

Contemporary Drama in the Arab World: Commencement and Evolution (1)

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Abstract. Drama has echoed and paralleled the life, customs, conduct, and general living traditions of society from its dim commencements on the ancient auditoriums and the banks of the Nile in olden Egypt approximately six thousand years ago. Drama is an advanced and simple means of recording and documenting human effort. There are many central playwrights significantly contributed to the progress and evolution of Arabic drama and theater and tended to perform dramatic representations within many Arabic countries throughout time and place.

This study is an attempt to shed light on two pioneer dramatists who were the first innovators, paving the way for the development of Arabic drama and theater. The first is the Lebanese Marun An-Naqqash, and the second is the Syrian Ahmad Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani. The paper is analytically and critically charted with an introduction. Then, it deals with a brief notion on the meaning of drama, focusing mainly on poetic drama and the origin and development of Arabic Drama. The central part copes with the two pioneers, An-Naqqash, and Al-Qabbani, shedding light on the struggle they made to give life to a very famous genre called drama. The paper reaches the end with a brief conclusion and recommendations if any.

Keywords: Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani, Arabic drama, Arabic literature, growth, Marun An-Naqqash, Poetic drama, Renaissance

Introduction

Literature, as a mirror of life, is universal. Civilizations are shared and exchanged among nations in a mutual approach. All civilizations and cultures are influencing and being influenced by others in a way or another.

The influence of literature among nations, from a country to another and from continent to another, is tangible and palpable all over the ages. No one can deny the contribution and influence of Arabic and Islamic civilization in the West. It started from the middle ages until the renaissance period and likely after, with witnesses of Andalusia, Constantinople, Holy Mecca and Al Medina El Monawara, Baghdad of Iraq, Al Quaraouiyine Masjed of Morocco, Great Masjed of Kairouan in Tunisia, Al Azhar of Cairo, Umayyad Masjed in Damascus, and many other beacons of learning and knowledge in Arabic Islamic world. Now the idea is contrary; Arabs are influenced by the West. The idea is that the contribution and influence of literature among nations are mutual (Dahami, 2017a).

As a literary mode, the drama has drawn the thoughtfulness of literary critics, reviewers, commentators, and all involved with dramaturgy. Drama mirrors the psyche of people and everyone that is involved with producing it. Drama is one of the most common, unique, and fascinating of the literary forms. It emphasizes and highlights the most disastrous and the most amusing flashes of people's lives.

Drama

The expression 'drama' denotes the verb to do or act, and its beginning is Greek. Drama is stemmed from the Greek conjugation '*dran*,' which symbolizes action. It is a manner of expression which generally depends on verbal articulation and motion or gesture of the performers involved. It is a tale to be staged through performance. It was used in

primeval epochs as the most appropriate means to tell a tale, signify a situation, or build up a poetic idea. The purpose of drama is both to amuse and to educate. It was brought into existence by poets, clerics, and priests of the primeval realm as one of the initial literary methods. Its beginnings have had a significant societal purpose and inspiration. "Man's morals, customs, and thoughts have been changed in content as well as reflected by the religious, social, and human implications of the drama" (The World Book Encyclopedia, 1987, p. 2078).

In origin, the category is connected to religious or public commemorations, festivals, and celebrations, as in the case of many Greek and Roman plays. In a more general outlook, the drama was brought on stage by medieval pagan and ritual plays such as the Greek and Roman drama as well as the mediaeval English semi-plays. The frequently-prolonged Christian cycles recorded in the annals of English towns such as "Chester, Wakefield, and York, or in the Oberammergau Passion play" (Allen, 2003, p. 194; Allen, 1998, p. 318). Most of all, the actual element that drama is said to be the most known and common of every literary category because it is a performance, mirroring life in an undertaking of impersonation and performed before spectators and spectators representing people's cultures, politics, and historical records.

