks the convict to entertain him in order to raise his spirits so that he can perform his job skilfully at the break of dawn. In this scene, the play’s problem is held back from the audience as the Executioner does not allow that Condemned Man to reveal his crime. The suspense is sustained as well in the Act’s second part. It is not until the
arrival of the Sultan in the third part of the Act that the issue is raised and fully discussed.

The opening scene is a comic treatment of the idea of human rights and freedom of speech in a society ruled by a totalitarian regime. It is in this scene that parallels could be drawn between the world of the play and conditions in Egypt under the military regime. Suppression of freedom of speech, convictions without trials and passing severe sentences that did not fit the nature of the crimes punished were common aspects of the Egyptian political life, especially during the 1960s. The Executioner in Scene i would not allow the Condemned Man to utter a word about the crime he committed and for which he is to die without trial, but at the same time wonders why the Condemned Man could not sing for him since his “larynx – thanks be to God – is perfectly free” (*The Sultan* 101). The same issue is more seriously raised in the second part of the Act as the Lady (presumably a prostitute) asks the Condemned Man:

LADY. … but what crime have you committed?

CONDEMNED MAN. Nothing much. All that happened was that I said …

EXECUTIONER [*shouting*]. Careful! Careful! Shut your mouth!

LADY. Naturally they gave you a trial?

CONDEMNED MAN. No. (107)

The exposition of the play’s theme is complete by the Act’s third part in which the Condemned Man is allowed to reveal his crime to the Sultan. The convict is accused of uncovering a serious truth about the Sultan; the late Sultan died before freeing the present Sultan from slavery. He is therefore not fit, the Cadi (judge) claims, to rule over a
According to the state’s law, he insists, the Sultan becomes a property of the state. He could only be freed if a citizen buys him in a public auction then sets him free. At this point of the Act, tension begins to rise as the controversy heightens between the Cadi, who insists on following the law no matter what it costs, and the Sultan and his Vizier who oppose the Cadi’s resolution. The action gains momentum as the issue is debated among the three in which the play’s main theme of “law” versus “force” is elaborately discussed:

SULTAN. Listen, Cadi. This law of yours has brought me no solution, whereas a small movement of the sword will ensure that the knot of the problem is severed instantly.

CADI. Then do so.

SULTAN. I shall. What does the spilling of a little blood matter for the sake of the practicability of governing?

SULTAN. I shall do everything I think necessary for safeguarding the security of the state and I shall in fact start with you. I shall cast you into prison. Vizier! Arrest the Cadi. (121)

The tension continues to build up with the Cadi’s final advice to the Sultan to choose between “the sword which imposes and yet exposes you, and … the law which threatens and yet protects you” (125). From this point on, until the climactic moment of the Act, this statement is repeatedly emphasised as the Sultan contemplates the Cadi’s words. The tension snaps in the Act’s final statement as the Sultan announces decisively, “The law! I have chosen the law” (126).
Normally al-Hakim depends on dramatic dialogue to reveal present action and past events and to portray characters. In *The Sultan’s Dilemma*, however, he uses stage directions with detailed descriptions of the settings. The opening scene of Act I reads as follows:

An open space in the city during the time of the Mameluke Sultans. On one side there is a mosque with a minaret; on the other, a tavern. In the centre is a house with a balcony. Dawn is about to break and silence reigns. A stake has been set up to which a man, condemned to death, has been tied. His executioner is nearby trying to fight off sleep. (96)

Likewise, stage directions give a full description of the action taking place. In the third part of the first Act, as the convict reveals the Sultan’s problem, stage directions read, “The Vizier, by a sign, orders everyone to move off with the Condemned Man, leaving only himself, the Sultan, and the Chief Cadi on stage” (116). Mood is similarly revealed through stage directions. Before announcing his final decision at the end of Act I, the Sultan is shown, “thinking hard as he walks up and down, with the other two [the Vizier and Cadi] waiting for him to speak. Silence reigns for a moment” as the Sultan, with “head lowered in thought” reflects on the matter.

Dialogue, nevertheless, serves to give details of the action taking place on stage. New entrances and exits or shifting attention to action taking place on the other side of the stage is often preceded or accompanied by an announcement by one of the characters. In Act III, the Shoemaker draws the Wine Merchant’s attention to the suspicious encounter between the Vizier and the Executioner on the other side of the stage:
SHOEMAKER [*turning to the corner of the square*. Look! Over there!]

WINE MERCHANT. What?

SHOEMAKER [*whispering*]. The Vizier and the Executioner. They look as though they’re hatching some plot.

WINE MERCHANT. Quiet! (163)

Similarly, a few minutes earlier, attention shifts to the interior of the Lady’s house as a room in her house is lit followed by the Vizier’s statement, “Quiet! A light in the window! Let’s move away a little” (154).

Dialogue reveals past events as well. As the Sultan demands an explanation from the Condemned Man in Act I, the latter replies:

CONDEMNED MAN. I did nothing at all except utter an innocent word in which there is neither danger nor harm.

........................................

VIZIER. He said that His Majesty, the great and noble Sultan, is a slave. (112-3)

And later the Condemned Man reveals the story of the Sultan:

CONDEMNED MAN. Twenty-five years ago, Your Majesty. You were a small boy of six, lost, and abandoned in a Circassian village raided by the Mongols. You were extremely intelligent and wise for one of your tender years. I rejoiced in you and carried you off to the Sultan of this country. As the price for you he made me a present of one thousand dinars. (113)
In the same manner, the Lady in Act III narrates her life story to the Sultan:

LADY. I shall elucidate. When I was a young slave-girl of the same age as the slave-girls I have with me now, my master brought me up to love poetry and singing and playing on musical instruments. He used to make me attend his banquets and converse with his guests, who were poets and singers: they also included intellectuals and men of wit and charm. We would spend the night reciting poetry, singing and playing music and conversing, quoting and capping quotations from masterpieces of literature ... (157)

As the main theme is fully exposed and discussed in the first Act, so character portrayal is almost complete by the end of the same Act. All characters taking major parts in the action of the following two acts are introduced and their personalities drawn in this Act. In this play as well, Al-Hakim uses the Shavian trick of trapping his audience into first impressions which are entirely reversed at the end of the play. This technique al-Hakim uses in his portrayal of the Lady, the Cadi, and to a lesser degree the Sultan. The major characters are the Sultan, the Vizier, the Cadi and the Lady living in the house occupying the centre of the stage. The position of the Lady’s house is symbolic of the centrality of the Lady’s role in each of the play’s three acts. From the house the Lady appears in the first Act to save the life of the Condemned Man. She reappears from her house in Act II to buy the Sultan and refuses to sign the manumission, thus raising the play’s tension. And her third appearance in Act III snaps the tension as she frees the Sultan in the climactic moment of the play.

