



A Perspective on the Progress of the Theatre of Saad al-Faraj, with Emphasis on Censorship in Kuwait and the challenged Play *Custom is Second Nature*

Ali Ali al-Anezi

The Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, Kuwait

Email: ali.alanezi.phd@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study is an examination of the life and work of the Kuwaiti dramatist Saad al-Faraj (1938 -). al-Faraj's name is virtually unknown in the West – particularly in the English-speaking West, although he is well known in Arab World. Only one academic study of any significance has appeared in Arabic on this eminent and fascinating dramatist, who was honoured by NCCAL and the Arab Theatre Institute at the end of his life. This study do not attempt to be comprehensive but focus on particular stages of al-Faraj's career. This study is, therefore, the only one to attempt to see al-Faraj whole. To do so it combines an account of his life which seeks to comprehend the various forces that shaped his thinking with an analysis of one of his main dramatic work. The study concentrates on the years following the trauma inflicted on the Arab world by the catastrophe of the defeat of June 1967. Al-Faraj's career can be divided into two phases: the immature plays of his young manhood; his late period – the 'Epic theatre', when his Nasrism politics were the main factor shaping his drama. The study places al-Faraj in his historical and sociocultural context and provides a brief background explaining the literary and theatrical traditions of the Arab world that influenced his activity as a dramatist. His late work is then examined in turn and his play *Custom is Second Nature* is analysed in accordance with the focus of the study. This means given to the late period, but no significant work is neglected. The study aims to trace the trajectory of al-Faraj's development using a variety of sources: the plays themselves, al-Faraj's own journalism and critical writings, interviews with him, and his close friends and colleagues, in addition to a number of journals, books and articles, some of which contain important interviews with al-Faraj that shed light on his thought and ways of working. Conclusions will be drawn but, more importantly, questions will be raised, and it is hoped that scholars will consider this playwright and his work a subject meriting further research.

Keywords: Saad al-Faraj; *Custom is Second Nature*; Kuwait Theatre; Arab Theatre; Censorship; Abdulhussain Abdulredha; June 1967.

1. Introduction

In the context of Arab theater, those works of particular political nature or those that challenge the conservative notions of modesty and what is appropriate for the public as opposed to the private have consistently fallen in the radar of state sponsored censors. Most of these works, even when removed from official censorship, are works of the oral tradition rather than the written tradition. Within the realm of Arabic theater, this phenomenon is not without precedence. Take, for example, Syrian theater artist Mahmoud Jabar (1935-2008) whose work fell under social criticism for his handling of topics such as corruption and nepotism. When his largely improvised works were performed for live audiences, they were never sponsored by the National Syrian Theater, and each seat carried a high pricetag for the privilege of witnessing such political heresy. Even when Jabar's work was eventually televised, only portions of the plays would be aired as other less socially popular segments were removed. Thus, the censor's pen may cut even the most renowned of artists, leaving the public to learn of their work only through heresy. Such was the case when journalists began to report Jabar's notoriously expensive performances, for which no manuscripts exist. Even outside the real of Arab theater and the censor's pen, theater has undergone analysis, criticism, and widespread study without the possession of manuscripts. Scholars can look no further than *comedia del arte* to find examples of this phenomenon, as well.

This particular study is an examination of the life and work of the Kuwaiti dramatist Saad al-Faraj (1938 -) in the context of early modern Arab theater (1970s- 1990s) as reactionary to ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the use of state sponsored censorship as a means of regulating political discourse in the region. al-Faraj's name is virtually unknown in the West; no academic studies of any significance have appeared in English on this eminent and challenging writer. Even in the Arab world, his standing rests largely upon his celebrity as a cultural icon who has devoted his life to the creation of drama. In this manner, he stands in contrast to other significant twentieth-

century Arab playwrights such as Tawfiq al-Hakim, for example, was also an eminent novelist (Ali al Souleman, 2005a). In its time, al-Faraj's theatre sought to arouse the audience to political action. In the twenty-first century, however, his plays are rarely discussed due to the decline of the theatre in the region, and the little attention that has been devoted to theatre studies by academics, and most importantly, the lack of access to his scripts.

This paper combines an account of al-Faraj's life which seeks to comprehend the various forces that shaped his thinking with a discussion of the role of theater for social action in the Middle East. In this context, the study considers the trauma inflicted on the Arab world by the catastrophe of their defeat in the Arab – Israeli war of June, 1967, October War and the Iran-Iraq War, and al-Faraj's work as a reaction to those traumas. Before considering of his last and most renowned play, we must first address the issue of censorship in the Arab world. Understanding the entrenchment of this practice is essential for moving beyond the need for manuscripts in consideration of al-Faraj or any other censored author's works, as they, quite simply are not available regardless of the claims made by the ministries which hold them. At the outset, this author attempted to access al-Faraj's manuscripts in the archives of the Ministry of Culture in Kuwait. Unfortunately, not all manuscripts deemed "removed" from censorship are actually accessible. Many may be so in name only, and such was the case for the work of Saad al-Faraj.

Despite his reputation among his own people as both a playwright and actor, none of al-Faraj's written works has been translated into English. It must also be admitted that even in the Arab world, al-Faraj's fame rests not so much on his plays as on his well-documented acting career and struggle with censorship. This contradiction is attributable to two factors, as the scholar Ali al Souleman points out: theatre in the Arab world and elsewhere has lost its dominance as an art form as film, television and computers have gained in status; and surprisingly little attention is devoted to censored, and thereby inaccessible works, by Arab academics (Ali al Souleman, 2005b). Thus al-Faraj the dramatist has been eclipsed by al-Faraj the celebrity.

