

THE STORY OF OEDIPUS IN EGYPTIAN THEATRE: A TRAGEDY AND A COMEDY

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ABSTRACT: *The Oedipus myth more than any Greek legend has inspired several leading Arab playwrights and authors who used the Oedipus myth as a source text for their plays, among which are two prominent Egyptian playwrights and authors: Tawfik Al-Hakim (1898-1987), one of the founders of the modern Arab theatre, and Ali Salem (1936-2015), a realistic comic playwright known for his sarcasm and social criticism. He played an important role in moving the modern Egyptian theatre in a comedic direction. The present paper is an in-depth analysis of the presentation of the Greek myth of Oedipus on the Egyptian theatre. In his play King Oedipus, Tawfik Al-Hakim is concerned with the discord between reality and truth. His aim is to deliver his message that man can become a hero only by his human virtues. On the other hand, Ali Salem's play The Comedy of Oedipus: You are the One who Killed the Beast is a political satire that depicts the myth of Oedipus from a different perspective. The play departs from the tragic portrayal of the Greek myth of Oedipus. Salem sets his play in the Egyptian rather than the Greek Thebes. He successfully delivers a message about the impact of fear on the freedom of expression in different societies. Salem aims at reviving the belief and pride in man in general within the limits of a human being not a god.*

KEYWORDS: Oedipus, Egyptian theatre: tragedy, comedy

INTRODUCTION

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Myth is a folklore genre consisting of tales of supernatural creatures, demi-gods, gods and goddesses that represent the different forces of nature. Myths exist in all folk tales of different nations, depicting stories that form part of their history. A myth differs from a legend in being symbolic and carrying a philosophical depth, thus, till present, myths form a source of inspiration for writers, musicians and poets. Even psychologists were affected by myths; for example, Freud and Lacan made use of the myth of Oedipus in their psycho analysis. Myths are appealing to all people's minds and hearts, especially that they preceded all literary works. In the Arab world myths of Antar Ibn Shadad, Al Zeir Salem, Seif Ibn Thi Yazan, and One Thousand and One Nights (Alf Layla Wa-Layla) are always vivid in the minds of Arab readers and authors.

Myths resemble folktales in their content: having super heroes and explaining different natural phenomena. They are passed on from one generation to another and presented in stories, plays or poems, like Homer's Odyssey or Chretien de Troyes' tales of King Arthur. Folk tales are not

always real, while myths depict man's communication with different worlds and realities and are sometimes considered history, like the myth of Icarus. Though myths sometimes may not be real, people for generations believed that they are, especially those related to cults.

Myths can be classified to different categories: **Ritual Myths** that usually serve survival purposes for different nations, **Myths of Creation** that depict the creation of the universe, **Explanatory Myths** through which primitive man tried to explain different phenomena, **Symbolic Myths** that depict stories of gods, demi-gods or heroes, and form part of the culture of different nations and tribes, like Loke, the Scandinavian god, and the Greek god, Hermes, and there are the **Myths of Death, Hell and Resurrection** that tell of heroes who experienced death or visited the land of the dead. The latter type in particular exists widely in Arabic literature, like the Epic of Gilgamesh which is commonly considered the Odyssey of the Arab world, written in Akkadian during the late second millennium BC.

Myths help man control his surroundings, believe in his ability to control his world and obtain his needs through practicing his cult. Myths and rituals sometimes share common paradigms. Some rituals stem from man's belief in his ability to control the universe; for example, some tribes use the skin of a particular animal to obtain their food, believing that if this skin is placed on a rock or a tree it will attract animals of the same kind. Moreover, tribes of some cults believe that performing a play enacting an expected catastrophe or an evil incident will drive evil away by tricking it into believing that it has already occurred. They believe that they can drive evil away and trick fate by replacing a forthcoming tragedy with an illusionary one, and, thus, their performance is a substitution for evil. These primitive rituals later developed to theatrical performances.

Greek myths are mainly concerned with the deeds and lives of gods, demi-gods and heroes, the creation of the world, and resurrection of the dead. Being a powerful source of inspiration, Greek mythology has been the subject of different studies around the world and survived till present day through different forms of art, like pottery, sculpture, Greek poetry and drama. Classical plays written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were inspired by the legends of the Greek gods and heroes, and Homer's epic poems the *Iliad and Odyssey* mention and allude to many Greek legends related to the Trojan War.

