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Notes

1 J.M. Davis (1978), p. 22.
2 J.L. Styan (1979), p. 24.
3 A Zar was a ritual dance and chant, "performed to drive out evil spirits and djinns that were supposedly lodged in the bodies of certain persons"(Al-Mojam 1960: 408). Loud drums, singing, chanting and the use of incense, candles, specific costumes were all part of the rites held for the cure. The inflicted person, as well as the therapist and the others of her or his team all moved in a circle around certain grains, cereals and candles placed in the center of the room. As the music and the dancers movements rose to a crescendo, resulting in the patient falling in a faint, the expulsion of the djinn was considered successful.
4 Al Kadi (2001), p. 141.
5 S. Issa (2002), p. 600.
6 S. Issa (2002), p. 605.
7 S. Issa (2002), p. 605.
8 A. Salama (2001), p. 215.
9 J.M. Davis (1978), p. 63.
10 A. Salama (2001), pp. 216-217.
11 A. Salama (2001), p. 215.
12 J.L. Styan (1979), p. 46.
13 J.L. Styan (1979), p. 257.
14 A. Salama (2001), p. 216.
15 S. Pomeroy (1998), p. 227.
16 O. Rank (1958), p. 250.
17 B. Gascoigne (1967), p.104.

TOPOGRAPHIES OF DESIRE
Recent Egyptian Drama and Strategies of the Absurd

Mieke KOLK

In these last years I have greatly enjoyed the books of Egyptian drama, translated into English and published by the General Egyptian Book Organization. Director of the series is Mohamed Enani, a scholar and playwright himself. He chooses and often introduces each piece. These plays, written in the last decades of the 20th century offer important reflections on a changing society. Their fascinating introductions also give us a picture of the social and artistic debates of recent times. Next to the Western publications of the work of most important authors already canonized (Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Yusuf Idris, Alfred Farag) who often discuss the importance and meaning of their intellectual background and aesthetic influences, these new booklets offer a spontaneous approach to Egyptian drama within the framework of cultural theory. The texts can be read as the product of a culture, as a strategic network of deliberations about norms and values. This approach makes it possible to avoid the usual stress on the East/West oppositions or Western influences on Egyptian drama. The fact that drama models from Western culture were adapted is not important. Instead we focus on how these models were used in different cultural spaces as "re/contextualizations or relocations", claiming agency and authenticity in its own specific forms of 'national' identity (Homi Babha).[1]

One of the books I brought home was the translation of the *Prisoner and the Jailor* (1989), three one-act plays by Mohamed Enani. The introduction is very rich. He writes about his youth, his education and his experiences as a scholar and a writer. He also delved into formalistic (Egyptian, Arabic enough / or too foreign?), formal (what style of drama?) and political (right- or left-wing?) discussions, leading to existential questions for an Egyptian writer and his political censors. Together with the *Prisoner and the Jailor,* I brought by Gamal Maqsoos *The Man who ate a Goose*, and by Ali Salem *The Dogs reached the Airport.* Nora Amin gave me two manuscripts: *The Vault*, and *The Box of our Lives.*

As with many other Egyptian drama texts of the last thirty years, titles betray the process of metaphorization that is characteristic of forms of Absurd Theatre, where the expression of reality is carried by 'unreality' and strategies of

irrationality and illogic are used as hiding places for an unwanted truth.[2] This poetic Symbolism is not only a common feature in traditional Arabic literature but also offers a political tool, an imagery open for multiple interpretations that can escape censorship. (It would be interesting to compare the strategies of the late 20th Century Arabic drama with the itineraries of the artists in the former German Democratic Republic, for instance in the later works of Heiner Mueller and Peter Hacks).

Male-female conflicts

As crucial as his introductory observations pointing to the *unsayable* within a culture are Enani's statements about the *unknowable* topic: the problematic relationship between men and women in Egypt. Facile male notions of supremacy make it very difficult to express male-female conflicts *verbally*, as is common in the West. "Man and woman still think in terms of black and white, while at the back of their minds the Arab tradition continues to suggest a dialectic of the master-servant relationship dealt with by Hegel".[3]

Rather than following a European tradition, Enani writes that the template for the male/female relationship in modern Arabic drama was influenced by images of love as popularized by American films in the fifties. The problem of conjugal life focus on what is ' unreal' and ' unrealistic'. In Egypt infidelity is very rare. More dramatic situations are taboo. To express these taboo situations a writer must withdraw to more symbolic spaces, where names are functions and reality shifts towards the metaphorical level of language. When that level is sustained we speak of an allegorical framing. More usual, authors speak about concepts as dreams, dreamlike structures and dream worlds, which hints at repression and disguise. In a literary domain where philosophical, psychological (Freudian) and linguistic theories meet, we see a conflation of figurations where the mechanisms of condensation and displacement in the psyche are compared with the working of metaphor and metonym in the poetic language. In this way words like **prison**, the **airport**, the **vault** and the **box** in the play titles are not only nightmarish symbols of enclosure and the desire for liberation but are also carriers of desire in the social and sexual space.

