

Antigone on the Syrian Stage

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Abstract Arab theatre has heavily relied on European dramatic conventions since its emergence late in the 19th century. For more than a century, the Arab theatre has indeed drawn on a variety of dramatic techniques and adopted traditions it found functional to treat contemporary issues. The aftermath of WWII witnessed radical changes in the Arab social and political structures that required new approaches to portray them. These transformations have naturally been displayed in the literature, including drama, of the period. Consequently, the Avant Garde, the Absurd and other traditions smoothly found their way in the heritage of Arab theater.

Arab playwrights also relied on European myth for their subject matter. They adapted various myths to the Arabic stage. The Antigone myth is one of the enduring myths that was used, though in different ways, by both classical and modern playwrights. Arab playwrights also adapted this myth for their own purposes. This paper is devoted to the Arab playwrights' employment of the myth. Two Arab Syrian playwrights, namely Saadallah Wannous and Jihad Saad, have drawn upon the myth to expose the evils of the systems. The plays are Wannous's *The Unknown Messenger in Antigone's Funeral* and Saad's *Antigone's Migration*.

Key words *Antigone*; adaptation; Wannous, Saadallah; Saad, Jihad.

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Antigone, the Legacy

The myth of Antigone is one of the Greek myths that not only endured for centuries, but came to have meaning for the oppressed and those whose voice is silenced in

the 20th and 21st centuries. Many modern playwrights and other writers adapted the play. Anouilh, Cocteau, Brecht, Fugard, Osofisan, Brathwaite, Heaney, Carson, and Zizek, to name a few, did so. In the words of Hanif Kureishi, Antigone is a “modern heroine [...] a rebel, a refusenik, a feminist, an anti-capitalist [...] a martyr, and without doubt a difficult, insistent person” (Kureishi viii). Her struggle with Creon is not simply the conflict of the *polis* and the citizen, or that of wills, but one of laws as well.

Hegel, who describes the play as “one of the most sublime and in every respect most excellent works of art of all time” (Hegel a 464), states that the conflict between Creon and Antigone is that between “the unwritten and infallible law of the gods” (Hegel b 261). Creon insists on depriving the individual citizen from any agency by taking the law into his hand as he represents the *polis*, and the laws of man. However, Antigone does not submit.

Kureishi continues his argument: “She is a rebel but not a revolutionary. She doesn’t want to remove Creon and replace his dictatorship with a more democratic system” (Kureishi ix). Her attempts to carry out human law do not succeed in veering Creon from his position and acknowledge his self-blindness, rather he insists on enforcing the laws of the *polis* crushing any signs of dissidence. Yet she manages to defy him and prove that she has agency over his rule by committing suicide, the ultimate weapon in her armory. Her death is symbolic, Lacanian rather than Freudian.

That Antigone speaks despite the despotism of her uncle, finds agency despite his insistence on depriving her of it, does not make her Agamben’s *homo sacer* (71), an individual who may not be sacrificed yet whose murderer might not be held accountable for, nor Lacan’s living dead (271), rather she becomes what Butler refers to in her *Antigone’s Claim*: “Antigone comes, then, to act in ways that are called manly not only because she acts in defiance of the law but also because she assumes the voice of the law in committing the act against the law. She not only does the deed, refusing to obey the edict, but she also does it again by refusing to deny that she has done it, thus appropriating the rhetoric of agency from Creon himself” (11).

Antigone is a complex figure that is both classic and modern. Thus, to adapt the play *as it is* would not do it justice, taking the risk of changing the play for a modern audience, would do. In the words of Slavoj Žižek: “the only way to be faithful to a classic work is to take such a risk — avoiding it, sticking to the traditional letter, is the safest way to betray the spirit of the classic. In other words, the only way to keep a classical work alive is to treat it as ‘open’, pointing towards the future” (xii).

Antigone, the Oppressed

Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997) is one of the most prominent Arab playwrights in the 20th century. His sojourns in Egypt (1959-1963) and later in Paris (1966-1968) were of great help for him to develop his theatrical gifts. His theatre registers a keen interest in issues and cares of Wannous's contemporary Arabic man, as well as being bound to a call to change the Arab present to the better. His first play was entitled *Medusa Stares at Life* (1962). In this play, as well as his other early plays, Wannous is influenced by existentialism and absurdism, especially through the works of Beckett and Ionesco, the latter having greater influence on Wannous (Dawwara, 190).

