

# **Religion, Politics and The Metaphor of North-Africa in Tewfiq Al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma and Fate of A Cockroach***

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the complexity of the mix of religion and politics in Afro-Arabian drama and how it impacts the revolution in North Africa sub-region. The paper brings out the existential problems that confront the Afro-Arabian mind which stealthily stimulated “Arab Spring” and the demands for change, self-determination and freedom from constituted potentates either by way of popular protests or by revolution. The two plays of Tewfiq Al-Hakim mentioned above fed the needs of this paper and captures, to a large degree, issues concerning the mass protests in the Afro-Arabian world which the dramatist addresses in his two plays. One of the nucleuses of drama is to conscientize and this paper observes that Tewfiq al-Hakim’s theatre offers a way out of the dilemmas of the Arabian world by addressing key subjects such as religion, race, politics, gender, power imbalances, revolution; time and place. Apart from the Africanness or Arabness, and, or, context of which the paper perceives these issues, *The Sultan’s Dilemma* and *Fate of a Cockroach* address these complexities as universal questions using the interpretative theory of understanding.

**Key words:** Religion, Politics, Metaphor and North Africa

## **Introduction**

‘Religion’ is a sensitive topic to handle. Whether one considers its root-meaning, its connotation, its origin or its definition, this view subsists. There is a wide variety of definitions in existence for religion and politics. But for the purpose of this paper, the best way to proceed is not to assume that religion has the same meaning in all times and places, nor to use whatever definition different writers and thinkers have found most pleasing. A better approach is to study the range of social phenomena observable in Afro-Arabian peninsula since the subject under study can be appraised from the beliefs of the people that are largely diversified, and then to formulate a definition of religion that incorporates features relevant to this specific context. This then will constitute a working definition –

not an attempt to classify religion in general, but a tool adapted for the purpose at hand.

Dime (32) defines religion as an ‘experience’ that endeavors to supply satisfactory answer to believers about life, death and rebirth, about man, his fate and his place in the universe. All the evidence in this definition points to the fact that most Africans – like most people on the planet– understand and interpret the world partly through the prism of religion. In other words, religion, whatever else it may be, is a mode of apprehending reality (Mbiti, 26). Ilesanmi (26) notes that “acquiring knowledge about the world in Africa, and by extension, the Arabian world is characterized by a holistic approach in which the sacred and the secular can be said to constitute one organic reality”. Since this is so, politics, as in the extant power relationships in a state, and belief-system meddles with each other to generate complexities and struggle for control over the state. A testament of this reality is the several protests, or is it dilemma, that grips the peoples of Egypt and parts of the Middle East on what has been termed as the “Arab Spring”. On another hand, like the influence of religion on politics in the medieval era, and in addition to the role drama played during that time, Tewfiq al-Hakim’s *The Sultan’s Dilemma* (1966) and *Fate of a Cockroach* (1966) depict the revolution in Egypt and Arabian cape.

### ***The Sultan’s Dilemma* (1966)**

*The Sultan’s Dilemma* examines the question of the legitimization of power, justice and morality, and the inefficacies that result from the entwinement of religion and issues of the state. In *The Sultan’s Dilemma*, a mameluke sultan who has acceded to the throne is found not to have been properly manumitted many years after his reign and conquests. As it is with the belief of the people, the sultan becomes unacceptable, and as a result, ineligible to rule because he is considered a slave among freeborns. To suppress every protest, Vizier, an agent of the state and friend to Sultan, applies the might of the sword (without court trials) to quench every agitation arising from the sultan’s unacceptability. The first victim of the state military force in *The Sultan’s Dilemma* is Condemned Man who has been sentenced to die at the call to *dawn prayer* by Muezzin. The sentence places Muezzin on a fix; whither to give a call to dawn prayer that will lead to the death of Condemned Man or to abstain from his religious duty. To manumit himself, Sultan offers himself up for auction as the tradition demands and he is bought by Lady who releases him after fulfilling a bond to spend a night with her.