Last autumn I brought two manuscripts to Amsterdam: Sameh Mahran's *The Boatman* (1998) and Nahed Nayla Naguib's *The Boat People* (1980). Within the realistic and metaphorical space of a perilous sea-voyage, both texts explore spheres of limits and limitations in what I call topographies of desire.

After reading an essay *Shipwreck with Spectator*: *Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* of the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg,[4] I decided to connect these three texts. Two recent Egyptian plays and an essay on the history of the actualization of the seafaring metaphor in Western culture could possibly offer themes on the existential impact of the image of 'voyage at sea'. *Vous êtes embarqués*, writes Pascal, always already at sea; living means: being on high sea with the chance of being saved or of going down.

Thinking metaphor

The use of metaphor has often been philosophically discussed, as by Karel Boullart in his article on *Comoedia Naturalis*, as a means to make sense of the world at large:

> "In the realm of theory and contemplation, one must cast a web of metaphor over all that is or can be – any philosophy, any world-view depends on such a set of root-metaphors, as they have been called, in order to give our finiteness its proper place in a world that is after all too large for our thoughts and too deep for our imagination".[5]

Boullarts colleague Hans Blumenberg reflects on the position of the metaphor as a stage in the process of concept formation with a shift towards the metaphor as a specific space of *non*-conceptuality:

> "Metaphor is no longer directed mainly toward the constitution of conceptuality but back towards the connections with the life-world as the constant motivating support (though one which cannot be constantly kept in view) of all theory. In every culture, what escapes the exertion of the concept, - that is the perspective on the whole of reality, the world, life, and history- is handed over to long-term work on images. The imaginative orientation achieved is condensed, transformed en elaborated in great metaphors and comparisons".[6]

This long-term work on images is, as Blumenberg describes in its historical development, that of life as a sea- voyage. This metaphor provides an outline of the entire voyage out and is composed of many conditions and possibilities. It also sets limits on what is nearly impossible, and what will, in the best cases, be recounted as sailors' yarn: impossible stories, endlessly retold. It is in this specific historical and cultural process of *condensation, transformation and*

elaboration of the spaces of this metaphor, I want to explore in the scripts. These texts dealing with the passage out and a shipwreck at the end with a *sailors yarn* as closing lines will point to the ultimate defeat of the young passengers and their desires for union/ reunion with their beloveds. At the center of the metaphor lies sexual rape and hidden violence between the sexes, leading to images of death and disappearance.

The modeling metaphor of life as a sea-voyage encompasses a whole series of possible events: the voyage out, the voyage home, the harbor, the foreign shore, anchorage, sailing the seas, storm, calm, distress at sea, shipwreck, barely surviving and merely looking on.... From early times the danger of the ocean stretched around the edges of the habitable world and included mythical monsters and the mysteries of the movements of the earth, Poseidon's realm. Blumenberg mentions two assumptions contained by the metaphors of seafaring and shipwreck: first, that the sea is a natural boundary of the realm of human activities, and second, its demonization as the sphere of that which is unreckonable and lawless and difficult to find one's bearings.[7] Going to sea at all has long been regarded as a foolhardy act, one that invites punishment. I will concentrate on three of the elaborations proposed by Blumenberg: reasons for embarking, distress at sea and the art of survival, and 'the voyage home'.

Seafaring as a transgression of boundaries

The play *The Boatman* of Sameh Mahran tells the story of a young couple who have been engaged for eight years, but have not been able to marry, which is to say they can not have sex. The text begins in a sophisticated and ironic way as the couple finds a sexual outlet in language games, hilarious comparisons with other creatures like fish, memories of more physical experiences in the bus and the cinema. In a very touching scene they fantasize about having a cocoon, a house, being together, touching and kissing. At this point all is sublimated poetic technique and as beautiful as time and place wants it. But the real thing is evocative of and made concrete by the images of sexuality on a foreign shore, over the water, where all worldly pleasures are known. This is why they take the risk of going with a boatman, who offers to take them to the sea, where they can be together. The boatman will drink and drug himself: no eyes no ears.

