

Duality of Expression: Revolutionary and Linguistic Politics in Ibrahim Al-Husseini's *Commedia Al-Ahzaan*

Mohammed Albakry*
Middle Tennessee State University

Abstract: This article discusses the Egyptian playwright Ibrahim Al-Husseini's recent play *Commedia Al-Ahzaan (Comedy of Sorrows)*. The play is a bold dramatic attempt to capture the giddy experience of the Egyptian revolution of 25th January, 2011. By offering a glimpse into the lives of some of the nameless crowds that amassed in Cairo's Tahrir Square, *Commedia Al-Ahzaan* gives a human face to their leaderless mass protests, which managed to topple Mubarak's dictatorial regime. The discussion focuses particularly on the play's dramatization of the moment of revolutionary awakening with its mixed feelings of hope and fear as well as the playwright's use of diglossic language mixing standard Arabic with Egyptian colloquial Arabic as a means of dramatic expression.

Keywords: Arabic literature in translation, Arab Spring, *Commedia Al-Ahzaan*, Diglossia, Drama, Ibrahim Al-Husseini

1. Introduction

A revolution time can be an exhilarating as well as frightening experience for those who live through it. Ibrahim Al-Husseini's recent play *Commedia Al-Ahzaan** (Comedy of Sorrows)* -- performed at the Egyptian El-Ghad Theater in July 2011—is a bold dramatic attempt to capture the giddy experience of the Egyptian revolution of 25th January, 2011. The play, which combines political topicality with dynamic theatricality, captures the grievances, hopes, and fears of a wide range of protestors who participated in the revolution: men and women, old and young, rich and poor, and city dwellers and peasants.

Commedia Al-Ahzaan marks Al-Husseini's eighteenth play. Born in the Nile delta governorate of Al-Sharqiyah, Egypt in 1970, Al-Husseini studied theatre arts at the prestigious Arts Academy in Cairo. Today he is known not only for his plays, but also for his poetry and theater criticism. Among his previous award-winning plays are *The Final Days of Akhenaton*, *Museum of Human Organs*, *Garden of the Assassins*, and *Seduction*. In his dramatic writing, *Commedia Al-Ahzaan* being the main focus here, Al-Husseini generally experiments with the juxtaposition of heightened and colloquial text to explore the themes of oppression, freedom, and social justice, a point which will be discussed further in this article.

In such a genre of political theater, it is almost impossible to avoid the element of melodrama and “preachiness” and *Commedia Al-Ahzaan* is no exception. What saves the play and makes it such a moving and poignant dramatization of revolt, however, is the fact that its depiction of the moment of

revolutionary awakening is more human than political. Instead of offering a naive celebration of the revolution, the dramatist displays a more nuanced attitude, a dual perspective so to speak, conveyed by an expressive dual language that mixes standard Arabic (*fus-hā*) with Egyptian colloquial Arabic (*Ammiyya*).

2. Plot and characters

First, pairing the dual nouns (*Commedia* and *Al-Ahzaan*) in the play's title is striking because of the incongruity of *comedy* and *sorrows*, but this is the first insight into the absurdity of the Egyptian realities that called for the revolution. Incongruities between the political rhetoric and the lived reality were so rampant that it was possible to see the whole civic situation as a farce. For some, therefore, reacting with indifference and cynic laughter became the only way of surviving the country's deteriorating conditions without losing their sanity. The play dramatizes some of these conditions: administrative corruption, chronic unemployment, and the brutal reaction of a police state always ready to suppress any semblance of civil resistance. The focus, however, is on the moment of uprising as it unfolds.

Set in a cemetery and an unnamed "Square", the play follows a young middle-class and college-educated Egyptian woman: Doha. Through a series of encounters with different members of society, Doha—the female personification of Egypt—experiences shock and disillusionment, and finally wakes up to the realization that "she has been blind to all the misery and ugliness into which her people sank" (Selaiha 2011). Beside Doha and a few secondary characters, *Comedy of Sorrows* has six characters: Yusuf and Niqrazan—two poor and downtrodden young men who are university graduates but live in a cemetery and scavenge trash and rotten food in order to survive (representing the working class and the many marginalized Egyptians); Hafiz—an old man who works as guard of the cemetery where Yusuf and Niqrazan live (representing history); Suleiman—a sadistic security sergeant (representing the corrupt regime and its oppressive security apparatus); Mansur—one of the demonstrators and Suleiman's son; and finally Nada—fiancée of a demonstrator killed in the protests. Each one of these characters has two voices: a regular voice and an internal, private one confined to the character's own thoughts.

