

BETWEEN TRAGEDY AND FARCE

Retelling the Story of two Devilish Sisters

Eman KARMOETY

The realm of comedy extends far beyond the concepts of any imagination; it can enfold any action since it is a world that has no laws, barriers or restrictions. In fact, it encompasses an attack against all rules of society: "Comedy is drawn from the most human of strivings: our continual impulse to rebel against convention and morality ..."¹ It is therefore, not surprising to find that the subject of comedy evolves about what is taboo and rejected by society, for the festive spirit of comedy celebrates all and sundry, regardless of any inhibition. However, transgressing into forbidden territory has its own peril, as it draws into the circle of tragedy: "Any comic character and any comic situation pressed hard enough can turn a comedy towards tragedy"². And vice versa, matters can be reversed, moving in the opposite direction from tragedy to comedy: "History repeats itself; first time as a tragedy, second time as a farce" as Karl Marx declared.

Two Egyptians, Bahgat Qamar, a popular comic writer, and Hussein Kamal, a successful cinematic director, selected what was to the law-abiding, pious Egyptian audiences a most horrifying tale: the episode of Rahya and Sikeena, known to all, and chose to present it as a musical tragicomedy, rather than a purely tragic form, as previous attempts had done. Rahya and Sikeena were two names that sent shivers of horror up the spines of Alexandrians, in the early 20th century, and for many years after inspired fear in all of Egypt. Dr. Latifa Al Zayat, the famed Egyptian novelist, a little girl at the time, recalls how her mother told her the bloodcurdling story of the queens of crime, Rahya and Sikeena.

I first discovered evil when ... My mother provided all the rituals of the killings in detail, almost enacting them, choosing the victim, luring her to their home, strangling her ... the zar³, drums that prevented all calls for help being heard by the police, whose station was just across the street. (72).

But who were Rahya and Sikeena? What is their story? Why were they so notorious?

In 1920, in Alexandria, a worker was terrified at finding a human arm in the floor of an old home. Further digging produced the rest of the body and other corpses, adding up to seventeen dead women. The former tenants, two sisters, Rahya and Sikeena, were brought in for questioning and after initially denying all knowledge of the matter finally confessed to killing the women and stealing their jewelry. The incredible fact that two creatures of the weaker sex had managed to kill so many women and dispose of their bodies, in less than a year, shocked the Egyptians, who rose up in fury at the apparent neglect and ineffectuality of the police force at apprehending the criminals earlier and preventing so much sorrow and loss of human lives. Fikri Abaza, later on a distinguished journalist and literary figure, then a young reporter in Al-Ahram, demanded angrily: "Where are the police? Where is the sword of the government that should fall on the necks of bloodthirsty criminals? ... The recent murders are a great calamity, the horrors of which have blackened the forehead of the 20th century".

Truly, the murder of so many women was horrifying and the terrible crimes were seized upon by the newspapers, which found the issue to be a hot item and articles poured out every day, while pictures of the two murderesses and the remaining members of their gang were splashed across the pages of every paper and magazine and sold in the streets and cafes of Egypt. The tragedy was magnified beyond all imaginable proportions; "Women slaughtered in Labban: 12 corpses unearthed!" (Al-Ahram, nov.). Rahya and Sikeena were blown up into inhuman figures. One rumor claimed that they were held in a zoo cage for public display and people rushed there in masses to catch a glimpse of the bloody pair, safely behind bars. "The rumor itself indicated that the Egyptian people not only wished to strip Rahya and Sikeena of their qualities as women, but also as human beings ... in general, even animals do not prey upon their own species as Rahya and Sikeena" (Al-Ahram, dec).

So intense was the interest of the people that it was exploited in other forms of media as well. "The trial of Rahya and Sikeena dominated public interest ... making it a rich source for countless films and plays for decades ..."⁴. For years, cinema and theatre presented lurid visions of the hapless sisters; figures that gave rise to hellish nightmares, drawn as they were by directors who wished to draw large audiences. With this in mind, the guilty pair were always depicted as bloody, thieving killers bent solely on robbing their victims of their gold without any qualms or compunctions whatsoever.

Figures of evil

Salah Abu Seif, one of Egypt's leading directors, presented Rahya and Sikeena in a film, in 1953, "depicting them in the same image imprinted in the minds of their contemporaries; purely figures of evil ..."⁵. No attempt was made to provide an explanation for their bloodthirsty actions although Salah Abu Seif was an established advocate of realism, as well as Naguib Mahfouz, who helped write the scenario. "Salah Abu Seif did not care to disclose the tragedy of Rahya and Sikeena or look for the motives behind their terrible, criminal behaviour ... but began his plot with the fear and panic caused by the disappearance of women"⁶. Moreover he casted Rahya as head of the gang, a strong masculine figure, who "upbraids the men for their failings; slapping them and spitting in their faces" (ibid). For the role he chose a prominent Jewish actress, Nigma Ibrahim, possessing stern, hard features and a deep, guttural voice, with which she cynically muttered words that immediately became immortal and were soon jocularly adopted by Egyptians as an adage: "Mahadish b'yakoolha b'sahil" (Life is no joy ride).