The Lady’s strength of character is evident from the moment she appears in the
balcony in the first Scene of Act I inquiring about the commotion raised by the drunken Executioner. She sustains this strength of character throughout the play, thus dominating the play’s action, even in scenes where she does not appear on stage. In Act I she appears to be the logical, stubborn, unsubmissive person who defends her rights and helps others to get theirs. She is the first to inquire from the Condemned Man if he has had a fair trial and as she learns of the injustice inflicted upon him she takes a quick action to save his life. She distracts the Muezzin from giving his call for the dawn prayer by seducing him into her house, thus preventing the Executioner from carrying out the sentence. Likewise, she defies the Vizier and the Cadi in Act II as they attempt to deprive her of her right of winning the Sultan. She confronts the Vizier:

VIZIER. Then sign this deed.

LADY. What does this deed contain?

VIZIER. Manumission.

LADY. Does it mean giving up what I am in possession of?

VIZIER. Yes.

LADY. Giving up the chattel I bought at the auction?

VIZIER. That’s it.

LADY. No, I don’t want to give it up.

.........................

VIZIER. You shall give it up, woman!

LADY. No.

............

Cadi. Manumission – otherwise the sale itself becomes null and void.
LADY. And what is manumission? Is it not the opposite of possession?
Is it not yielding up possession?
Cadi. Yes.
LADY. Then, Oh Cadi, you make manumission a condition of possession, that is to say, that in order validly to possess the thing sold, the purchaser must yield up that very thing.
Cadi. What? What?
LADY. You’re saying in other words, in order to possess something you must yield it up.... Or, if you like, in order to possess you must not possess. (141-42)
And in Act III she confesses to the Sultan that she was deliberately insolent to him at the auction in order to avenge his assumed sense of superiority; “Because I imagined you,” she claims, “as an arrogant sultan, strutting about haughtily and giving yourself airs – like most sultans” (158).

Surprisingly, in Act III, the Lady appears to be a kind, sensitive woman and a lover of the arts. The reversal of her early image as a prostitute comes as a surprise for the audience as well as for the Sultan who approaches her sarcastically until she reveals her true nature. The scene reemphasises the strength of her character. She admits to the Sultan that experience, and the various injustices inflicted upon her by society, taught her to follow her own rules. For, she declares in a statement reminiscent of Mrs. Alving’s words in Ibsen’s Ghosts:

LADY. ... it is no longer in my interests to correct people’s opinion. When one has crossed the ultimate boundaries of wickedness one becomes
free, and I am in need of my freedom. (156)

Mrs. Alving’s statement reads:

MRS ALVING. I will not be bound by these responsibilities, these
hypocritical conventions any longer – I simply cannot! I must work my
way through freedom. (qtd in A. Said 96)

The theme of dishonest law practices conducted within the system of law also
raises the question of whether real justice can exist. It has to depend on humans and they
are corruptible. Tension rises in Act III as the Vizier plots against the Lady. This
atmosphere of insecurity heightens as the Cadi joins him to plot for freeing the Sultan.
Tension snaps with the Sultan’s refusal to accept the Cadi’s “shameful” plan.

A third issue, raised in the play is the need for group action in order to have a
healthier society. This idea is enforced throughout Acts II and III by the recurrent loud
voices of the people in the square. In these two acts, al-Hakim represents the crowd in a
collective entity reflecting various points of view. In the Auction Scene, as the Vizier
calls for the Lady’s death, the people’s voices rise, some in favour of the decision and
others opposed to it. The masses’ presence is emphasised by their gradual entrances
throughout the act. Act III stresses also the power of the people with action and sound
effects. As the Muezzin calls for the dawn prayer, the people’s resentment foreshadows
that of the Sultan later in the act:

_The crowd makes their appearance in a state of agitation,
astonishment, protest, and anger._

THE POEPLE [shouting]. The dawn? Now? It’s still night – we’re in the
middle of the night. He’s mad! This madman – arrest him! Bring him
down, bring him down from on top of the minaret! Bring him down!

VIZIER [to the Cadi]. The crowds will fall upon this poor fellow.

CADI. Order your guards to disperse the crowds.

VIZIER [shouting to the guards]. Clear the square! Clear everyone out of the square!

The guards chase the people away and clear the square, while the Muezzin continues with his call to prayer. (167-8)

The fact that the Lady buys the Sultan and succeeds in keeping him for the night is an anti-totalitarian idea. Though she is set apart from the crowd throughout the play, she is still a citizen, one of the people.

Al-Hakim also uses the crowds to reflect on the good and evil in human nature. The opening scene of Act II emphasises selfishness versus selflessness in Act III. The comic conversation between the Shoemaker and the Wine Merchant over the issue of selling the Sultan reflects a materialistic outlook, opposed to the Lady’s humane point of view in the end of Act III. The Wine Merchant claims that he would buy the Sultan to make use of him as a means for business profit. He informs the Shoemaker that:

WINE MERCHANT. ... His mere presence in my shop would be enough to bring along the whole city. It would be enough to recount to my customers every evening the stories of his battles against the Mongols, the strange things that have happened to him, his voyages and adventures, the countries he has seen, the places he’s been to, the deserts he’s crossed – wouldn’t that be valuable and enjoyable?
WINE MERCHANT. If I were in your place I’d know how to employ him.

SHOEMAKER. How? Tell me.

WINE MERCHANT. I’d sit him down in front of the door of the shop in a comfortable chair. I’d put a new pair of shoes on his feet and a placard above his head reading: “Sultan’s shoes sold here,” and the next day you’d see how the people of the city would flock to your shop and demand your wares. (128)

This same notion of possession and profit is further emphasised in the Auction Scene in which all bidders compete to buy the Sultan for their personal needs. It is even satirically reflected in a child’s plea for his mother to buy him the Sultan. In a short scene between the child and his mother, al-Hakim refers to worldly dealings as mere game of loss and profit:

CHILD. The Sultan! Buy me the Sultan!

MOTHER. Quiet! He’s not a toy for you to play with.

CHILD. You said they will sell him here. Buy him for me then.

MOTHER. Quiet, child. This is not a game for children.

CHILD. For whom then? For grown-ups?

MOTHER. Yes, it’s for grown-ups. (129)

The outlook of the Lady, on the other hand, is intended to reflect the opposite side of human nature. Though al-Hakim does not portray her as an ideal character, still she stands for the ideal refining influence of the arts which bring up the beautiful and humane in man’s nature. Her refusal of the Sultan’s offer to repay her for her kindness reflects
this idea as opposed to the notion of profit and loss emphasised in Act II:

LADY. No, no, Your Majesty. Don’t take this honour from me. There are no riches in the world, in my opinion, to equal this beautiful memory on which I shall live for the whole of my life. With something so paltry I have participated in one of the greatest events. (171)

