

**POLITICS ON EGYPTIAN STAGE: AGITPROP IN SALAH ABDEL SABOUR'S
PLAY *THE TRAGEDY OF AL-HALLAG***

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ABSTRACT: *Political theatre is as old as theatre itself. A number of serious political plays exist in Classic Greek theatre, like Antigone (441 BC) by Sophocles and Lysistrata by Aristophanes (performed in classical Athens in 411 BC). Shakespeare also presented various political plays likes Julius Caesar (1599) based on true events from Roman history, and Coriolanus (written between 1505-1608) based on the life of the legendary Roman leader Coriolanus. Moreover, Bertolt Brecht contributed to political theatre, especially through his play The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui (1941) which allegorizes the rise of Hitler to power and depicts the rise of Arturo Ui, a fictional 1930s Chicago mobster who cruelly disposes of his opposition. The German theatre director and producer Erwin Piscator (1893-1966), who is one of the pioneers of modern political theatre in the west, emphasized the socio-political content of drama and highlighted - in the background of the events - the effect of politics on individuals. Moreover, in the late 20th century several angry political shows enabled black authors to gain a foothold in creating successful musical theatre as Melvin van Peebles's Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death (1971), and the musical revue staged in 1971 Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope by Micki Grant. Such plays combine a considerable amount of entertainment with political messages.*

KEYWORDS: politics, Egyptian stage, Agitprop, Salah Abdel Sabour's play, tragedy, Al-Hallag

INTRODUCTION

The prominent Egyptian writer and visionary Tawfik al-Hakim (1898-1987) declared that literature in all its forms should concern itself with the political and social circumstances in society. He asserted that since literature mirrors humanity which, in turn, is interrelated with politics and society, writers should depict the political and social atmosphere of their societies. Political theatre, thus, should post the questions that intrigue individuals in moments of oppression and injustice, not with the aim of providing answers but rather conveying deep vision in order to influence and mobilize public opinion. Political theatre is not necessarily against political regimes, but might be for them if they serve people's interests. Nevertheless, the renowned political plays are those against the ruling power, taking the side of the common people that are in need of political, social or economic changes.

Agitprop theatre is politically disputatious or oppositional and aims at raising the awareness and emotional response of people to specific issues. The term "agitprop" originated from the Soviet combination of propaganda and agitation. It is promulgated in world literature in general and in drama in particular as a form of a revolutionary theatre that dramatizes people's sense of alienation in their societies resulting from their fear and subjugation due to the absence of

justice. In the Arab world agitprop theatre is a means to gain freedom and independence from foreign occupation in some cases and from tyrant rulers in other.

Since its beginning, theatre in the Arab world attached itself to socio-political and economic changes, not only as a means of expression but also as a means of change. Starting from the sixties in Egypt different political plays were presented mirroring the social and economic atmosphere and highlighting political conflicts, like the instigation of Yusuf Idris (1927-1991) in *Al-Mukhatatin* (1969, *The Striped Ones*) in which the hero (probably President Gamal Abdel Nasser) tries to make amends for his mistakes and corrects the path that he drew for his people and, as a result, the beneficiaries with interests ask him to step down. The play deals with hypocrisy, falsehood and dictatorship. Another example is Alfred Farag's (1929-2005) play *Al Nar wal Zaytoun* (1970; *Fire and Olives*) that deals with the problem of national independence and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through making the individual a symbol of a whole nation. In other words, the question of injustice and oppression is posted in several plays, sometimes directly and in other times symbolically with an aim to cause an impact and a change without presenting answers to any of the raised questions.

