

THE QUEST OF ISIS FOR LAW AND JUSTICE : MAAT. VERSIONS OF HER DRAMA FROM PHARAONIC TIMES TILL THE 20th CENTURY

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Isis, mother-goddess, goddess of magic and healing, consort to Osiris and mother of Horus, is one of the Abydos Triad. This consisted of the Father/Osiris, the Mother/Isis, and the Son/Horus and was part of the Great Enead, made up of nine divinities. The cult of Isis spread beyond Egypt to Syria, Palestine, Greece and the Roman Empire and she was worshipped until Christian times. In Robert Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass* by the Roman writer Apuleius, second century AD, the Goddess herself appears and explains:

'I am Nature, the universal Mother... The primeval Phrygians call me Pessinuntica, Mother of the Gods; the Athenians sprung from their own soil, call me Cecropian Artemis; for the islanders of Cyprus I am Paphian Aphrodite... and the Egyptians who excel in ancient learning and worship me with ceremonies proper to my Godhead, call me by my true name, namely Queen Isis'.¹

In Egypt the Festivals of Isis were very popular and an Isis-play was performed every year. Other dramas in which she had a prominent role were *The Coronation Drama* and *The Memphite Drama*, also known as *The Memphite Theology* (c.1100) and a earlier text *The Triumph of Horus*. This text was made up of sixteen pages, set on papyrus, and dating back to the Twentieth Dynasty, the reign of Ramesses V (c. 1147- c.1143). A more permanent but briefer version of this drama exists on the walls of the Ptolemaic Temple of Horus at Edfu. As a powerful, domineering figure in Egyptian mythology, showing no fear or signs of intimidation for her enemies as the Forces of Evil - the Sungod Ra and Set- writers turned to her as a source of inspiration. Prominent among them was Tawfiq Al-Hakim, the father of modern, 20th century Egyptian drama who completed a version in 1955: "Ever since the writing of *Sharazade* in 1930 the character of Isis was destined to materialize... between both women was a similarity seen in the relations with their husbands. Each achieved something glorious for her husband".² Not surprisingly, this vision was criticized by feminist author Nawal Al Sadawi who decided to write her one, and only, play *Isis* (1986) to rescue the ancient goddess as an important icon and example for the women of Egypt.

In my article I want to outline the Isis character in these three different versions. It is clear that Isis' quest for justice touches the realms of suffering and pain. Her never-ending patience and love, her endurance, bring her in the end the victory for her son Horus. Her drama offers thus no tragic ending but a form of poetic justice which belongs in the domains of religion, be it Islamic or Christian, or in the much older Pharaonic concept of 'maat', concerning law, justice and order, which seems to forecast the Greek concept of *dike*.

Pharaonic Times

Egyptian mythology draws Isis as the devoted wife of Osiris, king of the lands, and loving mother of Horus. Her tale, narrated in Egyptian villages, tells how Osiris' envious brother, Set, contrives a plan to trap the good king in a box, which he tosses into the Nile. Isis patiently follows its trace and discovers the box lodged in the trunk of a tree, in Byblos, Syria. The king of Byblos, struck by the tree's huge size, has it cut down and placed in his palace as a pillar. Isis, disguised as a woman, is employed as nurse for the King's son. At night, she places the child in the fire but his horrified mother, snatches him away, whereupon Isis reveals herself as the Goddess of Magic and Healing, and how it was her intention to make the child immortal. Awed by this revelation, the King asks how he may serve Isis and she demands the tree that has been fitted as a main pillar for his palace. Granted her desire, she takes Osiris back to Egypt. She revives him by her magic spells and conceives her son, Horus. When the evil Set discovers Osiris' return he kills him and cuts up the body into fourteen pieces, which he hides in different places. Again the patient Isis searches for them and gathers them, making Osiris whole again but he is doomed to the underworld where he rules as Lord of the Dead. She then hides Horus, whom she watches over until he is old enough to avenge his father's murder and restore his throne.