In a montage-like format, the play is comprised of eleven scenes. In the first scene, we meet Hafiz, Yusuf and Niqrazan and see the miserable conditions under which they live. Niqrazan seems to think that he is a dog and barks and acts like one. While searching for food in the garbage dumpster, Yusuf and Niqrazan find Doha who emerges out of a trash bag after escaping from the security forces in "the Square". Yusuf knows Doha well, but she cannot remember him. In the later scenes, we get a glimpse of the political uprising with barbed wires and traces of blood scattered around the place. We see Nada in her mourning clothes after Hafiz buries her fiancé—a young man who was shot "with live ammunition". A surreal game-like act follows when Sergeant

Suleiman shoots at people who do not seem to die because the demonstrators are like “genie or cats with seventy lives”. Hafiz is seen busy writing in a big notebook and speaking with his “normal voice” for the first time to the surprise of Niqrazan who thought that Hafiz was mute. We get to hear Yusuf’s narrative and how his love story with Doha caused him so much trouble and misery and landed him in jail under different charges.

In scene 7 “*A conversation with a dead man*,” Doha engages in a self-revealing monologue with a protestor who was sitting upright leaning on a wall next to her. At the end of the scene, however, we discover that the protester is a dead man—perhaps a symbol of Egypt before the revolutionary awakening. Then Nada and Doha, Mansur and Yusuf get together, but the Sergeant comes to drag Yusuf away. The penultimate scene, “*Azrael’s room*,” opens with Yusuf tied down on a rack and being tortured by a whip at the hands of the Sergeant. While the Sergeant is enjoying the torture administered to Yusuf, his son “Mansur” is sent to him in the torture room. The Sergeant collapses and falls down in a state of hysteria. In the final scene “*Stealing dreams*,” the light focus moves from one character to the next and each of the main characters gets his or her turn to speak while circling around Doha. After a stray bullet hits the Sergeant and kills him on the spot, Niqrazan is finally able to stand upright like a human being. All the characters then simultaneously and joyously declare that “The people brought down the regime”. Hafiz, however, gets the last word and displays a more restrained and sober tone. His words reveal mixed feelings and show that he is fully aware of the many hurdles and pitfalls that lie ahead.

3. Analysis

This bare skeleton, however, is fleshed out with vivid, lyrical language and warm, concrete details reflecting Egyptian life, ranging from allusions to modern Egyptian history and the eras of Nasser and Sadat to cultural references steeped in the local Cairene idiom. As this brief review of the plot indicates, the traditional dramatic arc may not easily apply to this play whose eleven scenes lack any concrete acts and are arranged together in a related but rather loose manner. Nonetheless, the first and second scenes act more or less as the exposition providing the background information needed to properly understand the context of the play. The following scenes represent the escalating conflict located in the Square, and thus they might be considered the most dramatic part of the play. The final scene is not a resolution in the conventional sense, but provides a kind of sinking and chilling denouement where the final outcome is in doubt.

Combining realism and expressionism, the play endows the names of its main characters with symbolic significance. Yusuf, like his counterpart in the Biblical and Qur’anic account, is a dreamer; Doha, Yusuf’s object of love and dreams, stands for the “sunlight” or “morn” of a new era; Hafiz denotes memory, being the witness and recorder of the past, while Mansur “victorious” and Nada “dewdrop” are the new generation whose names carry the connotations of triumph, fragility, and hope. The name “Niqrazan”, however, is

hard to pinpoint, but it is an unusual name and can refer to both a man and a pet and thus fits a character that leads a dog's life. As for the Sergeant's name "Suleiman," it might be a reference to the former head of the Egyptian Intelligence under Mubarak's regime: Omar Suleiman. Even though these characters obviously represent metaphorical personifications, most of them are still believable and realistic enough in their depictions.