**Language, Dialogue and Interface of Religion and Politics in *The Sultan's Dilemma***

The relationship between *The Sultan's Dilemma* and the interface of time, religion and politics deals with language among other forms of communication. Explained as “ the expression and communication of emotions, or ideas between human beings by means of speech and hearing, the sounds being spoken or heard being systemized and confirmed among a given people over a period of time”, language also has to do with the conveyance of information and thought” (Funk and Wagnalls, 383). Umar-Buratai (56), asserted that theatre itself is a communication medium, given its deployment of images, symbols and metaphor and a whole array of verbal and non-verbal devices in order to signify meaning to the audience. Dialogue is one of the devices in drama that brings out meaning and shows the commitment of the playwright. Tewfiq al-Hakim employs colloquial Arabic mixed with Egyptian idiolects to set the tone of *The Sultan's Dilemma*.

The dialogue between Executioner and Condemned Man (96) in *Sultan's Dilemma* show the complex interplay of religious institutions and politics.

**Executioner:** At dawn I'll carry out the sentence on you...

**Condemned Man:** Dawn? It's still far off, isn't it, Executioner?

**Executioner:** I don't know.

**Condemned Man:** You don't know?

**Executioner:** It's the Muezzin who knows. When he goes up to the minaret of this mosque and gives the call to the dawn prayer, I'll raise my sword and swipe off your head- those are the *orders*. (Emphasis is mine).

The death of Condemned Man lies on the voice of the Muezzin; in a call to dawn's prayer, not on the sword of Executioner. Whether Muezzin would perform his religious duty and Condemned Man dies or abstain from calling dawn's prayer becomes a concern for the world to understand Condemned Man's predicament. The sword is a metaphor which Vizier and the sultanate represent. Executioner represents the nozzle of a gun whilst Muezzin represents its trigger. The same it is with religion and politics in this context. The interconnectedness of religious institution and politics is further made manifest by Condemned Man (96);

**Condemned Man:** ...Without a trial? I haven't yet been put on trial, I haven't yet Appeared before a judge.

**Executioner:** That's nothing to do with me.

**Condemned Man:** For sure, you have nothing to do with anything except my execution.

**Executioner:** At dawn, in furtherance of the Sultan's orders

The decision of Vizier to use military force to quell the protests and dissents that arise from the failure of the past potentate to manumit Sultan falls short of the cultural and religious standard that the people sets for themselves. To remedy the situation as required by *the* law, Sultan has himself sold by auction, uncertain in knowledge whether his new owner would set him free and forfeits its money. Lady buys Sultan at auction by proxy and refused to set him free. After much dialogue, Lady agrees to free Sultan *at dawn* after spending a night with him. Fear that Lady may not release Sultan leads Cadi to manipulate Muezzin to change the time to dawn's prayer. Lady signs the manumission agreement despite the trickery of Cadi and frees Sultan.

According to Adelugba (2), dialogue in Tewfiq al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma* is an index of social class, religious temperament and ethical signifier; it is also a vehicle for characterization. Conversely, the characterization of Vizier and Muezzin plays a persuasive role in the manipulation of religion in order to attain political ends. Chief Cadi, represents the stringent temperament of religious law which Vizier and Muezzin manipulates. The light-headedness of the Muezzin to give the call to dawn's prayer that will follow the death of Condemned Man throws up serious questions about the Arab (African) perception of time. The crisis of time—what constitutes dawn—is a major issue which surmounts the understanding of the Muezzin despite being the custodian of time as Cadi to the religious law. He complains thus:

I'm at a loss about this dawn- sometimes I'm asked to put it back  
and sometimes I'm asked to put it forward.