Whereas dialogue and stage directions portray characters, reveal past events and describe present action, the play’s segmentation determines the tempo of the action. The first two acts are divided into three major parts while Act III includes four parts. Each act begins with a slow rhythm in which a comic scene prepares the audience for what follows. Tension in each act begins to rise in the second part of the act and climaxes in the final moment of the last part. The segmentation is marked either by entrances and exits of some of the characters, or by sound and light effects. In Act I, the first segment ends with the song of the drunken Executioner followed by the loud protests of the Lady’s maid in the balcony. The second part, which includes the encounter between the Lady and the Condemned Man, ends with the entrance of the Vizier followed by the procession of the Sultan. The third part extends until the fall of the curtain marking the end of Act I. In Act II the entrance of the crowds breaks up the conversation about the auction between the Shoemaker and Wine Merchant. The crowd’s entrances, however, are further preparations for the auction that takes place in the following part. The act climaxes in the third part and ends with the Sultan’s sudden announcement of his approval to join the Lady. As in the first Act, the curtain falls immediately after the Sultan’s announcement. In Act III segmentation is marked with changes of light which shift locales of the action. Act III opens in the city square at midnight, with the people,
the Vizier and the Cadi gathered in the square facing the house of the Lady. The setting shows part of the mosque and part of the Lady’s house. The inside of a room is visible. In the opening scene the centre of the action is the people occupying the square. The first part ends as the square darkens and lights go up in the Lady’s room. This shifts action to the interior of the Lady’s house. This part ends as the Lady and the Sultan leave for dinner accompanied by music while “the light in the house is extinguished and a dim light comes up in the square” (163). In the third Act tension does not rise until the third part in which the Vizier and Cadi plot against the Lady. This third part also ends with the voice of the Muezzin giving his call for prayer, which is interrupted by the commotion of the people protesting against it. This third Scene ends with the guards clearing the square while lights go on in the Lady’s house as she appears in the balcony with the Sultan inquiring about the Muezzin’s untimely call. As lights are extinguished in her house, she reappears with the Sultan at the door to start the fourth and final part of the act. The climactic moment of freeing the Sultan is accompanied by music as the Sultan’s retinue moves off.

Whereas the occasional use of music, songs and dance in Acts I and III function as markers for segmentation, they also function, Badawi argues, as distancing devices to prevent the emotional involvement of the audience in the action. The dramatic effects of alienation including, Badawi states,

The humour, the visual effects, the singing and dancing of the Arabian Nights world, together with the legal debates and trial at which Hakim with his legal training is adept, combine to make this well-structured play, with its ironic parallelisms and reversal of situations, one of the most
entertaining and enjoyable works. (*Modern Arabic Drama* 74)

This play appears to have met with considerable success with the public in its first production in 1969. Richard Long cites examples of critical praise in his book *Tawfiq al-Hakim: Playwright of Egypt*:

The critics were unanimous in their praise. Ghali Shukri thought the play [was] one of his finest and the one which revealed him as a truly modern playwright ... Dawara had some reservations but overall gave it as his opinion that *The Sultan’s Dilemma*, with its skillful suspense, ‘precise, engineered,’ symbolic framework, ‘skill and charm of dialogue’ and ‘force and ... sharpness of logic ... [which] give the mind the shake,’ has achieved [an] outstanding position among [Hakim’s] other plays. (82-83)

Al-Hakim’s second visit to France in 1959-1960 inspired him to try his hand in the theatre of the absurd. In his introduction to his first absurdist play, *Ya Tal‘i al-Shajarah* (The Tree Climber, 1962), al-Hakim argues that, though the Egyptian theatre at the time was still in need for representational drama, it was also as important for its development to experiment with different forms and styles. “What we should fear,” he warns, “is freezing our arts in one mould while world’s arts are moving in various directions” (28). Yet, al-Hakim claims that though the ancient Egyptian and the more recent popular Egyptian arts, especially sculpture and painting, have certain qualities of the modern anti-realistic movements, still the notion of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life could not be adopted in the Arab world due to opposing Islamic beliefs. He elaborates on the same issue in an interview with Lucy Y’aqub, remarking:
in our religion … we do not believe that God has created the world meaninglessly. Rather, we believe that there is a wise purpose behind the creation of the world with all its harmony. (38)

This view, however, is not inconsistent with al-Hakim’s use of such absurdist themes as man’s physical and metaphysical confinement, the break of communication, and the sense of the disharmony in the human condition. Al-Hakim, however, indicates that his adoption of absurdism is more technical than thematic, for through this new style, he explains, he tried to present the “realistic with the unrealistic and the rational with the irrational” (qtd in A. Said 136). At the same time, he argues, it was necessary for him to mix this new Western style with elements from the Eastern culture. Thus by choosing a folk song as a source for his play and by introducing such characters as the Dervish, also inspired by the Egyptian folklore, al-Hakim claims that he was reviving folk arts in the same manner he treated the Arabian Nights stories. He then argues that the meaninglessness of the peasant folksong made it the most suitable source for a play written in the absurdist style. His main aim of The Tree Climber, he argues, was to present the play’s themes in an unconventional manner by employing an absurdist style that deliberately deviates from a logical dramatic structure in the portrayal of characters and settings, in the use of dialogue and even in the choice of the title itself. “Why did I name the play The Tree Climber?” he says. “It is a meaningless title … [derived from] an illogical, incoherent song … often sung with no one ever searching for its logic” (qtd in A. Said 136).

To ensure absurdist irrationality in the play, al-Hakim employs a fluidity of all dramatic elements: time, place, events and characterisation. The opening moment of the
play suggests that the stage will be used in a neutral or abstract way:

There are no sets in this play, nor are there divisions between times and places; the past, present and the future sometimes all being present at the same time and one person occasionally present in two places on the stage and talking in his own voice twice at the same time. Here everything interlocks with everything else. There are no fixed ‘props’: every character in the play makes his appearance carrying his ‘props’ and accessories and taking them out with him when he has finished. (qtd in Johnson-Davies *The Essential* 87)

To enforce this fluidity of time, space and action, al-Hakim recommends producing the play without special light or sound effects other than those indicated in the stage directions. In the play’s introduction he states,

What I aim at is getting out of the play what is and what is not expected from these contradictory situations of one person being in two different places without allowing light to separate these two places or allowing music to separate the different time dimensions.

(qtd A. in Said 136)

This fluidity of time, space, action and characterisation calls for a similar free use of the stage itself. As the Detective arrives at the house of an elderly married couple, Bahadir and Behana, to investigate the sudden disappearance of the wife, the past lives of both husband and wife become alive on the stage in flashback scenes – flashbacks often take place on one side of the stage and at the same time action in the present time takes place on the other. Moreover, throughout the first Act past and present merge allowing
characters to move freely between the two time dimensions without any barriers. Often, before the enactment of a flashback scene, one of the characters explains what is taking place on the other side of the stage. As the Detective investigating the wife’s disappearance questions the Maid, her description of the relationship between her master and mistress is exposed by a flashback scene. At this moment, past and present merge as attention shifts gradually to the other side of the stage:

MAID. … Would you like to see with your own eyes how they live?

DETECTIVE. Naturally, I would, but how can that be done?

MAID. It’s simple – just look over there and you’ll see them.

DETECTIVE. Where?

MAID [pointing]. There – in that corner near the window overlooking the garden. That’s my mistress Behana in her green dress which she never changes, seated in her usual chair.

At that moment the wife actually makes her appearance. She is about sixty; her hair is white and her dress is green. She carries her chair and sits down on it. She begins knitting at a dress.