Oedipus, in Greek mythology, is the king of Thebes who unknowingly kills his father (King of Thebes) and supplants him as monarch and as husband to his own mother (Queen Jocasta). His story inspired several artists and playwrights throughout the world, like the Greek playwright Aeschylus who is commonly recognized as the father of tragedy. He is the first of the early Greek tragedians who depicted the myth of Oedipus in his *Oedipus Trilogia* in 467 BC, and was followed by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, first performed around 429 BC, which is considered the masterpiece of classic Greek drama and became one of the most studied plays throughout the whole world.

In Egyptian theatre, the story of Oedipus inspired several playwrights in their tragedies and comedies, like Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898-1987) whose tragedy *King Oedipus* (1949) is considered

a masterpiece, and Ali Salem (1936-2015) whose play *The Comedy of Oedipus*, written in 1970, is a satirical comedy. Tawfiq Al-Hakim was the first to present stories from Greek mythology on modern Egyptian stage, successfully adopting the myth of Oedipus to his Arabic milieu. Oedipus, from the beginning of *King Oedipus*, is distracted from his family by the causes of the rampant plague on Thebes. His state of mind: his anxiety and despair foreshadow his fate. Queen Jocasta is presented by Al-Hakim as a loving and caring wife who shares her husband every detail of his life. She regards Oedipus not as the conqueror of the beast, but as the conqueror of her heart; she explains that she married her previous husband, King Laius, without love and never felt happiness with him. Jocasta's deep love of Oedipus in Al-Hakim's play justifies her reaction when truth is revealed at the end.

The discord between reality and truth is what concerns Al-Hakim in *King Oedipus*; for example, Oedipus was overwhelmed with his happy life with Jocasta that he forgot the purpose of his journey. The same reality also blinds Jocasta of the truth of her surroundings, especially concerning Oedipus's roots and history. The irony here is that the story of her happiness is the same story that will eliminate her happiness forever. Jocasta describes how her late husband, King Laius, got rid of their son with the intention of killing him, the act which, ironically, removed any obstacles between her and Oedipus to get married. She even tries, in act two, to explain that the prophecy should be interpreted only with regard to the reason behind it not as something that should have happened. She tries to prove her point by explaining that King Laius was not killed by his son as the prophecy said because his son is already dead. However, the more she explains, the more the conflict appears between the reality in which they all live and the truth. That is why Oedipus panics when he learns that the late king was killed in the same narrow crossroads in which he killed a stranger. He asks Jocasta to explain more of the exact place where the king was killed and what the king himself looked like, only to learn that he is the one who killed the king. Moreover, the remaining truth is revealed when a messenger from Corinth enters the court and informs everyone that Polybus has died. So Oedipus, who is secretly relieved, believing that Polybus is his real father, declines to attend the funeral so as to avoid meeting his mother which might materialize the second part of the prophecy. However, the messenger informs Oedipus that Polybus and Merope are not his real parents and that the messenger himself is the same shepherd who gave them Oedipus when he was a baby, stating that his birth town is Thebes.

Another part of the truth is revealed about the heroism of Oedipus when Teiresias - due to his hatred to Creon - invented a lie that Oedipus defeated the monster with a lion's body, a woman's face, and wings of an eagle that asks riddles at the gates of the city. With the consent of Oedipus, this lie becomes the reality that the people of Thebes live in, and through the words of the Chorus, ask Oedipus to rid them of the plague as he did of the Sphinx. The truth that the monster which Oedipus killed is just a lion is known only to Teiresias and Oedipus who is no longer afraid that the truth is revealed. Moreover, the truth is also revealed that Teiresias is the one who implied to King Laius to kill his son, the legal prince and who is predicted to kill the king, his father, and inherit the throne, which is ironic because Oedipus is that legal prince. Teiresias debates with Oedipus about how fatal the truth is and Oedipus finally agrees to keep his silence. Al-Hakim here

implies that for a character to be realistically complex, it needs to have contradictory traits: although he spends his life seeking truth, Oedipus agrees to live a lie invented by Teiresias.

Al-Hakim's Oedipus is an ordinary human being who is not only full of contradictions, but also a fraud and a fake hero whose consent to the lies of Teiresias renders him an anti-mythical figure. On the other hand, Queen Jocasta in Al-Hakim's play is a foil character that serves to shed light on the character of Oedipus. She states that she has never loved King Laius, the off-stage character who died seventeen years before the incidents of the play start. She is deeply in love with Oedipus and describes him as the conqueror of her heart as a woman who was seeking true love all her life. The refusal to face the truth when it is revealed at the end of the play by Jocasta who kills herself and by Oedipus who blinds himself after losing her is due to their deep love to one another.