These acts of stamina and patience endeared Isis to the people everywhere and she came to be regarded as the eternal mother of life and of all living things in her struggle against the evil Set, and in the retrieval of her son's right to succession in place of his murdered father, Osiris. "Hor (later known as Horus to the Greeks) was described in various texts as fighting a ritual combat with another male deity known as Set. Set is generally identified as the uncle or brother of Hor. The fights symbolized the conquest of Hor over Set, Hor symbolizing light and good, Set standing for darkness and evil".³ The temple priests acted out the plays and the king had a role to play which was probably performed by somebody else. A Chorus made up of the temple's singers and musicians probably also existed, with

whom the audience joined the chant, "Hold fast, Horus, hold fast!" referring to the striking of the evil Set with harpoons, the annihilation of the enemy and the restoration of order after chaos (p.31). The town spectators, the privileged audience seated at the Sacred Lake, the actors and the Chorus, all took part in the play: "All knew the story, all understood its significance, all were intensely excited and involved.... in particular at points of excitement and of tension, there would be completely unrehearsed and spontaneous interventions from the onlookers ... encouragement and incitement of Horus ..." ⁴.

The Triumph of Horus was acted annually on the 21st day of the second month of spring. Its performance was believed to have a magical effect but more importantly a political significance, strengthening the new king's accession through identifying him with Horus and identifying the late king with Osiris, whereas Set symbolized the enemies or invaders of Egypt. Isis plays a major role in this play, as the events begin with Horus' demand of his legacy, after Osiris' death. She is referred to as the great mother of Horus and supports him in his struggle against Set. Thus conflict in ancient Egyptian drama was between the forces of good and evil, between Isis and Set, or Horus and Set. Isis' sojourn can therefore be viewed as a symbolic quest for *maat*: "Truth", "order", "justice" or "balance", ... *maat* as universal order or harmony corresponds with the most fundamental role of the reigning king. This was to maintain *maat* (...) certain crimes were considered crimes against *maat*. These included disorder, rebellion, envy, deceit, greed, laziness, injustice and ingratitude'. ⁵

The action in *The Coronation Drama* begins with 'The Contendings of Horus and Set' which shows Isis' demand for law and justice. A divine court of nine judges is appointed to settle the dispute between Horus and Set, each of whom claims the right to rule the land. Ra, the sun god, presides over this panel, but is biased in favour of Set, who, as a true supporter, helps fight off those who attempt to attack the sun boat of Ra. The other judges are undecided, as Set seems a more appropriate candidate, being older, more experienced and politically and militarily seasoned, unlike the young Horus. Set loudly defies Isis to prove that Horus is Osiris' son, as he was conceived after the latter's disappearance from the land, whereupon he was assumed dead. Ignoring Set's attempts to dispute her claim for her son's legacy, Isis remains firm and bold. *The Memphite Drama* contains scenes pertaining to the trial viewing the dispute, after initially narrating the 'Creation Myth of Memphis'. Other plays, as *The Return of Set*⁶, clarify the powerful stand of Isis and her call for law and justice, despite Set's power and despotism. Although elements of the play are missing, in the part that remains Horus does not have any actual participation whereas Isis appears mid-stage, cal-

ling out boldly to Geb⁷ and the Enead, the panel of divine judges: 'I am Isis, your grand-daughter. Behold! He who has robbed me of my possessions, Typhon⁸, is on the rampage again! Disaster befalls the place in which he sets foot! He has dared to usurp the rule of land through brute force and violence, oblivious of the reverence that should be accorded your majesty. He has attacked Egypt without informing you and most certainly without receiving any such orders'.⁹ Isis does not show any fear or intimidation in this scene, either of the great Enead or of the usurper Set. Her call for justice is complied and Geb issues orders that Set should be banished to the desert. In this text Isis appears as the main protagonist, as Osiris is already dead and Horus seems to be still a child. She acts on her own, without any supporters or help from anyone, but is bold enough to demand her rights of the divine court. She calls attention to the chaos that Set has unleashed with his actions and demands that *maat*, law, justice and order, be restored to the land of Egypt.

