

Bewilderment between Might and Right: Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma* (al-Sulṭān al-Ha'ir)

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Abstract

The Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898- 1987) is one of the leading figures in Arabic literature and drama. In his masterpiece, *The Sultan's Dilemma* (1960), al-Hakim discusses an eternal question, which is mightier and has a lasting, influential role. Is it the power of authority or the power of the principles? Is it the sword or the law? The play is set in the medieval past, but its moral is addressed to the modern world. It explores the legitimacy of power through the character of a Mamluk Sultan raised into power. Suddenly, this Sultan faced a dilemma that he is neither a legible ruler nor released from the slavery of the earlier Sultan. Hence, the Sultan finds himself trapped between using forceful authority to establish his kingdom or applying the rightful law that might be difficult to be achieved, and it might take time. Sultan's dilemma symbolizes the political predicament that the modern world is facing.

Keywords: Arabic literature, political predicament; power, Tawfiq al-Hakim, *The Sultan's Dilemma*

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Introduction:

Arab art did not know the theatre in its modern form until the beginning of the twentieth century, especially with the prevalence of poetry for long periods as the distinguished literary heritage for Arabs to express their thoughts and feelings. For Arabs, poetry was the

deadly sin of pride; it seems [that] led the Arabs to ignore this art form [drama]. They were convinced the poetry was the art in which they excelled, and, as Greek drama was rooted in poetic expression, they concluded that it was futile to waste their time on an inferior art from another nation. (Al-Khozai, 1984, p.4).

The avoidance of Arabs to the theatre in the early Islamic era could be attributed to the fact that mythologies were not acceptable in Arab culture. The Greek dramatic work is not easy to be preserved and visualized by the Arab mental set. That caused the separation between Arab literature and drama. However, the connection of Arabs with the European literary movements through the translation of Western and Greek literary texts in the late nineteenth century has introduced them to new literary genera of prose, such as the novel, the story and the verse drama (Al-Shetawi, 1989).

Accordingly, some Arab playwrights adapted the Western forms and Greek mythology as they were, but other writers Arabized these foreign texts to suit the Arab political, social and cultural factors (Hussain, 2009). Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898-1987) is one of the many Arab playwrights who found in Greek mythology an outlet to express his feelings and opinions towards his age's serious issues. Based on Aristophanes Ecclesiazusae, he wrote his first Greek play *Praksa*, *aw Mushklat al-Hukum* and then *King Oedipus*. Furthermore, Al-Hakim had not only emulated the European literary texts; instead, he laid his hands on abundant Arabic and Islamic heritage sources, which provided him with literary, historical, mystical and religious themes to write profound literary texts (Al-Shetawi, 1989).

In his introduction to the collection of plays entitled *The Diverse Theatre*, Al-Hakim clarified his efforts, saying:

We have translated drama, ancient and modern, into our language for only a few years... Here then is the secret of my anxious voyage in every direction. In my mad anxiety, I have tried to hasten to fill part of the gap to the extent of my ability and strength. I have tried to take in thirty years a trip on which the dramatic literature of other languages has spent about two thousand years. (Plays, Prefaces, 1981, p. 2)

It is worth mentioning that Egyptian and Arab theatre's art would not have reached its current status without the great writer's pioneering efforts, Tawfiq Al-Hakim. Al-Hakim presented mature theatrical texts that discussed political and social considerations, departing from the verse drama and the adopted European drama that prevailed in his time. Arguably, Al-Hakim was the most significant inventor of Arab theatre. Awad (1975) regarded Al-Hakim as the true pioneer of Egyptian drama, and similarly, Shukri (1982) significantly described him as the father of modern Arab theatre.

2-Tawfiq Al-Hakim: The Man and the Writer

Al-Hakim was born in Alexandria in 1898 to an Egyptian father who worked as a prosecutor and a descended Turkish mother. In his biography, Al-Hakim claimed that his interest in literature and theatre, in particular, began at a very early age when he used to attend the show of the touring companies performance. Moreover, listening to his mother's reading of the Arabian Nights and other tales during his childhood, Al-Hakim's artistic imagination started to grow, producing several profound literary texts throughout his journey that spent more than half a century.