Al-Hakim's Teiresias is a totally different character than the mythical prophet who, though blind, is able to foresee the future. Unlike Teiresias in Greek mythology who was blinded by goddess Hera and rewarded by Zeus to live for generations with special abilities, Al-Hakim's Teiresias is a sly and cunning liar who implied to King Laius to kill his son, not because of an inspiration or warning from the gods, but for hidden political reasons: to deprive the legitimate prince from the throne. He is a manipulative and intimidating authoritarian who justifies his motive of getting rid of the legitimate heir of the throne as the result of believing in free will and wanting the people of Thebes to choose their own king. On the other hand, Creon in Al-Hakim's play is of noble qualities; he plays the same role in the Greek myth, being the interim ruler of Thebes after the death of King Laius, the brother of Jocasta and Oedipus' uncle who had decreed that anyone who would manage to kill the Sphinx would be rewarded the hand of the queen and the throne of Thebes. In spite of the fact that he was accused by Oedipus of treason and plotting with Teiresias to depose him, he was able to prove his innocence and regain the trust of Oedipus, especially that he willingly gave the throne to Oedipus. Towards the end of the play, Oedipus asks Creon to take care of his children and asks them to take Creon as their idol and guide.

The ending of the play, which is identical to that of the Greek myth, takes place throughout act three, which serves - through the words of Jocasta - in highlighting the main struggle of the play between truth and reality. The futility of man's struggle against his fate is Al-Hakim's message. He regards the eternal struggle between good and evil as having numerous forms. Oedipus' fate is tragic because he is not guilty of killing his father and marrying his mother as he did not know then who they really are. Thus, the struggle is between reality and motives, and between fate and people's plots. When man escapes his destiny believing he might change it, he only escapes to it.

Al-Hakim's Oedipus is not a sinner, and as much as he believes in justice, he believes in his innocence. Thus, when he blinds himself at the end of the play is not due to his feeling of guilt, but because of his grief over Jocasta: he expressed earlier that he will cry blood not tears over her. Oedipus' fate is to discover truth, but when he does, he realizes that it is so cruel that it destroys him and the ones he loves: his wife and children. Jocasta is incapable of facing the truth so she kills herself. Truth, therefore, may be considered the tragic hero in Al-Hakim's play as it not only defeats the false reality of Oedipus' life and relationship with Jocasta, but also destroys him and

his loved ones. Oedipus' flaw is his contradictory personality: he seeks truth, yet, knowingly, he lives a lie. For him, truth proves to be fatal. Al-Hakim's final message in the play is that man can become a hero only by his human virtues. False heroism, like that of Oedipus, renders a person less human and leads to his downfall.

Starting from the fifties and sixties in Egypt, modern theatre – with the help of several playwrights like Ali Salem (1936-2015) – was moved in a comedic direction. One of Salem's masterpieces is his political satire *The Comedy of Oedipus* that caused a stir when first performed on the Pocket Stage in Cairo in 1970. The play is subtitled "*You are the One that Killed the Beast*". The frame of play, which is written in colloquial Arabic, is the myth of Oedipus. Salem successfully delivers a message about the impact of fear on the freedom of expression in societies.

The comedy is set in the Egyptian rather than Greek Thebes. The story begins with Laius already dead and the people of Thebes threatened by the Sphinx, a monster that devours those who cannot solve the riddle, thus, commercial convoys stopped and people face starvation. New characters are presented, like Awalih, the Chief of Police, and Auneh, Head of the Chamber of Commerce; they both control the country and suppress people. Creon, in Salem's play is the Head of Security, while Oedipus at the beginning of the play is a stranger in the country who volunteers to face the Sphinx on the condition that the throne of Thebes and Jocasta are his reward. Teireias, who is not an old blind prophet, urges the people of Thebes to face the monster themselves but they are so fearful that they hand the task to Oedipus who succeeds in killing the beast, marries Jocasta, rules Thebes, and the people worship him as a descendant of gods.

Thebes becomes a police state controlled by Auneh and Awalih who arrest and suppress those who ask questions about Oedipus, while Oedipus is not in complete power, yet, he sets a plan to modernize Thebes. He introduces technology that takes the country 5000 years into the future, giving people a chance to use phones, televisions, electricity and stereos. However, people's fear and oppression render the country a dystopia. The Sphinx returns and Creon decides to face it but he is killed. The only chance for the people of Thebes to survive is to unite and face the beast collectively. Thus, Salem's message is that the heavy cost of fear is surrendering one's freedom; it is the unity of people that enables them to stand against external threats.