WIFE [turning to where the window is supposed to be]. Come on, Bahadir! Leave your tree and come inside.

HUSBAND [He enters carrying gardening tools]. I know. When it begins to turn chilly the venerable Lady Green goes into her sanctuary. (92)

A similar merger of past and present recurs in the second flashback scene as the Detective, suspicious of the husband, Bahadir, as having had a hand in his wife’s absence, questions him about his past life. The flashback then shifts the play thirty years
to the past when Bahadir was then a young railway inspector. The whole scene presents
workday in the past life of Bahadir in which he meets with the Dervish for the first time
on the train. Another merger of past and present occurs as the Dervish leaves the
flashback on one side of the stage to join the Husband and the Detective on the other
side, engaging with them in the present time.

In like manner, the two sides of the stage are occasionally occupied by events
taking place simultaneously in the present time of the action. While in the opening scene
of the second Act the Detective is preoccupied in a conversation with a Digger
supposedly searching for the Wife’s corpse off-stage, the Maid is on the other side
engaged in a conversation with an invisible Milkman through a window overlooking the
road. Al-Hakim sustains this atmosphere of mystery throughout the play. Thus, the
bewildering world of the onstage world extends to the off-stage domain which is kept
beyond the reach of the audience throughout the play. He therefore does not allow either
the Digger or the Milkman offstage to be heard or seen as an emphasis on the
unfathomable quality of the outside world, a technique reminiscent of Beckett and
Ionesco (A. Said 138).

The off-stage domain includes the garden where Bahadir’s mysterious orange
tree exists, and where the mysterious lizard, Lady Green, dwells. The uncertainty
surrounding the tree and the lizard is symbolic of life’s mystery. On various occasions
throughout the play, Bahadir’s tree is associated with life; it is particularly suggestive of
Bahadir’s own life. Very early in the play, al-Hakim makes clear this connection
between Bahadir and the tree. Here, Bahadir strongly rejects the idea of having the
police dig under the tree in search of the Wife’s corpse. He confronts the Detective
angrily:

HUSBAND. Do you wish to destroy my tree? Do you know what this tree means to me?

DETECTIVE. I do.

HUSBAND. To my whole life in fact?

DETECTIVE. I do, but it’s a question of a body and a case of murder.

HUSBAND. It’s my body … my own body and the spade which strikes at the trunk of the tree will be striking at my neck. Do you understand that? Do you understand?

…………………………

HUSBAND [attempting to seat him.]. You’re killing me. You’ll kill me – you’re committing murder. (100-101)

As the Wife arrives in Act II to discover the hole dug under the tree, she reproaches the Detective:

WIFE [looking towards it]. Why did you do that to it? He’ll be extremely sad.

DETECTIVE. It was inevitable. However, I don’t believe any harm has come to it – its roots are intact.

WIFE. I hope so, it’s his life. (163)

Apparently, the four different fruits which the tree gives in the four seasons, if fertilised with a “complete body of a human being,” refer to a year-long span. It also implies the cycle of life which includes both states of life and death. This process of repeated states of birth and rebirth, life and death is also alluded to in the second Act after Bahadir’s
release from prison. He reveals then, to the Detective and his wife, the pleasures of experiencing imprisonment and release; he associates it with a new birth which gives one the feeling of “a foetus which has returned to its mother’s womb, feeding and breathing from within, and waiting for a hand to drag it out at some time or another” (141).

The cycle of life becomes a major issue in the play. The play’s imagery includes images of new births, of existential, earthly entrapment and mystery, and of death. The hole dug under the tree is strongly suggestive of the grave. The close connection between the lizard and the Wife throughout the play symbolises their body/soul relationship. At various moments in the play their inseparable relation is obviously indicated so that they become one and the same. Both the Wife and the lizard are associated with the green colour, in a reference to vegetation, camouflage techniques of deception and disappearance, and the constant renewal of life. The Wife’s dream of having a daughter associates her with Mother Nature. The Wife always dresses in green and, in the flashback scene, she knits a green dress for her aborted daughter, on whose memory she lives; the lizard, likewise, is green in colour, and in fact is called Lady Green. No one but Bahadir actually sees the lizard, which strongly suggests the lizard’s abstraction. In Act I, the Maid informs the Detective, “This same lizard. That’s what he calls her. I’ve never seen her, but he sees her every day” (190). Bahadir’s close attachment to the lizard works in parallel with his marital relationship with the Wife. Throughout the play, the disappearances and re-appearances of the Wife, which constitute the driving force of the action, coordinate with those of the lizard. As Bahadir returns from prison only to find his wife back and safe, he goes to the garden to
discover also the return of his lizard. He cries out joyfully, “Yes, Lady Green has returned. I spotted her ambling along in her green dress on her way to her sanctuary…. I wonder where she could have been?” This same question links the Wife with the lizard as Bahadir immediately remembers his wife’s three-day absence and confronts her: “Talking of which – where were you?” (142). Similarly, the Death Scene at the end of Act II is a final emphasis on their inseparable relationship which emphasises their single entity. Bahadir’s announcement of the disappearance of his wife’s corpse at the climactic moment of the play is immediately followed by the announcement of his discovery of the lizard lying dead in the same hole designated for the burial of his wife. Thus, the mysterious disappearance of the Wife’s corpse and the inexplicable sudden death of the lizard work together to create the sensation of the mysteries of existence.

The train, a recurrent image in al-Hakim plays, symbolises life. This is indicated in the flashback scene between Bahadir, then a train inspector, and the Dervish:

INSPECTOR. And where’s your ticket?

DERVISH. To hand.

INSPECTOR [stretching out his hands.]. May I have it?

Dervish [producing a piece of paper.]. Here you are.

INSPECTOR [examining it]. This is a birth certificate.

DERVISH. My birth certificate.

........................................

DERVISH. That’s my ticket for the journey.

INSPECTOR. I want your ticket by which you travel on the train.

DERVISH. This is my ticket by which I travel on the train.
INSPECTOR. Which train?

DERVISH. The main-line train. (110)

Also in the same flashback scene, the children’s folk song heard from an off-stage wagon is a further indication to the train’s journey as being a symbol of life’s journey. The children’s song, from which the play’s title is derived, includes various elements symbolic of existence: a tree, a cow, food and God. The fact that the song is sung by young school children refers to an early phase in the cycle of life. Similarly, the song sung on the occasion of the new born baby in the first flashback refers to an even earlier phase. All three sound effects, the two songs and the train’s whistle, heard off-stage and merging together at the end of the play are suggestive of life going on despite the death prevailing in Bahadir’s house.

The mystery surrounding the play also appears in the portrayal of characters. Two characters are themselves mysterious: the Wife and the Dervish. The mystery associated with the Wife derives from her sudden inexplicable appearances and disappearances. Her three-day absence is particularly mysterious and uncertain. The Maid’s narration of the circumstances of her disappearance reflects the same atmosphere of confusion and mystery:

DETECTIVE. Didn’t he [Bahadir] tell you he intended to contact the police?