The latitude to which religion opens itself to be interpreted to serve both social and political causes is deepened by the mystification of time. Religious activities, like the *call to prayer* in *The Sultan's Dilemma* are removed from the religious end it serves to be manipulated by the state machineries. The role that religion and religious institution play in the manumitting of Sultan is both sentient and unconscious. These constituents set the motion of the plot of *The Sultan's Dilemma*. The first is the pretence and indifference with which contemporary religious thoughts perceive politics; and the other is the rational cut-out that

religion consciously offers to redeem mankind. These elements play themselves out in the first Act of *The Sultan's Dilemma* (108):

**Executioner:** Hurry, O Muezzin- we're waiting for you.

**Muezzin:** Waiting for me? Why?

**Executioner:** To give the call to the dawn prayer.

**Muezzin:** Do you want to pray?

**Executioner:** I want to carry out my work.

**Muezzin:** What have I to do with your work?

**Executioner:** When your voice rises up to the sky the soul of this man will rise with it.

**Muezzin:** God forbid!

**Executioner:** Those are the orders.

**Muezzin:** The life of this man hangs on my vocal chords?

**Executioner:** Yes.

**Muezzin:** There is no power and no strength save in God!

The duty of Executioner rests on the exertion of a clergy- the voice of Muezzin. Though the muezzin's call to prayer has nothing to do with any political activity, Tewfiq al-Hakim neatly ties them together. He thrusts the death of Condemned Man on Muezzin. Salvation is now transferred to the muezzin who is faced with his own dilemma between giving the call to dawn's prayer that will cause the beheading of Condemned Man or refraining from performing his religious rites. The involvement of Cadi, the custodian and representative of canonical law, in bending the law to rescue Sultan from the enchantment of Lady is the mindful extent to which religious totems can go in influencing matters of the state. Chief Cadi is a representation of the fluidity of canonical law in politics. Whilst his posture as the custodian of religious law in the political arrangement of the society is known for its rigid and fundamental adherence, the interpretation of canonical law in *The Sultan's Dilemma* transcends the understanding of Cadi. The conversation between Sultan, Vizier and Cadi captures the sturdiness of the law but on the ground of interpretation, they are faced with the dilemma of applying the sword of the law to quiet every opposition or to abide by the uncertainties of the principles of it. Chief Cadi (118) says to Sultan and Vizier thus:

**Chief Cadi:** The sword certainly does away with heads and tongues; it does not; however, do away with difficulties and problems.

**Sultan:** What do you mean?

**Cadi:** I mean that the problem will still nevertheless remain, namely that the sultan is ruling without having been manumitted, and that a slave is at the head of a free people.

**Vizier:** Who dares to say this? Whoever does so will have his head cut off.

**Cadi:** That is another question.

**Vizier:** It is not necessary for a person ruling to be carrying around documents and proofs. We have the strongest and most striking example of this in the Fatimid dynasty. Everyone of us remembers what Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah Al-Fatimi did. One day he came along claiming he was descendant from the Prophet (the prayers of God be upon him), and when the people did not believe him, he went at them with drawn sword and opened up his coffers of gold, saying 'These are my forebears, these my ancestors' ...

**Sultan:** What do you say about this, Cadi?

**Cadi:** Then, O illustrious Sultan, you would like to solve your problem through this method?

**Vizier:** Truly, why not... It is sufficient for us to announce publicly that Our Majesty the Sultan has been legally manumitted, that he was manumitted by the late Sultan before his death, and that the documents and proofs are recorded and kept with the Chief Cadi- and death to anyone who dares deny it!

**Cadi:** There is a person who will so deny.

**Vizier:** who's that?

**Cadi:** I.

**Sultan:** You?

**Cadi:** Yes, Your Majesty. I cannot take part in this conspiracy.

**Vizier:** It is not a conspiracy- it's a *plan* for saving the situation.

**Cadi:** It is a *conspiracy* against the law I represent.

Here, the tension between canonical law and the state is established. The *love-hate* relationship between religion and politics shoots out when religious institutions deem political *plans* as *conspiracy* against moral codes. Religion checks the excesses of the state when power transcend its frame to tamper and temper with canonical law. Cadi (119) goes further to dare Sultan:

Yes, Sultan- the law. In the eyes of the civil and religious codes you are only a slave, and a slave- by civil and religious law- is regarded as a thing, a chattel. As the late Sultan, who had power of life and death over you, did not manumit

you before his death, you are thus still a thing, a chattel, owned by someone else, and so you have forfeited the qualification for entering into the normal transactions exercised by the rest of free people.