Alienation and injustice are best depicted in Salah Abdel Sabour's play *Ma'sat Al Hallag* (1966; *The Tragedy of Al Hallag*). Salah Abdel Sabour (1931-1981), an Egyptian free verse poet, essayist, editor and playwright was greatly influenced by the American-born British poet, publisher, essayist, editor, literary critic and playwright T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). The impact of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) is evident in Abdel Sabour's play *The Tragedy of Al-Hallag*, the main character of which is a symbol of both rebellion and sacrifice. Both verse plays examine and depict the concept of self-sacrifice and martyrdom: the two main characters, Archbishop Becket and Al-Hallag, sacrifice themselves in defense of their cause. Salah Abdel Sabour depicts the spiritual significance of the death of a historic figure that symbolizes the eternal conflict between secular and spiritual powers, a story which parallels that of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Eliot, in this play, embodies this conflict in a limited number of characters: the Chorus (Women of Canterbury), three Priests, and four Tempters who represent Becket's past and his weakness towards power and secular glory, the four Knights of the king, and Becket himself who adheres to spiritual hope to defeat secular glory. The climax of the plot occurs when Becket discovers the power of martyrdom in defeating evil powers, embodied in King Henry II. After his assassination, the king's knights attempt to justify their blasphemous deed as an act of obedience to the king's orders, the aim of which is to save the country from being divided between the spiritual power, represented by Archbishop Becket, and the secular power, represented by King Henry II.

The fact that Eliot dwells inside the Archbishop's soul gives depth and vividness to the story. The depiction of Becket as a real human being rather than a stereo type character reveals Eliot's awareness of the hidden sides of man's soul. Becket's weakness is embodied by the four tempters, unraveling the strength and febleness in the Archbishop's character in addition to his heroic and even selfish motives. The form and content of the play unite clearly to present the main conflict between the contradictory forces of good and evil, stressing the idea that nobody is perfect, not even rulers or religious figures who are regarded by their subjects as heroes and saviours. The tragedy is, thus, highlighted through the symbolic purifying journey that Becket takes, ending up purged and cured. Like all protagonists in Greek tragedies, Archbishop Becket believes that he cannot escape fate, which leaves him only one way out:

through the power and glory of martyrdom to rid himself of pain and to defeat the powers of evil. Becket's internal conflict is symbolized by the Tempters, and his outer conflict is symbolized by the Knights. His martyrdom is the final stage of inner peace that is entitled only to saints who truly believe in surrendering to God's will.

In the fifties of the previous century, Egypt witnessed a fruitful period of translation of literature from all around the world into Arabic. Thus, the ideas and works of T. S. Eliot became well known among Arab writers along with the works of other prominent writers and poets, like the French poets Saint-John Perse and Federico Garcia Lorca, Andre Breton (the French writer, co-founder, theorist and leader of surrealism) and Rainer Maria Rilke (the bohemian Austrian poet). Some works were not only translated into Arabic, but were also published with prefaces and essays written by Egyptian authors advocating the use of different modern styles in poetry. The aim was to cope with the world, eliminate the barriers between the west and the Arab world, discover the western experience and acquire new understanding of the different social/political challenges.

The modernity of Abdel Sabour is based on his constant concern for humanity and man's social and political problems. The agony and anguish detected in his poems and plays are due to his eagerness to create a better universe through the revival of justice, goodness and righteousness among people. His message is that people should seek beauty in their surrounding world, only then a better world will exist. Moreover, he benefited from and conveyed the ideas of Arab mystics, like Mansour Al-Hallag (858 AD – 922 AD) and Bishr Al-Hafi (767 AD – 850 AD) in his poems and plays. Abdel Sabour also benefited a lot from the Indian Philosophy and culture during his stay in India as a Cultural Advisor in the embassy of Egypt. He was also influenced by the theatre of the Absurd in his play *Musafer Lail* (1968; Night Traveller) and by Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994) when he attended the performance of his play *The Chairs* (1952) in Cairo. He mentioned in his memoirs that Ionesco is one the greatest discoveries of his life whom he added to his treasury besides Shakespeare and Chekhov.