The first stage of Wannous's career, which began from 1962 to 1966, is characterized by generalization, a tendency towards abstraction and allegory regarding issues of fear, oppression and authority. These issues led the individual into introversion expressed in long monologues which are nearer to narrative than to drama in a language that is excessively poetic. Wannous himself comments on this saying: "I used to write plays for reading [...] I have no conceptualization of the theatre in my mind" (Maala 118). One of the plays he wrote during this period is *The Unknown Messenger in Antigone's Funeral* (Ar-Rasul Al-majhul fi Maatam Antijun) which is based on Sophocles' *Antigone*. The play was written in 1963 and published in 1965 along with its companion play and first of the duology, *The Tragedy of the Poor Molasses Seller* (Maasat Baai Ad-Dibs Al-Faqir) based on Sophocles' *Oedipus*, in a book entitled *The Tales of the Chorus of Statues* (1965).

One of the main characteristics of these plays is their excessive abstraction. The language of the plays does not report or register the action as much as it describes it. This would only indicate the aestheticism of the written word and the self-absorption of the characters, which is the result of oppression and isolation, that led the playwright to write long monologues (Maala 118). However, the plays are political in nature. Wannous himself emphasizes that the theatre was born and will remain political even when it does not concern itself with politics. It is so because when it does not, the theatre is acting politically by diverting people's attention from politics to other less pressing issues, keeping them busy from thinking about changing the status quo (Wannous b, 36-37).

The influence of classical western theatre on Wannous does not need to be stressed. Some of the first plays he wrote are adapted from Greek myths, like *Medusa*, *Oedipus* and *Antigone*. *The Unknown Messenger in Antigone's Funeral* is a one-act play in which Khadhra/Antigone is the oppressed young daughter of Khadhur/

Oedipus, the molasses seller. He is persecuted by Hasan/Creon, the petty spy turned head of authority causing her father's demise in the first play of the duology.

In *The Tales of the Chorus of Statues*, Wannous uses the chorus which he borrows from Greek drama. However, the chorus in his plays (*The Tragedy of the Poor Molasses Seller* and *The Unknown Messenger in Antigone's Funeral*) is made of a group of statues set in the town center to reflect the negativity and inaction of people. These statues represent an artistic correlative referring to the people whose role is limited to commenting on events.

Another radical change in the play is the character of Khadhra/Antigone. She is no longer the outspoken strong-willed girl who defies Creon and buries her dead brother, rather she is a broken-down girl who speaks incoherently, tortured and raped by the agents of the authority whom Hasan wants to possess:

I was beautiful.

The wheat spikes smile in my eyes.

And the roses sing in my mouth.

I was a princess.

And the horizon was rolled for my eyes. [...]

A painful story made impossible by time. **(The word impossible echoes painfully.)** The walls have devoured the horizon .. all horizon. The wolfish creature usurped the throne of the city. The knight sunk in mud deeply ... deeply. (Wannous (a) 364-365)

Wannous's play might be realistic if broken into pieces but it is closer to a nightmare if taken as a whole, as in the doggish face of Hasan, or killing the boy (whom Wannous might have adapted from the boy who enters at the end of each act of *Waiting for Godot* although the meaning and symbolism of each differs greatly) who returns afterwards. The play is not divided into scenes like *The Tragedy of the Poor Molasses Seller*, rather it continues as the dialogue develops, divided between Khadhra's monologues, the chorus of statues comments, and her dialogues with Hasan.

The conflict in the play is that between the authority, represented by Hasan, and Khadhra. The disparity of the conflict is clear from the beginning of the play. Hasan is powerful, authoritative and violent while Khadhra is the opposite — she is powerless and passive. Although the conflict is the same in both plays of the duology, it is not resolved in the same way: in the first play, Hasan wins, while in the second, he does not. The secondary conflict, that is between the chorus of statues

and the authority, is of little consequence as to the development of the play.

Khadhra loses her beauty as a consequence of the oppression and maltreatment she receives at the hands of the agents of the authority. The dialogue in the play can be taken as a long monologue by Khadhra dotted by the speeches of the chorus of statues and Hasan's. She loses any connections to reality as a result of the torture she is subjected to, which is reflected in her incoherent and broken-down monologues. Wannous opens this play in *medias res* which is unlike what he did in *The Tragedy of the Poor Molasses Seller*. In the latter, the audience follow the persecution and consequent destruction of Khadhur from start to finish. While the second play of the duology opens after Khadhra's destruction and her subsequent confrontations with Hasan, which ends with his destruction.

Some critics accused Wannous at this stage of his career of creating characters that are singular and not universal (Ramadhan 65) because they represent only themselves and not a social class that is in conflict with external forces. However, this is the heart and soul of existential philosophy and the Theatre of the Absurd. This abstraction is what makes such theatres, like the Theatre of the Absurd, universal throughout embodying the suffering of man in a lost world. Nevertheless, Wannous soon realized that this type of theatre is not suitable for an Arab audience who did not undergo what the western audience did. It is the latter's experience which made him identify himself with this kind of theatre that relies heavily on exposing the falsity and oddity of life. Due to this lack of correspondence between the stage and the spectator, Wannous stopped writing in this style and adopted a new style, especially after his disillusionment following the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967.

