Chapter Two

Arabic Drama

This chapter attempts to briefly survey the history of Arabic drama in general and Egyptian drama in particular. In fact, drama as a genre (in the Western sense) was characterised by its absence from traditional Arabic literature. Nevertheless, some traditional dramatic forms, such as ‘pharaonic drama,’ ‘maqama,’ ‘ta’ziya plays’ and ‘shadow plays’ existed in early Arabic literature. Therefore, this chapter explores the growth of drama in Arabic literature, starting with such indigenous dramatic traditions which eclipsed and were back-grounded “as a lack of being from both within and without” (Amine 146). It also attempts to investigate the reasons behind the absence of drama from early Arabic literature, and why these traditional dramatic forms have not been developed by Arabic dramatists. Furthermore, this chapter traces the development of modern Arabic drama, and investigates how Western drama influenced modern Arabic drama, and what are the cultural and political factors that led to such influences. Generally, Arabic drama appeared first in Syria in 1840s at the hands of Marun al-Naqqash and then in Egypt in 1870s in the writing of Ya’qub Sannu. These early Arab literary scholars introduced Western drama and theatre into the Arab World by means of translation, adaptation and arabicisation. However, modern dramatists such as Tawfiq al-Hakim, who tended to be eclectic and experimented with several forms and techniques of Western drama, wrote original dramatic pieces.

Ancient Arabic literature appears to have no place for drama. Within Arab society in the pre-Islamic and the Islamic periods, literature favoured poetry and rhetoric. Arab poetry was oral in nature and was by no means intended to serve as a dialogue on stage in an imitative piece of action. Furthermore, the Arabs of the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. neglected Greek drama and
preferred to translate Greek philosophy and medicine.¹ Even ancient Syrian scholars, who introduced Arabs to Greek philosophy and translated many of these works into Arabic, had no concept of Greek dramatic genres. Thus, Abu Bishr Matta ibn Yunus (d. 940) in his translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* understood “tragedy” and “comedy” to mean “praise” and “satire.” This misreading led the Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 1198) to apply what he thought to be Aristotle’s definition of tragedy and comedy to traditional types of Arabic poetry, *madh* (praise) and *hija* (satire) which he supported by examples from native poetry (A. Badawi *Fann* 95-96).

### 2.1 The Indigenous Dramatic Tradition

Arabs did not have dramatic literature similar to the Western forms, yet they had several traditions of performance (i.e. *pharaonic drama*, *maqama*, *ta’ziya plays* and *shadow plays*), which can be construed to have predisposed them to appropriate the Western model of drama. Pharaonic drama is an Egyptian drama that is 2,700 years older than Greek drama. *Maqama*, a unique Arabic form which originated in the Arabic Middle Ages, is based on a single anecdote and features a hero, usually a wondering rogue, in a solitary role, as narrator or monologist. A passion play which is called *ta’ziya* (condolence) was performed by the Shi’ite Muslims to commemorate the historical martyrdom of Hussein (the Prophet Mohammad’s grandson). This is perhaps the most tragic form in the Islamic performing traditions. Shadow plays (*khayal al-zill*) were performed in streets, market places, occasionally at court and in private houses. Generally, Arabic drama is viewed as a product of some deeply rooted attitudes and tendencies inherited from the past history of indigenous dramatic or semi-dramatic tradition. More importantly, these traditional dramatic forms are not only “mnemonic devices that assist in the preservation of

history but are also effective strategies for maintaining cultural difference” (Gilbert and Tompkins 54). Therefore the knowledge of such history is essential in order to see the manner in which the imported form was conceived and how it subsequently developed, for the imported form was in several ways determined by the local historic or theatrical tradition (Badawi, Early 7).

2.1.1 Pharaonic Drama

Pharaonic drama appeared in Egypt before Greek drama. That is to say, the people of ancient Egypt had a drama of their own long before the Greeks. The Greek historian Herodotus had a chance to watch a Pharaonic drama (a drama that is 2,700 years older than Greek drama). In 3200 BCE the most ancient Pharaonic play, which dealt with the theme of creation of the world and the Isis-Osiris-Horus legend, was composed. Pharaonic plays, however, were strictly religious and confined to the walls of the temples, though it is maintained that some plays achieved a degree of freedom from religious telos and transcended the temple as a religious site. Pharaonic drama, then, was born and buried within the temple, as Louis Awad maintains:

There was a theatre in Egypt. And that was five thousand years ago. Egyptians knew theatre two thousand years before the Greeks. Nonetheless, Greek theatre survived, whereas the Egyptian died. In Egypt religion begot art; and in ... Egypt, religion killed art. (12)

Egyptian drama remained one of the secrets of a deeply rooted civilisation until the advent of Western archaeologists at the end of the nineteenth century. And even then the fallacy that had sustained the Greek theatre’s originality survived. Why did such drama not reach the Arabs of the Middle East? This is not an easy question to answer, yet it is maintained that there was a lack of anthropomorphism similar to that of the Greeks, or rather that there was a rigid
Manichaeism characterised as superhuman/human, sacred/profane, and that “the gap between the human and the divine was too wide to be bridged, and therefore the ancient Egyptian theatre remained and died in the temple” (Gassner and Guinn 21). Pharaonic drama on the whole was not freed from theological constraints, and therefore was unable to transcend the temple and embrace the general public in secular spaces like the Greek agora. Because of the rigid opposition between the human and superhuman, this drama was not transported into the public and secular sphere. However, the very existence of such drama jeopardises the Western claim of dramatic origin (Amine 147).

Ancient Egypt’s performing traditions were strongly affiliated with the cult of Osiris, which for several millennia held the foremost place in their spiritual life. Ample archaeological evidence of the existence of such performing traditions “is provided for us by inscriptions and sculptures on Egyptian monuments going back as far as the Sixth Dynasty, by numerous papyrus texts, many of which are of great antiquity … illustrated with pictures of various scenes in the life and cult of Osiris and Isis” (Ridgeway 94-95). Besides the material evidence of the existence of such performing traditions among the ancient Egyptians, Herodotus, the Greek classical authority, “informs us that Isis and Osiris were the only gods worshipped by all the Egyptians, and he terms Isis the Moon (Selene), and Osiris Dionysus” (95). Another classical authority, Julius Firmicus Maternus contends that the ritualistic formulae held at the temples of Osiris were acts of commemoration of the dead hero and king rather than mere magical rites that ensure fertility as proposed by some Egyptologists. Maternus writes,

Osiris and Isis were brother and sister, and Typhon was the husband of Isis. Typhon, on discovering that Isis had an illicit passion for her brother, treacherously slew him. He tore the body in pieces and scattered the quivering
limbs along the banks of the Nile. Isis, in horror, thrust her husband, Typhon, from her, and taking with her sister, Nephthys, and the dog-headed Anubis, she resolved to seek the limbs of Osiris and to bury them. With the aid of Anubis she found and buried them. Osiris, who had been a just man, was henceforth worshipped in the temples under the form of a portrait figure. Typhon, on account of his pride, haughtiness, and arrogance, was held in abomination. In the shrines of Osiris his murder and dismemberment were annually commemorated with weeping, wailing, and great lamentation. His worshippers shave their heads and beat their breasts, gashed their shoulders, and inflicted other wounds on their bodies in imitation of the cuts and gashes that Typhon made in the body of Osiris.

(qtd in Amine 148)

Maternus’ description reveals a basic characteristic of Pharaonic drama: its re-enactment of human guilt in commemoration of the dead. Such behaviour, informed by a strong metaphysical input, is found in the Greek Dionysian rituals as well as in the Shi’ites’ ritual passion play (Amine 148).

2.1.2 Maqama

Another form of indigenous dramatic tradition is maqama (plural, maqamaat). It is an Arabic rhymed prose literary from, with short poetic passages. It is derived from the root qaama which means ‘he stood’ and in this case it means to stand in a literary discussion in order to orate. However, the earliest meaning of maqama is “an assembly” or “a place of meeting” (Moosa, The Origins 121). The term was used in this sense by many pre-Islamic poets, such as Zuhair ibn Abi Sulma, whereas Labid ibn Rabia used it to signify the people who attended such an assembly. In the early Islamic era, maqama denoted the audience of the caliph, in whose
presence a witty person would deliver a speech or tell a tale, and it came also to refer to the tale
told in the presence of the caliph. Later, it acquired the meaning of “a narration” or “an episode
narrated by an eloquent individual” (121). In this sense, it is properly applied to the tales of Badi
al-Zaman al-Hamadani and his followers.

Basically, each tale takes the form of a short narration related by an imaginary rawi
(narrator) who describes the adventures of a fictitious hero. The hero, a rogue and beggar, is
generally endowed with the supreme gift of rhetorical speech. The beauty of his language not
only leaves his hearers spell-bound, but forces them, almost involuntarily, to reach into their
pockets and shower him with money. Always restless, this rogue goes from country to country
and from town to town, using his power of eloquence to get more money. Each maqama focuses
on a single event which may either be drawn from experience or invented by the hero.
Sometimes, he chooses to entertain his casual audience with another subject, such as poetry. He
may roam into the realm of metaphysics, enchanting his listeners with tales about ghosts and
evil. He may assume the role of a preacher to remind the people of the true precepts of their
religion. Sometimes, the central figure of the tale may even be an animal, as in al-Maqama al-
Asadiyya (The Lion’s Maqama), in which the same author provides a detailed description of the
lion’s life and character and enumerates his various names in Arabic language (122).

The two classical exponents of the maqama are al-Hamadhani (967-1007), the composer
of this work, and the later and better-known al-Hariri (1054-1122). Al-Hamadhani was born in
Hamadhan, the ancient Ecbatana, in what is now Iran (to the southwest of Tehran) and spent his
life as a wandering scholar. The maqamaat of al-Hamadhani and al-Hariri have a similar
structure. They both consist of a series of unrelated episodes involving a wandering narrator, and
a trickster protagonist. In the maqamaat of al-Hamadhani, the narrator is an alter ego of
Hamadhani, a wandering scholar named Isa ibn Hisham. In each tale, he encounters a mysterious rogue named Abul-Fath al-Iskanderi. Iskanderi wanders, surviving on his wits and a silver tongue, running scams, always one step ahead of an angry mob. Each story is a small capsule description of a sometimes absurd predicament that the characters find themselves in. Nonetheless the stories are often used as framing for discourses on serious topics such as predestination, the vanity of human life, and the inevitability of death and judgment.

*Maqama*, both in content and structure, is more limited in scope and theme than the modern short story. It is a dialogue between the narrator and the central figure, superbly framed in a highly rhetorical rhymed prose. There is no unified plot in the modern literary sense, and the aesthetic purpose is not primary. Its main objective is unmistakably didactic and rhetorical: to present to the Arab audience the quintessential beauty of their language. Thus, the tales are characterised by highly ornamental language, embellished with simile and metaphor. The narrative and its significance are less important. Because of its loose and episodic structure, its lack of plot and description, and its dialogue form, *maqama* can hardly be considered an antecedent of the modern short story. Properly polished and improved, it might have developed into a viable literary genre. With form exalted over content, it remained stylised. Furthermore, Arabic society, which had been declining since medieval times and was conservative in religious, social, and literary matters, was unable to nurture the first-rate authors needed to develop this and other viable literary models (122).