Similarly, the writing of drama has assumed the standing of a text. The works of Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Lyly, Goethe, George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, Yeats, Pirandello, Chekhov, Racine, Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani, Salah Abd-Assabour, Ahmad Shawqi, and many others are considered major contributions to the literary legacy of the world. Travelers, through east and west, have provided us with explanations and interpretations of these sorts of common performance from all parts of the Arabic countries in the Middle East. Drama represents life in all its magnificence and brilliance, as well as gloom and melancholy. According to Dahami (2017), and Allardyce (1969), the drama "is so deeply associated with and dependent upon the whole material world of the theatre, with its thronging crowds and its universal appeal" (p. 30; p. 9).

Origin and Growth of Arabic Drama

Several Arab researchers and critics are concerned with the theatrical movement in the Arab world for years irrespective of their disagreement on the evolution of Arabic drama and theaters in history, prospects, and horizons. They are divided into two classes: one says that Arabs did not identify artistic theater before the nineteenth century, one of them is the critic and dramatist Farhan Bulbul (2001), who confirmed that Arabic drama has grown during the mid of the nineteenth century (p. 42). The idea is similar to Ghuneem (2011, p.162). The other mixes between the theatrical concepts and their terminology with an eccentric amalgamation that the boundaries between a period and another are lost because of such random mixture in thoughts and ideas about the theatrical activities or what some might say the quasi-theatrical activities.

Therefore, the mixture's concept has led some critics and researchers to exaggerate their suppositions, claiming that theatrical activity is Arab in origin, imitated by Westerners, within many other scientific and literary experiences, but reproduced and imprinted it with their temperament. The group's opinions that insist on confirming an Arab theater's existence before the nineteenth century argue and stress with the generalization that the nature of 'watching and entertaining' of some activities in specific occasions is illustrations of dramatic and theoretical activities. They argue that behind such activities confirm the value concerned with artistic drama since earliest times incarnating the relationship between people – audiences – and the purpose of such showing, which is the soul of drama even without prepared and constructed theater-houses.

Another point, supporting this group who did not stop the idea with only 'watching and entertaining' but also went further to more than that when it claimed that the existence of lyric poetry itself, is evidence of the theatrical existence material. In addition to that, they assert that the presence of the dialogues in poems is evidence of the theater's existence in its simple use.

Furthermore, Al-Ra'i (1979), says, "It can be said - with much confidence - that Arabs, and the general Muslims, have recognized different methods of theater and theatrical activities for centuries before the middle of the nineteenth century" (p. 29). Among those activities, the semi-theatrical or pre-theatrical, are The Shadow Image (Khayal Ath-thell خيال الظل), and The Imitations of Animal Sounds, as well as The Storyteller (Al-Hakawati الحكواتي).

Several critics go further than what Al-Ra'i has said; they declare that the Arab heritage was the origin of all civilizations and all sorts of knowledge; it is ill-fated that the west grabbed this heritage and reformed it according to their environment, so its portrait appeared to be unfamiliar to Arabs (Holt, 2000, p. 758). It is said that Arabic literature is full of representative anecdotes that are spoken in the tongue of birds and animals, or legendary or mythical human figures, as well as realistic. All of these components are fit for the theater because of the dramatic events and dialogue it contains. There is great hyperbole in a saying like this because a great part of it does not possess the components of transition or transformation into dramatic texts.

However, the researcher supports the belief that dramatic and theatrical activities in the Arab world might have been started even earlier. The notion needs further studies with serious investigations and scrutiny, especially that there are hints and witnesses of the availability of ancient theatrical places in different counties such as Jerash in Jordan.