Antigone, the Dissident

Jihad Saad (1959) is a Syrian actor, director, and playwright. For him, *Hijrat Antigone* (Antigone's Migration) is that of the soul under pressure, a search for the self, and an imagined city representing the legitimate child of freedom (Hatahit). In the play, Haemon, addressing his father, says: "You used to see as you wanted me to be, you've never seen me as I am" (Saad). Saad comments on this saying that the audience want to project their preconceptions on the performance instead of dealing with it as a unique, independent entity. He continues, "we live in an area full of immutable preconceptions and an immutable audience who cannot accept a transforming performance. What I present is a spiritual experience that calls for meditation. Dynamism lies not in motion, but in the weight of the moment" (Hatahit).

The play deals with the loss of one's homeland. This loss is realized in terms of

two dialectic relationships: the tyrant vs. the dissident (Creon vs. Antigone), and the father vs. the son (Creon vs. Haemon) (Zeiter 298). One of the differences between Wannous's and Saad's plays is seen here. While the former limits the play to the confrontation between Khadhra/Antigone and Hasan/Creon presenting a minimalist play where the conflict is a dialectic between two contrasting poles, the latter presents, in a play that is no less minimalist in terms of setting and décor, a number of dialectics in addition to the ones mentioned earlier as Oedipus and Polynices who also appear in the play.

Although the play is an adaptation of a Greek classical, Saad considers it a contemporary play:

Greek literature is a great pool of philosophical ideas [...] I consider [the play] a contemporary one, other wise I would have produced Sophocles' *Antigone*. ... I presented *Hijrat Antigone* which is the migration of the soul, of consciousness and of man in search of his true higher self facing all pressures, oppression, and the attempts to kill the seeds of love and freedom. Antigone migrates to another world which might be inside as a new consciousness, like myself as I am in a constant migration in search of something new, like any man and not only as a playwright. Every human being is in need of renewing his life every now and then like a phoenix [...] Antigone decided to leave her city and go into a new world, which might be her inner world, that is to say, letting go for the sake of a new life. (Anon.)

The action takes place on a bare stage covered with sand which brings to the foreground the actor as a human being, who is the most important element in the play in Saad's view. The actor embodies the word/the meaning on the stage as a human being before doing so as an actor. The actor is searching for the freedom of his being as well as the characters she/he portrayed arriving ultimately to the liberation of the audience. Saad emptied the stage of any lifeless objects which hinder and hide the movement of the actor and weaken his presence on the stage placing him in a second place after décor and stage props (Samman).

The play opens with a monologue in which Antigone mourns the death of her brother Polynices:

Antigone: Polynices, my dear brother, with your death you ripped my soul of my body and left me alone to carry this hell in my ribs. Here I weep you at your grave, the soul of our father Oedipus fluttering around us. My hands

shake and my little heart jumps from my breast in longing and sadness. (Saad)

From the beginning of the play, Antigone associates her death with her brother's whose body was left without burial. By revolting against her uncle's decision, she becomes (Lacan's) the living dead whose emigration is akin to her death (Ziter, 298). Ziter stresses that she is already dead as she lives under the rule of a tyrant, without freedom and will. The basic question the play asks, and which haunts Saad himself, is: one can actually run from his fate through emigration, or is his fate inevitable. Antigone's fate is homelessness which the play symbolizes by the impossibility of securing a grave for her brother, and later on for herself. Saad says: "She leaves and enters darkness. Where would she go? Where would I go? If I leave Syria, where would I go?" (Ziter 293) Antigone's homelessness brings to mind similar experiences of Syrians, Palestinians, and Iraqis during the last two decades, which Saad stressed. (Samman)

Creon is a tyrant whose only concern is to keep his authority, and the *polis*, intact. The *polis* disappears from the text/performance with only a stretch of sand left of it; perhaps a metaphor for what wars leave of cities. If the conflict in Sophocles' *Antigone* is between the polis and the citizen, here it is between the tyrant and the dissident. That's why Creon does not threaten Antigone only, he fantasizes about the ways to kill her: "You will die the worst of deaths; to be eaten by the worms if your body found a place to be buried in. You will be torn into pieces and your limbs will be scattered around. If a bird of prey lands to devour your rotting corpse it would not know the limbs are for one body" (Saad). Ziter argues that the relationship between Creon and Antigone is "a conflict between an authoritarian power that strives to eliminate even the idea of resistance and a dissident whose most heinous crime is her existence" (Ziter 299).