MAID. No, he merely said to me: ‘How long does it take to buy a skein of wool and return?’ I answered him that my mistress had said: ‘A period of half an hour.’ To which he had said: ‘When half an hour is up, tell me,’ and he left me and went with his spade to the garden. That was on
the following day.

DETECTIVE. The following day?

MAID. Yes, a night had passed since my mistress had gone out.

DETECTIVE. And didn’t he show any anxiety?

MAID. On the first day, no. He said to me: ‘Seeing that your mistress has not yet returned the half hour is not yet up. She is precise in her reckoning, and I am more sure [sic.] about her reckoning than I am about the rotation of the earth.’ And on the following day, the second night …

MAID. He said: ‘It’s possible that the earth has stopped rotating for a day, up to such time as your mistress appears at the appointed hour.

MAID. And on the third day he began to worry.

WIFE. Poor thing!

DETECTIVE. And what did he say?

MAID. He said: ‘The skein of wool your mistress bought has undoubtedly taken her round the earth’s globe twice. But that one single skein should take her round three times – that’s altogether too much.’

WIFE. Indeed, he’s quite right. (139)

More mystery surrounds the person of the Dervish, whose character is apparently symbolic of the abstract. In his introduction to the translated version of the play, Denys Johnson-Davies states that:
Only the dervish is a product of the East and represents the hidden forces [within ourselves?], the realisation – more readily acceptable in the East – that the irrational and the ‘absurd’ are an inevitable part of existence. (qtd in A. Said 143)

No exact interpretation can clearly explain the Dervish’s character. While on various occasions he seems to represent Bahadir’s own conscience, of which Bahadir is often afraid, on other occasions he symbolises conditions of human life. In the flashback scene Bahadir admits to the Dervish his fear of an invisible person constantly threatening his being: “I don’t understand what he wants…. He upsets me and frightens me and I’m afraid one day he’ll lead me astray” (115). But when the Detective inquires who this person could be, Bahadir’s confusion is obvious:

DETECTIVE. Who is that person who upsets you and you’re afraid will one day lead you astray?
HUSBAND. I don’t know.
DETECTIVE. But it’s you who are saying so.
HUSBAND. I don’t know why I say it.
DETECTIVE. But as I see it the dervish knows.
HUSBAND. Doubtless he does.
DETECTIVE. What way is there of finding out about this point?
HUSBAND. I don’t know the way. (115)

Bahadir’s fear of the Dervish in this scene foreshadows his intimidation by the Dervish’s arrival after Bahadir has killed his wife. Apparently, the Dervish arrives with knowledge of the murder. This scene shows the Dervish as the only character who understands all
and predicts all. The Dervish’s certainty about the future takes a curious twist when he joins Bahadir and the Detective in the Investigation Scene before the Wife’s murder. The Dervish then declares that he is sure of her fate: “Either he has killed her,” he says, “Or else he hasn’t yet killed her.” And in the flashback scene he predicts Bahadir’s future life when he mentions the suburb of Zeitoun, where Bahadir later dwells, the tree that produces four different fruits in the four seasons, and the “venerable Lady Green.”

The Dervish seems strange and mysterious at the first moment he appears on the scene. Throughout the flashback scene, the Dervish’s actions and statements refer to his abstraction. Bahadir states that the Dervish comes “out of the air,” and indeed his first encounter with him on the train fits that description: he boards the moving train, stretches out his hands from the train’s window into space, produces a few tickets, then throws them out of the window sending “them back whence they came.” In this scene, the Inspector, now believing the Dervish to be a sacred person with extraordinary powers, curiously proceeds to ask him to unveil his future life:

INSPECTOR. Do you know what I ask of life?

dervish [singing]. Oh tree climber bring me a cow with you. Milk it and feed me with a china spoon.

INSPECTOR. It seems you know. (112)

We are left in the dark as to what the Dervish knows, but his uncanny foresight is vividly established.

This scene between the Inspector and the Dervish raises the play’s second theme of man’s constant search for knowledge and the futility of his search. In his introduction to the play, al-Hakim comments on man’s natural love for knowledge: “man always likes
to argue, to pose questions and to receive answers.” He emphasises this issue in his play by allowing it to include questions which remain unanswered until the end. First of these is the futile investigation conducted by the Detective to sweep away the mystery surrounding the Wife’s three-day absence. Similarly, Bahadir’s wish to unveil his future is thwarted by the Dervish’s refusal to provide him with more information. Finally, Bahadir’s frustration at failing to uncover the mystery behind his Wife’s absence drives him to murder. The confrontation scene between Husband and Wife is the culmination of the play’s theme of man’s futile search for knowledge:

HUSBAND. Tell me, then, where were you?

WIFE. I was somewhere.

HUSBAND. Naturally. Inevitably you were somewhere, because you cannot be nowhere. But where was this somewhere? At the house of one of your relations?

WIFE. No.

HUSBAND. At the house of one of your acquaintances?

WIFE. No.

HUSBAND. It was, at any rate, a house?

WIFE. No.

HUSBAND. A hotel?

WIFE. No.

HUSBAND. A hospital?

WIFE. No.

HUSBAND. A sanatorium?
WIFE. No.

HUSBAND. A prison?

WIFE. No. (145-46)

An earlier scene foreshadows his final loss, as the Wife is surprised that he had regained his curiosity and interest in her. All this she considers “a bad sign.” She confronts the Detective with her concern:

DETECTIVE. Does it upset you that he worries about you?

WIFE. I don’t like him to be worried.

DETECTIVE. In such circumstances it is a duty to be worried.

WIFE. He has never known what it is to be worried – he shouldn’t have to know. (139)

As Bahadir re-enters at this very moment, he announces, to the surprise of his wife and the Detective, the pleasure of experiencing imprisonment. The theme of imprisonment is related to the issue of life’s meaninglessness and the breakdown of communication. Ironically, Bahadir’s release leads to imprisonment in the larger domain of his household which ends symbolically and literally in death. Not only does Bahadir lose the Wife and the Lizard, but he also becomes certain of his near death. The Dervish discusses with him the death sentence awaiting him at the discovery of his crime:

DERVISH. Without a doubt. Scientists will make of the tree a subject of research.

HUSBAND. Research? Then the scientists will come to this garden?

DERVISH. Exactly
HUSBAND. ...Nothing will make me afraid or flinch, even though I be sentenced to death, for otherwise my life could be worthless!

DERVISH. What is your decision?

HUSBAND. I want the marvellous tree. (161-63)

Ironically, Bahadir’s aspiration for a “marvellous” life indicated by his choice of the “marvellous tree,” does not extend beyond his wish. A moment later he discovers the disappearance of the corpse and the death of the Lizard. The Dervish’s departure is immediately followed by merging the sounds of the songs and the train’s whistle indicative of life going on despite death prevailing inside the house.

The scene of the murder raises the idea of lack of communication as one of the play’s major themes. The continuous break in communication reflects the absurdist notion of the failure of language to create a bond between human beings. This is obvious from the opening moment of the play when the Detective tries in vain to conduct his investigation. In this whole scene the dialogue drives nowhere:

DETECTIVE. When exactly did your mistress disappear?