The archaeological and historical shreds of evidence that remains these days in different Arab countries attest to the fact that the Arab theater is older than what some critics or writers propose. It is important that there should be a series of different scientific researches to investigate and explore the evolution of drama and theater in order to remove the suspicion with certitude. The first evidence is the ancient theatres in Jordan, in which it is used to show and perform various types of drama, plays, and music. Referring to the historical reference named (The Archaeological and Historical Monuments in Jordanian Provinces, Villages and Towns) by the historian Rana Ahmed Jamal (2016), who refers to a number of important evidences including:

1. Sabeel Al-Houriat (سبيل الحوريات): A Music Hall, or the Amphitheatre, whose remains are still located on the eastern side of the Roman Amphitheatre. This Hall is used as a small theatre to perform new plays, perform concerts, musicals and literary readings (p. 77).

2. The Roman Amphitheatre: it is a theatre which is located in the eastern part of the capital Amman, precisely at the bottom of Al-Joufat Mountain, on one of the hills facing the Citadel of Amman. This Amphitheatre was used for theatrical and musical performances due to the quality of its sound system. It can accommodate 5,000 to 6,000 spectators, and it is larger than the Southern Theatre in Jerash, which can accommodate 4,000 to 5,000 audiences. There are rooms behind the stage that performers use to change their clothes and prepare to appear in public (p. 113-114).

3. The Southern Theatre in Jerash Province: it is built in the late first century and accommodates about 5,000 audiences, as well as the Northern Theatre, which can accommodate about 1,200 spectators (p. 115).

All the previous instances and several others are confined, as mentioned above, to the (semi-theatrical) or (pre-theatrical) activities that were not able to be transformed naturally to the artistic and dramatic theater. They are, therefore, activities not fully connected with the theater and drama. Several critics and researchers fundamentally differ among themselves about the motives responsible for the activities' failure to be entirely developed into a

theatrical movement in the Arab world. All these differences between critics and researchers in their disagreement to reach a decisive, correct, and accurate estimation are due to the lack of historical sense when discussing the phenomenon of the absence of drama from ancient Arabs' lives. The researchers' consequent assumptions that the dramatic theatrical movement may appear anywhere and at any time, without making sure of the existence of its historical and social stipulations that calls for the accurate emergence of the dramatic movement. Such controversial responses led to confusion and inaccuracy.

Since the opinions of most critics and researchers agree that the art of drama and theater in the Arab world is an art that has been imported unless proven otherwise; its growth and development occurred as a result of the qualitative leap that occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century during the modern Arab renaissance. It is valuable to address the efforts of and shed light on those who carried out the seed of dramatic theater and its implantation of Arab literature so that the newborn grows, develops, and reaches artistic maturity.

At the very foundation, some neoclassical poet-dramatists started creating poetic dramas, the genre entirely unfamiliar to their predecessors. Due to the growing acceptance, popularity, and attractiveness, in the years of the nineteenth century, dramaturgical and theatrical companies. Many of these companies used to perform semi-operatic plays, whose texts shared prose and poetry. Even if Egypt was crowded with many dramatic events at the start of the century, the first phase of Arabic drama, involving poetized dramas, are also to be found in Lebanon. In 1876, Khalil Al-Yaziji composed his play named *The Manliness and Loyalty [Al-Murouah wa Al-Wafa]* (Ramadi, 1972, p.222; Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-‘Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1995, p. 146) written completely in verse. The play talks about the conduct and traditions of pre-Islamic Arabs. It is remarkable since its poetry is frequently separated between two or more characters.

Poetic Drama

Poetic drama is a drama written in poetry to be articulated; another conceivable general term is verse drama. In a poetic play, the conversation is written in poetry, which generally refers to blank verse. Several critics have stated that blank verse comprises lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. "The standard poetic form of Shakespeare in his plays is blank verse, written in iambic pentameter. It meant that his poetry was generally unrhymed and comprised ten syllables in the line. The lines are articulated with a stress on all second syllables. The blank verse of his early drama is pretty dissimilar from his final plays. Blank verse is often stunning, but its sentences are inclined to begin, pause, and cease at the end of the lines with the threat of humdrum" (Dahami, 2017c, p. 30). For an elongated period, the poetic drama was a central form of drama all over the reals and centuries. Ancient Greek tragedies are inscribed in verse, as is almost all of the English Renaissance dramas.