The voyage out is motivated by their longing to explore sexuality as a part of *human* life. The boy and the girl are in agreement about going on this voyage. Their mutual fantasies are exciting, and they are both frustrated by official and

common law as represented by the policeman and his wife who also stand for social power and corruption. The 'brother' of the policeman, boatman Bhuddah, represents, *nomen est omen*, in opposition, a darker side of an amorphous, oceanic space, driven by a sexuality Freud would have marked as polymorphous and perverse, that is not directed to any specific object. The boatman threatens the couple with monstrosities and horrors like the magnetic mountain, the long distance to the shore and worst of all his own desires: "You either swim or I take part in your pleasure, enjoy you and you and you". (34)

The little boat, rocking on the waves, is a symbol of the escape from the earth and from the land. As it lies rolling in the water it is also a symbol of embracing arms and a bed, rocking the couple in its wooden frame. When the boy and girl fall for a moment asleep, they lie separate from each other: *The young woman moans and rolls in her sleep. The young man does exactly the same thing*. In their fantasy as ever the same, in their dreams also. The boatman however interprets the moment for us. *Boatman looks closely at them in turn*: " I must I have grown two horns on my head just now." (28) It is as far as the lovers and the onlookers come in the desired union of the bodies.

The Boatpeople of Nahed Naguib step on the boat for a very simple reason. They have hopes for a better future and want to escape their country after the War. Naguib gives the people Vietnamese names and the utopian future is located in America. But the voyage out is a universal embarking and the trip to the foreign shores long and dangerous. As in Mahran's play, the passengers represent functions, in this case a social mapping of classes, sexes and generations: a journalist, a photographer, a baker and his wife, an old man and his mother (who turns out to be a goat), a young woman, and the boatman.

As with Mahran the boatman is all powerful and interested only in what he needs: money. After he has stripped nearly everything from each of the passengers, the voyage begins. It will last some days, some weeks, no one can tell. Because she is made individual rather than representative, the young girl Sayyum Nadjuk stands out. She has lost her father in an earlier flight and travels to the foreign country in the hope of finding him. It is Sayyum who creates a topography of desire by remembering her father and her youth.
Sayyum:

- "No I am not afraid. I do not feel anything. Since I separated from my father, I have been like that. I don't know where I am going, but I feel I have to keep going. If I stop I shall not find him.

- I shall certainly find him when I go ashore.
- I used to swim when we had our summer holidays. My father would stand on the seashore and I'd swim far out to the sea, even when the sea was rough. I used to love high waves and I was not afraid of whirlpools. I would swim out to the buoy and go further. I could swim to the nearby island easily. When I came out of the sea I would see my father standing on the shore waiting for me".

Here the sea is not a dangerous space. Instead it symbolizes self realization and becoming independent. The watcher from the shore represents the ultimate love of a caring father who validates her search for identity. It is this image she must rediscover. The arguments of the other passengers are more pragmatic: more freedom and physical survival for some and hope for more prosperity for others.

Distress at sea

As the second and fourth theme of his exploration German philosopher Blumenberg suggests: *What the shipwrecked person is left with* and *the Art of Survival*. Rather than offering sea monsters, Nahed Naguibs text provides another form of the *demonization* of seafaring, the absence of Law and the unreckonable sphere. Both conditions are represented in the vicissitudes of Sayyum. Her distress is predictable. When she declares that her mother is long dead, and yes, she is on her own, rape is in the air. It is only a question of time. When the baker's wife gives birth to a baby-boy and the celebrations are over, the moment has arrived. Another boat, maybe Thai-pirates, approaches. In the dark, during the commotion around a possible attack, Sayyum is raped by the photographer and no one hears, or acts, on her cries for help.

There is a nauseating summary of reactions:

- "She brought it upon herself
- He should marry her
- You should not have traveled alone
- Tell me sweetie, what happened"

The rapist himself says: "I could not help myself. I am only human. You all wanted her". Her situation deteriorates when all the men, starting with the boatman, begin to discuss how to have her, posses her and sell her; after all, she is fallen woman now. Sayyum is full of shame: "I can't look in their eyes. I feel

naked." And as if talking to herself:

> "Something inside me hurts. I feel like crying. I am regretting the days that will never come back and the dreams that never came true. (...) My father, where are you? Speak to me. Listen. Help me. I can't go on without you. And if you come back, will you be able to face this big world? How did you manage before? You were braving the world and we did not know. Was it a heavy burden? What did you do in this big sea? I can't keep going.... Hopes are always lies. They swing us left and right and then turn out to be lies".

The art of survival is closely connected with a curious phenomenon of denial. The girl is raped and cries for her father. But she has no words and therefore no word left for her real experiences. It is a remarkable silence as a gap in the theatrical discourse, where the rape itself can be shown but the reflection and reaction on this bodily humiliation cannot be spoken. Only from the sideline, in the shift in perspective from the position of herself, the I, to that of her father, a psychological displacement, she admits in the discourse about his life- experience a notion of violence in the world: we did not know what you had to keep up with. For herself she cannot speak. In the social domain no language is available. The male world has already made her a prostitute only her father can rescue her from such an existence. Hopefully.