Being a lawyer and an absorbent of Western philosophy, Al-Hakim's literary texts were primarily focused on the humanitarian subjects that had direct contact with the political and social issues that covered his time. Commenting on his work, Al-Hakim has depicted himself as an 'Easterner'. He seems a moral dramatist, a social critic and, in this way, a reformative playwright, a pioneer, and a profound and diversified dramatist. Despite Al-Hakim's liberal and patriotic tendencies, he was keen on his intellectual and artistic independence and was not associated with any political party in his life before the revolution. When the July 1952 revolution occurred, he supported it, but at the same time, he criticized the dictatorial and undemocratic policy that characterized the revolution since its inception. Al-Hakim was concerned with building the national character, developing national sentiment, spreading social justice, consolidating democracy, and affirming the principle of freedom and equality (Badawi, 1997)

President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) of Egypt ranked him as the spiritual father of the July 23 Revolution due to Al-Hakim's novel *The Return of the Spirit*, written in 1933, which Abdel Nasser believed paved for the emergence of the expected hero who would revive the nation from its dormant state. In 1958, Nasser awarded him the Medal of the Republic, and he won the State Prize of Appreciation in Literature in 1960. Yet, surprisingly, Abdel Nasser never banned any work for Tawfiq al-Hakim, even when he presented plays that criticized the Nasserist regime and defended democracy, like the *Bank of Worries* in 1966 and the *Sultan* in *The Sultan Dilemma*, who is confused between the sword and the law (Badawi, 1997).

3-The Sultan's Dilemma: Trapped between the Power of Law and the Power of Force:

Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma* (TSD) is a comedy written in 1960. It revolves around a Sultan from the Mamluk system who knew that the people in his city say that he is still a slave and that his previous master did not properly manumit him. According to them, The Sultan has no right to rule or be the ruler before becoming free. The Sultan vacillates between using forces to silence people (the minister's opinion) and following the law (and this is the judge's opinion). He, therefore, decided to follow the law and has himself sold by auction with the condition that his new owner will then set him free. However, Badawi (1997, p.7) believes that this play's events took place during the rule of the Egyptian Mameluk Sultans in the thirteenth century, where an actual sultan was put for sale at an auction. However, the play is not a historical play, for it deals with timeless problems.

The Mameluk era was known for its spread of violence, bribery, conspiracy, and deception and injustice in Egypt. The critic Fatima Yusuf Muhammad (as cited in Saqer, 2011) believes that Al-Hakim has chosen to return to that history to escape authority censorship at his time.

Nevertheless, he symbolically carried on the intellectual connotations and political projections. He expressed his opinion on the spoiled democracy aftermath of the Revolution of 1952, where its atmosphere was closer to the Mameluk.

Moreover, the play sheds light not only on the conflict between the power of law and force. It examines how men of strength twist the law as a means of justice to agree with our daily practices. In this play, Al-Hakim got inspiration from his work as a judge and his awareness of the judicial system's varied practices. He knew

the great tension in the international situation, the fear and anxiety caused by world leaders' inability to decide whether the solution to world problems is to be sought in arbitration by the sword of the law, in restoring to the atom and hydrogen bombs or the United Nations. (Badawi, 1989, p.70)

In his introduction to the play, Al-Hakim claims a correlation between the play's events and Egypt's political scenes after the revolution in 1952. Then, the country was under totalitarian emergency power and the military Junta. In a book entitled *Tawfiq Al-Hakim: A Reader's Guide*, Hutchins (2003) argues that this play is Al-Hakim's message to Abdel Nasser not to behave as he desired and that he had to submit to the law.

The play's opening scene is met with a comic treatment of the idea of human rights and freedom of expression in a society ruled by a totalitarian system. Just like the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, an Executioner and a Condemned Man, who is an "old slave-trader", banter about the impending death sentence, toasting the Condemned Man's health and Executioner's masterful work of beheading. Both are waiting "the call to the dawn prayer" where the Condemned Man's life "hangs on to the Muezzin's vocal cords" (*TSD*, p.19), and the Executioner will "raise [his] sword, and a swipe of [convicted man's] head- those are the orders" (*TSD*, p.6). Comically and ironically, the Executioner seems to be bad and asks Condemned Man to amuse him. He suggests that both have a drink at the prisoner's expense, and "it is incumbent upon [him] to raise his morale" (*TSD*, p.9) so that to fulfil his job of executing skilfully at the break of dawn. The convict tries to object, beseeching him bitterly: "without a trial? I haven't yet been put on trial; I haven't yet appeared before a judge" (*TSD*, p.6).