It is the aim of this paper to contribute to the understanding of the influence of the modern wars in the region on the content of censored play, and to consider the thematic of modern Arabic drama in particular, by introducing the career of Saad al-Faraj as a dramatist and summarizing – in light of its inaccessibility - his most important work, i. e. *Hatha Sefoh*. This title draws on a popular Kuwaiti proverb; 'This is Saifouh and these are his dilapidated clothes', which is roughly equivalent to 'Custom is Second Nature' in English. Given the complete lack of access to the manuscripts of al-Faraj's plays, the study aims to trace the trajectory of al-Faraj's development using a variety of sources: al-Faraj's summaries plays themselves, his own journalism and critical writings, interviews with him, his friends and colleagues, and numerous journals, books and articles, some of which contain important interviews with al-Faraj's that shed light on his thought and ways of working. The study makes use of an English translation of all the above by this author; it argues that al-Faraj's theatre was influenced by the key political, social and cultural developments of his time, and that he constantly sought to find forms that would express those transformations in dramatic terms.

2. Al-Faraj's Early Years

Fintas is a tranquil village in the South of Kuwait province, situated on a plateau with a commanding view of the Arabian Gulf coast. It was here that al-Faraj was born on 11 January 1938. al-Faraj's generation was the first to benefit from new educational opportunities and his parents encouraged his studies. Although al-Faraj's parents were by no means destitute, it should be remembered that they, and all the other peasants in Fintas and beyond, were living under an inherited semi-feudal system which the British Empire had done nothing to reform (Marry Ann Tétreault, 1995). The excesses of the feudal landlords were recorded in living memory, and al-Faraj's grandfathers would apparently tell him tales of the cruelty of life (Ali, 2016). The lords of Fintas owned over 10 square kilometers of land and had ruled the district for more than one hundred years. It seems that al-Faraj himself never witnessed any such incidents, but his elders' bitter stories seem to have made an indelible impression on him (Ali, 2016), though the power of the feudal dynasties would not be broken until 1961, the first year of the independence of Kuwait, which marked the first real attempt at land reform and social justice in the country. Al-Faraj certainly did witness how hard the life of the peasants could be, and he also witnessed the ways in which they alleviated the harshness of their existence. One of these was the evening meeting, "at which the farmers would enact impromptu dramas full of black humour and striking characters, which commented on the difficulties of their lives and their daily concerns" (Ali, 2016).

Al-Faraj's childhood was spent not only in academic study but, perhaps more importantly, in the study of his own people. He later spoke of the purity of the peasants' community, far removed from the contamination of modern civilisation and its materialistic complexities: 'The distinctive thing is how those people lived, helping each other in the face of life's hardships. The richest people were the poorest because of the extent of the support and charity they offered. The rich would give the poor families crops from their fields. So there was a spirit of love and solidarity among them' (Ali, 2016). The Kuwaiti critic Khalid Ramadan (1950 -), who spent most of his adult life in Kuwaiti theatres, remarked that 'his primary school teacher recalled that even as a boy al-Faraj was concerned with the plight of the people of his village. He was a serious nationalist and brighter than the other children of his age' (Ali, 2015). As well as attending the evening meetings, al-Faraj and his young friends would sit among his elders as they discussed their affairs, and he also began to acquire a little knowledge of his heritage. Guests of his parents would tell the children stories, sometimes from the folk tradition; religious men would discourse on the Quran; and there might be readings from the *al-Zeir Abu Layla al-muhalhil Adi ibn Rabia'*, the pre-Islamic epic of heroism and valiant deeds.

In 1969, having gained his Baccalaureate, he decided to pursue his studies in Western-based education. Al-Faraj travelled to England's capital and took up a scholarship in media. During his stay in England he became increasingly

interested in serious theatre, devouring works by European and American playwrights, including the Existentialists, Marxists and practitioners of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' and 'Epic Theatre'; he was also drawn to read critical literature on the theatre. It was at this time that al-Faraj became a reader of *al-Adab* and *al-Raid*, the most influential Arab and Kuwaiti literary journals, which translated and published works by Camus, Sartre and Brecht. In the late 1960s, the magazines had a great impact on al-Faraj's approach to theatre, and the influence of modern theatre is apparent in some of his early plays (Ali, 2013). Although al-Faraj had begun to write plays during his period of study in Kuwait (1962 – 1967), he wrote nothing while pursuing his post-graduate studies, and so the plays are the work of a young man beginning to find his way as a dramatist. His main preoccupation in the early years, prior to his direct exposure to the west and western drama and theory, was the relationship between the individual and the society and its authorities, especially the autocrat regimes to be found throughout the Arab world. These plays are of little consequence, especially in the context of Kuwaiti theatre at the time. al-Faraj himself disparaged his achievements in these early works, not so much for their deficiencies as drama as "for their uncritical and undisciplined absorption of social justice" (Ali, 2016). Above all, he criticised his own "inability to take a clear intellectual line towards contemporary political realities" (Ali, 2016). As Ramadan points out, however, the case of al-Faraj is a complex one, and argues that al-Faraj was influenced by the Anarchist European theatre and that his work contains both dystopian and symbolist elements. While the early plays no doubt contain elements of all these, the Syrian critic Nadim Mua'ala (1948 - 2014) adopts a simpler view of these works: 'Though often said to have been influenced by Anarchist European theatre, these early works are focussed on the "social condition" of the individual, rather than the issues of the "freedom, equality, and mutual aid" that mark Anarchist literature'. This reflection on the social condition, though loosely present in al-Faraj's early work, would become a continuing theme when he would return to the East and pick up his writer's quill once again.