The younger characters--Doha, Yusuf, Niqrazan, Mansur, and Nada--remain vivid characters that talk and act in a realistic manner typical of people of their circumstances and background. Even Suleiman, whose transformation in the last scene is a bit underdeveloped, is still a realistic albeit an exaggerated portrayal of an obedient and sadistic security Sergeant. Hafiz, however, seems more symbolic than real in his depiction, since his main role seems to be that of a narrative presenter whose poetic *fus-hā* "internal voice" in monologue is more dominant than his *Ammayya* "external voice" in dialogue. His sometimes lengthy monologues, commenting on the actions, hidden fears and inner thoughts of the other characters tend to reveal more about the others than they do about him. In this sense, Hafiz acts less than a character and more like a dramatic chorus, except that he is individualized.

Despite the seriousness of the subject matter and its tragic aspects, the "comedy" of the title stems from a few flashes of sarcastic humor that does not intend to trivialize "sorrows" but rather makes them all the more obvious:

(1)

يوسف : ما انت إللي عامل في نفسك كده ، ماشي مُرابعة وعامل نفسك كلب ، قوم إمشي على رجلك
 وبطل هبل ... انت بني آدم يا نقرزان مش كلب ...
 نقرزان : أنا راضي زمنتك ... عمرك شفت بني آدم عايش العيشه إللي أنا عايشها دي ...
 يوسف : أيوه شفت ... أنا أهه وعم حافظ كمان ، والميتين دول كلهم بني آدمين برضه بس ما بينكلموش
 ... قوم إمشي على رجلك بقى ...
 نقرزان : ما أنا عارفك مش ها تسبيني إلا لما تسمعني موشح كل يوم ده ... يا عم أنا كلب،
 وداني طويلة وليا ديل مخبيه جوّه البنطلون ، بأعض وباهو هو وبارفع رجلي
 على الحيط لمّا أجي أعمل بيبي ... استريحت ...

YUSUF

Well, you yourself choose to be this way... Walking on all fours and pretending to be a dog... Cut it out. Get up and walk on your own two feet. You're a human being, Niqrazan, not a dog.

NIQRAZAN

You be the judge of that. Have you ever seen a human being live the kind of life I live?

YUSUF

Yeah, I've seen it. Look at me and Uncle Hafiz and all these dead people, they're all human beings too, except they don't talk. So get up and walk on your own two feet.

NIQRAZAN

How typical of you— you won't leave me alone until you've delivered your daily lecture. Hey, Uncle, I'm a dog, I have long ears, I hide my tail inside my pants, I bite, I go woof woof, and I lift my leg up to the wall when I have to go pee. Satisfied? (Scene 1)

Any laughter that might arise from this interaction, however, is accompanied by a sense of discomfort. The dehumanization of Niqrazan and his embrace of it as a means of inducing acceptance of his miserable lot in life can simultaneously invoke a feeling of bizarreness and empathic pity. This is reminiscent of the techniques of dark comedy where laughter can be intertwined with tears and the audience is exposed to conflicting emotions all at once (see Jackson 1997). The light touch here cannot masquerade the broken dreams of a bitter and defeated soul.

Niqrazan's deprivation of his basic human rights robbed him of his sense of humanity and self-worth. He would rather think of himself as an animal in order to cope with his condition. After a while, he seems to have forgotten how to "be" human again.

(2)

نقرزان : مش قادر أقف ، شكلي اتعودت أمشي مُرابعة ...

NIQRAZAN

I can't stand; it seems I got used to walking on all fours. (Scene 11)

To restore his stolen humanity, Niqrazan needs an act of awakening both at the individual and societal level. Only through a revolutionary act can he gather the necessary stamina to rise up literally and metaphorically. Later in the same scene, we see that he manages to regain his agency and human dignity with the help of the other demonstrators at the Square:

(3)

نقرزان : [يحاول جاهداً الوقوف] أكيد هاقدر أقف ، ما هو ربنا لو ... لو عابزني كلب كان عملني كده ... أنا [بصعوبة] أنا بني آدم ...

يوسف : حاول تاني ...

نقرزان : [صارخاً] آآه ... [يقف مُنتصباً لأول مرة] أنا ... أنا قدرت أعملها يايوسف ... قدرت أقف ...