The distress at sea, in which the young couple of *The Boatman* is involved, seems much more complicated, although the power-mechanisms are comparable. The boatman threatens the young lovers in a way that goes far beyond their dependence on his steering capabilities in the middle of the ocean. The power-metaphor nestles everywhere. He reigns not only over their social future but also over their bodies, their bodily integrity and their sexualities, representing the castrating law in all its aspects: physical, social and in the end also sexual. Hanging over their sleeping bodies he wakes them with all the social threats available:

> "You, neither one of you have pure intentions (...) I said wake-up.
> Rise it is now working time,
> Wake up, your father has come.
> Wake up stupid, the creditors have arrived,
> It is prayer time,
> Your mother has died". (8)

But most disturbing are the conditioning of mistrust and a sense of betrayal that falls over both the boy and the girl. To the young woman, awakening, the Boatman sings: "She who her trust to a man gives (2x) is she who stores water in sieves." The boy is pestered by the story of the blind Pharao who discovered that his wife was betraying him, an authorial hint toward a comparable short story of Naquib Mafhoez. It is very important within this text that mute, mutual distrust already existed between the young couple, just under the skin, although covered over by layers of intellectual companionship, the ethical domain they live in has already passed verdicts on equality and self consciousness that comes from education and middleclass instincts. Mahran seems very critical with the couple on account of their general lack of social sensibility and survivor's energy. But the male-female opposition is most powerful in the construction of subjectivity and self-awareness, within the limits of a society forbidding the exploration of sexuality. A society, as Foucault would say, that refuses expression and exploration of the (discourses) about intimate practices which nevertheless dominates fully, human life and social identity.

The voyage home....?

Under Blumenberg's rubric of ' *Shipbuilding out of shipwreck'* the historical spectator is involved as "the type who, culture-critically or even aesthetically, takes note of his distance (...) coming from the ancient suspicion that there is a frivolous if not blasphemous, moment inherent in all human seafaring (...)".[8]

For the moment, I want to combine this notion with the possible endings of the drama-text in its teleology of the action and the movement towards closure as a debate about norms and values included in every text. The text of Sameh Mahran works toward an open ending in a double sense: the story is not finished and only concluded in an artificial jump into another time and space. What we see in the last image of the story is the boatman with wine and glasses, toasting the rambling boy who just saw his girlfriend disappear into the water among the little fish: "My love this is the last call. We'll set sail now. You have no gills. We are at a very close proximity from tomorrow. I fear you will become a smoked-herring."(37) It is the last stage of a disconcerting total destruction of the young man by the boatman. What we *see,* if the play is performed, is the young lover, half naked without trousers and shoes. Intimidated by the stories of the boatman about the magnetic mountain, the boy has put his clothes overboard. Superstition took over. His intellectual ruin is accompanied by his physical undoing: sickness, vomiting, shivering, peeing leads to corporeal dependency on the boatman.

Literally and mentally undressed, he gives in and goes with the boatman's suggestion that his girlfriend has betrayed him. The girl has no answer for either of the two men. She slips away in the water and disappears. The couple's brave adventure has left them nothing whatsoever. Not even a forbidden experience.

The end of the *Boatpeople* is just as black. After the boat is discovered by the police, the 'sailors' start to quarrel and fight. There is gunfire. The journalist frames the story, in an epilogue:

> "We followed them until they lost hope. And then how should it end:
> What do people after they lost hope and their illusions are shattered and there is no food left.
> What do they eat? Their brothers, daughters or wives?
> We now know why the sea laughs...."

Elaborations

Every voyage has a beginning and must find its end. Generally the seafarer will enter the harbor, where he/she can recover and maybe discover the ultimate end of this journey. When the story/ journey does not end, we as onlookers are confronted with a problem and must retrace our experiences during the journey itself. What sticks in my mind is the malicious destruction of the bodily integrity of the youngsters on the one hand and the creation of an atmosphere of too naïve innocence for these same youngsters on the other. A very difficult world to live in.

Notes

1 Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge 1994.
2 Marvin Carlson, "Avant-garde Drama in the Middle East", unpublished.
3 Mohamed Erani, *The Prisoner and the Jailor,* 1989, p. 34.
4 Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator, Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, Cambridge, Mass., 1997.
5 Karel Boullart, 'Comoedia Naturalis', *Philosophica*, 38 (1986), nr. 2, pp. 5-26.
6 Hans Blumenberg, o.c., pp. 2-4.
7 Id., ib., p. 8.
8 Id., ib., p. 10.