Poetic drama is predominantly associated with the earnestness of tragedy, offering an artistic motive to write in such a form. The practical one is that poetic lines are effortless for the actors to memorize precisely. Poetic drama is an imperative part of the drama, which is a critical and crucial component of Arabic literature in which it is a new influence, contribution, and involvement in Arabic poetry. Arabs distinguished this type of drama in the contemporary age, where they head towards Poetic drama since it offers them deep passion, a story, its action, and music and rhythm of poetry.

Poetic drama is a mixed amalgamation of both drama and poetry. It applies verse as its vehicle to appeal to the audience. "Poetic drama means much more than only a play" (Dahami, 2016). It aims at communicating a condition of survival in space and a given period of time supported by action. "Poetic drama deals with the vital and substance of life" (Dahami, 2018). The human being's attention can be expressed in verse more effectually than that text written in prose.

Emotion, sentiment, and feeling can be fully articulated in the vernacular tongue, which has gone to fit and shape its people's mode of belief and attitude. Poetic drama is deeply the language of all divisions of people in which the rhythm, the arrangement, the sounds, and the expressions of a language communicate the nature of the people that speaks it.

Meaningful poetic dramas in the theater is that one which makes the spectators less conscious of hearing unmixed poetry. It is that sort of expressive poetic dramas that makes audiences join in the characters' involvement. Several critics opine that poetic drama can communicate the voice of the soul, inspiring the heart and redeeming the soul as it excites the spectators' vision. In contrast, other types of drama do not have such abilities to create this influence on the watchers and listeners (Ghaith, 2017). The verse is superior to prose on the stage since it benefits from communicating intensity and eagerness to the substantial moments. Poetry supplements the play with the musical power that excites the spectators. Such excitement comes from the merging of the deeper sense, meaning, and connotation resulting from songs and incantations.

Poetic drama is believed to harness larger power to express attitudes, moments, and atmosphere. The consistent rhythms of its verses stir and stimulate the senses of both the speaker and listener, as well as lifting the veils on more profound meaning unseen behind expressions. Drama and poetry are not two distinct basics in literature; nonetheless, they are one essence. Poetry is vital to drama. Each one is turning toward the other. Consequently, they are fused and bonded together. "According to Eliot, the best drama can only be poetic, and the defects of drama, if any, can be compensated by good poetry" (Dahami, 2017b, p. 11). Thus, drama and poetry are united and inextricable.

A poetic play is thus as universal and unpretentious as music. It affords greater contentment; the watchers of a poetic play will appreciate at least two occurrences – on the one hand, an anecdote with its setting, plot, dealings, and action. On the other hand, the appreciation of poetry, cadence, music, and rhythm.

An effective verse drama assumes a kind of poetic expression that is both dramatic, proper, and justifiable for the action that it instigates or represents. A poetic play has something more to provide. In a poetic play, there is a type of musical pattern and design. The poet-dramatist and critic T. S. Eliot opines that "verse is not merely a formalization or an added decoration, but that it intensifies the drama. It should also indicate the importance of the unconscious effect of the verse upon us" (Eliot, 1950, p. 19).

Pioneers of Arabic Drama

The Arab Egyptian historian, A'bud Ur-Rahman Al-Jabarti, seemingly a somewhat mystified member of the spectators, offers his own justification of performance in the year 1800 by a French dramatic company during the French colonization that followed Napoleon's attack of Egypt two years earlier, in 1798 (A'si, 1993, p. 87).

The history of drama among Arabs is of great controversy and debate. However, many critics and historians declare that Arabic drama and theater commenced about the mid of the nineteenth century, more precisely in 1847. Arabic drama can consequently be perceived through two focal epochs: the first is before the fifth decade of the nineteenth century. The second is after the mid of the nineteenth century. A noteworthy change in drama occurred about the middle of the nineteenth century.