After gaining his degree from in 1974, al-Faraj returned to Kuwait, where he served in the Ministry of Information and became head of the drama division of Kuwait TV. At that time, al-Faraj had begun to write plays in the model of Bertolt Brecht's 'political theatre'. He pursued his study of theatre, broadening his reading and acquainting himself with various schools (Ali, 2016). Al-Faraj's popularity with Kuwaiti audiences, however, blossomed not necessarily from their love of his plays, but for his role within them. Soon, al-Faraj became famous for acting the role of "Saad" in a number of his plays; the character is highly successful and famous among GCC audience. He is best known for his personality of sarcastic humor that made a mockery of the Arab situation comedy template.

Al-Faraj's work is, however, greatly influenced by the political events in the Arab World and this was reflected on the different plays he wrote and directed. Mua'ala has commented that "al-Faraj is quite serious in real life. He, however, extracts comic energy from his painful political experiences. He acts without worrying about audience's reaction; a good actor should always look natural, committed towards his work, stay close to text as much as possible and make the character seem real. I believe, al-Faraj personifies all these features" (Ali, 2013). Of particular interest at that time, is his interview with Kuwait TV, in which he was asked to advise Arab dramatists on creating an Arab theatre in the absence of a strong rooted modern tradition; al-Faraj replied that attacks on the abuse of authority could be based on the implied criticism of the class conflict system found in the folkloric tradition. He suggested it would be a mistake to attempt to create theatre on the Arab models, which were inflexible and stifled spontaneity. Kuwaiti dramatists should therefore seek to make a fresh start, inspired by a modern collective enthusiasm (Kuwait Television, 1975). His comedic interpretations of real-life social conditions provided an outlet to do just this, and those social conditions are deeply rooted in the history of wars and conflict that have disturbed the Middle East for more than half a century.

3. The Undeniable Influence of War

Al-Faraj's theatre was heavily affected by the political and nationalistic implications of the catastrophe of the Six-Day War of June 1967, and the Ramadan War of October 1973. The two wars were for him, as for most Arabs, emblems of profound shock and suffering. Each was for him, a turning point in every respect, especially surrounding his ideas about theatre. This was a collective experience, as the wars "...had a clear impact on the public in general, and on educated men in particular, as to their beliefs, behaviour and thinking" (Al-Tahir Ahmid, 1997). As for al-Faraj himself, the memory of the shock was still vivid even as he approached his declining years. In an interview made by his friend and collaborator Ali al-'Awadi, he recalled:

My ideology is Nasserist. When Nasser acknowledged the 1967 defeat and we knew for certain it was true, I felt that this was the end. Everything connecting me to life, to being itself, had collapsed (Ali Husain al-Awadi, 2015).

The dominant idea of the 1960s and early 1970s was that of a nationalism not of individual countries but of the Arab peoples as a whole. This idea was embodied for a time in the personality of Nasser, the ruler of Egypt, whose major achievements, such as the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956 and the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) of Egypt and Syria (1958-61), were seen as triumphs in the Arab world and led to significant changes in local and international alignments (Roger Allen, 2000). The defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan at the hands of Israel in 1967, however, halted the advance of Arab nationalism and opened a period of disunity and increasing dependency on one or another of the superpowers, with the USA in the ascendant (Albert Hourani, 2002a).

Al-Faraj placed a high value on Arab unity, and like many Arabs in general and Kuwaitis in particular, he welcomed the establishment of any Arab unity. However, Nasser's attempt to rule UAR antagonised the Syrian merchant class, and the UAR was dissolved in 1961 after a military coup. Al-Faraj detested Arab authoritarian

regimes and all their successors apart from Nasser. Perhaps a few words should be said about al-Faraj's attitude to Nasserism. Al-Faraj belonged to no party; Mua'ala has commented that the playwright hated despotism "and Nasser wasn't a symbol of despotism back then" (Ali, 2013). According to Mua'ala, al-Faraj was a free Pan-Arabism, and he supported Nasser only because he espouses the unification of the Arab World, and he did not wish to witness the global triumph of capitalism.

The catastrophes of the late sixties and early seventies marked a turning-point in al-Faraj's life and work, and led to the production of *Hat al-Tair Tar al-Tair (The Bird Landed the Bird Flew)* in 1971. This play, written expressly for the stage by al-Faraj's comrade Abdul Amir al-Turki, with al-Faraj as the leading character, was Kuwait's first overtly 'political' play about class conflict, and the first notable success, to be halted mid-way through performing. In his own writing, al-Faraj, attacked Arab dictatorships in play after play; al-Faraj wrote *Bani Samit (Sons of Silent)* in 1975, with full awareness of the betrayals and compromises apparently necessitated by the realpolitik practised by Arab regimes. "It is evident from the play that he believed that these unhappy events were generated by the very nature of the social and political systems obtaining not only in dictatorial military states, but in every society divided into classes" (Ali, 2015). "The only possible solution, the play suggests, is to sweep away all such societies, to abolish hierarchies of every kind, and to progress towards a truly classless community" (Ali, 2015).