Some recent Arab critics have sought to draw an analogy between the *maqama* and certain European literary types, particularly those of Spanish origin. Shawqi Dayf, for example, asserts that *maqama* was introduced into Europe, along with other Arabic works, because of the intellectual interrelations between East and West in medieval times. He specifies that several of
al-Hariri’s *maqamaat* were translated into Latin, German, and English. Dayf cautiously notes that the impact of the *maqama* upon European literature, unlike that of the *Thousand and One Nights*, is hard to trace because of its concentration on rhetorical, rather than narrative, style. Nevertheless, Dayf attempts to link the Spanish *novella picaresque* (rogue novel) with *maqama*, largely in terms of similarities between the Spanish *picaro* and the fictitious characters Abu al-Fath al-Iskandari of Badi al-Zaman and Abu Zayd al-Saruji of al-Hariri (Dayf, *al-Maqama* 10-11).

Another scholar, Fakhri Abu al-Su’ud, argues that the *maqamaat* of Badi al-Zaman occupy a place in Arabic literature comparable to that held by the works of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in English literature. Abu al-Su’ud traces the parallel emergence of a fictional form characterised by social consciousness, analysis of individual characters, skilful use of artistic devices, and unity of thought. This argument, however, rests on a weak analogy between the narrators of the *maqamaat* and the invented personalities which populated the Tattler and the Spectator: Isaac Bickerstaff, Sir Roger de Coverley, Sir Andrew Freeport, and Will Honeycomb, along with a few female characters. Unlike the restless, ever-wandering heroes of the *maqamaat*, these characters are static and stereotyped (except Sir Roger) although endowed with some measure of individuality and humour. Abu al-Su’ud maintains, quite unrealistically, that had *maqama* appeared in the eighth century when Arabic literature was in its infancy, rather than in the tenth century: it would have been followed by developments which corresponded to those in English literature after the time of Addison and Steele, and would have led eventually to a full-fledged Arabic novel (653-54).

In the modern period, *maqama* was revived by writers throughout the Arab world, among them Faris ibn Yusuf al-Shidyaq (d. 1887), Ibrahim al-Ahdab (d. 1891), Abd Allah
Nadim (d. 1896), Ibrahim al-Muwaylihi (d. 1905), Muhammad al-Muwaylihi (d. 1930), Hafiz Ibrahim (d. 1932), Muhammad Lutfi Jumu’a (d. 1953), and many others. Moreover, there were two distinct lines of development within this revival: while some writers, including the Lebanese al-Yaziji and al-Shidyaq, followed the traditional form of *maqama*, Egyptian writers, such as al-Muwaylihi and Hafiz Ibrahim, attempted to experiment with it (Moosa, *The Origins* 124).

### 2.1.3 Ta’ziya Plays

The passion play, *ta’ziya* (literally “mourning; condolence”) is another traditional dramatic form which commemorates the martyrdom of the son of the forth Caliph Ali, and the descendents of the Prophet Mohammed by the ruling house of Umayyad. This type of folk drama is performed by Shi’ite Muslims (i.e. the followers of the house of Ali) during the first third of the Muslim month of Muharram, the tenth of Muharram being their great day of mourning as it is the anniversary of the battle of Karbala (A.H.60/AD 680) in which Al-Hussein fell fighting against the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. *Ta’ziya* plays are generally performed in Persian but some have been done in Turkish and Arabic. In Iraq the more usual term for their performance is *shabih* (likeness), because the actors provide a likeness, a mimesis, to the historical figures whose actions and deeds are portrayed (Badawi, *Early* 8).

*Ta’ziya* plays are continually reworked and added to by poets who actually appear at the beginning of the performance to introduce the dramatic spectacle with appropriate verses praising and lamenting the dead. Accompanying the actors is a choir of boys playing the roles of mourning women and by gesture and sound expressing overwhelming grief. The characters themselves are numerous and they include angels (played by boys) like Gabriel and Biblical and Koranic figures such as Eve, Jacob, Mary and various prophets. Even animals are included like the lion that pays homage to Hussein’s head. Every ounce of emotion is wrung out of the
situation in order to put across the plight of the descendants of the Prophet in the manner of, but more extreme than, the *Wakefield Miracle Play* of the Crucifixion (8-9). Moreover, the performers weep and ask for forgiveness for their personal sins. However, the performance contains many grotesque elements of real torture and violence, which the performers inflict upon themselves.

Structurally, the events of *ta’ziya* may not be performed in a particular chronological order. Nevertheless, many of the elements of drama are there. A stage is especially erected for the purpose in a public place which may be even a mosque. Furthermore, specific stage properties are used such as coffin ‘with receptacles for holding lights, also Hussein’s bow, lance, spear and banner’ (qtd in Badawi, *Early* 9). Although an appeal is made to the audience’s imagination, some realistic effects are carefully sought, a heap of straw may represent the sand of the desert of Karbala but real blood is employed. The reaction of the participants and the audience can be so overwhelming that violence directed against self as well as others has been known to ensure. However, despite such cruel realism and melodramatic sensationalism, the sincerity of the participants was known on occasions to be such that even foreign spectators, far from dismissing it as repulsive mass wallowing in grief, were deeply moved by the sight (9).

Comte de Gobineau (1866) argued that *ta’ziya* is ranked with Greek drama ‘as a great and serious affair, engaging the heart and life of the people who have given birth to it’ (9). In comparison, he found the Latin, English, French and German dramas to be ‘a mere pastime or amusement, more or less intellectual and elegant’ (Arnold 59-60). Arnold, in his essay “A Persian Passion Play” (included in his *Essays in Criticism*) argues that a better parallel was to be found in the Ammergau Passion Play, since the plays turn entirely on one subject, namely the sufferings of the Imam Hussein and his family (60). According to Badawi, Arnold is nearer the
mark, as there is much in common between ta’ziya and the medieval Mystery Plays produced by the guilds (Badawi, Early 9). Like the latter, the performance of ta’ziya is a corporate annual event in which people willingly collaborate and the expenses incurred, including the poets’ fees, are paid by the well-to-do as an act of piety. Whoever builds the stage ‘builds himself a palace in Paradise’ (Strothmann 590). It is worth mentioning that ta’ziya, due to its Shi’ite origin, sentiment and manner of presenting Islamic history, has not spread to the Sunnis parts of the Islamic world; it remains more important in Persian than in Arabic and more relevant to Iraq than to Egypt (Badawi, Early 10).

2.1.4 Shadow Plays

Besides pharaonic play and ta’ziya, the shadow play remains the most substantial proof of the Eurocentric fallacy of dramatic origin. Shadow drama was an acceptable form of entertainment in Fatimid Egypt, even though it may not have been quite as well known as elsewhere in the Islamic world at that time. The shadow play was performed during the medieval period in the Arab world. This genre was referred to in the poetry of Abu Nawas (747-814?):

The wine rises sparkling in the cup
Which is decorated with flawless drawings
Like the shadow player when he darkens
And plays with the string tune… (Mubarak 7)

It was not confined to farces or cheap comic shows but probably dealt with moral, religious, or historical themes. The medieval allegorical habit of mind enabled the cultivated audience to see moral or religious lessons even in dramatic entertainments such as the shadow theatre. According to Ibn al-Farid, some of the themes of the shadow theatre ranged from the heroic to the common and homely: armies fighting, land and sea battles, knights and infantry heavily armed with
swords, spares and arrows etc. (Badawi, *Early 13*). The characters also include supernatural beings of fearful appearance. At the other extremes, we find fisherman catching fish with nets, fowlers spreading their gins for unsuspecting birds, benighted camels racing through the deserts, ships tossed by the waves or wrecked by sea monsters, etc.

In shadow plays, which were performed in the streets and market places and occasionally also at court and in private houses, the action was represented by shadows cast upon a large screen by flat, coloured leather puppets held in front of a torch, while the hidden master, *al-Rayyis* or *al-Mugaddim*, delivered the dialogue and the songs, helped in this by associates, sometimes as many as five persons including a youth who imitated the voice of women. Like other dramas, shadow theatre was based on a set of conventions, and it seems that buffoonery was one of these conventions. Buffoonery is a means to an end for each genre has its own method, the end being to produce good literature (*adab a’ali*) not cheap and vulgar writing (*adab ad-dun*). This idea is reinforced by the words spoken by the Presenter (*al-Rayyis*) who claims that *khayal* (shadow) is a literary art that can be appreciated only by *ahl al-adab* (men of breeding/literary taste). The shadow play is not mere entertainment or pastime but a mixture of seriousness and levity and it requires some intelligence to see the point of it (14).

Basically, the earliest Arab author to discuss systematically the technique of shadow play, without however using the term *khayah al-zill*, was the scholar Ibn al-Hayatham (d.1039) in his work on optics, *Kitab al-Manazir* (Book of Optics). He defines *khayal* as “(translucent) figures (of characters and animals) which the *mukhayyil* (shadow mover) moves so that their shadows appear upon the wall which is behind the curtain and upon the curtain itself” (Al-Haytham 408). There are holes pierced in the bodies of the shadow play figures so that they may be held against the screen with a stick, the Presenter holds another stick in his other hand in order to move their
heads, arms and legs. The light of candle or lamp placed behind them casts coloured shadows of the translucent figures on the white screen. The audience sitting in front of the screen saw only the shadows of the figures. The man who moved the figures spoke or sang the text just as though the moving figures were speaking or singing (Badawi, Three 6). The performance took place in a fully arranged theatrical space in which a screen separated stage auditorium. Ultimately, the shadow play remains the only performing tradition in the medieval Arab world that relies on a written script.

Ibn Hazm (994-1064) uses the term *khayal-al-zill* in his *Kitab al-Akhlaq wa’l-Siyar* (Book of Conducts and Characters) in speaking of a different type of shadow play which may represent one of the first stages in the development of this art. He describes a system which gives the impression of a Chinese magic lantern. He likens this world to a shadow play in which images are mounted on wooden wheel revolving rapidly so that one group of images disappears as another appears, as a generation follows generation in the world (Monroe 98-99). This is the earliest attempt to be found in Arabic to see philosophical significance in the shadow play. The poet Ahmed al-Bayruti provides further information concerning the staging of the shadow play and its significance:

I see this universe as a shadow play;
Its Mover is the much-forgiving Lord.
The right-hand box is Eve’s womb;
The left-hand box is the grave. (qtd in Hamada 45)

The presenter has two boxes from which he takes his figures, which are arranged in it in the order of their appearance laying them in the second after they have been displayed. The boxes
respectively symbolise the womb and the grave. The whole universe is but a shadow play, with God as the *muharrik* [Mover] (Moreh 46).

As far as the terminology of the shadow play is concerned it is commonly designated *khayal al-zill* and sometimes *khayal al-izar* (very occasionally *khayal al-sitar*). The curtain on which the shadows of the figures are cast is called *izar* or *shash*, and sometimes *sitar*. The figures are called *shukhus/ashikhas* or *suwar* (rarely *tamathil*). The plays are known as *babat*, and sometimes *fusul* (“scenes” or “acts”), the former term is being used to both shadow play and live play (53). However, the word *khayal* had, in the *Jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic era) and the first century of Islam, the primary meaning of ‘figure’ and ‘statue,’ but it later underwent semantic evolution and acquired besides the various meanings of “imagination” (as the antithesis of *haqiqah*; “truth”, reality”), “phantom” and “fantasy.” During the third to ninth century it was used as synonym for *hikaya* (“imitation” or “mime”), and by the beginning of the fifth to eleventh century it had completely replaced this term; *khayali* and *mukhayil* were used both for an actor in a live performance and for the presenter of a shadow play (46).

