

Why Did the Arabs Not Know the Theatre in the Western Sense until the Mid-Nineteenth Century?

Mekhled .N.B.al-Zyoud, *Drama Department, Yarmouk University.*

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لماذا لم يعرف العرب فن المسرح بالمعنى الغربي حتى منتصف القرن التاسع عشر؟

مخلد الزيود، كلية الفنون، جامعة اليرموك

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة لمعرفة الأسباب التي أدت إلى عدم معرفة العرب لفن المسرحي بالمفهوم الغربي المتعارف عليه ألان وغياب هذا الفن من الثقافة العربية. إذ لم يعرف العرب هذا الفن إلا في منتصف القرن التاسع عشر على يد التاجر اللبناني مارون النقاش ثم انتقل هذا الفن الجديد إلى مصر ليتجذر في الثقافة المصرية على يد عدد من الرواد كان أبرزهم يعقوب صنوع وغيره من الرواد الأوائل. هذا الغياب أدى لظهور نظريات وأراء متعددة من قبل الباحثين العرب وبعض الباحثين الأجانب لتفسير هذه الظاهرة الجديرة بالاهتمام واقترح الباحثون مجموعة من العوامل كان من أهمها العامل التاريخي والديني والبيئي وما هو مرتبط بالعقلية العربية وطرق تفكيرها. ستحاول هذه الدراسة مناقشة أهم النظريات والآراء وتقديم تحليل لها وتحاول تنفيذ بعضها التي ربما لم تتفق وواقع الثقافة العربية سواء قبل الإسلام أو السنوات الأولى لظهور الإسلام الذي جاء ليقدّم بدائل تبدو منطقية من وجهة نظر البحث كان أهمهما القصص في القرآن الكريم.

Abstract

This study aims to examining and investigating the reasons behind Arabs' lake of knowledge of western-sense theatre and the reasons behind the absence of this art in their culture. The Arabs had no idea about this art until mid-nineteenth century when the Arab Lebanese merchant, Maroun Alnakash, got squinted with it. The study presents, analyzes and comments on the main theories and points of view that explain this absence and its causes. The study questions the validity of this term and argues that aspects of theatre and drama were latent in the period and the early years of Islam. The study attempts to establish a link between reasons behind the Arabs' lack of knowledge of theatre and the religious aspect of this. The study discusses and examines theories as well as points of view expressed by Arab and foreign scholars interested in the phenomenon of absence of theatre in Arab culture. This concept shall be analyzed and commented on. It will be followed by the discussion of scientific research methodology adopted in order to achieve the aims and objectives of the study. This has been done by relying on the questions aiming at verifying the study's hypotheses.

Introduction

The art of drama as it is known today in the Western sense (i.e. the enactment by human actors on stage of a story through action and dialogue in verse or prose) did not come into existence in Arab culture until the mid-nineteenth century. More specifically, in 1847, a Lebanese writer in Beirut, Marun al-Naqqash, and two decades later an Egyptian writer in Cairo, Yaqub Sannu, adopted drama and introduced it into Arab culture. Drama in Arab culture proved to be a success in Cairo due to the mood of the Egyptian society and its early contacts with the French and the British. (al-Rai,54) Arab dramatists made creative attempts to write and produce plays based on the European model. Arab dramatists, researchers and orientalisists who were interested in the Arab culture and civilisation tried to find convincing arguments to explain the absence of this art in Arab culture.

