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AL-FĀRĀFĪR AND *AL-MAHZALA AL-ARĎIYYA*:
THE LIFE OF AN EGYPTIAN MAN, A TRAGIC FARCE

The writings of Idrīs are filled with original ideas, imaginative thoughts and new means of expression. His writings always provoked unresolved discussions, polemics and attacks by the critics. However, none of the author's work attracted as much attention, nor produced as much critical review as his famous play *al-Fārāfir*.¹ There are shorter and longer studies of the play in Arabic, English, French and Russian. When we look at this apparently rich critical assessment of *al-Fārāfir* we may more easily notice one striking feature, namely, that most of the critics tend to see the play through the prism of Idrīs's introduction to *al-Fārāfir* entitled "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī"² (Towards an Egyptian Theatre). The ideas presented there by the playwright became an obstacle to the objective analysis of the play and directed the attention of the critics towards only one issue, that is, to determine whether this *masraḥiyya* (play) is truly "Egyptian" or composed out of the European theatrical forms and ideas.

On analyzing the critical assessment of *al-Fārāfir*, we notice that with the exception of the recent study by Hanita Brand,³ the analysis by W. Kirpičenko⁴ and the discussion by Fārūq 'Abd al-Wahhāb,⁵ the critics are preoccupied with its form and with seeing things that are not there. Not much attention was paid to a genuine analysis of the play's content. Even Fārūq 'Abd al-Wahhāb, who in his introductory remarks points out the need to put aside

¹ Y. Idrīs, *al-Fārāfir*, Cairo: Maktabat Gharīb, 1977. The première of *al-Fārāfir* took place on *al-Jumhūriyya* Theatre (16 April, 1964). After three weeks the play was taken off the stage.

² Y. Idrīs, "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī", *al-Fārāfir*, Cairo: Maktabat Gharīb, 1977, pp. 7-48. The article was also published in *al-Kātib*, January, February, March 1964.

³ H. Brand, "Al-Fārāfir by Yūsuf Idrīs: the Medium is the Message", *Journal of Arabic Literature*, XXI, pp. 57-71.

⁴ W. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, Moscow: Nauka, pp. 147-162.

⁵ Fārūq 'Abd al-Wahhāb, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Masraḥ al-Fikr", *al-Masraḥ*, July 1966, pp. 170-173.

Idrīs's introduction "Towards the Egyptian Theatre" and to analyze the play itself,⁶ "forgets" his own words and eventually preoccupies himself with the issue of the "Egyptianness" of the play.

In our opinion the critical assessment of *al-Fārāfir* needs to be supplemented. The play requires re-thinking, a new analysis of its interior meaning and an attempt to explore Idrīs's concepts and symbols anew.

When we look at the content of *al-Fārāfir* we tend to agree with Fārūq 'Abd al-Wahhāb who says that the plot of the play is simply-structured and easy to read but most critics' studies make it look as if it was very complicated, and try to find a number of impressive references and search for possible influences by various foreign playwrights and theatrical traditions.⁷ In *al-Fārāfir*, Idrīs presents us with a story about the relation between the master and his servant, a story the basic lines of which we may find in some other literatures but at the same time a true Egyptian story closely attached to the Egyptian world of reality, to Egypt's unresolved political, social and cultural problems. However, the artistic aim of the author stretches further than that. Idrīs, not only presents the disturbing Egyptian reality but with clear signs of optimism decisively calls for radical change, that is, to put an end to the human exploitation of one another.

Al-Fārāfir is composed of two acts. The first act of the play opens with the Author, dressed in a funny uniform: a starched white shirt, an elegant jacket, brief shorts and shoes without socks, addressing the audience and thus preparing them for the kind of drama they are about to experience. He suggests eliminating the distance between the actors and spectators. Furthermore, he emphasizes that whatever will happen on the stage is not the truth but rather mere acting. The Author announces the entrance of Farfūr, a skinny strange-looking, individual, dressed in a clown suit, his face covered with white powder, his head

⁶ Ibid., p. 171.

⁷ Ibid., p. 172.

covered with a tarboosh. Farfūr commands the Author to "produce" a Master for him to serve as well as a Mistress, so he can get on with the show. Soon, the Master is found asleep amongst the audience, so he is awakened and the play can begin.