The real beneficiary of the triumph of nationalism, however, was not the Arab peoples, but the state – those who controlled the government and those in the military and civil service through whom its power was exercised. The post-colonial governments had inherited the means of control, armies, police forces and bureaucracies. Indigenous public ownership became the rule, and oil became the key to development even in those countries that did not possess it: in Syria, twenty-five per cent of revenues came from the pipelines which carried oil from Iraq and Arabia to the Mediterranean coast. The most spectacular example of state intervention, however, was given not by industry but by reform of the system of landownership. This had the greatest political and social importance, because most of the population of the Arab countries still lived in the countryside and also because almost everywhere the large landowners formed the most powerful class, possessing the most influence over the government and the most capital. As for oil, al-Faraj was always concerned that oil wealth was not used to benefit the people; cities were growing everywhere, especially Hawally and Nagra in Kuwait, which was swollen by Palestinian refugees (from 30,000 in 1948 to 250,000 in 1970). Many other Palestinians ended up in camps or slums elsewhere in Jordan, and in Syria and in Lebanon. The camps on the outskirts of Beirut, Damascus and Amman became virtual quarters of those cities (Albert Hourani, 2002b).

In most Arab cities there was a great gulf between rich and poor, particularly the destitute people who migrated from the countryside in search of a meagre living. The plight of such people is dramatized, for example, through the characters of Saad and Hussain in *Sons of Silent*. This gap became wider than ever, giving rise to popular movements and mass demonstrations in which students and workers figured prominently. 'With the failure of the social democratic experiment the populace looked for salvation either to the extreme Right (Muslim Brotherhood) or the extreme Left (Marxism)' (Badawi, 1993a). Islam remained a powerful force, and there were modernist attempts to reform the faith that were influential among the educated elite and reflected the discontent many Arabs felt with themselves and their world. Perhaps the writer 'who best expressed the problems and hopes of his generation' (Albert Hourani, 2002c) was Taha Hussein (1889-1973), a blind scholar, historian, novelist and critic, who was committed to the cause of social justice. Hussein is unquestionably one of the most significant intellectual and moral figures of the twentieth century in the Arab world, and was a great influence on al-Faraj among many Arab intellectuals in his later years (Ali, 2016). With the rise of the Islamists in the Middle East, Hussein has become the object of attack by conservative religious thinkers (John, 1995). Al-Faraj himself, was a committed secularist, who never refrained from attacking Islamists themselves, reserving his scorn for narrow-minded or power-hungry clerics, who appear in abundance in his dramatic work and are heavily criticised in his writings.

Other developments of the 1970s disturbed al-Faraj: the Arab unity ideas collapsed gradually, and the Arab states grew militarily weaker and became disunited, particularly with regard to the Arab-Israeli problem. The gap between rich and poor was growing, and increasing oil wealth led to dependence on external investment. Al-Faraj later satirised these developments in his late play *'Ala Haman Ya Fira'on (You Can't Fool Me)* in 1978. The play revolves around a wealthy and feuding Kuwaiti families, the Abualhasanis and the Rikaies, who are real estate tycoons. The power and influence of the USA in the region increased, and the *infatih* opened Arab economies to the West, led to a consumer boom and encouraged the rapid development of the private sector (Albert Hourani, 2002d). Al-Faraj became depressed; President Sadat of Egypt visited Menachem Begin in Israel with a view to opening direct negotiations for peace. The betrayal was too much for the Arab World. The mood in Arab World was further darkened by the shock of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the seizure of Beirut in 1982 (Ali, 2016). He also sought to understand the transformations that were profoundly changing Arab societies; the inexorable expansion of the mass media and their exploitation by repressive governments, together with the increasing influence of traditional forces hostile to modernism, had a great impact on the Arab world and contributed to the decline of the theatre and the marginalization of the intellectual.

As the decade progressed, al-Faraj began to entertain the hope that he might find it possible to return to drama, as he reflected on what he had achieved and failed to achieve. It was necessary to revise his opinions, to reconsider his earlier responses to events and to discard his broken dreams. When he returned to writing drama he attempted - without abandoning history or politics - to free himself from his earlier illusions and turned away from larger political questions to deal with personal courage, integrity and responsibility. For the first time he gave himself a relative freedom to liberate himself from the duty to write only about issues of national or international importance. He turned instead to creating a theatre that explored more intimately the relationship between the individual and society. Abandoning the grand narrative of modernization and focusing on the personal and private, al-Faraj brought

the individual character to centre stage (Ali, 2016). Though still an Arab Nationalist, he came to see that his consciously held project of writing in the service of a political reforms that had proved a vain dream had constrained his potential as a dramatist. Moreover, the focus on collective action had made him neglect the struggles and sufferings of individuals, which he had considered unworthy of serious attention. During this period, al-Faraj refrained from writing plays for nearly a decade. Though his pen was silent he was storing fodder, as it were, for his controversial re-emergence as a playwright. Theatregoers and censors would note that his work was deeply rooted in the disappointments of the latter half of the twentieth century and the failure of the pan-Arabic movement.