Abdel Sabour was influenced as well by Luigi Pirandello, especially in having a play within a play, which is evident in his plays *Al-Amira Tantazer* (1969; The Princess Waits) and *Laila wa Al-Magnoon* (1971; Leila and the Madman). Furthermore, in the sixties of the previous century Abdel Sabour's name became linked to the Spanish poet Lorca when the Egyptian theatre presented Lorca's play *Yerma* (1934) and assigned writing the lyrics to Abdel Sabour. The influence of Lorca is manifested in Abdel Sabour's play *Ba'd An Yamout Al-Malik* (1973; Now the King is Dead). Abdel Sabour's poetry and plays carry both an artistic and a humane value. He influenced generations of poets in Egypt and in the Arab world, especially that his poems and plays are social and political criticism that carry traits of sadness, and convey the boredom and anguish of modern man, mostly inspired by real events.

The age-old conflict between religious authorities and secular/political powers is cleverly depicted in Abdel Sabour's play *The Tragedy of Al-Hallag* (1966). In spite of the similarity between the play and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* in terms of technique and style, Abdel Sabour maintains his own tone and experience. He believed that verse is the origin of drama and that theatre is the most suitable means through which a writer can express his ideas. Being social critics, Eliot and Abdel Sabour posed the vexed question about the writer's role as a social and political reformer. Abdel Sabour chose the story of Mansur Al-Hallag - the Persian

mystic, poet and teacher of Sufism - who, due to his active political involvement, was accused of turning people against their ruler, convicted of heresy and executed. Al-Hallag's unfair trial is a symbol of the struggle of the intellectual against authority in search of freedom and justice. A similar struggle of a religious figure against the ruler's authority is depicted in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. The play is divided into two parts between which a sermon is delivered by Archbishop Becket in the Christmas morning of 1170. The sermon reveals the real meaning of Christmas: to grieve and to celebrate simultaneously for the same causes. The sermon paves the way for Becket's forthcoming martyrdom, especially that the next day is the celebration of the first martyr, Steven, which indicates that martyrdom is not caused by coincidence since saints are not made by coincidence, and the true martyr is he who surrenders to God's will. The sermon is also a closure to and a rejection of the four Tempters who embody Becket's divided inner self at an earlier stage of his life. They also reflect Becket's inner conflict between experience, lessons learnt and ambition. Thus, the sermon reveals Becket's choice which will be put in force in the second part of the play.

The Tragedy of Al-Hallag is divided into two acts: the first is called "The Word" and the second is called "Death" which denotes the ordeal that every intellectual faces in his society. The first act consists of three scenes; Scene One depicts the end of the events of the play: Al-Hallag is seen crucified on a tree while a number of characters speak of the causes that led to this end. Several questions are raised: is Al-Hallag killed because of his love of God? Is he killed for political reasons? Did the passive, superstitious and oppressed mob kill him? Scene Two is a flashback, the setting is Al-Hallag's house where he is discussing with his friend, Shibli, the Sufi's role in society. Al-Hallag clearly expresses his refusal to limit his role to being secluded from people and the surrounding socio-political circumstances and focus only on his salvation, which is the traditional pattern of every Sufi's life. Shibli regards this as going against the doctrine of mysticism, and Al-Hallag takes off his cloak and throws it away because he believes it separates him from people. In Scene Three, Al-Hallag is in the market in Baghdad square among common people and he speaks of poverty, aggression and tyranny. However, he is tricked by two law officers into speaking about Sufism; he is then arrested and sent to prison. Scene One, Act Two is set in prison where two prisoners make fun of Al-Hallag, who, at the same time, endures the cruelty of the guard who ruthlessly whips him. The guard is intrigued by Al-Hallag's endurance of severe pain, and his attitude soon changes to regret and asks Al-Hallag for forgiveness. Scene Two depicts the trial of Al-Hallag by three judges, one of them fears that the charges and sentence are already set, so he steps down, while the second judge describes Al-Hallag as God's enemy. Al-Hallag is accused, firstly, of turning commoners against the ruler and, secondly, of heresy and, although he defends himself, he is sentenced to death.