As the action develops the Master demands a name for himself in the play but after a few suggestions he is persuaded by Farfūr to abandon this. However, he still demands an occupation. Farfūr proposes various professions, such as an intellectual, an artist, a doctor, a broadcaster, a football player, a thief, etc; all of which the Master turns down after making fun of most of them, finally accepting the occupation of grave-digger. Farfūr finds it difficult to obey the orders of the Master and the matter even requires the Author's intervention. The problem is settled temporarily and the relationship between Farfūr and the Master seems to work well. Subsequently, they both get married. The Master marries two women, that is, the one found for him by Farfūr amongst the audience and another one sent by the Author. Farfūr gets married to an ugly, thin, mannish-looking bride. Soon, both Master and Farfūr start begetting children.

The grave-digging business is going slow. There are no dead to bury. The wives need money for their housekeeping. Farfūr is told by his Master to find a corpse to bury, i.e., to kill someone and to his surprise, a man in the audience conveniently happens to be looking for someone to end his life for him. At this point, the obedient Farfūr absolutely refuses to follow the order and appeals to the Author. Finally, the impatient Master resolves the problem, that is, he himself kills the man. Farfūr, horrified at his Master's crime and his growing lust for blood, runs away.

The events of the second act take place sometime later. The Master, angry and miserable because of his servant's desertion, is wondering where he can find him. Suddenly Farfūr arrives from the back of the auditorium pushing a handcart filled with surrealistic models representing Europe and America and bits of guns, aircrafts and gallows. Farfūr offers to buy or sell: old iron, old glory, a hydrogen bomb, a philosophy, an author or an audience. Farfūr and the Master are delighted to see each other. They exchange the news

about their children. It seems that the Master's children, amongst them Alexander, Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler, have not only relieved their father of his work but have also perfected his profession burying quickly and easily millions of corpses. As for Farfūr's descendants, named after famous dark-skinned characters and slaves of history, they have become the victims of the Master's "activities".

The Master and Farfūr decide to resume their life together but on a completely different basis. They agree to try out, with the help of various suggestions from the audience, different relations between themselves. They reverse their roles, become equal; they form various regimes and even an empire of freedom. However, nothing works. Once they have established an egalitarian cooperative they are approached by the dead man from the first act, who is looking for a place to be buried. However, their venture irritates him, and he leaves them without hiring their services. Finally, when all the attempted solutions fail, the Master and Farfūr quit their roles and resume them only when their wives force them to provide for their families. Their search for a solution continues. They even have decided to turn back to the Author. However, they are told by the audience that he has disappeared. Surprisingly, he is delivered to them in a bundle looking like a newborn baby, which they untie only to find smaller and smaller bundles inside, until what remains is too small to be seen. The dramatic tension increases and the search for a solution continues.

Finally, at the suggestion of a stage-hand who has to rush home (his wife is about to have a baby that evening), they commit suicide as a way out of the problem, since death obliterates all distinctions and renders all men equal. However, even this last, desperate move does not help because to his horror Farfūr discovers that instead of their becoming two equal atoms with neither master nor servant, he has been turned into an electron, spinning forever round the proton, his master. The play closes with Farfūr's plea, as he addresses the audience pathetically gasping for breath, weeping and spinning round and round:

Farfūr: Good people, Farfūrs. Save your brother! My voice is going. Find a solution! A solution; someone, a solution, otherwise I stay like this.

There must be a solution; there must be a way out. Your brother is finished. A solution, I beg you. Not for my sake but for your own. I am just acting (his voice fades). It's you who are going round and round!⁸

What are the major issues of this — as many critics agree — great *masraḥiyya*? How can we "read" its inner meaning? Does the play have an underlying subject or element which keeps its apparently irrational matters together?

When we look attentively at the content of *al-Fārāfir* and follow closely its dialogues, we notice easily that Idrīs touches here on a number of themes, makes, with a big dose of sarcasm, detailed comments on the existing Egyptian situation as well as discusses human nature in general. However, our analysis here will not focus on all the details and minor problems but it will aim to grasp the major ideas of the author and present them clearly.

As for the content of *al-Fārāfir*, two major issues may be distinguished, namely, Idrīs's criticism of the Egyptian political, social and cultural order in the 1960s and the problem of human freedom. Apart from these two subjects discussed by Idrīs, we may also notice another important theme, i.e., the issue of modern women and their role in society.⁹

As for the form of *al-Fārāfir*, we have to take into consideration two issues, i.e., the author's attempt to create an original Egyptian theatre and the impact of Western drama on his artistic vision.¹⁰

As we mentioned previously *al-Fārāfir* is characterized by a great level of detail. A first glance at the play indicates a kind of chaos or lack of logical order of any sort. However, Idrīs endowed his play with a strong pivot or a certain magic force which keeps these only apparently illogical ideas together in one meaningful unity. This magic is associated with the

⁸ Y. Idrīs, *al-Fārāfir*, p. 200, v.21-25, p. 201, v.1.

