

Syrian Drama Escaping Censorship: Sa'dallah Wannous's *The King's Elephant* and *The King is King*

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Abstract

Sadallah Wannous (1941-1997), a leading Syrian playwright, was concerned in his political theater with preaching democracy and raising the awareness of the masses in order to have more involvement in the public arena. His drama was hurdled with censorship and he had to find indirect ways in his plays to instigate opposition. This article investigates whether the lack of freedom of expression curbs the creativity of the dramatist. My aim is to study and evaluate the dramatic techniques Wannous used in his attempt to circumvent censorship. This is mainly done through a critique of his plays in the light of my textual analysis, Wannous's statements in his non dramatic writing and available literary criticism. Wannous's polemical play *An Evening for the fifth of June* (1967-8) was banned after the first performance. Two later plays were chosen for this study; *The King's Elephant* (1969) and *The King is King* (1977). In both plays, Wannous analyzed the nature of authoritarianism and the psyche of the repressed majority, and urged for dissent in far fetched plots that do not directly reflect the status quo. To do so, he made extensive use of fables, folk tales, allegory and symbolism. By exploring new theatrical modes, Wannous was able, not only to politicize the masses, but also to produce high quality art that is thought-provoking and entertaining at the same time. For the purpose of economy I limited my article to two plays. However *The Adventure of the Slave Jaber's Head* (1970) is very pertinent to the main question herein and can be added later in a more extended book-length study.

Key words: *Censorship, Revolution, Syrian drama, Syrian theater, Wannous.*

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Syrian Drama Escaping Censorship: Sa'dallah Wannous's *The King's Elephant and The King is King*

Sa'dallah Wannous (1941-97), one of the leading Arab dramatists, was a passionate advocate for raising awareness of the oppression practiced against the people. *In his Manifestoes Toward a New Arabic Theater* (1970) published in his complete works, *AL-A'mal Al-Kamila* (2004), he explained that his theater had a progressive political message which he addressed to the "common People" who are "conspired against by the oligarchy and kept ignorant and depoliticized. ...Such classes are hoped one day to become the pioneers of revolution and change." (2004 vol 3, 91-2). Since he always yearned for freedom, the aim of his theatrical performances was to politicize the masses and to instigate a revolution against authoritarianism. This article will examine the way Wannous 's theater attempted to educate his audiences and at the same circumvent the strict censorship imposed on the freedom of expression. Starting with a critique of his early censored play, *An Evening Party for the Fifth of June* (1967-8) this article will proceed to study Wannous 's more creative dramatic modes in his two plays; *The King's Elephant* (1969) and *The King is King*. (1977)

All of Wannous's plays depict and criticize the lack of people's involvement in the political decision and indirectly encourage opposition and promote a more democratic outlook. Freedom was his obsession. In a conference of the Union of Arab and Syrian Writers in the middle of 1970s, he, together with fellow colleagues, issued a statement condemning the increasing oppression and gagging of writers, and pleaded with Arab regimes to allow more democracy and freedom. This statement angered the Assad regime that was hosting the conference. Thus he was consequently marginalized and no longer allowed a leading role in the Writer's Union (Najm 01/03/2015). During his productive years, free thinkers and activists were persecuted and often executed merely for airing their views or criticizing the government. Martial law was declared in 1963 and has not been lifted since then. The people's will to free thinking was brought to a halt because of the excessive cruelty practiced against leaders of opposition. An example of such practices is the 17 years solitary confinement of the lawyer and leftist activist, Riyadh Al-Turk, between 1980 and 1997, for censuring the government's policy in suppressing the protest of Muslim brotherhood in Hama 1980. (AlJazira Encyclopedia 2015). The process of gagging activists and artists continued on. For example, the novelist Hani al-Rahib was arrested in 1985 and laid off from his job as a professor at the University of Damascus not for anything he wrote, but just for saying at a Writers Union Lecture in Damascus that individual freedoms were greater in Egypt than in Syria. (Kahf, 2001, p.8). Wannous communicated his messages on the stage within this atmosphere of close scrutiny of the government. He was summoned for an interrogation by the political security forces and several of his plays were delayed for several years or banned altogether. (Al-`Anezi, 2006, p.132). In order to escape censorship and persecution he gradually learned- from his own experience- to avoid topical issues and to make only symbolic reference to the status quo in his far fetched fables, folk tales and historical anecdotes. Such oblique critique of the present allowed Wannous a margin of freedom, and also lent an artistic touch to his dramatic work. In her article, "The Silence of Contemporary Syrian Literature", Mohja Kahf reveals that "paradoxically, the heaviness of censorship in Syria spurs some writers to new levels of creative development, as they seek more sophisticated ways to express their art and their truths." (2001, p. 8). According to a Syrian film maker Usama Muhammmad, There are

