Origins of Arabic Theatre: A Transcultural Theatrical Relation Between Arabic and European Theatre

By

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A thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Comparative Literature

School of Arts and Sciences
April 2017
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Acknowledgement

This project would not have been possible without the support of many people.

Many thanks to my advisor, Dr. Kristian Aercke, who read my numerous revisions and helped make some sense of the confusion. Also thanks to my committee members, Dr. Nada Saab and Dr. Vahid Behmardi who offered guidance and support.

And finally, thanks to my parents, sisters, and numerous friends who endured this long process with me, always offering support and love.
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Abstract

This comparative study explores the origin of Arabic theatre and its development vis-à-vis European theatre.

Chapter 1, the Introduction, states the problem and reviews the literature.

Chapter 2 observes the contradictory arguments concerning the seeming absence of a native indigenous Arabic theatrical tradition. Hence, this chapter tracks the history of Arabic theatre from its medieval origins to the introduction of European-inspired models in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 3 focuses on the beginning of formal Arabic theatre in the nineteenth century in Syria (including Lebanon) and Egypt. The emphasis is on the supposed father of Arabic theatre, Marun Naqqash, and his leading production al-Bakhil (1846).

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the implications of crossings in genre and culture, and more in particular the transcultural interaction between early twentieth-century Arab and European theatre—Oscar Asche’s Chu Chin Chow will serve to illustrate this interaction.

Keywords: Arabic Theatre, Origins, Al-Bakhil, Chu Chin Chow, European Theatre, Imitation, Transcultural Imitation.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

When researchers embark on addressing the origins of Arabic theatre, they find themselves amidst two lines of thought. The first line, represented by Arab writers such as Abbas Al-Aqqad, Najib Mahfuz, Mohsen Badawi, and others, denies that an Arabic theatre ever existed before the mid-nineteenth century. The second strand of thought, supported by critics as Ibrahim Hamada, Ali Al Rahi, and Shmuel Moreh, views modern Arabic theatre as an extended continuation of the foundations of dramatic expressions in Arab literary legacy (Alabdullah 749). They emphasize the originality of Arabic theatre via a continuum that links the existence of theatrical manifestations in Arab heritage to Arabic theatre in its modern sense. In this context, this study intends to join this debate by first attempting to explore these two lines of thought, their grounds, and arguments. It will do so by shedding light upon the vagueness concerning the origin of Arabic theatre as a literary genre, and how it was affected, if at all, by western theatrical legacy. Successively, joining this debate from a comparatist approach would enable us to question whether European theatre was swayed by Arab theatrical practices. As a consequence, one of the answers that this study aims to unfold revolves around Arabic theatre, whether it is original or merely follows a western inspiration. This study proceeds to a more theoretical discussion of the factors that form the genre of drama in each culture—whether these elements are fixed or reciprocal. In particular, it focuses on how and why they are manifested once received in another culture. Thus, in case such an
exchange or transformation of theatrical elements pertaining to each culture turns out to be existent, my thesis examines the reasons that lie behind it. This in turn leads us to re-examine the dimensions of fictional texts, particularly theatrical texts, how they are influenced, and how they can, like historical texts, be a mirror to culture.

Henceforth, my research starts by classifying the pre-modern forms adopted by Arabs and digging up their true origin. After analyzing their roots, my study turns to the true inauguration of Arabic theatre in its modern sense in the nineteenth century. By delving into this realm, this path branches out to two crucial issues. Who were the first Arab playwrights to get inspired by European playwrights such as Molière, Goldoni, or Shakespeare? And why did these Arab playwrights use this art? Particularly, my research will examine the work of Arabic playwrights who were influenced by their political context and who borrowed techniques from the European drama for the purpose of promoting the production of drama in the Arab world as well as ascribing moral and artistic benefits to it (Moosa 30). Successively, my study will examine the play al-Bakhil which was written by Marun Naqqash. My analysis shall further explore how this well of inspiration shifted to be perceived as a disturbing factor also due to a political situation; thus, with this shift, eliminating the liberty of borrowing from western theatrical elements. Thereby, my study seeks to understand whether such commonality between Arab playwrights and European playwrights ever existed.

On the other hand, at the beginning of the twentieth century, European theatre, distinguished by its Aristotelian genre concept, attempted to deviate to a new understanding of drama through seeking inspiration from other cultures (Syska and Pannewick 2). My thesis aims to find theatrical elements alien to the European theatre.
Consequently, the field of comparative literature encourages such endeavors. For these reasons, the European theatre and its socio-political context will be probed alongside the Arabic theatre and its political dynamic through studying Oscar Asche’s *Chu Chin Chow*.

### 1.2. Defining Drama and Theatre across Time

Drama is a vibrant and varied art form found in play, storytelling, street theatre, festivals, film, television, interactive games, performance art and theatres. It is one of the oldest art forms and part of our everyday life. Through taking on roles and enacting real and imagined events, performers engage audiences who suspend their disbelief to enter the world of the drama. Through drama, human experience is shared. Drama entertains, informs, communicates and challenges.

Drama is the specific mode of fiction represented in performance. The term comes from a Greek word meaning "action" (Classical Greek: δρᾶμα, drama), which is derived from "I do" (Classical Greek: δράω, drao). The two masks associated with drama represent the traditional generic division between comedy and tragedy. They are symbols of the ancient Greek Muses, Thalia, and Melpomene. Thalia was the Muse of comedy (the laughing face), while Melpomene was the Muse of tragedy (the weeping face).

Considered as a genre of poetry in general, the dramatic mode has been contrasted with the epic and the lyrical modes ever since Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE)—the earliest work of dramatic theory.

In English (as was the analogous case in many other European languages), the word "play" or "game" (translating the Anglo-Saxon plèga or Latin ludus) was the standard term used to describe drama until William Shakespeare's time—just as its creator was a
"play-maker" rather than a "dramatist" and the building was a "play-house" rather than a "theatre." The use of "drama" in a more narrow sense to designate a specific type of play dates from the modern era. "Drama" in this sense refers to a play that is neither a comedy nor a tragedy. It is this narrower sense that the film and television industries, along with film studies, adopted to describe "drama" as a genre within their respective media. "Radio drama" has been used in both senses—originally transmitted in a live performance, it has also been used to describe the more high-brow and serious end of the dramatic output of radio.

The enactment of drama in theatre, performed by actors on a stage before an audience, presupposes collaborative modes of production and a collective form of reception. The structure of dramatic texts, unlike other forms of literature, is directly influenced by this collaborative production and collective reception. The early modern tragedy *Hamlet* (1601) by Shakespeare and the classical Athenian tragedy *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429 BCE) by Sophocles are among the masterpieces of the art of drama. A modern example is *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O’Neill (1956).

Drama is often combined with music and dance: the drama in opera is generally sung throughout; musicals generally include both spoken dialogue and songs; and some forms of drama have incidental music or musical accompaniment underscoring the dialogue (melodrama and Japanese Nō, for example). Closet drama describes a form that is intended to be read, rather than performed. In improvisation, the drama does not pre-exist the moment of performance; performers devise a dramatic script spontaneously before an audience.
1.2.1 What is Theatre?
In defining the theatre half of "theatre history," there is just as much uncertainty, for theatre as a term is no less difficult to get a handle on than history. Those who have tried to define it have often resorted to metaphors. For example, Samuel Johnson called theatre "an echo of the public's voice," Shakespeare called it "a mirror," Giraudoux "a trial," and Farquhar "a banquet." The last carried his comparison on at some length:

Like hungry guests, a sitting audience looks:

Plays are like suppers; poets are the cooks:

The founder's you: the table is this place:

The carver's we: the prologue is the grace.

Each act a course, each scene a different dish.

While metaphors like Farquhar's may contain a grain or even a bushel of truth, the reality they reflect is more poetic than scientific—a more concrete definition is in order here by going back to the origin of the word.

Reconstruction of a Greek Theatron, "theatre" derives from an ancient Greek word, in this case theatron meaning literally "an instrument for (-tron) viewing (thea-)," which is problematical in and of itself. By this definition, a theatron refers to only the audience's part of the theatre, where the seats are, the actual "instrument for viewing," that is, the place from which the viewers watched the drama. That discounts the other parts of the Greek theatre where the performance, for the most part, takes place: the orchestra (dancing area), the skene (the tent behind the stage), and the parodoi (the side entrances
into the orchestra).

Thus, theatron is too narrow a term to help us much in defining "theatre." After all, does theatre even require a specific "instrument for viewing"? Street theatre, by definition, does not have a theatron, but few would say it is not theatre.

So, "theatre" is, in fact, hard to define. In reality, theatre offers a very wide range of possibilities in both theory and reality. The American composer John Cage said that "theatre takes place all the time wherever one is." The critic Bernard Beckerman claimed that theatre happens whenever "one or more human beings, isolated in time and/or space, present themselves to another or others..." Neither constitutes a very restrictive definition. When it is not possible to tell theatre from a lecture, a tennis match, or astronauts on the moon, the search for a definitive definition is not over.

One modern theatre historian, Patti Gillespie, has referred to theatre as "performances by living actors that take place in the presence of living audiences," which is at least a more concrete definition. But it really only substitutes one abstract (theatre) for another (performance), which leaves open the question of what "performance" is. And her clear reaction against recorded performance ("living actors") is less than helpful. It is not the point here to carve up artistic territory but to define what theatre is internally, not to say or imply what it is not. It would be equally valid to assert that theatre is not car repair.

And "living audiences"? As opposed to what? Dead audiences? Many actors claim to have performed before "dead" audiences, but surely that is not what Gillespie means. The great theatre historian of the late twentieth century, Oscar Brockett, focused his studies in theatre history on theatre as an institution, or, as he puts it, an "autonomous activity" as opposed to merely "theatrical" elements in society at large. But that
presupposes a society has some general recognition of theatre as a distinct art form and, inevitably, that means it must also have a representative word or way of referring to that institution, some sort of equivalent to our term "theatre." And such a definition is circular: "theatre" is what a society calls "theatre."

Moreover, equating vocabulary in different languages is a notoriously difficult enterprise. When translating words from a foreign language into English, we are imposing our views of life on another society. If we decide that some foreign word is equivalent to "theatre," are we not the ones asserting that that society has the institution of theatre? This problem exists in assessing "theatre" in ancient Egypt, where there is no word exactly equivalent to the word "theatre," but there do appear to have been "theatrical" institutions, e.g. festivals that had some sort of performance-based component. The same difficulty exists in assessing whether Native American rituals, such as the buffalo dance, constitute "theatre." So, while Brockett's view of "theatre as an institution" is helpful in defining theatre and almost certainly points us in the right direction, it presents its own problems and suggests that ultimately a fully satisfactory definition of theatre may not be possible.

1.2.2 The Elements of Theatre
If there is no definition, can we at least delineate what constitutes theatre,? By looking for particular elements that are essential to theatre, perhaps we can gain, if nothing else, a sense of what theatre is.

To begin with, most theatre historians and critics would agree that language is fundamental to theatre. Whereas song predominates in opera and movement lies at the heart of ballet, the principal element in theatre is narrative language of some sort, which
is not to say that song and dance cannot serve as elements of theatre, only that the spoken word tends to dominate even in musical theatre. It must be admitted that the definition of "language" has to be somewhat flexible in this case, because theatrical language can be sign language as in deaf theatre and the complex symbology of gesture found in some Asian theatre—much as with pantomime in Western theatre—but in all cases, language-based communication of some sort lies at the heart of the medium.

A second element fundamental to theatre is impersonation. In the same way that rules define a game or instruction underlies and shapes everything that happens in a classroom, impersonation is a formative component of theatre. A person or persons pretending to be people or things other than themselves is found in all forms of entertainment we call "theatre." The escape that such disguise provides to both performer and audience is, no doubt, one of the attractions of theatre. It opens the door to fantasy and all the enjoyments that unreality affords.

The third and last, but arguably the most important, element of theatre is the audience. Without an audience, without viewers viewing the viewed, how can there be theatre? The Greek theatron got at least that much right. The audience, the "watchers," constitute a crucial element in theatre, as can be seen from the simple fact that there is theatre for the deaf—there is, in fact, theatre for almost every disability—but not theatre for the blind. It is notable, too, that in antiquity there were blind poets, blind philosophers, blind politicians, blind musicians, but no blind playwrights or actors or any record of the blind being involved in or even attending theatre. It is curious, then, that we call those attending theatre the "audience," a word drawn from the Latin word for "hear" (audio), thereby attesting to the power of language, the first fundamental element of theatre listed
above. But "spectators" is arguably a better term (from Latin specto, "watch"). After all, can we say that pantomime has, in a literal sense, an "audience"?

1.2.3 What is Theatre History?

1.2.3.1 Defining "Theatre History"

Such wide open definitions of its component words complicate the process of creating a definition of "theatre history." Given that "history" is "story" and "theatre" is "seeing," we might be led to assert that theatre history is a "narrative of the development of performances viewed by audiences across time," but, as we just saw, that involves several absurdities. In particular, employing synonyms like "performance" does little to advance our understanding, and surely it is important to recognize in any definition put forth theatre's focus on language and impersonation and, most of all, the centrality of the audience. Thus, theatre history might be said to be the "reconstruction of the relationships between audience and language-oriented impersonation-based presentations in the past," but there are obvious problems with that definition as well. Even if it were possible to recreate ancient performances in their costumes, sets and even language, it is still impossible to resurrect the ancient audience.

This points to a fundamental difficulty in analyzing theatre in general: all performance is history the second it is over. The moment the word is said, the gesture is made and the lights go down, the illusion is gone and, if no new illusion arises, the theatre in the strictest sense of the word is done. The magic that arcs between viewer and viewed is a sequence of momentary flashes and that magic evaporates when either audience or play disappears. Moreover, unlike art historians, theatre historians cannot retrieve or study the work itself, because the most crucial element is lost and unrecoverable—that is, the
original audience, that collective of watchers listening as a group and reveling in the theatrical illusion and conventions prevalent in their day—all of which certainly makes "authentic" reproductions of past theatres appear rather pointless. Reconstructions of ancient performances more often than not result in mechanical, boring theatrical events that use "authenticity" as a screen to mask their creators' lackluster, uncourageous artistic choices.

So, where does that leave our attempt to define theatre history? Trapped somewhere between the play and the audience, the living and the dead, theatre history turns by default into a study of the records of performance in a society, a culture's collective memory of the evolution of its theatre and drama. Imperfect as that definition is, it underscores an important point: theatre history involves the revival of past performances not necessarily on any real stage, but in the imaginary stage of the historian's mind. That makes it all the more important for historians to be aware of their own biases and cultural predilections since these may distort the picture unduly.

1.2.3.2 A Brief History of Theatre History
Given all this, what then should theatre historians seek in historical data? What type of information should be included or, more important, excluded from theatre history? What historical methodologies are valid? A brief overview of the history of this academic discipline sheds some light on this question and the state of the art.

The Mediaeval Stage by E.K. Chambers, Theatre history as a modern scholarly discipline began in the nineteenth century, when the "scientific" approach to academic study was on the rise. Positivism, the conviction that all things are knowable and expressible and that movement through time shows a general progress toward better
things, brought with it the notion that theatre historians should be looking for earlier, simpler and more primitive forms that over time lead to later, more complex and "better" forms. The quintessential example of this is E.K. Chambers' The Mediaeval Stage, a monumental study of theatre from late Rome to the sixteenth century. Chambers operated on the premise that the theatre preceding the Elizabethan Age was, in fact, making slow progress toward Shakespeare's theatre and that the roots of the great bard's drama can be seen in plays many centuries before his time. Typical of positivistic academicians, historians at this time saw theatres as "buildings," plays as "dramas," and recurrent theatre practices as "inherited rituals."

Later, in the twentieth century, this positivism was shown to involve several misconstructions of the data. That anything earlier is necessarily simpler and anything later more complex, an attitude good for bolstering the sagging egos of later peoples, but hardly useful in assessing reasonably the "progress" of history. "Progress" itself contains within it an unnecessarily pro-present bias, for it assumes that we are moving "forward," that is, becoming better than our predecessors, when the data of history give much evidence that human evolution proceeds in cyclical rhythms with many peaks and valleys. The supposition that there is some sort of rectilinear progress over time toward an increasingly better everything is, in simple terms, untenable.

In addition, theatres are more than mere buildings measurable in wood and stone. They are, in fact, "spaces" for actors and audiences to interrelate, spaces which need not be material at all, if they can house the illusion that constitutes theatre. And plays are not just words, not just dramas, but scripts that only hint at the multitude of different sensations and occurrences which combine to make theatre. Not only are words not
necessarily the most important thing happening on stage, they do not have to happen at all, although communication of some sort must occur in "theatre."

And infrequently are theatre practices merely inherited rituals which serve no real purpose other than to maintain tradition. More often, when traditional elements are seen in theatre, they play some sort of vital role. A good example of that is the chorus of Greek drama which is often cited as a relic of Sophocles' and Euripides' past, a thing later tragedians in the Classical Age supposedly despised ever more across time until they finally dropped it altogether. Euripides, in particular, is said to have been impatient with having to include a chorus in his plays and to have mocked the conventional inclusion of this singing, dancing crowd of passive onlookers who actually participate in the action only rarely. To some modern scholars, the choruses of his later plays seem notably lacklustre and ill-defined. But this is to overlook the importance that the chorus played in Greek theatre. It provided music and dance, a much-beloved element in all ancient Greek entertainment.

To wit, Greek history preserves a story that Athenian soldiers who were captured by their Sicilian foes during a failed attempt to seize the city of Syracuse in 413 BCE were able to rescue themselves from immediate execution by singing the beautiful choruses of the tragedian Euripides' later plays. If the story is true, it is strong evidence that audiences in antiquity, even ones at the moment hostile to the Athenians, appreciated and enjoyed the musical element in Euripides' plays. If, on the other hand, the story is not true, then it is even stronger evidence for the later ancients' enjoyment and appreciation of the chorus, because such a fiction assumes it was self-evident to the
ancient mind that everyone loves a good Euripidean choral melody. A lie has to be probable if it's going to work.

In either case, Euripides' choruses are clearly not some burden imposed on him or his audience by dint of tradition, some boulder he must roll up the parodos like a tormented theatrical Sisyphus. Indeed, the chorus is one of the real joys of the ancient theatre and obviously a defining constituent of the playwright's art. The truth is, it is not Euripides but we who are uncomfortable with Greek choruses because communal songs such as these, when presented on stage, seem foreign and unwieldy to us. It is hard for many of us moderns to imagine how or why they were performed, and so we write them off as "primitive."

The reason for that is, at least in part, because we have lost the music that made them so enjoyable to the ancient Greeks. It's natural that a chorus is going to look weak and ill-defined if the text is spoken—instead of singing, try speaking any well-known and well-liked modern song such as Handel's Hallelujah chorus or imagine a crowd of farmers and cowboys chanting "Oklahoma OK!," and see if the song doesn't lose a great deal of its efficacy as art—indeed, a fairer estimation of the ancient evidence points exactly the other way. The ancients, including playwrights, actors, and audiences preferred the music in their theatre, and the chorus is no mere "relic" which tradition forced upon the tragedians but a vital and integral part of their medium.

So where should we look for the type of data that we can use in composing our study of ancient theatre and drama? The answer has to be, in everything imaginable. Our investigation must include a comprehensive examination of ancients' lives and society, especially their values and sense of what constitutes right-and-wrong. Surely their
religion, what made them feel reverence and fear, what stirred them on a fundamental, emotional level is also central to theatre history. And we cannot discount philosophy, because from an understanding of their aesthetics—that is, what appealed to them as beautiful and worth regarding—as well as their sense of reason, we see what a classical audience was willing to believe and accept. The truth is, all facets of society involve theatre and are integral to the study of theatre history, a daunting but unavoidable prospect.

1.2.4 Introduction to the Question of the Origins of Theatre and Drama
Although the origin of Western theatre itself does not strictly fall within the scope of the study of classical drama, Greek drama is the earliest form of theatre attested in the West and so it behooves students of classical drama to review what constitutes the background of the subject they are exploring. In other words, using the definition of "theatre" constituted above lends focus to the search for its origin, especially when we look for art forms antecedent to the earliest Greek drama which center on language, impersonation, and audience and which led to, or may have led to, theatre.

This also predicates a certain approach to the question. While we are looking for audience, impersonation, and spoken language in performance, we will not be looking for other things which from a modern perspective one might presume are prerequisite to drama. Theatre buildings, for instance, are not absolutely obligatory, nor are dramatic scripts. Even more important, we must not seek "progress" across time, especially the sort of advancement measured by modern technological standards. And we must avoid seeing merely theatrical elements in society as evidence of theatre as an "autonomous activity." We are looking for the institution of theatre, not just presentational devices of
any sort, because all societies, even those without the custom of institutional performance, have viewers and viewed but do not necessarily have "theatre." Our sources are nothing less in scope than society itself. Any autonomous activities that involve impersonation, audience, and language, such as festivals, celebrations, rituals, and the like where people watch other people speaking and playing roles, may give evidence of where theatre came from.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

In fact, when taking into account the changes leading to the emergence of new forms of dramatic experimentation, it is absolutely necessary to remain aware of the relationship that takes place between literary text and cultural history. Therefore, one aspect of this thesis is the cross-cultural synergy produced in the process of creating or re-modifying literary forms, drama in particular. Moreover, a consequent result is to establish an understanding of genre that would be valid and accepted collectively across the two cultures. I am aware that such efforts are not particularly fertile given the very debate around the notion of genre. In the 1970s, Tzvetan Todrov identified in his fundamental essay “The Origin of Genre” the core problem lurking beneath the debate on genre: “One can always find a property common to two texts, and therefore put them together in one class. But is there any point in calling the result of such a union a “genre” (162)? Hence, one can say that commonalities between texts are not enough to classify them as genres. Therefore, another objective of my thesis is tackling the issue with a flexible notion of genre. Thus, the goal of this research is to delve into the potential that cultural journeys and encounters are able to discharge in the arena of genre and genre alteration.
According to the aforementioned information, my thesis shall draw on Stephen Greenblatt whose approaches and theories of literature are utilized in anthropology. Such a methodology will enable me to supply evidence that drama texts are able of far more than simply “reflecting” the culture from which they come. In addition, the literary texts that I will use will enable me to reinterpret culture. The purpose is to show how theatrical forms can relate to and arrange the culture’s distinct elements into new assemblages; hence, proving that meanings given to the world are spread through literary texts which in turn form the condition of their possibility. The scope of my investigation shall extend to include what theatrical techniques and productions originated in Arabic culture. It will seek to highlight the Arabic theatre’s originality thus challenging accusations of borrowing from European theatre. Stephen Greenblatt is crucial here since he is one of those scholars who call for a “cultural poetics”. Robson explains that “One way of assessing would be to think about how the idea of poetics modifies our sense of culture … as the product of a form of making, culture is related to other practices and to the systems of thought that govern production” (Robson 29). The approach at this stage shall follow a process that scrutinizes texts with the same importance as their cultural history. Therefore, using this concept, this thesis examines theatrical expressions which have occurred through different cultural fields within and outside geographical areas during particular periods in history since texts become measures that give us the “history of humanity” or the “totality of a period” (Robson 47). Thereby, the purpose of this process allows us to understand what each culture is capable of.
1.4. Purpose and Research Questions
Along the process of this inspection, goals may undergo changes in terms of number or emphasis. Establishing a definite understandable purpose is crucial in order to map out the intended steps of this research and to select key concepts and objectives that this study will be working on.

Did Arabs develop theatre prior to their encounter with European models in the nineteenth century? If so, what varieties of theatre existed? Can any of its expressions be known as Islamic? And in case the Arabs did not develop theatre, why not? And does this deficiency of theatre stand as a limitation of the Arab-Islamic culture? Is it factual that Islam prohibits the production of representational art? If so, or if assumed to be so, did this prevention disturb the growth of Arabic theatre? These questions, and others that follow them, are addressed in this study. In what manner and by what means did Arabic theatre develop in the mid-nineteenth century? Who was/were the first playwright(s) to inaugurate theatre in the Arabic world? What were the conditions that led to such a production? Who was the audience and what was the reaction of the culture towards such a novelty? Moreover, this thesis advances to the early twentieth century to further find out if European playwrights sought non-European Arabic theatrical manifestations in their attempt to create a new kind of theatre. If so, why did they conduct such techniques in their plays? And did they use Arabic theatrical techniques?