⁹ For Idrīs's discussion on the issue of modern women see: *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, pp. 183-206 and *Khulūw al-Bāl*, pp. 75-86.

¹⁰ The form of *al-Fārāfir* will be discussed in the last section of this article; namely: "Form, style and language: striking a balance between Egyptian sources and Western influences".

personality of Farfūr and the real content of the play is presented by his actions and reactions. Farfūr is the pivot of this *masraḥiyya* and human freedom, the issue he himself embodies, is the play's underlying subject.

The critics easily categorize *al-Fārāfir* amongst the plays of the theatre of the absurd, saying that Idrīs plunges into philosophical speculations about human matters. Did Idrīs here really cease to be a realist (*wāqīʿī*)? Did he really abandon the Egyptian man whose everyday struggles were always his great concern?

We would definitely agree with Ramsīs Yunān¹¹ and point out that in *al-Fārāfir* Idrīs not only remains a realist but his critical glance becomes sharper and his sarcasm even stronger and more bitter. One may ask: How in this apparently absurdist and disorganized dramatic structure did the author achieve a high level of social and political criticism?

In order to uncover the dark reality of the existing Egyptian situation during the 1960s, criticize the political, social and cultural order of the country and present some kind of solution and direction, Idrīs "discovered" for his play an unusual and fascinating personality. He created the character of Farfūr, a modern Egyptian jester. This funny looking individual, a wag who smoothly combines charm with a sharp tongue; a clown, who through laughter, seeks to create a new philosophy for mankind, enabled the author to speak plainly and sarcastically about all the Egyptian forbidden matters and hidden ills.

It is as difficult for a writer to criticize openly the government's policy as it is for a servant to criticize his master. Such criticism requires an acrobatic mind and a talent to create literary tricks. In *al-Fārāfir*, Idrīs fully displays these skills. It should be pointed out that the author's basic literary trick here, namely, the introduction of the fool-clown-type personality is not new in the world of drama. Fools and clowns that may be considered the entertainers and educators of the rulers and societies have been known since the Greek and Roman empires. As for Idrīs's clown Farfūr, we would not argue here as other critics have done,

¹¹ Ramsīs Yūnan, "al-Fārāfir", *al-Kātib*, June 1964, pp.50-54.

whether Farfūr is truly Egyptian or not, whether his roots can be traced to the West or the East or whether he is a copy of Harlequin from the *commedia dell' arte*.¹² For the moment we will set aside questions of form and content: What is really important for us here is the purpose of Farfūr's existence in Idrīs's theatre and the effects of his actions and reactions in *al-Fārāfir*.

Criticism of the Egyptian world of reality is present in almost every dialogue of the play in the form of allusions, digressions and humorous comments. Idrīs's sharp and sarcastic glance at the political, social and cultural order of Egypt can be seen best in Farfūr's and the Master's long dispute about the possible occupation for the Master. The dialogue begins in a humorous way. It looks like a funny game which can make us laugh:

Master: I must have a job. Listen, Farfūr, choose a very respectable job for me, boy. Something modern.

Farfūr: How about being a national capitalist?

Master: Don't you have anything better?

Farfūr: I do. Would you like to be an intellectual?

Master: What do your intellectuals do?

Farfūr: They do nothing.

Master: How come?

Farfūr: This question clearly proves that you are not an intellectual...

What about being a singer?

Master: What will I do as a singer?

Farfūr: You say "Ah" for thirty or forty years.

¹² For an interesting discussion about the similarities between Harlequin and Farfūr see: Raʿfat al-Duwayrī, "Arlikinū wa Farfūr", *al-Majalla*, March 1966, pp.115-137.

Master: Just that?

Farfūr: No, no. Melodious "Ahs" of course; sometimes it's "Ah, Aha"... Sometimes "Ohohoo" and occasionally "Eheehee".¹³

As the dialogue develops and Farfūr, in a similar manner, brings discredit to most of the jobs and professions discussed we begin to wonder: Why, in spite of the funny answers and jokes, do we not want to laugh? Instead we become upset. This dispute in its interior meaning is not funny at all because it refers to the existing problems, and the picture of the Egyptian reality of the 1960s as it is presented here is frustrating and disturbing. The government is corrupt, the intellectuals forced into silence, and people with power and money live off the sweat of those who are weak and poor. The Master demands a respectable job for himself. The author, speaking from behind the mask of Farfūr, says plainly that under the circumstances presently existing in Egypt, he is unable to fulfill his request. According to him a decent occupation does not exist. The government posts are filled with the wrong people. The justice system is corrupt:

Farfūr: How about being a lawyer?

