Chapter-1

INTRODUCTION

Drama is not a native Arabic art; under western influence, theatre was introduced to the Arab world in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was not until the end of the second decade of last century that Arab dramatists began to produce plays which reflected their own culture, and dramatic criticism began to appear in Arabic magazines and news papers. There were no academic studies in drama until the university of Cairo adopted studies on theatre in 1940's, awarding its first masters degree in 1947 and the first Ph.D on Arabic drama in 1955. In the last generation, dramatic criticism became more familiar to educated Arabs and drama studies became available at several colleges and universities.

Some Western and Arab scholars claim that, for religious reasons, Islam prohibited the practice of theatre because the religious authorities believed that theatrical portrayal of humans would challenge or compete with Almighty in his unique creative power. However this explanation for the total absence of drama in Arab literature through the ages is refuted by Tawfiq al-Hakim. Whatever be the reason, Arabs did not attempt to express themselves through the medium of theatrical arts. Those scholars consider the Napoleonic Expedition to Egypt to have been the turning point which accelerated the Arab renaissance that resulted in the European influence on Arabic literature and the introduction of drama to the Arab world.

The first effort of this study is to demonstrate that various forms of performances, music and oral traditions have been enjoyed in the Middle East since ancient times. These activities have reflected the artistic, intellectual and popular taste of the peoples of the region. *Ta'ziya*, *Khayal al-Zill* and *Hikaya* were some of the forms of public entertainment already known to the Arab world before the arrival of theatre in the middle of the nineteenth century. Those

types which contain theatrical elements appealed both to the Arabic general public and to the educated classes across the generations.

As Yusuf Idris observed that drama and the dramatic are to be witnessed everywhere in the Arab world. As certain productions take to the streets, the more experimental practitioners of the genre would seem to be going back to its indigenous cultural roots. Meanwhile, the institution of the theatre itself has become a part of the literary and cultural milieu of the Arab world, bringing with it from the West the large number of theoretical issues that impacted upon the performance of drama and adding to them a further collection of questions that are intrinsic to the Arabic environment. With Arabic drama we witness a genre in a continuing process of adaptation and development, one that, by its very nature, must confront the political, social and cultural problems of the day. In the Arab world that can be a dangerous role, but within that broad and variegated space the struggle for creative change is a continuing process.

In Europe, Arabic drama was known in the early 1960's, but in the United States it is one of the least acknowledged subjects of oriental studies. Jacob M. Landu's *The studies in Arab theatre and cinema* (1969) and *A list of Arabic plays* are perhaps the first published books on Arabic drama written by an American scholar. With the exception of Tawfiq al-Hakim whose works have been translated into most European languages, Arab dramatists are still largely unknown to the world. This study is a step particularly to fill that gap through the critical study of the historical dramas by Ali Ahmad Bakathir, one of the most original Arab playwrights.

Bakathir was a prolific writer who in addition to his great sum of poetry wrote more than sixty plays, six novels, many one- act plays and short stories. However, Bakathir contributed influentially to modern Arabic literature in several literary genres; drama, poetry and the novel. In fact, it was Bakathir's

commitment to Islamic ideology throughout his entire life which made him unique among contemporary Arab dramatists; his works were dedicated to representing the Islamic perspective in all aspects of life. His artistic mission was firmly to establish Islamic as well as historical drama in the field of Arabic literature.

The main aim of this study is to highlight Bakathir's explanation for his love for history in his dramas because the events of history crystallized in the course of time and could extract from them the relations and details which were not intended by the writer to achieve through his artistic work. Therefore, the events of history help the writer to achieve his goal by making the artistic work and depicting a truth in a broader and wider way than the truth presented by the reality.

Bakathir was amongst those dramatists who firmly decided to discover the contemporary Arab reality with this time-dimension by deriving the node of dramas from history and by establishing linkages between the past and present so as to push the present towards a better future and more prosperity. The main cause of Bakathir and the writers of his generation behind going back to history was that the World War II had raved and forced them to open their eyes and to enrich their hearts after the appearance of the ugliness of political, societal and the economic reality and the culture and awakening worked together for taking a positive national action which can change all this. The task of the litterateurs and intelligentsia was to breathe a new life into awakening, which had become stagnant because of demonization of the pioneers. The story, meanwhile, was a genre which was impressing upon the readers and litterateurs in a different kind. Because of this, the story-teller took refuge in history like what Abdul Hamid Jauda al-Sahar did in *Ahmas,* Najib Mahfouz in *Radubis*, Bakathir in *Ikhnatun wa Nefertiti* and Adil kamil in *Malik min Shua'a*.

Bakathir tried, with the help of historical reality, to show his concern for the Egyptian society- as per his own perception- in many of his historical dramas which he presented during this period, after this period and during the period when he presented his explanation for the myths and at the later period when he recorded the reflection of contemporary reality in his works. We see him returning to the historical reality in his last drama named *Harb al-Basus*.

Bakathir did not present his concern about the historical reality by itself but he intended to present the time gap so that he can comment on the contemporary reality, which makes his ability in presenting the issues from his perspective limitation. Thus, his going back to history is something like running away from the reality of the current scenarios so that he can declare his actual stand and his particular vision towards this contemporary reality. Although most of Bakathir's literary works are dramas, he is better known in the English language as a novelist and a pioneer poet of Arabic free verse.