Before discussing the main points of view which explain the absence of theatre from the Arab culture, this study argues that the use of the term "absence" is inappropriate in the context of scholarly research, for the following reason: the term "absence" negates the existence of any basic roots or seeds for the art of theatre in the Arab culture before and after Islam. This idea of absence is inaccurate, for the Arabs must have had certain religious rites and practices which might contained features and characteristics of the theatre with the potential of evolution and growth to produce some form of basic theatrical dialogue or performance. Moreover, the customs and traditions, which are part of the popular cultural heritage of any society, contain theatrical elements capable of evolving. The pre- and post-Islamic Arab society, being such a case, certainly had specific customs and traditions which were regularly practised on special occasions, such as the harvest, which was accompanied by singing and dancing as an expression of joy over the harvested crop, the rites connected with the burial of the dead, the ritual associated with the birth of a child, the annual festivities, the celebration of victory in wars, the rainfall, the weddings, and the popular games particularly those played by children. Accordingly, this study assumes that the theatre, in its basic form, was not absent from the Arab culture before or after Islam. The Arabs, however, did not know the theatre in the sense that prevailed in the west from the time of the ancient Greeks to the middle of the 19th century. This study will discuss and analyze the main opinions expressed by Arab and foreign researchers about the reasons behind the absence of theatre in the modern sense from the Arab culture. The question adopted by this study will be "Why did the Arabs not know the theatre in the western sense?"

Zaki Tulaymat, one of the most famous Egyptian pioneers of the Arab theatrical movement asserts that 'the theatre has never been considered a part of Arabian architecture, whether in the Peninsula or in the countries which were conquered by Arabs. The evidence for this is that archaeological expeditions have never discovered any playhouse built by Arabs'. (Tulaymat,Z, 89) While this is undeniable, the question remains why the Arabs were not prompted to think about the existence of the theatres that had been built by Greeks and Romans in countries conquered by the Arabs. The Arabs were ignorant of theatrical architecture in their regions before Islam and when Islam came they considered it a pagan culture belonging to people who did not believe in one God. Moreover, the non-existence of theatrical structures in the Arabian Peninsula is not a convincing evidence for the absence of drama from the Arab culture, since theatrical performance could take place in an open area, palace, market or house of worship.

Dr. Jacob M. Landau, gives two reasons for the fact that there was no regular Arab theatre until the nineteenth century first for the people with whom the Arabs came into close contact had no well-developed theatre. Secondly women, particularly if unveiled, were strictly forbidden to appear on the stage. Besides, while a large part of the Greek cultural heritage, in the various fields of literature, science and thought, was translated into Arabic at various times, no reference to classical drama found its way into Arabic translations until recent years. (Landou, 1-2) With regard to the first point raised by Landau as a reason for the absence of a theatre tradition in the Arab culture, this study observes that Landau did not refer to the term "Arabs" whether pre-Islamic or post-Islamic, nor, did he specify the countries with a flourishing theatre culture, which the Arabs got in touch with.

Concerning pre-Islamic Arabs, Mecca was then an important commercial and religious centre. The people of Mecca had widespread trade relations with neighbouring civilizations, particularly the Greeks and subsequently the Romans, both of which had a highly developed theatre tradition in terms of text,

performance and stage building. However, it is true that the Arabs in the Pre-Islamic period and in the early years of Islam were neither captained with of the elements of drama in general nor of theatre constituents such as text, stage, scenery or acting. Therefore, Landau is right to state that drama in Arab culture did not come into existence until the mid-nineteenth century. If he is speaking about the Arabs after the advent of Islam, it should be noted that Muslims began spreading their new religion in the Arabian Peninsula, after conquering Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, which then formed part of the Eastern Roman Empire. This conquest gave the Arabs the opportunity to see the grand theatre architecture landmarks, which still bear witness to the development of theatre in the cultures that the Muslims got in contact with. The second point raised by Landau is that women as actresses were absent from most European theatres, and that women did not appear onstage in the Greek theatre. He observes that even so, theatre flourished in the Greek and European cultures. Landau disregards the fact that the Arabs before and after Islam did not know theatrical art in general and therefore it is not possible to decide that women were the reason behind the failure of theatres to develop and flourish in the Arab world.