1.5. Review of Literature
Due to the lack of sufficient sources in Arabic on various issues deliberated in my thesis, I have chiefly counted on works written in English. I have relied on articles in journals and on the internet, and have made use of various books which separately discussed

Finding the script for the first play ever performed in the Arab world was somehow an equivocal task. Thereby, *Arzat Lubnan* (1868) stands out as the key source for chapter three as it contains the first primary source for this study, Marun Naqqash’s play *al-Bakhil*. Edited by Marun Naqqash’s brother, Niqula Naqqash, this book includes Marun Naqqash’s speech on the initial inauguration of theatre in 1869, a biography of Marun, Marun’s speech on presenting the first play, a chapter about plays and how to produce them, the collection of Marun’s plays *Riwayat al-Bakhil, Riwayat Abu ‘l-Hasan al-mughaffal*, and *Riwayat al Salit al-hasud*. Additionally, *Arzat Luban* comprises a prayer written by Marun Naqqash and sung by actors on the first performance of the first play, poems praising his work, fragments of his own poems, and elegies to him. This chapter also makes use of Zaydan’s *Tarikh Adab al-Lugha al-Arabiya* (1958) and Najm’s *Al-Masrahiyya fi al-Adab al-Arabi al-Hadith* (1967). I especially turned to Badawi’s *Early Arabic Drama* (1988) and *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (1993) along with Jabarti’s *Aja’b al-Athar fi al-Tarajim wa al-Akhbar* (1897). Furthermore, this chapter referred to Landau’s *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema* (1958), Urquhart’s
The Lebanon (Mount Souria): History and Diary (1860), Salim Naqqash’s Fawa’id al-Riwayat aw al-Tiyarat (1875), and Daghir’s Fann al-Tamthil fi Khilal Qarn (1848). Moreover, Riger Allen’s Introduction to Arabic Literature (2000) and Philip Sadgrove’s Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century (1996) stand out as useful references to this chapter. All translations from the Arabic are my own unless stated otherwise.

In chapters four and five, for my second primary source, I shall ground my work on Asche’s Chu Chin Chow: The 1916 Musical Comedy: Complete Book and Lyrics (2016). Chu Chin Chow is a play that was inspired by the One Thousand and One Nights collection of stories that were accumulated in Arabic throughout the Islamic Golden Age. This age extended from the eighth-century to the thirteenth-century when the Islamic world flourished with science, economic development, and cultural works. Particularly, Chu Chin Chow was inspired by Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves story. In addition, this chapter finds value in the work of Singleton’s Oscar Asche, Orientalism and British Musical Comedy (2004) which examines the work of Oscar Asche in an engaging and stimulating manner. Singleton outlines a historical timeline while applying a logical use of theory as he reflects upon the general cultural and political context that led to major theatrical productions such as Chu Chin Chow and other plays. More secondary sources shall be used throughout the writing process of these chapters.

1.6. Overview of Chapters
The second chapter shall participate in the debate whether Arabic theatre ever existed before being exposed to European theatre. This chapter aspires to prove the existence of Arabic theatre prior to any European encounter. By doing so, this attempt poses my study in a confrontation between prominent writers such as Mustafa Badawi,
Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, and Najib Mahfuz who argue that Arabs were first exposed to drama as a contemporary literary genre in the course of the military expedition led by Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt from 1798 to 1801 (Jabarti). They claim that Arab’s first exposure occurred when French dilettantes entertained the French soldiers in Cairo by acting out plays. Consequently, my study is set to counter this previous stance by attempting to dig up features of theatrical manifestations in the Arab literary heritage prior to the nineteenth-century when Napoleon first set foot on Arabic shore in Egypt in 1798. Henceforth, one purpose of my investigation is venturing on a search for evidence that the Arabs knew theatre in the primary years of Islam: that is, in the centuries from the birth of Islam in the seventh-century to the Golden Islamic age which dated from the eighth-century to the thirteenth-century. Thus, my thesis intends to prove the Arab originality of Arabic theatre. Accordingly, the first stage begins in digging for any proof for an Arab perception of theatrical performances.

The third chapter of this study delves into an era when the well-known Arabic theatre started functioning in the mid-nineteenth century. It is when the genre of Arabic theatre was recognized as a model enlightened by devices functioning within the adaptation, movement, and transformation of elements of the genre of drama. Arab commissary voyagers returning from Europe, enchanted and captivated by European theatre, inaugurated this European genre, the Aristotelian theatre, into the Arab world. On their own accord, they initiated and prepared, firstly restricted to the private circle, theatre performances coming from literary texts following the model of prominent European dramatists (Tahtawi 228-231)\(^1\). This chapter travels 170 years ago. It is divided into two

\(^1\) For a full description refer to Rifa’a Rafi’al-Tahtawi’s *An Imam in Paris*. 

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sections. First, it briefly reviews the three pioneering Arabic playwrights of the early nineteenth century, Marun Naqqash, Ya’qub Sannu’, and Ibrāhīm Qabbānī, while taking the general cultural and political context into consideration. Second, it examines Marun Naqqash’s drama *al-Bakhil* which remains distinct in being the first drama in Arabic (Matti 29). Specifically, this discussion shall take place in the light of this play existing as an adaptation of the European play *The Miser* which was written by Molière. The aim behind approaching *al-Bakhil* as an imitation is to reveal why such mimicking took place by Arab pioneers. The purpose is to link their use of this new art form to the context of the progressive era of *al-nahda* or “renaissance” movement in the Arab world, particularly in Cairo and Ottoman Syria, which included Lebanon, where this cultural and intellectual awakening first started. In addition, after establishing this link, my research aims to deduce that the purpose of such a link was to propagate public reformist liberal concepts. At the same time, this study finds it quite necessary, informative, and beneficial to find and point out the fact that theatre as a textual genre of European derivation vastly gave way to its acceptance and popularity in liberal, progressive, and western-oriented parts of Arab society throughout this era. In this context, this chapter requires us to shift to Stephen Greenblatt’s previously highlighted theory which urges us to question the social, political, and cultural voices of any literary fictional text since they uncover much of information about the culture itself.

In consent with that, my study further intends to uncover an incident which shall not only further ground the hypothesis of the study but also exposes the internal motif which has hidden such a reciprocal action between the two cultures for such a long time. This motif shall further back-up the necessity to unlock the link between culture and
literary fictional texts, especially performative texts which reflect that same culture. This goes back to the anti-European tendency which steadily gained power in the 1920’s and the 1930’s. The importance of such an observation rests in proving how since this stage, and with increasing stamina during the second half of the twentieth century, the genre of Arabic production of theatre turned out to massively be a politically-engaged platform.

The process of exceeding dissociation and detachment from Europe took place specifically after the Arab-Israeli war which was concluded by Israel’s decisive victory in 1967. Hence, this study asserts that the denunciation of European influence took place as it was more and more alleged as a perturbing factor. Quite a number of artists and critics recalled local common techniques of dramatic performance in Arab culture. They evoked forms such as the story-teller, ritual portrayals or shadow theatre, methods which are not considered consistent with the European genre notion of literary theatre. Hence, this line of thought hopes to verify that this new understanding of the authenticity and essence of Arabic theatre doomed the discontinuation and break from the procedures and forms of the European genre and consequently created a new genre which is an independent and non-western form of art.

Comparatively and similarly, chapters four and five of this analysis takes us to Europe. Just several decades earlier, specifically during the start of the twentieth century, a movement also rose in Europe, it sought to separate itself from the Aristotelian genre model. The purpose of this movement was to issue a new understanding of theatre that could reproduce the social and political fluctuations of that stage. The focus of this chapter is on the avant-garde attempts in dramatic art in Europe which extracted their inspiration from non-European dramatic forms, wanting to generate a new type of
modern theatre. The significance of such research resides in selecting some of these new modes of expression which these playwrights implemented in European popular culture. Certainly, we can believe that these modes pertain to be authentic in cultures outside Europe (Szyska and Pannewick 2), modes inspired by the Arab culture. Thus, I shall ground my work on Asche’s *Chu Chin Chow: The 1916 Musical Comedy: Complete Book and Lyrics* (2016). *Chu Chin Chow* opened at His Majesty’s Theatre in London on August third 1916 and was performed for five years adding up to 2,238 performances, a fascinating top score that stayed for nearly forty years. The play reached the stages of America as it was played for 208 times in New York in 1917–1918. It consecutively had successful seasons in a number of places in America and Australia in 1920, 1921 and 1922 (Pitman 1). Most importantly, Oscar Asche was inspired in *Chu Chin Chow* by the *One Thousand and One Nights*, particularly *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves*, a work accumulated in Arabic throughout the Islamic Golden Age (Singleton 1). Thus, this thesis aims to uncover a parallel movement between European and Arab artists, who, one could claim, met half way, each side seeking for an authentic and liberated form of drama close to their culture, context, and audience.

### 1.7. Significance and Implications

The significance of my research culminates in the study of the genre of literary text in drama and its transference from a different culture into the Arab world. The second step involves the alteration and adjustment of the transported genre through the inclusion of features inserted by the receiving cultural field, the Arab world. Such a procedure leads to the release of a new modified genre. Meanwhile, an alteration of the

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2 The play was produced in 1916. To locate the script, I found a copy published in 2016.
genre model was also occurring in the sending culture, Europe, where artists were bringing in features from different cultures. They were incorporating these features into their own genre model from the cultures that were once receiving. My thesis traces this pattern in order to demonstrate that the notion of a genre, travelling through diverse cultures, cannot be simply transported without itself undertaking change, as if this trip would leave it untouched. Thus, this search intends to clear the enigma cluttered around the process of transferring features of a genre by explaining that the procedure of transfer yields to changes. As a result, the usefulness of my study lies in illuminating the idea that the emergence of a new and altered form is not a cultural misunderstanding nor a wrong reading. Hence, my study shall base its results on the studies of James Clifford, an interdisciplinary scholar whose work joins views from history, literature, and anthropology. So, to use James Clifford’s phrase in this context, stating that genre is a type of “inventive syncretism” fills a certain gap present in the discussion relevant to genre, its elements, whether these elements are what make it a genre, and how it differs from one culture to another even if it holds similar features, which in turn can be original or transformed.

I hope that my work will help to untie the complexity inherent to the transference of the elements of genre. I expect to create a work that will not simply recount facts, but will give information about the process of transferring the genre of theatrical elements between cultures. Consequently, my thesis aims to reflect on and uncover the factors which have given this genre a new coherent figure within these modern cultural communities. I anticipate that my research on the case of Arabic drama and its connection to European drama is not only going to answer questions concerning the
originality and purity of theatre in each culture; but also, it shall ultimately and most significantly, illustrate that genres cannot be recognized as fixed entities. As a result, my thesis attempts to show that the quest for the roots of genre, if one limits oneself to literature, would probably lead to no results. Therefore, my study suggests a solution which is to breach genre-centered approaches. Then it becomes possible to consider the originality and means of voyages as instigators of genre, explicitly as the core mechanics in social drama.
Chapter 2

Early Arabic Drama

2.1. Introduction

The following chapter serves to examine Arabic drama, also interchangeably known as Islamic drama with a focus on the pre-modern era, seventh to nineteenth century. This chapter is also an introduction to chapter three and four which focus on Arabic drama in the nineteenth century, European drama in the early twentieth century, and the works of selected prominent dramatists from those periods.

Hence, this chapter focuses on popular theatre since the seeming lack of a native theatre culture has been the center of attention of many experts and scholars for a long time. Arab/Muslim theatre had not been culturally adopted as a form of high fine art, as opposed to the one developed in Europe during the Renaissance, even though some scholars would argue otherwise. Hence, the factors and the truth behind such a deferment are going to be discussed in this chapter. This is not to say that theatre had no presence in the Arab world – but rather, that there are shortfalls.

2.2. Examination of the Historical Background

There is wide agreement that Marun Naqqash’s play “al-Bakhil” (Arabic for “stingy”), which was written and produced in 1846, marked the birth of modern Arabic drama. One of Naqqash’s goals was to make the audience more acquainted with such a style that was inspired by the dramatic scene in Europe. Naqqash firmly believed that
theatre can promote civilization and virtue and discourage vice, as expressed during the opening speech for his play (Badawi 44).

Theatre was regarded as a low simple expression. For instance, weddings and ceremonies included theatrical acts for the mere purpose of entertaining the audience. It was not intended for serious literate followers. Since theatre did not interest Arab scholars, it is therefore not surprising that accounts of Arabic theatre are mostly written by Europeans who traveled and lived in the region (Sadgrove 11-25). This explains why Naqqash avoided the local culture to be his audience, and rather sought European influence, in order to build a theatre scene in the Arab world that would cater to the “noble and intelligent” (al-Khozai 33).

There was no suitable environment for the development of dramatic theatre in the Arab world prior to the mid-nineteenth century. This is especially due to the absence of an encouraging model and a lack of interest. In addition, while the ta’ziyah was indeed thriving in that period, it was limited to the Shi’a community only.

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3 It is impossible to understand the importance the ta’ziya has for the Shi’ite community without some knowledge of the historical circumstances that gave rise to it. This does not mean that its dramatic qualities cannot be appreciated by a non-Shi’ite audience, but it will be useful here to explain the context to shed light on Shi’ite audience’s intense emotional involvement. This is to note that that drama existed among the Muslims of the Middle East. The Shi’ite Passion Play or the ta’ziah, which developed into its present practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, honors the martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson Hussein at the hands of Caliph Yazid’s troops. It was this historic incident that marked the beginning of the later split of Muslims into Sunnis and Shi’ites. The origins of ta’ziya and its key features include a theatrical space, style, performance, and intense emotional involvement of the audience in the tragic event of Karbala.
At this point, a discussion about the definition of drama is handy. Badawi defines it as “the imitation on a stage by human actors of a story or situation through action and dialogue in verse or prose” (Badawi 3). According to al-Khozai, it is “a literary genre either in poetry or in prose that describes life and characters or narrates a story by means of action and dialogue through acting on a stage” (al-Khozai, 1). While there is no universal definition, such statements help to provide perspective.

But why, prior to Naqqash’s work, did the literary genres lack behind in dramatic content (Badawi 3), so not to be considered as pieces of theatre? As shall be discussed later, there stands an opposition to this negative connotation; however, for the moment, it will be assumed that this statement holds true.

It should be pointed out that early Arabs were not familiar with drama. Before Islam, poetry was predominant and drama was lacking (Badawi 3). After the expansion of the Islamic empire, Islamic culture got influenced by the civilizations that Muslims were in touch with, such as the Byzantine and Persian. Novel cultures started to mark their impressions on the Islamic heritage. For instance, in the ninth century, numerous texts were translated; yet, these translations were generally from Syriac, not Greek. Ancient Greek dramatic texts were not translated into the Syriac language for the reason that Syriac academics were either apathetic or hostile to pagan literature. Hence, most of the literary and dramatic works of such new cultures were not translated due to religious reasons (opposition to paganism) and thus, were not available to Muslims. Nonetheless, while Muslim intellectuals such as al-Kindi sorted out or did not reach out to imaginative pieces of literature, particularly drama, they benefited from a vast sea of
knowledge in medicine, science, and astronomy after their contact with the other civilizations (Sadgrove 11).

It may be suggested that the scarcity of drama in the early Islamic period is correlated with its absence from the Qurʾān. Moreover, during that period, Western Europe and Byzantine theatre scenes were fading, while the Islamic culture was blooming. By al-Kindi’s era (c. 801 – 866), the new Islamic state had been developed and achieved “the self – confidence of an imperial culture resting on worldly power and the conviction of divine support” (Hourani 77), which might have made Muslims believe there was nothing in literature to learn from other civilizations. Badawi further extends this view as he states that the great success in poetry made Muslims self-satisfied. It can be argued that the belief that Arabic language, being the heavenly language and the exact utterance of God in the Qurʾān, sanctioned it as divine and caused Muslims to consider literary expressions in other languages as inferior since the most supreme level of human expression could have been only achieved through the Arabic language (Badawi 3).

It is more likely that Muslim translators were unaware of Greek drama rather than they were intentionally avoiding it. However, they were perfectly aware of Poetics, one of Aristotle’s most prominent works which had an influence on Arabic philosophy. Nevertheless, having examined its translation by Abu Bishr (d.939) and the comments on it by the renowned philosophers al – Farabi (879-950), Avicenna (980-1036) and Averroes (1126-98), scholars have argued that the Arabs were not able to make sense out of the works of Aristotle. For instance, tragedy was rendered as “madih” and
comedy as “hija” since these two genera were familiar forms in Arabic poetry, but their meanings were not perfectly harmonious with the Greek concept (Badawi 3-4).

While the Arabs had established their own art of drama by the tenth century, drama remained nevertheless neglected. One of the reasons is that, even until the mid-nineteenth century, religious and literary figures in the Arab world considered theatre as a low form of art and thus unimportant. Another reason is that while Arab translators were indeed interested in Aristotle’s works, it was only to understand his criticism style and make it of use in poetry (Moreh 116).

Moreh points out that, contrary to some beliefs, Muslims did indeed have a significant culture of live theatre (Moreh 3). Why then did it not expand into a high level of art? Besides considering it as being despicable to the religious and literary elite, there are some speculations (Badawi 4) made by some scholars such as Badawi and al-Khozai.

Al-Khozai opposes Landau who believes that the reasons behind not translating Greek drama are the lack of contact with theatre-rich cultures and the prevention of women in taking roles on stage. While the first reason is plausible, the second is not because women also did not take part in other theatre scenes, particularly the Greek and, later, the English. Rather, al-Khozai believes that the factors that affected Arab drama were, as shall be discussed further on, linked to attitude, aesthetics, environment, and history (al-Khozai 3-17).

The first factor, “attitude”, seems the weakest among all factors as it suggests that the mentality of Arabs is not suitable for the development of drama. According to Badawi, stereotypical views have made the Arab mind seem abstract and individualistic (Badawi 4). Al-Khozai, however, opposes such a label by pointing out that creativity
was abundant in Arabic work such as “‘Antara” and One Thousand and One Nights (al-Khozai 3). Moreover, al-Khozai refers to pre-Islamic poetry for additional support to his perspective (Badawi 4; al-Khozai 4). Similarly, Badawi mentions Islamic architecture and considers it as an indicator of the creative capabilities of Arabs (Badawi 4). It is interesting to note that the renowned Tawfiq al-Hakim once criticized Arabic literature for “lacking structure” (Masr Bayna Asrin 216-220). Nevertheless, decades later, he changed his views as stated that Arab and Pharaonic cultures were based on well-structured expressions of art and thus had the potential of developing theatre; but rather, as he points out, Arabs chose to focus more on poetry (“Internal Characteristics” 82).

In terms of “aesthetics”, al-Khozai explains why it was difficult for Arabs to understand Greek drama as he states that the Arab translators were unable “to see beyond the categories of the qasida when attempting to grasp the meaning of the terms “tragedy” and “comedy” (al-Khozai 5-6). The translators and scholars cannot be held responsible for their misreading since their culture did not have dramatic poetry; thus, their language was void of equal words for these new ideas (al-Khozai 5-6).

Moving on to “environment”, some have argued that theatre requires stability, which could not be accommodated by the Arab nomadic lifestyle (Al-Malik Audib 25-26; al-Khozai 6-7) However, al-Khozai disagrees with this idea, pointing out that nomads were only a small portion of the Arab population. On the opposite, most Arabs were well-settled in Mecca, an economic hub back then, being proof enough (al-Khozai 7; Aziza 11; Badawi 4). The argument falls further short when we find that the Muslims, after the distribution of Islam, inhabited an empire that included Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo.
Moreover, before discussing religion, another factor that must be initially discussed is “mythology”. Al-Khozai contrasts with Badawi in terms of considering mythology as a key cause of drama. Badawi claims that the Arabs and the entire Islamic realm struggled with “the absence of the mythology [as it being] essential for the inception of drama” (al-Khozai 8). Al-Khozai initially agrees by affirming that the variety of mythology offered within the Greek culture promoted the accomplishment of the four great Athenian playwrights⁴. However, al-Khozai provides us with a counter argument that cancels the necessity of mythology to conceive tragedy. Al-Khozai notes that by deeming mythology as a direct component to tragedy, Badawi neglects Aristophanes. Furthermore, al-Khozai refutes by proving the presence of mythology in Islam via the mythic facet that comes along the dramatic power to the ta’ziyah. As a result, al-Khozai makes it clear that shortfalls in drama cannot be linked to the lack of mythology in Islam (Badawi 4).

Last but not least: “religion”. Al-Khozai states that before Islam, Arabs did not have unified religious beliefs, as opposed to Greek paganism, which curbed the rise of religious rituals such as the ones that instigated the growth of Greek drama. If so, then what about the impact of Islam? Al-Khozai links that, “The quintessence of drama lies in [religious] conflict, which was manifest in Greek drama” (al-Khozai 9). Subsequently, this leads this study to refer to al-Khozai’s approval of the ideas of Aziza which are concerned with such conflicts. More specifically, the latter examines that there are four different kinds of religious conflicts, all related to the freedom of man. Each of these conflicts explored in classical Greek drama; however, were they absent in Islamic

⁴ Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes
culture? The four conflicts are: vertical (conflict with divine will), horizontal (legal/societal conflict), dynamic (conflict with instinct/fate), and internal (conflict with oneself). A brief expansion on those conflicts is presented in what follows (Aziza 21).

Since no Muslim dared to challenge the will of God, a vertical conflict was completely absent. Muslims believe in predestination, as opposed to free will, and hence readily accept things. This was not the case with the Greeks, whose dramatic works were heavily influenced by vertical conflicts (Badawi 4). Nevertheless, Badawi argues that there still could have been room for drama, as even though Muslims did not oppose God’s will, many other groups did not accept Mohamed’s teachings – which could have been inspirational enough to write pieces of drama on this type of conflict. In terms of horizontal conflict, Aziza states that rebellious Muslims were considered as unbelievers, and states that this was considered as an inappropriate substance for a complete dramatic production. This notion is surely misleading on account that Islam itself sprung from conflict inside the city of Mecca. Clashes and struggles were recognized during the years succeeding the death of the Prophet. Culmination of conflicts occurred up until the death of Hussein at Karbala and the start of the split of believers between Sunnis and Shi’ites. It is useful to note that acknowledging that the Shi’ites established a theatre via the practice of the ta’ziyah comes conjointly with the fact that they could not have done so if the schism in Islam had not happened (Aziza 40-50). The discussion of the ta’ziyah shall be treated in what follows. Nevertheless, this brief reference to ta’ziyah is beneficial as it shows the real truth that the history of Islam includes many instances of conflict between persons, between the people and the state, amid divisions inside states, and between states, all of which might have equipped drama with a suitable substance.
As for the other two types of religious conflicts, the dynamic and internal, these are linked to the understanding of the history of Muslims. Aziza claims that their history is traditionalist and is grounded on the acceptance of God’s will in all matters. It is described as an agreement between God and the faithful believer, where the believer is expected to receive all life events as the will of God. Aziza; thus, regards Muslims as naïve and pious, which is not completely accurate (Aziza 29-31). In fact, this view is a simplified generalization. Hence, Aziza can be disputed by referring to the complexities of Islamic theology and by the fluctuations of fourteen centuries of Islamic history. The fourth kind of conflict, concerning the person and his or her fate, is related to the third and may be disapproved on the same grounds.

Both al-Khozai and Badawi discuss the problem of Islamic culture being unfriendly to drama. Some argue that Islam opposes figurative arts; however, this is not true, except perhaps within mosques. “The figurative arts were not only tolerated but encouraged when the danger of paganism had disappeared,” states al-Khozai (11; Badawi 4). Nevertheless, the Muslims did not take the opportunity to develop theatre as much as such arts (al-Khozai 12). Al-Khozai continues to suggest a number of historical reasons, which if they are taken together, could explain why drama did not flourish within the monotheistic Islamic culture, between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, which corresponds to the same period of the Middle Ages in Europe, which was between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. As mentioned previously, first, Christian Syriac translators discouraged medieval Arabs from engaging with translating Greek thought since they considered it as pagan literature. Second, the Islamic empire had a vision that they would someday head the civilizations of the world and; therefore, heirs had to turn
to Islam and consequently should use Arabic. In fact, they meant to collect and translate all the world’s classical works into Arabic. Third, Arabs had a slight interest in and little contact with European Christians, who were developing drama during the Middle Ages. Hence, it was somewhat unlikely to develop a drama culture inspired by others in the Arab world during that time. These factors combined with deterioration in the Abbasid Empire’s economy after the Mongol attack in the thirteenth century meant that Islamic culture was not capable of taking part in the Renaissance which was starting to take place in Europe.

The previous historical arguments presented by al-Khozai are thorough and somewhat true, especially those related to the early Islamic periods. However, they fail to accurately highlight the later Islamic periods (such as during the European Renaissance phase) as such times involved flourishing Islamic civilizations (Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal) that were in some aspects, such as visual arts and architecture, actually influenced by European art and hence were more open than turned inward.

Nevertheless, things differ when it comes to imaginative literature mainly when we consider the advanced pre-modern period, since literature in the Arab culture experienced a serious decline during the sixteenth century, as opposed to the way it was during the pre-Islamic and medieval eras. According to Sadgrove, “In the two or three centuries before the nineteenth century… The majority of Arabic writers of imaginative prose and poets demonstrated a distinct lack of imagination and flair in their works; the creative spirit needed to found a literary theatre was lacking.” Moreover, Sadgrove also points out that since Arabs believed their language to be “sacrosanct”, they tried their
best to keep foreign influences away. This put limitations on their literary works as imitation lasted only due to the texts that were produced before (Sadgrove 11-12).