two responses to the censorship rule. ..One, to make a bad art and talk about nothing, or two, to say what you want to say and make art. The trick is to find one's own... language that is indirect, so one can make films about political power, religion, sex, and violence in a metaphorical—and often more powerful way (Nice 2000, P.11).

Likewise, Wannous had to find indirect ways to reflect on the human condition in Syria and to communicate the inevitability of people's revolution. In doing so he produced less polemical and more creative art.

One example of an earlier polemical play that was banned is *An Evening Party for the Fifth of June* (1968). This play breaks down the fourth wall and engages the actors and audience—some of them actors in disguise—with a heated discussion about the reasons for the defeat in the 1967 war and the loss of land to Israel. The play holds the government responsible for the 1967 defeat and openly censures the police state that restrains the civil society. It made the audience aware of their fears by staging a public arrest of the all characters and audience by the "supposed secret police". Being so obvious, this criticism caused the play to be banned after the opening night. Several years later, the play, however saw another production. A government official who attended the dress rehearsal of a later play, *The Adventure of Jaber the Mamlouk's Head* (1970) decided that the latter should be banned. To fill the program of a theatre festival, *Evening party* was allowed to be preformed the following night, as the government of Hafez Al-Assad felt that it was beneficial if the public thought they were being allowed a margin of freedom of expression. After all, *An Evening Party* could be interpreted as a condemnation of the previous government that was responsible for the 1967 defeat. (Al-'Anezi, p.132)

Dramatically, *An Evening Party* (1967-8) suffered from two shortcomings. First, it was too modernist and experimental, borrowing excessively from the western theatre; a trait that made it alien to Arabic culture and its theatrical tradition. Second, it was too topical and polemical in its condemnation of the failures of political leaders. This made it closer to an interactive political debate than a work of art. Wannous realized that he should look for different resources for his future plays in order to combat his own artistic failure and the police state censorship. In an interview with the literary critic Mary Elias in 1996, Wannous revealed that "My early clash with the censors revealed to me the limits of my dreams and of the theatre's capabilities" (Al-'Anezi, 2006, p 131). For his next dramatic production, he internalized the advice given to him by his French mentor, Serrault. The latter advised him: "You, the Arabs can contribute to the world theatre by breaking away from the inflexible forms of the European models - which restrain our mobility and disable our thinking – in order to invent new theatrical forms and styles" (Al-'Anezi, p. 132). Thus Wannous moved to folk tales to derive plot lines and parables that would serve his essential purpose of creating the required transformation towards freedom". *The King's Elephant* (1969) is "based on a folk tale from the oral repertoire, told by hakawatis in the streets and cafes of Syria and not included in collections such as *The One Thousand and One Nights*." (Al-'Anezi, 2006, p. 125). Having delved into his own tradition for sources for his theatre, "Wannous emerges as one of the few dramatists who have doggedly pursued the development of a lively and innovative indigenous tradition of drama in the face of considerable odds." (Allan Roger 1984, p. 111) Popular heritage helped Wannous to create a commentary that dealt with the long existing oppressive regimes in Arab history and to, symbolically, make the connection with similar regimes in modern times.