Mohammed Ibn Daniyal Yusuf al-Khuzai (1248-1311) is the name most associated with this tradition and he can be called the first Arab dramatist par excellence. He wrote three shadow plays under the title *Tayf al-Khayal*, “by far the oldest known to us and the only dramatic pieces that have come down to us from the Islamic middle ages” (Badawi *Three* 1). Generally, Ibn Daniyal’s plays are considered to be a rich source of information for the social historian. Though they concentrate on certain aspects of medieval Islamic society (in Egypt) they are deeply rooted in social reality (Badawi, *Early* 15). All the three plays: *Tayf al-Khayal* (The Shadow Spirit), *Ajib wa Gharib* (The Amazing and the Stranger), and *al-Mutayyam* (The Love-Stricken One) begin with a short introduction in which the author briefly explains his intention. The
introduction is addressed to the audience by the first character that appears in the first piece. Each of these three shadow plays has its own individual form. Despite their common characteristics as shadow theatre, each of them has its own peculiar atmosphere and theme or themes. Far from being formless, random effusions in verse and rhyming prose, from which passages can be cut at will on grounds of obscenity or whatever, they are fairly well organised creations of a conscious craftsman, both in dramatic technique and in spirit they come very close to medieval European drama, to the Mysteries and Moralities (15).

Generally speaking, the medieval Arabic shadow play is permeated with traces from another genre that was prominent among the Arabs at that time, al-maqama (the assembly). Many Arabic critics, such as al-Khousai, argue that the shadow play (khayal al-zill) developed from al-maqama:

If Arab culture lacked drama in the European sense, it could certainly pride itself on a literacy ‘genre’ that was unknown to other nations. The ‘maqama’ (assembly) undoubtedly has been considered the most perfect form of literary presentation in Arabic literature since it came into being in the eleventh century at the hands of Badi Azzaman al-Hamadani. The imprint he left on this genre has been imitated throughout the ages…. The maqama has played a role in one of the forms of drama known by the Arab as khayal al-zill. (19-20)

Arabs did not only know pharaonic drama, maqama, ta’ziya and shadow play but they also knew some other indigenous dramatic forms such as the samir (theatre-in-the-round), the madh (chants of praises), the qaraquz (puppet shows similar to Punch and Judy shows) and the hakawati or story-telling. However, these forms have not been dynamised from within because they were not considered as drama. That is why some critics argue that drama was absent from
Arabic literature. In fact, the possible reasons for the lack of dramatic heritage in the Arab world have been continuously debated by Arab and Western critics. According to M. M. Badawi, Islam, being a strictly monotheistic religion, forbade the worship of idols and, therefore, just as it discouraged figurative arts like painting it would not have allowed drama (Badawi, *Early 4*). The fact that Greek drama was strongly repudiated by the early Muslims is mainly due to its paradigmatic multi-theistic constructs. Greek drama’s celebration of simulacra and conflict constituted a real danger to the newly established order of the monotheistic Arab-Islamic society (Amine 153). However, there is no mention in the Koran and Sunna of the Prophet Mohammed of any kind of rejection of theatrical practice or of the making of spectacle. Hassan Buhraoui, in his critique of Ahmed Bin Siddiq’s attack on theatrical activities in the name of Islam, argues that “among the biased ideas that settled in the minds of the early Muslims under the influence of Orientalists’ propaganda and the exaggeration of theologians is that Islam forbade all kinds of visual representation” (qtd in Amine 153). That there is a modern theatrical trend in the Arab world called *al-Masrah al-Islami* (Islamic Theatre) disproves the early claims that Islam forbids theatrical representation.

In his introduction to *al-Malik Odib* (Oedipus the King, 1949), Tawfiq al-Hakim also raises a similar argument. According to al-Hakim, there is no direct prohibition of the dramatic art in Islamic teachings. He also rejects fear of paganism as a reason for the disregard of the early Arab translators for the theatre (20). Al-Hakim argues that the early Arab translators were never reluctant to borrow from non-Islamic or pagan cultures; he cites as examples several translations from the Greeks and the efforts of these translators to mould these works as to suit the Arab mentalities and the Islamic philosophies (20). Al-Hakim also proposes several possible reasons that might explain the Arabs’ avoidance of drama. He ascribes the absence of the theatre in the
early Islamic era to two reasons: first, the absence of mythology from the Arab culture which made it difficult for the Muslim mind to understand the Greek dramatic action, and second, the absence of theatre art in both pre-Islamic and Islamic periods which made it impossible for the Arabs to visualise this art form (22-23). It was therefore a lack of the “tool” and not a “permanent hostility” that caused this schism between the Arabic literature and drama (A Said 10). Al-Hakim also considers the pre-Islamic nomadic way of life to be partly responsible for the absence of any form of collective art. He argues that the lack of the necessary stability for the rise of a theatrical activity (similar to that in the Greek and Roman cultures) could be attributed to the Arabs’ lifestyle (al-Hakim, al-Malik 25). A fourth possible reason which al-Hakim considers is the Arabs’ mastery of lyrical poetry. Poetry has been the Arabs’ distinguished literary heritage of which they were always proud (26).

Jacob M. Landau, in his *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema*, attributes the absence of the genre in the Arab world until the nineteenth century to the following:

a) The peoples with whom the Arabs came into close contact had no well-developed theatre, b) Women, particularly if unveiled, were strictly forbidden to appear on the stage. Only the combination of these two reasons may account for the fact that while a large part of the Greek cultural heritage in the various fields of literature, science and thought, no item of the classical drama found its way to Arabic translation until recent years. (1-2)

Initially, Arabs came into contact with Greek drama through Christian Syrian translations, though they developed an ambiguous animosity towards the genre. The same Arabs came into contact with the Turks, Persians and Indians, who had developed their own performing traditions before their encounter with the West. If women by the end of the nineteenth century were
forbidden to appear on the stage, such absence does not in the least obstruct dramatic activity, as Greek and Elizabethan theatres were also exclusively male domains and women were not allowed to appear on the stage until 1660, the period of Restoration drama and the reopening of theatres in England. Therefore, the absence of women in the dramatic activity has never been an obstacle to theatrical activity (Amine 152).

For some critics, these different types of traditional dramatic forms (shadow play, maqama, samir and qaraquz) were essentially popular entertainments which, with the possible exception of Ibn Daniyal’s works, were not regarded as serious literature and were therefore ignored by literary historians and critics. It is probably for this reasons that they did not develop much in form. On the contrary, their development was arrested; they did not go beyond an elementary stage of dramatic representation (Badawi, Early 28), with the obvious exception of some shadow plays. For example, Jacob Landau argues that the shadow play was a means of entertaining the rich and the poor without paying any attention to its artistic and literary attribute. He writes:

A shadow play is histrionics performed by the casting of shadows on a curtain, visible to the audience. This is a pastime, which entertained even the rich, intellectual highbrow, but in the main it was an amusement enjoyed by the humblest in various countries. (9)

On the textual level, Arabic indigenous performing traditions were excluded from the realm of theatre in its Western form because they were not based on written scripts. That is to say there were no dramatic texts as self-referential scripts that would develop writing for the stage. The idea that there is no dramatic script in the Arab heritage has been appropriated by the Arabic intelligentsia (Amine 56). For example Abdelkrim Berrchid, the founder of Festive
Theatre in Morocco, reproduces the typical discourse that the Arabs have adapted to speak about themselves since the humiliating encounter with the Western ‘Other’ (that is, since the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798):

We can mention a basic reality related to Arabic theatre: the absence of a founding text that is the absence of a theatrical unconscious in writing. Such absence makes our writing no more than a duplication (supplement) of an absent text that is necessarily the Western text instead of being a real contribution and a creative writing. How, then, can this founding text be achieved and found? (Berrchid 33)

However, according to Khalid Amine, the absence of an Arabic self-referential dramatic text is “a big lie” and “an effect of the Western surveying gaze” (Amine 156). In fact, the shadow play is the only performing tradition in the medieval Arab world that relies on a written script. George Jacob (1862-1937), an Orientalist, found three manuscripts signed by Ibn Daniel: the first manuscript is in Derenbourg, the second in Istanbul and the third in Cairo. These three scripts had remained unnoticed till George Jacob’s first investigations in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, the self-referential dramatic script that Berrchid refers to was not absent before appropriating the Western model of textual practice, but rather it was eclipsed, back-grounded and dismissed in favour of the Western text (Amine 156).

However, a few modern dramatists employ some of these traditional dramatic forms (or some of their characteristics) in their plays. For example, the influence of the shadow play is discernible in the early popular comedies and in the writings of the early twentieth century writers such as Naguib al-Rihani, Mohammed Taymour, Tawfiq al-Hakim and Yusuf Idris. Gilbert and Tompkins maintain that “When traditional performance elements are incorporated
into a contemporary play, they affect they play’s content, structure, and style and consequently, its overall meaning and effect” (54). According to Badawi it is important “to remember those common features of popular traditional dramatic entertainments because they seem to have influenced the imported foreign forms for many years” (29). Song and music, for instance, remained a feature of the Arabic theatre during the first two decades of the twentieth century and they were revived “partly by the influence of Bertolt Brecht, by many post-Revolution avant-garde dramatists” (Badawi, Modern Arabic Drama 3).

Similarly, modern plays (mostly comedies and dark comedies) followed the line of social and political satires dated back to medieval popular entertainments. This continued into the 1960s and 1970s when plays “constituted a protest against the ruthless crushing of the individual by the all-powerful machine of a totalitarian state” (3). Likewise, the influence of the episodic structure of the shadow play is evident in modern Egyptian plays; for modern Egyptian playwrights

Had preference for the unilinear, episodic form, and it is significant that they welcomed with alacrity Brecht’s epic theatre. The ease with which they employed a Presenter or Narrator to introduce the character of a play or to relate or comment on the action, even when there was no apparent justification for it, could be explained by an atavistic desire to return to the technique of the shadow theatre.

(Badawi, Modern Arabic Drama 4)

In spite of the Western influence, Arabic playwrights attempt to search for a national drama by means of reviving traditional dramatic forms. For example, Yusuf Idris recommends the samir theatre (a peasant theatre in the round) similar to the simple form of folk entertainments in villages which retained the medieval elements of song, dance and story-telling
and allowed for a free interaction of performer and audience. With these elements included in modern drama, Idris aspired for a theatre which would achieve “complete involvement in the dramatic act, a state of spiritual elation in which both actor and spectator become one and the same” (qtd in A Said 17).

A similar idea of an actor-spectator theatre was also raised in al-Hakim’s al-Safqah (The Deal, 1956). The play is intended to reproduce a theatre in the round to portray the simple lifestyle of the peasants. Al-Hakim recommended an open air performance with no scenery, the audience surrounding the action while actors enter and exit among the audience. The play’s events take place in an open space in a small Egyptian village. Al-Hakim emphasises the need for a national theatre in his book Our Theatrical Form (1967). Here he advocates a “poor man’s theatre” which employs older techniques of the recitations of the rhapsodies such as the Narrator and the Mimick. The Narrator (a kind of one-man chorus), is to present the play, explains things to the audience (apparently village peasants), links events and comments on the action. The Mimick (a man or a woman) presents the roles without impersonating the characters. They are to make that clear to the audience from the beginning by addressing them in their actual personalities. Ali al-Ra’i remarks that:

This form al-Hakim found appropriate to our needs. For one thing it is easy to adopt. It is really a poor man’s theatre, easy access for all sorts of people, and particularly convenient to strolling players and the like, who would be able to take it to the smallest village without much trouble or expense. (qtd in A Said 18).

Though al-Hakim never put his theory into practice, other writer experimented with this technique. Najuib Sorour’s Yassin wa Bahiya (Yassin and Bahiya) which is a semi-narrative and
A semi-dramatic play is a good example of this. Sorour employs the story-teller as narrator and commentator while the dramatic parts are acted.