Such dramatists were slightly interested in reworking and evolution of the drama and theatrical translation. Besides others, these main playwrights tried mainly to familiarize plays by eminent French dramatists like Jean Poquelin, known as Moliere and Jean Racine. The Arab new dramatists have endeavored to present and perform their plays consistent with the Arab spectators' perception.

Furthermore, they all cope with the didactic and moral purpose of drama. Their plays likewise held a combination of verse and rhyming prose, applying a conventional style with spoken expressions and dialect. In spite of such notions, they provided rich sources of stimulus, inspiration, and revelation for the next generations of Arab dramatists. Some Arab dramatists lit the beacon and paved the way for contemporary Arabic dramas and theaters such as Marun An-Naqqash, and Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani. They influenced the process of dramatic activities, which was the base of widespread and successful current Arabic drama and theater (Mousa, 1997, p. 14).

Marun An-Naqqash: A Pioneer Designer

Marun An-Naqqash (مارون النقاش) (1817-1855) (also written as Al-Nakash, or An-Naggash), was the first man in the Arab theater, whose name was associated with the first Arab theater activity. He was born in the Lebanese city of Saida in 1817. He was raised and educated in Beirut since 1825. An-Naqqash is an intellectual pioneer of active hopes about successful Arabic theater and drama. He was a successful employee and a distinguished thinker in comparing him with people of his period. He left his job-seeking the profession of being a successful businessman, and he became so. He had the ability to expand his sphere of knowledge and experience by learning from Western cultures' experiments and being close to different professional dramatists. His experience of watching the many European plays formed a basis for losing construction, an Arab theater with its own regional specificity and particularity. That is what occurred after his return to Beirut after a long tour in Europe. He consolidated his determination to establish the art of drama and theater because of raising awareness and preaching the causes of progress and advancement.

An-Naqqash's first drama is written in verse. Numerous lyrical verses are involved in his design; however, his technique required some dramatic standards and conventions. An-Naqqash's dialogues certainly are narrative and prosaic. He likewise mixed his words with some comical or sardonic requirements and with conversational language and vernacular. An-Naqqash plays, among characters, are so rich and musical to a degree that they can be sung, regardless of the different language gaps. He established a significant attempt to create an autonomous Arab drama and theatre (Ismael, 1999, pp. 21-25). Marun has realized the social and intellectual reality that presented to him about theater and art. He apprehended the nature of the intellectual and social obstacles that he will face. Such expectation created inside him a strong desire to sacrifice all his property in order to secure an atmosphere with the minimum conditions necessary for the growth of Arabic drama.

Through the scientific method and objective research, Al-Tikriti in his supposition confirmed, in contrast to several critics, that the first play of Marun An-Naqqash called *The Miser* [البخيل] *Al-Bakhil* has no relation or connection to do with Moliere's play *The Miser*. The slip-up lies in the fact that those critics have quoted and written from others their sayings without referring or analyzing the text of the play written by Al-Naqqash. Their blunder became even greater when they considered the play of Al-Naqqash as an adjustment of Moliere's play. One of those who supported the idea of translating Moliere's play is Elias Abu Shabakah, who indicates that Marun Al-Naqqash had transmitted the play *The Miser* of Moliere but did not mention that it is his; the idea is supported by Mousawi (2018), as well as Mahmoud Hamed Shawkat (1970), in his book *Theatrical Art in Modern Arabic Literature* (p. 24).

It can be certain that most recent studies and research confirm, almost unanimously, that the play of Marun Al-Naqqash *The Miser* is a drama composed by Al-Naqqash from the beginning until the end. It is not a translation of Moliere's because he is a playwright and a man of dramaturgy. Al-Naqqash composed his play *The Miser* after his deep reading and experience of the drama and dramatic activities. It is natural to find Mullerian influences or

hints in the writings of Al-Naqqash since Moliere is rightfully a great dramatist of modern comedy who influenced a large number of subsequent writers, including Marun Al-Naqqash.