Little did people sense the actual pain and bitterness couched within the words; the frustration and disappointment that drove the real Rahya and Sikeena to tread the bloody, danger-infested, fatal path of murder. A tragedy of their own engulfed the lives of the two unhappy sisters, born as they were to a fate that mercilessly offered no escape. Driven from one abode to another, in search of livelihood, they savored the foul taste of hunger and deprivation; inhaled the stench of the backstreets of squalor and poverty. While in her early teens, Rahya was married off to a man twice her age. Fate as yet had not finished taunting her; her husband soon died leaving nothing behind for his widow. She had hardly begun to taste the air of freedom when she was coerced into marrying her brother in law, Hasb'Allah, as she was carrying his brother's child, who had to be raised by the family, according to tradition.

Sikeena's share of life's bitter cup was no less. She was forced to marry a man whom she seemed to find intolerable for they were soon divorced, whereupon she ran off to Alexandria. There she met Abdel Aal, a man from Upper Egypt and several years her junior. They immediately fell in love and became so strongly attached to each other that he had her name tattooed into his arm. Even when his mother forced him to divorce Sikeena and marry a girl of her choice he went back to his sweetheart. When Hasb'Allah stole some objects, he ran away, leaving Rahya to bear the consequences and go to jail in his place. After serving her sentence she decided to join her sister in Alexandria, where their crimes began as

a means of supporting themselves and their idle husbands. Although Abdel Aal worked on an almost regular basis when work was to be found, Hasb'Allah was never able or willing to work for long periods and squandered Rahya's pitiful earnings on his personal pleasures. Sikeena also had to pawn her clothes on many occasions, when she was penniless.

Egypt, a British protectorate at the time, suffered severely from the aftermath of World War I. Poverty, destitution, robbery, prostitution and crimes spread through the land of the Nile. Rahya and Sikeena fared no better than others, ignorant and untrained as they were and married to men that were ineffectual as breadwinners. The glitter of gold bangles on the arms of other women aroused Rahya's greed and envy. Her original plan was to lure one of these vain creatures, ply her with drink, then strip her of her gold. This failed as the woman, in spite of her intoxication, resisted their attempt to pull off her jewelry. It soon became evident that murder could not be avoided. It would also seem, that most of the plans were masterminded by Rahya and Sikeena, who during the police inquiries revealed sharp wits. However, the actual killings, were never carried out by them but by their husbands and other men, which were recruited for the tasks of pinioning the limbs of the victims and burying them afterwards in the flooring. On one occasion the men fell upon the woman in question so hastily that the sisters were suddenly confronted with the crime, taking place before their very eyes. Horrified, Rahya ran out of the room but Sikeena was paralyzed with fear so that her wine glass fell and crashed to the floor in shatters, as she "started to crawl out, unable to rise to her feet, only realizing —later— that she had urinated involuntarily—out of sheer fear"⁷.

Dramatic motivation

These were the highlights which writer Bahgat Qamar exploited in his drama *Rahya and Sikeena*, altering the facts to serve his purposes: providing motivation for the devilish sisters' crimes, "attempting to arouse our sympathy for the murderesses when we discover that they are the victims of their step-mother (Anuma), who murdered their mother in order to marry their father ... they proceed to kill her using the same method she used to kill their mother (using a wet towel to suffocate her)"⁸.

The play, which ran successfully for three consecutive years, included farcical elements within its structure such as incongruous pairs; Rahya is presented as a blond, attractive woman; hard and calculating, while Sikeena is a brunette, with

mysterious, dark eyes; emotional and romantic. They always argue because of their different dispositions and their inability to agree even on the victims they choose to kill. Their husbands make up another incongruous pair; Hasb'Allah is older, shrewd and cynical, whereas Abdel Aal is tall, young, naïve and foolish. They constantly bicker, as each tries to prove himself master of the house: "Like and unlike pairs of characters are so typical of farce: Box and Cox, Flash and Fribble, duplicate lovers, male opposed to female, old versus young, twins and doubles, and so forth. The artificiality of the arrangement signals both a distancing of the characters from the audience and a lessening of their humanity: they lack the flexibility and the individuality of life"⁹.