The last element taken from medieval drama in modern Egyptian plays is the use of folklore (*hakawati*); the *Arabian Nights* and *Kalila and Dimna* are two major sources for modern playwrights. Al-Hakim is one of the writers who relied on Eastern sources for his choice of material for plays. He states that while writing his play *The Sleepers in the Cave* (1933) he was under the influence of ancient Egyptian culture. With the intention of mixing Western dramatic techniques with texts and plots derived from the Eastern cultural heritage, he wrote his next play *Shahrizad* (1934). Moreover, al-Hakim employs *hakawati* in order to provide a Brechtian distancing mechanism to his drama (Allen 322).

### 2.2 The Beginning of Modern Arabic Drama (1870-1910)

Although traditional dramatic forms never ceased to exercise some influence on the writings of many modern Arabic playwrights, they never developed into drama in the Western sense (Badawi, *Modern Arabic Lit.* 330). The latter was imported to Arabic literature only around the middle of the nineteenth century. During the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt (1798-1801) the French troops were entertained by French dramatic spectacles. As the European community in Egypt increased under the modernising rule of Mohammed Ali and his successors, the interest in European opera and drama grew and performances were given both by visiting foreign companies as well as local amateurs. Thus Western theatre was introduced to the Arabs with strong aura of authority. A whole apparatus of translation and reproduction of Western theatrical cannons flourished in the Arab world. As a result, Arabic dramatists started to adopt Western models leaving behind their own indigenous dramatic forms that could have been dynamised from within. The first Arab writers to resort to Western drama as a source of
inspiration and imitation are the Lebanese Marun al-Naqqash and the Egyptian Ya’qub Sannu. They introduced Western drama into the Arab world by means of translation, adaptation and arabicisation. Though modern Arab dramatists translated and adapted Western plays, they wrote original dramatic pieces as well. More importantly, they assimilated Western dramatic techniques in their original plays. As Gibbs indicates:

It was, then, as a self-confessed imitation of the European theatre that the drama was introduced into the Arab world in the nineteenth century. Aspiring actor-managers hitched their wagons to Corneille and Moliere. Perspiring translators battled with the Anglo-Saxon idioms of Shakespeare and Shaw. But out of all this there has gradually emerged a mixed art, in which Arab elements have been grafted on to a transplanted and acclimatized stock. (qtd in al-Shetaiwi 21)

2.2.1 Marun al-Naqqash and the Rise of Drama in Syria

The first Arab dramatist to imitate Western drama was Marun al-Naqqash (1817-1855), a Lebanese merchant who saw dramatic performances in Italy and France during his trade visits. Though al-Naqqash was not Egyptian, he influenced Egyptian theatre. The theatre company of his nephew Salim al-Naqqash and some other Lebanese troops also learned theatre from al-Naqqash and popularised theatre in Egypt. Al-Naqqash motivated other scholars of his time to import Western drama and theatre and to write original plays. He might be acclaimed as the founder of the Arab theatre (Moosa, The Origins 26).

Al- Naqqash was born in Sayda (Sidon) on February 9th 1817 to a Maronite family, but raised in Beirut, where the family moved in 1825. A precocious boy, he learned beside Arabic, Turkish, French and Italian and began to compose poetry at eighteen. He soon mastered oriental
music. Later al-Naqqash became a business man. His work took him to Aleppo, Damascus, and the rest of Syria. In 1846 he visited Alexandria and Cairo and then he sailed to Italy, which had strong relations with the Arab East. In Italy he visited many theatres and was so impressed that he decided to introduce the stage into his own country (26).

Upon his return to Beirut, he formed a troupe with some friends who shared his enthusiasm. In 1847 he wrote and produced, with the help of his family in his own house, al-Bakhil (The Miser), the first modern play in Arabic (26). Encouraged by the favourable reactions of his invited audience, which included local notables and foreign consuls, he went on to produce, again in his own house, his second play Abu’l Hasan al-Mughaffal wa Harun al-Rashid (Abu al-Hasan the Gullible and Harun al-Rashid) in 1849-50. Subsequently al-Naqqash managed to obtain an Ottoman decree to allow him to have a theatre built close to his house in which he produced his third and last play al-Salit al-Hasud (The Sharp-tongued, Envious Man) in 1853.

His dramatic career, however, did not last long, for in 1855 while he was away from home, he caught a fever and died at the premature age of thirty-eight (Badawi, Early 43).

Al-Naqqash’s first play al-Bakhil (The Miser) deals with two misers, al-Tha’labi and Qarrad. Al-Tha’labi wants to marry off his young and beautiful, widowed daughter, Hind, to the ugly and elderly miser, Qarrad. Ghali, al-Tha’labi’s son, is horrified at this prospect and tries in vain to persuade his father to consent to Hind’s marrying instead his friend, Isa, a relation of her deceased husband, whom Hind loves. The action of the play consists in the young people’s successful attempt to get rid of old Qarrad and marry off Hind to Isa. In brief, knowing what a miser he is, they arrange that Hind should pretend not only to agree to marrying Qarrad, but also to show him how eager she is to be his wife because she is looking forward to spending his money extravagantly on clothes, finery, jewels and gracious living. At once Qarrad, who is
himself after what he believes to be Hind’s money and inheritance, is alarmed and declares that he is no longer interested in the marriage, but Hind will not release him without financial compensation. In the mean time, al-Tha’labi is persuaded by the young people that Qarrad intends to kill him in order to seize the money which Hind would inherit on his death. Shocked and disgusted by Qarrad’s behaviour, al-Tha’labi turns Qarrad out of his house and consents to marry off Hind to Isa (44).

Apparently, *al-Bakhil* has the same title as Moliere’s *L’Avare*. Therefore, some scholars such as Mohammed Yusuf Najm argue that it was a translation (*The Drama* 416-17). According to a contemporary critic, Jurji Zaydan, this “was the first drama in the Arabic Language” which al-Naqqash had “composed this play from the beginning to the end” (qtd in Moosa, *The Origins* 27). Najm goes on to acknowledge that al-Naqqash wrote his play after he had read Moliere’s comedy and made use of its characterisation and humorous elements (*The Drama* 416). The treatment of miserliness and stinginess, which constitutes the main humorous elements of the drama, shares much with *L’Avare*.

Similarly, Badawi is of the view that al-Naqqash’s *al-Bakhil* is not a translation or adaptation of Moliere’s *L’Avare* but rather “original” (*Early* 44). He writes:

> Probably because of the similarity of its title, it was wrongly assumed for a long time that al-Naqqash’s first play, *The Miser*, was not a translation or adaptation of Moliere’s *L’Avare*. But a cursory look at the Arabic play is sufficient to show that it is indeed an original although, as in the rest of al-Naqqash’s work, one can detect in it an echo of Moliere as well as the general pervasive influence of his

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2 Moliere’s *L’Avare* deals with the petty attitudes of a miser who is extremely avaricious. No matter how ugly and deformed, this miser, like other men, is a human being. He loves to be flattered beyond belief. He wants to marry a young pretty girl-provided his marriage brings him financial gain, because money is his chief love. His love of money even tempts him to sacrifice the happiness of his own children if it conflicts with his aim. While he vies with his sons to wed the same pretty young lady for pure selfish interest, he denies his daughter the right to marry the man she loves. He would rather have her marry an old but wealthy friend of his.
drama. Bearing in mind the fact that it is the first modern Arabic play, it is for the most part a remarkably competent work. (44)

The most striking feature of al-Bakhil is that it is written in verse rather than prose and that it is set to music. In other words, it is meant to be an opera, especially since the author’s intention is evident from the introduction he delivered before its first performance (Moosa, The Origins 27). He classified dramas into different categories: “One of them, which the Europeans call prose, is divided into comedy, drama, and tragedy, which are performed without verse and unsung; the second one, which they call opera, is sung” (qtd in Moosa, The Origins 28). Al-Naqqash goes on to explain:

It is important and necessary for me to compose and translate in the first place the first and not the second type [the opera] because it is easier and more likely. But what made me deviate from the norm and follow this course is that the second type [the opera] was to me more tasteful, desirable, splendid and delightful. Secondly, my opinion, desire and earnest concern made me inclined to believe that the second [opera] would be preferable to my people and kindred. (28)

In this way, al-Bakhil was not merely the first native Arabic drama, but also the first Arabic comic opera.

His second play Abu al-Hasan al-Mughaffal (Abu al-Hasan the Fool) was based on the Thousand and One Nights story “al-Naim wa al-Yaqzan” (the Sleeping and the Wakeful), tale number 153. It describes how, disgusted with the ways of the world and the fickleness of friends, Abu al-Hasan wishes he could be given sole sway over the world even for one single day in order to set things right. Overhearing him, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid who happens to be on one of his usual nightly inspection tours of the city of Baghdad accompanied by his executioner,
decides to grant him his wish to see how far Abu al-Hasan will be able to change the world. He has him drugged and transported to the palace where he wakes up to find himself the Caliph. When his time as Caliph is over, Abu al-Hasan discovers to his dismay that he has been able to realise very little of his good intentions, having spent his time in the pomp and distractions of royal office which blurred his vision and affected his judgment.

However, the play departs from the sources in both plot and structure. Unlike the story, it treats the problem of the movement from one social class to another. Whether or not al-Naqqash was aware of the social implications, the encounters of his protagonist, who comes from a low class, with the privileges of a higher class intermingle questions of social standing with the problem of appearance and reality, which is the point of the original story (Moosa, *The Origins* 29). Abu al-Hasan has always dreamt of bettering his lot, and his daydreams have become a reality to him. However, the Caliph and his Vizier devise a ruse to show him that the world is not as he sees it. Even when he is given the power and authority he has never had before, he faces as many problems as he did when he was poor and powerless.

*Al-Bakhil*, unlike, *Abu al-Hasan* is only partially set to music. Its language is a combination of prose and poetry. Moreover, the style of this play is less lucid than that of *al-Bakhil*. Al-Naqqash uses the traditional rhymed-prose prevalent at the time. More importantly, al-Naqqash makes charming use of Molière’s wit (29). A good example is seen when Abu al-Hasan asks his brother Said if he knows the attractive Da’d, if he visits her family, and if he has any relation with them. The scene follows the same pattern as Harpagon’s questioning of his son Cleante about Marian in *L’Avare*. Cleante praises the young lady before he realises his brother’s interest in her (Najm, *The Drama* 369). This entertaining drama must have appealed to the nineteenth century Syrian audience, and the mere fact that al-Naqqash adapted a story from the
Thousand and One Night to the stage is evident of his fertile imagination and prodigious originality (Moosa, The Origins 29).

Al-Salit al-Hasud (The Sharp-tongued, Envious Man), al-Naqqash’s third play, is probably the most symmetrically structured of al-Naqqash’s plays. The events of the play take place in nineteenth century Beirut, although very little social reality is, in fact, portrayed in it (Badawi, Early 50). The course of events shows Abu Isa, a teacher of Arabic language and literature who has moved into Beirut from Damascus and who owes a large sum of money to a handsome young man, Sam’an, the sharp-tongued and envious man of the title of the play. Rahil, Abu Isa’s attractive young daughter is in love with Sam’an and they want to get married. Abu Isa agrees to marry off his daughter to Sam’an because he owes him money. Sam’an is not only misanthropic but also jealous. He always suspects that Rahil is deceiving him and accuses her of hiding lovers in her room. Nevertheless, Rahil loves him. At last, a good man Ishaq al-Qudsi offers to marry Rahil. Her father consents to the marriage though he had promised Sam’an to marry her off to him. Abu Isa likes Ishaq because he is rich and can get money from him to pay off his debt to Sam’an. Rahil refuses to marry Ishaq but when Sam’an continues to accuse her of dishonesty she changes her mind and agrees to marry Ishaq. Feeling defeated, Sam’an pretends to bless their marriage but secretly plans to kill them and their guests by presenting them with poisoned chocolate. Sam’an’s servant reveals this, and Sam’an is shamed. He leaves threatening to take revenge on all of them.