Modern Times: Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1955)

Isis' powerful, domineering figure is a source of inspiration for many Egyptian writers who turn to ancient Egyptian mythology for symbols of power and resistance. Among these is Tawfiq Al-Hakim¹⁰, father of the Modern Egyptian Theatre. Isis' strength, perseverance and devotion to Osiris, is exhibited in Al-Hakim's play *Isis*. Set, who is called here Typhon, his name in Greek,¹¹ tells that Osiris is unfit to rule. The author supports this opinion by showing Osiris as irresponsible, naive and passive, in spite of being a man of learning. Isis on the other hand, seems a more formidable opponent for Typhon, commanding more respect than her husband. In Typhon's conversation with Sheikh Al Balad, the corrupt official who acts as his aide, Typhon expresses his fear of Isis in spite of his power and authority:

Sheikh al Balad:	She's a woman ... what can a woman do?
Typhon:	She's not that simple, you don't know her.
Sheikh al Balad:	She's a woman alone.
Typhon:	But strong as a rock ... she'll search for her husband in every corner knock on every door ... and ask everybody ... she'll cause trouble.

Al-Hakim's play is 'realistic' in its approach, that is following a logic of possibilities in situations, motivations and characters. So for instance, instead of having Osiris drown (and revived) after being pushed into the Nile, Al-Hakim makes him land safely in Byblos, Syria, where Isis finally finds him. It is in kee-

ping with Osiris' passive nature as drawn by Al-Hakim, to take up residence there and not inform his wife of his whereabouts. Again when he returns to Egypt and finds that the people believe the rumors spread by Typhon, defaming his character, he makes no attempt to defend himself but is satisfied with the existence of a refugee, hiding in the Marshes and helping the people cultivate their land. He is called El Ragul El Akhdar, the Green Man, by the villagers of Khamis, where he has taken up abode after returning from Byblos. This would seem to refer to his ability to make arid lands fertile, or to the mythological role assigned to him as God of Fertility and Vegetation. It could also refer to his immaturity.

Another realistic aspect of Al-Hakim's *Isis* is that the divine characters of Isis, Osiris, Typhon and Thoth appear as humans, not deities, seemingly under the influence of pre-war French playwrights as Andre Gide, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Anouilh, whose plays, derived from Greek mythology, made the human element the main issue: "Gide and Cocteau and the others find a certain relief in humanizing, debunking, and even vulgarizing ... by bringing the myths nearer to humanity they make them more real".¹² Many Egyptian critics, as Louis Awad, disapproved of Al-Hakim's action, stating that this deprived the figures of their legendary grandeur and dignity. Others critics supported him, as Typhon's treachery is a human trait, as is the goodness of Isis, as well as her firmness and resistance against evil, represented by Typhon. The urge for vengeance, expressed by Isis and Horus, is another human tendency. Mandoor discerned the logic of Al-Hakim's realistic approach as enabling the stage-performance of the play and guaranteeing the audience's approval.¹³

Of course Osiris has ambivalent characteristics already in early mythology. He is believed to have been a king who was later turned into a deity. He had taught his people how to plant, read and write but by mingling with the commoners he may have threatened the order of social hierarchy. The attack upon him and his subsequent dispatch to the underworld could indicate rejection of his philosophy. The figure of Osiris, reinstated by his heir, Horus, was put to use by the pharaohs, who identified themselves with Horus, legally claiming the throne, and incorporating the myth into a ritual performance. These socio-political overtones of ancient Egyptian drama were realized by Tawfiq Al-Hakim and employed accordingly. His socialistic Osiris is depicted as an inventor of water wheels and other agricultural tools, instructing the Egyptians on the cultivation of their land and leaving state matters in the hands of his wife, Isis. Typhon/Set on the other hand is drawn as a devious politician who employs bribery, threats, conspiracies and assassination to become king of the land. He bribes corrupt government officials into supporting his cause and getting rid of Osiris. The trapping of Osiris in

a box is presented as a conspiracy made up of several men, as in Plutarch's version. Typhon also terrorizes and instills fear into the hearts of the people so they will not resist his rule.