It should be remembered that the general situation in the region allowed the entertainment of the hope that 'change' could sweep away corruption and the corrupted. Many groupings, from the Marxists on the left to the Muslim Brotherhood on the right, believed that the despotic Arab states, weakened by the defeat, could be overthrown by the people – as long as the people were properly led and guided. Belief in the 'inevitable' collapse of the existing order was not confined to the Arab countries: Europe and the USA were also shaken previously by powerful political disturbances that seemed to some to be the heralds of profound social transformation, linked by a shared international consciousness of the need for radical reform. Street protests were occurring in Germany, where there had been a wave of student agitation against the university system; in Spain where from October 1967 to June 1968 students organised street demonstrations for freedom of the press and against the Franco regime; in Italy, where students campaigned in Rome, Pisa, Turin and Milan for reforms of the university system; in Poland, where students were in the forefront of the liberalisation movement in the period later to be known as the Prague Spring. 'A wind of freedom had swept across Europe and had taken to cosmopolitan Paris all the seeds of revolt it had gathered from different parts of the continent. And in Paris, these seeds found their most fertile ground yet' (Marc Rohan, 1988). The 'May events' of 1967 almost brought down the French government. Al-Faraj was studying in the First World in that turbulent era, and was apparently exhilarated by the ferment taking place in the capitals of the old colonial powers.

Al-Faraj deplored the condition of his nation and strove to find a solution. He was to find it, at least for a time, in the committed theatre. Al-Faraj later said:

After the first Gulf War, the battle to create a relationship between theatre and awareness was a pressing issue. It was clear that the theatre, like the Arab people, was taken by surprise by the wars, and it had been too late in responding to the pressing issues. It seems that because of negligence and other complex cultural problems in which the ruling regimes had a hand, the theatre had not found time to tackle these questions (Marc Rohan, 1988).

It seemed to al-Faraj that the wars had dealt a fatal blow to his earlier works; it had also unmasked the dreams that Arab leaders, had peddled in their public addresses. The playwright began to fashion his pen into a surgical instrument, anatomising the anaesthetised regional body, hoping that his theatre would be a catalyst in bringing about change. For al-Faraj, the Arab Wars was not simply a bitter military defeat; rather it was a natural consequence of the power monopoly and corruption that characterised the dictatorial regimes, as well as a direct reflection of the internal defeat of the ordinary citizen brought about by the moral and often physical torture he had experienced daily at the hands of such regimes. For him, the defeat revealed the true nature of the relationship between the ruling regimes and the people, evident in the removal of the ordinary citizen from the decision-making process. It revealed also the potential importance of what he termed later 'the enlightenment of the Arab people' through an 'astute theatre', that would urge them to recapture their social and political rights, stolen by the totalitarian regimes that ruled them with an iron fist. As he explained, *Custom is Second Nature* was written under the pressure of the absurd wars, in an atmosphere of depression and frustration and from a desire to bring about enlightenment. It was a matter of urgency not only to reflect the existing state of affairs but also to try to describe the human reality in such a way that would open other horizons and allow us to seize a better future' (Marc Rohan, 1988).

At first al-Faraj found himself unable to respond to the Arab Wars. He vividly described his struggle with the impulse to abandon writing altogether: 'Following the wars, as a scattered Arab nationalist, I wondered, why do we write? The question was so bitter' (Marc Rohan, 1988). However, when he returned to his work in the 80's he found that the vitality of the capital's intellectual and cultural life gave him the energy to begin to write again. He determined to eschew what he now saw as equivocation and nightmarish distractions, by radically reconsidering and going beyond his early theatre. Of this new mood he later wrote, 'The wars was so bitter that it created a [new] kind of awareness' (Ali Husain al-Awadi, 2015).

4. Censorship and Kuwaiti Theater

It has been mentioned already that the plays of Saad al-Faraj, though uncensored in name and stored with the Ministry of Culture in Kuwait, are in practice inaccessible. Such is the case for countless other works, as censorship has a long history from a global perspective. Its use and practice in the Middle East is also renowned, as regimes apply and remove the use of censorship over all manner of literature. Such applications of censorship were secured early on in the post-colonial period following the Second World War. They tend to be broad and sweeping, and are the reason al-Faraj's work remains to this day inaccessible by the both the general public, including GCC academics. The Kuwaiti censors, in particular, had wide-ranging powers granted them by the 1956 Press and Publications Law; these included censorship of "all means of communication, propaganda and publicity before issue; also their seizure, confiscation and suspension and the closure of the places in which they are printed" (Kuwait Press and Publication Law, 1956).

Thus the Kuwait theatre from the nineteen sixties through the nineteen eighties attempted to be a cultural ornament, presenting examples of world theatre or panegyrics to the regime and showed nothing al-Faraj considered

relevant to Arab life. Al-Faraj commented that its “main concern was to tailor its activity to the identity and needs of its Bourgeois audience” (Ali, 2016). Al-Faraj therefore decided to oppose the government-sponsored Arab theatre, which deliberately ignored the ‘downtrodden citizens’. Before Abdul al-Turki’s *The Bird Landed*, some writers had commented critically on political situation, although such comments were very rare, and they were concealed, similarly to those in al-Faraj’s early works, under symbolism and ambiguity in order to escape the attentions of the authorities. The censorship of every form of expression in the dictatorial states of the third world is surely too well known to need detailed comment here. The case of *The Bird Fell* is totally different, because al-Faraj and al-Turki were determined to confront the government with its misdeeds and failings, and to issue a challenge to its sensors, no matter what the consequences.