Marun An-Naqqash is a great member of an affluent family of Lebanese businessmen. In 1847, he returned from a call to Italy and arranged and presented performances of his famous play, *The Miser* 1847 (Tawfiq, 2013, p. 131), in his house in the next year. As the title indicates, the play's theme and leitmotif share a considerable topic in public with Moliere's drama of the same title; however, the writing was no mere slavish reproduction. See (As-Sirihi, 2017, p. 16).

The greater part of the play is a verse to be sung; in that, An-Naqqash, the singing company, would create the new genre more pleasant to its spectators. This connection between dramatic presentations and music has continued a predominant attribute of considerable contemporary Arabic drama. Gave heart by the accomplishment of his primary experiment An-Naqqash improved a tale from the ancient *Arabian Nights* for his next and most flourishing play, *The Mutt Abu Al-Hasan or Harun Ar-Rashid, 1849-50 [Abu Al-Hasan al-mughaffal aw Harun Ar-Rashid]*. An-Naqqash had to attain a verdict from the Ottoman powers before he could host performing plays in his house (Ghaith, 2017, p. 90).

What is noticed here is An-Naqqash's insistence on explaining his motives for choosing opera (poetic theater). However, logic forces some to choose prose (prose theater), because of its simplicity, as he himself indicated. However, he preferred the difficult genre – poetic drama – emphasizing that his choice was not arbitrary. Rather, it was dictated by a distinct social requirement, which is taking into account the tendencies of the Arab audience to whom this sort of literature will be presented. The dramatist realizes that opera's art is based mainly on singing, music, and poetry, which are essential elements in Arab culture. In his view, such elements are closer to the Arab taste, and thus more fortunate in success and acceptance if compared to its counterpart, prose (Zaitonah, 1988, p. 28).

The choice of An-Naqqash for this theatrical color reflects, in fact, his consciousness and belief in the necessity of matching the characteristics of the foreign literature with the givens and principles of the Arabic culture. He declared that his aspiration is to present a literary theater of western gold that is Arabic molten. Such perspective indicates that he formulated a foreign imported material into Arabic formulation, which suits Arab perception because he understands that presenting Western plays literally would make them appear strange. Consequently, they would not receive any positive response from Arab spectators.

Therefore, Al-Naqqash, like the rest of the pioneers who followed him, was keen to introduce amendments to such plays and adapt them to suit the Arabic environment and its features. Accordingly, his ingenuity was mixed in one play between poetry, prose, music, and other Arab culture elements. The concern of An-Naqqash on the compatibility between the features of drama and the tendencies of his people is an aspiration of reviving drama suitable and appreciated by his audiences.

It is noticeable that the attempt of An-Naqqash to justify his choice of a particular theatrical genre by responding to personal taste was not enough, in his view. Once again, he tried to search for a more convincing justification for this experiment in his conservative society. The moral justification was the basis on which he passed his cultured message to his people. He did not fail to realize the importance of this art as one of the means to achieve prosperity and other advantages. He believes that drama has a moral role in society through which people's problems and faults are exposed, along with suggestions of solutions. Furthermore, the dramatist believes that watching a play in the theater or reading it has the advantage of acquiring discipline and learning eloquent more vocabulary, and take hold of good manners.

An-Naqqash was keen to encourage people to like drama and attend theaters. He emphasized its moral purpose, confirming that he did not deviate from the positions of most

pioneers of the modern Arab playwrights. They contributed to the revival of dramas renaissance in the Arab realm. An-Naqqash, in his endeavors, had made commendable efforts in this field. He and his counterparts often talked about the benefits of this art and its effective ability to reform, direct and educate, emphasizing, in particular, that he is not incompatible with morals and religion, avoiding all clashes with the prevailing values and customs.