Hence, conservatism worked against the progress of literary Arabic drama, which was also paralleled by a stagnating Ottoman empire. Noteworthy is that, despite its military effects, France’s 1798 campaign in Egypt had a significant cultural effect (al-Khozai 14) with the devout righteous practice toward language, the negative attitude towards theatre occurred, thus, depriving it of a respectable position in Arab culture. Many authors have tried to explain why Arabic drama was absent prior to 1846; however, not all of them presented convincing answers. In that regard, Badawi states that many such authors took an apologetic attitude in their attempts and expressed Arab inferiority. However, Badawi disagrees and is quoted saying “The absence of drama is in no way an indication of cultural inferiority and the fact is that the Arabs did develop their own dramatic writing as well as their own epics; even though the form that these products took was different from the Western form (Badawi 5).

2.3. Traditional Dramatic Entertainment

What, then, were these other forms? Putting ta’ziah aside, there were indeed some varied acts of theatre in the Middle East between the early days of Islam and 1846. For example, Moreh points to the live theatre performances of pre-Islam Arabs (Christians and Jews); however, these vanished by the sixth century, as they had been substituted by “games, mimes and other lowbrow performances (Moreh 9). Moreover, the Coptic fest of Nayrus or Nawruz, and the Persian custom of hiring court performers such as jesters, singers, and buffoons, sustained into the Islamic era (Moreh 10-11).
Some might say that we should not care about traditional Arabic theatre since what matters started in the nineteenth century. In this regard, Badawi argues that “any account of modern Arabic drama which ignored such activities would suffer from serious deficiencies, not just on grounds of incompleteness but also because it would fail to provide the necessary historical background” (Badawi 7). He elaborates on this idea by stating that traditional dramatic entertainment had an influence on modern drama, and as such its effect cannot be ignored.

Badawi, indeed, has a strong point, as elements of traditional entertainment can even be found in mid-twentieth century Arabic pieces (such as those by Wannous). However, given the scope of this chapter, we will not expand the discussion to include works from the mid-twentieth century though the importance of these traditions cannot be neglected. As previously stated, the Qurʾān does not prohibit dramatic productions. However, the Hadith views entertainment in a negative light, as it distracts Muslims from their religion. Nevertheless, there is proof that early Muslims, including Mohamed himself, were appreciative of entertainers such as clowns, mimes, musicians and dancers (Moreh 21-22).

However, not all performers were well-appreciated, such as the “mukhannathun”. These were mainly effeminate men who rode hobby horses – an act known as “kurraj”. Caliphate Omar, for instance, stated his intentions to expel them from Mekka (Moreh 28).

The “samaja”, actors with masks, were another type of performers in the pre-Islamic era. Masks typically depicted animals or demons and were an essential component in dramatic rituals of Arabs and other nearby civilizations (Moreh 45).
However, such actors faced opposition later on. For instance, the Mamluk sultans in Egypt considered their behavior to be “licentious.” It is noteworthy that *samaja* in the notion of “comical mask “is mentioned in Avicenna’s comments on Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Moreh 51).

Buffoons and jesters were also at one point popular – not only for the masses, but also for the ruling class providing a sort of entertainment for the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs. For instance, al-Mu'tasim made Ibn Junaid, a fart-making jester, his favorite amusement companion. Even though this manifestation is a high stretch from formal theatre yet, his company was also for the sake of his appearance and dialogue.

While the above discussion on the types of performers drifts away from the world of theatre, it is worthwhile to note that many of them were comedians who delivered live performances that are comparable to theatre acts (Moreh 65-68). Also noteworthy is that such performances carried on for a long while, even until the eighteenth century (Moreh 72).

According to Moreh, pageantry was another way through which Arabs made pseudo-theatrical representations of life. This usually happened during weddings and circumcisions, and were delivered by artisans who incorporated both comedy and seriousness in their acts (Moreh 76-77). Al Ra’i provides an account related to the procession of Haroun al-Rashid:

The procession is led by a group of men on foot carrying banners, followed by groups of musicians and strong men carrying bows and brandishing their swords. Then the Caliph appears wearing a black cloak, riding an Arab stallion of fine pedigree; behind him is a group of ministers and government officials mounted on
horses decked in lavishly decorated cloths, and following them come government men and guards. This procession is essentially a theatrical performance organized with great precision. The streets of Baghdad are its stage, and the performance moves from the Caliph’s palace to the mosque. Its principal hero is the caliph, the public crowds are its audience; its aim is to impress and awe the public and to show them the strength and wealth of the government. (al-Ra’i 40)

Al-Ra’i provides other similar accounts, such as that of Caliph al-Moktader that was held to honor truce diplomats from Byzantium. The purpose was to impress the guests as thousands of soldiers were involved in the pageant, and decoration reached the level of painting trees and animals with gold (al-Ra’i 44). Nevertheless, most celebrations were far less lavish and some of them contained acts of theatre (Moreh 77-78) or a show of horses and jockeys. In the eighteenth century it was common to find riders mimicking combats between the Bedouin. Similarly, pageants might consist of conjurers, gymnasts, acrobats, jugglers, and snake-enchanters.

2.4. Dramatic Theatre Performances

But what about dramatic theatre performances? Was there a more developed form of entertainment that combined literature and/or religion for both intellectual and recreational purposes? The answer may lie in the concept of “storytellers,” who were battle narrators before Islam, but turned to religious admonishers “waʾiz” after Islam (Orsan 105). Opinions are mixed whether admonishing began during the second caliphate or later on during the time of the Umayyad (Orsan 108; Rikabi 123). The storytellers were intellectuals or magistrates who first admonished within mosques, but were able to do so outside as well later on during the Umayyad era. Their lectures were joined by sermons,
and were eloquently delivered in a rhetorical style. A new form of storytellers rose during the Abbasid era, and were referred to as “haki” or imitator (Rikabi 443).

Al-Jahiz gives a renowned account of an impersonation, hikaya, in one of his works known as Bayan:

We find that the impersonator is able to imitate precisely the pronunciation of the natives of Yemen with all the special accents of that area [...] when he imitates the speech of the stammerer it seems that he has become the ultimate stammerer, as if all the peculiarities of every stammerer ever born have been rolled into one. When he imitates the blind man, copying the distinctive features of his face, eyes and limbs, [...] it is as if he has synthesized the peculiar features of all blind men in one complete character. (qtd. in Moreh 87)

While such a performer seems talented, there does not seem to be a plot, nor interaction with other performers. Nevertheless, Moreh shows that such imitations were occasionally made as short written satires that ridiculed scholars and rulers (Moreh 87-91).

However, the most essential scripted text that was written in the Abbasid era is an admonishing monologue rather than an imitating sketch, and is similar to sermons. Yet, it differs from lectures and has dramatic components, and has been a source of inspiration for many other works during that time (Moreh 91).

Performance for the “play” was carried on during the third caliphate by a religious Sufi who acted as a fool. It was mainly about holding a trial for the caliphs (portrayed by actors who did not have any dialogue), whereby the Sufi, as the judge,
chose their destiny; heaven or hell. Since it involved a certain level of criticism, actors had to be careful and avoid crossing limits. The “play” starts with the judge asking and receiving affirmation from the audience about the Prophet’s place (Heaven), and then involves bringing each caliphate to him in turn, whom he admits into Heaven. The judge’s verdict for Ali Ben Abi Taleb, the fourth caliphate, and the father of Hussein, the martyr of Karbala, is presented below:

May God reward you for your services to the Umma [community of the faithful], Abu ‘l – Hassan, for you are the legatee and friend of the Prophet. You spread justice and were abstemious in this world, withdrawing from the spoils of war instead of fighting for them with tooth and nail. You are the father of blessed progeny and the husband of a pure and upright woman. Take him to the highest heaven of Paradise. (Moreh 91)

However, the play shows the Sufi condemning all the caliphates that followed, especially Yazid who was responsible for Hussein’s death. This can be clearly seen from the below dialogue:

[……] you are the one who killed the people of the Harra and laid Medina open to the troops for three days, thereby violating the sanctuary of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace. [……] you killed Hussein and carried off the daughters of the Prophet as captives on the camel […] bags take him to the lowest Hell! ((Moreh 92)

Finally, when the timeline gets to the Abbasids, the Sufi would be silent but would quickly condemn them to Hell (Moreh 93). Hence, it can be seen that, as opposed to
buffoons and jesters, the Sufi had religious objectives and got involved in theatre as an act of self-humiliation (playing the fool) since theatre was despised (Moreh 93), although his role was not of a humble status. Therefore, the Sufi’s play is unique in presenting a true Islamic matter together in its purpose and subject.

Another interesting, yet drastically different piece is “Hikayat Abu al-Qasim al-Baghdadi” which revolves around everyday life scenes in Baghdad during the tenth century. Nevertheless, it also aimed to mock the religiosity of the Shi’a during that time. This can be seen from Abu al-Qasim’s role as a devout man who also insults people and talks in an obscene way. While the play includes dialogue, it is Abu al-Qasim who is most active since Abu al-Qasim takes the largest part in the continuous dialogue with the guests at the party that he crashes. According to Moreh, this play was not only intended to represent society in tenth-century Baghdad, but also to inspire later dramatic works. Indeed, pieces of it were of use to future dramatist such as Ibn Daniel, one of the leaders of shadow plays (Moreh 99).

Storytelling carried on into the twentieth century. For instance, Al-Hakim and Wannous relied on it in their dramatic works so as to provide an authentic native feel to their predominantly Arab audience. Moreover, those who recited medieval romances became known as “Sha’ir” or rhapsody. Such performances are taken into account by Edward Lane, a Victorian scholar. Even though he considered the satirical elements as “ridiculous,” he viewed the recitation of romances in public as “attractive” (Lane 8). Noteworthy is that these romances combined both narration and drama through prose and verse, and were memorized and delivered exuberantly (Lane 397-398).
Moreh refers to the academics Ynis and al-Ra’i in stating that *hikaya* preceded the shadow play, and was even prior to *maqama* and *risala*; in fact, it was an influential source to those genres, one that can be seen from the similar heavy inclusion of dialogues (Moreh 104). This study shall focus on the *maqama* since it had solid links with the shadow play. According to al-Khozai, the *maqama* is a genre that is peculiar to Arabs, and in addition to having some elements of drama, it also “depended more on linguistic sophistication than on the relatively thin plot” (al-Khozai 19). The *maqama* was invented by al-Hamadani and later developed by al-Hariri, and it remained popular even into the twentieth century (Hourani 53). One description of the *maqama* is provided by Moreh, who states that it is a:

Short and ornate “picaresque” work in rhymed prose, couched in the first person singular. It usually contains a narrative element consisting of an amusing or surprising, real or true to life scene, and it is formulated in the present tense. In every *maqama* there is a narrator [and in the case of *maqamat* al-Hamadani he is] called “Iṣa Ibn Hisham, and a hero, Abu al-Fath al’Iskandri, who generally appears as disguised beggar […] trying to earn a living by his wits, his linguistic virtuosity and talent. (Moreh 105)

Moreh also argues that the *maqama* imitated the *hikaya*, both in structure and dialogue. Consequently, this allowed it to have an admirable position in the Arab world (Moreh 107-108). Moreh states that the *maqama* might have relied on live drama in some aspects. Additionally, it inspired the genre of “*khayal az-zill*”, of which only a small collection of references is still in existence – one of the most notable being that of Shams El Deen Ibn Daniel (1248 – 1311).
Shadow theatre had been endorsed in Arab culture during Ibn Daniel’s era. As a note, *khayal az-zill* is not the same as the *Karagoz*, which was a Turkish genre that involved small satirical dialogues, even though the two genres were close in terms of presentation. More specifically, the *Karagoz* included themes of violence and sex to a level that even shocked foreign travelers, who characterized it as indecent and licentious (Sadgrove 14-16).

Even though some obscenity was present in the plays of Ibn Daniel, his aim was more of mirroring his contemporary society (al-Khozai 22; al-Ra’i 45). Before presenting a discussion of his works, an explanation of shadow plays is necessary.

The action was represented by shadows cast upon a large screen by flat, colored leather puppets⁵, held in front of a torch, while the hidden puppet master, al-Rayyis or al – Miqaddim, delivered the dialogue and songs, helped in this by associates, sometimes as many as five persons including a youth who imitated the voice of women. (Badawi 12)

Ibn Daniel thus aimed to revive this type of plays, which was most popular during the Fatimids era in Egypt (909 – 1171). In that period, it mostly revolved around religious themes and served as an admonishing tool. In this regard, the Imam al-Shafii (767 – 820) states “I see the shadow play as the greatest admonition to those who are advanced in the knowledge of Ultimate Reality. I see figures and spirits passing by departing; all perishing while the Mover remains” (Nua’man 80). Moreover, Ibn al-Farid (1182 –

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⁵ The puppet show which is assumed to be modern was in fact known in the Middle East as early as the 1820’s in Persia.
1235), an Egyptian mystic, wrote a deeply emotional poem that gained widespread popularity, which was based on shadow play (Badawi 13).

Although Ibn Daniel used elements of buffoonery and levity in his plays, entertainment was not his ultimate goal; rather, he aimed to use them to deliver high-quality pieces of literature that would appeal to more sophisticated readers. For instance, he used characters inspired by the lower spectrum of society not for mockery but to represent a certain truth in each one of them. As such, Badawi believes Ibn Daniel’s works to be a valuable resource to social historians (Badawi 15-24). In fact, the characters he depicted were so vivid and accurate that they described Egyptian society all the way from the medieval period until as late as the beginning of the twentieth century (Badawi 15).

Given the scope of this chapter, a full presentation of Ibn Daniel’s plays is left to the reader to check in Badawi’s text (Badawi 14-24). Nevertheless, a short illustration of his three plays is worthwhile.

Perhaps the longest and most elaborated of his works in terms of script and characters is his first play, “Tayf al-Khayal”, “The Shadow Spirit”. The story revolves around a sarcastic soldier called Prince Wisal and his sexual adventures, in addition to his failed attempts at finding a wife. However, the storyline is not the essential thing in this work, but rather the characterization and the acute treatment of the Arabic language. For instance, the introduction of Omm Racheed as a matchmaker hints to social aspects in Egyptian history. The script ends with Prince Wisal attempting to redeem for his sins by going on a spiritual tour to Mecca, which also sheds light on social behavior back then (Badawi 15-19).
His second play, however, greatly differs from the first and resembles the *maqama* in structure. “*Ajeeb Wa Ghareeb*”, “The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger”, is centered around the lifestyle of a group of people known as Banu Sasan who rely on deceit and ruse to survive (Badawi 20). The most interesting thing is that The Stranger [Ghareeb] is not one fixed character, but is rather represented each time by a different person from an array of individuals who lead the aforementioned lifestyle. Each one of these characters has its individual befitting language. Moreover, there is an absence of plot and interaction amongst these characters. Badawi considers that the play indirectly invites the readers to repent and purify themselves (Badawi 21).

In his third play, “*Al Motayam*”, “The Love Stricken One”, there is indeed a plot, which comically revolves around homosexual tendencies. More specifically, Al Motayam gets fascinated by a charming and youthful man whom he met at the showers. The play shows references to Arab romantic poetry, and shows Al Motayam talking about unorthodox behaviors, such as his homosexuality. The play ends with the appearance of a character called Malak al-Mawt (Angel of Death) who induces a wakeup call in those who follow such behaviors, including Al Motayam, and encourages them to repent before they die (Badawi 21-23).

Badawi notes that Ibn Daniel uses the Arabic language flexibly in his plays, “ranging from the classical to the colloquial with an admixture of obscure jargon and even gibberish when the need arises” (Badawi 23). Badawi adds that the value of such use of language lies in its success in portraying characters, especially through accurate appropriation of register and rhythm. Moreover, they are associated with the *maqama* as all of Ibn Daniel’s plays involve people from the lower class yet who are witty, and they
also end with scenes of repentance. Thus, this places his works in the category of “Fool Literature,” whereby a focus is placed on the non-sustainability of worldly pleasures (Badawi 23-24).

After Ibn Daniel, there is no evidence on shadow plays up until the seventeenth century. Moreover, later works were not as impressive as his. As such, no live theatre acts were produced as a result of inspiration by shadow plays (Badawi 25; al Khozai 23). Nevertheless, this genre was not a waste as some found usefulness in it. Landau states that:

The great service of the shadow theatre to the Arabic history of civilization is in its having preserved, for the future, precious information about little-recorded ideas and customs of past generations. Artistically, it prepared the ground, along with the storyteller’s mimicry and the Passion player’s performances (being more important, in this respect, than either of them), for the arrival and acceptance of the Europeanized amusements – the theatre and the cinema.

(Landau 24)

Yet, a question remains unanswered. With shadow theatre being in a declining state, why did Ibn Daniel, who clearly had a distinctive literary talent (especially in characterization), base his works on this genre, as opposed to the flourishing theatre? The most convincing answer is that at his time shadow theatre was admired, whereas live theatre had been despised for being unworthy of a literate merit. Thus, although Ibn Daniel was very acquainted with the world of acting, which is undeniable as he was the only one back then to describe the actors’ atmosphere, he chose to stick to shadow theatre to satisfy his audience (Moreh 138-139).
2.5. Traditional Theatrical Forms Today

Finally, it is worthwhile to briefly present some information on “modern” Arabic live theatre (or pseudo-theatre) – acts that took place from the seventeenth century till the present day, especially in Morocco. For instance, “round” theatre still has its fans there. As the name suggests, people gather in a circle around actors who recount folklore tales, and who involve the audience involved (Qajah 25). Other acts include scenes related to domestic fights or socio-economic and political problems, which usually includes one humorous main actor. Such performances were especially popular in the 1960’s (al-Ra’i 226-230).

Morocco was also home to the talabah drama (drama students). It is mainly about university students who were once rewarded by Sultan Rachid for helping him get back power. He celebrated his triumph by forming a tribute which evolved to a theatrical performance. One student is crowned as sultan for seven days, and is then expected to return this authority to the real sultan. In case he refuses, he is beaten and disposed of in the water of the Fez River, which symbolizes the loss of authority (qtd. in Qajah 236).

One additional type that was performed in Morocco was the Bissat drama that started in the eighteenth century. The sultan supported, and sometimes participated in, this act, and the Bissar’s character was that of wit, power, acrobatic agility, and courage, and also included indirect criticizing of the sultan’s regime. Hence, such a character would wear a mask to do so. Additional characters represented things such as greed and purity. Moreover, the actors collected donations during the Eid to support their act, especially from the sultan after they pray to the Profit to grant blessings for him (al-Ra’i 233-243; Qataya 227).
2.6. Authentic Arabic Theatre Reported Via the Lens of European Visitors

Finally, this chapter will discuss some acts of satirical entertainment that were observed by eighteenth and nineteenth century visitors from Europe. Such performances were mostly done by male strolling players (*Al Muhabazoon*) (Moreh 152). Lane believes that while these acts were rarely worth talking about, they were successful in gaining popularity due to the vulgarity and indecency they employed. One of the farces that Lane witnessed in 1814 was about a poor peasant who owed the governor a certain amount of money yet was unable to pay it back. As a result, he gets beaten; despite that, he makes satirical mercy requests. Finally, his wife manages to set him free by bribing a sheikh and giving herself to the governor. Lane states that this act was played for the Bacha so to shed light on issues happening under his rule (Lane 395-397; Moreh 156-157; Sadgrove 19-20; Badawi 11-12).

Perhaps the earliest account about one of those performances is that of the one in Aleppo in 1750 by Russell. Another early record is that of Niebuhr in 1763 that was about a farce that included Jews, Christians, and Muslims. As a note, from that time till the 1900’s, a farce player in Egypt was referred to as Ibn Rabiya, and the others in the group as *Awlad* [Sons of] *Rabiya*. Niebuhr writes of an open-air performance in the backyard of one house where the actors or *al-mala’b* changed costumes behind a curtain. However, he nor other Europeans enjoyed the play as it was too lengthy, stereotyping, and included “insipid repetition.” As a result, the crowd ultimately got bored, and the play was not carried to the end but rather stopped halfway through (Moreh 154; Sadgrove 17-18; Najim19; Badawi 11).
One additional account is provided by Belzoni, an archeologist from Italy, who wrote about two acts of comedy that were performed during wedding celebrations in the early nineteenth century in Cairo. The first was about a man who had been deceived while arranging his travel to the hajj, whereby the driver offers him an unhealthy camel for the ride. After discovering the trick, the pilgrim beats the driver, who manages to run away. Belzoni states that the play caught the audience’s attention as they imagined themselves in such a situation (qtd. in Moreh 155). The second play made fun out of European travelers by making them clowns. In particular, they are tricked by a poor Arab family that claims to be rich (qtd. in Moreh 155).

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that theatre existed in the Arab world well prior to 1846, but was unfortunately not able to flourish for specific reasons, as opposed to Renaissance European theatre. Many scholars have tried to pinpoint those reasons, and there seem to be two that are most plausible: the reproach exercised upon it by leading religious figures, and its disdain by the literary elite. The works of Ibn Daniel were hindered due to being technically limited; in addition, the *Trial of the Caliphs* stands isolated as a form of Islamic theatre and was not seen as more than a simple buildup on admonishing acts. Later acts were mostly satirical farces that focused on issues such as corruption and injustice exercised by those in power over the weakness of the poor and the frail average peasant. As such, there was little room for the development of plots and characters. Nevertheless, this does not imply that such performances ceased to exist when Europe-influenced theatre started to rise in the Arab world (Moreh 157; Sadgrove 23-24; Badawi 28-29); On the contrary, they remained popular even till the twentieth
century, not only in the Arab world, but also in Europe when European dramatists were seeking new, original, non-European theatrical forms. This topic is the subject of chapter 3, but before moving our discussion to the west, we shall examine the official inauguration of Arabic theatre in the nineteenth century through figures and selected plays such as Naqqash’s *al-Bakhil* which is marked as the assumingly first formal coherent Arabic theatrical production via deeming it as a mere product of direct European influenced theatre.

At this point, there remains one type of Islamic drama that we have not discussed in the level of detail it deserves: the *ta’ziyah*. It is still a source of controversy for Sunni Muslims, and some scholars view it as ritual instead of theatre. It should be noted that such issues do not mean that Islam opposes drama – the opposite has been shown in this chapter. In fact, Moreh states that “there is nothing in Islam as such to preclude dramatic development of intrinsically Islamic themes, [nor] non-Islamic, un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic themes” (Moreh 163). Nevertheless, *ta’ziyah*, which can be examined in a different study, was never made into secular drama. Yet, it has been the only type of tragic drama that has been developed by Muslims without any external influence.
Chapter 3

Arabic Theatre in the Nineteenth Century

3.1. Introduction
From its onset about 160 years ago, till the early nineteenth century, the history of the inauguration of Arabic drama influenced by European style, can be somehow credited to the three: pioneers dramatists from Syria and Egypt. In the 1850’s Syria included what is now known as Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. This study will review these three playwrights and their hallmark plays.

Soon after Egypt broke its Ottoman shackles in the nineteenth century, it dominated Arabic drama, despite its origins in Syria. No other region witnessed such cultural development. The significance of Egypt is also because drama did not evolve anywhere else in the area until its independence and the departure of European powers. Subsequently, several notable playwrights and directors developed outside Egypt.

As shown in the previous chapter, Arabic theatre never enjoyed the distinction and popularity accorded to either poetry or the novel. Arabic theatre, while borrowing heavily from European art forms, has tried valiantly to ingrain and keep its nationalistic essence in its drama. Arabic drama has never laid claims to being an Islamic art, and was forever at loggerheads with conservative Islamic factions over its religious non-conformity. This study will show how, curiously, Arabic drama started not with a Muslim, but a Beirut Christian.
3.2. The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

By the late 1700s, the Ottoman Empire could not be considered as an equal counterpart to the western European powers in terms of technology and scientific knowledge. Its gap with Europe was widening because of its inability to keep up with the improvements in technology and its recession in science. Unlike the Ottomans, Europe was developing and achieving growth in trade, increase of capital, and advancement of industry and production; thereby, the Ottoman Empire was deteriorating for its countries were mere providers of raw resources and purchasers of completed products. Vested interests opposed Selim III’s improvements in defence, and Egypt succumbed to Napoleon in 1798 to become just a pawn in the war against Britain (Hourani pp. 259-62).

The French occupation of Egypt lasted for a period of three years only. But short rule had a great cultural impact, specifically in the fields of technology, science, and the introduction of theatre. Initially a means of entertainment for the occupiers, it seems the Egyptian elite did have some knowledge of the theatre, and had probably attended some dramatic showings at the Esbekieh Square in Cairo (Badawi 29; Sadgrove 29).