This lack of humanity, according to the dramatic critic Amir Salama is used in *Rahya and Sikeena* to promote humor, through the mechanical actions of the two women, as they go about their bloody business, much as anybody else would go about theirs. To enforce this, director Hussein Kamal employed the Brechtian technique of alienation in some scenes, to allow the audience to realize that the two women on stage are merely actresses. "In one of the comic spectacles, Shadya and Sohair Al Bably (the two actresses) mimic the dialogue used by the early actresses Nigma Ibrahim and Zuzu Hamdi Al Hakim, in their famous film *Rahya and Sikeena* in burlesque-style, in a further attempt at alienation"¹⁰.

The step-mother in Bahgat Qamar's play is portrayed as the cause of all the misery in the two women's lives. Not content with killing their mother and marrying their father, she places Rahya in domestic service, where she is raped by one of the aristocracy. She also forces Sikeena into marrying an old man. The two girls run off to Alexandria but when their stepmother follows, they soon rid themselves of her. The stage darkens and to the accompaniment of music and song, Sikeena carries out a pantomime of speech to the stepmother, as Rahya, as in a dream, mechanically wets a towel, which she then uses to suffocate the malicious stepmother, who lets out a piercing scream. Using silence, space, dark and light to provide psychological insight and a revealing of the women's emotions and reaction after their first murder, director Hussein Kamal places each of the women within a circle of light, their backs to each other: "This state of fear, horror and wariness lasts till it nearly suffocates the spectators, whereupon they are released and ready to move onto an different state"¹¹.

Comic relief

This different state is the realm of the comic, relying largely on the husbands of Rahya and Sikeena, drawn as insipid buffoons, manipulated and deluded by their wives. Hasb'Allah, Rahya's husband, who in real life indirectly left his wife with no other recourse except crime as a means of livelihood, is depicted in the play, as a lazy organ player, in love with Rahya, who marries him only to work him as a stooge, burying the dead women. He is shown to be a weak, spineless creature, whom Rahya despises. Portrayed by one of Egypt's major comic actors, Abdel Mineim Madbuli, he provides much of the satirical humour and commentary that draw attention to the jarring juxtaposition and incongruity between the laughter taking place and the crimes being committed backstage. In his shabby attire and clownish posture, he repeatedly demands that the corpses buried in the basement be removed, while Rahya angrily waves him offstage. This draws nervous giggles from the audience who are caught in between the joke and the sad fate of the miserable victims. "As the gap narrows so that what remains incongruous is still funny, but too close to the bone to laugh at, then we move swiftly into the realms of the tragic"¹².

Abdel Aal, Sikeena's husband, is transformed in Qamar's play into a policeman whom Sikeena, in an attempt to seduce him, plies with food and drink, till he marries her, hoping that he might shield them from the interference of the police. Their courtship and honeymoon, derived from the real love story between Sikeena and Abdel-Aal, provides scenes in which the incredible dullness and stupidity of Abdel-Aal, the man of law and order, is exhibited; a reference to the inability of the police force of that day to apprehend the criminals who committed the bloody murders under their very noses. The cosy atmosphere of love and dalliance between Sikeena and Abdel-Aal, during their courtship and before they are married, contrasts sharply with the audience's awareness that Sikeena is actually a killer. In the play, as in Salah Abu Seif's film, the murders are supposedly committed to the accompaniment of the zar: loud drums, music and chanting, which were used by the gang to muffle the victims' cries for help. When the neighbours complain of the noise, Abdel-Aal is sent to the women's home. Unaware that they themselves are the notorious criminals he proceeds to warn the sisters of the gang of murderous women. As the ironic state of affairs draws laughs and guffaws from the audience, it is immediately connected to a tragic and pathetic situation that leaves the spectators breathless and in shock.

Abdel-Aal, gallantly insists on making a thorough search of the house, to make sure no criminals are hiding about. Flirting nervously with him, Sikeena

perches her self atop a box seat into which a struggling victim has just been pushed. "There can be no relaxation in a play that acquits by laughter at one moment and then convicts us the next... the detachment of comedy is not allowed to us, nor the sympathy of tragedy"¹³. The miserable creature, not quite dead, moaning, pokes out an arm, which Sikeena hastily pushes back in, while the dim-witted policeman, puzzled by the latter's antics, as she bounces up and down in the slapstick routine of clowns, to keep the box seat shut, amid the audience's laughter that borders on horror and "increases the degree of awareness and sense of the tragedy about to unfold on stage"¹⁴. In this drama, Rahya and Sikeena are domineering and forceful, commanding their menfolk, who meekly obey. Even Abdel Aal, the man from Upper Egypt, who loudly claims that he is the master of the house, is hoodwinked by Sikeena whose wits are far too sharp for his slow understanding.