To the earlier plays, the plot and setting of al-Naqqash’s third and last drama al-Salit al-Hasud reflects various aspects and customs specific to Syria in mid-nineteenth century, although it manifests the Molierian touch (Moosa, The Origins 29). The characters are recognisable as contemporary types and the action centres on the practice of fixed marriages. Parental authority
was dominant, but children sometimes defied it. The author could have ended this drama with the marriage of Rahil to Ishaq al-Qudsi. But for no demonstrable reason he engages Sam’an and the rest of the cast in unnecessary intrigues. Thus, the finale becomes flat. Moreover, this play is written in a mixture of rhyming prose and verse, and it is not entirely sung. On the whole, the language of the dialogue does not express the character of the speaker, except in a few scenes. One interesting feature of this drama, however, to be seen here also, is the use he makes of the chorus. While occasionally commenting on the action, the chorus changes its character and plays several roles at different moments ranging from pupils to night-watch-men to ordinary male and female citizens (Badawi, *Early 52*).

Again, Molière’s inspiration is conspicuous. The dialogue between Abu Isa and his pupil, Jirjis regarding what is prose and what is verse brings to the memory a similar dialogue between Jourdain and the philosopher master in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

3 The strange and thoughtless Sam’an recalls Alceste in *Le Misanthrope*. Furthermore, the two valets, Jabbur and Bishara, who appear as wealthy men of prestige, remind us of Mascarille and Jodelet in *Les Precieuses Ridicules*. When Madelon and Cathos reject their respective lovers, La Grange and Du Croisy, these lovers employ their valets Mascarille and Jodelet to expose the weakness of the two ladies. To conceal their identity, Mascarille clothes himself in his master’s finery and assumes the title Marquis of Mascarille while Jodelet appears as the Viscount of Jodelet. 4 Al-Naqqash admits through Sam’an that he has “borrowed some of its (this drama’s) themes from the *Riwayat Ifranjiyya* (European dramas)” (al-Naqqash, *al-Salit* Act 3 Scene 4 389).

Al-Naqqash’s plays are significant for many reasons. First, they attracted the attention of the Arab dramatists to European drama; Arab scholars introduced European drama and theatre

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3 See *al-Salit al-Hasud*, Act 1, Scene 4 and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Act 2, Scene 4.
4 See *Les Precieuses ridicules*, Act 1, Scene 9 and *al-Salit al-Hasud*, Act 2, Scene 7-9.
into the Arab world. Secondly, they inspired Arab scholars to emulate Western drama by writing original plays. Thirdly, al-Naqqash opened the door to assimilating European dramatic techniques, especially French, in Arabic. More importantly, he played a significant role in introducing theatre not only into Lebanon but also into Egypt – his nephew, Salim al-Naqqash (1850-1885), whom he trained in theatre, went to Egypt in order to practice his theatrical career. Nevil Barbour writes:

> In 1876 Salim al-Naqqash, a nephew of Marun, with his friend Adib Ishaq and a company of actors including Yusuf al-Khayyat, famous, it is said, for his skill in female parts, visited Alexandria and gave a season at the theatre of Zizinia. The pieces presented were translations of European plays, including *Andromache*, *Charlemagne*, *Phedre*, *Horace* and *Zenobia* adapted by al-Naqqash and Adib Ishaq and enlivened with songs. (174)

Al-Naqqash premature death was a great loss to the burgeoning stage. Nevertheless, his theatrical activity was directly continued by his brother Nicola, and his nephew, Salim Khalil al-Naqqash. Nicola’s interest in the theatre came more from recognition of his brother’s pioneer accomplishment than from personal ambitions. He continued the training of amateur actors and always wished that his brother were still alive to see what his disciples had accomplished. Completely modest, he acknowledges his brother’s superior dramatic talents and admitted that he was the first to follow his footsteps (Moosa, *The Origins* 32). As a token of his devotion, he produced his brother’s drama *al-Salit al-Hasud*. The performance was attended by the Ottoman Wali and proved to be a success. Nicola’s own dramas included *al-Shaykh al-Jahil* (The Ignorant Old Man), *al-Musi* (The Testator), and *Rabia Ibn Ziyad al-Mukaddam* (a name of a character), whose theme was drawn from Arab History (33).
i. Salim al-Naqqash

Marun’s nephew Salim Khalil al-Naqqash, an active writer, translator and journalist, proved even more active and ambitious in the theatre. Although most of the dramas he produced were adaptation of European originals, his literary and theatrical output was prolific. In addition to his uncle’s three plays, Salim al-Naqqash brought to Egypt five works more which he had adapted or loosely translated. These were *Aida* (adapted from Verdi’s opera *Aida*), *Mayy aw Horace* (Mayy or Horace) based on Corneille’s play *Horace*, *al-Kadhub* (The Liar) based on Corneille’s *Le Menteur*, *Ghara’ib al-Sudaf* (Strange Coincidences) and *al-Zalum* (The Tyrant), the last two obviously adapted from European plays which have not yet been identified (Badawi, *Early 53*).

*Aida* was first staged in Cairo in 1871. Al-Naqqash based his work on Ghislanzoni’s libretto and turned the opera into an operetta mainly, but not wholly, sung to popular Arabic tunes of the time. The dialogue is a mixture of verse and rhyming prose. Moreover traditional poetry of love and boasting is used in this play. Lovers express their emotions in the traditional Arabic idiom, just as warriors praise their own valour and courage in the conventional Arabic heroic manner. There is hardly any characterisation; the main character, the Egyptian soldier and lover, Radamis, takes major decisions affecting his as well as other people’s lives, without his motivation being made psychologically convincing, as the author makes no attempt to show any character analysis or development. The last two lines of the ‘play’ with which Aminaris concludes her elegy on the two dead lovers refer to Aida and Radamis as *shuhada gharam* (love’s martyrs). The theme of a young man giving up everything – military glory, the offer of marriage to the royal princess who is madly in love with him, the prospect of the throne of Egypt and life itself, for the sake of the woman he loves – was found captivating by the Arab audiences.
The same use of non-dramatic, traditional poetry of love and boasting is also found in *Mayy aw Horace*. The theme of the play is, of course, love and war, and the inevitable conflict which ensues between love and duty. Horace, the Roman, is married to Malaka, who comes from Alba and whose brother, Guriace, is betrothed to Horace’s sister, Mayy. When war breaks out between Rome and Alba, the men have to fight one another in single combat. Horace kills Guriace much to Mayy’s horror and, shocked at the unpatriotic reaction of his own sister, he kills her in a fit of uncontrollable anger, but is pardoned in the end by the king in recognition of his heroic services to his country. It is obvious that the story outline of Corneille’s play is kept and with it the main (historical) characters, King Tulle, Horace’s father and son and Curiace. However, the King is given a vizier by al-Naqqash; the names of some characters are changed: Valere becomes Qaysar, Sabine and Camille are Arabicised becoming Malaka and Mayy respectively and their confidante, Julie, becomes Rogina, a servant in the household of Horace’s father. Al-Naqqash also adds a chorus consisting of the King’s retainers, but they hardly say anything until towards the end of the play when they join in singing a hymn of praise for the King and the Vizier in the true Arab manner (55).

In *Aida* and *Mayy wa Horace*, the lovers die in tragic circumstances but this is not so in *al-Zalum* (The Tyrant), which, despite its happy ending, has much in common with *Aida*. The King’s son, Iskandar, the tyrant of the play’s title, falls in love with Asma, the orphaned commoner, who does not reciprocate his love because she has lost her heart to Salim, the nephew of Lubna, the dead Queen’s midwife. Salim is offered riches by Iskandar in return for giving up Asma, but he refuses the offer and prefers to endure jail torture for his love. Likewise, Asma rejects the attentions of the King’s son and chooses to suffer in jail instead. After a series of complications, wild adventures and improbable events, Salim is united with Asma and all ends
happily. Critically speaking, the work has many of the ingredients of a popular medieval romance. The characters are painted in black and white: Iskandar, the tyrant, is all bad while Salim and Asma are idealised lovers (in fact the play was known also as *Salim wa Asma*). Furthermore; the dialogue is full of traditional and non-dramatic poetry in which the speakers complain of the pangs of love, of the weakness of tyrant or the harshness of fate (56).

Like *al-Zalum*, *Ghara’ib al-Sudaf* (Strange Coincidences), known also as *Hifz al-Widad* (Faithfulness) is a tale of love, adventure, improbabilities and coincidences, as the title suggests, but is set against the background of a nationalist uprising in India. Thanks to the miraculous interference of a grateful India all ends happily for the European characters, English and French alike. The dialogue is mainly in prose interspersed with verse, but interestingly enough the prose here is generally free from the fetters and artificialities of the customary *saj*’. The last play, *al-Kadhub* (The Liar), however, did not prove successful after its first performance. As it has been said it is based on Corneille’s play, but unlike Dorante in *Le Menteur*, Dib does not in any way gain the audience’s sympathy. He is a thoroughly evil man who deserves punishment for his wicked lies. The play ends with the moral uttered by all the characters on the stage and addressed to the audience, that lying is a wicked vice and that a liar is bound to fail (Najm, *al-Masrah* 247-8).

It is obvious from the preceding account that Salim al-Naqqash’s contribution is in no way an improvement upon the work of his uncle from the point of view of dramatic structure or characterisation, although it sheds considerable light on the types of plays the Arab audience saw and which helped to form their taste. Several things become clear: the dominance of love themes, the romantic quality of events, and the passion for singing as well as the overtly didactic and moral function of drama. Like his uncle, Salim believed that drama was meant to portray virtue
in an attractive light, thereby encouraging people to follow it, and to show clearly the disastrous consequences of vice so that they could avoid it (Badawi, *Early 56*).

In Egypt, Salim al-Naqqash enlisted the help of his fellow Lebanese friend, Adib Ishaq, who had already translated Racine’s *Andromaque* (in the usual mixture of prose and verse with songs added) at the suggestion of the French Consul in Beirut. Ishaq joined him in Alexandria where for a while they collaborated in theatrical activities but soon (in 1877) they turned away from theatre becoming engrossed in political journalism. The works of Ishaq were progressive steps towards the creation of a domestic drama. Like al-Naqqash and other contemporary writers, he introduced verse and music into the adapted dramas as a means of attraction for Arab audience. Furthermore, he cut down lengthy dialogues because they were boring to Arab audience (Moosa, *The Origins 35*).

After Salim al-Naqqash and Adib Ishaq deserted their theatre in 1877, Yusuf Khayyat (d. 1900) reorganised the troupe and added a few Egyptian actors to it. He made his successful debut as director with the performance of *Sun’ al-Jamil* (Doing Good), at the Zizinia Theatre. In 1879, the company moved to Cairo where it enjoyed the Khedive’s encouragement and support. The Khedive became indignant, however, watching a performance of *al-Zalum* (The Tyrant), which contained allusions to despots and injustice. Thinking the play was an indirect criticism of his rule and person, the Khedive ordered Khayyat and his troupe out of Egypt. The Opera House was closed to Arab actors and performances until 1882. In that year Sulayman al-Qirdahi (d. 1909) and al-Shaykh Salama Hijazi (d.1917) obtained the government’s approval to resume Arab acting.

