

- 2 H. Cixous, *The Name of Oedipus/Songs of the Forbidden Body*, in *Plays by French and Francophone Women*, edited and translated by Christiane P. Makward and Judith G. Miller, Michigan, 1994.
- 3 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *Plays, Prefaces and Postscripts, Volume I: Theatre of the Mind*, translated W.M. Hutchins, Three Continents Press, 1981.
- 4 Nehad Selaiha, *Egyptian Theatre : A Diary 1990-1992*, Cairo 1993, p.137.
- 5 Verena Conley, *Hélène Cixous : Writing the Feminine*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1984, pp. 155-156.
- 6 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, 1981, p. 283.
- 7 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, 1981, p. 87.
- 8 M. Aziza, *Al Islam wal-masrah*, Kairo, 1971.
- 9 Friederike Pannewick, *Das Wagnis Tradition, Arabische Wege der Theatralität*, Wiesbaden, 2000, p. 112.
- 10 Pannewick, o.c., p. 85.
- 11 H. Cixous, *Aller à la Mer*, in *Modern Drama*, 27, 1984, p. 546.
- 12 Al-Hakim mentions himself the Oedipus' versions of St. George de Bouhelier, Jean Cocteau and Andre Gide. I suppose that the rewritings of the Greek classics by Anouilh, Giraudoux and Marguerite Yourcenar would be even more adequate to reflect this collective moment which represents the 'Zeitgeist', inspiring an artistic community to comparable thematic motivations, artistic forms and imagery.
- 13 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, 1981, p.7.
- 14 Nicole Loraux, *Tragic ways of killing a woman*, Cambridge, M, 1987, p.23, p. 106.
- 15 Lorna Hardwick mentions Wole Soyinka's discussion of the contrast between Western and Yoruba thought patterns and cosmology, brought out in his version of *The Bacchae* of Euripides and most recently in Nigerian productions of Greek plays. An adaptation of Euripides *The Women of Troy* in a Yoruba setting *The Women of Owu*, by Femi Osofisan recently had its world-premiere.

GREEK MYTHOLOGY IN ARAB TRAGEDY. A RETURN OF THE MYTH OR TO THE MYTH?

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Beyond any doubt, Tawfiq Al-Hakim has been the first Arab author to have introduced Greek mythology in Arab theatre. He wrote his *Pygmalion* (1942) after his visit to France (1925-1927), where he became convinced that any attempt at becoming a 'serious' author had to lead him to the roots of Greek theatre. It was in Paris that he discovered through French translations the dramatic writings of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, based as they were on mythological stories. These myths were a primary tool for him, since they allowed him to develop the type of conflict he liked so much to express, the one between man and the different forces inhabiting the universe. From then on, it became clear to Al-Hakim, that any attempt at integrating the theatre into our Arabic society and culture, implied on the one hand, a movement towards the origins, towards the ancient Greeks, and, on the other, a projection of their mythic stories, belonging to another society, into our oriental ethic and intellectual values¹. Therefore, after having written his *Pygmalion*, he turned to the most famous of all Greek myths and in 1949 he wrote *Œdipe Roi*, not unexpectedly, since he had read the Sophoclean version and has seen it staged in French theatres, and since, at the same time, he had also read *Œdipe* by André Gide and *La machine infernale* by Jean Cocteau. Both of these writers tried to integrate the modern world into the human epic experience, but Al-Hakim tried to distinguish himself from all those who had adapted or revisited this myth in Western literature. In his opinion, all mythic symbols that the Arabic mentality could not understand had to be eliminated, but at the same time, he also wanted to frame this myth into a more Islamic atmosphere. Therefore, he chose not to stage a purely Greek Oedipus, but rather a more human version of him. Unfortunately, he only succeeded in staging an Oedipus who had poor human and heroic qualities and who solved no riddle at all, since there was no Sphinx. Moreover, once he knew that he was the son of Jocaste, he insisted that both of them remained husband and wife.

After his *Pygmalion* and *Œdipe*, Al-Hakim turned to the famous myth of Electra, one of the great foundational stories of the West which ran across western theatre and which was immortalized from the earliest Greek texts on, to *Mourning becomes Electra* by Eugène O'Neill (1931), *Electre* by Gide (1937) and *Les Mouches* by Sartre (1943), passing by the Italian version of Vittorio

Alfieri's *Agamemnon and Oreste* (1783), the French version *La tragédie d'Electre et d'Oreste* of André Suarès (1905) and the Austrian version of *Elektra* by Hugo Von Hofmannsthal (1909) ².