After the French armed forces’ retreat from Egypt in 1801, French drama suffered a setback till 1829. However, the 1830s saw some amateur local productions, along with performances by visiting Italian troupes in Cairo and Alexandria. Italian theatre and opera became a hit with both Europeans and educated Egyptians residing in Cairo. The mass populace was debarred, left out, from these spectacles. Nonetheless, such masses showed interest in the familiar indigenous shadow plays and farce.

Egypt formed strong European ties by 1847, and extensive social reforms as well as encouragement to an Egyptian elite were being put in place by Muhammad ‘Ali, a
Macedonian Turk. He wrested the powers of not only a debilitated government in the country, but also in parts of Sudan, Syria, and Arabia. Combined European forces threatened by the formation of a strong Egypt, soon put an end to his advances, and contained him to just being a Khedive in 1841. He and his family ruled Egypt till 1952 (Hourani 273).

By the 1830s, Muhammad ‘Ali was actively pursuing his reforms, with help from European experts, and extensive knowledge exchange with European nations, particularly France, was carried out. Education was to be of prominent importance till about 1920, and the most eminent scholar of the time was Rifa’a Rafi’ al-Tahtawi (1801-73), whose Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz of 1834 describes his impressions of the culture, drama, and opera of Paris and the performers eloquently (Sadgrove pp. 34-36).

In the 1840s, Egyptian spectators, particularly amateurs of opera, most possibly comprised the Islamic top milieu, despite the fact that the more conservative Muslims maintained their distance from theatre. Furthermore, there was no local stage in Arabic yet. The Egyptian court of law used Turkish unlike the Khedive, and accordingly it was in another place in the Arab sphere that the Arabic drama arose. Thus, the forerunner was a trader from Beirut, Marun Naqqash who staged a reworked copy of Molière’s L’Avare in his private household in 1847, some say 1848 (Sadgrove 39; Landau 56).

Why did this revival take place in Syria, and not in Egypt? In the 1850s, Syria was comprised of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Since the start of the century, American Presbyterian missionaries had strived along with French Catholics in providing an education for the country’s young population; both founded printing presses and trained
educators. These exertions, amongst others, smoothed the path for an Arabic literary revitalisation to bloom during the mid of the century. Beirut, like Alexandria, was a significant gateway for European cultural expositions, and the hub of missionary education. It is not unexpected that the first Arabic playwright have been a traveller in Europe and a product of missionary education, since Christians were more prone to accept Western impacts than their Muslim fellow citizens (Landau 56-57).

3.3. Marun Naqqash
This was the advent of Naqqash (1817-55) onto the Arabic theatre forefront, and al-Bakhil was viewed by select foreign and local dignitaries. Moving from his birthplace, Sidon, to Beirut in 1825, Naqqash became a trader like his father. His trade spread and took him to Aleppo, Damascus, Cairo, Alexandria, and it was on one of his Italian journeys that he got inspired in 1846. The ongoing European influence inspired him to write musical plays, in keeping with the trends back home. Al-Bakhil won him recognition and inspired further plays, the most prominent being Abu’l Hasan al-Mugaffal (1849-50), based on the One Thousand and One Nights. This success got him permission by way of an Ottoman decree (firman) to build a theatre adjoining his home, where his last play, al-Salit al-Hasud, was staged in 1853. His short-lived career ended with his death in 1855, aged just twenty-eight.

The element of music used in al-Bakhil is significant since it remained a key factor in Arabic theatre for a long period of time. Based on his own conviction about the importance of music in drama, Naqqash succeeded in proving this point to his audience. Peculiarly, male members of the playwright’s family also played the female characters
on stage, deferring to the Muslim sensitivities about unveiled women (Badawi pp. 44-45; Landau pp. 57-58; al-Khozai p. 46).

Al-Khozai was not too taken up with Naqqash’s work in al-Bakhil, calling him just a versifier, and proclaimed al-Bakhil as “a product of an age of decadence” (al-Khozai 47). However, Abu’l Hasan al-Mugaffal elicited praise for being inspired by the hereditary One Thousand and One Nights instead of European influences.

All of Naqqash’s work was published and produced by family members. Naqqash’s brother published his dramas, his nephew Salim organized an enterprise and acted them in addition to his own plays, in another theatre in Beirut. He took this group, which incorporated actresses, to Egypt in 1876, partially since he was harassed by powerful conservative religious figures in Damascus, and partially since Egypt offered formal reinforcement and sponsorship. In 1884, Abu Khalil Qabbani (1833-1902), another noteworthy dramatist of Arabic theatre in Syria, followed his enterprise to Egypt. He excelled in two productive decades of labour in Egypt. Successfully directing several of his own and others’ works, he stopped after the theatre was burned down in 1900 by an act of arson (Allen 197).

3.4. Qabbani
During the 1870s, Qabbani followed in Marun Naqqash’s footsteps and established Arabic theatre in Damascus, rather than Beirut. Unlike Naqqash, he was constrained by his limited education, a traditional Islamic one, and he did not learn any western language. He produced plays by the Naqqash brothers, as well as his own. These were mainly inspired by Arab folk-tales and Arabian history. Although the number of his works is not certain, only eight of them exist today, all in the style of classical Arabic
drama. Qabbani was more accomplished as a musician and poet than Naqqash, but his
dramatic technique was just about equal (Alhajri 149). In Syria, he was primarily
endorsed by the Ottoman ruler Midhat Pasha. However, the Damascene fanatic religious
institution started to coerce him. They specifically protested against the depiction of
Harun al-Rashid on stage. The extremely puritan sheikhs viewed theatre as profane and
an appalling deviation, and ultimately thrived in securing a verdict from the Syrian
Sultan not only ruling the closing of Qabbani’s theatre but also prohibiting all forms of
theatrical performance in Syria.

Qabbani was hence forced to seek a career and an audience somewhere else. He moved
to Egypt. His finest works came about in Egypt where he did not only produce his own
plays, but adaptations of foreign works such as Racine’s *Mithridate* (Allen 197; al-
Khozai 80; Badawi 57) as well.

During Qabani’s stay in Egypt, in the 1870s, and under Khedive Ismail (1862-79), Egypt
underwent major transformation and gained practical independence from the Ottoman
Empire. The aim was to make it as if a part of Europe. Notable changes were the
opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and the construction of a grand opera in Cairo along
with some theatres. However, all this brought about heavy debts since Egyptians loaned
copious amounts of money from European sponsors. And eventually by 1876 Egypt was
not able to return the money. The supremacy of the financiers led to the financial
enslavement of Egypt via imposing land, costum duties, tobacco and other taxes by the
Khedive on all classes of the Egyptian society. Each and every one, in one way or
another, struggled from the oppressiveness executed via the tax collectors. The Egyptian
peasants were the most affected. They were forced to endure the Egyptian debt more
than other classes. The tax-sum that they were submitted to was quadruple compared to what they had paid earlier. And for the sake of paying the money-lenders they had to sell their harvests, even before they were reaped, to the tax gatherers at a half or a third of their real value. For the period of the taxation procedures, the peasants were degraded, beaten, and abused, until the khedive was confronted by a massive nationalistic movement. In fact, this movement worked with the Chamber of Deputies in 1881. They sought independence and this triggered a diplomatic intervention by Britain and France. With the financial reins already in their hands, the British invaded Egypt in 1882, and henceforward practically reigned supreme there (Hourani pp. 283-84).

3.5. Ya’qub Sannu’
In Egypt, Khedive Isma’il did not endure any form of criticism against him. And his doubts against Arabic theatre were confirmed by the undertakings of the third drama pioneer, an Egyptian Jew, Ya’qub Sannu’(1839-1912). As al-Khozai observed, Sannu’ was the founder of Egyptian theatre and satirical journalism, and he played a noteworthy part in the Egyptian nationalist movement (al-Khozai 124).

Sannu’ seems to have more prominence. However, since most of the information about him was self-propagated, one has to wonder about its veracity. Prone to exaggeration, he claims to have penned and produced 32 of his own plays, as well as dramas of other writers; all this in a short career span of just three years, from 1870-72. With only seven of his plays surviving, much debate surrounds his work (al-Khozai 124).

Sannu’ innovated by writing in everyday Egyptian Arabic so as to reach the masses, and not in the classical language. This earned him a controversial reputation among future playwrights. Rumour has it that he self-trained following the works of Goldoni, Moliere,
and perhaps Sheridan. He translated and adapted these works for Arabic viewership, although none of these adaptations exist anymore. The year 1870 saw him forming a troupe of a few of his former students, and seeking the Khedive’s approval to act in a drama at a show targeting a vast number of notable spectators. We have neither the title nor the script of this play. It seems that this play aimed to explode the prevalent Western notion of moral decadence of the harem order. Its fervent acceptance not only motivated Sannu’ to regroup his entire company, but also to add two actresses, both of whom were non-Muslim Levantines. Accordingly, Sannu’ was the first to undertake this bold step of hiring and bringing women on to the Egyptian platform. After 16 weeks from the exuberant premier show, Sannu’s enterprise performed three dramas at the Khedive’s palace at Qasr al-Nil. During that event, Isma’il named Sannu’ as their ‘Egyptian Molière’ (Badawi 33; Sadgrove pp. 94-95).

Sannu’ seems to have upset the institution and particularly the khedive. Isma’il removed his investment in 1872 and Sannu’ was forced to close down his theatre. It remains somehow vague concerning exactly what provoked Isma’il to do this. Some plausible causes can be that the British protested against being criticized and reprehended in one of Sannu’’s dramas. Another production, \textit{al-Durratayn (The Two Rival Wives)}, a forthright blunt denouncement of polygamy, was performed at Qasr al-Nil. This pointed at, and ultimately annoyed, the khedive; moreover, Dravcht Bey, the Minister of Education, was also antagonistic to Sannu’’s theatrical doings and messages. Subsequently, the entire company was economically on thin ice, and the performers, both men and women, protested since they were not earning steady wages. The notions publicized by Sannu’ were labeled as radical, yet the advent of females on the stage,
correspondingly, overwhelmed and daunted the ultra-puritan Muslims (Badawi 33; Sadgrove pp. 94, 105-11).

3.6. The Consolidation of theatre in Egypt before WWI
In the 40 years leading up to WWI in 1914, Arabic theatre underwent some form of consolidation. Competing drama troupes sought the attendance of a wide cross-section of audience, which was no longer limited to the elite. This new audience formation helped to shape the destiny of Arabic drama. Landau observes, “Most troupe directors put material consideration over and above artistic ones” (Landau 74). French adaptations were revisited over and over, and in accordance with the popular demand for music, musical melodramas and comedies became the flavour in favour. Syrian Jewish and Christian actresses were now a regular feature in the plays, and conservatives were up in arms over this. Syrian journalists too, lauded the establishment of Arabic theatre in Egypt, and the notable al-Ahram weekly praised it as a benefit to society (Sadgrove pp. 125-37; Landau 74). Theatre soon became popular, though not respectable, and Muslim actresses appeared on stage only after WWI.

Arabic theatre had been going through developmental pangs for the 50 odd years since Naqqash’s first play had been produced. It had taken place together with that of the traditional common farce or fasl mudhik, which had made the journey from the rural areas to the cities, where it met with responsive viewers amid the uneducated residents of Cairo and Alexandria. These spectators were baffled by the drama delivered in the musical theatre, and they favoured the combination of ridicule and clowning presented by the farce. Nevertheless, an increasing amount of Egyptian citizens were learning in a structure founded on the western archetype and became educated enough to applaud the
hard work of gifted characters, dramaturgical companies, beginner troupes, theatrical communities, and school and society theatres. These events were wholly lauded by an autonomous Arab press during a time when the Egyptian milieu was transforming to incline towards the freedom of opinion, and from time to time drama fell faultily of censorship. The initial decades of the twentieth century witnessed a partnership of these inclinations and the development in Egypt of a fresh age group of actors and dramatists whose efforts produced a mature Arabic drama for a progressively cultured community.

Due to the WWI occupation of the Arab Near East, the Arabs and the Europeans were in contact with each other, which created a more enlightened class of Arabic-speaking peoples. This in turn led them to be more receptive to the theatre in general (Landau 75). A wider cross-section was noticed in the audience, leading dramatists and poets to realise the expressiveness of drama. The emancipation of Muslim women received a boost after the War, and some women even started appearing on the stage. This was tantamount to a social and moral revolution in Egypt (Landau 76).

3.7. The Rise of Arabic Drama in Syria and Egypt
It was the theatre of Italy that inspired Naqqash to form a stage troupe of like-minded friends and introduce drama in Beirut. His first drama, *al-Bakhil*, staged towards the end of 1847 could be considered the first Arabic language play (Naqqash 388; Najm 33-35). Naqqash’s guests to his first performance in his house comprised foreign and domestic dignitaries. Recognition of his play was mentioned by the European press, since Syria had none at the time (Zaydan 153, 250-251; Daghir 446). The audience responded with enthusiasm, which further inspired Naqqash to put up *Abu’l Hasan al-Mugaffal aw Harun al-Rashid* (1849-50), which borrowed heavily from the *One Thousand and One
*Nights.* This in-house performance again saw foreign officials, the Turkish Wali, some visiting Ottoman high-officials, as well as the local elite, as guests. Based on the enthusiastic praise and response received by this show, Naqqash managed to get a *firman* [decree] to build a theatre adjoining his house. His third and last play, *al-Salit al-Hasud* was staged here in 1853. After his death, this theatre was bought by the Beirut Papal Nuncio and, as directed by Naqqash’s will, converted to a church. It is probably the current Santa Church in the Jummayza Quarter (N. Naqqash, pp. 11-388; Zaydan 154; Barbour 174; Najm pp. 35-38).

Naqqash’s plays could not attain the popularity he had hoped for, because it was still limited to foreigners and the educated classes. To gain popularity among the unaffected masses (Naqqash 6; Zaydan 154) required some luring, which was promised by way of the plays having folk music and poetry (S. Naqqash 521). Sometimes, Naqqash suffered from self-doubt about his art ever succeeding, and one of his characters in *al-Salit al-Hasud* iterates this, “The continuance of the theatre in our country is unlikely” (N. Naqqash 389).

Marun Naqqash’s outstanding career came to an abrupt halt when he contracted a fatal fever on a business trip to Tarsus. He succumbed to it on June 1, 1855. After his early death at just age 38, composition and staging of drama in Syria was maintained by his troupe and trainees (N. Naqqash 6). Twenty years later Salim Naqqash, his nephew, shifted the group to Egypt, and staged *Abu’l Hasan al-Mugaffal* there in 1876.

*Al-Bakhil,* Naqqash’s first work is considered to be a translation of Molière’s *L’Avare* by many, since the titles of both plays were the same. Not so, averred Jurji Zaydan, who
insisted it being the “first drama in the Arabic language,” (Zaydan 154) and composed by Naqqash “from beginning to end.” However, Najm insists that this play was written after Naqqash had read Molière, and emulated the characters and comic elements in his own drama (Najm pp. 416-417). The portrayal of miserly and tight-fisted qualities which accounted for the main humor in Naqqash’s drama, were such examples borrowed from *L’Avare*.

### 3.8. The Origins of Modern Arabic Theatre

The *Riwaya Mudhika Kulluha Mulahanna Dhat Khamsat Fusul Ma ‘rufa bi Riwayat al-Bakhil*, or the complete title of *al-Bakhil*, was a romantic comedy of five acts of verse set to music. This music, used for the romance of *L’Avare*, was its distinguishing feature (N. Naqqash 90). It is yet unknown whether Naqqash or his brother Niqula designated this title in *Arzat Lubnan*; nor is it very important. What matters is that the drama “is all set to music” (Landau pp. 57-58). From Naqqash’s speech before the first performance, it can be deduced that the play was supposed to be an opera. He categorized the drama he had witnessed in Europe as follows: “One of them, which the Europeans call [prose], is divided into comedy, drama, and tragedy, which are performed without verse and unsung; the second one which they call opera, is sung.” He offers further explanation:

> It is most necessary and important for me to compose and translate in the first place the first and not the second type [the opera] because it easier and more likely… But what made me deviate from this norm and follow this course is that the second type [the opera] was to me more tasteful, desirable, splendid, and delightful. Secondly, my opinion, desire, and earnest concern made me inclined to believe that
the second [opera] would be preferable to my people and kindred.

(qtd. in N. Naqqash 16)⁶

Regarding *Arzat Lubnan*, Niqula gave credit to his brother for the care in setting his dramas to music, and how he had set a numbering system in place to simplify the individual alignment of the role of the actor to the melody. Niqula also listed the melodies to align with the numbering in the text at the end of *al-Bakhil*. He took pains to explain the source of the melodies—whether popular Egyptian or French. Pointing

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⁶ In the same way, a brief travel in time is interesting at this point particularly when the same facility was established and introduced earlier in the West and when a similar ambiance occurred: Through the structure of design, the format of how the stage was assembled, and by taking advantage of the representational aspects of the “great machines,” the closed location of the “splendid performance” [theatre, opera house, or pleasure garden] correspondingly asserted the authority of the sponsor. The new forms (machine play and opera)…. Still redolent of Neoplatonic symbolic strategies, the private festive performance emphasized and confirmed the status quo in the relationships at court. These magnificent performances of new machine plays or operas were, at the same time, an invention of the absolutist Baroque age, the best synthesis of the period’s intellectual, political and artistic concerns, and, perhaps, the culmination of the organized spirit of play in the West (Aercke 33).

These entertainments, regardless of where or when they have been established, might be understood both as a comment on the events of the period and as an organized breach or deviation from the somewhat still prevalent reality which was spread. Through representative celebrations of the influence of the sponsor, the plays voiced a strong reaction towards the forces that “succeeded in imposing intellectual and physical restraints on ordinary humankind … The proverbial courtly-Baroque opulence in ornamentation may well have been an overcompensation for a crushing sense of worthlessness and a neurotic fear of annihilation and of the void” (Aercke 33).
definitively at the melodic intention of the drama shows that al-Bakhil was, along
with being the first Arabic drama, also the first Arabic comic opera.

Naqqash effectively used various dialects and speech inflections, generally a mixture of
different Arabic accents and colloquial Lebanese to build his plots. This is illustrated by
‘Isa’s Egyptian dialect to portray the Egyptian secretary’s character, and imperfect
Arabic being used to represent Turkish characters. However, this innovation faced
criticism which Niqula tried to downplay by the fact that it was Naqqash’s first attempt
at playwriting, and he was against the very idea that Naqqash used realistic dialogue on
purpose. In Niqula’s words, “If it were not for al-Bakhil’s poor language I would not
have been able to compose the riwaya of al-Shaykh al Jahil, which is purposely filled
with grammatical mistakes” (N. Naqqash pp. 26-27). Notwithstanding this criticism,
Naqqash’s first dramatic venture was a resounding success with all classes of audience.

Next, Naqqash borrowed from the One Thousand and One Nights to author Abu al-
Hasan al-Muggafal (Najm, 23), although this was just a sketchy resemblance. His play
deals with graver social implications, and through the plot and his protagonist he
conveys the prevalent problems concerning the gaps among the social classes. This
struggle and differences between imagination and reality are effectively conveyed
through the characters of Abu, the Caliph, and the Vizir. We are still unsure whether this
was a deliberate or unintended ploy in Naqqash’s play.

Abu al-Hasan deviated from al-Bakhil in that it was not entirely a musical drama, yet
the songs had the same indexing as in the latter. However, the notice that indicated the
lines where the songs were numbered, was replaced by indications to verse or prose (N.
Naqqash 110). The melodies listed at the end of the drama referred to the same French musical compositions used in al-Bakhil. While Abu al-Hasan can lay claims to being a musical drama, it also incorporates poetry and prose.

Compared to al-Bakhil, this play comes across as a hodge-podge of rhyme, prose, and music, and is rather ambiguous with its use of foreign influences throughout. Some of its characters and long-winded speeches could have been done away with without any detriment to the structure and essence of the play. The lack of clear stage directions is another flaw in the drama, and situational references could have been given more authenticity. For example, a peculiar note at the start of act two is used to mark the setting: the Saray, a Persian word for palace, of the Caliph7 of Baghdad; and that the chamber comprises kingly clothes, a crown, and a rod. However, the Caliphs of Baghdad never had crowns nor held rods. Hence, the accessories therein, are all skewed, and could have been more thoroughly researched.

When Abu al-Hasan questions his brother Sa’id about his relations with the comely Da’d and her family, it is a witty throwback to Molière’s L’Avare, where Harpagon questions his son Cléante about Marianne. Cléante sings her praises without realizing his father is interested in her as well (Landau 58-59; Najm 369). The Syrian audience of the 1800s was vastly entertained by this drama, and Naqqash’s tremendous innovativeness was evident as well from his other adaptation of a story from the popular One Thousand and One Nights for the stage.

7 Caliph is used in Iraq, Sultan in Syria, and Khedive in Egypt.
Naqqash’s third and last drama had more serious plots. *Salit al-Hasud*, contrary to the lighter vein of the previous plays, dwells on the social customs prevalent in Syria at the time. However, Molière’s influence can also be witnessed in this drama (N. Naqqash 324). The audience was able to identify with the characters and the plot revolves around the custom of arranged marriages and parent-child relationships. This drama comprising three acts and 46 scenes is a combination of verse and rhyming prose, which flows naturally and is not stilted, and like Naqqash’s second play, song indexing has also been incorporated in it.

By modern standards, the style and language are wanting, and the dialogue tends to run on. The central theme is watered down by lengthy explanations and morally didactic interpretations. Specifically, the discussions of defective poetic characteristics, correct meaning of publicly used terminology, and monologues regarding analysis of verse and pitfalls to be avoided make the play more of a classroom lecture than a form of entertainment. The play gets somewhat lost in the emphasis on poetic technicalities.

Despite the erudite leaning of the play, Naqqash still managed to bestow considerable freedom on his characters, including Rachel, who exhibits a free-thinking spirit. The roles are dynamically penned yet overshadowed by the lengthy dialogues. Naqqash shows his characters with sensitivity, particularly Sim ‘an, Rachel’s fiancé.

Molière’s touch is unmistakable again. The interchange between Abu ‘Isa and Jirjis about prose and poetry in Naqqash’s “Al-Salit” [act one, scene four] reminds us of Jourdain and the philosophy master in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* [act three, scene four]. Mascarille and Jodelet, the two imposters from *Les Précieuses Ridicules* could
very well have been represented as Jabbur and Bishara, the two valets posing as wealthy men before Rachel and her maid. Mascarille and Jodelet had been prompted to masquerade as their masters in order to expose the failings of the two ladies, Madelon and Cathos (Molière, *Les Précieuses*; Naqqash, *al-Salit*). Naqqash goes so far as to declare through his character, Sim ‘an, that he has “borrowed some of its themes [referring to *Salit al- Hasud*] from the riwayat Ifranjiyya [European dramas]” (N. Naqqash 389).

### 3.9. The Rise of the Arabic Drama in Egypt and Syria

To fairly critique Naqqash’s plays, one needs to keep in mind the socio-political and literary atmosphere prevalent in Syria, i.e., also in Lebanon, during the nineteenth century. His works were the harbingers of modern Arabic literature, and he has earned his place as the father of Arabic drama. He needs to be credited with perseverance, boldness of action, and unmitigated enthusiasm in introducing the Arabs to the world of theatre.

David Urquhart provided a viewer’s account of Naqqash’s credibility as a dramatist after watching *Abu al-Hasan al-Muggafal* in Beirut in 1850. He visited Naqqash’s house on January 12 and found many people there, including respectable members of society. His account of the performance was critical, as he found the acting somehow disorganized and the singing poor. However, he acknowledged that the audience liked it. He found that the Arab soul could be definitely triggered to awareness and that Naqqash had imbibed reasonable knowledge of European stage practices during his travels abroad (Urquhart 178-181; Najm 35-38).
Naqqash’s untimely death was a great drawback for the infant Arabic drama, yet his efforts found fruition in subsequent productions in both Egypt and Syria. A number of dramatists and performers aligned their work with educational societies and institutions. 

*Al-Madrassa al-Wataniyya* staged a number of plays, including *Yusuf al-Hasan* in 1865. Another notable performance was an adaptation of Fenelon’s *Télémaque* by Sa’d Allah al-Bustani (Zaydan 154; Najm 52) in 1896. The theatre also found patronage from various schools, including the al-Sharfa Monastery (Daghir 434-438; Najm 51-52), Zaki Cohen’s Jewish School (Najm 52-53) *al-Talathat Aqmar*, and the Jesuit School (Cheiko 70).

The *al-Jam ‘iyya al-Ilm ‘iyya al-Suriyya*, a well-known learned society, had been encouraging education and the arts among Arabs since 1868, and its members undertook the production of many historical plays (Tarrazi 69; Cheiko 127; Najm 31).

Plays were also performed by amateur and charity groups, such as the Greek Orthodox and the Maronite Charitable Associations. The latter, along with a group of prominent writers, the *Zahrat al-Adab*, donated the profits from the performances to charity (Zaydan 82). Some individuals also sponsored performances, such as the *al-Shabb al-Jahil al-Sikkir* by Tannus al-Jirr which was performed at the house of Habib al-Qirdahi in 1863 (Najm 57, 397-399).