To add to the point made by Tulaymat concerning buildings, the art of theatre itself does not constitute part of the Arab cultural tradition. As Mandur observes, 'ancient Arabs did not leave us a dramatic legacy similar to that of the other literary arts. One of the reasons is in the nature of the Arabic literary tradition, which concentrated only on poetry' (Mandur, 14) Mandur and Landau's observation that the Arabs lacked both the knowledge of theatre and any awareness of what it stand for or is worth mentioning. Yes it is an actually in the Arab's decoction on poetry that we can find an explanation for the delay in the emergence of drama in Arab culture. Arabs, according to al-Hakim, 'continued to consider the pre-Islamic poetry, written in the "time of ignorance", as a model to be followed. As a result, the development of Arabic poetry was confined to its subject, not its form', (al-Hakim, 25). Drama, according to al-Din? is not 'a development of lyrical poetry in which Arabs had achieved the highest standard. Therefore lack of it, is simply due to the fact that Arab poets never had the sense for drama' (Ismail, 47) Al-Din's point was elaborated by Al-Hasan who pointed out that 'dramatic expression depends on a realisation of the tragic nature life. The lack of a sense of drama was the main reason for the lack of dramaturgy in ancient Arab written as oral' (al-Hasan, 11) Al-Hasan fails to take into account the epic poetry written by the Arab poets before and after Islam, which recounted the lives of popular heroes, and praised their heroic feats in epics that abounded with dramatic, emotion-packed images describing the hero's struggle from childhood until his victory in battle or his death.

One of the best examples of this sort of poetry is the epic of «Antara al-Absi,» which was written by Antara himself to depict his suffering and his feelings of inferiority due to his black skin. He made up for his inferiority by proving his braveness in wars until his tribe considered him a hero. Subsequently, Abla, the white daughter of the chief of the tribe, fell in love with him, and Antara shared her love. The two lovers then fought a long battle against the traditions of their society until finally their love triumphed and they got married. In the early years of Islam, another epic, Taghribat Bani Hilal was written in both poetry and prose to narrate the story of the migration of the Bani Hilal tribe from the Arabian Peninsula to Tunisia under the leadership of the black slave Abu Zayd Al Hilali Salamah, who, again, overcame feelings of inferiority through heroic feats. These folkloric stories with their dramatic elements remind us of the origins of some of Shakespeare's plays, such as Romeo and Juliet, which was well known in Italian literature, or Othello, the jealous moor, or the story of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, and others.

When Islam arrived, it denounced poetry as being the inspiration of the devil and the Jinn sparking discord and conflict among the followers of the new religion. The Quran accused the poets of straying from the right path: 'As for poets, the errings follow them. Hast thou not seen how they stray in every valley, and how they say that which they do not do?' (The Quran, 26:224-226) More importantly, Islam fought against individual heroism and the glorification of heroes. It considered all those who are killed in battle while defending their homeland, property and religion – regardless of the amount of heroism exhibited – to be martyrs who will be rewarded by God in Paradise. Consequently, the poetry movement, with the exception of religious poetry stagnated until the Abbasid Age.

In accordance with the above observation, this study notes that al-Din's opinion is a generalised statement, since he does not take into consideration the particulars of each period of Arabic lyrical poetry, whether in the pre-Islamic or in the Islamic era. This study considers the views of Isma'il to be more specific: It is also undeniable that the tragic sense of Greek classical drama is irreconcilable with Islamic values. Nevertheless, this is not to say that there is no place for tragedy in the Islamic cultural heritage. There is certainly another basis for tragedy besides the Greek belief in a malevolent fate, such as the selfishness and weakness of man and his unwillingness to abide God's law. This is perfectly acceptable to the Muslim frame of mind and the history of Islam abounds with such themes, which provide excellent tragic material. (Ismail, 49)

Moreover, in the political and social conflicts during which Arab civilization was formed in the pagan and Islamic periods, there developed a particular Arab character, which was quite different from that of any other people. It is not because of the lack of a sense of tragedy that the Arabs did not produce tragedy, for neither did they produce comedy. It is because the Jahili way of life was different from that of the ancient Greeks. In Jahili society, for instance, there was no continuous divine interference in human life such as in ancient Greek culture. The idea of life after death did not occupy the Jahili mind, instead they used to welcome death for the glory of their tribe. (Mandur, 14)