Master: What do they do?

Farfūr: You beg the court's justice to judge in your favour.

Master: And if the court does not?

Farfūr: We'll have advance fees, anyway.

Master: No, I prefer to be a prosecutor.

Farfūr: That man who hates everybody for no reason? No, uncle. A judge is better.¹⁴

¹³ Y. Idrīs, *al-Fārāfir*, p. 77, v. 9-13, 20-22, p. 78, v. 1-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78, v. 19-24, p. 79, v. 1-2.

The administration is full of dishonest employees:

Farfūr: O.K. You can work as an accountant. You save people's tax money and take it yourself.¹⁵

The posts which require high professional skills are often given to incompetent people, who lack necessary knowledge and qualifications:

Farfūr: Well, you can work as a physician.

Master: No, I don't know anything about medicine.

Farfūr: Do you think physicians do?¹⁶

As for the ordinary jobs, according to the author, it is also difficult to find a suitable one. The pay rate is low, the work conditions are bad and the work load too heavy:

Farfūr: How about being a traffic policeman?

Master: What does he do?

Farfūr: He is a poor man like the rest of us who do not have cars, yet all day long he orders around those who do have cars...

Master: How about a bus conductor? Please, a conductor.

Farfūr: Do you know how to swim?

Master: Swim? Where?

Farfūr: In your sweat?

Master: Is that necessary?

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78, v. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79, v. 6-8.

Farfūr: Very much so. If you don't know how to swim in your sweat you must learn how to swim in other people's sweat. If you know neither, you'd be no good.¹⁷

There are better-paid occupations, considered easy and clean but requiring a loss of one's self-esteem. Therefore, many people would not like to take them:

Farfūr: How about this one. Work as a doorman at the Hilton Hotel. With this outfit of yours they'll accept you at once and will even give you a clothing allowance.

Master: What do I do?

Farfūr: You'll be a European-style beggar: you stand there in all your elegance and those going in and out will give you tips...¹⁸

Ironically enough also sometimes by pure luck, a person without an education and professional skills may find a job which will bring him a fortune, respect and popularity;

Farfūr: I've found it! A fantastic job. Be a football player!

Master: That requires qualifications.

Farfūr: No qualifications. You throw your books away and play in the street for two or three years until you're a cub of sixteen or seventeen. In time they discover you and you become a star... And all the people in the stadium will shout "Sido! Sido!"¹⁹

The dispute about possible occupations for the Master continues. The Master still demands a respectable profession. However Farfūr's job description brings only confusion and disappointment. He gets impatient:

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 81, v. 1-4, p. 82, v. 1-3, p. 83, v. 1-4.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 81, v. 4-9.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 79, v. 13-15, 17-21.

Master: Don't you know of any job where one can work?

Farfūr: There is one. Work as a thief.

Master: O.K. I am ready to do that.²⁰

While discussing this "profession", speaking from behind the mask of Farfūr, Idris uncovers the brutal fact of the Egyptian reality. The author points out that this "profession" has become widespread; it even dominates the Egyptian work force. These "skilled professionals" are ready to fill all the available jobs from minor positions up to the well-paid, responsible posts in the government:

Farfūr: Now, would you like to be a big thief, a medium thief or a regular-sized one?

Master: Does it require any thinking? A big one, of course.

Farfūr: Well, then work in import and export trade.

Master: And the medium one?

Farfūr: Start a co-op.

Master: Anything but that. How about a regular one?

Farfūr: That's a really poor one who sweats doing it, climbs pipes to get into a house or picks a wallet that turns out to be empty... Something like that.²¹

Being a prosperous thief requires not only some skills but also work. For people like the Master, who according to Farfūr, would not like to make an effort, this occupation is not suitable. He has in mind something better, almost effortless:

²⁰ Ibid., p. 81, v. 10-13.

²¹ Ibid., p. 81, v. 11-19.

Farfūr: How about forgetting all that and working for the government. You have all the qualifications.

Master: How so?