The Executioner does not allow him to utter a word about the reasons for being a prisoner, depriving him of his legal right to be presented before a judge and have a trial. The Condemned Man has sent a petition to the Sultan to save him from execution, and he is anxious that the dawn will break soon and no response from the Sultan. By showing indifference and cruelty, Al-Hakim, through the Executioner character, criticizes the authoritarian power, which pays no attention to its people and their suffering, and how this power is used unjustly and mercilessly. Al-Hakim draws a parallel line between this play's world and Egypt's political scene during the 1960s under the military regime. The government executed the opponents and severely convicted them with sentences that did not fit their crimes and with no actual trials. (Badawi, 1989)

The suppression of freedom of speech is shown seriously again when a wine merchant asks the Condemned Man about his crime:

WINE MERCHANT: Why? For what crime?

CONDEMNED MAN: For no reason except that I said

EXECUTIONER: Quiet! Don't utter a word! Shut your mouth!

CONDEMNED MAN: I've shut my mouth (*TSD*, p.10)

The drunken Executioner's great deal of noise provokes the remonstrance of a lady neighbour, who is presumably considered as a prostitute. After a violent dispute with the Executioner because of his shouting and vulgarity, the Lady approaches the Condemned Man, recognizes him as one of her old acquaintances, and sadly wonders about his condition. However, the Man is forbidden from uncovering the reasons:

LADY: what crime have you committed?

CONDEMNED MAN: Nothing much. All that happened was that I said

EXECUTIONER [*shouting*]: Careful! Careful! Shut your mouth!

CONDEMNED MAN: I've shut my mouth.

LADY: Naturally, they gave you a trial?

CONDEMNED MAN: No. (*TSD*, p.18)

The Condemned Man informs the Lady that orders are issued to be executed at dawn within the Muezzin's arrival, although his complaint's response has not been confirmed. The Lady, therefore, asks the Executioner whether the Sultan knows Man's crime; he answers her, "The Vizier- the orders of the Vizier are the orders of the Sultan." (*TSD*, p.19). Soon after dawn, the Vizier, sent by the Sultan to inquire into the matter, "appears surrounded by his guards." (*TSD*, p.21) He is astonished when he sees the convict is still alive because the so-called prostitute has prevented the Muezzin from calling to prayer. She has been able to delay the execution by inducing the Muezzin, who comes to be one of her closest friends within the quarter, to have a warm cup of coffee because the cold of the night is affecting his vocal cords. The Muezzin legitimizes the acceptance of the Lady's invitation, saying, "There are only two men there [at the mosque]. One of them is a stranger to this city and has taken up his abode in the mosque, whilst the other is a bigger who has sought shelter in it from the night cold" (*TSD*, p.20). Al-Hakim here criticizes the religious men as individuals of two faces, and they are afraid more of how people look at them because this look provides them with power and respect.

Upon seeing the Vizier, the Condemned Man begs the Vizier to help him, for he is still waiting for his complaint to the Sultan. The Vizier, who hopes that he will be too late to stop the execution, says resentfully:

Yes, your complaint is known to his Majesty the Sultan, and he ordered that you be turned over to the Chief Cadi [Chief Judge]. His Majesty the Sultan will himself attend your trial. This is his noble wish and his irrefutable command. (*TSD*, p.22)

Meanwhile, the Sultan arrives, accompanied by the Chief Cadi. It is now clear that the Condemned Man's crime referred to the Sultan as a slave he had sold to the predecessor Sultan. At the advent of the Sultan with his entourage, the Condemned Man cries him for justice, saying: "Your Majesty! Justice! I beg for justice! ... I have committed no fault or crime! ... And I haven't been tried yet! I haven't been tried!" (*TSD*, p.31).