In addition to the above important observations, Hawamdah has this curt explanation for the absence of drama from Arab culture: 'Arabs were not interested in this form of art because they felt no social need for it', (Hawamadah, 8) Al-Ra'i argues that the playwrights, directors and researchers in this field should focus their attention on producing a theatre that serves and helps people in Arab states to solve the numerous problems that they are suffering from, rather than looking for the reasons for the absence of drama in Arab culture. (al-Rai, 53)

On the basis of our discussion of opinions and reasons behind the absence of theatre in Arab culture, this study assumes that the writers, critics and researchers were not particularly successful in defining these reasons clearly enough to enable an understanding of the phenomenon and suggest adequate solutions.

Al-Khozai's study, *The development of the Early Arabic Drama 1847-1900*, however, has to some extent succeeded in classifying the main reasons for the absence of theatre in Arabic culture. This study will therefore adopt al-Khozai's classification, with the exception of the "aesthetic reasons", as, according to al-Khozai, this point is closely associated to the religious and the mental reasons, and we see no reason for separating it from them. By adopting al-Khozai's study, we do not adopt his opinions or theories, but will discuss and attempt to provide scientific evidence for these views in order to find a logical explanation for this study.

The historical reason

According to al-Khozai, 'The earliest contact recorded between the Muslim Arab world and the West took place in the eighth and ninth centuries when the Arabs became interested in Greek culture despite the absence of a living Greek dramatic heritage'. (al-Khozai, 13) It is easy to refute this argument because the first contact took place in the pre-Islamic period through trade caravans that moved between Mecca and the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire at the beginning of the fourth century. We can surmise that the traders had seen the structure of the Greek and Roman theatres; also they may have attended some of the celebrations and plays. Hence the historical reasons is not sufficient reason for the absence of drama in Arabic culture.

The environmental reason

Many researchers such as Landou, alri , Najm, al-Hakim and Barsheed. agree that the nature of the Arabian Peninsula in general and the life-style of its inhabitants in particular played an important role in the absence of drama from the Arab culture. Most of the people were nomadic and traveled in the Arabian Peninsula seeking water and pasture for their animals, which made for unstable societies. This is confirmed by many writers, such as al-Hakim, who describes the Arabian Peninsula as: "Nothing but desert as extensive as the sea, where camels move like ships, wandering with their loads from one island to another, these islands being scattered oases. Everything in this nomad life homeland kept didn't encourage existence of the theatres, because they require stability in the first place", (al-Hakim, 25) .The Arabs' lack of the notion of stability, to (al-Hakim) mind, is the real reason for their neglect of dramatic poetry required for dramatic performance of this art. The amphi-theatre (owned by the state) revealed by excavations in modern times is a strong firm edifice. Any one looking looks at the hugeness of this construction with its relics and paintings, will immediately judge that a thing like this must need a stable civilization and fixed standard of social life. (al-Hakim, 25-6)

Point out yet not all of the Arabian Peninsula's inhabitants were nomad: Salih states that: 'The majority of the inhabitants lived in urban centers renowned for their advanced economic activities', (Salih, 19-22) This means that the nomads constituted only part of the population, so this is not a convincing explanation for the absence of the art of theatre in the pre-Islamic period or in the early years of Islam, since there were urban centres such as Mecca, Ta'if and Medina in the pre-Islamic period, and cities such as Damascus, Cairo and Baghdad after Islam. This study assumes that the Bedouins did not spend all their time in the deserts, but in oases where there was water and pasture and that they must have had their own traditions and culture. The study does not consider that the environment played the main role in the absence of theatre from Arab culture.