MAID. Just as the lizard returned to its lair.

DETECTIVE. You mean at sunset?

MAID. I didn’t see the sun set.

DETECTIVE. And when does the lizard return to its lair?

MAID. When my master makes his appearance from under the tree.

DETECTIVE. And when does your master make his appearance from under the tree?
MAID. When my mistress calls for him. (188)

A similar aimless conversation takes place as the Detective starts investigating the Husband, while an ultimate break in communication occurs in the flashback scene between Husband and Wife and foreshadows similar break that leads to the Wife’s death. In this scene al-Hakim uses a disparate, disjointed conversation in which words spark responses that employ the same words but with different meanings. The scene reflects the “self-created worlds” in which each of them lives. Whereas the Husband is completely immersed in the world of the tree and its dweller, the Wife lives in the world of her aborted baby. The same atmosphere of confusion continues as the Detective tries to converse with the returned Wife. This constant break in communication culminates in the confrontation of Husband and Wife in the Act II, which ends with the Wife’s death.

This theme of the lack of communication reflects also the mood of uncertainty and irrationality dominating the world of the play. The play stresses the existentialist notion that there is no inherent logic in human existence. The only reality is what man believes in. Man creates logic out of his desperate need to give meaning to his life. Thus, reality changes according to man’s changing perspective. This notion is raised in Act II as the Detective attempts to explain the Dervish to the Wife:

DETECTIVE. A man who knows everything and sees everything. He suggested that your husband killed his wife and buried her under the tree.

WIFE. He suggested that, suggested that he’d killed and buried me? And where did this man come from?

DETECTIVE. He came from the train.
WIFE. From what train?

DETECTIVE. From out of the air. I mean he was in the train – with your husband in the train – then we called him and he left your husband in the train doing his inspecting and came and sat down with us here – with your husband and me in this very place.

WIFE. What a muddle! Do you understand what you’re saying?

DETECTIVE. No.

WIFE. Neither do I. I don’t understand.

DETECTIVE. The fact is I don’t understand what I was saying. It would appear to be quite meaningless.

WIFE. Of course. (133)

Yet, a moment later she assures the Detective that she believes his story and finds it “perfectly rational.” The Dervish emphasises the idea of changing reality according to man’s change of perspective. He rejects Bahadir’s claim of the meaninglessness of his wife’s existence. He addresses Bahadir, “what you call futility is in relation to yourself,” for the “meaning of every being [is] within its own framework not within your head!” (160). Bahadir’s discovery of the disappearance of the corpse ends the play where it starts. In his book, Modern Egyptian Drama, Farouk Abdel Wahab argues that it is a pattern in many of al-Hakim’s plays to end at the points where they begin. “If there is any change,” he states, “we are made to see that it was pointless” (qtd in A. Said 148-49). This quality in al-Hakim’s dramatic works gives expression to the meaninglessness emphasised in the above argument between the Dervish and Bahadir. The play’s themes of existential entrapment, lack of communication, the irrationality and uncertainty
dominating man’s world, and the futility in trying to establish a meaning for existence are all clearly associated with the theatre of the absurd.

Although *The Tree Climber* was a success on the Egyptian stage, it was met with negative reaction from two of Egypt’s major literary figures: Taha Hussein and al-Aqqad. On hearing that the play purported to be “absurdist,” al-Aqqad replied: “Have we now so completely finished with the rational that we need to explore the irrational?” (qtd in Ya’qub 46). Al-Hakim explains their reaction in defence of his play stating:

The truth is, neither Taha Hussein nor al-Aqqad were used to reading that type of drama. Neither has read anything but the classics known for their clear logic and rational dialogue.... Taha Hussein could not swallow it [the play] when he did not see in it the conventional logic he is used to finding in an ordinary dramatic work. (qtd in Ya’qub 45)

Al-Hakim then proceeds to mention various positive critical reactions to the play. He cites, in particular, the statement issued by the Theatre de L’Atelier which praised the play’s combination of ancient Eastern folklore with a new style (A. Said 149). In his article “Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898-1987): Leading Playwright of the Arab World,” Paul Starkey also praises the play as being al-Hakim’s first and most successful play to reflect an influence of the theatre of the absurd. Starkey also discusses the hybrid nature of the play which combines both Eastern and Western elements:

Despite the reassuring presence of a dervish on the stage, and the derivation of the play’s title from an old Egyptian peasant song, *Ya Tal’i al-Shajarah* (The Tree Climber) makes few concessions to Egyptian popular taste: the dramatic techniques employed are those of the “Theatre
of the Absurd,” to which the play is indebted both for its rejection of established stage-conventions and for its main themes…. Yet though the play reflects the preoccupations of the “Theatre of the Absurd” in its expression of the breakdown of communication, and its picture of man giving way to aggression when confronted with the unknowable, it lacks the starkness and brutality associated with the works of Beckett or Ionesco; moreover, the play, also contains elements of symbolism not readily associated with the “Theatre of the Absurd,” most obviously the figure of the dervish. (29)

In a similar vein, *Bank al-Qalaq* (Bank of Anxiety) is another example of al-Hakim’s stylistic hybridity. It is an interesting hybrid play which is described by al-Hakim as a *masriwaya* [i.e. play-novel or narrative play] (Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama* 85). It consists of ten narrative chapters alternating with ten scenes of dialogue, and this is probably the product of the author’s aesthetic boredom. Al-Ra’i finds in the play an approximation to the ‘total theatre’ (85). For Badawi, it is quite possible to extract the ten scenes to obtain a self-sufficient play, regarding the narrative part [i.e. the ten novelistic chapters] as no more than expanded stage directions, which are not essential to our understanding of the action. The theme of *Bank of Anxiety*, however, is interesting in that it shows al-Hakim’s overwhelming awareness of the dangerous malaise of Egyptian society.

In fact, *Bank of Anxiety* is extremely contemporary in form, perhaps in advance of its time. Much of the play-novel is in the form of dialogue. It might be expected that Egypt’s great playwright would eventually develop this new, fast-moving form for a
novel: the *masrawiya* (play-novel). It is a revolutionary technique, giving the play-novel the same impact and double vision as can be achieved on film. The author describes the characters from the outside, instead of having them speak in a straight-forward confession. By shifting his focus from the inner to the outer, somewhat the way a cinema camera moves in on its subject and then jumps far away, al-Hakim can reveal a great deal about his characters. The treatment of Adham’s thoughts as he walks along the Nile is a good example of his technique:

> The evening air was fresh outside. It was one of those Cairene nights of May. The stroll along the Nile “Cornish” was delightful. The couples of lovers sat in intimacy all along its stone benches. Every boy clung to his girl. As Adham walked among them, he saw too clearly what their future would be: housing crisis, crises of communication and consumer goods.... That is the end result of the addition, subtraction and division in love operations in our present age. The thing that worries the lovers now is how to get together. But when they are joined under one roof and all becomes naked between them, worry will take on a new aspect … (17)