These two male figures stand in Al-Hakim's *Isis*, as in many of his plays, in a conflict of opposites, creating a balance of extremes. Osiris represents knowledge, benevolence and compassion; Typhon represents corrupt politics, brute force and power. This is related to Al-Hakim's theory of "*Al T'adulliyah*"¹⁴ (Equilibrium). It is interesting to note the affinity between Al-Hakim's *T'adulliyah* and the concept of duality in ancient Egypt. A. Ismael comments on this equilibrium: 'This is by no means a personal tendency; it stems from the orientation of Eastern society in general, and of Islamic society in particular, from which he derives his deeply rooted belief in the supernatural, and which has established a perfect equilibrium between the spiritual and the material... For Tawfiq Al-Hakim, the more urgent duty was to restore the equilibrium between the world of reality and the world of dreams in which the oriental mind used to live and revel'.¹⁵ The structure of Al-Hakim's play, *Isis*, is based on the conflict between the world of reality and the world of dreams, between politics and knowledge, deviousness and compassion, attempting to achieve a degree of balance between them. Al-Hakim, in his epilogue comments: 'Who should rule the world? The scientist, who invents, discovers and provides food and changes destinies or the other who succeeds in overcoming the crises of the crowds?' His play implies that might is right and that people should be strong to stand against any form of oppression. In view of the people's weakness and apathy and Osiris' ineffectual benevolence and passiveness, it is Isis who must provide the required resistance and resilience against Set's autocratic plans. She demands justice, law and order in a world dominated by corruption and power. Undaunted by the tremendous forces she confronts she resorts to subterfuge, even stooping to the wiles employed by her arch enemy, Set. She bribes Sheikh Al Balad to bear witness with her in court against his former master and so wins her case about the succession of her son Horus. The end of the drama does not evoke feelings of excitement but a sense of disappointment at the yielding of principles, morals and ideals in the face of corruption, brute force and treachery. Left with the *overwhelming question*, to borrow Eliot's famous query, about the meaning of the triumph of Horus at the end of the drama the author returns the question to his reader with another question: 'Is it morally wrong to use the corrupt means employed by one's enemy or better to remain pure but risk being destroyed, as seen in Osiris' case?' With the 'dirty hands' obtained through bribery and corruption, Isis managed to arrange 'poetic justice', but not as a triumph of its own accord but by means of the power of evil...'¹⁶

Feminist Times: Nawal al Sadawi (1986)

Nawal Al Sadawi¹⁷, international famous feminist writer, considered Hakim's Isis a poor shadow of the actual mythological figure and an insult to Egyptian women, who have always regarded themselves as offspring of the ancient goddess. She had even made reference to herself by entitling her autobiography: *A Daughter of Isis*. To remedy Al-Hakim's offensive incursion against women, Al Sadawi decided to write her *Isis*, 1986, a play in two acts. She claimed she would write the actual story of Isis. Her play is a re-reading of the original myth in the context of an actualized feminist discourse. In her preface she deprecates Al-Hakim's comparing of Isis to Penelope, the faithful wife of Greek hero Odysseus, and Sharazade of *A Thousand and One Nights*. The comparison, she notes, calls for an appraisal of their wifely devotion and motherhood, totally disregarding all other human qualities: 'Tawfik Al Hakim's patriarchal philosophy, which views woman only as a shadow in her husband's footsteps, prevents him from seeing the multidimensional character of Isis ... as the Goddess of wisdom, knowledge and speed...not only did she love justice but sought for it.' (pp. 11-12). Gender politics dominate Al Sadawi's *Isis*, which opens with a scene in which Ra, the Sun god shows favoritism towards Set, promising him the land, in exchange for the latter's protection of the Sun-god's boat. Ra expresses contempt for women in general: 'The heir must be a male...a man...not a woman or female. The reign of women has come to an end and that of manhood, power and terror has begun....' (p. 24). Many important issues are raised in this opening scene: terrorization, dictatorship and male rule. Ra is seen in following scenes complaining of the infidelity of his favorite concubine who has betrayed him with one of his slaves, a black slave. It is the story of *A Thousand and One Nights*, once more employed by Al Sadawi intertextually, revealing how Ra's chauvinistic slogans are hollow echoes of impotence. Set also reveals that he desires to ravish Isis but has failed to do so because of her superior power and intellect.