When the Khedive dismissed al-Khayyat, Sulayman al-Qirdahi, a member in al-Khayyat’s troupe, organised the remnants of the troupe in 1882 and added new actors and singers
including the famous Egyptian singer, Salamah Hijazi. Al-Qirdahi introduced women (in the first place his wife) in the female parts, hitherto exclusively taken by men, and added a female singer called Laila to the company (Barbour 175). In Alexandria, al-Qirdahi produced a number of plays such as *Nakth al-Uhud*, a translation of Racine’s *Phedre*, 1885; Fenelon’s *Telemague*; *Harun al-Rashid* by al-Qabbani, 1884; and others. He inserted tunes and songs in his shows. Al-Qirdahi’s troupe continued working until 1909.

ii. Ahmad Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani

Many of the plays in al-Qirdahi’s repertoire were the work of the Syrian actor and dramatist Ahmad Abu Khalil al-Qabbani (1833-1902), who had already produced considerable theatrical activity in Damascus. Al-Qabbani, a product of traditional Islamic education, knew no European language. Probably inspired by the example set by Marun al-Naqqash, he tried to establish Arabic theatre in Damascus sometimes during 1870s. Together with the works of Marun and Salim al-Naqqash, he produced plays of his own which were derived from Arab and Islamic heritage and folktales and contained much singing, music and dancing of which he was very fond (Badawi *Early* 57). He first met with some success and was even encouraged by the authorities, particularly the Turkish ruler, Midhat Pasha, who commissioned Iskandar Farah to form a theatre troupe in Damascus of which al-Qabbani was to be an important member. However, after a while al-Qabbani was opposed by extremist religious and puritanical factions which forced him to close his theatre and bring his activities to an end. In 1884 he moved his troupe to Alexandria where he began to produce his plays at the Zizinya theatre and Danube café. Soon he was able to act in Cairo, even at the Opera House and subsequently in the provincial towns of Egypt. He continued to be active until 1900 when, after the burning of his theatre, he returned to Damascus where he retired on a state pension.
According to Najm, the number of plays performed by al-Qabbani totals thirty one (*al-Masrah* 401-2). Of these fifteen were his own works, while the rest were either written by other Arab authors ranging from Marun al-Naqqash to Najib Haddad or freely translated from plays by European playwrights, notably Corneille, Racine, Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas (402). The first play which al-Qabbani wrote is entitled *Nakir al-Jamil* (The Ungrateful Man). The theme is the ingratitude of a destitute young man named Ghadir to Halim, the Vizier’s son, who, against the advice of his mentor Nasir, befriends him, adopting him as his intimate companion and sharing his worldly possessions with him. Ghadir plots Halim’s murder because he resents being bound to him and feeling subservient to him, but his plot misfires and by mistake he kills Habib, the King’s son, instead. He simulates deep grief and regrets at what he has done and persuades Halim to help him, and in order to turn suspicions away from himself he gives him the dagger he has used. In the mean time, he treacherously convinces the King that his son’s killer is Halim since the blood-stained dagger is found with him. The aggrieved King orders Halim’s execution, but later he finds out the truth and Halim is set free. To the astonishment of all, Halim pleads with the king on behalf of Ghadir, who is then forgiven by him.

Generally, the play remarkably shows little dramatic insight, being both episodic in structure and excessively verbose in dialogue. It is written in a mixture of verse and rhyming prose, which is meant to be sung. Moreover, the characters are crude types whose names suggest their dominant quality. Ghadir means ‘treacherous,’ Halim ‘forbearing and forgiving,’ Habib ‘beloved,’ Nasir ‘supporter’ and so forth. There is no attempt at psychological analysis and despite the excessively long and worldly speeches; characters do not even begin to explain their motives. In addition, the action takes place in a timeless world of nowhere in particular. Despite
the Arabic names of its characters, *Nakir-al-Jamil* may have been derived from the plot of a Western origin (Badawi, *Early* 58).

The source of the next play, *Hiyal al-Nisa* (Trickeries of Women) – also known as *Lusiya* (Lucia) – seems to be an adapted European play (59), judging at least by the European names of characters and the setting. Lucia, the wife of Count Frederick Governor of Messina, is in love with her husband’s nephew Jean, who does not feel the same about her but is instead in love with her stepdaughter Eugene. His rival for Eugene’s love is the Count’s secretary, Emile. The Count proceeds to marry off his daughter Eugene to Jean as they are deeply in love with one another. The frustrated Lucia and Emile plot to destroy the young married couple but fail in their attempts and are punished by the Count who puts them in jail. Like *The Ungrateful Man*, this play, which starts reasonably well, soon develops into a popular romance full of improbable events and ends happily with the unbelievable forgiveness of this wicked characters and a prayer for the Sultan. *Afifa* (The Chaste Woman) and *Lubab al-Gharam aw al-Malik Mitridat* (Lubab al-Gharam or King Mitridat) are two plays by al-Qabbani derived from European sources (60).

As already mentioned, not all al-Qabbani’s plays were derived from European sources; he also wrote plays with indigenous traditional Arab themes. *Harun al-Rashid ma’a Uns al-Jalis* (Harun al-Rashid with Uns al-Jalis), which is based on the forty-fifth night of the *Arabian Nights*, seems to have been one of his most popular plays. Al-Mu’in ibn Sawi, the Vizier of Prince Ibn Sulayman of Basra, becomes jealous of his colleague al-Fadl Ibn Khaqan because he is convinced that the latter is the Prince’s favourite and he therefore plots his downfall. A chance presents itself when al-Fadl allows his son Ali Nur al-Din to marry Uns al-Jalis, the beautiful and accomplished slave girl whom al-Fadl has been commissioned to buy for the Prince, and with whom Ali has fallen desperately in love. At the instigation of al-Mu’in, who forges a letter from
the Caliph ordering the death of al-Fadl and his son, the incensed Prince imprisons al-Fadl, seizure his property and is about to put him and his son to death. However at the eleventh hour the Caliph intervenes for, by a series of adventures, Ali and his wife Uns a-Jalis have been able to see him and impress him with the justice of their case. Al-Mu’in and Ibn Sulayman are punished by life-imprisonment, al-Fadl is promoted to the post of Governor of Basra and the young couple is generously recompensed by the Caliph.

Generally speaking, the story of the play deviates from the Arabian Nights version in some important details designed largely to make the character of Ali more sympathetic, while the events are telescoped in order to render the work somewhat more dramatic. Nevertheless, the play is not dramatic enough and once more it is largely an excuse for singing. However, while it shares with other plays the jail scenes which provide ample opportunity for tear-jerking, self-pitying verse, it differs from most of them in that it is not mainly about love; al-Mu’in’s destructive jealousy is certainly an important component, even though the author does not allow himself sufficient room to portray it in a convincing manner (62).

Al-Qabbani’s other plays include Harun al-Rashid ma’ al-Amir Ghanim ibn Ayyub wa Qut al-Qulub (Harun al-Rashid with Prince Ghanim Ibn Ayyub and Food of Hearts), al-Amir Mahmoud Naji Shah al-Ajam (Prince Mahmoud, son of the Shah of Persia) and Antar Ibn Shaddad (Antar Ibn Shaddad). In fact, al-Qabbani’s dramas are far too limited in scope to be universal. It is perhaps expecting too much from a nineteenth-century Arab playwright to harmonise his dramas with traditional and modern ideas. Also, it is unfair to expect him to use some ancient tales to criticise the foibles of his society. Al-Qabbani was an imitator rather than an innovator. However, he was perfectly in tune with the traditional set by Marun al-Naqqash. He might be considered the creator of the “Arab operetta” which influenced the succeeding
theatre in Egypt (Moosa, *The Origins* 40). He helped to popularise musical drama not only in Egypt but also in the whole Arab world. Moreover, because of his more traditional, cultural upbringing and background and his greater command of Arabic language, he also played a considerable role in establishing the tradition of regarding the cultural and literary heritage of the Arabs, including the *Arabian Nights*, as a constant source of inspiration for Arab dramatists.

Although Salim al-Naqqash, Adib Ishaq, and Al-Qabbani were all Syrians, they were active in Egypt. It was an Egyptian nationalist Jew, Ya‘qub Sannu, who first established a significant native theatre in Egypt.

### 2.2.2 Ya‘qub Sannu and the Rise of Drama in Egypt

Ya‘qub Sannu (1839-1917) is considered to be the father of the modern Egyptian theatre (Badawi, *Early* 31). Sannu, who was born in Cairo, came of Jewish parents. He seemed to have been a precocious child, for he claimed that at the age of twelve he could read the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in English as well as the Arabic Koran. He began to compose Arabic Poetry at an early age, and one of his earliest works was a poem in praise of the principal of his school. On his father’s advice, he composed a poem praising Ahmed Yagan Pasha of the ruling house of Mohammed Ali; the Pasha was so impressed that he decides to send the thirteen-year-old boy to Italy to study at his expense. In Italy, Sannu spent three impressionable years (in Livorno), during which time he acquired such mastery of the Italian language that he is reported to have written three plays in Italian (31).

Soon after he returned to Egypt at the age of sixteen, Sannu lost both his father and benefactor. He supported himself by teaching European languages and sciences to the sons and daughters of Egyptian dignitaries. Moreover, Sannu participated in varied intellectual activities among which were the founding of cultural societies and the establishment of several
newspapers and periodicals. More importantly, he soon became keenly aware of the need to arouse the interest of the average, non-westernised Egyptians in drama and theatre. He was already convinced that theatre had a vital role to play in the renaissance of the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular. He held the aim of the theatre to be, as he put it in one of his plays ‘to promote civilisation, progress and the refinement of manners’ (qtd in Najm, *al-Masrah* 211).

In 1870, Sannu formed his troupe of players, chosen out of a number of his old pupils, and he trained them to perform a play which, he claimed, he had written specially for them having studied works by Moliere, Goldoni and Sheridan in their original languages. What that play was we shall probably never know for certain. One scholar writes that it was ‘a small vaudeville show complete with songs sung to the tune of popular melodies’ (Gendzier 34). On being introduced to Isma’il’s aide, Khayri Pasha, Sannu requested him to show the text of one of his plays to the Khedive and seek his support. Isma’il was apparently impressed and granted the young dramatist permission to perform before him at a show attended by the court, several diplomats and local dignitaries.

The play had a good reception that Sannu was encouraged to reorganise his troupe and to include two women, which was a daring step to take at the time. Sannu was, therefore, the first to introduce women onto the stage in Egypt and not, as Landau asserts, the Syrian, al-Qurdahi, who included actresses in his troupe more than a decade later (68). However, the two women who served in Sannu’s troupe were non-Muslim Levantines whom Sannu claims he taught to read, write and act in a matter of weeks. Subsequently, Sannu was invited to perform before the Khedive again and it was on one such occasion, during a performance given in the Khedive’s private theatre at Qasr al-Nil, that the Khedive is alleged to have conferred upon him the title
“The Egyptian Moliere,” partly in recognition of what Sannu was doing and partly out of a desire to compare himself with Louis XIV, Molière’s illustrious patron (Badawi, *Early* 32).

On that evening, Sannu’s troupe put on three plays: *Anisa ala’l-Muda* (A Fashionable Young Lady), *Ghandur Misr* (The Egyptian Dandy) and *al-Durratayn* (The Two Rival Wives). Obviously, all the three comedies were satirical. However, the author does not provide us with a brief account of the first play where he launches an attack on the blind imitation of Western manners and superficial aspects of Westernisation; a young woman spoils her chances of marriage by flouting social customs and indulging in excessive freedom in dealing with young men copying the behaviour of Western women. It is reported that *The Two Rival Wives* which is an outspoken attack on the practice of polygamy, incurred the displeasure of the Khedive who felt that it was directed against a practice followed by himself as well as by members of the court. It does not seem, however, that it was this play that brought an abrupt end to Isma’il’s patronage of Sannu in 1872. The reasons for the Khedive’s closure of Sannu’s theatre are not clear. Many have assumed that it was because of the dramatist’s political criticism (33).