Farfūr: Don't you want a place where you can sleep and dream that you are dreaming? You'll have, from one pay day to the next, a whole month of dreaming.²²

In this statement by Farfūr lies the essence of the author's political and social criticism. As long as the policy of the government remains the same Idrīs does not see the possibility of any improvement. The changes have to begin here in the government offices starting with those very important departments in the ministry and ending with small administrative bureaus. These posts can no longer be filled with incompetent people, with those who lack commitment and determination to honestly work for the well-being of their country. Then, these changes must be spread to all sectors of the Egyptian work-force. The mentality of the people must undergo a quick evolution, their "dreaming about dreaming", interrupted and stopped forever, and their consciousness awakened and alerted to the requirements of the time. Here the author sees the role of intellectuals who instead of being forced into silence or to the practice of various literary tricks and acrobatic forms, should be encouraged and employed by the government and promoted as "missionaries" carrying out, explaining and completing its now correct message.

In his writings Idrīs always displays a lot of optimism and shows strong faith in Egyptian man and his better future. Therefore, the author's "decision" in *al-Fārāfir* to choose for the Master a rather sad occupation associated with human life's end may puzzle us. Did Idrīs really become a pessimist? Did the intellectual crisis of the 1960s and his possible foreseeing of the inevitable "disaster" change the author's outlook that much? Certainly not. In that artistic decision we may see a light of hope. Idrīs made his heroes (the Master and

²² Ibid., p. 82, v. 9-12.

Farfūr) busy in grave-digging because in that symbolic way he pointed out that the "catastrophe" could be avoided, that there were still chances to correct the chosen way, to learn the lesson, to bury all the mistakes and build the constructive program anew because, as Farfūr said: "Instead of living in order to die, we should die in order to live".²³

While in the dialogues of the first act the author focuses on the presentation of his critical attitude towards the existing Egyptian reality, the discussions of the second act of *al-Fārāfir* concentrate on human matters in general and on the problem of man's freedom in particular.

As mentioned previously the play *al-Fārāfir* possesses a sort of magic force which is associated with the personality of Farfūr. This modern fool or clown does not only make us laugh, he also criticizes and teaches and most of all makes us realize that in order to change or improve our existence we have to understand how we live and why. The logic, the simplicity and the wisdom of his idea makes us wonder and become eager to catch and remember every word of it. His revolt against the Farfūr-Master situation fascinates us. Although, we know that it is only a theatrical play-game, it awakens our consciousness and makes us see the need to attain the true knowledge about our situation, to learn more and more and draw certain conclusions. For us, Farfūr is the agent of freedom:

Farfūr: Well, I've decided not to act unless I understand.
I must know why I am Farfūr and why you are the Master.²⁴

Speaking from behind the mask of Farfūr Idrīs makes us realize that knowledge and understanding should be our first step:

Farfūr: More important than living is knowing why we live. And even more important than knowing why is to know where we are going.²⁵

²³ Ibid., p. 85, v. 16.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 135, v. 20-21.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 185, v. 17-18.

According to Farfūr we accept all the burdens and pains of our life because we are in the middle of a certain routine, we do not know anything else, and we do not even imagine that something else exists:

Farfūr: And everywhere it is Master and Farfūr. Who is to be Master and who Farfūr, and why should I be Farfūr and you Master? Ever since life began it's been like that, thinking that that's the way it is and that people cannot live otherwise. But in all honesty, is that a life? Is that a way?...We accept it for one reason only, because we don't see it.²⁶

Idrīs's character is courageous enough to say "No!" to his existing situation. He is no longer willing to obey his Master because he simply wants to "understand", to know why he is being used exploited and oppressed. Furthermore, he does not accept his "role" as it is "written" by his "author". Farfūr wants to be the one who would "program" himself and decide about his own actions and movements:

Farfūr: Oh, boy! Being written is so ugly it's almost obscene. The most beautiful thing on Earth is a feeling that you are your own author, that you can do it any way you like.²⁷

We were all born as free human beings but as the author pointed out in *al-Fārāfir* we created political and social systems which turned against us, destroyed our freedom, made us hate and exploit each other and hampered our creativity. All this became the cause of our misfortunes today.

Idrīs made the heroes of *al-Fārāfir* try different relations among themselves and various regimes but none of the proposed solutions proved to be successful. Why did the author present us with this long search knowing that it would lead nowhere? According to Idrīs, the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 187, v. 1-4, 6-7.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 138, v. 4-6.

situation cannot be solved by the regimes we know. What kind of solution does he propose then?

All the critics are preoccupied with determining if the final action of the play, i.e., Farfūr's desperate call for a solution, indicates optimism or pessimism on the author's part. Surprisingly, nobody attempts to look deeply into the question: What provoked the call in the first place? Does Idrīs call upon us to terminate the relation Farfūr-Master? Is he truly against the existence of Masters?