In *The Comedy of Oedipus*, Ali Salem satirically describes the political atmosphere in Egypt after the 1952 revolution and the 1967 war after which the country became a police state controlled by the secret police against which people feared to speak out. This is metaphorically described in the play: the secret police is represented by Awalih, the national council is represented by Hormohed - the High Priest and representative of religious power - and Auneh - the Head of the Chamber of Commerce. All these figures are feared by the Thebans who are too afraid to stand against their injustice and suppression. Nevertheless, the note of hope with which the play ends comes through Teiresias' closing words: "... Thebes will forever belong to its people who started to realize the solution to their problems... You who might have laughed at the story of my city, I swear, that was not my intention." (p. 118).

Ali Salem's unique depiction of the myth of Oedipus reveals his conviction that individual heroism does not exist. He moves the setting of his play to the Egyptian Thebes rather than the Greek and the Oracle of Delphi is replaced by the temple of Amon so as to show that his story is different. Although Salem introduces new characters with Pharaonic names, like Auneh, Ptah, Hormoheb, Senefro and Awalih, he kept the main Greek figures: Oedipus, Jocasta Creon and Teiresias in order to highlight the contrast between the heroic world of the Greek Oedipus and the dystopian world ruled by Salem's Oedipus who, as implied by Salem, is a Nasser figure. In spite of the fact that Oedipus is worshipped by his people, he rules according to a political system that is based on suppression, torture and violence. In Salem's play Oedipus/ Nasser is an anti-hero who blindly rules a police state, the conditions of which are socio-politically corrupt. Salem attempts to ridicule the idea of an individual hero while satirizing corruption, tyranny and oppression. With the intention of avoiding comparison with the Greek myth, Salem depicts Oedipus in a way that exposes the dilemma and vulnerability of a ruler who is blinded to the socio-political situation of his country and runs a country that is, in fact, controlled by corrupt politicians, academics and priests.

In spite of the apparent weakness of Oedipus in *The Comedy of Oedipus*, Salem depicts him in a way that revives the belief and pride in man in general within the limits of a human being not a god. In Act I Oedipus, who is not king yet, is a proud boastful person as seen when he answers the queen's question to the people of Thebes on the wisest, most intelligent and experienced person to solve the riddle, telling her: "I am, your majesty" (p. 47). Moreover, it is Oedipus who asks for a reward in case he kills the beast and insists on it, which reflects his concern of his personal gain. However, after becoming the king, his main concern is to take his country into modernity by introducing new technology that his people did not know. His flaw is his shortsightedness and inability to perceive the surrounding corruption. Although he caused advancement in the country and introduced the radio, telephone and television, he neglected building the inside of his people who turned into weak fragile people unable to face the beast when it reappears and threatens their country again.

Teiresias is the same wise philosopher whose prudence allows him to speak Salem's words, especially about fear: "Fear, Awalih, cannot be divided ... fear is a mass disease.. the people of Thebes are not individuals .. the people of Thebes are one whole alive body .. like any community in the world, anything occurs to any part of this whole body, the entire community is affected .." (p. 116). Teiresias is the light amidst the darkness of peoples' minds and their leader's blindness to their suffering. His words sum up Salem's disbelief in individual heroism, especially when he objects to Oedipus's decision to confront the beast all alone: "... The truth that the people of Thebes need to understand.. is that no matter how strong or how genius the person is, he alone cannot kill beasts every time ..." (p. 119). Teiresias also helps Oedipus realize his silent accomplice when he gave Awalih a free hand to control internal affairs. Yet, he advises Oedipus to tell people the truth and to be honest to them because as long as they love him, it is never too late.

Jocasta, on the other hand, is presented in a totally different way than that in Greek mythology. Salem's Jocasta is a deteriorated selfish woman who blames Awalih for her marriage to Oedipus, expressing her utter disappointment in being the wife of a man who is indifferent to her and prefers his inventions than sharing bed with her, as she tells Awalih. Moreover, she does not mind sacrificing Oedipus's life by urging him to face the beast all by himself for a second time.

Creon, on the other hand, is a caring and loving person who is faithful to Oedipus and to Thebes. He always tries to separate himself from the corruption of politics. He is a fully responsible person who, towards the end of the play, accepts the blame for the deterioration of Thebes; he believes that he shares Oedipus's failure in creating brave Thebans. He tries to think of different ways to save the country, one of which is facing the beast on his own. Thus, he accepts the role of the martyr whose death is certain to trigger people's revolt against fear and injustice.