Drama and theater and its practice among Arabs became a manifestation of civilization and an effective means of achieving progress and prosperity for people. Hence, planting it in Arab soil has become necessary, especially at this particular stage in the Arab nation's history. Imagining the situation of how sensitive it was, can be exemplified by the profession of a pioneer, the Syrian playwright, actor, and company director, Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani. The second playwright is the Syrian Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani. He appears to deal with relatively Arabic tradition in his dramas. He shared the two dramatists, An-Naqqash, and many others, the attention in acclimating and translating dramas. Al-Qabbani performed more than fifteen dramas and translated dramas by western playwrights as Corneille and Jean Racine. Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani's first play is *The Ungrateful* (Nakkir Al-Jamil ناكِر الجَمِيل) in 1870. He emphasized some historical personalities such as the poet-knight of pre-Islam Antarah ibn Shaddad, as well as emphasizing on modified notables of past narratives from *Arabian Nights* [Alif Laylah wa Laylah]. The next drama is *The Trickeries of Women* (*Hiyal Al-Nisa* حِيل النِّسَاء) produced in 1871 that is adapted from European plays.

Ahmad Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani: A Pioneer Originator

Ahmad Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani (1833-1902) (also can be written as Al-Kabbani, or Al-Gabbani) is considered one of the most influencing dramatists in the modern age. Some critics declare that he is greater than both Marun Al-Naqqash because Al-Qabbani is more interactive with the dramatic and theatrical movement. He is more knowledgeable in the fields of other genres related to drama, such as music, singing, dance, and composing songs.

Abu Khalil Qabbani's first learning was in the madrassah (المَدْرَسَة) before joining the new official elementary school. He made a career in the cemetery, and his surname was called by its Arabic name (Al-Gabanh/Al-Jabanah). Al-Qabbani sold his house to provide money for building a theater risking the difficulties and problems that he may face because the society with its traditions and conventions is not accustomed to appreciating such art in his living place.

Al-Qabbani has a clear pioneering role in the theatrical movement in Syria despite all that was said about him and what was rumored about his being influenced by a Turkish play or Lebanese performances that he watched in Beirut or Damascus, or what was said about his influence by the missionary and ecclesiastical school theater. At the same time, many writers and researchers have praised and affirmed his leadership in the foundation of Arabic drama and theater.

The tales of *Arabian Nights* were one of the important sources that Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani relied on upon writing his plays. Two plays he wrote, which were in their subjects an honest transfer of two stories from the nights, without distortion or deviation. However, such a saying is not accurate because Al-Qabbani did not take these two stories without (distortion or deviation), as claimed by some critics. Copying in this simple way means the writer's ignorance of the professionalism of theatrical writing and its backgrounds.

On the one hand, Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani had the ability to perfectly compose zajal and poems and was amazingly fluent in involving incidents in a concise storytelling plot. The best of him is that he endeavored to associate his theatrical composition with the classical literary language (An-Nawasirah, 2010, p. 34). On the other hand, he struggled to make his dramas accepted by the people via approaching a style similar to those attractive folkloric narrations such as *Arabian Nights* and other traditional stories. Al-Qabbani was a great pioneer among

the Arab theater pioneers; to him, the favor goes from all that he has achieved in the field of the theater (Biblāwī, 2008, p. 79). He challenged the historical circumstances of the society in which stood against a revival of drama and theater. However, he did not surrender to the pressure of such circumstances, yet, continued to defy any difficulty personal or communal.

Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani, in the early 1870s, was inspired by the Ottoman ruler, Subhi Pasha, and after that by Midhat Pasha, the eminent reformer, to present some plays specifically yet another piece stimulated by the anecdotes of Harun Ar-Rashid to be originated from the *Arabian Nights*. “He was commissioned by Subhi Pasha to compose drama to be performed and ascend through it to morality and straight principles. Al-Qabbani succeeded in this commission to make all those who know him to be proud of him and his ingenuity” (Al-Khala’e, 2012, p. 299). In 1884 Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani rivaled An-Naqqash family by shifting his company to Egypt (Mandour, 2020, p. 15). There he relished a very productive two decades of work, directing several dramas by himself and by others till his stage was destroyed by fire in the process of arson in 1900. Egypt, to which the casts of An-Naqqash and Al-Qabbani moved, provided a considerably more favorable atmosphere for these and other innovators in Arabic drama (Ardash, 1998, p. 232). The town of Cairo had been prolonged to the banks of the Nile to become a city in which this new city is connected to the old. A bulky square had been opened to provide accommodation to the new Cairo Opera House. Simply half a mile from the location of the opera house, European performing troupes frequently performed plays on the open-air arena in the newly renovated Gardens of Ezbekiyya.

Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani did not deviate from the experience of An-Naqqash concerning the place where he presented his first presentation; that is, he did not dare, in turn, to present his first performance in front of the public to avoid the dire consequences that could be dragged from this adventure in a traditional society that was suffering from ignorance and Ottoman control. In his perspective, the theater is the art of squares and people, not the art of suffocation behind walls. For this reason, he struggled to make drama performed, not only read irrespective of the challenges he faced.

And while Al-Qabbani in his theatrical works, especially those that he derived from the tales of *Arabian Nights*, were faithful to the source from which he made the subjects of his plays available. He, in terms of form or content, read the Arabic heritage and tradition, absorbed them, then masterfully fabricated his thoughts and hands to produce innovative modern dramatic and theatrical production. The tribulations he faced as a result of his work dictated the need to find logical justifications to defend his work with this art, first, then trying to find the shortest and easiest way to lay the foundations for this drama.

It is no wonder that his performances were met with great demand since the first show so that the Damascene spectators were not surprised by this bold artwork as much as they admired and amazed such local comedy presented by an ancient Muslim. He established a house for acting and began to compose national representational narratives of his composition, authorship, and representation so that the astonishment of the ears and the eyes came not less in the mastery in terms of their subject matter, costumes, and tones—besides, his views on the attractive representation of the West. The dignity of Abu Khalil is that he did not transfer the art of acting from a foreign language, and he did not go to the Western drama to quote it verbally.

Great difficulties he faced forced him to leave Damascus for Egypt, where he continued his pioneering experience with great success, especially in producing poetic drama and musical theater. Perhaps Al-Qabbani is the one who has the merit in establishing this art in Egypt, and perhaps that is because his art met a notion and acceptance in the hearts of Egyptians. It was not only a purely representative literary art, but also a combination of acting, music, and singing (Samman, 2010, pp. 23-25). Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani was confident

in various arts like music, singing, and composing. He was likely an individual who has the ability to sow the seed of musical theater in Egypt and paved the way for Sheikh Salama Hegazy, Sayed Darwish, and others who worked in musical theater in Egypt (Sarhan, 2006, pp. 273-275).

Conclusions

Drama and theater, for the mentioned pioneers who legitimized the modern Arab renaissance, are forms of art that outline one of the new features that they aspire to achieve. Pioneers like Marun An-Naqqash and Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani have strived to establish it in their communities, a new innovative Arabic drama, and theater fit for Arabs. Their aspiration is one of the means of ensuring the realization of a modernization project based mainly on the desire to assert oneself and catch up with civilization. It is not of great importance if their plays do not express their ideas and reflect their political and social aspirations. However, what occupied their thoughts, is the attempt to set the foundations of this literary genre and root it in the Arab soil as unique, innovative, and distinctive.

Arabic drama, whatever the critics argue in the issue of its commencement, it is true that nowadays is an inevitable literary genre among all Arabs by the favor of those who sacrificed their smooth life and struggled by word, money, and physical efforts for the sake of Arabic drama. They made a palpable contribution to make Arabic drama compete among the universal realm of literature. Drama is well-rooted art that produced living seeds, which was implanted by An-Naqqash, Al-Qabbani, and many other Arab pioneers. Even if it came from abroad, it propagated in the Arab land and was fully prepared for its cultivation; even so, it grew and developed and took its final form known to all.

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