Al Sadawi's gender discourse stridently challenges patriarchy: 'The play's scope is extended, in the attack against patriarchy'.¹⁸ Set delivers a pompous lecture on the pre-destined domestic role for women and that of leadership for men, since men are physically superior, but is curtly checked by an amusing reposte from the clever goddess: 'If whoever is physically superior should rule, why aren't we ruled by mules? Doubtlessly mules are stronger than you, Set ...' (p. 84). The reply would also seem to be directed to Al Hakim's inferred suggestion of the superiority of power. As Al-Hakim before her, Al Sadawi tries to avoid supernatural contrivances, but retains Isis' position of goddess. To explain Osiris' appearance after his supposed drowning, she inverts the boatman incident belonging to the myth, but especially as it appears in Al-Hakim's play. Instead of speaking contemptuously of

women, the courageous sailor expresses his admiration for the goddess and tries to help her in spite of Set's commands that none should help her. As Isis is also the Goddess of Navigation, he announces, 'You saved me from drowning when I was out at sea. I have brought you a gift from Syria ... [*opens a wrap in his hand*]. Dates of Syria....' (pp. 87-88). The dates are symbolic of the child, Horus. In the following scenes, the sailor is called Osiris, transforming into her beloved husband. In this manner Al Sadawi draws the figure of Isis in a modern light, choosing her own mate and fashioning him in the image she desires. The angry Set challenges the new Osiris: 'If you are Osiris, Isis' husband, then you must be my brother; are you my brother?', who answers: 'No, I'm not your brother and I don't want to be....' (p. 109). The 'old' Osiris does not appear at the beginning. The opening announces his disappearance as in the myth and plays of ancient Egypt. When he returns it is only for a short time. Isis searches for him, but refuses to acknowledge his death: 'No! He is not dead. Osiris is the God of Goodness and gods do not die and goodness will never come to an end in this world. Osiris, the God of Kindness lives on in my heart and in the heart of every kind human ... Osiris is love ... is beauty ... is morality ... is peace ...' (p. 46).

Employing a technique of symbolic representation, Al Sadawi does not attempt to adopt Al Hakims realism drawn from Greek Classicism, but moves in the other direction towards the ancient drama form of Egypt concentrating on Isis as the main protagonist, a powerful, assertive, (tragic) heroine. Her quest is twofold, the search for Osiris and for justice. She is accompanied by 'Maat' and insists on restoring Osiris, the symbol of love, peace and harmony. These can be attained only in the presence of law, order and justice, which Sadawi re-enacts through the ancient Egyptian conflict between Isis and Set, order and chaos, law and crime, justice and tyranny. The political innuendo referring to the invading elements in Pharaonic plays, as *The Triumph of Horus*, is discerned in the role of Ra, who, as in the myth seems favorably inclined to Set for services rendered. In order to allude to contemporary social and political issues, however, Ra is given a more prominent role in Al Sadawi's play, assuming the role of a tyrant who fuels Set's growing ambition through bribery and unlawful allotments. Presented as an overbearing dictator, who needs the support of blackguards like Set to maintain his rule, Ra has nudged Nut, the sky goddess, out of political life into the shadows of domestic life. Under house-arrest, she is not to be spoken of anymore. Ra's example is followed by Set, who tries to do the same with Isis but fails. Ra echoes the illustrious Shahrayar in his sexual frustration and misogyny. Unable to impose fidelity on his concubine, who produces a dark-skinned child, Set advocates the violent abuse of women in blind retaliation. In the final courtroom scene, Isis, the eternal representative of Egyptian women, avenges them by brus-

hing aside his edicts as a point for judicial reference in the trial:

SET: (protesting): I am the chief magistrate by command of the Great Ra.