Arab history and folklore were also gaining popularity in dramatic performances in Beirut, such as the *al-Muru ‘a wa al-Wafa* by Khalil al-Yaziji in 1878 (Zaydan 157; Daghir 346). Zaydan credited it as being the first Arabic verse play and an important
landmark in Arabic performance history (Zaydan 157). In all fairness, that credit should actually be accorded to Naqqash’s *al-Bakhil*.

A notable performance requested by the French Consul in Beirut, a free-form version of *Racine’s Andromaque*, was staged thrice in 1875, the profits from which aided orphanages (Ishaq 533-573). *Sayf al-Nasr* by Yusuf al-Asir was also performed that year, its profits going towards purchasing printing materials for the Arts Society (Tarrazi 137).

It is next to impossible to keep count of the numerous plays written, translated, or adapted between Naqqash’s death and the end of the century. A great number of them have been lost or gone into obscurity. One composer alone, *Ibrahim al-Ahdab* was responsible for nearly 20 plays, most of them drawn from Arab history. His works were well received by the public and encouraged by Rashid Pasha, the Governor of Damascus (Tarrazi 103-104).

Naqqash’s dramatic legacy was carried on by his brother Niqula and his nephew Salim. Salim also died abruptly in 1884. Niqula was quick to learn and had been trained by his brother in business administration so that he could take on Marun’s duties at the Beirut Customs Department in his absence. Post 1852, Niqula actively pursued his business, government matters, and his law practice. 1877 saw his election to the Ottoman Parliament in Beirut. Despite all this, his journalism continued unabated, and in 1880 he founded the newspaper *al-Misbah*. His earlier experience as the editor of *al-Najaf* (Tarrazi 122) served him well to run the paper for 28 years.
Niqula’s efforts were more a recognition of Marun’s pioneering work rather than self-interest, and he continued training amateurs in theatre, wishing all the while his brother were still alive to see their success (N. Naqqash 3).

He humbly acknowledged his brother’s talents and considered Marun a teacher’s model (N. Naqqash 5). His devotion to his brother was demonstrated in the production of *al-Salit al-Hasud*, which had Niqula’s son acting, and which was attended by the Ottoman Wali (al-Khuri 445).

Niqula wrote a number of Arab-history themed plays, among which were: *al-Shaykh al-Jahil*, *al-Musi*, and *Rabi‘a ibn Ziyad al-Mukaddam* (N. Naqqash 5).

Naqqash’s nephew Salim was a journalist (his publication of various newspapers and journals attest this) but was more prolific in the realm of drama since he wrote, translated, and produced many adaptations of European plays. His most recognized work was the nine volumes of *Misr li al-Misriyyin*, from which the first three were destroyed by the Egyptian government for allegedly misrepresenting the biographical details of Khedive Muhammad Ali and the later Khedive Isma‘il. The six other volumes came into circulation after his premature death in 1884 (Zaydan 287; Cheiko 153).

Salim as a journalist gave an account of the history of European theatre, and based on his observations, he justified the use of amorous passion in drama, at the same time iterating that drama should be more than mere entertainment. According to him, all aspects of drama should be based on moral and educational norms in order to be justified (Zaydan 287; Cheiko 153). He was a great promoter of Arab theatre, and his troupe was representative of this. The performance of *al-Bakhil* was followed by his adaptation of
Pierre Corneille’s *Horace* in 1868. The latter was a runaway hit with the European audience despite being a very ordinary production (Bustani 694-696). Salim’s efforts, though basic, were tireless as he strove to adapt and align different voices to the melodies (Bustani 694-696).

Salim faced material and other supportive constraints, since running a theatre meant investments of all kinds. He was prompted to move from Beirut to Cairo, realising the more amenable atmosphere encouraged by the Khedive there (Bustani 521; Najm 94). Appealing to the Khedive and being able to convince a director of the Opera earned him permission to perform plays in Cairo: the magazine *Al-Jinan* reports the enthusiasm of the Egyptians, since the support of their Khedive “would enable the Arab nation to enjoy the performance of riwayat (which means “novels” although they meant “dramas”)” (Bustani 422; Najm 95). Salim’s troupe was delayed from its Egyptian debut for about a year, and finally opened with Marun’s *Abu al-Hasan* in Alexandria, 1876 (Najm 96-97). Here the troupe performed both Salim’s and Marun’s plays.

Salim was soon joined by his colleague Adib Ishaq in Alexandria to help him. Ishaq revised Salim’s adaptations of various French works, he added verses to some, and published them. For example, *Andromaque*, de Bornier’s *La Fille de Roland* and *al-Malik Sharliman* (Charlemagne). Pierre Zaccone’s *La Vengeance* was published in translation as *al-Intiqam* in 1880. After the author’s death, another play, *Ghara’ib al-Ittifaq*, was allegedly stolen with his other belongings from his home in al-Hadath, a Lebanese village (Najm 96).
In Alexandria, Ishaq’s adaptations were also produced on stage. *Andromaque* and *al-Malik Sharliman* reportedly experienced a positive response (Ishaq 5-15; Tarrazi 134-135; Tarrazi 105-109, 150, 257-258; Zaydan 274-275; Zaydan 94-100). Others argue that both Salim and Ishaq soon became disheartened with theatre, and left their troupe to pursue journalism in earnest (Zaydan 155; Rida 1-45; Barbour 174; Najm 100-101). Unfortunately, Salim contributed little to innovative Arabic drama, since most of his works were either adaptations or translations, at times even misrepresenting the originals. He actually admits this in his version of *Horace*, although his incorporation of Arabic verse and music, along with his usage of the verb “allaftuha” (implying that the drama was written by him) suggests he was the author, with some characteristics being borrowed from Corneille (Salim Naqqash, “May Trajidiyya”).

Salim’s work, however, remained in the Arabic theatrical forefront, his writing more clear and polished than his uncle’s and even though somewhat elaborate, the rhymed prose was well-received by audiences. Simultaneously, Ishaq did little to contribute to new ideas in drama, instead following the styles of previous dramatists. He did however, abbreviate some parts of *Racine’s Andromaque* and introduce a new lyrical scene (Isahq 559; Najm 215).

After Salim and Ishaq handed over the theatre to Yusuf Khayyat in 1877, he rallied the troupe to produce *Sun ‘al-Jamil* at the Zinzinya Theatre in Alexandria (Zaydan 154; Najm 103-106). The entire company soon relocated to Cairo. After the khedive’s short-lived patronage, they were banished by him because their production, *al-Zalum*, was perceived as a personal affront by him (Zaydan 155; Barbour 175). For a short period after 1882, the Opera House was accessible again to Arab performances; however,
activity in Egypt was suspended till 1884 on account of the Urabi Revolution (Zaydan 155; Najm 107-115).

3.10. Conclusion

Arabic Theatre and Drama and the Gaze of the Other

If the aforementioned words and historical perspective are anything to base this viewpoint on, modern Arabic drama all but owes its existence to French influences, and opinion has gone so far as to admit that it was “over determined from without” (qtd. in Read 116). This colonial influence has been labelled as the “other”, and along with its heavy-handed bearing down on all aspects of life, the literary activity also suffered its consequences. For the Arab identity, this “other” became an overwhelming onus, instead of a quiet entity lurking in the background. Homi Bhabha likens it to the effort of erasing one form of writing on a parchment or palimpsest, and replacing it completely with another (Bhaba xv)\(^8\). On the other hand, the colonizers viewed the Arab identity as the cultural “other”, and thus tried to justify their success at colonizing the very minds of the Arab community. Thus, the West abounded within and outside (Spurr 193). This colonizing of the Arab mind resulted in a struggle between their cognizant Europeanization and their tradition, and the theatre of the West made its dramatic entry at this very fruitful moment. The initial part of this chapter which discusses the Arabic duplication attempt of western drama could very well have been an effort to undermine

\(^8\) Similar to a palimpsest. There is a text which has another text under it, an original text that is erased and a new text is written, but the original text is there.
the colonization influence, a watering down, if you will, by the colonized for the sake of subverting the model provided by the colonizing “other”.

While the Arab world was viewing this heavy reliance upon western drama as an invitation to literary greatness (via European influences and other countries like Syria and Egypt), it was a subliminal acceptance of a world-theatre, and a subservience to political ideologies, rather than poetical ones. These supports of the western theatre further succeeded in incorporating western culture and polity into “other” territories. John Maier openly admits that Arabic writers choosing to follow western literary diktats were weighed down heavily due to writing under western influence (Maier 178). This influence amounted to a deviation from Arab culture; nevertheless, it was being called a “facet of modernism”, which does not fit, nor is highly appropriate to Arabic culture. This was a well-thought strategy, not a chance happening, implanted as the western curbs on Arabic “otherness”. However, the West was not to be entirely blamed for this cultural annexation; the Arabic elite/intelligentsia were eager to emulate the West and become as westernised as possible (Bowles viii). The subtle, yet far reaching effects of colonization could be found in the minds of the elite who were largely responsible for the internal dispersion of the western literary influences that reigned for a long time in Arabic literature.

This taking over of the Arabic literary scene, specifically the theatre, by western drama, occurred over a long period, viz., from 1847 up until the 1960s (Ramley 1). While heavy-handed adaptations and Arabic translations of Shakespeare and Molière were rampant, there were embryonic attempts at giving them an Arabic flavour. An Arabic essence was being infused into foreign texts, or rather, into their translated or adapted
versions. This was a driving-force of the inner native entity to assert itself, since it was becoming heavily westernised (Maier 178). However, these decades saw the western influence holding sway and the “othering” of the Arabic “self”. Influenced by the colonizer since 1847, the Arabs falsely admitted to having no Arabic theatrical reference to fall back on, and bowed down to the “other’s” superior dramatic skills, incorporating them as the backbone for all subsequent Arabic drama. Arabic drama became a shadow of the western model.

As mentioned in chapter 1, the lack of Arabic texts to base Arabic drama on was a fallacy fostered by the West. This instated the performance as a stand-alone, and not just an iteration of a dramatic script. Likewise, Arabic performers received no recognition, since Arabic drama was assumed to be just a reiteration of its western origins and following the same path. Nineteenth-century drama mirrored the conflict of good and evil as connoted in the western drama of the time. At the same time, no recognition was afforded to traditional Arabic performances, since these lacked a formal script; in addition, the lack of physical theatre facilities augmented the misleading conclusion that Arab theatre was non-existent before its cohabiting with the western “other”.

The notion of the absence of Arab-origin drama has also been supported by the Arab educated elite. In 1987, Abdelkrim Berrchid, founder of the Moroccan Festive Theatre, summed up the thought process of Arabs by saying that, “the absence of dramatic text makes our writing just a duplication of the western one, and [asks] how the founding text will be achieved and found?” (qtd. in Ben Zidan 33)
Western drama got reception in the Arab world since the 1798 Napoleonic invasion of Egypt which was “forced to acknowledge the superiority of the West” (Badaoui 6). In 1973, Twaij Mohammad Baquir states in his *Shakespeare in the Arab World* that although French drama came in with the Napoleonic invasion, it could not be called Arabic art, and it departed as soon as the French army withdrew (Baquir 28).

However valid Baquir’s observations might be, it cannot be negated that the Napoleonic invasion was also the harbinger of cultural and ideological processes, and the vanguard of the colonization of the oriental world.

Marun Naqqash’s *al-Bakhil* in 1847 can truly be called the kick-off point of western theatre in the Arab world.

Between late 1847 and early 1848, Naqqash put up the Arabic adaptation of Molière’s *L’Avare*, as his *al-Bakhil*. Consequently, a number of drama critics have erroneously credited Naqqash as being the founder of modern Arabic drama. M.M. Badaoui consciously allocates the borrowing of western drama in the mid-nineteenth century, first to Beiruti Marun Naqqash, and later to the Egyptian Yaqub Sannu (Badaoui 7). But as discussed in chapter 1, Naqqash was not the originator of Arabic drama, and this implies that theatre “was not confined, as previous research has suggested, to Egypt, Syria, and more particularly, Beirut” (Sadgrove 22). *Al-Bakhil* saw male members of Naqqash’s family performing, and the audience comprised of the elite of Syria (i.e. including Lebanon), who tried to imitate the European bourgeoisie. This appropriation can now be viewed as a break-away from indigenous performing arts and their manifestations in an alien art form.
However, Naqqash was vocal in giving credit to Western drama as “literary theatre and a European gold cast in Arab moulds” (qtd. in al-Khozai 23). The European fabric had to be re-sewn to fit the Arab perception and incorporated the free-spirited indigenous performances of the shadow plays of Middle Eastern origin. Keeping in line with the European ambience, Naqqash’s first play also relied heavily upon the stage settings particular to L’Avare, which were highly appreciated by the elite audience already steeped in European bourgeoisie elements.

3.11. Inferences

The infusion of traditional Arabic performance genes into the confines of an alien theatre resulted in some confusion, and this posed quite a few problems for post-colonization people. Theatre in these times took into account the dithering situation of the people and made a hybrid statement, allowing them to acknowledge their subservience. This see-saw of diametrical opposites made for an uneasy marriage of East and West, and helped bridge the gap between the two. Edward Said aptly puts it as “cultures actually assume more foreign elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude” (Said, Culture and Imperialism 15), which in turn leads to an inherent hybridization of performances.

In its present form, Arabic theatre can be viewed as straddling a tightrope between two differing literary forms. It can also be rightly said that no certain boundaries can be allocated to it, since it is difficult to say where one edge begins, and the other ends. Lines are blurred in between, and an amalgam of East and West is what remains. It seems to be a happy medium between western theatrical hegemony and the local Arabic performance which was steeped in history and tradition. This is evident in; first, the
strong presence of the *halqa* and the *hakawati*, which have, for long, been the hall-marks of Arabic performances, and second, in the easy coexistence between open town-centers like the *jema-el-fna* and the confined modern spaces of a theatre building. It is safe to assume that modern Arabic theatre of the post-colonial era is a hybrid entity and cannot be attributed completely to any one given cultural form. Hybridization is not a pure amalgam of two separate elements, but instead a third dimensional element is created, which gradually emerges. Efforts go into creating, transforming, and innovating new categories of art, drawing on previous creations. This is how the dramatic forms that exist today are different from previous “others” and also from the original models it was fashioned out of.
Chapter 4

The Reciprocal Imitation

4.1. Introduction
The roots of the Arabic theatre have been argued for and against by two differing viewpoints: one propounded by Najib Mafuz, Abbas Al-Aqqad, and M. Badawi, and others negating the theory of an Arab theatre prior to the mid-nineteenth century; while others like Ali al-Rai, Ibrahim Hamada, and S. Moreh explain that modern theatrical expressions inherited their roots from the continuum of the Arab literary tradition which they belong to. In reviewing these two opinions, this paper has so far addressed the question whether Arabic theatre stands original, or is a mere imitation of western drama.

While Arabic theatre did exist before 1847, it never attained the heights of its European counterpart. Various scholars have attempted to decipher this hypothetical “cultural” insufficiency. At a shallow level, it appears that Arab drama failed to develop completely, first on account of the stigma imposed by religious factions, and second due to the scorn assigned to it by the literati. As discussed in chapter one, Ibn Danyal’s Trial of the Caliphs did not evolve since it was an art devised for the admonisher which technically restricted and limited it to be a mere sample of Islamic drama. And this sole piece of Islamic theatre can be viewed just as an advisory depiction of morality. The subsequent short dramas were either coarse farces, or satires of prevalent class distinctions. Here the powerful and wealthy were portrayed as exploiters of the poor. In spite of these plays doing nothing for the plot or the actor, they survived during the
hegemony of the European adaptations. Specifically, in Egypt, they enjoyed popularity with the masses, despite being scorned by the Arab educated classes (Moreh 157).

One Islamic drama that has given rise to much controversy cannot be ignored. The Ta’ziyah was viewed more as a religious treatise rather than a theatrical production. However, we have shown that Islam is not averse to drama. As Moreh explains, Islam does not “preclude dramatic development of non-Islamic, un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic themes” (163). Despite all this, the Ta’ziyah remained a religious, tragic drama, created solely by Islamic civilization, without any dependence on external impetuses.

This study has pointed out how, historically, Arabic theatre took off in 1847 in Beirut, with the production of Marun Naqqash’s al-Bakhil, an Arab take on Molière’s L’Avare. As a merchant and traveler, Naqqash was influenced by western theatre and firmly believed it to be the optimal theatre form in the world. While he did try to imbibe this model into his productions, he discerned the Arab audience’s need for an affinity with their own history and culture. This instigated him to look closer home, and draw inspiration from the One Thousand and One Nights.

The later nineteenth century was a period of considerable upheaval in Arab society. In the wake of Europeanization, many European ideas were absorbed by society, and while the resurrection of the Arabian cultural forms came about during Ottoman rule, the intellectual uncertainties of the period spilled over into modern times. Right from the onset, Arabic playwrights found the going hard, trying to establish connections between the stage and the Arab audience on the foreign façade platform of European theatre. Western drama could not strike a chord in Arab hearts, unlike poetry and other arts.
Naqqash, Qabbani, and even Sannu’ noticed this disinterest, and all experienced difficulties establishing this new theatre form in Arab regions.

Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding the origins of Arabic theatre, it indiscriminately borrowed form and technique from western theatre. David Urquhar even remarked on the fervent imitation by Naqqash’s theatre, “they had seen in Europe footlights and the prompter’s box, and fancied it an essential point to stick them …” (qtd. in Najm 36). Whilst Arabic playwrights strove to reach out to the audience’s heart, and produce plays harking back to their own history and culture, the fact remains that modern Arabic theatre is assumed to be a reproduction of western theatre.

4.2. The Fallacy
“Even today there is no Arabic drama; there is only a drama in the Arabic language” (Hastings 872).

The fallacy is that, without doubt, modern Arabic drama is attributed with having its birth in European drama. This fallacy was reinforced by colonization as well as visiting troupes from Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. At the outset, Arabic drama was unmindful of the characteristics and the strategies of western theatre. Most glaring among these was the slow infiltration of western influences in non-western lands. Theatre was an apt medium for percolating the thought processes of the West into the unsuspecting Arab audience. According to John Maier, western influence was “a burden [that had influence] on all Arabic writers who opt to write narrative forms invented by and for the West” (Maier 178). This considerable influence was misaligned with the Arabic cultural fabric. It was dubbed as another form of “modernism” has only been the West’s imposition of forms that limit the Arabic culture. The embracing of this colonial
westernization by the Arab intelligentsia further accelerated the situation. The colonizers generated native intellectuals who internalized and followed the adapted discourse.

The Arabic theatre was strongly engulfed by the western mindset from 1847 till 1960 as ingrained and obvious in the theatrical industry (el-Ramly 1). Playwrights from Syria and Egypt adapted and translated works of Molière and Shakespeare, thereby, sprouting in Arabizing the foreign texts. This practice included rewriting foreign texts to be molded according to Arab characterization. While drama borrowed heavily from the western model, it sought to reflect the interior self. For in the practice of assuming the western example “the shape of lives and the shape of narratives change” (Maier 178). This era was recognized by including the native forms via a number of extremes which ultimately often required obliterating and othering the self. All this contributed to the all-pervading presence of the western theatrical model. The Arab dramatic identity, blurred by the other’s text, has assumed (at least since 1847) that it had no existing theatrical text to refer to for the purpose of creating drama. Such an inexact confession eased the path towards favouring the other’s means of expression. The western sample turned out to be presumed as the theatrical foundation of all succeeding writings; thus, Arab efforts to appropriate this western example were more or less considered as mere shadows or complements of the West.

The aforementioned claim about the non-existence of an indigenous self-referential Arabic theatrical text is a huge fallacy and a mere result of the biased western perspective. It was founded on a logocentric inclination; i.e., considering words and language as major and core features when it comes to manifesting external reality. This tendency had controlled western theatre since the first European dramatic period (Greece
in the fifth century BCE), i.e., appearing in the medieval morality plays, and then in Shakespeare and the Renaissance, through the drama of the late nineteenth century (Amine 155). Such logocentric sovereignty of theatrical purpose over theatrical enactments has been denounced by several western playwrights such as Brecht, Artaud, Beckett, Boal, Barba, and others throughout the twentieth century. From then onward, a performance was regarded as an entity on its own, instead of a mere shadow of a dramatic text. Considering western performance conventions have been organized by a firm antagonism amongst the theatrical text and theatrical mise-en-scène, such opposition was in consent with an equivalent framework of origin and reflection, basis and supplementation. Analogously, original Arab performance forms were left out from the field of drama during its western practice, since such traditional manifestations did not sprout from established written dramatic texts. Moreover, the lack of an Arab platform (or special buildings for theatrical productions like the Europeans had) triggered the western assumption that Arab civilization was devoid of drama. In consequence, based upon western observed examination steered mostly by colonial ethnographers and anthropologists, the Arabs possessed neither dramatic writing nor a physical platform before meeting the western “other”. This fallacy of belief in the absence of Arabic dramatic script was also adopted by the Arab intelligentsia, and Abdelkrin Berrchid is known to have said that the Arabs started speaking the tongue of the western “other”, and the “absence of a founding text makes our writing no more than a duplication of the western text” (Berrchid 33). However, this was not the case. Rather than considering the original theatrical text as absent or lacking, the Arabic dramatic
script had only been over-shadowed, eclipsed, and abandoned by the over-arching western text.

The first encounter between the Arabs and the western theatrical text apparatus was during the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 when the Arabs were forced to realize their “own backwardness” (Badaoui 6), and theatre was used as a tool to promote the West’s superiority and civilization. Mohammed Baquir writes in his *Shakespeare in the Arab World* that, while Napoleon brought drama along with printing and journalism as civilizing tools into Egypt, a theatre was established by General Menou. Baquir also mentions that ‘there were two men of Fine Arts and noted musicians amongst those of his [Napoleon’s] scientific expedition. They performed some French plays in Egypt to amuse the [French] officers” (Baquir 28). This reiterates the ideological eclipsing that was inflicted in a conceptual and corporal way upon the Arabs under the guise of promoting cultural civilization.

Thus, 1847, when the adoption of western theatre began, is often referred to as the point of departure or break-off, and Naqqash’s *al-Bakhil* was unanimously recognized by both worlds as being the first modern play in Arabic. In retrospect, this landmark production can in fact be viewed as a breaking away from the indigenous traditional plays to a period of westernized echoes spanning a hundred years or more. The degree of impersonation varied in form; however, the origin remained foreign to Arab contexts.

When the play was staged at Naqqash’s home on an impromptu stage, he outright credited his western sources, although ascribing it as “European gold cast in Arabic
moulds” (al-Khozai 23). Hence, since the apparatus is European, it should be adjusted to suit an Arab sense of flavor. Flavor swayed by original native traditions of acting such as *al-hakawati, al-halqa*, and shadow plays. His *al-Bakhil* remains instilled with logocentric dependence on the western ideal. Such dependence is exhibited in the script adapted from Molière’s *L’Avare*, produced within the bounds of a proscenium arch that creates a separation (a “fourth wall”) between stage and audience, an audience that was already identifying itself with the West as a native petite bourgeoisie who were promoters of modernism.

4.3. Implications and Crossings and Passages in Genre and Culture

The post-colonial Arab world experienced a state of flux on account of the conflict between tradition being conveyed to an actual western-influenced theatre building, and between the different narratives. This implied a hybrid cross-breed Arab subject that adapted itself to withstand the trauma of colonial impositions. This transposition succeeded in bringing about a positive amalgam of opposites. This means that there is a unification of past and present, tradition and modernism. Edward Said discusses that the dialog between cultures, “Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more foreign elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 15). And since culture is fundamentally hybrid, flexible and dynamic, performance by its own is hospitable to alien features. Thereby, cultures are not really stand-alone, but unconsciously imbibe many elements from foreign cultures, which are reflected in theatrical performances.

Stephen Greenblatt has drawn on processes first outlined in anthropology for his insights in early modern literature. He advocates that literature, particularly theatre, is not a mere
representation of the culture of its origin, but is a crucial part of the culture, effectively offering a remodeled version of it by a combination of newer elements. This can be seen in the texts of plays, poetry, or novels. It is also a continuous process that is constantly changing. Dispersal of knowledge in the world is deemed possible through literary works, and drama interprets and reinvents culture by being part of it. Greenblatt considers the establishment of “cultural poetics” or a new history, which regards fiction to be as grave a matter as its cultural and historical roots (New Historicism).

Under the aegis of “cultural poetics,” studies have been undertaken to examine the varying facets of artistic communication, especially theatre, and how they have been influenced by culture, geography, and history, both intrinsically, as well as from external influences. Close behind every new form of literary expression lurks the region’s cultural history, and this study has focused on the resultant transcultural synergy created along the path of altering or generating the text. This was done not to try to propound a category of genre that can be applied broadly and which can further create confusion, as noted by Peter Stoltz (209-227), since no union of certain categories can really be called a genre, and this is what Tzvetan Todorov had also rightly pointed out to in his essay, “The Origin of Genre”: “One can always find a property common to two texts, and therefore put them together in one class. But is there any point in calling the result of such a union a genre?” (Todorov 159-170). Therefore, it can be inferred that transcultural interaction does not constitute a genre.