NIQRAZAN

(Makes an intense effort to stand up)

I know I can stand up. If God ... if he wanted me to be a dog... he would have made me one...I...

(With difficulty)

I am a human being...

YUSUF

Try again.

NIQRAZAN

(Screaming)

Ahhh...

(He stands upright for the first time.)

I... I did it, Yusuf...I did it...I'm standing. (Scene 11)

The combination of the serious political and social commentary with the use of colloquial Egyptian dialect and mixing the elements of comedy and melodrama goes back to the pioneers of Egyptian theaters Muhammad Taymur (1892-1921) and Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987) (Starkey 2006:173-185). Like Al-Husseini, these pioneers were politically engaged in what could be called "protest theater," a genre with a long lineage in Egypt which produced in the 1960s and 1970s a tremendous output of plays full of social criticism that "...constituted a protest against the ruthless crushing of the individual by the all-powerful machine of a totalitarian state" (M. Badawi 1987:3-4). Replacing the individual hero with the unified people, however, *Comedy of Sorrows* celebrates the coming together of a people as active agents in their own lives:

(4)
 [يتحد الجميع ومعهم " ضحى " في كُتلة واحدة ، ثم يتقدمون خطوة للأمام ...]
 الجميع : [معاً في هتاف واحد] الشعب ...
 حافظ : الله لم يخلق الفساد ...
 الجميع : [معاً] أسقط ...
 حافظ : الله خلق البشر ومنحهم الرحمة ...
 الجميع : [معاً] النظام...

(All unite along with Doha in one front, then take a step forward.)

ALL

(Together in one voice)

THE PEOPLE...

HAFIZ

God did not create corruption...

ALL

(Together)

BROUGHT DOWN...

HAFIZ

God created humans and gave them compassion.

ALL

(Together)

THE REGIME. (Scene 11)

This new "people power" movement that replaces the individual hero has its own new language, the collective language of civil society and human dignity. Being a direct response to the revolution, the focus of the play's plot is on dramatizing a nation's awakening, narrating its moment of popular uprising, and portraying its accompanying struggles. In this dramatization of a significant turning point, a revolution in the living and even current present, *Commedia Al-Ahzaan* displays a Bakhtinian carnival sense of the world.

Like revolutionary times and their aftermath, the carnivalistic life is a life drawn out of its usual rut, and turned upside down. In this sense, the play's celebration of revolution is a celebration of the moment of transition "... the shift itself, the very process of alternation" (Bakhtin 1984, cited in Hamadan

2006:20-21). The carnivalesque-cum-revolutionary act is an act of transformation that defies the establishment and its traditional hierarchical barriers; an act that brings together a mixture of genders, social classes and age groups; and finally an act that blends the tragic and the comic, and is willing to confront death in order to bring about change and renewal.

The celebratory tone, however, is belied--or balanced--by fear of what may come after. As it documents the drama of democracy's birth, the play also warns against its abortion. The jubilation is tempered by a painful awareness of the limitations and risks and the myriad "profiteers" who could hijack the revolution-- as is apparent in Hafiz's final warning:

(5)
حافظ : تلك تركيبة قدرية ... مضى الليل ... مضى من باعونا وشردونا وصنفونا وعذبونا ... مضى الليل ونحن الآن في انتظار الفجر ... سقطت رأس الأفعى ، لكن جسدها مازال ينتفض بقوة ... سقط جدار الخوف ، ومازالت عشرات الجدران الأخرى باقية ... هنا مُتعهد حُرَيَات ، وذاك مزوّر أفكار ، وهذا مستثمر ثورات ، وهناك مُشعل فيتن دولية ، ومازال يطل برأسه مؤليه حُكّام ، وطوائف محتكروا صكوك التوبة ، وخلف الصورة يتخفي قاتل أحلام ، ومُصدر أوهام ، ومُهرب ثروات قومية ... تُجار الألام اليوم أكثر من كل الأيام ... على بُعد خطوات يأتي الفجر ... خبئوا النور ... خبئوا أحلامكم ... خبئوا ثوراتكم فخلف كل نبي يحلم يوجد صانع شر ، وخلف كل ثائر يُضحى يختفي قاطع طريق ... أيها السادة ... مازلنا في انتظار الفجر ...