ISIS: You cannot be judge and defendant, too, and the God Ra's orders do not apply to this court. It is a public court and not all present believe in Ra. There are various gods and religions and in this court of justice we cannot impose only one god or one religion (p. 127).

Resolving the conflict in a public rather than a divine court, Al Sadawi's play echoes the Pharaonic plays in concluding with the triumph of law and justice in the face of tyranny and oppression. It also refers to contemporary socio-political issues such as assertive feminism in the face of male dominance and the role of the masses in political representation. Having criticized Al-Hakim for allowing Isis to appear as a helpless woman and resorting to Set's corrupt methods of bribery, she avoids the same pitfall by slightly switching the situation. In her play it is the brutal military commander of Set's armies who approaches her, heavy with guilt, offering to help in any way, as atonement for his past sins. Assigned the difficult task of luring Set to the court, he is stabbed by the furious God of Evil. Al Sadawi ends her play in true ancient Egyptian style, as she promised to do in her preface, with Set compromising himself publicly; chaos and anarchy receding before the power of law, justice, order and harmony. The pursuit of *maat*, law, justice and order in the previously viewed variations on the Isis-Osiris theme reveals two interesting aspects of the social and political implications in Egyptian drama, both ancient and modern. In all of them Isis insists on attaining all her legal rights as an Egyptian citizen. The eternal demand for *maat*, justice, is in all these plays, ancient and modern, rooted in and expressed through myth: 'Myths are permanent. They deal with love; with war; with sin; with tyranny; with courage; with fate: and all in some way or other deal with the relation of man to those divine powers which are sometimes felt to be irrational, sometimes to be cruel, and sometimes, alas, to be just'.¹⁹

The search for *maat*, justice, law and order, is a difficult mission especially in the face of evil and power. Egyptian duality however dictates the joining of opposite forces. Isis acts as a neutralizing force, uniting them all. Her quest comes to a successful end only to be renewed again and again with the withdrawal and subsequent flood of the Nile waters, whereupon it is re-enacted by another Isis, in an eternal flow as a never-ending quest for *maat*: law, justice and order.