Yet, Creon is not only in conflict with Antigone, but with his son Haemon as well. He reprimands his son after seeing him cry at the grave of his cousin and friend Polynices. Haemon replies to his father that he never treated him as a son because of his hunger for power and egotism: "You have neglected me and my childhood and the most beautiful days of my life. You never cared for me. I longed for a word that would give me strength. I longed to sit by your side when I was a child to feel you a father. You treated me like a dog that crosses the court, worthless and without any value" (Saad).

Death haunts the play from its onset. One of the first things to be seen on the stage is the mound of sand that represents Polynices' grave. His appearance on the stage to answer Haemon is a foreshadowing of Haemon's sealed fate: "I remember

the thorn that went in my foot when I was chasing you in the woods we loved. You came and removed it with such skill. [...] Who can remove the thorn your father placed in my heart and the hearts of all of you? [...] Who can return the fleeing sweet dream that dwelt in your eyes and Antigone's beautiful eyes?" (Saad) Haemon joins the ghosts of Oedipus and Polynices indicating his death.

Through the ghost of Oedipus, Antigone attempts to create "a link with others who have lived through disaster and want only to avoid harsh conditions" (Ziter 304). However, the relationship between Antigone and the *polis*, Thebes, is stressed in the play more than her filial relations, which signals a sharp difference to the Sophoclean original (Ziter 298-99), and is clearly seen in the last things she says in the play:

O city dwelling between my ribs, in my soul, who gave my life and showed me first light and drawn my path ... O city who shaped my face as a child and a young girl and planted in me a soul baptized in her holy secret ... a soul clear and gentle like the breeze at sun set, and violent as a sad winter storm [...] Here I am casting my last look upon you ... planting the marks of my eyes in your walls ... I go broken hearted ... no father to protect me and no brother to console me on the way ... I leave you my decaying goods and the memories of a lost lifetime ... I leave my robes ... my jewels ... a lock of my hair ... on your holy ground ... and I turn my face toward the brink of the abyss of eternity ... (Saad)

Antigone's fear is the fear of dispossession which is clearly seen in her relationship to the *polis*. In her dialogue, which creates an agonizing dialectic relationship, she does not want to leave Thebes but cannot live under dictatorship. The dialectic is even more complex than this simplification: if she stays, she will be killed and will not be buried; if she leaves, she will not have a homeland to be buried in. The last stage direction in the play, "Silence ... Antigone stands ... she leaves the city ... towards void and darkness" (Saad), offers no ray of hope. The dissident Antigone is leaving, after having lost her father, brother, and lover into darkness. This dispossession narrates the tragedy of Syrians, Iraqis and others who had to flee their countries during the last two decades of violence that stormed and still storms the region. The play is not simply an adaptation of a classical text, but an apt comment on a human ordeal that is yet to be solved.

Conclusion

Although the plays are over forty years apart, both agree on one thing: there is tyranny and oppression that crushes the individual, and turns cities into wastelands. Both plays depict the head of the state, Hasan/Creon, as one who would stop at nothing to destroy any (potential) opposition to his absolute rule. In both plays, the city is not of any consequence, nor are its inhabitants. The city is never named in *The Unknown Messenger in Antigone's Funeral* and is represented as a stretch of sand in *Antigone's Migration*. The citizens of the city in *The Unknown Messenger in Antigone's Funeral* are reduced to statues which collapse and shatter as a metaphor of helplessness, and are never present in *Antigone's Migration* which is also a sign for their helplessness. The plays no longer represent the Athenian ideal of *polis* vs. citizen, rather they represent the tyrant (both in the classical Greek and modern sense of the word) vs. the oppressed/dissident citizen.

Another departure from the original which sets the plays apart is the twist in the storyline from being about filial love and divine retribution into plays about oppression and dissidence. Another difference lies in that Saad grants Antigone some sort of agency to act on her own, while Wannous denies Khadhra any. Another point of discrepancy between the two plays is that while Wannous ends his play with a spark of hope, Saad does not.

It is both intriguing and tragic that despite more than forty years time-lapse between the plays, and the different backgrounds and ideologies of the playwrights, the status quo which led two dramatists to write two plays depicting oppression is the same. It is also intriguing that both playwrights chose Sophocles' *Antigone* as a model to adapt. Such an area of research, adaptation of classics for the Arabic stage, remains largely neglected. Perhaps it is time to shed light on this area. It would definitely shed light on the nature of the relationship of the system to its subjects and playwrights' different responses to it in a corner of the world that is still beset with internal and external conflicts.

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