The King's Elephant (1969) starts with panic among the people in the slums and narrow alleyways of an unnamed location or time, after an elephant, that is kept by the king as a

pampered pet, treads on a little boy and squashes him to death. This is only one of multiple incidents as the elephant continues to wreak havoc in the lives and livelihood of the impoverished town. People mourn and are frightened, but are pacified by their faith in God and fate. Zakaria, an educated countryman, insists on organizing the masses to march to the king and present their complaints. He teaches them and they all rehearse their dissonant words till they are all able to harmonize their utterances. In the presence of the king, the down-trodden masses lose their new found courage and are relegated to silence. Even the instigator, who is let down by the crowd, fails to utter his complaint. Instead, he asks for another female elephant to relieve the loneliness of the much beloved elephant. As told in 1969, *The King's Elephant* depicts long-term subjugation of the masses and foretells the 2011 revolution. Wannous contends that this is only the germination of a coming revolution which will be excessively violent one. The revolution, which was called for in 1969, during the time of writing the play, came 42 years later after more elephants had been bred, or after the number of government's agents that had continued to suppress the people multiplied, and the people's anger simmered enough in a tight boiler to blow up.

In depicting the resignation and fatalism of the people, Wannous is making a very important comment on the collective repressed psyche. It is noteworthy that the "commoners", as the king and his guards call them, are totally resigned to their fate, a belief in destiny and fate being a basic belief in Islam, Wannous himself is secular and not concerned here with making a comment on religion itself. A closer analysis of the trodden villagers shows that fatalism does not so much emanate from an innate disposition to piety. Rather, it is engendered by internalized long-term fears that have prevented the oppressed from recognizing the source of their oppression. They had been silenced by terror, had to stoically displace their longings and desires for a better life. They had to resort to submission to God's will in return for piece of mind and endurance of pain. This prolonged injustice has given way to the rise of religiosity that we see in Arabic culture in present times

The character that stands out of the suppressed crowd is Zakarai, the school teacher. He is the prototype of revolution leader. He refuses injustice, and instigates protest. He shows considerable amount of courage to face the king. However, like others, he has been terrorized long enough to realize that he cannot face him alone. He relinquishes the cause and expressed love to the elephant when the other villagers fail to support him. Critics such as Ali Al-'Anezi and Marvin Carlson have viewed Zakaria as a demagogue who led the people, used them and later betrayed them. They regard him as an opportunist who made use of the people's passion to his own interest. (Al-'Anezi, 2006, p 126) Such an understanding would detract greatly from the meaning of the play which should be read as one incomplete step towards revolution. The main lesson in this parable is the extent of injustice and its crippling consequence on the people's psyche. The main aim is to raise awareness of the inevitability of a revolution. The decision is taken, people are rallied, Zakaria is passionate to alleviate oppression, but he is yet unable to overcome his fear. He is not a demagogue, but an anti-hero who lacks the grandeur of a tragic hero.

After acting out the play, the actors abandon their parts and stand in a line addressing the audience in a Brechtian alienating mode. They alternate in vocalizing the last lines.

Group: That was a story.

Actor 5: Which we acted

Actor 3 In the hope we can all learn a lesson from it.

Actor 7: Do you know why elephants exist?

Actor 3: Do you know why elephants breed?

Actor 5 But this story of ours is only the start

Actor 4: When elephants breed, a new story starts

Group: A violent, bloody story, which one day we'll act for you (Wannous, 2004, p 451)

In 1969, Wannous was already aware that the proper longing and will to freedom and justice would require further courage and commitment, for the process would be fierce and violent. This is true now of the current situation in Syria since the eruption of 2011, after more than 20000 lives were lost and 5 million were displaced (George Sabra 2015). This bloody story is the story of the strife for freedom that Syria is presently witnessing.