What the Condemned Man is true and "is neither damage nor harm". Nevertheless, the matter is complicated because the old Sultan did not set his successor free, and now this "great and noble Sultan is a slave", and the Condemned Man claims, "he [the young Sultan] was the slave trader who undertook the sale of our Sultan in his youth to the former Sultan." (*TSD*, p.24) The Condemned Man reveals the historical background of the Sultan's slavery, saying:

Twenty –five years ago, your Majesty. You were a small boy of six lost and abandoned in a Circassian village raided by the Mongols. You were extremely intelligent and wise for one of your tender years. I rejoiced in you and carried you off to the Sultan of this country. As the price for you, he made me a present of one thousand diners." (*TSD*, p.24)

The Vizier treats the Condemned Man violently, terrifying him and commenting on his words, "It's a terrible and sinful world" (*TSD*, p.23), saying that he "deserves death for his babbling and indiscretion. The Vizier tries to explain the ground of his harsh and unfair action against the Condemned Man, clarifying that he has sentenced this Man for death because "this man claims that you have not yet been manumitted, that you still a slave and that a person bearing such a stigma is not entitled to rule over a free people." (*TSD*, p.25) The Vizier behaves as if he is the primary protector of the Sultan and the Sultanate. The country's security depends on his injustice, inhuman deeds that he counts as a symbol of loyalty. Here, Al-Hakim might attempt to warn Nassar from his entourage for not deviating from the revolution's noble aims and returning to the chaos of false democracy.

Therefore, the Sultan's succession is legally invalid, and he cannot continue to govern the country because a slave cannot rule over free citizens. Lawfully, all property of the former Sultan, including the slaves, must fall to the treasury under the statute as the young Sultan's case. He must also be placed up for sale at a public auction. The Sultan, however, assures the Condemned Man that he will "be given a fair trial in accordance with your wish, and the Chief Cadi shall be in charge of your trial in our presence" (*TSD*, p.23). The Sultan holds a tripartite summit meeting with the Chief Cadi and the Vizier at this pivotal moment. The playwright's creativity portrays a very sharp confrontation incarnated in the dialogue between the Sultan and the Chief Cadi, on the one hand, the Sultan, and the Vizier on the other hand.

The Sultan finds himself trapped between two opposite forces where each draws him to its side. Both might lead him to good or evil according to his own will. Achieving a balance of power between them is very difficult; this is externalism to the Sultan. He recognizes this complexity, stating that.

"This man [the Chief Cadi] puts us in a dilemma; he makes us choose between two alternatives, both of them painful: the law which shows me up as weak and makes a laughing-stock of me, or the sword which brands me with brutality and makes me loathed" (*TSD*, p.34).

For the Sultan, "this is [his] most fearful moment, ... for every ruler—the moment of giving the final decision" (*TSD*, p.38). Which side will the Sultan take?; "the sword which imposes and yet exposes [him]" and by which he can cut off the head of the Condemned Man and hang him up "in the square before the people, [so] no tongue would thenceforth dare to utter". Alternatively, "the law which threatens and yet protects [him]" (*TSD*, p.36), yet it would guarantee a political legitimacy, the legitimacy of the Sultan. Thus, this legitimacy is a low price in front of a real king protected by law and the people's love. This legitimate Sultan does not depend on the sword that can impose power only for a period and then is taken from him because if blood is shed once, it will flow dozens of times, and no one will stop it.

Regardless of the Sultan's threatening of excluding or killing, the Chief Cadi insists on the law-abiding opinion saying that:

We should put up His Majesty the Sultan for sale by public auction and the person to whom he is knocked down thereafter to manumit him. In this manner, the Exchequer is not harmed or defrauded in respect of its property, and the Sultan gains his manumission and releases throw law." (*TSD*, p.36)

The Cadi wisely explains how the power is a changeable and shifted matter:

... you have a choice, Your Majesty. You can employ it [sword] for action, or you can employ it for decoration. I recognize the undoubted strength possessed by the sword, its swift action and decisive effect. But the sword gives the right to the strongest, and who knows who will be the strongest tomorrow? There may appear some strong person who will tilt the balance of the power against you. As far as the law, it protects your rights from every aggression because it does not recognize the strongest- it recognizes right. (*TSD*, p.36)

After a violent argument with the Sultan, the Chief Cadi as a representative of law can address the humanistic and wise corner in the Sultan. He convinces the Sultan who has "conquered the Mongols ..., the right-hand man of the late Sultan, whom he arranged to rule after him" (*TSD*, p.26), to accept the Cadi suggestion and be exposed in a public auction under the specific condition of freeing him after buying. One of the most exciting scenes in the play is the sight of bidders inspecting the merchandise whom they find this auction is an exceptional one as no one can "find a sultan being put up for sale every day" (*TSD*, p.39). Al-Hakim points out worldly dealings as mere games of loss and profit in this short scene. The wine merchant wants to buy the Sultan because his presence in the winery would attract customers, and the shoemaker wants to buy him so that he could use him to display his goods. Even a Child satirically intends to participate in the purchase, dealing with the Sultan as a toy:

CHILD: Mother! Buy him for me!