The social and political role that the intellectual (represented by Al-Hallag) plays in standing against injustice in order to change the reality of oppression and to reform his society is Abdel Sabour's message to every persecutor. Al-Hallag was accused of heresy and executed as a result of demanding justice, thus, the main reason behind his execution, like that of Archbishop Becket, is political, which renders his death a symbol of the on-going struggle between rulers and thinkers in society due to the rulers' persecution and injustice, which gives more depth to the play. Both Al-Hallag and Archbishop Becket are willing to die for the cause that they believe in, which, according to them, is inseparable from their religion. To attain their goal,

they defied their rulers – the Abbasid Caliph and King Henry – and chose martyrdom in defense of their principles.

The Tragedy of Al-Hallag, nevertheless, is far more than being a mere imitation of *Murder in the Cathedral*, in spite of the easily detected similarity. Although both plays depict a tragic struggle in the protagonist's mind, Al-Hallag's struggle is more powerful as he not only defies the ruler by drawing the commoners' attention to his injustice and urging them to revolt against his oppression, but also by going against the code of mysticism when he became part of public life. On the other hand, resemblance exists between Salah Abdel Sabour himself and the character of Al-Hallag. Abdel Sabour's poetic experience is identical to the Sufi experience in terms of insight, creativity and puzzlement between objectivity and subjectivity on both social/political and spiritual levels. Moreover, external factors shaped Al-Hallag's fate, and external influences helped shape Abdel Sabour's writings.

Socialism was dominant in the Arabic literature of the sixties; several Egyptian plays that interacted with the social and political realities were produced, like Youssif Idris's *Al-Farafir* (1964; *The Flip Flaps*), *Sikkat al- Salamah* (1967; *The Road to Safety*) by Saad Al-Din Wahbah, and *Al-Zayr Salem* (1967) by Alfred Farag. This common inseparability from society and politics exists in *The Tragedy of Al-Hallag*, which highlights the crisis of every intellectual that is embodied in the conflict between the sword and the word. The thinker's social and political role and his refusal to live a separate life from that of his community is reflected in Al-Hallag's words during his trial:

Hallag: What should I do?
 Should I call upon the unjust
 To lift injustice from the people!
 But can a word open hearts that are sealed with locks of gold!
 What should I do?
 I possess nothing but words,
 So let the wandering winds carry my words
 And let me impress them upon paper, a testimony of a visionary man.
 In the hope that the thirsty heart of a great man
 Will find these words refreshing
 And spread them among the people
 And, when he comes to power,
 Strike a balance between power and thought
 And join wisdom with action.

(p. 129)

The fact that intellectuals carry the burden of man and endeavour to rid him of oppression and injustice is the cause of Al-Hallag's anguish:

Hallaj: What is poverty?
 Poverty is not the longing of the hunger for food and the naked for clothing;
 Poverty is the soul oppressed
 Poverty is the use of deprivation to humiliate men,
 To kill love and plant hatred.

(p.130)

Al-Hallag and his mystic friend, Shibli, sufficed with religious preaching and avoided interference with the regime; as a result, they are politically secluded from their society. Al-Hallag later discovers that he lives in an enslaved community, people inside and outside prisons have lost their freedom. Thus, he decides to play a role in his society and help rid his people of injustice and oppression. Instead of seeing God in his mystic seclusion only, he started seeing God in all people, realizing that religion is inseparable from everyday life:

Hallaj: Suppose we manage to avoid the world.

How should we deal with evil then?

Shibli: Evil! I am confused.

What do you mean by “evil”?

Hallaj: The poverty of the poor;

The hunger of the hungry;

In such eyes as theirs, I see a glow

Which means something – something – but I don’t know what.

Words glow in their eyes: I am not sure what they mean.

(p. 42)

Al-Hallag is finally conscious of the necessity of facing injustice which, he realizes, is pure evil. As Shibli was advising him against this, news came that Al-Hallag is accused by the authorities of turning people against the ruler. However, Al-Hallag is not frightened as he believes that he is doing this for God. Al-Hallag’s mysticism helps him endure imprisonment and torture; he feels that his soul is alienated from his own body that is part of the materialistic world with all its hypocrisy, corruption and injustice. That is why he is in no pain when he is cruelly whipped by the guard; his soul is alienated and without it the body feels no pain:

Guard: Why don’t you cry out!