The form of folktales in *The King's Elephant* (1969) is a safe haven that is used in order to communicate a political message of warning, paint a framework for dissent and plant the seed for rebellion. In dramatizing the king of all times (Malek Al-zaman), a title that is reminiscent of Scheherzad's tales told to Haroun Al-Rashid in *A Thousand and One Nights*, Wannous, symbolically, makes a connection between the arbitrary tyranny then and now in modern times. Not only does the play divulge the state of oppression then in 1969, but also it condemns the consequent complacent pacifism and fatalism of the public. It aims at moving the public towards a more proactive stance whereby they will be able to stand up for themselves.

The main shortcoming of *The King's Elephant* (1969), just as in the previous play, *An Evening Party* (1967-8), is that it fails to give enough attention to the human content. Wannous's characters are a cohort of men and women who represent the collective psyche of a nation. But none of them are fully fledged or round characters. Even Zakaria, the protagonist, is flat and lacks some human complexity. Wannous's dramaturgy matured later and his characters acquired more dimensions. His later plays *The Adventure of the Mamluk Jaber's Head* 1970 and *The King is King* (1977) "reveal how Wannous began to shift the focus to human narratives, to delve into characters without falling into the trap of donning ideological mask" (Al Asad, in Massad (ed), 2007, p. 181)

The King is King (1977) contains shrewd comments on political corruption, inequality and the nature of autocratic authority within the disguise of personifications, allegory and folk tales.

As the stage banner at the opening scene announces, "*The King is King* is a personification that aims at analyzing the structure of authority and disguise"(Wannous, 1977, p.583). The play is a game of disguise. At one extreme, the king owns everything. He is in the disguise of flamboyance and majesty. At the other end of the spectrum, the impoverished commoners are disguised as beggars. Almost all of the characters are alienated from their own inner essence by their disguise and their socio-economic condition. The banners are read aloud as staccato phrases by two of the characters: Obeid and Zaher. Throughout the play, they meta-dramatically remind the audience that this is a game. Obeid and Zaher in their disguise as beggars are in fact the directors of the play within the play and are the instigators of revolution within the game. The play, which is acted by circus-like performers, is an allegory rather than a realistic presentation of an autocratic government.

The plot line of the play within the lay is inspired by the *Sleep Waker's tale* from *A Thousand and One Nights* (Meyers and Saab, 2013, p.128). In that story, a bored king wishes to entertain himself by dressing up one of his subjects with his own clothes, and then he has fun watching him act. However, the commoner, Abu Azza, becomes extremely enmeshed in his new role and will not give up his new power. He assumes a more greedy and authoritarian personality than the previous king. He eventually "holds on to the specter with a fist made of steel and fire"

(Wannous, 1977, p.671). He holds up an axe and prohibits playing, illusions and dreams. The real king promises utter violence and autocracy with warnings that terrorize even the audience: "I will break all mirrors, I will slaughter everyone, everyone with no exception. All the witnesses of the game, all those who participated in it, all those who watched it, everyone, every one"(p.666). Likewise, the surrogate king in disguise, Abu Azza, promises similar blood thirsty action: "The axe will become my hand, my arm, my heart, my attire and my bed.... Nothing cleanses kings but blood.... I will wash in blood...It will be my perfume" (p.670). The king is king indeed; no one from his entourage or subjects recognizes the change, for "The king has no face" (p 672). Shahbandar asks Imam if he noticed that the King's face has changed, and Imam answers: "He has become more royal" (p. 672). The king's personality does not matter. Wannous is not criticizing the moral degeneration of a certain leader or king. Rather, he is making a commentary on the impact of absolute authority on statesmen and ultimately raising awareness of the need for democracy. In his notes to directors and interpreters, Wannous explained his intention that "raising awareness and analyzing the structure of authority is revolutionary acts that will continue till they achieve their purpose. In some stages of strife, education is part and parcel of action and is complementary to revolution" (2004, vol1, p 681). The game of disguise in this play communicates the message that absolute authority devoid of liabilities submerges the real personality of any king and changes him into a greedy bloody dictator.