The temperamental reason

Writers hold the view that this is one of the main reasons behind the absence of the art of theatre in the Arab culture. They consider the Arab to be mentality to be compared to other nations with a long heritage of theatre and other creative arts. Al-Khozai considers these writers to have fallen into the trap of generalisations: 'Those who discuss the creative mentality of the Arabs are often inclined towards sweeping generalisations that only result in arousing heated discussion and creating an atmosphere of polemic that is not without occasional bitterness' (al-Khozai, 3) and gives examples from the popular Arab culture to refute

this reasoning. He further writes 'If this were true what would one say of the anonymous authors of such folk epics as Antara, Abu Zayd al-Hilali, not to mention tales like Arabian Nights? Did these writers not possess creative minds enabling them to produce or recreate in translation such works of fiction?' (al-Khozai, 3) Al-Khozai, also, points out that in order to emphasize 'the differences between the ancient Arabs and their European counterparts, some orientalist have sought to claim that the Arab mentality is abstract whereas the European's is concrete'. (al-Khozai, 3)

This study agrees with al-Khozai, and adds that the claim made by some writers that the Arab mentality was backward is a feeble claim, as the Arab civilization and culture went through a number of stages, and were influenced by a number of geographic, historical, economic and religious reasons, similar to all other nations throughout history. A good example is the emergence of Greek drama from religious rituals and practices and its gradual development until it finally reached its golden age. Moreover, one wonders whether the absence of one particular form of art or science in a certain culture signifies that the mentality of the people representing this culture is stationary. Actually the mentality of the ancient Arab is based on individualism: 'The Arab is believed to be an individualist by nature and thus unable to work within a group. As a group spirit is imperative in the theatrical arts, so drama could not flourish where individualism was an inherent feature of everyday life'. (Abdiin, 17) This study also agrees with the opinion that the desert played an important role in creating individualism among Arabs, and that is why they were pioneers in poetry, the product of individual creativity. This would also apply to Greek drama, for the playwright depends on his individual creativity, as does the poet or the painter. Also Individual creativity leads to collective creativity. Al-Hakim: gives the reasons behind Arab scholars not translating Greek drama into their own language as they found Greek narrative poetry (based on legends) difficult to understand, and Greek tragedy was similarly incomprehensible, being a literature designed not for reading, but for acting, with which the Arabs were unfamiliar. (al-Hakim, 19)

This does not take into account a major issue in translation; and that is mistranslation. When the Arab philosophers translated Aristotle's works, from the Syriac language to the Arabic language, it is clear that the Arabs had no idea of the genres Aristotle was discussing in his text. The terms tragedy and comedy were rendered as panegyric (Madih) and satire (Hija) or invective respectively, the two accepted genres in Arabic poetry. It is true that al-Farabi and Avicenna used the original Greek terms, but they still took them to mean panegyric and satire. Aristotle's poetics and rhetoric exercised some unmistakable influence on the development of classical Arabic literary theory and stylistics, but the influence remained limited to details of language and style or to the working of poetic imagination. Tragedy and comedy were never discussed later on for the simple reason that originally no one seemed to know exactly what they meant. (Badawi, 3-4) According to Islamic history, the translation was produced between 939 A.D. and 1198 A.D. that is around five centuries after the advent of Islam. This confirms that up until the translation of the works of Aristotle, the Arabs did not know the theatre, whether as a literary genre or as a performance art. They therefore translated the Greek tragedies and comedies on the basis that they were works of poetry. In any case, the faulty translations did not receive much attention. This study suggests two explanations for that. Due to the translators' inability to understand the contents of these works, the translations were inadequate, which caused misunderstandings and consequently, these works were neglected, for the translated poetry did not measure up to the original Arab poetry. Moreover, the Greek drama's references to the gods, the hidden

powers, fate and other matters of faith contradicted the Islamic religion. This led the Muslims to consider this kind of poetry a legacy of the non-believers of the past and to reject it in accordance with the Quran. Al-Khozai comments:

‘It must be considered that when the Arabs did show an interest in Greek civilisation it was during what is known as the Golden Age of the Abbasids in the second century of Islam. By this time Arabic poetry was maturing; and because of the new monotheistic faith it was unlikely that Arab scholars would turn to what they considered a pagan art form. The appearance of gods in these plays, or, at least their invisible interference in most of their action was naturally repellent to Muslims. It was therefore unthinkable for Muslims to introduce obvious signs of blasphemy into their culture’ (al-Khozai, 4)

Actually the translations were never revised until the mid- 19th century when the theatre became known in its then prevalent European form. This study confirms that mistranslation played a significant role in delaying the appearance of drama in Arab culture after Islam, more specifically in the seventh century, when the Arabs had direct contact with the Roman Empire which inherited Greek civilisation. The Arabs who were interested in the products of the Greek civilisation translated from this heritage works of science, medicine, mathematics and philosophy. In other words, the Arabs showed interest in areas that were useful for their daily life and ignored the arts of music, theatre and painting which did not their social needs. such as of dancing, acting, singing and singing in theatrical performances which bring pleasure and entertainment, rather than for the written dramatic text and its complicated poetic language inaccessible to the general public, and which may have reached them through inadequate translations that lack the human and sentimental values of the original. ‘Because of the extraordinarily high status accorded to the Arabic language, it being the sacred language of the Quran as understood by the believers to be literally the word of God, the Arabs, who prided themselves on their tongue, seemed to feel no need to translate any foreign literature, since in their view, the highest degree of human eloquence could only be attained in Arabic’. (al-Khozai, p4)

This means that the Arabic language is considered a holy language that should not be polluted by other words that contradict religious faith. Even so, this would not justify the absence of drama in Arab culture.

The religious reason

Despite the different reasons mentioned previously concerning the absence of the theatre in Arab culture, most studies put greater emphasis on the role played by religion. As is worth while differentiating between two periods: the Pre-Islamic and the Islamic one. Most studies have focused on the attitude of Islam toward theatrical arts, but ignored the Pre-Islamic period. while this study has to take into account the difference between the two. This study is based on the belief that the roots of drama in Greek culture emerged from myths and rituals. The study seeks to establish that similar myths and rituals had developed on the Arabian Peninsula in the pre-Islamic period and considers that these myths and rituals have not been given proper consideration in previous research. The absence of drama in the Arab culture in the pre-Islamic period has generally not been referred to. Arab paganism during the pre-Islamic period was different from the paganism of the pharaohs and the ancient Greeks; it was undeveloped and therefore did not provide dramatic opportunities. As a result, Arab literature remained without dramatic form and purport until the Islamic age. (Mandour, 14-17)

Contrary to Mandour's, this study assumes that Arab paganism, with its religious rituals and practices expressed in the worship of idols and the annual pilgrimage rituals to Mecca, contained theatrical elements capable of evolving and growing. They may have borne some similarity with the pharaonic pagan rituals which remained in their religious framework, while Greek rituals evolved, were supplemented and modified over time until finally the religious framework was broken and a new form, the theatre, emerged. When Islam came, it fought paganism and called for monotheism. Paganism was thus forgotten, and new religious rituals were introduced which had some theatrical features and elements capable of evolving. Tulaymat argues that, 'the paganism of the pre-Islamic period did not pass the stage of adolescence'. (Tulaymat, 89). This study disagrees with Tulaymat's idea, arguing that Arab myths and rituals evolved through different stages of development and reached their peak in pilgrimage rituals.