Although, Idrīs, in his play makes fun of the Master and criticizes him severely he does see the necessity for his existence. Each society needs its big and small masters. This is the law of nature and according to the author, the law to which we must submit or else "confusion and anarchy will prevail".

We are unable to fight the law of nature. Idrīs is well aware of that and therefore he attempts to make us realize that we have to solve our problems in accordance with this natural order. As presented in the play, both Farfūr and the Master were convinced that death would render them equal. However, even after their bodies were turned into dust Farfūr to his horror discovered that they did not achieve anything, the relation of Farfūr and Master prevailed. The thin Farfūr became an electron (loaded negatively) and the bigger Master a proton (loaded positively). Due to the law of nature (physics) the lighter mass began to revolve around the nucleus (the proton is the main part of it).

As the physicists free the electron from its spinning movement and, by the ionization process, make it a free agent, we have to discover our way to improve our existing situation. It has to be pointed out that, although free, an electron does have a master because eventually its actions and reactions are stimulated by the law of physics. When we think about the situation of the electron, an analogy comes to our mind automatically: Isn't this a solution the author possibly had in mind?

According to Idrīs, every human being should be so free to fulfil his desire for creativity, knowledge and understanding. However, since we are unable to change the law of

nature, every man as a member of society should submit to the guidance of a wise master whom he will fully respect and trust, a master who will in return respect and trust each and every man in his society and will be willing to benefit from their experiences and wisdom.

Idrīs continues his reflections on the Egyptian problems of the 1960s and on humanist concerns in general in his subsequent play, i.e., *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* (The Terrestrial Comedy, 1966).²⁸ Although some critics see that as reminiscent of *al-Fārāfir* enriched by new ideas and visions, we agree with those scholars who say that here the author is not as original and creative as he had been in *al-Fārāfir*. The play is long, boring and "heavy". Its content is dense, with too many problems, ideas and details. It looks as if Idrīs has turned *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* into a "debating hall" at several points, depriving the play of life and movement. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the eyes of the critics this play stands in the shadow of its predecessor. In comparison to *al-Fārāfir*, the critical assessment of *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* is lukewarm and unenthusiastic. We can here take note of studies in Arabic by Muḥammad Barakāt,²⁹ Shafīq Majallī,³⁰ Fārūq 'Abd al-Wahhāb³¹ and Bahā' Ṭāhir³² and discussions in English by M.M. Badawī,³³ French by Ch. El-Khourī³⁴ and Russian by W. Kirpičenko.³⁵

²⁸ Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1984.

²⁹ Muḥammad Barakāt, "Qabl Raf' al-Sitār al-Qawmī wa *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*", *al-Masrah*, January 1966, pp. 32-33.

³⁰ Shafīq Majallī, "*Al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*", *al-Masrah*, March 1966, pp. 26-28.

³¹ Fārūq 'Abd al-Wahhāb, "Masrah al-Fikr", pp. 174-175.

³² Bahā' Ṭāhir, "Mahzalat al-Nuqqād ghayr al-Arḍiyya", *al-Kātib*, April 1966, pp. 146-154.

³³ M.M. Badawī, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, pp. 160-161.

³⁴ Ch. El-Khourī, "Yussef Idrīs", *Le théâtre arabe de l'absurde*, Paris: Éditions A.-G. Nizet, 1978, pp. 93-107.

³⁵ W. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 163-173.

Idrīs's former plays show that his artistic vision and literary experiments are always deeply rooted in the Egyptian world of reality. Therefore, before we assess *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, we must ask why the author decided on this boring dramatic structure? Why did he overload his play with so many ideas and write it in a mixture of styles? Why did his message seem somehow lost or hard to grasp? A close look at the content of the play may bring some answers.

Al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya belongs to the theatre of the absurd. This realistic-fantastic drama construction, in which the dream world is combined with reality, is based on one of Idrīs's short stories.³⁶