Although the play was based on literary tradition and was set in no specific time in history, the sudden replacement of the king with another and the consequent consent of the entourage and the public bring to mind the multiple coups in 1960s and 1971 in Syria when the public had no active part in elections and, instead, resorted to silence and passivity. Written in 1977, *The King is King* predates and anticipates the multiple massacres committed later between 1982 in Hama City and in 2014 against the dissenters and civilians everywhere else in Syria. It is very clear that Wannous had an accurate perspectives on the political arena at that time, and he depicted the true situation of the oppressed in his own dramatic way. His ambition was to raise awareness. In his notes to the directors and interpreters he explained: "Those who are presenting the play are educating and learning at the same time. They are not only analyzing the authority, but also discussing, even if that discussion was only inner dialogue". (Wannous, 2004, vol 1, p.681)

The configuration of characters is significant. One group which represents the "mob" or the common people, are always pleading for permissions. Another group represents the authority; a king, princes, noble lords, sword bearer (punitive authority) and police leader, stand for prohibitions. The game between the two groups is a tug of war, for throughout time, they have arrived at a balance. The third group is comprised of the Shahbandar, a notable businessman, who represents capitalistic power and the Sheikh who represents religious authority. They are allowed to symbolically manipulate characters and puppets.

The characters declare that this is a dream realm, an imaginary kingdom, the story is illusory and the whole play is but a dream. However caution should be made lest fantasy turn to reality. Thus, Wannous sets the scene where complex ideas about class struggle, authority, corruption, and dictatorship can be discussed with the least chance of censorship or prosecution.

In a sub-plot, the revolution is underway. Obeid and Zahed are dissenters in the disguise of beggars. They work secretly to raise the awareness among people concerning their oppression and poverty, to organize people and instigate a revolution that never erupts in the play. It is still too early for this to occur as people are not yet fully aware. Zahed, who is enthusiastic to start the wave of protest, believes that the public is dejected and any organized initiative will help clarify

the image and be more conducive to dissension. On the other hand, Obeid, a more careful organizer, believes that, despite the people's misery and fear, a unanimous resentful attitude has not matured yet. In case of any dissent, the only recourse of the king is terrorism and more terrorism. (Wannous, 2004, p.602) Therefore the dissenters should wait and not reveal themselves too soon as easy victims; the seed of a rebellion should remain secret for a while.

Wannous was aware that a revolution against the dictator was inevitable and that the terrorism of the dictator was a foreseeable consequence. He was dedicated throughout his dramatic career to discuss and prepare for this eruption in various ways. Therefore, his character Obeid reverts to imagined historical anecdotes and tells Izza dreamily and optimistically about the king who had been eaten by his subjects. The play ends with all of the characters stripping off their disguises. They begin to alternately narrate softly and then chant loudly as a unified chorus:

History books tell the story
 Of People who were exasperated by injustice and hardship
 Their wrath was ignited
 They slaughtered their king
 They ate him up
 Then ate him up
 In the beginning they had stomach ache
 Some of them threw up
 But after a while they felt better. They became equals and life showed up
 No more disguise or disguised
 No more disguise or disguised (Wannous, 2004, p.675) (my translation)

This highly stylized synchronized ending helps break away from realism and communicates Wannous's revolutionary message within an overall farfetched plot, a technique that enabled the playwright to evade censorship.

Searching for the dramatic means by which he could educate his audience about democracy and freedom, Wannous used a wide scope of theatrical techniques and modes. He moved away from polemics and avoided direct reference to the status quo. Thus he kept his revolutionary statement in the realm of symbolism and dialectics of signifiers. His fables and allegories indirectly depict authoritarianism in the action of suppressing the majority. His plays provoke the public into dialectic reasoning and stir them to take pro-active political roles. In the fantastic fable of *The King's Elephant* (1969), he longed for an end of suppression and anticipated "the violent bloody story" (Wannous 2004, p451) that will accompany people quest for freedom. While in the folk tale form of *The King is King* (1977), he analyzed the structure of authority and the psyche of a despot and depicted people's longing to "eat him up" (Wannous, 2004, p.675) and live free from tyranny. In escaping censorship Wannous did not relinquish his commitment to educate the masses, but grew more creative and attractive in his dramatic expression.

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