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NOTES

- 1 Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman*, New York, 1990, pp.22-23
- 2 Tawfik Al-Hakim, *Isis*, Al Fagalla, Maktabet Misr, 1988, p.115
- 3 M. Stone, *op. cit.*, p.89
- 4 H.W.Fairman, translated and edited, *The Triumph of Horus*, London, 1975, p.51
- 5 Lorna Oakes & Lucia Gahlin, *The Mysteries of Ancient Egypt*, London, 2003, p.462
- 6 This play is inscribed on a papyrus, referred to as the Louvre Papyrus 3129, and was deciphered by the famed Egyptologist, Etienne Drioton. Probably inspired by the Horus-Set trial of the Shabaqo Stone, it seems to have been written for public performances.
- 7 The divine personification of the earth and husband of the sky goddess Nut. The father of Isis, Osiris, Set and Nephthys, he is inclined in the favour of his grandson, Horus, during the trial but hesitates in expressing this.
- 8 Cf 7.
- 9 Etienne Drioton, *Le Théâtre dans l' Ancienne Egypte* (Al Masrah Al Misri Al Kadeem), Cairo, 1986
- 10 Born in Alexandria (1898-1987), he grew attached to the theatre; the performances of the time were basically adaptations of Western drama. Sent by his father to Paris, to study law, Al Hakim came to the realization that the void that existed between Egyptian theatre and World theatre could only be bridged by employing the basics of Greek theatre within a Middle Eastern context. He was impressed by the French Theatre and dramatists. He was also highly interested in the plays of Shaw, Ibsen, Pirandello and Maeterlinck.
- 11 Al-Hakim uses the Greek name for Set, Typhon. He also uses much of Plutarch's version of the Isis-Osiris myth.
- 12 Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, New York/Oxford, 1985, pp. 532-533
- 13 Mohamed Mandoor, *Masrah Tawfik al Hakim*, Cairo, 1966, pp. 44-45
- 14 Al-Hakim's concept of *Al T'adulliyah (equilibrium)* is based on a balance between all natural elements; in the sphere of intellect and literature it maintains a balance between matters of the soul and body, mind and heart, good and evil. See Ahmed Sakhsookh, *Tawfik Al Hakim*. Cairo: El Hayaa El Masriyah El Aama L'il-kitab, 2002, pp. 17-63.
- 15 A. Ismael, *Tawfiq Al Hakim: His concept of Equilibrium*, in: Noosoo Inglizia Fi Al Adeb Al arabi Al Hadeeth, Ed. Abdl El Kader El Kot, Beirut, 1978, Dar El Nahda El Arabia, pp.105-106
- 16 Fouad Dowara, *Masrah Tawfik Al Hakim*, 2 vols, Cairo, 1986, 2, p.205
- 17 Born 1931, Dr. Nawal Al Sadawi become a successful psychiatrist and rapidly occupied a high post in the Ministry of Health, from which she was ousted for her outspokenness and boldness of expression in her *Woman and Sex*. She has written countless other books and novels, all expressing her feminist beliefs. *Isis* is the single play she has written.
- 18 Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women and God(s): Nawal El Sadaawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, translation Summer Ibrahim, Fagalla: Dar Al Mostakbal, 2003, p.195
- 19 G. Highet, *op. cit.*, p. 540

**THE NARRATIVE SOURCES OF
TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM'S SHAHRAZAD:
THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS.**

Richard VAN LEEUWEN

The first half of the 20th century was a period of great political and intellectual ferment in the Arab world in general and in Egypt more specifically. Various political movements were resisting foreign domination and carving out the contours of national entities. In Egypt, the nationalist revolution of 1919 prepared the way for a complex power struggle between political factions and the British administration, in which rivalling ideologies, class interests and foreign economic penetration contributed to a new ideological configuration, a new social awareness, and a new sense of identity. Within this struggle, the nature of the cultural tradition, as the constituent element of an emerging national identity, became a subject of debate. The sources of cultural identity were rediscovered, re-examined, and, perhaps, re-invented to justify and determine the boundaries of a national community. The debate was partly the culmination of the process of *nahda*, or 'renaissance', which had begun in the 19th century and which involved a broad cultural self-examination in order to redefine Egypt's cultural orientation and to mobilize the assets of the cultural heritage.

Within this period of upheaval, Tawfiq Al-Hakim wrote his celebrated theatre-play *Shahrazad*, in 1934. In a way, Tawfiq Al-Hakim personifies the many contradictions of his lifetime, the political vicissitudes and, especially, the search for cultural roots and a cultural identity for the buttressing nation. This intellectual endeavour, combined with an astonishing productivity, made Tawfiq Al-Hakim into one of the doyens of Egyptian culture, together with such figures as Taha Husayn and Nadjib Mahfuz. It is these literati who not only laid the foundations of the modern tradition of Egyptian, and even Arabic, literature, but also represented the hegemonic tendencies within the broader cultural debate. In this contribution I will concentrate on Tawfiq Al-Hakim's play *Shahrazad* as an example of the author's thinking about his literary sources, focusing on the main narrative model of the play, the *1001 Nights*, and on the way in which this source is used to conform to a notion of the tragic element in drama. Parallels and differences between the play and stories of the *1001 Nights* will be related to Tawfiq Al-Hakim's quite original distinction between Greek and Egyptian forms of tragedy.