The play takes place in a public clinic of distorted appearance, crowded with people. A doctor deeply disturbed by his family problems while performing his duties is surprised by a very strange event. His nurse Şifr informs him that there is a man called Muḥammad I who requests a medical certificate saying that his younger brother Muḥammad III is mentally ill and should be taken into asylum. The doctor performs a regular examination and notices that Muḥammad III is not exactly mad. The patient complains about an "unknown complaint" of this world and about hostility and evil among the people. This sensitive young man sees clearly that he cannot confront all this and prefers to withdraw from the world's problems by entering an asylum. Muḥammad I is determined to get the papers. Therefore, he brings a witness, the wife of Muḥammad III. The testimony of Nūnū, who says that her husband wanted to kill her, seems to convince the Doctor. However, the whole affair is stopped by Muḥammad II, a policeman, a second brother who rushes to the clinic with a gun. He warns the Doctor that Muḥammad III is not really mad but that the oldest brother Muḥammad I is plotting to put him away so he can seize his share of land inherited from their father, having already swindled him (Muḥammad II) of his inheritance. The Doctor, who already had some doubts about Muḥammad III's insanity is ready to accept the story. However, Muḥammad I

³⁶ The play is based on Idrīs's short story "Fawqa Ḥudūd al-'Aql" (1961), from the collection *Lughat al-Āy Āy*.

is persuasive in his self-defence and in attributing Muḥammad II's behaviour to his recent mental breakdown. The Doctor, who is not happy to witness the domestic argument between the three brothers, has to decide about the patient's sanity. He is not sure how to decide and the only solution to this difficult problem which he can think of is to interrogate Nūnū, the wife of the patient. However, this woman has disappeared and the Doctor is told firmly by all those present, including his nurse, that she has never been there. At this point the Doctor himself begins to doubt his own sanity.

In the second, third and fourth acts of the play a lot of strange and surprising things occur. The clinic is "visited" several times by Nūnū who wears several masks, and by other living and dead members of the family. Each of them attempts to help the Doctor in his quest for the truth and presents his own version of the story of the Brothers. The Doctor, the one who is supposed to decide who is lying and who is telling the truth, pretends to be the audience and only listens and makes observations. The truth seems to be far away. The Grandfather of the Brothers suggests forming an arbitration court to investigate the matter.

The court led by the nurse Şifr, who was chosen to be a judge, proceeds with lengthy and surprising interrogations and accusations. Finally, the Doctor, who does not foresee any possibility of finding the truth, prefers to withdraw from the whole affair. He is convinced that if humans continue to live in the jungle of problems they have been inhabiting, the brothers and sisters will go on fighting one another over inheritances and possessions. Therefore, the Doctor decides to put himself in a straitjacket, asks his nurse to tie it for him and instructs the policeman to take him to the asylum.

In *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* the author "moves" according to two basic lines. The first is an extensive examination of the Egyptian realities of the 1960s. The second one presents generic human concerns such as issues of justice, good and evil. Here the author focuses on the problem of truth and the human need to search for it.

The play *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* presents us with a "grotesque", frightening and bitter symbolic picture of an Egyptian family and the story of its quarrels, disagreements and

problems. The family of Muḥammad and its members represent all the important layers of Egyptian society. The family is in deep crisis, all the brothers are against each other. Who is the one responsible for the family's present situation? In other words: Who is the one to blame for the Egyptian (Arab) society's predicament during the 1960s?

According to Idrīs, it is as difficult to find anyone guilty in this family dispute, as it is to blame any faction of Egyptian society for the existing chaos and disorder. The regime has failed, so have the reforms. The "court" with the nurse Şifr, as the chief judge, prosecutor and attorney general, reveals the author's strong social and political criticism and points out his angry, decisive stand. Idrīs speaks from behind the mask of Şifr and condemns landowners (Muḥammad Qārūn and Muḥammad Ṭayyib) who leave the land to their sons forcing them to fight for supremacy. He condemns the new bourgeois (Muḥammad I) whose greed for power and money has no limits; and he accuses the army (Muḥammad II) of being undisciplined physically, morally and ideologically. He also criticizes intellectuals (Muḥammad III) who are afraid to come forward to "correct" the message. Idrīs's criticism does not end here. The author condemns working class (Şifr) as well:

Qārūn: It seems that this court knows (the matter).

Şifr: Knows what?

Qārūn: The truth.

Şifr: What truth? The truth of what?

Qārūn: Who is responsible.

Şifr: Responsible?! What for?

Qārūn: Oh, Lord! For the situation we are in, right now!

Şifr: Responsible?! What for?

Qārūn: For this problem, for this misery.³⁷

Idrīs had already criticized Egyptian society severely in *al-Fārāfir*. However, while condemning all the regimes, leaders and reforms, the author was unable to find a solution to the country's problems and hidden ills. In his "grotesque" *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, Idrīs not only repeated his strong criticism again but at the same time he undertook the task of explaining why such a solution could not be found. According to the author, Egyptian society's predicament during the 1960s was that this society was missing the truth, the true essence of the revolutionary message had become misshapen and lost. The people were misled and national unity was destroyed.