HAFIZ

As fate would have it, the night has passed. Those who sold us, abused us, discriminated against us, and tortured us have passed. The night has passed and now we await the dawn. The head of the snake has fallen, but its body throbs with life. The wall of fear has fallen, but scores of other walls remain; here is a contractor of freedom, and there a counterfeiter of ideas, this one is an investor in revolutions, and that one an igniter of conflicts; just around the corner lie the idolaters of rulers, and the monopolizers of indulgences, and in the background prowl the murderer of dreams, the exporter of illusions, and the smuggler of national riches; the profiteers are more numerous today than ever before, but a few steps away lies the dawn. Hide the light...hide your dreams...hide your revolutions; behind every dreaming prophet lurks a villain, behind every self-sacrificing revolutionary lies a thug. Ladies and gentlemen, we are still waiting for the dawn...

These prescient words prophetically anticipate the birth pangs of a new-born democracy.

An act of revolution is no guarantee that things will be better unless the masses are awakened to pursue the "vital possibilities" of their freedom by engaging actively in guarding it (Gasset 1930). Revolutions are fragile and must always be protected from all kinds of imposters and usurpers such as the "counterfeiter of ideas...[and] monopolizers of indulgences." The latter is an apt reference to the religious zealots who believe that their way is the only way to salvation. If there is ever to be a real change, a "long revolution"-- to appropriate the title of Raymond Williams' famous book (1961/2001)-- has to follow the "short" one.

I now turn to the language of the play, which is an important part of its appeal. Among the play's most obvious characteristics is its mixture of linguistic registers. A blend of Standard Arabic and Egyptian vernacular, *Commedia Al-Ahzaan* demonstrates an acute awareness of the problem of diglossia in Arab theater and the tension between the popular and the literary (E. Badawi 1999:19-20; see also M. Badawi 1988:19). This mixing of linguistic varieties is characteristic of the nature of Arabic language and the lived realities of its speakers. As defined by Ferguson (1959:336), diglossia is:

A relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature ... but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

The old dilemma of whether to use standard or colloquial Arabic in serious theater is solved by adopting different strategies. Somekh (1991:40) reviews some of the attempts to overcome this challenge in theater and outlines a few strategies summarized below:

1. Colloquialized *fus-hā*, i.e. writing the dramatic dialogue in a relaxed *fus-hā* that reflects some of the features of the vernacular
2. Bivalent texts where the writer prefers lexical and syntactic choices that are shared in the two varieties; the celebrated Egyptian playwright Twafiq Al-Hakim was a case in point of this "third language".
3. Mixed texts where both varieties are used according to the educational level and class of the speaker; the pioneering Lebanese playwright Farah Antun (1874-1922) was an example of this compromise.
4. And finally, the texts, or dual text, strategy, i.e. simultaneously writing two versions of the text at the same time; the writer Mahmud Taymor is a prime example of this strategy.

Al-Husseini in *Commedia Al-Ahzan* modifies the "mixed texts" style by incorporating both written, formal Arabic and the spoken informal dialect (*fus-hā* and *ammiyya*) as a medium of dramatic expression. The main characters in the play, particularly Hafiz, employ two voices: an internal monologue voice that uses literary *fus-hā* - and tends to be poetic (being more dependent on rhetorical metaphors and similes and use of parallel structures), and an external normal voice that moves the dialogue along in the Egyptian vernacular—*ammiyya*. Throughout the play, the high variety or literary form (to use Ferguson's terminology) is adopted for the reflective and isolated internal voice of the characters while *ammiyya* is consistently used as medium of ordinary social and interactive dialogic speech.

The following excerpt from the first scene is an illustration:

(6)

[يرفع " حافظ " عكازه ويضرب بها أحد الحوائط ... تكشف الإضاءة عن " يوسف ونقرزان " ،
وهما يستيقظان من النوم]
يوسف : فيه أيه يا عم حافظ ، هوّ الصُّبح طلّع وللا أيه ...؟
نقرزان : أيه ده يا عم ، دا الدنيا لسه مضلمة ... مافيش خيط نور واحد ضرب في السما ...
حافظ : [بالصوت الداخلي] شمس اليوم لها طعم الفرحة ، ورائحة العطر ، لها رقة الفراش ونعومة
الورد ، لها قوة العشق ودفء المعشوق ... شمس اليوم تحتاج لمن يُصادقها ، لمن يُبادلها حُباً
بحب ، لمن لا يسرقها ... شمس اليوم لو جاءت ولم تنتظرها قد لا تأتي مرة أخرى ...