Not adhering to a fixed notion of genre, and focusing on selected plays, this study considers the areas and capabilities that cultural interactions cause along the genre shift.
Using the example of *al-Bakhil* I have elucidated how modern Arabic drama is a compound resulting from artistic intermingling (Pannewick and Szyska 2).

4.4. Transcultural Interaction Between Arab and European Properties in the Genre of Drama

The genre of Arab drama is an ideal illustration of the mechanisms functioning during the adaptation and alteration of genres. The adoption and translation of the bourgeois European genre was injected into the Arab cultural milieu by the colonizers and Arab travelers coming back from Europe. The plays which were based on texts of Molière, Shakespeare, and Goldoni found favor amongst the originally limited private circle (Szyska and Pannewick 2). As much a cultural venture as a political one, these early inroads into the theatre were used to further modernistic ideas among the audience, in the fashion of *al-nahda*. This textual literary genre attributed to European origins gained popularity amongst the progressive sections of Arab society. The western-inclined sections of Arab society took this European-origin literary genre to their hearts, and moved away from this inclination only in the 1920s and 1930s. Towards the middle of the twentieth century, the Arab theatre genre started getting a political flavor, and this escalated after the defeat by Israel in 1967. Authors, artists, and critics got nostalgic about the theatre in the Arab cultural context, recalling the indigenous forms, and conceived them as the “very essence of Arabic theatre”. This awakening served to break away from ties with the European genre and created an independent, authentic Arab spirit of art.

Interestingly, at the beginning of the twentieth century the European theatre genre was also beginning to break away from the previous and incorporating a new concept of
drama that represents the social and political fluctuations of the period. The more progressive drama was looking to non-European drama for inspiration, aiming for a new type of modern drama. In their quest of achieving their notion of bridging the gap between art and life and shifting art into life, playwrights searched for novel ways of manifestation, assumed to be particularly authentic to cultures far from Europe (Szyska and Pannewick 2). Incidental slapstick, story-telling, and ritualistic depictions became crucial components in the new European drama. This highlights a stimulating parallel drive between European and Arab playwrights, who, one can assume, met half way, each side in pursuit for an authentic production of theatre that their audience could identify with.

Right from the 1900s till World War II, two categories of orientalists stood out in western theatre: the modernists such as Yeats, Craig, and Artaud, who used the “orient” for story-telling and representation, and the pictorialists who visualized it as an exotic fantasy spectacle (Singleton 14). The pictorialist fitted under the umbrella of popular show business: the colonial exposition, drama, the masquerade, and the musical play. In 1900, London’s “Her Majesty’s Theatre” marked the beginning of twentieth-century Orientalism with a charity masked-ball (The Spear 146). Britain’s hegemony was depicted through a series of spectacles. Society ladies took to displaying the orientalist creations of costume-designer Percy Anderson in these parades. The critics singled out the tableau “The Masque of War and Peace” which featured Britannia in the middle of her colonies, wherein each was depicted by a female in a mock traditional costume. Orientalist plays of the time resorted to female representation a lot, for example in Henry Hamilton’s Crown of India at London’s Coliseum in 1912. Oriental colonies were
regularly represented as women and children under the British protectorate. In 1900, Loïe Fuller was a pioneer by actually using native performers in *La Geisha et le Chevalier* in Paris.

In London, Orientalism was at its zenith, with more and more orientalist titles being staged. In the 1910s and 20s, Oscar Asche presented his exotic pantomime spectacles, rooted in fairy-tales, representing his credible, if often erroneous version of the orient. He was an ardent orient fan, and this was evident in his productions that harbored a lot of native flavor. To present the orient with a jaundiced eye was not what he had intended, although in retrospect it would seem so. He was living in the Imperialist age, and traditionally, also was wont to subscribe to racial hierarchy. So, what followed the theory of relativism and the kindred spirit of universalism dissipated in the face of the New Imperialism, and the co-mingling of East and West was not likely to take place.

Representing the orient on the stage was always a matter of perspective, as was the relation it enjoyed with the historical, commercial, and imaginary elements. Acting out the orient has continuously been a concern of relevance, where the plan of the Empire exchanged the physical representation of the orient with its own thoughts concerning capitalism and Christianity. To act out the orient was a tool by which all that was wanted and desired for in European culture could be imagined, fashioned, and performed …and hence, achieved by substitution. The stage was a means of annexing the orient through fantasy and catered to the vicarious wishes of the Europeans. This wishful appropriation was fanned by the notion of all things that the European could not envision, namely, the ritualistic, the religious, the pure, at times the barbaric. The orient was at most times the
West’s complete antithesis, in climate, sexual norms, cultural distance, tradition, and beliefs. This performance from the ruler’s perspective only, i.e., the West, is what Ziauddin Sardar termed as the performance of “Orientalization” (Sardar 114).

However, the orient also became a means for projecting social inequalities proposed by racial varieties as well as conscience-cleansing without any repercussions, and a vehicle for airing political apprehensions. Not that all this had any real meaning for the larger sections of the audience, anyway. The inconsistencies ingrained in the representation of the orient were likened to those within the management of the Empire. It was a mixture of extremes, being loved and hated simultaneously. Witnessing adulation and censure, imitation and mockery, nonetheless, it was a means of conveying social, cultural, and political messages with respect to current issues. Therefore, the post-colonialist view of the orient in Orientalism as merely being a playground of imperial profiteering was a fallacy since it was not only a zone in which to transmit and convey imperialist indoctrination, but also an area to delve into, question, and investigate the self. Despite it being a far realm of the imagination, whose shallow exterior presentation would have us convinced, the orient of the Empire granted a medium for relevant, current, and newsworthy issues. The orient of the Empire seemed to be removed from the distant fantasy it summarily portrayed, and served as a platform for the discussion of topical issues of the day.

4.5. Asche and Orientalism

Orientalism, in the 21st century, can only be interpreted as a cultural echo of imperialism, and theatrical orientalists from Gilbert and Sullivan to Asche unwittingly contributed to this perception. While both boasted of setting fashionable trends and
laying English society open to criticism, they were also in awe of the orient’s strict social norms that could inspire both tragedies and comedies, and they conceded ample room for fantasy. They presented the orient in splendid mimicry, yet their presentations were actually portraying England behind the oriental mask. They could safely discuss sensitive social issues but only within the oriental guise, especially with regards to class and race, since otherwise the Lord Chamberlain’s office could censure them. The then prevalent British class hierarchy was thus portrayed and commented upon through the conflicts among the various races and classes depicted on stage. Furthermore, popular musical comedy got away with criticizing the class supremacy and making a joke of the ineffectual aristocracy. The gender characterized in the oriental form was something alien to the English form, and contrary to the popular belief that the scanty costumes of the female actresses were but a titillation for the male audience, since the male characters exposed just as much. The anomaly was that the modern orient, while indulging in spectacular costumes, also let a lot of the flesh bare to the gaze. Therefore, the entertainment was as much for the women as it was for the men. As opposed to the blundering male characters portrayed in Asche’s plays, the women were strong and conniving, despite the propensity of post-colonial Orientalism leaning towards patriarchal dominance. Asche’s female protagonists were invariably strong, keen, and courageous, not silent violets, while the men evoked nothing more than gust and pomposity. The feminism conveyed herein, and in travel discourses, strikes one as being a contradiction of the East/West and female/male pairing. It started to recover women’s voice through the heroine’s discourse. The male character in Asche’s productions was perpetually left secluded at the end of his musicals, having a semi-tragic character.
Asche’s orient served as a second-hand spokesperson against the prevailing ills of the English society and imperialistic ramifications, such as corruption, greed, and exploitation, and sought to redress them. Notwithstanding all this, he was an Australian-English advocate of the Empire, no matter how unobtrusively he alluded to the drawbacks of imperialism and the English society through his work. However, his belief in the Empire was never in-your-face, and for all purposes, he tried to confine it through story-telling and characterizations rooted in distant regions. His travels took him far and wide, and his writing reflects this. Although Asche could not bring about a great reformation, this distant location afforded him the liberty of spectacularism. Described by J.C. Trewin as “an actor of immense, undisciplined power”, his characters were apt for his athletic build and deep voice (*The Edwardian Theatre* 19). Using these qualities to the hilt, the lavish oriental costumes held an analogy to Delacroix’s version of a painted lion, whose magnificence and savagery existed beneath the gilded surface in all its allure.

Asche’s career on the London theatre-scene was a long and varied one, spanning the late-Victorian to Edwardian periods and beyond, when the audience taste shifted on account of World War I. His grounding came from Benson and Tree’s tutelage, and however great his intention to limit his drama to finer culture, his predilection for Shakespearean comic and villainous characters tended to deviate towards popular theatre. During 1893-1903, as Asche was setting up his own company, a modernist, progressive art form was arising, which, according to Dennis Kennedy strove to “re-establish art’s position in the social order, thus permitting their work to comment on and criticize that order” (131). A “New Drama” of ideas was beginning to affect the stage,
with George Bernard Shaw as the uncontested champion of this socially awakened literary form. Christopher Innes points to Shaw as being the front runner for subsequent British drama. Although recognized more widely as an actor-manager pandering to popular tastes, Asche also contributed to the cause, albeit in a small way, working with Edward Gordon Craig and directing Ibsen. However, if the cause had continued, Asche’s commercialism was to have separated him from it. He had managed to gather an excellent team from his Bensonian days: costume designer Percy Anderson, scene designers Joseph and Phil Harker, and music director Christopher Wilson. Music is what made the maximum impact on his plays in the 1910s. In this vein, William Archer is known to have opined that “the New Century’s ‘real New Drama’ would not be the theatre of Ibsen, Shaw, or Maeterlinck, but the sex-and-shopping musicals” (qtd. in Kennedy 3). Orientalism was also a strong ingredient of most of these musicals.

Asche contributed a lot to the characteristic British musical comedy, and he breathed new life into it. Light opera was the forerunner of the musical comedy, at the time under the patronage of the D’Oyly Carte Company, and boosted by Gilbert and Sullivan. This genre of theatre found its honorable place on the stage in the late 1800s. This was the time that burlesque had dwindled, which was a hybrid of “well-known stories” with a “modern or topical twist,” invigorated with musical infusions of various genres. As a genre, musical comedy arrived when Victoria’s reign had ended, and British imperialism was at its zenith. The nation was in an era of peace and material success brought about by the Industrial Revolution. By this time, London’s theatrical world was “the teeming center of the pleasure world” (Wilson, Edwardian Theatre 11).
In 1901, more than 260 theatres were running their productions for spectators representing a range of all the walks of British society.

At no other time was the theatre more popular, and it hardly had any rival except the music hall. Musical comedy was considered an inferior genre of theatre, and the distinction between it and “legitimate” drama resulted in a classification of theatres where the burlesque dramas were limited to periphery theatre halls. Musical comedy came into its own by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and flourished as a vehicle for social issues along with a flexible structure allowing fantastical productions. “The musical comedy is the apotheosis of the theatrical turn, it has transferred to the dramatic stage the methods of the music hall” (Adams 202). The “musical comedy”, therefore, provided a form of entertainment, which was holding no claims to being a “legitimate” form of drama, and yet was so adaptable as to be called “formless”.

4.6. Historical Background to the Development of Orientalism in Asche’s Career
When Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton first ventured as producers and directors of their own company in 1904, they had already trained and performed with the well-known dramatic names of their day. Asche worked with Frank Benson, Beerbohm Tree, Gordon Craig, and Pinero, largely in Shakespearean roles. He was to make his fortune at musical comedies, but at that time his renderings of Shakespeare, comedy or others, were sustaining him. Romantic high-drama served as backdrops for their talent and their renown as actors. Given the dominance of the musical theatre in Edwardian London’s West End, Asche could no longer rely on his casual musical style (Wilson, Edwardian Theatre 210). He tried melding popular music with Shakespeare’s comic works, to the
extent that he might have been dubbed as transforming them into musical comedies. Trying to innovate after the success of Stephen Phillips’ plays, through Beerbohm Tree productions, Asche found that music signified the geography and history of wonder in drama.

After Asche and Brayton left Tree’s partnership, the duo partnered with Otho Stuart, with Asche producing and his wife Brayton performing at the leased Adelphi Theatre, and Stuart as the financial partner. They concentrated on “Shakespearean and other worthy poetical plays” (Asche, *His Life, By Himself* 112). This choice suited Asche very well, since both he and Brayton were trained and recognized as classical performers. Following the genres of Shakespeare and modern poetical drama from their days with Tree at His Majesty’s Theatre, Asche produced over 19 plays between 1904 and 1922. Brayton was typically cast as the heroine’s foil to Asche’s villainy, and the couple was hardly ever cast in plays as a romantic one. Brayton invariably portrayed romance with another character, and Asche was the evil thwarter. Both were physically suited to their characterizations. Lily Brayton was a beautiful lady, who possessed a mesmerizing voice, while Asche was a muscular, sporting type known for physical action on the stage.

Asche was successful in casting actors, musical director Christopher Wilson, and Tree’s favourite scene-artist, Joseph Harker, as well as favourite costumier Percy Anderson from George Edwards. He managed to gather an outstanding design team right from the outset, and this team was to steer his productions through continuous oriental fantasies. Anderson made quite an impression in the London theatre arena, more so since Asche’s productions greatly emphasised costumes. A Londoner, born in 1885, he debuted with
William Fullerton’s comic opera, *The Lady of the Locket* at the New Empire Theatre. Kurt Gänzel attributed his success to his lavish and extraordinary costume designs, so uncommon at the time (Gänzel 1: 28). He further elaborates by saying that Anderson was the first to break from the mould of the colours fashionable on the contemporary British stage: “The costumes were designed and made with a lavishness and individuality uncommon in the theatre of the time” (Ibid 28). Being hired by George Edwardes at the D’Oyly Carte, he designed the costumes for *The Yeoman of the Guard* and *The Gondoliers*. His career took flight at the turn of the twentieth century, and soon the heavy oriental influence became apparent in comedies such as *The Geisha* and *San Toy*. When he joined forces with the Asche-Brayton company, this orientalism became just an allusion to the time and historical references via the characters in the comedies. What these dramas did was to whet the appetite of the British audience for exotica and attraction for a cultural “otherness” in drama, simultaneously unravelling characteristics of the Victorian/Edwardian society in England.

Asche’s company was instated in 1904, and before setting off to a tour in Australia in 1909, he had produced eight poetical plays as part of his repertoire. These were mostly based on Stephen Phillips’ work, their titles themselves testimony to the contexts of the characters, the age in which they were set, and their location: *The Prayer of the Sword, Under Which King?*, *The Lonely Millionaire*, *Tristram and Iseult*, *The Virgin Goddess*, *Attila*, *The Two Pins*, and *Count Hannibal*. These copies of Phillips’ works were dubbed “Elizabethan-Jacobean pastiche” in blank verse by J.C. Trewin (*The Edwardian Theatre* 117). Phillips’ plays themselves were attributed to as being the work of “the elder Dumas with the voice of Milton” (Trewin, *Benson and the Bensonians* 122)
by William Archer. Contrarily, Tree reckoned them to complement Shakespeare’s work. Soon, Asche experienced a waning in the audience’s attention with the Edwardian era progressing and their pursuit of more frivolous entertainment. Apart from his first play, none of the others had much mentionable success. On the other hand, the six Shakespeare productions he put up in the same period were highly popular. Nonetheless, all plays continued at the Adelphi for short runs, helping to expand the label of what was known as the Asche-Brayton brand in theatre. As mentioned, on September 19, 1904, their company was founded. It opened with The Prayer of the Sword, a drama by a Bensonian, James Bernard Fegan. The story was set in medieval Italy, and tells of an Italian monk who falls in love with a Duchess and leaves the monastery to serve God with his sword. The outcome of it all results in the Church banning his marriage to the Duchess, while she loses her lands. Brayton played the female lead, with Asche portraying the villain. As Scorla, he kills the Countess, leaving the hero bereft.

The play received acclaim. Harker and Anderson’s designs and historical validation were lauded by critics, particularly Harker’s authentic recreation of Italian settings. However, Fagan’s writing skills drew disapprobation for their prolonged dialogues and tedious oration from the characters (Illustrated London News 456). It was, to some perceptions, a betrayal of Asche’s intended poetic drama, by becoming more of a melodrama. Yet others claimed to find it as being influenced by Shakespeare, Tennyson, and even Browning. The audience somewhat appreciated the production, judging from the 70 shows, and their level of immersion in the plot which was evident in their outcry against the Pope’s order banning the lovers from marrying (Ibid 456). In spite of the romantic overtones of the drama, it was the villainy that got the most appreciation, as
Scorla, portrayed by Asche, overshadowed everyone else’s character by “the force of his personality” (Ibid 456).

Unfazed by previous criticism, Fagan’s poetical drama, *Under Which King?* set in medieval Scotland, was produced with the political overtones of the times. Brayton again performed the female lead, albeit in a breeches role, and Asche portrayed the somewhat contradictory and relenting villain. A suspenseful, passionate drama, the play only received below moderate success in its 28 runs. The audience was unable to identify with the unfashionable Scottish setting and the weak character of the villain. The resolution of the political anxiety was all too convenient, and the accompanying Scottish music left the viewers uninspired. This lackadaisical drama provoked no real engagement from them and provided little entertainment. It was neither outright tragic nor fanciful enough to give them a thrill and thus received just a lukewarm response. Asche’s interpretation of the poetical drama was compartmentalized into good, evil, and love interests, and as such could qualify as a sub-category of the romantic melodrama, a trend that was to shape the company’s development in the next few years.

Asche’s subsequent shot at producing theatre by a current dramatist was a contemporary comedy: *The Lonely Millionairess*, by Mrs. Henry de la Pasture, which originally opened at a show the preceding year at the Court Theatre and was selected by Otho Stuart as an initial endeavor by the company to participate with present-day issues. The drama starts with Sir Charles Ducarel coming back to his inherited estate, Cleddon Court in Hertfordshire. He returns disguised and basically out of interest to know what has occurred during his absence. He introduces himself as Mr. Charles and is involved as a personal assistant to the new landlord, Mr. Thomas Frankland (Asche), an elderly
millionaire from Lancashire who owns a cotton-mill. Charles becomes infatuated with Christina (Brayton), Frankland’s daughter. Christina has a desire to grow into a writer and an artist and is tutored by an Italian instructor, Luigi Peretta. Christina falls in love with Peretta, who is married and holds the intention of laying his hands on a share of the Frankland capital. Frankland’s attempt to bribe him to leave does not work as Christina pursues him to London, eagerly followed by Charles, who overthrows the egotist Peretta and asks Christina to marry him. Moved by this, Frankland weds his daughter’s governess. The play concludes with two marriages. This comedy of social status and conduct and signs of the illustration of both “otherness” and Empire, marks the start of oriental organization on Asche’s platform. Yet, these matters do not stem from diverting fancies but from local issues. Despite the fact that Sir Charles is coming back home to the place where his baronet dad went broke, he is in charge of an Argentinian corporation called Ducarel & Co. and is now financially able to purchase Cleddon Court so he can own it once again. Here, the forecasts of capitalist imperialism are signaled. The upper classes can maintain their standing midst the newly-rich giving a hand to the imperialism that had developed in the late-Victorian age as a capitalist system in the mainframe of the Empire. Private enterprise or capitalism stands as the new creed for this post-Victorian culture whose ideals are spread with as much fervour as Christian campaigns. The villain in the play is, as you would expect, the one outsider. His unwelcomed chase of the English damsel is made worse by Sir Charles’s revelation of his marital status. This foreigner was willing to commit adultery, polygamy, and deceit. In addition, old money and new money are brought together by the taking of the operating module of capitalism, renouncing Argentinian foreigners whose work can be
abused to line the pouches of an absent factory proprietor and Italians (foreigners again) to be paid off at first and then beaten. Moreover, dramaturgically, Asche remained on the borders of melodrama (Daily Telegraph 11), with this being his paramount chance to employ foreignness to produce dual contraries. The reviewers claimed that “it cannot be said that it is suited to the methods of the Adelphi company who are used to pieces of greater breadth and strength,” (Globe and Traveller 4) so the spectacle closed after only 20 shows.

Asche was now realising that London critics and audiences were not taking to this kind of melodrama very well and that the major part of his company’s charm lay in its Bensonian fundamentals. Popular Shakespearean drama and musical comedies were what sold the best, hence he resorted to The Taming of the Shrew to cover the losses incurred.

Along mid-1906, Asche continued with his poetical drama plans and showed an updated version of Tristram and Isuelt, a poetic mythology fashioned after the well-recognised 1865 Wagner opera. Tristan and Isuelt, a four-act play, which was set in Cornwall and penned by J. Comyns Carr, highlighted the conflict between the Irish and the Cornish nobility. Asche again portrays the villain with his Cornish scheming and plotting, while Brayton plays the Irish heroine. The conclusion of the play sees Tristram and Isuelt being murdered upon their return to Cornwall. The two commendations for this play that ran for 46 performances were the roles assayed by Brayton’s sister, Agnes, in a cameo role (Illustrated London News 358), and Asche’s own villainy, where he was said to “combine two qualities of dignified and sinister” (The Play Pictorial 8: 117). The Play Pictorial was known to comment on the theme of the play, “Stories like these are
seldom deliberately formed, but grow gradually in the imagination of primitive races” (Ibid 114), the reference being to the Celtic Cornwall and Ireland. These two ancient kingdoms were united into a macro-kingdom in 1906. The kingdoms are portrayed as harbingers of spite, jealousy and hateful rivalry. Thus, the far from familiar atmosphere of the play is depicted through their somewhat unfamiliar and uncivilized history in which the hero is entangled.

Although Asche kept vacillating between his recent poetical experiments and the stalwart Shakespearean plays, he now digressed from his previous inclinations and broke new ground with Besier’s *The Virgin Goddess*, which ran for 38 performances. Following Aristotle’s three unities, Asche sought to transpose a Roman influence, and the resulting medley was, in David Mayer’s words, inclusive of “issues of gender, religion… and imperialism” (Mayer *Playing Out the Empire: Ben Hur and Other Toga Plays and Films* x). The drama was devoid of any Christian element, as well as of melodramatic elements, and it probably appealed to Asche because of its distinctive characterization and its exoticism. The intricacies of mythological Greek characterization have Asche as the villainous hero, and Brayton as the somewhat conniving heroine. The play concludes with Brayton being killed by Asche, who lives to mourn his loss (*Tatler* 280: 107). The audience responded very positively to the ability of the actors to run-on from one act to the next, and Asche hoped for a great new beginning (Asche, *His Life, By Himself* 115-16); however, this hope and even the positive reactions from the press could not sustain the play for more than five weeks. The audience was not too enamoured with *The Virgin Goddess*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was run to cover the rest of the lease period at the Adelphi. *The Virgin
Goddess did not fare well for numerous reasons, among them being that the central character was made “too barbaric” (Illustrated London News 618). However, the not so well-known reason was Brayton’s inability to perform for most of the run, on account of an accident. Her appearance just for the final run could not save the show. In its report on the showing of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the Illustrated London News actually pointed out that the fun-loving Edwardian society of the times found Asche’s tragi-drama to be “cold comfort” (Illustrated London News 832-934), and hence out of the five plays produced, only the two comedies found favour with the audience. Asche’s Shakespearean productions kept his books in the black, but his newer attempts at experimental drama were failing to captivate the audience, since they did not portray the values of the middle class, which was what interested the audience the most (Singleton 57). Although his dramas supported imperialism directly or indirectly, the “otherness” was exhibited as just a poor second allusion. While class differentiation did find a place in the plays, the ruling classes always had the upper hand.

Asche had to wait out three more plays before homing in on the orientalism that was to become his fashionable hallmark. By early 1907, the lease on the Adelphi had expired but by now the Asche-Brayton company had become a box-office success. They toured the country with both Shakespearean and poetical dramas, only returning to London for a short stint later in the year. This time they supported Tree’s productions at His Majesty’s Theatre, and made their mark in the following year at the Aldwych with a fresh play each season. The foremost of these was Laurence Binyon’s Attila, produced by Tree, and featuring Asche in the lead role. Asche himself described it as “a most beautiful work” (Asche, His Life, By Himself 120), yet he was financially weary at this
juncture because of the failure of *The Virgin Goddess*. He only consented to producing it as part of his Shakespearean season, so that any losses incurred could be recompensed.