Hallaj: Does a dead body cry out, my son?

Guard: Cry out; let me stop hitting you.

Hallaj: You will tire and stop, my son.

(pp. 88-89)

Al-Hallag’s trial is misleading, the case is fallacious and the sentence is already decided upon. The trial aims at deceiving the commoners and at the same time executing Al-Hallag after accusing him of dissidence and corrupting his society by tempting people to protest and revolt against their ruler. As the Vizier stated in his letter sent to the court, Al-Hallag must be judged in the name of God: if the Sultan’s right can be ignored, God’s right cannot, thus, Al-Hallag must be punished for his crime against God because he claims that God manifests himself in him, which, according to the Vizier and the Court, is heresy. However, the real cause of the trial is political and the name of God is used to eliminate Al-Hallag’s soul in addition to his body and prevent the existence of his memory - after his execution - as a symbol of revolt and sacrifice. Ibn Surayj, a judge who objects on the accusations and resigns from court, sums up the true reason behind the trial:

Ibn Surayj: But that is sheer deception.

You have decided to slip the noose around Hallaj’s neck.

You are afraid that his memory might live

And you decide to wipe it out.

Furthermore, you are afraid of the anger of the people.

The rabble whose voices I can hear now,
And you wish to appease them by sacrificing Hallag's
reputation and name.
On the altar of the mob.

(p. 133)

Part of the play's agitation lies in the fact that the court easily convinces the crowd that Al-Hallag went against God. When the judge, Abu Umar, asks the crowd about Al-Hallag's deeds, they say it is heretic, and when he asks of the suitable judgment, they say he should be punished by death:

Abu Umar: ... What's your opinion, O Muslims,
Of a man who says that God reveals Himself to him
or that God manifests Himself in him!
Crowd: Heretic! Heretic!
Abu Umar: How do you punish him?
Crowd: Death! Death!

....

Abu Umar: Go now into the streets.

....

And tell what your eyes have just witnessed.
Hallaj's words about poverty were a veil for his heresy.

....

You condemned Hallaj to crucifixion, to death on a tree.

....

You were given the power, and you judged.
Go tell the people:
The people judged Hallaj.
Go! Go! Go!

(Exeunt. Slowly, with bowed heads)
(Curtain – End)

(pp. 138-139)

The fact that the stage directions state that the crowd left "*with bowed heads*" denotes their shame and guilt. The chosen punishment of Al-Hallag proves that if the thinker is not supported by the commoners, his cause is a lost one. Abdel Sabour's message here is that people should not permit the authorities to misinform or mislead them, since lies and deception are the basics of all dictatorial regimes and their means of controlling the commoners.

According to Abdel Sabour, freedom and justice parallel citizenship and nationalism, no difference should exist between the ruler and his subjects; the central role of every intellectual is to teach and enlighten people. Thus, confrontation between the ruled and the ruler is inevitable; this is symbolically depicted in Al-Hallag's unfair trial followed by his execution, which echoes the assassination of Archbishop Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* that was justified by the knights as necessary to avoid the division inside the country. Al-Hallag represents every revolutionary intellectual who demands justice for the poor, the persecuted, the ignorant and the oppressed. Like Archbishop Becket, he is a saviour whose death is the signboard on the road of freedom and justice. The similarity between Al-Hallag and Archbishop Becket is apparent as both share the sanctity of religious figures, both have a hidden

desire for martyrdom; they are victims of a conspiracy schemed by the ruler, and both find peace in surrendering to God's will.