Through the grotesque style of *The Comedy of Oedipus*, Salem employs the myth of Oedipus to picture a disintegrated public life ruled by evil politicians, hypocritical academics and corrupt priests. Salem resorts to comedy – as the title indicates – to avoid relevance with the original tragic story of Oedipus. Although Oedipus in Salem's play is not corrupt, his vulnerability and unawareness of the real condition of people of Thebes render him symbolically blind, resembling the Greek Oedipus who ends up blind. Salem presents an anti-hero, thus, satirizing the belief in individual abilities to save humanity. Teiresias, on the other hand, is a more positive character, though he attains the same shrewdness and cunningness of the mythical one. Salem gives him the task of awakening people's consciousness to the deceit and corruption of the regime. However, Teiresias here is not an old blind prophet, but a young revolutionary figure who decides to face and fix the shortcomings of post-independence. The Thebans and Creon defend Teiresias when Awali decides to arrest him for humiliating the Municipal council. Creon, the commander of the guard clearly states: "... I will not allow anyone to be put under arrest merely because of his opinions. Regarding Teiresias no one can doubt his great love for the city... (p.296). The contrast between Teiresias and Awalih reflects the contrast between the ancient prosperous moral Thebes and the new helpless city, which becomes a dystopian police state inhabited by fearful people.

The lighting scheme in Salem's play highlights the contrast between ancient Thebes and Thebes during the rule of Oedipus and directs the attention of the audience to the important points of action. Light is used in a symbolic way to reflect the socio-political condition and the characters' changing state of mind. As evident in his stage directions, the function of light and darkness is part of Salem's technique. After Oedipus's victory, the lighting is "dimmed" and the stage is in "complete darkness", foreshadowing not only his gloomy rule but also indicating how blinded Oedipus will become to the suffering and suppression of his people. Moreover, the deterioration of Thebes and Salem's episodic structure, mainly in Act II, are reflected in the stage directions "blackened stage, ultraviolet rays, and projected shadows" (p. 311). Through the light and the puppet like technique, Salem directs the audience's attention to the difficult socio-political situation of Thebes. The fact that Oedipus has become merely a shadow of a hero is implied in the stage directions used to describe the lecture hall of the hypocrite Professor Senefru: "a large screen

lights up, and on it appears the shadow of Oedipus, gigantic around him” (p.315). Moreover, the absurdity of the ancient Egyptians’ worship of their Pharaohs/ kings is reflected in Act II, Scene iv, in which faint lights show the Thebans “kneeling and chanting in voices filled with awe and devotion, as if praying. Oedipus stands before them” (p.321):

People: Oedipus-Ra You’re the one who killed the beast...

(p.321)

Ironically, the inventions that Oedipus introduced to the Thebans helped in diminishing their souls; he provided only for their physical needs but destroyed their spirits. After Teiresias faces Oedipus with the damage that he has caused to the people of Thebes, his words to him sum up Salem’s message:

Teiresias: You are also, my Lord, the author of the worst invention in history – Fear! Let fear worm its way into the heart of man and it mingles with blood, his intellect, his dreams.... At that point, man is no longer man. He becomes something brittle, and what’s brittle easily crumbles.

(p.342)

The scene ends with intensified light falling on a single spot where Oedipus, Teiresias and Creon stand, symbolizing their final union, while “the rest of the stage is in darkness” (p.347) to reflect the current state of the Thebans. However, the fact that light extends gradually to cover the entire stage represents Salem’s note of hope as Oedipus’s confusion starts to clear. Firstly, he thought: “how faint the light is in the palace tonight. I can’t see very well” (p.348), then his final moment of enlightenment is expressed in his own words using the light and darkness symbolism:

Oedipus: I’ve discovered at the peak of my glory that there are still things that I don’t know. I shall leave.... I shall set off on a long journey, in order to learn.... I thought it was the light that was faint.... Ha! I didn’t know the world could hold so much darkness....

(p.349)

The title of Salem's play is his note of hope, as it indicates that any story or situation, like that of Oedipus, is not necessarily tragic. It might be a tragedy or a comedy based on how you regard it or deal with it. The subtitle of the play: *"You are the One who Killed the Beast"* enhances Salem's note of hope and his belief in human capabilities. *"You"* might not indicate Oedipus in particular, it might refer to any individual, to the people of Thebes, or people in general. Inside every person there is an innate power that – when used – will enable him to overcome the threats that he fears and face his own beast. Bravery is what enables a person to face the *beast* that threatens him. Ali Salem and Tawfik Al-Hakim share the same point of view and they deliver the same message that every man can be a hero by relying on his human virtues and abandoning fear without being a mythical figure.

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