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THE ANGRY BRITISH THEATRE OF
OSBORNE AND WESKER
AND
THE THEATRE OF NOUMAN ASHUR
(1955 - 1970)

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PREFACE

The 1950's witnessed various changes in England and Egypt; . leading events in a descending line in the former, and an ascending line in the latter. These changes were reflected upon the theatre of that period. In England, they created the Angry Theatre, led by John Osborne; while, in Egypt, the second generation of playwrights emerged, led by Nouman Ashur. These two playwrights have paved the way for the flow of other dramatists, belonging to their generation. For example, Osborne exercised a remarkable influence on Arnold Wesker, and motivated him to express his angry feelings in the form of drama.

The objective of this thesis is to present a comparative study between the leaders of both generations, John Osborne and Nouman Ashur. Arnold Wesker could not be ignored, because he is an advocate of the real spirit of socialism; namely, the necessity of preserving brotherhood feelings with others. This point is shared by Ashur, who is a socialist preaching for the abolishment of class discrimination, which threatens the existence of this brotherhood spirit.

This critical study covers the period between 1955-1970. In 1956 Osborne started writing, and after the 1970's, the powerful flow of his anger diminished as television plays attracted him more. Concerning Wesker, he started writing after the publication of Osborne's play Look Back in Anger (1956), and his Centre 42 project, the living model of his plea for elevating the workers' artistic sense, was dissolved in 1970. As for Nouman Ashur, this period falls within the reign of Nasser, starting a little earlier in 1952; but, it is necessary to note that Nasser's most important decisions and changes appeared during this period. We find that the plays of Nouman Ashur reflect the social changes related to the 1952 Revolution. Therefore, a study of his works will be confined to the plays produced within these years.

The Introduction of this thesis deals with the conditions behind the rise of the Angry Generation in England, and Ashur's generation in Egypt. It compares between their theatres and the preceding ones in both lands. Osborne's essential role in the Angry Theatre, and Ashur's role in his generation in Egypt, is likewise discussed. The reason for Wesker's choice is presented too. Furthermore, a biographical survey of the three dramatists is covered.

Chapter I deals with class conflict. It discusses the concept of this phenomenon in the works of each writer. In the plays of John Osborne, we perceive how he concentrates on addressing the reader's feelings, with no real analysis of the reasons, that led to this anger. Through a close analysis of Wesker's plays we can trace the real reasons behind the failure of socialism, as he presents an explanation of the real spirit of this political ideology and its plea for sharing brotherhood feelings between people. Similarly Chapter 1 will include Nouman Ashur's analysis of the changes brought about by the July Revolution, especially those related to class divisions within society.

Chapter II deals with character analysis, emphasizing Osborne's deep sense of isolation and how it drives him to create protagonists who express mere monologues on the stage. Wesker presents his characters mostly within a family atmosphere while Ashur shares with Wesker this family atmosphere. He presents typical Egyptian characters on the stage.

Chapter III presents an analysis of the style and technique of each individual writer, emphasizing how they share different techniques and their use of

everyday language in their plays. The foreign influences upon them are also discussed. This chapter will assess the influence of Brecht on Osborne and Wesker, as well as the impact of Brecht, Chekhov, and Gorky on Ashur. Finally, the Conclusion of the thesis will summarize and state all the similarities and differences between John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, and Nouman Ashur.

4.3. Quotations from Arabic references and texts are translated by the researcher. The original extracts are included in The Appendix.

INTRODUCTION

THE MID TWENTIETH CENTURY
IN ENGLAND AND EGYPT

The period following the termination of the Second World War, and in particular the 1950's witnessed various changes in England and Egypt. Different currents and events occurred leading to drastic changes. These changes brought about a conversion in concepts and beliefs, measures of evaluation, class barriers, together with a sifting of the common man's role in society. These alterations were reflected upon the theatre of that period, whether in the material presented, the playgoers, or the actors.

Starting with the English society, we will immediately notice the descending direction of events. The great Empire, referred to as the Empire of an everlasting shining sun, has lost most of its colonies: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India and Pakistan⁽¹⁾ achieved their independence. Not only that, but it has involved itself in the Egyptian Suez war, after President Nasser's declaration of the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, whose shares were held by the British Government together with French investors. Nasser nationalized the Company to finance with the canal dues the Aswan Dam project on the Nile, after Britain and America had announced their unwillingness to support the⁽²⁾ project. The Suez war lasted for one week, as England

(1) F. E. Halliday, A Concise History of England from Stone Age to the Atomic Age (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 222.