(HAFIZ raises his stick and strikes at a wall. The stage light reveals YUSUF and NIQRAZAN waking up from their sleep.)

YUSUF

What's going on, Uncle Hafiz? Is it morning or what?

NIQRAZAN

Hey, Uncle, it's still dark. Not a single ray of light in the sky.

HAFIZ (INTERNAL VOICE)

The sun today has the taste of joy, the smell of perfume, the delicacy of butterflies, and the softness of roses; she has the power of love and the warmth of the beloved... The sun today needs someone to befriend her, someone to give her love for love, not someone to give her away. The sun today, if she comes when we are not ready for her, may not come again. (Scene 1)

Any attempt to use *fus-hā* as medium of dialogue by the characters would probably have felt artificial or contrived, but this kind of duality poses a major translational challenge. In translating this play into English, the challenge is to maintain some contrast between the heightened and colloquial prose of the two voices. To some extent, this could be achieved by capturing the salient stylistic features and tropes that mark the two varieties used for each voice. This entails utilizing contractions, discourse markers, repetitions, and other informal features of conversational discourse (see Tannen: 1989) in the dialogue while using more formal diction and parallel syntactic structures (as is apparent in the above extract) to approximate the poetic nature of the Arabic monologues.

One of the salient stylistic features of the more poetic *fus-hā* involves bringing out contrasts in the ideas by contrasting the words, clauses, or sentences within the parallelisms. This use of antithesis depends on the force of this figure of speech to give more emphasis and vivacity, but it can also drag the style sometimes:

(7)

[حركة إضاءة مُتغيّرة ، مؤثر صوتي ، تتجمد حركة ضحّي ... ثم بالصوت الداخلي ...] لنا أقدارنا
ولهم أقدارهم ، لم نُخلق جميعاً لكي نُمَارَس أدوار البطولة ، بعضنا خُلِق ليُمَارَس أدوار الهروب ،
بينما تفرغ البعض الآخر لأدوار التتكر والرزيلة ...

(change of light, sound effect, DOHA freezes.)

DOHA (INTERNAL VOICE)

We have our fate and they have theirs; we are not all created to play the role of the hero; some of us are created to play roles of escape, while others fill the roles of denial and wretchedness. (Scene 1)

Girgis Shukry (2011)-- in an otherwise very positive review-- was critical of Al-Husseini's employment of linguistic duality and especially his overreliance on outmoded rhetorical tropes for the *fus-hā*. The play's quasi-poetic style, though flowery and a bit direct-- Shukry argues--may not necessarily be an aesthetic or communication issue in reading. But in performance, he adds, the audience might be confused by the sudden shifting in the duality of voices. Needless to say, it would be even harder for an English-speaking audience to appreciate the extent of the linguistic duality embedded in the original Arabic text. The challenge of establishing the contrast in the translated text, therefore, lies more heavily with actor and director in performance.

Al-Husseini's obsession with the diglossic situation and its implications for theater and its language is in full display in *Jinat al-Hashshashin (Garden of the assassins)*. This historical play, inspired by the radical acts of the Hashshashin sect under their leader Hassan i Sabbah (around 1092 to 1265 AD) is a critique of the rise of contemporary religious fundamentalism and its adoption of violence as an ideology that justifies its ends. In this play, Al-Husseini chose the "duel text" strategy to theatrically tackle such a weighty historical and contemporary subject matter: first in *fus-hā* (being the variety that represents the more natural choice for historical drama) and then "translating" it to *ammiyya*. While the pioneering Mahmoud Taymour (1894-1973) recast his *ammiyya* works in new *fus-hā* versions in order to reflect his identification with the growing pan-Arab nationalism (Suleiman 2008:41), Al-Husseini's reverse strategy might not be nationalistically inspired. But it appears to be motivated by his unease with the sole use of the vernacular as a medium of expression in dramatic works. Despite the pervasiveness of *Ammayya* and its importance to local identity, the prestige and respectability of *fus-hā* still holds sway for serious Arab writers who may aspire to widen the stageability of their plays.