The Bird Landed was a problematic case for the authorities from its earliest days. It should be noted, however, that the ban was lifted in 1976, by which time *The Bird Landed* was no longer considered a threat or even a nuisance to the regime, which was now more securely established and even began to consider its formerly ‘dangerous’ rebels to be valuable propaganda assets. *The Bird Landed* demonstrated that in order to maintain their power, the regimes must tighten their grip on every significant kind of culture, and ensure that their propaganda is disseminated as widely as possible. To do this, they made use of theatrical censorship both directly, by banning plays, and indirectly by encouraging productions such as those presented by the Arab National Theatres. Sometimes Arab regimes took more extreme measures than those applied to al-Faraj. we have noted that the Syrian poet Adonis (1930 -) was imprisoned in 1956; and in Iraq, and in Egypt, for instance, a playwright, an actor, or even a singer might be persecuted by the security authorities though the fabrication of false evidence and jailed. The Egyptian secret police used this tactic against playwrights and intellectuals opposing Nasser’s rule (1954-1970), on the ground that they were guilty of undermining the 1952 July revolution which had overthrown King Farouq. The eminent journalist Mustafa Amin (1914-1997) was imprisoned in the mid-1960 and tortured by Nasser’s jailers for his opposition to the regime. The charge was that he had been spying for the USA. He was released by President Sadat in 1974. Whether direct or indirect, the effect of censorship was to create the anger and grief reflected in al-Faraj’s theatre, and to cause people to reject the state’s ‘ready-made’ awareness and the dominance of the single view in those countries where the tongues of millions of people are cut off.

Censorship plagued the dramatists since the 1960s, and continuous to restrict freedom of expression; indeed, modern Arabic and Arabian Peninsula drama cannot be understood without an understanding of the power of the censor. In the early part of GCC playwrights’ career censorship was imposed by governments for political rather than religious reasons, but, as Mostyn notes; “Throughout the Arab world the secular nationalism and Marxism of the 1960s and 70s have given way to Islamic fundamentalism” (Trevor Mostyn, 2002a). This force has had a powerful impact on every aspect of life in the Arab world, drama included. Mostyn further remarks that the 1980s and 90s witnessed a dramatic growth in the influence of political Islam, which has at times become the equivalent of a shadow government, or even the actual government, as in Arab world (Trevor Mostyn, 2002a). In the later part of their career GCC playwrights became deeply concerned by this trend, seeing it as inimical to their most cherished principles. Their championing of the thought of secularists such as Taha Hussein should be understood in this context. They were right to be concerned: even today their works are unavailable in so many GCC countries, some cannot be performed without cuts. Nevertheless, political censorship continued (Trevor Mostyn, 2002a).

Censorship is a universal phenomenon, and in this sense al-Faraj is right to claim that the play applies to all class societies. It is not necessarily true, however, that all class societies must rely on ever more terror and repression. Bourgeois democracies have other means of ensuring stability and compliance. Augusto Boal remarks in this connection:

[...] the ruling classes pretend kindness and become reformist [...] in the belief that a social being will be less revolutionary to the extent that he is less hungry. And this mechanism works. It is not for any other reason that the working classes in capitalist countries show so little revolutionary spirit, and rather prove to be reactionary, like the majority of the proletariat in the United States. They are social beings with refrigerators, cars and houses [...] (Augusto Boal, 2002).

As in al-Faraj’s case, in 1992 the Syrian left-wing playwright Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997) was interviewed by the American journalist Judith Miller. He told her that Syrian officials tolerated some of his more critical work because it enabled them to show the West that Syrians enjoyed freedom of expression. “My very existence is propaganda” (Judith Miller, 2002), he explained. He pointed out that the Syrian censors had banned his prominent play, *The Rape*, and that *al-Thawra* and *Al-Baath* newspapers had been barred from publishing his name; like Israel, he was “an abstraction”. The regime’s displeasure had been aroused by the play’s final scene, in which Wannous bring himself to create a sympathetic Jew who believed in Israel’s right to exist.

The work of censors in various parts of the Arab world and in all genres of literature have operated to create an available cannon of literatures limited to socially acceptable themes and topics. Simultaneously, censorship has forged a celebrity of sorts among those whose works fall under its scrutiny. It is in this frame of reference that we should consider the most popular work of Saad al-Faraj. Driven by a growing frustration over the unceasing procession of wars, and emboldened by a sense of social righteousness, al-Faraj penned *Hatha Sifoh*, or *Custom is Second Nature*. The play would quickly be shut down, but its themes, as re-told by al-Faraj and his contemporaries, captured a spirit of social critique that has allowed its folk memory to remain alive and to be retold here, even as the physical evidence of its existence remains under lock and key.

5. The Final Action: Custom is Second Nature

In the mid 1980's, al-Faraj resumed his passion for playwriting and produced four plays, after a gap of four years: *Daqat al-Saa'ah (The Clock Ranged)* (1984), *Momathil al-Shaa'b (The People's Representative)* (1985), *Hami al-Diyar (Protector of Homes)* (1985), *Hatha Sifoh (Custom is Second Nature)* (1987). In these works he reconsidered the relationship between theatre and politics, using the theatre as an instrument to unmask corruption and as a mirror to reflect the real situation of man in the Arab countries as he saw it. Al-Faraj said in an interview published in 2017 that, 'We should create a theatre because we want to change and develop the people's mentality' (Ali Husain al-Awadi, 2015). He later argued that when 'people are given the chance to express themselves and learn how to make their voices heard, they will gradually come to possess the boldness necessary for making a true statement and thus shattering the internal power that has seized their destiny' (Ali, 2016). Al-Faraj emphasised that in *Custom is Second Nature* he sought to create a theatrical form, controlled by the people rather than controlling them, which would be 'active'; that is, which would lead to a revolt against the existing reality. 'I said to myself,' al-Faraj continued, 'why don't we start from the status quo [...] why don't we work out a theatre that is suitable for us?'