The four-play Asche-Brayton Season opened with this story of *Attila the Hun* at His Majesty’s which ran for 32 performances. *The Black & White* described this play as “a tragic poem” (*Supplement* ii-iii). Asche personified the grandeur of the setting through his own and Brayton’s costumes. Despite all the critical acclaim, and the fabulous scenery and costumes by Charles Rickett, *Attila* again failed to make the mark with the audience. Asche ascribed it as “a unique production, but before its time”, being completely off the time scale (it was set in 453 A.D.). The period it was set in was far removed from the audience’s imagination (Asche, *His Life, By Himself* 120). However, Asche should have realized it was not just this, but that the drama being a pseudo-historical production with an epic impulse was the primary drawback (Singleton 57). By 1907, Asche had stereotyped himself into the Shakespearean buffoon/villain roles. And these kinds of tragedies, in spite of their remoteness and exoticness in terms of settings, were not going down well with the light-hearted audience who failed to identify with Asche being cast in such roles.

With Tree taking back his theatre in January 1908, the Asche-Brayton couple again took on touring Britain and Ireland. In this period, another new play was produced by Asche. After a long stream of unsuccessful trials with new work, this play was to mark the conclusion of this failure with new plays, and one last West End Season. This three-week season was at the Aldwych under Charles Frohman’s management in 1908. After that, Asche was to go abroad on his first Australian tour, successfully coming back to the Garrick playhouse in 1910, with not only a Shakespearean drama but also two new
shows that were to thrust him to eminent fame. That last production prior to the Australian tour was a Frank Stayton medieval comedy, *The Two Pins*, which highlighted a turning point in his style and tactic towards approaching new work since it was his first experiment with orientalist exotica together with comedy. Asche’s previous forays into orientalist exotica (pertaining to time and geographical distance) had been fraught with overpowering characterization, poetic dialogue, and dramaturgy.

*The Two Pins* was first performed at the Theatre Royal, Newcastle and then at the Aldwych in London, both in 1908. This play, set in the thirteenth century Rhine Valley, had Brayton playing her second “breeches” role, and had a happy ending, where Asche and Brayton unite romantically. What is perplexing is why this particular play enjoyed moderate success whereas preceding ones did not? Perhaps the form and costumes were the main causes, and the musical scores by Christopher Wilson and songs by Courtice Pounds added to the charm. Nevertheless, having toured the country, in just the last week of its three-week season at the Aldwych, it had to be replaced by *The Shrew*. The choices of form and music which Asche made at this juncture were the forerunners of his soon to follow vindication, the oriental fantasies arising from a combination of musical comedy and exoticism. He realised that this combination would prove to be his success.

Post the Australian tour, Asche’s final contemporary work, *Count Hannibal*, came onto the West End stage, after running trials in the counties, e.g., Bristol’s Prince’s Theatre, before the Australian tour in 1909. This was his very first adaptation from the 1901 Stanley Weyman novel. Here again, Asche was venturing into something new. A French historical drama, completely action-oriented, portrayed the Huguenot-Catholic
conflict, and Asche performed in the lead role of Hannibal comrade of King Charles IX. In spite of his unfair pressure on Lady Clotilde (Brayton), Hannibal ultimately does well by her people, and wins her over. The play incorporated all that was attractive to audiences of the time—schemes and plots, love angles, hapless heroine, villainy at its best, superb music, et al. The brisk pace it followed only added points to its charm. Anderson and Harker contributed much by way of ornate costumes and befitting backdrops. Although the play missed the elements of poetry and comedy, its adaptation conformed to the extents of the romantic melodrama, and ran successfully for two months at the New Theatre in 1910, after which it was played at the Garrick for another 153 performances in 1911. Based on being the longest-running Asche production, this success laid the grounds for future successes and firmly established Asche’s reputation and productions.

In spite of this success, it took nigh five years of trial and error before Asche could come into his own. So far, his success lay vastly in his Shakespearean repertoire, perceived by some as being sheltered by it also. Considering his penchant for all things Shakespearean, how then was Asche inspired to experiment with new theatre? He restored the standing of first Tree and then Benson; however, Tree’s influence on his thought-processes was proven to be greater. Although both had a vast influence on his Shakespearean productions, Benson’s work was solely limited to Shakespearean adaptations, but Tree’s productions were not exclusively so. Therefore, it was from there that Asche found his inspiration for poetic exoticism. With the exception of the mythical *Tristram and Isuelt* and the more current *The Lonely Millionaireess*, all of Asche’s poetical dramas were redesigned accounts of fictionalized historical incidents, thus,
staying true to the design of the time period was a mandate for him. This precision of portraying accurate accounts was combined with imagination of the stage and costume designs. This imagination was due to the lack of evidence yet still appeared as a portrayal of truth; hence, it conceived its own brand of exoticism via temporal dislocation. In spite of all the actors being European subjects (hence geographically near yet culturally remote), the historical distance and the unfamiliar cultures of the dramas were indications of exoticism. However, after examining the process of Asche’s career and the development of orientalism in his works, it becomes evident that the visible reformation of historical distance, along with the selection of form and dialogue [tragedy and poetry respectively] detracted from the allure of his exoticism. His next contemporary production, *Kismet*, which focussed on the actual oriental in terms of both subject as well as production, rather than the all-encompassing exotica, embedded Asche’s reputation for success in the London theatre milieu.

4.7. *Kismet*

Australian native Asche first toured his home land during 1909-10 with a repertoire of five Shakespearean plays: *The Taming of the Shrew, Othello, The Merchant of Venice, Merry Wives, and As You Like It*, conjointly with *Count Hannibal*, and was befittingly hailed as “the first Australian to be an undoubted international theatrical success” (Madelaine 104). Back in London, he set out on a different dramatic journey, dabbling in oriental spectacularism. This happened at the critical juncture when “traditional stage practice” was embracing experimental modern theatre (Kelly 40). The modernist orientalism, which inspired Asche, first arrived to London’s theatrical platform as two visiting European productions. One was Reinhardt’s *Sumurûn* in 1911, a
symbolist “pantomime” from the orientalist One Thousand and One Nights. However, the play resorted to no pretence at realism. The white skin complexion of the European performer was obviously visible beneath the paint and the European footwear was clearly seen, so the characterization of orientalism lacked realism (Asche, His Life, By Himself 137). The preceding Ballets Russes production of Rimsky-Korsakov’s Scheherazade in 1910 was the touch-point for all of Asche’s oriental spectacular themes. The Bacchanale Orgy was to become the hallmark of Asche’s subsequent plays in one way or another, the most notable being Cairo/Mecca9. Both dramas showed at the London Coliseum. Asche first adapted the idea for Kismet from Edward Knoblauch’s One Thousand and One Nights, which was originally titled Hajj’s Hour. Asche presented a harem bathing scene in order to step outside sexual norms and restrictions by projecting this behaviour onto oriental characters. By representing the idea through oriental characterization, he tried not to offend sensibilities, yet titillated the hypocritical, stiff-collared English audience. Through representing lust in the sphere of the orient, Asche exposed this desire which is disenchanted by the English ethics in society. Anyway, Knoblauch’s One Thousand and One Nights was a common phenomenon by now (Asche His Life, By Himself 173).

When Asche began his orientalist productions, he stuck to accurate representation, as was the current trend. This accuracy depended largely on financial means- both for travel as well as for importing whatever was required. However, realism was flexed to

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make way for what would be real theatrical orientalism, which tended to go beyond realism into fantasy. A review termed the production to have “more of gorgeousness in it and less of truth” (“Kismet at the Garrick Theatre” 3). Asche was fair, if anything, and while fun was made of oriental people’s culture and language through comical accents, the same treatment was met out to English quirks of customs and societal norms.

Asche adapted Knoblauch’s original work once he had Australian and English rights. He came up with a bazaar scene which he experienced in real life during his journeys. Portrayal of Hajj was edited, and so it included the projection of a more humorous and sensitive character since he intended to take that role. The end result was that the already familiar Kismet\(^\text{10}\) took on a more comical, rather than serious, turn (Singleton 64). The Orientalized settings and spectacular costumes of the musical comedies were the assumed source of attraction to some of the target audience. In addition, the plays appealed due to the vicarious criticism of English society and since imperialism came under examination under oriental disguise. However, arguments support that the play succeeded largely on account of the grand chorus of dancers who were scarcely wearing anything.

Kismet tasted unprecedented success through its 330 performance run at the Garrick in 1911. Asche did realise, however, that the Orientalism of the play would succeed through its musical adaptation. Interestingly, the musical Kismet, or The Two Tangled Turks had shown at Broadway in 1895, but was not connected to Knoblauch’s One Thousand and One Nights’s Hajj’s Hour at all. Asche’s depiction of Knoblauch’s

\(^{10}\) Knoblauch’s play which was remade as Kismet
drama was derided for lacking the elements of a musical, in spite of the use of varied musical instruments. Wilson, the musical director, thought that musical score was deemed more of an interpolation, and a little incomplete and out of context, with none of the audience-grabbing melodies that would credit it to be labelled a proper musical. Once the initial success of the play quieted down, Knoblauch and Wilson got down to creating *Hajj*, a simple one-act musical, under Asche’s production at the Palace Theatre, 1915. *Kismet* eventually found its niche in the cinema, but it was only with Charles Lederer and Luther Davis giving it a new musical form in 1953 that it really made a mark on the live stage. This production opened at the Ziegfeld Theatre in New York, and with Borodin’s musical score it created its space in musical repertoires for times to come. This was totally a musical, contrary to the original Asche/Knoblauch play.

Asche imposed his own perceptions of orientalism and moulded the play accordingly, and this was what was fed to the audience. *Hajj* was founded upon an *One Thousand and One Nights* account. A highly intricate plot set in Baghdad, full of revenge, and pseudo-religiosity only helped to further preconceived notions of eastern fanaticism in the minds of the audience. Asche, who was by now an established idol of the West End theatre, transferred his own oriental concepts onto the spectators. His production was the “one ruling perspective which defined itself as West” (Sardar 114), despite the thin veneer of a skewed impression of the orient. In his attempt at portraying the orient, he managed to incorporate western nuances. For example, Asche, as Hajj the beggar, snored noisily despite the fact that the others were heading to prayer. When provoked, he uses Allah’s name blasphemously. Hajj spends his time begging at the door of the mosque from the believers who were heading inside. The audience does not
see the interior of the mosque, so the religion is inaccessible. Each and every time he speaks, Hajj gives up talking about the orient: he speaks of redemption in a way that Christianizes Islam. This was a calculated choice at making the dialogue more familiar to the spectators of London; it was to insert the scene with comedy. Maybe the audience knew about the various differences concerning the two religions, and possibly laughed at Hajj’s try to bring them closer.

4.8. Gender

The female gender was desired as well as held in awe by orientalists and pseudo-realist painters, and the mystique of the oriental woman of artists in the 80 years before Asche was something yet unexplored. This existed along with the orientalism of class and race and it mutated to suit the tastes of the audience. The allusion to the “other” woman’s mysticism was not so much as a physically “veiled” entity as in the paintings of yore, but in the secretiveness, as were also the other native intrusions in the orientalist’s presentations. The orient was invariably depicted as “always the other sex” (Yeğenoğlu 56), since showing a veiled woman as one was the easiest physical characterization. The orientalist contributed to create the divide between the East and the West by either depicting the East as a veiled woman, or a villainous character, or a racially distinguished characterization. In order to construct the self and the dominance of imperialism, it was the best- known strategy to portray the other either through racialism or feminism. For all known purposes, Orientalism strove towards theatrics by first creating a mystique and then revealing the other, thereby ensuring its allure.

In this manner, it is evident that the use of veiled woman in the orientalist musical comedies was not just for fantastical and titillating purposes. The characterization was to
set in place the orientalist longing, and the element of “othernesses”. This also enabled the producer to put up a spectacular show.

4.9. Conclusion

Asche’s personal journeys from Australia to South Africa were geographically far greater than those undertaken by the transition from Kismet to the mega hit Chu Chin Chow. The two plays shared a common geographical location, Persia, but the latter had more distinct leanings towards what came to be known as “the integrated musical.”

Asche picked up a wealth of information and exotic ideas while interacting with imperialist and colonial authors on his travels. These encounters not only gave him new themes to think about, but also gave wings to his hitherto constrained fantasy. His Orientalism developed via venturing into incorporating the more commercial “fantasy” rather than authenticity in his productions. Kismet thus laid the foundations for the imaginative representations of the orient as the setting of imperialist fancy rather than the realistic picture. This was to be the focus of imperialist desire and attention. Asche’s representation of Orientalism was not very successful since it ruffled feathers, with its close battles with reality in the native milieu sometimes. Nevertheless, Kismet’s One Thousand and One Nights story set the precedent for a prototype that transported the musical comedy genre well past its successful Edwardian era, into becoming the most popular kind of theatre in the 1910s and early 1920s.
Chapter 5

Chu Chin Chow

5.1. Introduction

*Chu Chin Chow* was a contradiction of sorts, by the fact that it was ascribed the dubious reputation of being “the stock theatrical joke of its times”, along with being double-faced. At first it seemed not to have a long-lasting effect on London theatre, however, time was to prove that incorrect. It was the height of orientalist influence in musical drama and popular theatre at the time. W. Macqueen Pope observes, “It was a piece of musical and stage magic that started an era and struck a note” (Pope 208).

Asche had already discovered through *Kismet* that imaginary orientalism could get away with great creativity arising out of purely commercial objectives and moulded his productions to suit. This laid grounds for *Chu Chin Chow* being targeted as being of poor dramatic quality and a travesty of exoticism. Unlike *Kismet, Chu* was adapted from *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*; and hence, its familiarity and its flexible orientalism appealed to a wide-spread audience (Moore 89). In spite of Asche adding many new elements to *Chu*, it delivered familiarity which comforted the anxious audience of the time, which was in the turbulent take over of war. With its many themes such as valour and cleverness woven into the plot of winning even when it is least expected, the play was viewed as a romantic and heroic parallel to the national military exploits during World War I. Imperialism was again at the forefront despite the setting of an imaginary
Arabia. Familiarity with the characters, both champions and antiheroes, the appealing music with oriental overtones, fantastic visualization, and the titillating costumes made up for its allure. Further, while it had intriguing and commercial elements through twists of plot, slaughter, and love driven by desire and retaliation, yet it was framed within moralistic uprightness, which sought to criticize all forms of demoralization. To sum up, on the London stage, it was the synopsis of a hundred years of popular theatre, including pantomime, melodrama, and musical comedy.

By the end of the war in 1918, the nationalistic fervour of theatre had transitioned into providing a means of escape from the after-war recession. An advertisement ranted about its being “The World’s Most Gorgeous Production,” and *Chu Chin Chow* lived up to this image by demonstrating riches through fake jewellery and costumes that were in contrast to the true financial situation of fashion of that time. At its peak of popularity and counting on the returning audience, it sold out 10 performances a week. And to satisfy the repeat viewers, the entire production underwent major adjustments and refurbishing every six months. While scenes were amended, the scenery and costume updates were advertised to attract even more customers. This was reported by the *Tatler*: “the mounting, the scenery, and dresses of Mr. Oscar Asche’s fascinating new production…” (793: 293) stand as the chief backbone of this grand audience-pleaser musical, and the consumerist audience was attracted to the awe-inspiring deluxe production in terms of costume spectacle offering a fantasy to be enjoyed “on this side of the footlights” (Ibid 293). Nonetheless, the wily use of semi-transparent costumes which showed a good amount of female skin added an extra erotic appeal to its already general titillation, mostly in the name of oriental authenticity. This proved to be a
crowd-puller as well. In the aftermath of the war, when society was in a state of chaos, all norms underwent upheaval (Barker 13), and the public display of thinly-disguised eroticism was rampant in theatre. Nothing so excessive or “immoral”, on such a great scale, had ever been presented on stage. This extravaganza invited much speculation about the costs of production. However, the total investment was a mere £ 5,356 and some change, a sum that was rapidly recovered after a few weeks. The fabled fairy-tales in the drama had a keen effect on the national awareness and cognizance of the public. One regular attendee was the mother of a soldier killed in the war in France. She had seen the play at the opening of the run with her son and consequently would come back again on the anniversary of his death. Much credit was accorded to the musical aspects and their effect on the events subsequent to the war. For example, it has been said that the first division of triumphant troops played “The Robbers’ March” from *Chu Chin Chow* when they paraded into Germany. Some others scoffed at the show’s quality being so poor that “the soldiers gladly went back to the trenches” to escape it (Ervine 171). Regardless of everything said and done, the commercial success of *Chu* proves that it had an effect on a large social scale. Similar to many capitalist projects at that time, *Chu* propagated goodwill. Earnings from the sale of products\(^\text{11}\) in the theatre were donated to St. Dunstan’s Hostel for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors. Meanwhile, evening concerts provided donations for further charities. Additionally, major political events inspired Asche to amend and edit scenes of the play, for instance the addition of “The Allies and

\(^{11}\) The products are going to be discussed in detail later throughout the chapter
the Dominions” paying tribute to Armistice Night. Paradoxically, while *Chu Chin Chow* offered reprieve from the war, yet culturally it remained a part of it.

The magnificent proportions of this most popular play did well to disguise its modest beginnings. A list compiled of one of the early editions, of the first year of production of the play, enumerated 17 principal actors, 34 male and 29 female chorus participants, and 8 children (Singleton 111). This cast also included various animals, e.g. camels, goats, etc. which even Asche recalled with affection. Numbers kept increasing considerably until the final performance, some five years later, because of additional scenes during the regular overhauls that occurred over the course of time.

The roots of this stupendously successful drama lay sometime in the past. The Asche-Brayton company, after *The Spanish Main*, started touring country theatres with new performances of old classics like *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. On an abjectly rainy day in Manchester, Asche was forced to give up his daily routine of golf, and thus sat down to write his first oriental-themed play, which had been a long-yearned aspiration. Dictating to a stenographer, Asche took a week to bring about the first act of the play, and took the same time for the dictation of the rest of the play later in Glasgow along the way of the tour. All of this effort seemed to fall between the cracks as none of London’s top managers were inclined to take to the idea. One would presume that producers such as George Dance and Robert Evett of Daly’s would have welcomed such a production; nonetheless, they declined the play. But succour came from the contacts of the composer Frederic Norton with his Green Room Club associates. Asche convinced his mates from the past, some of London theatre’s most skilled pictographic orientalists: scenery designer Joseph Harker and costume designer Percy Anderson, to join him.

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As the production personnel started coming together, Asche revised the *Chu Chin Chow* to place Brayton, his wife, as the female lead. The two of them along with Beerbohm Tree formed Eastale Ltd., a production house, with all three having equal shares. Thence started a six-week rehearsal stint for what was to be the most popular show for a generation and more. The contractual terms of the company made Asche a debtor to his wife, although this was hardly the first time. Fifty percent of the authorship royalties went to Norton, and the remaining fifty percent to Brayton. By way of royalties, an author garnered 6%, up to the very considerable sum of £1,500 a week, and subsequently 10%. Although Asche was deprived of a producer’s fee, he was compensated by the manager of His Majesty’s Theatre: Henry Dana. Dana set forth a contract which bestowed an offer described as dubious and preposterous. This outlined that if the production amassed £50,000 in less than 20 weeks, Asche would be rewarded, in addition to his royalties, with 20% of all the earnings which were in surplus of £1,500 per week. This was never matched on the London stage. Asche’s vision came to fruition in just 17 weeks after the show opened on August 31, 1916. After the thundering success of its five-year run, when the performance finished on July 22, 1921, and completing 2,238 shows, with over 2,800,000 tickets sold, the play had totalled a whopping three and a half million pounds, Asche personally profiting to the tune of more than £200,000, and his wife even more. This oriental flight of fantasy reached ground-breaking demands throughout the period of WWI as the production transformed from deluxe imaginative fashion gowns to a main profit-making venture along the western stage as the play toured the outlying areas. And later, franchised in the US and Australia it raked in even more.
From the start and throughout the course of its run, *Chu Chin Chow* found a place in the audience’s heart and received recognition from various sources, e.g., in *Vanity Fair* which mentioned it as “Two-Chinned-Chow”, and once more in *Zig Zag!*. The theatre-goers of London could identify with its allusions to war, and the play found great resonance with soldiers on home leave as well. The play overcame various war-related obstacles such as power cuts, mishaps, and deceases which occasionally interrupted the normal course of performance. Its music settled in the viewers’ consciousness, and it became increasingly popular through the reruns. Asche made sure to retain rapport with his audience, especially at times when the show started late. Asche would implore ideas from the audience on how to fill the time. And so, the rest of the display was filled with the viewers’ most wanted scenes and musical numbers. Interruptions would also come by way of air raids and Asche would engage consciously with the audience and keep them entertained. This activity was a canny and useful marketing device, one which brought the spectators closer, since a lot depended on the viewers’ vote for changes needed to the play. The magnificence of the show and the acquaintance of its ideas secured its continuation. What started out as a cross-breed between musical comedy and pantomime, conjointly with the interaction between the play-goers, customer service, real animals presenting the native elements of the orient, and the abovementioned unanticipated disruption by the actual happenings of the war, gradually turned into a revue. Its pantomime element allowed it to point out evident incidents from the real world into theatre. Meanwhile, similar to musical comedies, its cheerful, expressive plot was frequently restructured with further music numbers to suit the demands of the public. And in comparison with every previous orientalised
performance of musical comedy plus pantomime, Chu kept up with the latest trends in oriental “authenticity”. It even went to the extent of incorporating the sounds and scents of the East. One way was by staging real animals and poultry acting as a zoological chorus. What was odd about Chu’s stage was the paradox, wherein oriental authenticity was portrayed by actual potters, an animal chorus, live near eastern music, yet the costumes kept edging further from reality and turning to fantasy. For instance, the pitchers of the pitcher-bearers in the “Mean Street” scene were in sharp contrast to their costume, as were the actors playing the xylophone and psaltery (Sketch Supplement 2-3). Chu’s imaginative commercial choices turned from the real-orient to the fantastical one. The demand for decorative gowns had diminished since the start of the century, but public extravagant couture for balls was popular socially, and Chu’s audience fell into the mode. Knowing that the plot was a moveable restating of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves provided Asche with a stylistic outline for his fabulous texture (Singleton 113).

5.2. Plot
Much like Kismet that preceded it, Chu Chin Chow opened with a prolonged build-up, setting the oriental flavour on the stage with slaves singing and bearing platters of food accompanied by droning flowing drumbeats. Upon the return of the wealthy tycoon Chu Chin Chow (acted by Asche) to Baghdad from China, a feast is held by Kasim Baba, another wealthy yet most hated merchant in all Baghdad. Being the despised villain, Kasim plans to get Chu (Asche) drunk and rob him of his silk and satin goods. Here the western superiority is established by showing the near (Baghdad) and far orient (China) with two facets: the two are rich and greedy. Kasim’s chief steward, Abdullah, and
Zahrat, the most pleasant slave in the harem (Brayton), unfold the drama by discussing the impending scam.

Abu Hasan, the original perpetrator of Zahrat’s kidnapping and installation as a spy in Kasim’s household, holds her lover hostage, and with Zahrat’s connivance, robs Kasim each time some stranger visits his home. Each time the stranger is Abu Hasan himself in disguise, this time as Chu Chin Chow. Far East (Chu returning from China), portrayed by Near East (Hasan), portrayed by an Englishman (Asche)-all ultimately result in suppositions exaggerated twice over. It seems apparent that the orientals are playing their games with the sole purpose of making money by whichever means possible. The female gender is reduced to just being a harem ornament or a subject of slavery, and their only recourse is to escape to another harem, perhaps with a more benign master. Patriarchy, sugared by popular songs, is justified “in the name of Allah”. This is all the fantasy created around the oriental taste, and it finds home in Ali directing his son to the favourable qualities of a fat wife through song, which culminates in a prayer to Allah:

When a pullet is plump she is tender,

When she’s scraggy no teeth can rend her,

‘Tis so even with a wife,

When she’s fat one blesses life,

But when she’s skin and bone,

She’ll never nag and moan,

‘Tis then the prayer to Allah rises,

O to live alone. (Ibid 19)
The exoticism of the quasi-Biblical intonations by referring to god (Allah) further prolongs the religious leanings, and subsequently the sexism rampant throughout the play. Humour is used strategically through the digs at gender relations, while Asche directs the stage with great detail in the call to prayer. This is articulated as the artists bow down in prayer and touch the ground with their foreheads and open palms (Ibid 20). This theatrical representation of religion originated from the early 1800s’ pictures of the Whirling Dervishes, and their identification with Islam. As with any mystery religion, Islam, with its closed entry to mosques, fascinated the orientalist and whetted the observers’ desire to delve into unknown territory like harems and veils. Islam created a flurry of interest in the English audience. Religion was practiced behind the closed doors of the mosque and at the same time public worship gave it a drama-like performative quality. Prayer time put a halt to all mundane activity, and this was something the west really longed for. The restraints imposed on worship by the Church of England during Victorian times were many and religious conduct was supposed to be dignified, private, and quiet.