"I do not think it misogynistic to present women as strong, assertive, successful ... even if they are also selfish or villainous ... old myths are paraded not to illustrate that the female sex is evil, but rather to induce the audience to question the traditional judgment on these women"¹⁵.

Female rebellion

The aim of presenting the legend of Rahya and Sikeena in the comic genre was not purely commercial, but also to heighten the audience's awareness of the concept of evil, and to think objectively about the women's role in the tragic events. Latifa Al-Zayat, who had voiced the attitude of most Egyptians during her time, connected the manifestation of evil itself with the two women. According to psychology and cultural studies, woman's strength and evil tendencies go back in time to ancient civilizations of the East, as that of the Edomites, inhabitants of the rock city of Petra, where mother-goddess cults existed, only to be later transformed into or overruled by a masculine deity. Moreover, lore has it that Adam, the first man, rejected the first woman, Lilith, who "was "replaced by the man-made woman, Eve. With all Eve's docility, however, she inherited seemingly from Lilith, who was a rebellious and mischievous demon, the curse of badness..."¹⁶. In other words, rebellion and dissatisfaction on the part of woman was regarded as evil, while a display of power and strength was discouraged. "... of this force in woman, man always was and still is afraid" (ibid).

Farce exhibits rebellion against convention and morality and so the play had to transcend to a more serious level to deliver the moral lesson, which the audience desired and herein lies the paradox.

The intellectual comedy by itself would become tiresome, and in one or two plays, where it is predominant, does become so. The suffering by itself, concentrated on and wept over for its own sake, would become either pathos or melodrama but revealed bit by bit in its fierce struggle against intrusion or misinterpretation, it approaches tragedy¹⁷.

The last victim is actually Rahya's daughter, unbeknown to her. Espied by the two sisters in the marketplace, a handsome prospect, they lure her back to their home. Sikeena suggests that they should not kill her as she is too young and that they have spilt enough blood. She pleads with Rahya, who, ironically refuses to show any mercy, recounting her own pain and misery. The girl's worried father arrives and a painful recognition between him and Rahya takes place, as well as a bitter reproach on her part. When she discovers that the girl being murdered by her sister in the basement is none than her own daughter, believed dead all these years, she calls upon Sikeena to hold her hand only to discover that it is too late; the girl is already dead. As the two women's screams rise through the air and Rahya falls in a faint to the floor, realizing that she has killed her own daughter, the curtain falls.

According to Aristotle, the main character in a tragedy must recognize his error, *anagnorisis*, and then suffer the consequences, *catastrophe*, either with his own death or that of his loved ones. However, the two sisters do not qualify as tragic heroines since their dark nature prevents that categorization. Thus, the play shifts into melodrama, as the punishment fits the crime. Amir Salama, finds the combination of farce and melodrama concocted by Bahgat Qamar delightful, but applauds Hussein Kamal's amazing ability to shift from tragedy and dark comedy in the first act then revert back again in the final act to tragedy, which has the final call in the rather melodramatic end of the play. Thus the wheel of horror, tragedy and farce rotates full circle to return to the initial point of tragedy.

Bibliography

- Abaza, Fikri. *Al-Ahram*, (1920, 25 nov.); *Al-Ahram*. (1920, 18 nov.); *Al-Ahram*. (1920, dec.)
 Al Kadi, Khaled Mohamed, *Rawae Al-Adab Al-Kadaey [The Best of Court Literature]*, 2001, Cairo: Egyptian Book Organization
 Al-Mojam-Al Waseet, *Al-Waseet Dictionary, Vol I*, 1960, Cairo: Matbaet Misr.
 Al-Zayat, Latifa, *Al Bab al-Maftooh /The Open Door*, Cairo: Egyptian Book Organization.
 Aristotle, *Poetics*, Longings & Horace eds., 1975, Penguin Books, Ltd.
 Davis, Jessica Milner, *Farce*, 1978, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Gascoigne, Bamber, *Twentieth-Century Drama*, 1967, London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd.
Issa, Salah., *Rigal Rahya w' Sikeena/Rahya and Sikeena's Men*, 2002, Cairo: Dar Al Ahmadi for Publications.

Pomeroy, Sarah, "Images of Women in the Literature of Classical Athens", in *Tragedy*, Ed. John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler, New York: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd, reprint from *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, 1998, New York: Schocken Books.

Salama, Amer, *Al-Comedia wa'l Masrah Al-Masri Al-M'aser (1975-2000) Modern Egyptian Comedy & Theatre (1975-2000)*, 2001, Cairo: Egyptian Book Organization.

Styan, J.L., *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*. 1979 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Rank, Otto, *Beyond Psychology*, (1958), New York: Dover Publications, Inc.

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