In the line of this tradition, Al-Hakim wrote in 1962 a new version of the Electra theme, called *A manger pour tous*, in which the old mythic character of Electra is turned into the modern one of Nadia, while Orestes becomes Tarek. In this version, there is a clear thematic correspondence between the female parts, the male parts being strongly differentiated. Whereas Electra manages to convince Orestes to kill their mother, as a revenge for the death of their father, Nadia fails both to convince her brother Tarek to do the same and to avert him from his prime objective, to change the face of the world fighting famine.

From Pygmalion to Electra, passing by *Œdipe*, Al-Hakim was looking to actualize myths belonging to another culture, using different icons, in order to create stimulating conflicts between absolute ideas, often abstract and ambiguous for an Arabic public, and mediating between reality and truth, art and life, jurisdiction and power. Conflicts like these, based as they were on different kinds of myths, created an intellectual type of theatre which addressed a public that was ill prepared for it. Therefore, Al-Hakim took the licence to transform the Greek myths in a way that revealed big differences between geno- and phenotext. However, this freedom was not granted to him when writing his *Isis*, based upon the famous pharaonique myth of Isis and Osiris, which was felt to function as a sacred text.

In the next section, it will become clear that the myth of Oedipus, which ran across the whole western theatre, from the foundational texts to contemporary theatre, meanwhile passing through the whole western civilisation, has managed to do the same in Arabic theatre.

Ali Ahmed Bakatheer wrote *Le roi Oedipe* in 1949, just after Al-Hakim's *Oedipe*, but in doing so, he was inspired by an Islamic philosophic vision. Greek destiny became Arabic destiny and the conflict between Oedipus and the priest became one between good and evil. Bakatheer's *Oedipe* was singled out not as a tragic hero –according to Aristotelian criteria– but as a popular hero who ran across difficulties and who knew how to surmount them³. And just like Al-Hakim, Bakatheer changed the myth in an important way: in his version, Jocaste knew that Oedipus had killed her husband Laius before marrying him.

The myth of Oedipus continued to attract Arabic writers, especially Egyptians, and among them one can refer to Ali Salem who wrote *C'est toi qui a*

tué le monstre in 1969, a play which originally had another title, *Oedipe 68*. This play was a political parody showing us a contemporary Oedipus, looking more like an Egyptian than a Greek. The events did not take place in the Greek city of Thebes, but in Thebes Luxor, the Egyptian town on the Nile. In the eyes of Ali Salem, the story of Oedipus is not a Greek myth, but rather a pharaonique one⁴. And once more, the Arabic writers allowed themselves to introduce some great changes in this myth. This Oedipus did not kill his father, and neither did he marry Iocaste, the only link between the old and the new Oedipus being his capacity to resolve the riddle, without, however, being able to free the city of the sphinx. Another kind of ambiguity persecuted this Oedipus, who spent all his time finding ways to improve the life of the citizens, whereas those who surrounded him did not cease to suppress these same citizens. When the sphinx came back, threatening the city once again, the same citizens, wanted to attack it, but were unprepared and had to withdraw. In fact, this defeat symbolized the one which upset Egypt and the whole Arabic world in 1967 and the whole play was inspired by the revolution of 1952 and the great expectations of the Egyptian people after the rise to power of Jamal Abdennaser. Finally, however, all the great victories acclaimed by the media between 1952 and 1967, appeared to be lies.

In 1968, Fawzi Fahmi, another Egyptian writer, was inspired by the same myth and wrote *Le retour de l'absent*, a play which was only staged in 1977, ten years after the defeat, as if during these ten years nobody dared to stage our defeat, our deception and our pain. Fawzi Fahmi too allowed himself to introduce a great number of changes in the myth, as if it was the destiny of Greek mythology to go through a lot of changes in Arab drama. A political conspiracy replaced the old mythical malediction and prophesy, a transformation that both here and in all the other representations of Oedipus in the Arab world, observes the political importance of this theme. This frequent reappearance even makes us wonder whether the convocation of the myth finally is not a pretext to develop this political discourse, since it allows one to substitute the philosophical reflections, so strongly present in the Greek myth, for the more precise political actuality of the Arab world. In Fawzi Fahmi's version, Oedipus even refuses to blind himself for the well-being of Thebes, leaving the classical solution to blind himself with Jocaste's broche aside.