(2) Allan Palmer, Twentieth Century History 1900-1978 (England: Penguin, 1981), p. 351.

had to withdraw obeying the resolution of the United Nations, whose charter England had violated through this attack. Arthur Marwick comments on the Suez Crisis saying:

The great unhappy event which encapsulated Britain's painful readjustment to a changed world, ... was the Suez war of 1956 when Britain, in consort with the French and the Israelis, and in flagrant violation of her obligations under the United Nations' Charter, attacked the Egyptian Republic. The 'armed conflict' (as Eden called his war) lasted for a week, long enough to demonstrate that Britain no longer had the logistic power to mount an efficient ... operation in the Middle East, ... (1)

England's withdrawal has increased the inferior position it has reached amongst the powers of the world. Eden had to resign after the Suez Crisis. Dr. Hussein Munes comments on Eden's attitude saying:

It is the irony of fate that he was the Minister of Britain's Foreign Affairs when Mussolini demanded the internationalization of the canal and he refused the idea of internationalization, and insisted upon the Egyptian identity of the canal. Now he demands its internationalization. (2)

The Suez war was a serious mistake of the Conservative Party and its Prime Minister Eden. People expressed their dissatisfaction through a revolt against nuclear weapons. The Russians' military interference

(1) Arthur Marwick, Britain in Our Century, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 158.

(2) د. حسين مؤنس ، القناة لنا (القاهرة : دار الهلال ١٩٥٦) ، ص . ٥٩ .

against the Hungarian revolt helped to increase their refusal of weapons. These events spread disappointment in the British society. John Elson ironically states: "Those inclined to the left were faced by the spectacle of Russian tanks rolling into Hungary, those of the right watched in despair the fiasco of Suez".⁽¹⁾ The British citizen suffered from the lack of anything worth fighting for. The principles of those belonging to the left and those belonging to the right, swang badly. A feeling of disappointment and a mistrust of Government and the whole Empire prevailed.

This prevailing spirit was reflected upon the theatre of that period in England. The theatre of the 1950's was closely related to the people, discussing their problems and conditions. It emphasized specifically their vacillation between hope and disappointment, which was quite different from the preceding drama in the twentieth century which was hardly interested in the problems of the common man. English drama of the early twentieth century had little to offer compared with European dramatists as Chekhov, Strindberg or Pirandello. The most important development occurred in Ireland and Manchester. Annie Horinman, the Irish wealthy patron of Drama, devoted her wealth for the establishment of a theatre in Ireland. She helped the

(1) John Elson, Post War British Theatre, (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1976), p. 74.

Irish National Theatre Society to acquire the Abbey Theatre.⁽¹⁾ W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) and Lady Gregory (1852-1932) helped in the establishment of the Irish National Theatre. Yeats wrote about thirty plays between 1892-1938 and was influenced by the Japanese Noh drama, hence he made use of masks, dance and music. Realistic drama did not attract him. Yeats was more interested in arousing feelings through poetic plays based on Celtic myth and legend. Lady Gregory mainly wrote one-act peasant comedies and invented the Irish folk-history. Synge (1871-1909) fused both styles of Yeats and Lady Gregory⁽²⁾ for he made the mythic seem familiar. Still realistic drama did not interest him. R. A. Banks comments on Synge's approach to the theatre presented in his Preface to the Playboy of the Western World saying:

The Playboy of the Western World sets out in its Preface Synge's approach to the theatre, which was non-political and therefore detached from the contemporary political troubles ... He was opposed to both the symbolists and the realists ...⁽³⁾

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- (1) Gamini Salgado, English Drama A Critical Introduction. (London: Edward Arnold, 1980), pp. 183-184.
- (2) Oscar G. Brockett, Modern Theatre. (London: Allyn & Bacon Inc., 1982), pp. 37-38.
- (3) R. A. Banks, Drama and Theatre Arts. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), pp. 240-241.

Moving from Ireland to England, we find the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) the most prominent verse dramatist. His play Murder in the Cathedral (1935) is his masterpiece. Still, Eliot is remote from everyday life. In that respect Gamini Salgado comments:

In one way or another all the plays explore aspects of the idea of martyrdom in relation to society, first dramatized in Murder in the Cathedral but Eliot's grasp of everyday life seems too remote (1)

Concerning the prose dramatists in England at the beginning of the 20th century we have John Galsworthy (1867-1933), who was primarily a novelist. He has taken a step towards realism, writing 'problem plays' on social themes before and after the First World War. Harley Granville Barker (1877-1966) moved the 'problem play' into the sphere of the 'play of ideas'. James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937) escaped from reality into his own world of make-believe. James Bridie (1888-1951) wrote 'plays of ideas'. He suffered from being compared with Shaw. His plays often carry religious themes, finding dignity in faith. Likewise, John Boynton Priestly (1894-1984) wrote 'plays of ideas'. He wrote an immense number of plays. (2) During the two World Wars the theatre shrank. The number of performances decreased, most of

(1) Salgado, p. 188.

(2) Banks, pp. 230 - 235.