Al-Hasan argues that, 'drama is not a native Arab art, for the simple reason that the Greek drama, from which the western theatre derives, remained unknown to them'. (al-Hasan, 8) It should be noted, though, that this point does not specify either the period or the time, and that al-Hasan has ignored the cultural and commercial contacts between the Arabs and the Greco-Roman civilisations. For al-Khozai, 'it is impossible to trace the origins of drama in such a society because we are unable to find any unified religious belief held by the majority of the population'. (Al-Khozai, 9) Al-Khozai has in mind the pre-Islamic Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula who followed Judaism, Christianity or other beliefs as well as paganism, but he ignores the extent to which these religions were based on myths and rituals that could be developed in the way the Greek myths, legends and rituals developed. If Greek drama 'stemmed out of the dithyramb, their song of intoxicated rejoicing at the rebirth of Dionysus, god of wine and fertility, where tragedy was born' (Freedly, 8) an Arabic indication that drama have developed similarly.

Concerning the Islamic period, some scholars have seen the absence of dramatic art in Arabic culture as a direct result of a prohibition on the part of Islam. This study assumes that, whilst the influence of Islam cannot be ignored, there is not any evidence, either in the Holy Quran or in the prophet's sayings, to support any prohibition of dramatic art. There is no reference to dramatic expression either before or after the rise of Islam: 'there are no grounds to justify the view that Islam prohibits drama for one simple reason: namely that drama was unknown at the time of the advent of this religion'. (Al-Khozai, 12).

What can be taken into consideration concerning the attitude of Islam toward drama is that Islam is a monotheistic religion whose first teaching is the worship of one God and the forbidding of the worship of idols. Therefore, Islam forbids painting, sculpture and figurative art in order to wipe out from the minds of the followers of Islam all past memories of paganism: 'The angels do not enter a house where there are dogs and paintings, or, those who make these images are tortured on doomsday by being asked to revivify what they have created'. (Hunayan, 564-5)

This saying led Ahmad Amin, an Egyptian writer, 'to attribute the absence of drama in Arabic culture directly to religion on the grounds that, since Islam prohibits painting, it consequently also prohibits acting'. (Azziza, M, 16) This study considers Amin's opinion unacceptable. He tried to make an analogy between painting and acting, but he did not make any similar analogy between painting and poetry. Poetry creates a dialogue between the poet and his characters or between the characters themselves, and it is known that dialogue is the basis of drama as well as poetry. Mandur contradicts Amin: 'Islam continuously and absolutely prohibited the making of statues. It is self-evident that making statues is utterly different from

depicting characters, and making them move in a play'. (Mandour, 18) this study will try to show that the attitude of Islam toward drama is based on two points:

First, Islam dismissed the ancient Arab mythology, because it challenged the regulations of Islam: 'The Muslim could never think of himself as a challenger of God or ever consider being in a position of defying his will. God is the origin and basis of everything and everything is derived from him and returns unto him'. (Azziza, 15)

Second, Islam presents its alternative world-view through the Holy Quran as the book is considered to be the word of God. It encompasses the stories of Prophets and ancient nations in a dramatic dialogue, and offers a new, exciting mythology about Judgment Day, hell, paradise, angels and devils. This formed a practical and realistic alternative for Muslims. This study suggests these two points as the main reasons for the absence of drama in Arab culture after Islam. The study will try to investigate and examine whether the absence of drama in Arab culture is not due to historical, environmental or temperamental reasons, but that the religious reasons in the pre-Islamic period and in the early years of Islam played an important role in this absence.

Let us not forget that the rituals and religious myths of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period might have provided a basis for the development and emergence of drama in Arab culture. However, in the pre-Islamic period the mythology was simple, crude and lacked conflict. As Al-Hajjaji further notes: 'These beliefs remained within the pagan framework and did not provide any opportunity for the development of ritual and perhaps was one of the reasons behind the rites ceasing to grow'. (al-Hajjaji, 18-9)

The confined nature of the pre-Islamic Arab myths and rituals hindered the full growth and development of religious rites, especially when compared to the development of the Greek myths and rituals in Dionysian festivals which led in turn to the emergence of Greek drama. 'It would have been almost impossible for Arabic drama to have established itself in an environment that lacked the full range of mythology such as was available to the Greeks'. (al-Khozai, 8) Furthermore, the relationship between the worshipper and God is vague and sometimes crude. Mandour comments, 'some of the Arab people in pre-Islamic times formed their deities from pressed dates and these accompanied them throughout their journeys. When they felt hungry they would eat them'. (Mandour, 14) In the light of this discussion, it must be noted that, although the majority of Arab and non-Arab researchers have occupied themselves with the absence of drama from the Arab culture, no one has attempted on studying the myths and rituals of the pre-Islamic period and the early years of Islam.