MOTHER: What?

CHILD: The Sultan! Buy me the Sultan!

MOTHER: Quiet! He's not a toy for you to play with.

CHILD: You said they'll sell him here. Buy him for me then.

MOTHER: Quiet, child. This is not a game for children.

CHILD: For whom then? For grown-ups?

MOTHER: Yes, it's for grown-ups. (*TSD*, p.41)

Finally, the supposed prostitute Lady who pays her whole life's savings inherited from her late husband (the wealthy merchant) pays thirty thousand dinars. The Lady refuses to implement the Sultan's manumission condition, insisting on taking him to her house as her slave. Everyone goes crazy and looks at the Cadi, who tries his best with the Lady, and then he surrenders because he knows that she is right. Finally, the Lady addresses the Sultan, telling him:

... give this night to me, You Majesty-a single night. Honor me by accepting my invitation and be my guest until daybreak. And when the Muezzin gives the call to down prayers from this minaret here, I shall sign the deed of manumission and Your Majesty will be free." (*TSD*, p.2.69).

Hosting the Sultan and having a conversation reveal their characters. The Sultan discovers that this Lady is innocent of the accusation of prostitution. She is nothing but a respectable and decent widow who loves poetry and art. She opens what looks like a literary parlour for poets and poetry lovers. At the same time, the Lady discovers the goodness of the Sultan and his gentleness. Although this seems a win-win situation, the Lady proves her virtue, and the Sultan solves his authenticity as a ruler. Nevertheless, the Lady represents an excellent example of the arts' influence that elevates the beauty and human in Man's nature (Rahman *et al.*, 2020). Her rejection of the Sultan's offer to compensate her for her kindness mirrors this thought instead of the notion of profit and loss stressed in Act II.

Lady: No, no, Your Majesty. Don't take away this honor from me. There are no riches in the world, in my opinion, to equal this beautiful memory on which I shall live for the whole of my life. With something so paltry, I have participated in one of the greatest of events. (*TSD*, p.85)

Thinking of the consequences of selling the Sultan to this Lady, the Chief Cadi twists the agreement's words and violets the spirit of the law by ordering the Muazzin to call for the Fajar (morning) prayer at midnight. The Sultan vehemently refuses this conduct from the Cadi and decides to fulfil the convention, but the Lady rejects and waives her right. The Sultan blames the Chief Cadi for this trick; yet, the Lady kindly justifies the Chief Cadi's deed to his loyalty and devotion towards the Sultan. The Sultan appreciates the Lady's loyalty and humanity by describing her as "one of the most outstanding of women! The people of the city must respect her. That is an order, O Vizier!" (*TSD*, p.58). The Sultan rewards her by presenting her with the big jewel acquired by defeating the Mongol army.

"Without a drop of blood being spill" (*TSD*, p.59), the Sultan concludes a life lesson that the law is what preserves, maintains security and safeguards the rights of the citizens and that the law and bearing its consequences is a thousand times more significant than using the sword and its implications.

Conclusion:

Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma* is analyzed as a play that deals observably with a conflict of legitimacy and the eternal confrontation between the force and the law. The Sultan finds himself in a great dilemma between the lower self and higher-self, and achieving equilibrium is critical. Inability to achieve equilibrium would transform society to become a jungle in which only the fittest survive. Furthermore, the study scrutinizes the establishing line between the law's spirit and its application and pursuance. The Sultan's legitimacy that was under attack is resolved by manipulating religion. In this play, Al-Hakim opposes all justifications for human beings to be violent or aggressive to obtain political or religious power. The play also emphasizes the significance of achieving justice by Chief Cadi's honesty, which represents wisdom and a safety valve of peace and the law in the Sultanate. Moreover, the play mirrors Egypt's political atmosphere after the Revolution of 1952, presenting an indirect message to President Gamal Abdel Nasser, emphasizing the importance of the law and its application.

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