As far as the research outline is concerned, the thesis is structured in six chapters that logically cohere and lead from one issue to the next. The first chapter, this introduction gives details of previous scholarship and sources linked to the topics. The second chapter deals with the historical background which, as explained above, is of crucial importance to the understanding and appreciation of the topic. It covers the general development of Arabic drama (thereby adding more background) before going into the specifics of the actual topic, namely the origin and development of the Arabic drama, and finally the contribution of Ali Ahmad Bakathir as representative of this development. The first half of the chapter surveys the main theatrical arts and their founders in Egypt, emphasizing the fact that the Arabic theatre in the formative period consisted mainly of translations and liberal adaptations of western plays which usually took the form of musical theatre. The second half of the chapter surveys

the emergence of original Arabic playwriting which started in the second decade of the century; it provides brief biographies of the pioneer dramatist, their prevalent themes and best plays.

The third chapter traces Bakathir's literary development through the stages of his life. The dramatist started his career as poet of note in his original home, South Yemen. Bakathir's emigration to Egypt and enrolment in the English Department at Cairo University led to his work as a dramatist. Bakathir's study of English literature and of Shakespeare in particular, guided him to some of the innovations the dramatist pioneered, such as the use of running blank verse and free verse which became a medium of later Arabic verse drama. However, Bakathir wrote the majority of his plays in prose, emanating from his credo that drama could be poetical without the restrictions of meter and that free verse should be used only in non-realistic plays.

The fourth chapter discusses the dramas of Bakathir on different aspects of human life such as social, political, historical and religious. These works are analyzed to show Bakathir's unique and innovative style of writing for which he was so famous. Knowledge of the historical aspects and his major works will explain much of his opinions and ideas (as gleaned from his writings).

Bakathir wrote plays both in prose and verse. He has also composed an epic drama on the life of second Caliph 'Umar bin al-Khattab. Bakathir had a distinct preference for subjects drawn from history, myth and legend as well as folklore, a preference for which he tried to find an aesthetic justification. Even when he wished to make a comment on the modern world, he often found it easier to use the past as a metaphor for the present. His passionate commitment to Islam made him turn naturally to Islamic and Arab history, but his treatment of myths and legends embraced a wider field, including ancient Egyptian and Greek themes.

Of his huge output, only a few plays deal with contemporary social issues. They mostly deal, in some form or other, with the problems of Egyptian women and the relation between the sexes. The historical dramas of Bakathir are derived from both ancient and modern history of the Arab world. Bakathir's others plays set in the modern world deal with political issues. His religious plays are moral fantasy based on the Islamic ideology from the Holy Quran and anecdotes from Quranic interpretations.

Thus as an Islamic ideologist Bakathir endeavoured persistently to present the Islamic point of view; he implicitly presents Islam as a philosophy throughout his various works. Consequently, Bakathir's interpretations of events and stories from modern or ancient history constitute an addition to the world's dramatic heritagewith a distinctive Islamic content and treatment. He was the only Arab dramatist who consistently dedicated his works to Islamic ideology, as well as conducting his life by its principles.

This research reveals the influence of Shakespeare on Ali Ahmed Bakathir and shows the latter's creativity in adapting Shakespeare's ideas and employing them to highlight the conflict between Arab people, especially the Palestinians, and the rising power of the Zionists, the new generation of the Jews.

The fifth chapter deals with the theme and style of Bakathir's historical dramas. To gain a good and clear understanding of this author and his works, this chapter deals with his circumstantial and factual background. Seen against this background, it will be clear who and what influenced Bakathir in his writings.

Bakathir's plays are divided into two groups: plays inspired by events (political plays), which established Bakathir as the first Arab playwright to use drama for political purpose; and plays inspired by ideas (intellectual plays) with their material largely borrowed from history or the western literary heritage, but

given new interpretations which reflect his Islamic ideas. Bakathir's Ikhnatun, Al-Hakim, Napoleon and Oedipus are selected as models of his intellectual plays.

The sixth chapter gives an assessment of Bakathir's historical dramas, covering both positive and negative criticism. Bakathir's plays on history received great fame in all parts of the Arab world.

Bakathir's plays deal with themes from both history and mythology. Some are set in the modern world and treat specifically social or political problems of contemporary Egypt and the Arab world. It must be admitted, however, that despite Bakathir's obvious commitment to his subject, on the whole these tend to be less satisfactory as drama, not least on account of the type of language he uses in his dialogue. Because of his deeply held religious and political convictions, namely, his total commitment to Islam and Arab nationalism, Bakathir avoided colloquial Arabic altogether, but the literary Arabic he employed often sounded too literary and turgid for his modern themes and lacked the immediacy of spoken speech.

The conclusion summarizes all the main points of the aforementioned chapters, review the substance of the discussion, and mention some aspects that can be further researched.

Each chapter has a short introduction and a concise conclusion. Each chapter is divided sub-chapters leading from one issue to the next logically.