Al-Faraj began to write *Custom is Second Nature* at the end of Iran-Iraq War (1980 – 1988); Kuwait initially stayed neutral and also tried mediating between Iran and Iraq, yet in 1987, Kuwait (whose tankers were being attacked by the Iranians) asked the US to intervene. He evidently concluded that the situation required that those who had the courage and determination should speak out against the communities that had failed internally and internationally. Al-Faraj did not shrink from speaking what he believed to be the truth about the troubled reality in Arab world and its causes, though he wanted to do so in a new way. *Custom is Second Nature* dealt with that bitter reality in a way that was unprecedented in the theatre of Kuwait; al-Faraj's method was one of direct attack and loud denunciation of the totalitarian regimes understanding of ordinary citizens freedom.

After he had abandoned writing for the theatre, he explained the nature of that change. Unsure of the future of Arabic drama, his words were bitter:

When I started writing *Custom is Second Nature*, I wanted to convey the meaninglessness of writing and the emptiness of words (Ali, 2016).

According to al-Faraj, *Custom is Second Nature*, came at a time, when drama was predominantly a "...mouthpiece [of the people]" (From an interview conducted by al-Hurra TV channel). The extraordinary challenge posed by the play and the debate it immediately engendered alarmed the government. In late 1987, after a few performances the authorities not only banned the play, but the Ministry of information also withdrew the script from sale, thus preventing its printing as well as any further performances. They saw the play as an outrageous instigation against Islamists, and were not persuaded to reconsider even when he was awarded a prize for committed drama by the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters in 2006.

He had a conviction that culture in general and theatre in particular were being methodically marginalised by the totalitarian Arab regimes, and he believed that the role of the theatre was to improve the downtrodden members of society mentality, especially the peasants and working class, whom al-Faraj called 'the lower-class citizens' (From an interview conducted by al-Hurra TV channel). In other words, it should serve the transformation of society by acting as a catalyst of serious action.

In the absence of an accessible manuscript, a detailed summary must suffice: in *Custom is Second Nature* al-Faraj employs a complex structure of intersecting voices and narratives, creating a polyphony of different discourses (Ali, 2013). The play is based on the suffering of Kuwait on the hands of Islamic forces in the 50's era, using this event to comment on the Islamist growing power in the 80's. It is critical of the extremist scholars, and offers qualified praise to the moderate clerics. In *Custom is Second Nature* truth is presented as problematic; no one individual's recollection or interpretation can be taken as definitive. The play dramatizes the search for truth conducted by the various members of an upper-class family living in Kuwait in the 1950s – the 'second nature' of the title. The story of the family's secret is presented by a multiplicity of voice, as the authorial voices is diminished. The play consists of six parts, comprising an interwoven accumulation of connected events and narratives delivered by several narrators. Thus truth is presented as incapable of being objectively established or agreed by consensus. In the closing scene the *Msolifchi* (a kind of storyteller), who comments ironically on the events at various points in the play, demystifying the action, calls the truth "a superior Mirage" (Ali, 2016). Truth does not exist, there are only stories and news about the truth.

The contradictions in the characters and the tensions in their motivations are the substance of the drama and are intended to prompt critical thought in the audience, which is presented with the argument that individuals take no less responsibility in the making of history than nations and governments (Ali, 2015). *Custom is Second Nature* themes are very varied, ranging from savage satire on global capital and the consumer culture to meditations on family history, memory and the relativity of truth, as regard to four characters, the Head Merchant, his two companions and an Islamic theologian called al-Mulla, who it later emerges are the powers behind controlling the downtrodden class. Ramadan notes that this work is politically and humanly richer and more significant than anything al-Faraj had written before (Ali, 2015). Anti-corruption is a constant theme in this play. In this work al-Faraj, eschewing all religious or philosophical comfort, confronts his own disappointment in its naked reality.

Custom is Second Nature was al-Faraj's first and last work to reflect this new programme. Khalid Ramadan, remarked, 'When I saw *Custom is Second Nature*'s first performances [in Kuwait] I felt so happy in spite of the grim regional conditions of that time. I was glad because this was the first time that a GCC playwright had stood firm in that difficult time to confront the truth in all its severity and harshness' (Ali, 2015). The play achieved immediate fame and remains highly regarded among Kuwaiti intellectuals. No other Kuwaiti play of the late 1980s has achieved

such a reputation, which is founded upon several important features. *Custom is Second Nature* is a transitional work, for it too is concerned with ‘historical awareness’ and, while presenting a narrative that conforms to the generally accepted facts, offers a revisionist view of the Arab clerics that seeks to overturn the pious myth of the sober-minded character. Thus the play is in certain respects the counterpart of Brecht’s *Life of Galileo*. But the cleric is only one figure among the play’s many characters (Ali, 2015). Second, *Custom is Second Nature* was one of the rare Kuwaiti plays to draw a demarcation line between two periods. It discards the sensationalism and empty nationalist slogans that had predominated in the 1960s and 1970s, and attempts to anatomise the conditions prevailing in the region in order to disclose the real causes of the *status quo*. Third, and perhaps most importantly, in addition to its enlightenment purpose, it also called for a change in the function of theatre, and its role in serving society. Shortly after writing the play, al-Faraj said, ‘I want a theatre that teaches and that inspires to man development, challenges the audience, provokes them, pushes them to ask the question: ‘why [are things as they are]?’ (Ali, 2016) This naïve and unrealistic hope, partly fired by al-Faraj’s experiences in Arab Wars, was doomed to fail in the very different conditions of the Arab world.