Some of the initial Arabic reviews of Al-Husseini's play were either dismissive or intrigued by his experimentation. In an insightful critique, Mustapha Al-Daba (2011), for example, saw the first version as the "master copy" of the author and the second as the director's version (the altered version that incorporates the director's vision which might not necessarily be the same as the author's). The first version, Al-Daba maintains, is written with the implicit consciousness of the *reader* in mind as evidenced by the fewer scenes in the *ammiyya* version as well as other differences in signification and scene arrangement. In other words, to adopt the terminology of translation theory, the Arabic of *ammiyya* version was seen as an altered and derivative target text based on the *fus-hā* source text.

The point of going into some detail about *Jinat al-Hashshashin* is to show the extent to which Al-Husseini as a contemporary playwright is willing to engage in the language politics of diglossia, a highly charged issue in Arabic culture (Suleiman 2003, 2004). His linguistic experiment with language shifting and the effect it may have on the dramatic structure of his work and its reception reiterates the argument about the appropriate language use in the Arab theater. In a sense, his experiments take the “continuing debate” back to where it started almost a century ago (see E.Badawi 1999). The playwright’s use of *fus-hā* could be a statement that Standard Arabic is a viable living language suitable for dramatic expression, and not just the preserve domain of non-dramatic fiction such as novels and short stories. Alternatively, his use of *ammiyya* to dramatize a historical play could be a statement that the vernacular is also capable of being a successful medium in a sub-genre (historical drama) that has traditionally been dominated by *fus-hā*. In any case, adopting both varieties of Arabic simultaneously in *Commedia Al-Ahazan* seems to be an artistic and politico-linguistic compromise in an attempt to prove that the two varieties could complement each other. The structured juxtaposition of the two varieties in one play shows Al-Husseini’s view of this functional complementation: Standard Arabic is more elevated, better suited for capturing and expressing deeper thoughts in isolationist and more reflective monologues whereas the vernacular is more suitable for the intimate and dynamic interaction of dramatic dialogue.

4. Conclusion

The double consciousness that characterizes the approach to revolutionary politics in *Comedy of Sorrows* is matched by mixing of the standard and vernacular varieties at the linguistic level. This duality of expression, I argue, gives the play a dynamic theatricality, but the play needs to be put in its socio-historical context in order to be properly appreciated. Responding to an important moment in Egyptian living history, Al-Husseini’s play in a narrow sense is a dramatic portrayal of a popular uprising whose significance might be too early to judge. In a wider and more important sense, however, the play is also about what comes after this moment as well as the disorienting nature of uncertainty and anxious waiting at a time of political upheaval. Just as the pace of revolution has been swift, so too have been the writing and translation of the play—a testament to the urgency of this socio-political and historical event.

Drama in translation provides an opportunity for the audience to gain an intimate understanding of a foreign culture and particular moment in history, while also highlighting commonalities between cultures. *Comedy of Sorrows* offers the audience a profound understanding of recent events in Egypt, which differs significantly from the narrative of the mainstream media. In spite of its local context, the play addresses the cross-cultural themes of economic disparity and collective awakening that speak not only to Egypt’s revolution, but also to recent protest movements elsewhere across the globe. Rather than *Orientalizing* this work in performance, by focusing on the uniqueness of Egyptian or the so-

called “Arab Spring” events, a presentation of the English language version of Al-Husseini’s play has the potential to reveal mutual social challenges and effect change.

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* Mohammed.Albakry, Associate Professor
Middle Tennessee State University
Fulbright Visiting Professor
Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco
Address: Middle Tennessee State University
PO Box 70, 1301 East Main Street, Murfreesboro, TN,
37132. USA.
Email: Mohammed.Albakry@mtsu.edu

**The play was translated by Mohammed Albakry and Rebekah. Maggor and was the opening event for the Radcliffe Conference "Women Making Democracy" at Harvard University, Boston in March 2012. Other performances of the play in the United States took place in New York and Tennessee.

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