A somewhat skewed approval by Allah of slavery was endorsed in the plays and this is illustrated in act I, scene 5 with praise being offered to Allah for giving his blessing to the trade:

Praise be to Allah who hath sent us His prophet and cursed be Satan the stoned, the deceiver of mankind. May the patron saint and the friend of buyers and sellers bless this market and all who buy and sell therein and grant them prosperity and length of days. (Ibid 27)
It is quite clear that the irony of the bodily exposure and the flesh trade was lost upon the audience; particularly in the absence of any opposition, it was justified in a way. Apparently, the male form was exposed to reveal the musculature, but actually served to whet female longings. It seemed that Asche the orientalist found refuge in the trend set by earlier paintings of the orient, and translated the sexual overtones onto the stage in the 1900s (Mackenzie 64). As in Kismet, the public gave its sanction to the trade since it was not really English and presented as normal by the religious call. The mystical value of the play was enhanced by white actors playing black slaves, which left the audience spell-bound. The audience saw the black slave as natural, but not so the white slave.

Asche cannily managed to incorporate a hierarchical scale even among the portrayals of the slave trade in the play. The comic slave scene had Kasim’s slaves in three categories: the first made up of two white slaves, one Japanese, and one coloured slave. Here too, the white had the superior position. Apart from the white slave, the Japanese one was also ranked superior, since the Japanese were attributed with “having white hearts under a yellow skin” (Sladen xx). Abdullah presents the slaves to the buyers:

Maids to grace a king’s harem

Bodies black, brows, white and cream,

Lips that melt and eyes that gleam

Behold! (Asche, Chu Chin Chow 27)

At the end of this poetic presentation, the slaves turn to the buyers, and dropping their garments, expose bare backs to the audience. This whole exercise served to underline their race, gender, and sexuality, and to raise desire in the audience, by leaving a lot to the imagination. The song continues in fervour, with more slaves being added to the
stage; a second group was comprised of dancers and their race was connoted via stage
directions: “slave with fuzzy wig leading”, and the third, which included slaves with
dark-coloured skin, was described by Abdullah as constituting large girls:

Behold!

Dancers ripened by the sun, [second group]

Slender virgins everyone,

Others weighing half a ton! [third group]


This dancing spectacle of “wild and uncouth” dancers (named in the programme as
such) culminates in Zahrat using them as a cover to kill Hasan (Chu). The slaves even
give voice to the sexual titillation as they whip up the audience to a frenzy (Ibid 29). The
attempt to kill Chu fails, and is depicted by Asche as an inventive flash of light on the
stage. This results in Zahrat getting arrested and Hasan escaping with all the money.
This victory of the gender emphasises the theatrical hegemony of the patriarchy.

Theatre of the time invariably depicted the woman as a commodity, and Asche is
no exception. In the following act, Hasan hoards his gold in a cave and imprisons Zahrat
there as a part of his spoils. The notion of woman as a commodity is further highlighted
by the jewels in the cave, representing those on the costumes of the female singers.
Thus, both wealth and women are considered commodities. Zahrat is freed by Ali and
convinces Hasan/Chu to hide his 40 thieves in Ali’s house in jars. The jars where the
robbers are hiding are filled with boiling oil, and Zahrat succeeds in doing away with
Hasan. Zahrat unshackles herself, and using her craftiness and shrewdness, she relieves the kingdom from a cruel antihero. Familial, social, and religious values are reinstated through the culmination of the actions and the threat against them. This also iterates that, much like war, the agents that threaten the stability of norms are the same agents which push and reinforce their presence in society.

*Chu Chin Chow* gave comfort to the nation in stressful times by managing to allure its desires by its raunchy characterizations. In this manner, the play was sought out by the audience both as a care-giver and as an object of pleasure.

### 5.3. Pantomime

Defined as a hybrid kind of spectacle, *Chu* derived from the format of a musical comedy and borrowed from pantomime its cast, basic materiel, pageants, tableaus, and scene changes. It acknowledged the amalgam of pantomime which had developed during the nineteenth century and that evolved to culturally adopt and continuously recall the role of the Empire. By the mid-1800s, pantomime had slowly started imbibing even more and more of a musical flavour, moved away from its comical roots, and ventured into the world of fantasy (Singleton 114). Around the last period of the nineteenth century, the pantomime was carving its place in the theatre world, evolving and transmuting. It shifted from being solely the stage of the performers to incorporate more and more scenery, theatre mechanics, and costumes. It organized a complete platform in its own right. The performers, too, learnt more skills like acrobatics to upgrade themselves. A.E. Wilson described these changes as the pantomime becoming a multi-branching drama with elements of burlesque, ballet, spectacular pageantry, fairy tale, and a jesting buffoonery component “tacked on” the scenes (Wilson, *Christmas Pantomime: The*
Indeed, it was the makeover to the Harlequinade\textsuperscript{12} that the play-goers, to a large scale, attended. Puns became the dialogue of comedy, consistent with the oriental pantomimes such as \textit{Aladdin} or \textit{Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves}, whose folk tales accounted au courant scenery for spectators who were attracted to the issues of the Empire. The first of English translations of the \textit{One Thousand and One Nights} fables were made in the early years of the eighteenth century. These had led to the fruition of the aforementioned oriental tales conjointly with \textit{Sindbad the Sailor}. At first, \textit{Aladdin} from the \textit{One Thousand and One Nights} fairy tales was adapted for the theatre at Convent Garden in 1788. The translations and adaptations of \textit{One Thousand and One Nights’ Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sindbad the Sailor} all contributed their unique flavours to bring together the new representation of the pantomime. At this time and in the course of adaptation, the somewhat coarse originals were transformed into romantic tales, having a hero/villain context. Asche was influenced by Augustus Harris, whose Drury Lane tenure in 1879 added symbolic insertions of imperialism within the spectacular staging of eastern tales. To do this he inserted pageants which were satirical barbs on colonialism such as “The Kings and Queens of England” and “Soldiers of all Nations” (Mayer, \textit{Harlequim in His Element: English Pantomine} 324). These pageants represented a double meaning of superior and subordinate; the occupation of colonies and the flattering fake praises by satirized representatives of those colonies. This trend continued even when Arthur Collins headed Drury Lane later on.

\textsuperscript{12} Factor of a pantomime in which the clown characters act the major parts.
While Asche’s combination of musical/pantomime/comedy harboured the thinly disguised allusion to the “otherness” of the East, the subsequent literature held from subtle representation of it. There came a time when the eastern setting dominated, and England found itself in the place of the exotic other. A closer look at the popularity of these oriental fantasies will underline the geographical distance which triggered the imagination in the mind-set of the audience since the orient was a fictional place in the general public fantasy at the pinnacle of the Empire. The critique of current issues in the country was also watered down yet directed to the audience by the vehicle of Orientalism. Invariably, in the penultimate scene, it reverted closer home, and would cater to the familiar opinions of the public in the basest form. In essence, the values and reasoning of the home-country were juxtaposed onto the exotic theme to mend and reinstate the justice of Englishness. This was an attempt to expose the good/evil struggle within English society, albeit in an indirect manner. This meant that Orientalism was just superficial and the intrinsic English norms were aired through their portrayal. No matter where the fantasy transported the audience, only the return to the anglicised orient and the imperialist plan could set matters of the plot back to the right track.

Interestingly, this orient was backed by the right-wing ideology also. In the early 1900s, many pantomimes dealt with local political issues, and at this time, any form of discontent was harshly attacked and politicians and policies were pinpointed. One example is the Suffragettes movement by Tanner and Risqué in *The New Aladdin: An Extravaganza in Two Acts* in 1906. But where were the spectators located amidst these pantomimes with their shift and conversion of beliefs and structure from their home-land to an imaginative eastern site? The audience needs to be identified in order to justify
Asche’s popularity. Primary, the English right-wing policy was the dramatic ground where Asche’s audience was placed in by means of contemporary hints and current references. Next, the audience was placed in an imagined space of dramatic invention. These dual places were co-dependent. Nevertheless, more essentially, the viewer was located within a third make-believe realm, settled someplace amid actual political facts and fanciful flights of imagination. The spectator seemed to be located in two diametrically opposite worlds- that of right-wing politics and of theatrical creativity. What was apparent were the differences between “us” and “them”: heroes and villains, resulting in a structure for real and imagined spaces together, and the spectator viewed the “them” within the “us.” Hence, the orient became not only a place of exotic community, manners and sites, but of English behaviors and politics as well. The stage was the zone where the familiar plus the distant were functioning at the same time. This was the Augustus Harris custom of pantomime that Asche was to situate in his own fictional fantasy.

5.4. The Language of Costume
Interestingly, the plot of the play lost its charm to the critics. However, considerably more attention was paid to its spectacular costumes by the popular press and journals. The Tatler had a piece by Arkay in 1918, which did not concur with the production’s attempt at authenticity:

I’m sure it doesn’t resemble the East in the faintest. If it resembles anything eastern at all, it resembles the East of an Academy picture… there is nothing more difficult than to put on the stage a realistic impression of the eerie
and the fantastic. (794: 330)

The critic laid bare Asche/Anderson’s orientalist depiction through costume and stage design. To be faithfully realistic to the orient means having an in-depth knowledge about it. For Anderson, the costume designs were based on the research of historians and others. His costumiers themselves had access to numerous native pictures to choose from, and Asche’s notions of oriental designs were gathered from his excursions to first class hotels in Egypt and Ceylon. However, for the great majority of the public, the orient was still the realm of the unknown. A year after the production of the play, and subsequent to its annual changes, the Tatler printed a number of the new costumes, and revised its original statement about the veracity of the oriental origins:

Mr. Oscar Ashe is one of the greatest manufacturers of the Eastern atmosphere that the stage has ever seen, and fanciful as some of his colour schemes may perhaps sometimes appear, they are not very wide of things that can be seen today in almost any of the native cities of Ajmere and Rajputana. (846: 331)

It was now becoming apparent that the viewpoint of critics was undergoing a change, as was the acceptance of bizarre fantasy on an equal footing with the imagined reality of the orient, so much so, in fact, that the critics wrote definitions of the orient through the depiction of the 1919 annual overhaul. Sketch coined the description by balancing the unfamiliar elements of the imagination with the unfamiliar, presumably real, elements of the East:

Four new sets of mannequins in frocks remarkably alike for their bizzarrerie, their gorgeous colour scheme, and their pervading sense of Oriental splendour. (336)
It took three years of further experimentation before the orient found its place in the public imagination through the term *bizarrie* and was alluded to as such in various reviews and articles concerning the production. This “bizarre” tag ensured it was being viewed from a distance, dubbed spectacular, attractive, oriental, yet remaining a mystery and a veiled entity. Simultaneously, several costumes from the play were being advertised for rental for fancy-dress balls, thereby establishing the separation between the otherness of the bizarre orient coming in useful as fanciful dressing up in the English cultural sphere. This also gave the Englishmen a vicarious pleasure of owning a piece of the alluring orient, even if for a very short time. The *Sketch* was worried that this was just a passing phase:

> The attraction of the East cannot be gainsaid after a visit to His Majesty’s; and if you happen to be a woman, you wish the Western fashions were more like the amazing creations seen on the stage. (18-19)

Literary critics were all for the oriental fashions to hit the upper society of England. In fact, they moaned that the imagined fantasy did not transform into social reality yet. The orient had not yet accessed the actual social realm (*Tatler* 793: 293). As a further strategy to market his production, Asche soon made available various articles used in the play, and announced their sale during the December 6, 1920 performance. The oriental commodities of the play were advertised for sale. For example, the pottery prepared on stage, in the “Mean Street” scene could be purchased for different prices, whereas in reality they were fired by the Wedgwood Company in England. *Chu Chin Chu* became an extravagant –ball gown event and a marketplace designed for the
selling of the orient, which justified its mimicry in social circles. The orient as a trend became a product to be sold.

Applying contemporary literary criticism of oriental attires to *Chu*, this study notices that costumes were used on the stage to define and divide geographical locations and class structures, and to incorporate an English class system in addition to the divisions amongst countries and races. And even though, one would have supposed, the orient granted a free rein for inventiveness and creativity, the costumes swiftly came to ape the English social system and transport it onto the canvas of the orient. In 1906, Mrs. Aria observed, “How true it is that manners, like morals, are mere matters of geography”. By this observation we are establishing that if manners, similar to morals, are built-in features of certain classes in certain geographic locations, they also suggest a hierarchy of races and nations. It was thus that certain classes of society became accustomed to the hierarchy of nations and races. A collection containing 1,200 coloured picture plates of costumes known as the “Münchener Bilderbogen” illustrated a mild form of anthropological analysis of the costumes of countries around the world. This examination took a scientific approach in that costumes were not only divided by nation, but also they were separated based on class, age, and occupation within the same nation. Hence, the constituents that the costumes depict are displayed. The models representing oriental costumes were all coated with body paint that makes them look Caucasian, consequently, detaching the costume from its natural environment in a pictographic act of occupation that documents the following proprietorship by the white colonizer. They added to the indigenous costume the association of the coming appropriation and combination of European qualities. Logically then, Asche’s production did the very
same thing in not only portraying reality, but going beyond in representing the class or caste system through costume. The dramaturgical language of colonialism intensely uncovered the mission of the Empire.

5.5. Conclusion

A native of Australia, Oscar Asche (1871-1936) is mostly remembered not only for his superlative acting skills, but also a dramatist who set the stage on fire with his orientalist productions. The extent of his creativity knew no bounds, and his productions were numerous. Best known for his ostentatious reproduction of the *One Thousand and One Nights* in his *Chu Chin Chow* during World War I, Asche succeeded in neatly summing up some 100 years of oriental imagery in the popular theatre of the times (Singleton 1). For all practical purposes, England was suffering from megalomania\(^{13}\) about its own Empire, yet wary about the disgrace of the Boer War, the threat from Russia, and the technological superiority of the Germans when WWI happened. This national anxiety seemed at odds with the overriding nationalist fervour predominant in the cultural expressions of the time. While “Rule Britannia” was at the top of the hit charts, the shadows told of political factions and an uncomfortable society.

The theatre was a place where the public could go and forget it all, and revel in pure entertainment- provided by fantasy, exoticism, and socially relevant comic irony. Uncountable British soldiers were dying on the battle-fields, and in the midst of the fear at home, Asche pandered to the public in order to alleviate some of the anxiousness. He

\(^{13}\) A fixation with doing exaggerated or magnificent things.
outdid every other dramatist in producing entertaining, musical plays with oriental backgrounds, replete with Boys Own -and Robin Hood -kind of adventures and fairy tales. His productions catered to all that the audience desired, and employed large casts, song and dance routines with highly sexual overtones, exorbitant costumes and a rakish attraction that translated into commercial successes.

Being a canny marketer, with the pulse of the audience under his fingers, Asche was influenced by Augustus Harris’ Drury Lane pantomime ventures, and wove imperialist threads into the fabric of his plays. His interpretation of the orient was in line with the Edwardian era of flippancy, and its predilection for flexible musical comedy. In Asche’s productions, the orient was mocked through racial representations and became an object of pity since it was unable to measure up to the West either in social graces or sexual fascination. Filled with nationalism at the supremacy of the Empire over the orient, the English audience was more than eager to welcome this kind of burlesque entertainment, the spectacular scenery and costumes, and the satirical ridicule of current mores in their own society. This was going on despite efforts from orientalist and anthropological scholars to educate the public in the social conditions of “natives” under imperialist rule, and in spite of the era’s beginning interest in the accuracy and veracity of the knowledge of the orient. The dramatic representation lacked accuracy since the orient depicted in the plays was actually England in disguise. This was the ideal, imaginary venue to vent all issues that were hitherto difficult topics, e.g., carnality, gender, class, and race. It was also convenient to expose current social customs which could be ridiculed in this guise without offending the sensibilities of the public. Morality triumphed invariably, and justice was meted out, whether or not it was the desired outcome.
Asche tasted overwhelming success through the long runs of all his orientalist musical productions, and to ensure this he resorted to regular overhauls, whereby each time the orient suffered in terms of distance from reality. However, this distance was not based as much on the East-West divide of imperialism as on the snowballing fantasy that took the audience further and further into imaginary realms.

From 1911 to 1922, Asche held complete sway over the London theatre scene: as actor, author, manager, producer, stage designer, etc. His personal orientalist viewpoint and his musical productions of the genre (Kismet, Mameena, Chu Chin Chow, and Cairo) became the most popular ones of his time (Singleton 2). Both he and his wife, Lily Brayton, who also starred as his leading lady, attained the heights of stardom. He adeptly adapted Shakespeare’s characters Falstaff, Katharina, and Pistol to serve his own productions when he changed tracks from Shakespearean productions to his own musicals. He gave them an oriental look and used them to full effect in his commercially viable ventures. Although he was not the only or the first person to do this, since the orient had reached the crest of popularity during Edwardian times, he was certainly the first to make huge gains out of it. Until the cinema took over the genre of orientalism, and weaned away the British audience from the theatre in the mid-1920s, Asche could rightly be said to have been at the vanguard of popular orientalism. Eventually forgotten from British theatrical history, Asche’s work can rightly be called the foundation on which the orient flourished across the Victorian via the Edwardian eras to the time of WWI. Besides, it also spanned genres in theatrical offerings- pantomime, music-hall, and musical comedy. Asche’s career ran through nearly forty years of British theatre,
and his interpretation of the spectacular musical romance was the last of the popular theatre.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

*Chu Chin Chow* summed up all that a century of theatre had popularized: melodrama, pantomime, and musical comedy. And *al-Bakhil* can be credited as being not only the first Arabic drama, but also the first Arabic comic opera. These two plays were mainly used for the practice parts of this study in order to prove that the genre of Arabic theatre in its modern sense is the result of trans-cultural interaction between the European and Arabic forms. This comes about by the infusion of another culture into the Arab world, and a modified genre arising from the permeating of one through the other. This also affected the European genre where elements from a foreign culture were gaining recognition and being imbibed. Simply put, in the process of transference, the transferrer as well as the transferee are affected. The resultant mutation, according to James Clifford is a kind of “inventive syncretism” (Clifford 22).

Modern cultures absorb interactions from “other” cultures, and with much thought and self-analyses, shape the outcomes in a reasonable manner.

The interrelation between Arabic and European theatres proves that no genre is a stand-alone entity, and neither can it have an “origin”, nor result in a combination by itself. But breaking away from traditional etymology and criticism, it becomes apparent that forays [rituals and rites of crossing and moving] of one culture into another are the intrinsic qualities of social drama
that give rise to a genre. The constantly changing and productive quality of art is of paramount importance here. Gan, the Indo-Germanic etymology of genre means “to generate”, and illustrates this aptly. (Ryan 109-126)

Based on the presented criteria, genres can be observed as Venn Diagrams where orbs touch, intersect, and even form a new entity. The malleable limitations (Wenzel 175-178) afford a great flexibility in artistic structures that emphasize their affinity for transformation. Refuting the hypothesis that the European and Arab East were totally removed from one another in their literary concepts, this study can elucidate the case of Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, who accompanied a student group sent to study European society, culture, and technology by the then Egyptian ruler. Rifa’a competently recounted his experiences of an alien culture through the literary conventions of his travelogue, Takhlis al-ibriz fi tahlis Bariz. What was apparent was that the travelogue genre embraced considerable diversity in terms of themes. Genres in art go through a complex process of development, wherein not only do they compete with other genres, but also keep up with changing issues of production, social environment, and audience responsiveness. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the audience was of paramount importance to literary work. The audience’s criticism and expectations directed reference to, and hence the popularity of the text. This reference system, according to Jauβ, Iser, and others, using the textual network of responses, ultimately decided the genre of the text based on how the audience perceives it in combination with its conditions that brought about its productions (Jauβ 256). This same reference system comprises the familiar elements shaping the particular genre and the associations the text emits to its surroundings, which are also familiar to the audience, and to other similar scripts. Here, the text implicates a
system of attractive elements directed towards the spectator. Accordingly, the examination of responses based on texts only is insufficient when classifying genres. Previous theories have disregarded the notion of the genre being a categorization, instead, more recent research emphasizes that genre serves as a communicator, both in the author’s compositions, as well as audiences’ and critics’ interpretation of the text (Amos 275-301; Goch 15-16). Texts can be of varying complexity, and unless the spectator is aware of the distinctions whether or not a text belongs to a specific genre, it is very difficult to classify genres (Kuon 237-252).

To circumvent this difficulty, Martin Goch likens a genre to an inter-relational family, which Wittgenstein had also suggested previously. Goch’s “participatory model” propounds that texts belonging to a certain genre share common characteristics and this makes up its range (Goch 23-25). Genres from different cultures do not discourage interaction with foreign ones, and this is where Goch’s model helps. Research also shows that readers comprehend supposedly foreign expressions through the acceptance of the unrestricted capabilities of any given genre.

Both the origin as well as the meaning of the artistic structure are important. Artistic expression is influenced by prevalent tastes, ideologies, and religion. These constantly changing factors give rise to new expressions, different from their predecessors. This breaking-away from previous norms was depicted by Russian Formalism as “estrangement” which works as a catalyst in the metamorphosis of literary concepts (Shklovsky 3-34). These changes bring about a shift in groups and meanings, as is evident in the changing of the genre landscape. According to Clifford Geertz, the
“hegemonic social meta-commentary” is in a state of constant flux, and modernistic litterateurs constantly strive to break from tradition, thereby fashioning newer genres.

The discussion of modern Arabic theatre and early twentieth century British theatre is also a pairing of new artistic styles with literary development.

In his study of One Thousand and One Nights and genre-construction, Richard van Leeuwen propounds that European authors such as Oscar Asche did not use the One Thousand and One Nights as a technical base for their exotic tales of oriental culture. Instead, they used it for the purpose of ideological distance with their own society could be maintained by these means. Herein the orient provided indirect means to “evaluate European society.” This novel approach in itself upset existing literary genres. This adaptation of the One Thousand and One Nights’ Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves as Chu Chin Chow ushered in a new genre of the fantastic theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe.

Culture can never be viewed as a stand-alone, and exists within a pattern of multi-level interactions, reactions, and interpretations (Görling 33). Societies are made up of the intermingling and grouping of individual characteristics on one hand, and a process of adaptation and blending-in that affects societies as well as individuals on the other. Over the course of such processes, some national, ethnic, and religious factors arise as “cultures”, and are used to denote a singular or group identity, each distinguished from the objectified “other”. In this context, it is difficult to differentiate between the self and the other, and assuming these distinctions, there will be cultural confrontations between the two. These differing cultural entities can be likened to a host and a parasite in the
biological sphere, and confrontations between them are likely to be of ethnic or religious
flavor. The allegory here is of two similar-sized entities, each of definite form, of
different spirit, yet not entirely antithetical to one another.

Accordingly, the actual initiation of Arabic theatre in its modern sense in 1847,
when Naqqash produced – in Beirut – what was possibly the first enactment of his
Arabic play *al-Bakhil*, which borrowed heavily from Molière’s *L’Avare* can be in
Görling’s explanation of culture be considered as a “concept covering the whole range of
possibilities of signifying practices, including even those possibilities which are pushed
to one side, repressed, neglected, or only existent as a potentiality in a single culture”
(Görling 34). However, perhaps we can observe these repressed factors in some other
culture in a freer form. Transcultural interaction does not imply a culture as stand-alone,
intermingling only superficially, rather it is a process in “continuous flux”. Global
interaction has led to an intermingling of cultures, capital, and workforce, and adoptive
actions have underlined the process of cultural absorption leading to the aforementioned
fallacy of thinking that Arabic theatre is purely a western imitation when it is truly not.

What then is inter- or trans-culturalism? In our context, it can be a merger of
differing cultural entities by convergence and intermingling. Hitherto supposed fixed or
indigenous cultures are themselves peripherals of. This has been illustrated via musical
comedies from the first official modern theatre in the Arab world and the new theatre in
the early twentieth century in England. Such interculturality has its own methodology in
impacting the literary world. Andreas Pflitsch sums up that at the global level literature
blurs borders, yet emphasizes the local identity of it. When the language and structure of
a genre shift, or die out, or even when hybrid cultures arise out of movements within
society, a “negotiation of multiple identities” becomes necessary, according to Stephen Greenblatt.

**Intermedial, transcultural, and transgeneric crossings**

Interaction between cultures gives rise to interactions between literary works, and leads to a similar yet disparate world of texts. This rapidly changing world results in the break-down of traditional forms, and the emergence of new concepts.

The development of a new genre is dependent on the artistic interpretation of the text. Long-standing constraints have given way to inter-textuality that extends to inter-connections between texts. Evidently, combinations of varying art forms give rise to change and evolution, and this capacity should not be taken lightly.

This study has collated characteristics of both Arabic and European theatre, and both territorial as well as thematic areas have been covered. This varied approach refutes the distinct categorization of genres and indigenous literature, but rather seeks to assess their change and evolution in a more meaningful manner. Light has been cast on how transcultural involvement forces literary and artistic patterns to move dynamically. The interactions with alien cultural elements and the visual intrigue of the exotic refreshes perceptions of one’s own culture. The ensuing disharmony and conflict raises soul-searching and helps make better decisions in adapting to newer, better forms of artistic expression.
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