In 1977, the Syrian writer Walid Ighlassi, was inspired by the same myth and wrote his *Œdipe*, a play which he qualified as a 'modern tragedy'⁵. It was situated in a large modern city, the place where intellectuals and businessmen were facing the newest imported technological devices. It was a play secretly pervaded by myth, since the first names of the characters were no longer the same as in

Greek mythology, charged as they were there by a strong cultural force. No Oedipus, Iocaste or Creon this time, but on the contrary names like Soufiane, Bahy, Modar ..., professors, directors of university centres, informaticians. No longer any sphinx, prophecy nor priest, but rather a conflict between man and electronic brain. This means a transposition of myth, but hardly transposed, a nearly invisible work of mythic materials, demanding a very careful process of interpretation.

However, Greek myths continued to be present in Arab tragedies, as can be seen in the successive use of the Pygmalion-theme after Al-Hakim. Later on, there was *Pygmalion* by the Syrian writer Khalil Hindawi (1942) and *La fin de Pygmalion* written by another Syrian writer Mohamed Haj Houssein (1962), two plays in which the notion of 'l'art pour l'art' is applied and where the imagination is venerated.

But also the myth of Prometheus has been reproduced in Arab tragedy, and more specifically in three plays, two by the Syrian writer Khalil Hindawi *Le voleur du feu* (1945) and *La rose du volcan* (1960), and one by the Moroccan Mohamed Kaghat *Prométhée 91* (1991). Whereas the *Prometheus* of the Syrian Hindawi is still heavily coloured by mythical traditions and the narration of the eternal story, the *Prometheus* by Kaghat is situated in the Arabic Gulf, and more precisely, during the second Gulf War. His protagonist is certainly still charged by beliefs which characterize his original site, but on the other hand, he is also situated within Islamic traditions and Arabic myths: he is a hero and a saviour, bringing civilisation to the Arab world, evoking on the very moment of the collapse of contemporary myths (Jamal Abdenasser, Saddam Houssein...) a kind of nostalgia present in the great myths.

Also the myth of Antigone has been present in recent Arabic tragedy. The Syrian writer Saad Allah Wannous wrote in 1965 *L'émissaire inconnu dans les funérailles d'Antigone*, a play which reflected upon the political reality of the present-day Syria. The Syrian author Riad Ismat took his inspiration from the same myth writing in 1978 *Le deuil sied à Antigone*, a tragedy which recalled the trilogy written by the American playwright Eugène O'Neill *Le deuil sied à Electre*. Although the myth of Antigone largely remained invisible in Riad Ismat's play, still it could easily be recognized and dealt no longer with the battle of the *Seven against Thebes*, but rather with Lebanese civil war.

Moreover, not only did Arabic dramatists find their source of inspiration in the great Greek myths, present as they were from the origins of theatre, they also

relied upon mythological material hardly known or present in western tragedy. This is the case with the Syrian writer Khalil Hindawi who, in 1962, wrote his *Sisyphé*, a play which highlighted eternal human suffering and its conflict with the mysterious divine imperatives, but which also presented Sisyphus fighting and revolting. The Syrian Saad Allah Wannous also relied upon a myth which is hardly known in western tragedy, the one by Medusa, the famous sorceress who could transform everything she looked at into stone. In 1963 he wrote *Méduse regarde la vie dans les yeux*, staging the antagonism between science and art, love and power, underscoring at the end of this tragedy that power meant the greatest danger for mankind.

These few lines present a short outline of the way that Greek mythology has been used in the Arab dramatic system, a track in a civilisation which is not a native given one, and in a culture where it is not an object of belief, not well known, and where it has been presented to a public which has not been instructed in it. That's why it has been read, re-read, transformed, deformed and interpreted by Arabic dramatists, who have modified the artistic treatment of myth, and the relationship to myth, turning the Arabic theatre which was inspired by Greek mythology, into the most political of Arabic theatres.

Some remarks:

- 1) If the Egyptian Al-Hakim was the first Arab writer to have introduced Greek mythology in the Arab literary system, then the Syrian Khalil Hindawi can be considered the Arabic dramatist who has written the largest number of plays inspired by Greek mythology.
- 2) If, of all occidental writers, the French dramatists are the ones who had most to do with Greek mythology, then, of all Arab writers, the Syrian dramatists are the ones who have been most inspired by this mythology, for example Khalil Hindawi, Abderrahman Abou Qaws, Mohamed Haj Houssin, Saad Allah Wannous, Ali Ouqla Arsan, Riyad Ismat, Walid Ikhlassi..., to name just a few.
- 3) Egyptian writers have been mostly attracted by the myth of Oedipus. Between those to have written an Oedipus, we mention: Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Ali Salem, Fawzi Fahmi...
- 4) If the myth of Pygmalion has not had a wide appeal among western dramatists, it has attracted a lot of Arabic dramatists, especially Al-Hakim, Khalil Hindawi and Mohamed Haj Houssin, all of whom wrote a *Pygmalion*.
- 5) If the German writer Heinrich Von Kleist (1777-1811) was the first dramatist to have transferred –within the western dramatic system, the story