Whatever the real cause, Sannu’s theatrical activities, which lasted barely three years, came to an end, and his relations with the Khedive became strained. Having gone through periods of ups and downs, he was finally exiled in 1878, after launching an attack on the Khedive in his satirical newspaper *Abu Naddara Zarga* (The Man with Blue Spectacles). Sannu went to Europe where he resumed his political journalism, issuing a series of satirical periodicals in which he published a large number of short dramatic dialogues called *Muhawart* (dialogues). However, they are too brief to possess any dramatic structure, too caricature-like to allow for any characterisation or deep psychological insight and too directly political to be works of art (33). Nevertheless, the interesting thing about them is that Sannu developed within them a crude kind
of symbolism in his *dramatis personae* whereby Shaykh al-Hara (the Quarter Chief) stood for Isma’il, al-Wad al-Ahbal (the Foolish Boy) for his successor Tawfiq, Jam’iyyat al-Taratir (the Assembly of Clowns) for the council of Ministers, and Abu’l-Ghub (the Man of Misery) for the Egyptian peasant, etc.

Sannu, moreover, wrote larger plays such as *Bursat Misr* (The Cairo Stock Exchange). It is the first in the collection and it is basically a comedy of manners and intrigues. It is clearly the work of someone who had read the work of Moliere, Goldoni and Sheridan before trying his hand at writing Egyptian drama. The main theme is the rivalry between two suitors for the hand of Labiba, the daughter of a rich banker, Salim, and the success of Ya’qub, the victorious suitor, through the intrigue of his agent and servant, Yusuf, in contrast to the failure of the other suitor, Halim, who is only after her money. The play consists of two acts: Act I takes place at, or near, the Stock Market while the setting for Act II is the home of the rich banker, Salim. Act I contains no fewer than eleven short scenes, whereas, there are seven in Act II, and each act ends with a song.

Sannu’s satirical intent in this play is abundantly clear. Apart from the dangers of monetary speculations at the Stock Exchange, the butt of the author’s social criticism is the foolish imitation of Western manners by Egyptians in an attempt to impress outsiders as well as one another. Similarly, the playwright attacks prearranged marriages and the failures of parents to take onto consideration their daughter’s wishes or feelings. Moreover, he condemns the contemptuous attitude towards the Egyptian working class which dismisses them as mere *fellaheen,* as exemplified in Teresa’s manner of treating the servant, Faraq. Yet the play is not merely a didactic exercise; it is lively, dramatic entertainment (Badawi, *Early* 35). The humour

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5 Fellaheen (in Arabic) means peasants.
sometimes arises from the traditional linguistic sources, i.e. mispronunciation of Arabic by foreigners or the comic effect of dialect, such as the use of Nubian in the reported speech of the Nubian doorman at the Stock Exchange.

Like The Cairo Stock Exchange, al-Alil (The Invalid) dramatises the successful attempt of a young couple to achieve a marriage union after overcoming obvious obstacles, in this case, instead of disparity in wealth the impediment being the mysterious illness of the young woman’s father. Whereas the action of the former play takes place against the background of “the Stock Market,” in The Invalid the context is medical practice in contemporary Egypt, particularly in the newly established sanatorium at Hulwan. Habib is suffering from severe depression as a result of the shock of hearing his brother’s sudden death in Istanbul. He has been receiving treatment from several doctors but without success, much to the chagrin and near despair of his unmarried, young daughter, Hanum, who is looking after him. Mitri, a young friend of the family who is in love with Hanum, has been calling on the patient every day and giving her much moral support.

A Moroccan Medicine man, Hajj, visits the patient and prescribes treatment by magic. Hajj prevails upon Habib to make a solemn vow to give his daughter in marriage to the person who manages to bring about his cure. Mitri takes Habib to Hulwan sanatorium which is run by his friend Dr. Kabrit and he at once confides to him his plight concerning Habib’s vow. Kabrit agrees that should he be able to cure the patient he would give up the daughter in favour of his friend Mitri. In this way, Habib gets better as a result of the hot baths and the special treatment administrated by Dr. Kabrit. Consequently, he becomes entitled to the daughter whom, according to the plan, he gives up at once for his friend Mitri. The play ends with a song celebrating the benefits of the Hulwan sanatorium and praising the ruler of Egypt for his having given the order for its establishment.
Once more the humour, which becomes more striking when the scene shifts to Hulwan, relies largely upon language – the faulty Arabic used by the European doctor, Kabrit (whose name, incidentally, means sulphur). Also amusing is the appropriate language of Moroccan. Here again the echoes of the traditional shadow plays can be heard. As in the previous play, the minor characters of the servants, both in Habib’s household and at the sanatorium (e.g. Said) are memorable and lively sketches. The underlying social criticism is directed not only against quack medicine but also against the foolish practice of arranging the marriage of daughters without their consent (Badawi, Early 36).

The third play in the collection al-Sawwah wa’l-Hammar (The Tourist and the Muleteer) is no more than a brief dramatic dialogue (covering a couple of pages), between an English tourist who insists upon speaking faulty and ungrammatical classical Arabic, and a muleteer who complains that it would have been considerably easier for him had the tourist spoken English to him. It is a mildly amusing scene, where again the humour arises from the popular, traditional use, or rather misuse of language.

Another work, Abu Rida wa Ka’b al-Khayr, a play in two acts, opens with a song by a black-man servant, Abu Rida who is madly in love with the black maid, Ka’b al-Khayr. After complaining of his passion in an amusing speech, which is addressed to the audience and which derives its humour from the Nubian mispronunciation of Arabic and partly from the colourful imagery he uses, when by chance the mistress of the house, rich, young widow, Banba, learns of his passion he pleads her to help him and use her influence with her maid in obtaining her agreement to marry him. Banba soon discovers that the maid, convinced that Abu Rida is really after the neighbour’s maid, cannot bear him and would rather see the back of him.

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6 Some of the characters’ names in the titles of plays were translated and some others transliterated depending on thematic relevance.
of him. Banba, however, assumes that Ka’b al-Khayr is only jealous of the neighbour’s maid and she therefore promises to further the cause of Abu Rida.

Parallel to this theme of the servant’s love for the maid is that of the eligible cloth merchant Nakhla’s love for the young widow, Banba; here we find an interesting inversion of the usual practice of making the servants’ love a sub-plot to the main theme of love between their masters and mistresses. And just as Banba undertakes to bring the servants together, so the professional matchmaker-cum-saleswoman, Mabrouka, assiduously endeavours to promote the cause of the marriage union of Banba and Nakhla, in the mean time earning quite a bit of money from both sides. A somewhat tenuous link between the two themes is created by the mistress’s vow to bring about the marriage of her servants before her own wedding. As it happens, the engagement of the mistress proves a lot easier to bring about than that of the servants. Despite the various tempting offers made to her in the way of money and expensive clothes, she categorically refuses Abu Rida and agrees to marry him only at the end of the play when he seriously threatens to commit suicide in her presence.

Critically speaking, this play has many merits, and is certainly one of Sannu’s plays which deserve to be revived on the stage. It is a competent piece of dramatic writing for it is reasonably well-constructed and moves forward fairly smoothly, with enough action to sustain the audience’s interest. The dialogue is witty and lively, and exploits to the full the colourful potentialities of the extremely expressive, colloquial language; each character is given a distinct type of language in keeping with his temperament, sex and station of life (Badawi, Early 37). The author once more derives much humour from dialect, mispronunciation of Arabic and amusing malapropisms (e.g. the Nubian servant’s calling the matchmaker, Mabrouka, by the name Mafrouka with its slightly obscene suggestions). Moreover, we have a memorable
character, Mabrouka, who is a masterly portrait of the traditional figure of the matchmaker in Egyptian society.

*Al-Sadaqa* (Fidelity), a one act play, also begins with a song sung by one, Najib, who proceeds to give in a soliloquy, too, the necessary background information to the audience. Najib and his sister Warda are orphans who have been living for four years in Alexandria with their Aunt Safsaf, a rich widow who has taken good care of them. Warda loves her young cousin Na’um, who is studying in England, and they have vowed to marry after his return. She is worried because for three months she has not received a letter from him. Her brother Najib loves Taqla, the daughter of the Syrian merchant Nimat Allah, who is himself in love with the widow Safsaf and wants to marry her.

A young English man meets Warda at a party, admires her, and asks his friend Ni’mat Allah to ask her aunt for her hand. Warda naturally refuses because she is waiting to marry her cousin, who is in England. When Safsaf tries to convince her niece to marry the young English because her cousin must by now have found an English young woman, Warda tearfully answers that she will never betray him. The young Englishman tells her that he knows her cousin in England, and that the cousin has become engaged to his sister and will soon marry her. Warda faints upon hearing this news but soon recovers and prepares to leave the house when her aunt rebukes her for not marrying the young Englishman. The suitor follows her to the door and reveals his real identity. Na’um has disguised himself and played the role to test Warda’s love and devotion. In the end, Warda marries him, her aunt marries the wealthy merchant, and her brother Najib marries Taqla. According to a critic, this play is a very light-weight piece, despite the lively dialogue and the typical Sannu humour which arises from the usual linguistic sources:

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7 Badawi’s translation of the title seems to be thematically grounded although the word *sadaqa* in Arabic literally means ‘friendship.’
broken Arabic of Hincks and the Syrian dialect of Ni’mat Allah (Badawi, *Early* 35). Not much social criticism is attempted here. The play ends, just as it begins, with Najib’s singing.

Far more serious is *al-Amira al-Iskandaraniyya* (The Alexandrian Princess). Unlike *Fidelity*, which is designed largely as an entertainment, *The Alexandrian Princess* is obviously satirical in intent (39). It is perhaps the first extant Arabic play to launch a frontal attack on the negative aspects of superficial Westernisation, the problem of the blind imitation of the outward forms of Western life in Egyptian society. Maryam, the wife of a wealthy Alexandrian merchant of humble origins, is a social climber and a snob who gives herself airs and graces. Having fallen under the spell of France and all things French, she forces her reluctant but henpecked husband, Ibrahim, to agree to her adopting a French way of life at home. She will not hear of her daughter marrying Yusuf, the decent young man who is in love with her, because he is a mere Egyptian and a common man. She also has made up her mind to marry her off to Victor, whom she believes to be a titled Frenchman on a visit to Egypt and the son of the French aristocrat whom she and her husband met in Paris during their summer holidays the previous year.

The plot of the play, which is basically a comedy of intrigue and impersonation, influenced to some extent by Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *Georges Dandin* (39), describes the course of action adopted by the young couple to fool the mother and circumvent her opposition to their marriage. By an ingenious stratagem Yusuf pretends to be Victor, the son of the French nobleman (whom Maryam has not seen in Paris as he had been on a visit to England at the time). He forges a letter of introduction from his assumed father and engineers a meeting one evening at the theatre with the mother and daughter to whom he subsequently pays attentions. When he comes to ask for the daughter’s hand in marriage, the mother is naturally delighted and only after the couple has naturally been married does the mother learn the truth
about the impersonation from the real French nobleman who unexpectedly visits Alexandria. The shock of the discovery makes her faint, but being powerless to do anything about it she gradually learns to accept this marriage.