Custom is Second Nature was never reprinted even for academic usage, and never produced ever since, “to avoid censorship” (Ali, 2013). According to a newspaper report, “The play was very well received in Kuwait [back then], and was shown there for a number of nights” (Ali, 2015). In Kuwait, this success caught the attention of a number of critics and directors, who requested that the censor lift the ban and permit the play to be performed at The Second Festival of Theatre Arts, to be held the same year (Ali, 2015). The authority concerned had already decided to lift the ban on similar works, but quickly went back on its decision after few a days without giving any reason or justification; Ramadan has commented that “the censors’ decisions were often capricious and difficult to fathom” (Ali, 2015). Mostyn notes that the Arab governments censors had wide-ranging powers granted them by the State of Emergency Laws; these included censorship of “all means of communication, propaganda and publicity before issue; also their seizure, confiscation and suspicion and the closure of the places in which they are printed” (Trevor Mostyn, 2002b). So *Custom is Second Nature* and many other similar plays, were a problematic case for the authorities from its earliest days.

Al-Faraj had prepared his actors for the performance of the 7th night, and the dress rehearsal took place a couple of days before the first nights, when the Ministry of Information officials arrived. According to al-Faraj, “In 1987, the rehearsals and the productions were going very well. Some officials came, and when we had finished, they said to us ‘This play is inappropriate’ and told me, we would not be allowed to continue presenting it the following evenings. I was summoned later on for an interrogation. [...] I think the play was banned because of its similarities with the socio-political situation [in the region] back then, and because it contains a perceptive reading of the political situation” (Ali Husain al-Awadi, 2015). Curiously, censors had already after Kuwait’s liberation in 1991, removed the ban on *Custom is Second Nature*; according to al-Faraj, no performances were given ever since. Ramadan commented, “Censorship in Arab World is unpredictable. You can’t say for sure why they released this play and banned that one!” (Ali, 2015). However, it is probable that censors considered these plays banned before 1990 were directed against the old issues and thus could be released for performance, while those written after 1991 could be interpreted as alluding to current situation and therefore should be banned. But even after 1991 al-Faraj did not present *Custom is Second Nature* in Kuwait, and as this author has noted several times, the manuscript is still inaccessible (The National Council for Culture).

When al-Faraj awoke from bitter experience of *Custom is Second Nature*, he was, Ramadan recalls, “in complete shock” (Ali, 2015). He emerged into a world which, he realised, had no place for the writer he had been. There could be no question of simply returning to his former methods. *Custom is Second Nature* had been his last attempt to bring the unchallengeable truth before the people; now that truth itself had disappeared like a dream. “At the end of the eighties”, he told Ramadan, “I reached the point of desperation, where my life appeared absurd. My dreams melted away before my eyes” (Ali, 2015). Although al-Faraj continued to work as an actor he abandoned his chosen calling as a playwright and devoted himself to a radical reassessment of all he and his contemporaries had struggled to achieve. The grand narrative of the class struggle, which had ignored and marginalised the individual, was called into question, and al-Faraj came to realise that the great project of modernisation – social, cultural and political – to which he had devoted his energies, was no longer relevant to his society. He was also forced to acknowledge that the theatre was no longer the locus of debate that it had been in the 1970s and 1980s, and, more importantly, that the ideology that had underpinned and given impetus to that theatre had been discredited. He and his fellow writers had been guilty of oversimplification and naivety; in their absolute certainty that they were in possession of the truth they had turned a blind eye to the developments that were occurring around them with inexorable force.

To conclude, As M. M. Badawi has written, “More than any other literary form perhaps, even more than the novel and the short story, drama affords incontrovertible evidence that Arab writers have been the political conscience of the Arab nation” (Badawi, 1993b). Al-Faraj took his role as guardian of the Arab world’s political conscience very seriously indeed, and this sometimes led him to reject possibilities that might have proved fruitful. According to Ramadan, al-Faraj was approached after *Custom is Second Nature* by Abdulhussain Abdulredha, a famous comic actor and comedian. Abdulredha, described by Mua’ala as ‘Kuwait’s Woody Allen’ (Ali, 2013), asked al-Faraj to work together, on a project in which Abdulredha would star, for a substantial fee. al-Faraj refused this attractive offer. What are, however, the ‘truths’ we can affirm about al-Faraj as a man and a dramatist? On the evidence provided by his plays and other writings, by his friends, and by critics and commentators, the picture emerges of an unbending, deeply serious individual who was governed by a strong moral purpose, which was to create a theatre capable of enhancing the socio-political and human conditions of his people. As the theatre declined, al-Faraj sought and found means of expressing the conditions of his fellow Arabs, and his work also resonated with

the concerns of those in the wider world who struggle with questions of identity and the need to adapt to the demands of life. Although the contradictions are particularly sharp in the Islamic world, between secularists and traditionalists, and even within Islam between the orthodoxy and the *Sufi* tradition, the problems that preoccupied al-Faraj have also preoccupied people outside the Arab world. For this reason his work should be remembered and acknowledged, even in the summative and not substantive, for its the potential to reach a wider audience in an approaching period of time in which nominal and practical censorship of socially critical literatures in the Arab world is no longer necessary.

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