Al-Hallag, however, is a more complicated figure than Becket whose internal conflict - represented by the four Tempters - turns into an external conflict without any mystery. Al-Hallag's character is more intriguing as several questions are raised: how does the authority regard him? How do the Sufis regard him? How do the commoners regard him? Moreover, how does he regard himself? Furthermore, the motives of martyrdom differ from one character to another. Becket aspires to become a martyr and, consequently, a saint to render the church victorious and, thus, defeat the monarchy. Al-Hallag, on the other hand, regards his martyrdom as the only means by which his words would be heard and immortalized. The result of his martyrdom is what originally caused it, i.e. his words. Even his flaw is more complicated as he endeavours to unite people's hearts against injustice and declares this in the market place unaware that people are easily misled, especially the ignorant commoners.

Abdel Sabour's main concern is the human being in general whose existence should be connected to a general comprehensive belief not only in God, but also in finding perfection. The reason behind his choice of a mystic figure is his belief that God gives man what he deserves: man could attain perfection on earth only through maintaining justice, goodness and love. However, man infected earth with oppression, poverty and persecution, thus, it is man's responsibility to purify the universe in order to prove that he deserves the life granted to him by God. This could be achieved only through conquering evil even if it costs man his life. *The Tragedy of Al-Hallag* traces the roots of evil and the means by which to defy oppression and maintain justice. That is why Al-Hallag is not just a religious figure, but a revolutionary man, and a social and political critic whose goal is beyond his personal salvation. His goal is to save humanity from persecution and injustice. Like Abdel Sabour, Al-Hallag believes that the poverty that threatens the world is the oppression that people suffer from.

The justification of the Knights after killing Archbishop Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* - that they are merely executing the King's orders - resembles that of the two judges in *The Tragedy of Al-Hallag* who claim that they are merely tools of the Caliph. The Knights, on one hand, and the Judges, on the other, represent the rulers' tyranny and oppression. The women of Canterbury, in Eliot's play, and the commoners in the marketplace, in Abdel Sabour's play, symbolize fear and embody it. In both plays the unjust ruler is not governed by law, principles or even religion, while the oppressed commoners are governed by fear. Moreover, both plays present a traditional tragic hero with one or more weaknesses: Becket's flaws are his ambition for martyrdom and his pride in his religious superiority, and Al-Hallag's flaws are his trust in the commoners' perception, in one hand, and his immodesty that is evident in the trial scene during which he takes pride in his special relation with God and goes against the Sufi concept of not speaking of it, on the other; thus, signing his own death warrant.

Mirroring the oppression that intellectuals suffer from in the Arab world adds peculiarity to Abdel Sabour's play, in which Al-Hallag is presented as a symbol of the Egyptian thinker who stands against the ruler's injustice. During the sixties in Egypt, especially after 1967 war which had a devastating effect, some people regarded President Gamal Abdel Nasser as a hero and believed in the concept of Arab Nationalism, while others regarded him as an unjust oppressor. In his play, Abdel Sabour succeeded in presenting the martyr in a way that is more suitable to

Arab societies through the close relevance between Al-Hallag and every Egyptian intellectual who opposes authority. The intellectuals' eagerness to play an effective role in their societies and to influence people's opinion is symbolized by Al-Hallag's removal of his cloak on the basis that it distinguishes him from the commoners.

CONCLUSION

The Tragedy of Al-Hallag reflects the originality of Abdel Sabour's distinguishable art in mirroring the Arab community and reflecting the spirit of the nation. He was influenced by and read the different works of Baudelaire, Brecht, Shakespeare, Osborne and Ionesco, however, Eliot's influence remains the greatest on him. Eliot's liberty of mind and his peculiar sense of time allowed him to move between different periods of time and civilizations, tackling a wide range of ideas and concepts related to time and human existence. This, in addition to Eliot's varieties of mysticism greatly influenced Abdel Sabour whose belief in the innate goodness of man and people's capability to defeat evil in all its forms is the core of his message, especially in *The Tragedy of Al-Hallag*. His awareness of the challenges that threaten human existence and security enabled him to express people's reactions against tough and painful socio-political realities and to create a new generation of rebels against hatred, enslavement and injustice.

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