When we take a closer look at this dense content of the play, it appears to us as a chaotic surrealistic "mixture" of reality and fantasy, and nothing is concrete, logical or simple. Then, it becomes clear to us why Idrīs's play is composed in this way and why the portrayed reality seems illogical and muddled. In this symbolic picture of Egypt's 1960s, we find the author's strongest political and social criticism. *Al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* is more than a portrait of an Egyptian family. It is a picture of Egyptian society in the deep crisis of the 1960s: ruined economically, and rift with ideological problems and contradictions. It is a society misled and betrayed by its leaders, instilled with fear, and completely unprepared to face the inevitable "disaster" about to come. As the author depicts in his play, the society is in complete chaos, having lost its common language and national unity, causing each of its members to turn against the other. This society needs a *ḥakīm*³⁸ to make a right diagnosis and put an end to the endless fights and disputes. Does Idrīs see in *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*

³⁷ Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, p. 155, v. 7-15.

³⁸ In the play, Idrīs calls his hero Doctor Ḥakīm. This word can be translated as follows: wise, judicious, wise man, sage, philosopher, physician, doctor (H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. by J.M. Cowan, Ithaca, New York: Spoken Language Services, 1976, p. 196.

the possibility of restoring order to this "disturbed" society? Does he believe the truth can be found?

The family of Muḥammad is in a deep crisis and the Doctor is supposed to resolve the problem, i.e., to find out who amongst the Brothers is right. The truth has only one meaning; there is no tricky double meaning. However, the Doctor is not sure whom he is going to believe, he needs someone to direct him and help him make the right choice:

Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib: The truth will not leave this room. The truth is here.

Doctor: How is it here? Please, explain this to me.

Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib: Here, inside of us. We are the problem; we created this problem. The truth is inside of us, inside of one of us...

Doctor: Our existence, what is it for? Why should the truth be inside of us?³⁹

The Doctor is confused and frightened by the lack of understanding amongst the Brothers. He is unable to grasp their illogical problems:

Doctor: The world has become crazy! One Brother is pitted against the other.
Why has my brain become the prisoner of logic?
Is all this happening "outside"... to frighten me?
What will I lose if I go with them? Why do I torture my brain myself?⁴⁰

He is also afraid to decide and he wants to leave this responsibility to someone else. It does not matter for him whether this person can make a decision or not:

Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib: Do you agree that he be the judge?...

³⁹ Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, p. 117, v. 1-6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 148, v. 4-8.

Doctor: Yes, I agree very much. For the sake of the truth let Zero (Şifr) judge us.⁴¹

The Doctor, like the audience, listens to all the people who appear in the clinic to present their version of the story but he does not want to take sides or to acknowledge this "farce". He desperately searches for Nünū who in his imagination becomes the symbol of justice and truth. However, it is difficult to reach her. She comes and disappears. Nobody knows her real face. The doctor believes that Nünū is his only hope to find the truth and therefore he insists on finding her. However, her arrival does not help because Nünū, like the others is far from the truth:

Nünū: I am the picture without a frame. I am the picture that anyone can put any frame on. A picture is a very simple thing. You imagine it is very difficult. You see it and you touch it. You live all your life talking about ideas as though they exist.⁴²

The Doctor is lost and sees no other way to escape this "farce" than to put himself in a strait-jacket and enter an asylum. Only this can give him "freedom":

Doctor: I feel free, free! The future of my children is safe.⁴³

The message of the author is pessimistic. His hero's search for the truth did not bring any positive results but rather isolated him from society. Does Idrīs really see the presented realities in such dark colours? Luwīs 'Awaḍ has called *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* a complete "capitulation".⁴⁴ Has the author truly given up on Egyptian society?

We tend to disagree with the view presented by Luwīs 'Awaḍ. There is a dose of optimism in Idrīs's thinking. Although the Doctor's withdrawal from the "farce" may symbolize his escape from the "jungle of worldly problems" and his rejection of the

responsibility, one can see at the same time his desire for more knowledge about mankind and his problems, i.e., the desire which might benefit him in the future. At the moment, according to Idrīs, this *ḥakīm*'s temporary withdrawal is necessary. However, the author believes that the society's "doctor" will return equipped with sufficient knowledge to find the truth and put the correct frame on the picture.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 122, v. 17-18.

⁴² Ibid., p. 160, v. 22-23, p. 161, v. 1-4.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 163, v. 19-20.

⁴⁴ Luwīs 'Awaḍ cited by W. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 173.