Furthermore, his juxtaposition of sections of pure dialogue in the text adds to the shifting, cinematographic effect. He has produced much the same atmosphere – “suspended between reality and psychedelic eccentricity” (Hoppe, Online) – that is achieved in films. The following quotation from the end of Chapter Six and the beginning of Scene Six is a good example of Hakim’s technique. Adham’s newspaper friend Mutawally is talking with Adham and Sha’ban in their newly established bank. He has noticed Sha’ban’s attraction for the rich manager’s niece and Adham attempts to steer
him away to a different topic before he gets too curious. After Mutawally leaves, Adham and Sha’ban wait for their Bank of Anxiety clients to come. Chapter Six, of which the last page is quoted, is a novelistic chapter, followed by a “scene” arranged like a play:

The crafty reporter noticed Sha’ban’s concern, and cast a sly glance in his direction. Adham understood what he was after, and hastened to cover up for his friend by pointing out that all the case meant to them was an attempt to understand her social class. What was its actual position in this changed society? … Had society really changed? From what point of view had it changed? And how far-reaching was the extent of this change? Was it really complete change, or merely superficial?! … Mutawally only shrugged his shoulders. Suddenly he seemed tired, because everything outside the realm of pure reporting made him yawn…. Even commentary and analysis of news bored him and made him lazy. Whenever the course of a conversation would reach a joke or a similar triviality, he would get up and leave. This was what he did now. He left the two companions saying that he would return another time to get what news the bank would make…. Adham and Sha’ban were left sitting, waiting for their customers to come. They waited until waiting lost its meaning. And they almost forgot that they were waiting for anyone or anything…. Then, when the doorbell rang they took no notice of it. Or rather, they noticed it, but did not believe it. But it was really ringing …

Scene Six
(Adham is sitting stiffly at his desk. Sha‘ban is in front of him. The Doorbell is ringing … )

SHA’BAN. Is it really ringing?

ADHAM. Or … do you think we’re dreaming?

SHA’BAN. And is it really a customer?

ADHAM. That is what we will know when you open the door.

SHA’BAN. Am I the one who is supposed to open the door?

ADHAM. Of course, who else?

SHA’BAN. Why don’t you open it?

ADHAM. Because I am the director.

SHA’BAN. And I am the treasurer.

ADHAM. There is no treasurer any more. We did away with that office because the rich “Bek” handles all financial transactions now.

SHA’BAN. Then there is also no longer any office of director.

ADHAM. How do you mean? [sic.]

SHA’BAN. Because the rich “Bek” also handles general administration. You’re no more than a simple employee here, with a desk in room number one.

ADHAM. By this reasoning, you, too, are just another employee and your desk is in room two.

SHA’BAN. Precisely. In other words, there is no difference between you and me. Therefore when the bell rings, one of us must answer.
ADHAM. It must be you who answers because your are number two and I am number one. Number one is better than number two.

SHA’BAN. It’s stopped ringing. It seems that the customer has left …

(128-29)

The dialogue continues in this vein until the customers come in and begin to recount their problems to Adham and Sha’ban. As seen in the part quoted, *Bank of Anxiety* alternates between the novelistic form and the dialogue without underlying rationale. There is no particular reason the author could not have put what the newspaper reporter said into the dialogue form. The play chapter comes as an interlude to the text. The text merges with the play, giving the novel an ethereal quality, especially since the dialogues are slightly absurd. The reader of *Bank of Anxiety* is suspended like the characters themselves. His attitude alternates between the intense participation of the playgoer and the detached feeling of the omniscient observer in a novel.

**4.2.3 Linguistic Hybridity**

By 1900 and the first two decades of the twentieth century, Classical Arabic (*fusha*) was the medium of theatrical expression. And though the twenties and the thirties teemed with theatrical activities conducted in vernacular (especially melodramas), serious romantic dramas – mostly translations and adaptations – were mainly in Classical Arabic. But the vernacular sentimental satires of Najib al-Rihani, Awad argues, were the most influential on the new dramatists (including Tawfiq al-Hakim) in the period prior and succeeding the revolution of 1952. Al-Rihani made use of the vernacular “in comedy and in tragi-comedy a living reality at least in Egypt, if not in the Arab world” (L. Awad 184).
However, when al-Hakim first used the vernacular in his celebrated novel *Awdat al-Ruh* (The Return of the Spirit, 1933) and in some of his plays such as *Kull Shay’ fi Mahallih* (Not A Thing Out of Place, 1966) he was met with harsh criticism which condemned him as being “a corruptor of the sacred tongue” (qtd in A. Said 14), led by Taha Hussein, a highly esteemed figure. These attacks caused al-Hakim to avoid the vernacular for a while and to use instead what W. M. Hutchins called, a “hybrid language,” a middle language between the classical and the vernacular. Hutchins comments on al-Hakim’s linguistic hybridity:

> Al-Hakim has not only written works of diverse inspiration with diverse subjects but has written in different types of Arabic as well. He has written in literary Arabic which is not often spoken and in urban and rural spoken dialect which is not often written. In Incrimination, he has experimented with a language hybrid which he hopes will eventually bridge the gap between the different levels of Arabic. (qtd in A. Said 29)

This compromise earned al-Hakim membership in the Arabic Academy of Languages.

In the play *al-Safqah* (The Deal, 1959) with its themes of land ownership and the exploitation of the poor peasant farmers, al-Hakim coaches 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 onstage in a way which, while not exactly the idiom of Egyptian Arabic, was certainly comprehensible to a larger population than the literate elite of the city. The use of such ‘hybrid language’ enabled al-Hakim to solve the diglossic problem in the field of drama (Somekh 74). In his postscript to the play, al-Hakim indicates that the type of language he devised is comprehensible
both in terms of *fusha* (standard or classical) and of spoken Arabic (*al-Safqah* 159-62). By producing such a text, the playwright is released from the dilemma as to which of the two linguistic levels he is to employ in his dialogue.

In other words, the device would make it possible to write plays which, when read in print, can be understood in accordance with the norms of Classical Arabic, but when staged, it is adaptable, automatically and without incurring many textual changes, to the level of the local dialect (*a’ammīyya*). The following written sentence can operate, therefore, on two linguistic levels, as specified below:

Аسمحوا لي بكلمة صغيرة

Can be read in terms of *fusha* (standard) as follows:

*Ismahu li bikalimatin saghiratin* [Allow me to say something].