of Oedipus from its tragic into a comic atmosphere, writing *La Cruche Cassée* in 1808, an enterprise which has been seen as a very provocative treatment of the famous myth⁶, then the Egyptian writer Ali Salem realized the same kind of treatment of the same myth, writing *C'est toi qui a tué le monstre* in 1969, a comedy.

6) If Arab dramatists have imitated Greek and western writers, referring to the same myths which made up the glory of western foundational texts, they differentiated themselves by elaborating myths hardly known, or lacking a great career in the western tradition.

7) Since Greek myths treated in the Arab dramatic system happen to be myths used outside of all belief, and outside of the context of their origin, Arabic dramatists allowed themselves to assemble in one and the same play, myths which were not interrelated. And so it happened that the Egyptian Al-Hakim gathered in his *Pygmalion* three different myths: Pygmalion, Narcissus and Galatea. The Syrian Ali Oqla Arsan brought together in his play *Maternité* three myths: Oedipus, Antigone and Electra. The Moroccan Mohamed Kaghat assembled in his *Mythes contemporains* (1993) three myths: Io, Antigone and Electra.

8) Since Greek mythology is hardly known by an Arab audience, Arab dramatists felt obliged—in their dramatic systems—to tell the story, to present the plot, to fill in the white spaces brought about by specific cultural causes. Sometimes this storytelling was successful from an artistic and literary point of view, sometimes it was so naive that it resulted in a total failure.

9) In the beginning, when Arab dramatists, in their tragedies, evoked Greek myths, it was especially meant to present questions of a metaphysical and theological order, questions dealing with the absolute sense of beings and things. It has only been after a number of political, social and economic defeats, and after a great number of military losses, that Arab writers have started to treat the same myths in order to discuss everyday problems, also to think about Arab political systems, social, economical and cultural questions, and also about the sense of the proper developments of the tragedies they wrote

10) The presence of Greek mythology has proved to be a dominant one in Arab tragedy, more important than any other mythology, since only few Arab writers, with the exception of the Egyptians, have been able to approach Pharaonique mythology, and with the exception of Iraqi dramatists, only few Arab dramatists have been visiting Babylonian mythology. Nevertheless, most Arab writers have been able to adapt, visit and convolve easily Greek mythology, as if it were a moment belonging to Arab culture itself.

11) If the use of Greek mythology in the western dramatic system has been an artistic choice, a return to roots, a nostalgic longing for sense, as well as a desire to write on the basis of a story, facing some other writing practices where the stories have been fading out⁷, often enough, in the Arab dramatic system, the convocation of Greek myth has been a way of formulating silently whatever what one was not allowed to say loudly or to say in a direct way, faces and voices of a mythic character being used in order to sidestep every kind of censorship. Often enough, this has been an obligation rather than an artistic or literary choice. That is why the Syrian Khalil Hindawi spoke in the name of most Arab writers, saying: "When I discovered that I could not talk about reality as I wished... I returned, as a lost one, towards myths, this time towards Greek myths »⁸

NOTES

1. Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *Préface d' "Oedipe roi"*, Le Caire, 1977, Bibliothèque des littératures, p. 31.
2. Jacques Schérer, *Dramaturgies d'Oedipe*, Paris, 1987, P.U.F, p. 180.
3. Moustapha Abdallah, *Le mythe d'Oedipe dans le théâtre contemporain*, Caire, 1983, p. 104.
4. Ibid., p. 137.
5. Walid Ighlassi, *Oedipe : Tragédie moderne*, Libye, 1981.
6. Jacques Schérer, o.c., p. 182.
7. Cf. *Le retour du mythe ou le travail de l'origine*, in : Les cahiers des Lundis, 1993/1994, p. 31-32. (Association théâtrale, Paris)
8. Khalil Hindawi, as mentioned by Ahmad Ziyad Mhabak, in : *Le mouvement de l'écriture théâtrale syrienne (1945-1967)*, Damascus, 1986, Les éditions de l'union des écrivains arabes, p. 303.