The hypothesis underpinning this study is best articulated as a question. Is the fact that the Arabs did not have a theatre culture directly linked to the religious myths, rituals and practices performed in pre-Islamic times, and the ability or inability of these rites to grow and develop into a form of theatre?

This is one question the study will try to answer. Furthermore, it will explore and examine the attitude of Islam toward these myths and rituals. This is important since Islam demolished these myths and rituals and presented, as a new alternative, the stories of prophets and ancient nations. These stories were presented in two forms, realistic and fantastic.

Realistic stories presented in the Quran contain realistic events, which occurred to individuals, groups or nations in the past. The characters have realistic traits, and the stories are told in the works of history and were handed down from one generation to the next. The events are convincing and credible. Fantasy does

not play a major role, as their aim is to convince people to embrace the new religion and to learn specific lessons from them.

Fantastic stories contain extraordinary events. The places and characters do not abide by the rules of logic and realism and they are not credible. From the religious point of view they are classified as miracles brought about by hidden forces to provide evidence for the might of God, the Creator of the universe.

Both kinds of Quranic stories are reminiscent of drama texts that are written to be read and enjoyed, not to be performed on stage or re-enacted. Most of the times, the preacher or Imam of the mosque would read these texts to the audience of worshippers, thus inadvertently playing the role of the narrator or actor, and indirectly (unintentionally) meeting the audience's need for the theatre of which they had no knowledge. Through these stories, Islam defined the nature of God and forbade challenge (conflict) between man and God. Because of the new monotheistic faith, it was unlikely that Muslims would turn to what they considered pagan myths and rituals.

Conclusion

The study has reached a number of conclusions related directly to its research topic, and the problem and hypo study proposed by it. By examining and analysing the information gathered from the relevant sources, we assume that the theatre, according to the western cultural concept, was not known in the Arab world until the mid-19th century. This form of art remained absent from Arab culture before and after Islam, until certain Arabs interested in the arts had the opportunity to get in touch with western culture, to see theatre performances and read plays either in their original languages or in their Arabic translations. These first contacts established their awareness and understanding of this form of art, enabling them to adopt it and cultivate it in the Arab culture.

This study concluded that the vast majority of Arab researchers in particular, as well as some foreign researchers interested in this subject, have used the term "absence" in relation to technical art. This study argues that the use of the term "absence" is inappropriate in the context of scholarly research in that, the use of the term "absence" negates the existence of any basic roots or seeds for the art of theatre in the Arab culture before and after Islam. This idea of absence is inaccurate, for the Arabs must have had certain religious rites and practices which may have contained features and characteristics of the theatre with the potential for evolution and growth to produce some form of basic theatrical dialogue or performance.

Moreover, the customs and traditions prevalent in any society as part of its popular cultural heritage contain theatrical elements capable of evolving. The pre- and post-

Islamic Arab society, being such a case, certainly had specific customs and traditions which were regularly practiced in a special occasion, such as the harvest, which were accompanied by singing and dancing as an expression of joy over the harvested crop, the rites connected with the burial of the dead, the rituals associated with the birth of a child, the annual festivities, the celebration of victory in wars, celebrating rainfall, weddings, and the popular games particularly those played by children. Accordingly, this study assumes that the theatre, in its basic form, was not absent from the Arab culture before or after Islam. The Arabs, however, did not know the theatre in the sense that was known by the Greeks, until the mid-19th century.

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