The play is cunningly constructed; the very opening scene is in a sense a harbinger of the main theme of the play; the juxtaposition between the Egyptian servants, Hasanayn, and the European maid, Carolina, and the former’s infatuation with the latter’s beauty. The audience’s interest and suspense are maintained because the audience is not told of Yusuf and Adila’s plot until very late in the course of the play; to add to the credibility of the action the dramatist makes the husband equally ignorant of the plot, so that his comments on the strange course of events become a vocal expression of the view of the audience. In short, *The Alexandrian Princess* is no primitive drama; it makes its point concisely, competently and without at any moment ceasing to be entertaining. Interestingly enough, there are no songs in this play.

Equally satirical in intent is the play that apparently aroused the Khedive’s displeasure, *al-Durratan* (*The Two Rival Wives*). It is a short play, about one-third the length of *The Alexandrian Princess*. Ahmed, the central figures, is a lower-middle-class Egyptian whose friends usually call him “malik” (king). He spends most of his time smoking hashish with his friends. Although Sabiha, his wife of fifteen years, is faithful and devoted to him, Ahmed is captivated by Fattuma and desires to marry her. He convinces his wife that she needs a helper around the house, and that Fattuma is just the person. Sabiha reluctantly accepts, but, of course, the two wives begin to fight constantly. Ahmed’s life becomes miserable, and he eventually divorces and expels both wives. Soon, however, he discovers that although he is free, he is lonely and unable to manage by himself. He realises that he has made a great mistake in taking a second wife. Sabiha feels that she should have been more understanding of her husband’s situation and
returns to him, admitting her mistakes. Ahmed is soon reconciled with her and promises not to disrupt their married life again.

The Two Rival Wives is clearly a skeleton of a play, and not a full length drama. It is also more primitive in technique, although as usual with Sannu his mastery of dialogue already reveals itself, particularly in the speeches given to the first wife, whose character is briefly sketched out but in an exceedingly vivid manner. The fighting scene is rather crude and the humour arising from it is of the cheap variety. The play may have set out to criticise a serious social custom, polygamy, which was practiced by the Khedive and the court. But dramatically, it is basically more than a farce in which the playwright seems to resort to puppet shows of qaraquz.

The last play in Sannu’s published collection is of a different nature and style. It is the only play of a reasonable length which he published in his lifetime; it came out as late as 1912. This is Molier Misr wa ma Yuqasih (The Egyptian Moliere and What He Suffers). This play has been linked to Moliere’s L’Impromptu de Versailles by which, as Najm claims, it was generally inspired (Najm, al-Masrahhiyya 434), although we must not exaggerate what some scholars see as ‘the unmistakable influence’ of the French play (Moosa, ‘Ya’qub Sannu’ 428). The only thing in common between the two plays is that both deal in part with the difficulties faced by the dramatist or director vis-à-vis his company of actors and actresses in rehearsing for a performance. However, the difference is much more significant. Moliere wrote his play to avenge himself on his professional rivals, in particular Boursault, who had attacked him in the play Le Portrait du Peintre. It is true that Sannu does refer to an attack on his plays by an Italian critic, who condemned him for his use of the colloquial language in his dialogue, and that Sannu defends himself on the grounds that drama is meant to be about what people actually say or do,
and that in real life nobody speaks classical Arabic. However, Sannu’s play deals primarily with Sannu himself and the efforts he made to establish Arabic drama in Egypt (Badawi, *Early 41*).

It is important to remember that these plays were written to be acted, not read. While Sannu attempts, often successfully, to dramatise life in Egypt as he sees it, the published texts do not emphasise the settings or provide accurate descriptions of them. The fact that the dialogue is in colloquial Arabic makes it more difficult to understand the humour and meaning. The humour in these dramas derives not only from subtle situations and odd characters, but also from the different accents of non-Arab characters. Moreover he shows great skill and facility in handling the dialogue of his plays. By accurately rendering both idioms and nuances, Sannu faithfully captures the thoughts and life-style of the class he portrays. He knows the language and topics of conversation of the peasants, bourgeoisie, and high-class society.

Sannu’s dramas not only attracted a large audience of Egyptians of all classes, but also provoked the curiosity and interest of the spectator. The audience became involved with the stage, sometimes to the point of participating in the action. De Baigniers quotes a journalist writing for the *Saturday Review*, who praised Sannu’s theatre, stating that the audience frequently made comments or suggestions to change the end of a play to satisfy their wish for happy endings. Sometimes the spectators would tell the actors what to do, or incite one character against another. In a love scene for example, they would exclaim, “Let see whether you will let your rival take your beloved away from you,” or, “How can you prefer such a stupid and arrogant man to this decent and respectable young man?” (qtd in Moosa, *The Origins 65*). When these comments were spoken, Sannu was hiding backstage, ready to prompt the actors with the right answers to save them from embarrassment.
Furthermore, Sannu remarks that the quality of his audience improved considerably in the second year of his theatre. Intelligent, responsive, and interested, it represented all segments of Arabic and Egyptian society. Its indirect interventions in the performance turned the most serious situations into occasions for roaring laughter. In the drama *Ghandur Misr* (The Egyptian Dandy), Sannu did not realise that the actress he had assigned the role of a desperate lover hated the actor who was to play opposite her. The poor actor truly loved the actress and was grateful for the opportunity to perform a love scene with her. After the actress finished a line expressing her love, the actors, taking her acting as a truth, elatedly turned to her and whispered softly, “May God bless this stage which finally humbled you and made you express your love to me before thousands of spectators” (qtd in Moosa, *The Origins* 65). The actress became furious and, forgetting that she was on the stage, slapped the presumptuous actor in the face. She turned to the audience and declared that the words of love she had whispered to the conceited actor did not represent her true feelings. “For”, she continued, “I would rather be blind than love him. It is the author, the Egyptian Moliere, who put these words in my mouth” (65). Sannu was shocked and utterly embarrassed by the incident. To his complete disbelief, the audience roared in laughter and applauded. They were so amused by the feud that they demanded a repetition of this incident.

More importantly, the influence of Sannu’s theatre on the conservative elements of Arabic and Egyptian society was apparently tremendous. He seems even to have stirred the imagination of the Azharite Ulema, who had never been stirred to writing a play. Al-Shaykh Mohammed Abdo al-Fattah, a learned friend of Sannu’s, composed a tragedy titled *Layla*, which was performed on Sannu’s stage. Cabinet ministers, scholars, and poets attended the performance, and the audience’s response was quite favourable. During a scene depicting the
killing of four sons of a tribal chief by a ruthless despot, however, a wag slyly whispered to two newly assigned police officers in the audience that it was their duty to prevent people from being murdered. The gullible police officers jumped to the stage and arrested the “murderer” amid the jeers and laughter of the spectators (I. Abduh 32). Such incidents reflect Sannu’s importance as the creator of a native theatre using familiar rather than classic situations. His social comedies reflected his profound understanding of the ethos of the Arabic Egyptian people, whose strengths and foils he depicted more accurately than the Syrian dramatists working simultaneously.

It may be useful at this stage to pause and ask, what did the two pioneers (Sannu and al-Naqqash) of modern Arabic drama have in common? It is interesting that, although both dramatists clearly followed their paths independently and a gap of twenty-three years separate their first plays, Sannu and al-Naqqash share a number of features. In the first place their work betrays the influence of Italian opera (Badawi, Early 51); they both emphasised the role of singing in drama, albeit in different degrees. Secondly, both were clearly inspired by Moliere, whose influence was crucial in shaping the early attempts at writing Arabic plays. The plays we have been discussing owe an obvious debt to the artificial comedy of intrigue; they have complicated plots, in which servants are no less involved than their masters, with disguise and mistaken identity as obvious sources of humour which also arises from malapropisms, dialect and misuse of language.

On the thematic level, the dominant themes in the work of both dramatists are love and marriage, money and greed. Where the plot requires mixing of the sexes, non-Muslim characters are introduced. It is interesting that both playwrights confined their work to comedy and farce; even when complications threaten to take a sad turn, a happy end is never in doubt. Here and in the particular kind of comedy they wrote, al-Naqqash and Sannu determined the course of Arabic
drama for generations. It is noteworthy mentioning that few serious attempts at writing tragedy were made later and these tended to belong more to melodrama than to tragedy proper. The result is that Arabic tragedy did not develop to the same extent as comedy. For tragedy the Arabic theatre generally turned to translations from European dramatists, particularly Shakespeare, Corneille and Racine. Yet there are important differences between Sannu and al-Naqqash, both in the content and the language of their plays. Sannu’s work reflects contemporary social reality much more intimately than al-Naqqash’s, which as reflected above, tends to be set either in social vacuum or else in the fantasy world of the Arabian Nights. Likewise, unlike al-Naqqash, Sannu did not hesitate to use spoken Arabic in his dialogue, and with the exception of his last play he refrained from the employment of traditional rhyming prose (Badawi, Early 53).

In this way, after the closure of Sannu’s theatre in 1872, Arabic theatre in Egypt seemed to have passed through a period of stupor until the arrival of Salim al-Naqqash from Beirut in 1876. He brought with him a company of actors and began performing the plays of his uncle Marun al-Naqqash. Moreover, Salim was the first of a series of Syrian actors and dramatists who, attracted by the Khedive’s encouragement of the arts, came to perform in Egypt, where they often settled, forming and reforming different troupes, thereby determining the course of the Egyptian and Arabic drama both by their own activities and by the example they set to the Egyptians. The closing of years of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth witnessed the rise of a large number of theatrical companies which included Egyptian actors and playwrights. As early as 1900, Egyptian theatre had become not only a permanent feature of Egyptian urban life, but a political force of some significance (Badawi, Modern Arabic

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8 See the chapters “The Arabs and Shakespeare” in Badawi’s Modern Arabic Literature and the West.
Original plays dealing with recent political events were banned by censorship and even some translated plays were treated with suspicion by the British authorities if they contained matter which could be regarded as capable of inflaming national feelings. The ever-growing number of theatres showed musicals, translations and adaptations of Western drama, together with serious original Arabic plays, as well as the popular farces which were a development of the rude traditional form. Leading Egyptian actors and actresses became widely known throughout the Arab world.

From the late 1920s, the Egyptian government began to take an active interest in the serious theatre in an attempt to protect it from the threat posed by the popular commercial theatre which provided a cheap diet of singing, dancing, slap-stick comedy and Arabicised French vaudevilles. Scholarships were provided to study drama and acting in Europe and in 1930 a school of dramatic arts was set up under the direction of the properly trained Zaki Tulaymat. By the 1930s drama and acting had acquired some respectability for various reasons, which include the increasing number of well-educated or upper-class individuals who became involved in the theatre, and the growth of theatre criticism, published first in the national newspapers or weeklies and then in many magazines devoted almost exclusively to the theatre which began to flood the market in the twenties. Another relevant factor is the interest taken in drama, ancient and modern, by the highly esteemed author and critic Taha Husayn, whose enthusiastic reception of the first serious and mature play by Tawfiq al-Hakim remains one of the most memorable passages in his critical writings (5). It is significant that the first play the new National Theatre Troupe performed, in 1935, was al-Hakim’s first serious and mature play *Ahl al-Kahf* (The Sleepers in the Cave, 1933).
There are, therefore, good reasons to deal, in the next chapter, with Tawfiq al-Hakim who is the best known and most important figure in the development of modern Arabic drama. When al-Hakim started publishing his work in the early thirties, drama was slowly becoming a respectable form of literature, although, partly because of the world economic crisis, the Egyptian theatrical world was shrinking rapidly, and the theatrical activities that managed to survive were largely confined to the popular commercial stage. The rift between drama as literature and drama as stage performance was, alas, becoming ever wider. Al-Hakim’s extraordinarily long and active career as a dramatist, during which he produced more than eighty plays, spans over half a century, from the 1920s to the 1970s, a period which can justly be described as that of the fully-fledged modern Egyptian and Arabic drama (6).