It can also be realised in terms of Egyptian [Cairene] Arabic:

*Ismahuli bikilma sughayyara* [Allow me to say something]. (*al-Safqah* 41)

Al-Hakim’s “new hybrid language,” then, is not only an experiment at producing a standard text which is reminiscent of the spoken idiom. It is also an attempt to create a bivalent text which exploits the inherent ambiguity of non-vowelled Arabic script (Somekh 75). In a point of fact, in his postscript to *al-Safqah* al-Hakim did not use the term “third language,” but that term gradually came to denote the textual type inaugurated in *al-Safqah*. (The term “third language” is used in the postscript to al-Hakim’s play *al-Ta’am li-Kul Fam* (Food for Everyone, 1963), although the author seems to refer in that case to the simplified type of standard rather than to the strictly bivalent type.)
Al-Hakim also made an attempt at writing plays with bivalent texts as in *Bank al-Qalaq* (Bank of Anxiety) and *al-Wartah* (The Dead Trouble, 1966). This time, however, he employs a number of forms and functionals which are exclusively dialectal. For example, in *Bank of Anxiety*, al-Hakim uses Egyptian dialectal phrases such as “لَيْهَ يَا بْنِي لَيْهَ” [*laih ya bni laih*] (35), “لِكِن ايْه” [*lakin aih*] (191), and “البَوليْس؟ تاني؟” [*el-boolees? tani?*] (237). Similarly, in *al-Wartah* we find Egyptian forms such as *illi* [who or which], *di* [this]. In the postscript to *al-Wartah*, he contends that in using such functionals he is not really violating the norms of Classical Arabic, because ‘*illi*’, for instance, is nothing but a short form of ‘*alladhi*’ (al-Hakim, *al-Wartah* 189-99). The same applies in al-Hakim’s view of words such as *aywa* [yes] and *ma’rafshi* [I don’t know].

However, al-Hakim’s innovation aroused heated debate among critics and linguists (Somekh 75), and it would seem that it did not generate a great deal of enthusiasm among other Arab playwrights. Furthermore, al-Hakim himself seems to have abandoned the idea of producing plays with bivalent texts. Most of the plays he wrote in the 1960s and 1970s are either in simplified standard Arabic or in straightforward spoken Arabic (75).

### 4.3 Evaluating al-Hakim’s Hybridity

As it has been discussed earlier, many plots and themes of al-Hakim’s plays are derived from texts of the past (Greek or Eastern myths). Al-Hakim seems to suggest that texts of the past “can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha, *Location* 55). For al-Hakim, past and present are inseparable; he employs the wisdom of

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2 [*laih ya bni laih*] is literally translated as “Why, son? Why”; [*lakin aih*] as “But what”; and [*el-boolees? tani?*] as “The police? Again?”
the past in order to reflect upon the present life.\(^3\) Though plays such as *The Sleepers in the Cave*, *The Sultan’s Dilemma*, and *Praxa or the Problem of the Government* tell stories of the past, they actually deal with contemporary issues. For instance, *The Sleepers in the Cave* relates to Egypt’s current situation as the country awoke from centuries of stagnation to face the challenge of the twentieth century and Western civilisation; *The Sultan’s Dilemma* indicates the great tension in the international situation, which is the fear and anxiety caused by the inability of the world’s leaders to decide whether the solution to world problems is to be sought in arbitration by force or by the law; and *Praxa or the Problem of the Government* reflects the failure of the democratic government in Egypt. In harmony with the view proposed later by Homi Bhabha, al-Hakim seems to suggest that the author should not only “recall” the past, but rather “renew” it by “refiguring it as contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (Bhabha, *Location* 10). What makes al-Hakim distinct from other Arab dramatists and writers is that for al-Hakim the past is not ‘nostalgia’ but a ‘continuum’ that links to the present and ‘becomes a part of the necessity of living’ (10).

Al-Hakim’s hybrid plays indicate his power of creativity and innovativeness which open up equal spaces of mixing that neither assimilate everything into one global pot, nor deny the right of special recognition to indigenous people and tradition. Moreover, al-Hakim’s hybridity entails a gentle modification of his perceptual apparatus to accommodate foreign concepts; and as a result the reader arrives at a new way of perceiving which is necessarily different from, yet accepting of, both cultures s/he

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encounters or inhabits (Kuortti and Nyman 68). In fact, al-Hakim’s hybridity seems to be a result of his ceaseless experimentation with the genre of drama in Arabic and with the linguistic capacities of Arabic in order to create a national drama. As a dramatist, al-Hakim experimented with all possible forms and styles while projecting the various social and political issues of the day. In his preface to *al-Masrah al-Munuwwa* (Theatre of Variety), al-Hakim explains the reasons for his experimenting with various dramatic themes and techniques. He argues that his efforts were motivated by his awareness of the “frightful gap” that separates Arabic literature from the world’s literature due to the lack of an Arabic dramatic heritage (303). He therefore states that

> For this reason … I have looked to every age. I have created plays that draw inspiration from the Greek theatre … plays inspired by the Quran … [others] inspired by *The Thousand and One Nights* … plays inspired by our contemporary society … and then plays inspired by different sensations and settings … the voyage has toured different styles … [and] has also been through assorted varieties…. I have tried to take in thirty years a trip on which the dramatic literature of other languages has spent about in two thousand years. (303-304)

In this sense, al-Hakim’s experimental hybridity seems to be aesthetic [intentional], in Bakhtinian terms, which is described as ‘shock, change, challenge, revitalize or disrupt through deliberate intended fusions’ and in so doing ‘create an ironic double consciousness’ (qtd in Kuortti and Nyman 6-7). Thus, al-Hakim’s hybridity denotes the way that elements from diverse, seemingly contradictory cultures can, without losing their uniqueness, meet and combine a third space of identity (222).
More importantly, al-Hakim’s hybrid plays which are constructed in the ‘liminal’ ‘third space’ not only undermine the polarisations of East and West and Self and Other, but also attempt to bring these bipolar opposites close to each other. Like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, al-Hakim seems to suggest that cultures are not really pure but rather mixed and hybrid. They are not discrete phenomena, but being always in contact with one another. Moreover, they ‘actually assume more foreign elements, alterties, differences, than they consciously exclude’ (E. Said 15). In addition, al-Hakim’s hybrid plays create new cultural meaning by means of rearticulating and translating elements that are neither Eastern [Arabic-Islamic] nor Western, ‘but something else besides which contest the terms and territories of both’ (Bhabha, Location 41). Al-Hakim is perhaps the most genius Arab dramatist who has benefited from the potentialities of Western theatre as well as Eastern (Arabic-Islamic) tradition and heritage, and has produced a new form of dramatic writing.

Al-Hakim’s hybridity is an attempt to bridge the gulf between East and West, Self and Other, past and present, and tradition and modernity. The hybridised nature of his plays reflects dialogic exchange that negotiates the contact zone and constructs bridges across the gulf: bridges like those described in Irene Nakai’s poem:

i must be like a bridge
for my people
i may connect time: yesterday
today and tomorrow for my people
who are in transition, … (qtd in Kuortti and Nyman 140)
Unlike colonial texts that often focus on binary dynamics of resistance or absorption, al-Hakim’s texts (plays) indicate a dialogic nexus of exchange between bipolarities. As hybrid constructions, they offer a multicultural vision beyond the rhetoric of melting pot or mosaic. These plays weave together Eastern (Arabic-Islamic) tradition and Western literary tradition into transcultural texts. They reflect dialogic strategies against colonial dialectics, and craft a hybrid borderland of resistance and freedom where possible worlds and multiple voices co-exist (139).
Works Cited