**Sultan:** Is this the law?

**Cadi:** Yes.

**Vizier:** Take it easy, Chief Cadi! *We are not now discussing the view of the law but are looking for a way by which to be free of this law*, and the way to be free of it is to assume that manumission has in fact taken place...

**Cadi:** In relation to me it's different, *for I cannot fool myself and I cannot free myself from the law*, being as I am the person who represents it; I cannot break an oath by which I took upon myself to be the trusted servant of the civil and religious law.

**Sultan:** *You took this upon yourself before me.* (Emphases are mine).

*(Fate of a Cockroach and other Plays, 118-119).*

From the foregoing, it can be drawn that the attempts of the state or its agents to free itself from canonical law meets strong resistance posed by the sanctions of religious institutions. The same thing passes for religious institution when it attempts to free itself from civil law. This is evident in Act three of *The Sultan's dilemma* where Cadi bends the principles of the canonical law he represents in attempt of release Sultan from the allure of Lady. Cadi orders Muezzin to climb the minaret and give the call to dawn prayer even before dawn. He defends Muezzin's misdemeanor and reinterprets the canonical law to suit his case. Sultan censures Cadi. Sultan (169-170) criticizes Cadi for reinterpreting the call to dawn prayer to serve political purpose thus:

**Sultan** (Shouting): Shame! Enough! Enough! Stop this nonsense! Cease this pettiness! She shall not sign. I absolutely refuse that she should sign this way. And you, Chief Cadi, aren't you ashamed of yourself for fooling around with the law like this?

**Cadi:** Milord Sultan...

**Sultan:** I am disappointed. I am disappointed in you Chief Cadi. Is this, in your opinion, the law? The expenditure of effort and skill in trickery and fraud!

**Cadi:** Your Majesty, I merely wanted...

**Sultan:** To rescue me, I know that, but did you think I'd accept being rescued by such methods?

**Cadi:** With such a woman, Your Majesty, we have the right...

**Sultan:** No, you have no right at all to do this. You have no such right. Maybe it was the right of this woman to indulge in trickery- she cannot be blamed if she did so; maybe she should be the object of indulgence because of her intelligence and skill. As for the Chief Cadi, the representative of justice, the defender of the sanctity of the law, the upright servant of the canonical law, it is one of his most bounden duties to preserve the law's purity, integrity, and majesty, whatever the price. *It was you yourself who first showed me the virtue of the law and the respect it must be shown, who told me that it was the supreme power before which I myself must bow.*

And I have bowed down right to the end in all humility. But did it ever occur to me that I would see you yourself eventually regarding the law in this manner; stripping it of its robe of sanctity so that it becomes in your hands no more than wiles, clauses, words- a mere play thing (Emphases are mine).

From the dialogue above, it is evident that canonical laws influence the moral compass of politics. It gives critical consciousness to the people and prepares them to resist any intrusion or alien element into the moral, political or religious codes. As of the point Muezzin (167-168) gives the call to dawn prayer (at midnight) the people rise against him. The voice of Muezzin rings out:

**Muezzin** (from afar): God is great! God is great! Come to prayers!  
Come to prayers! Come to salvation! Come to salvation!  
The crowd make their appearance in a state of agitation,  
astonishment, protest, and anger.

**The People** (*shouting*): The dawn? Now? It's still night- we're still in the middle of the night. He's mad! This madman- arrest him! Bring him down; bring him down from on top of the minaret! Bring him down!

As Hamdan (19) implies, the tampering of religious codes for political reason or the political interpretation of religious systems to fit political conclusion raises the temper of both religious and political institutions. Between these two rests the revolutionary inclination of a people who rise above the control, standard and limitation set by these two institutions. As it is seen in the persona of Sultan in *The Sultan's Dilemma*, the collusion of canonical and civil law can be used as a veritable tool to demand for a change from the status quo.



### **Fate of a Cockroach (1966)**

*Fate of a Cockroach* is a Three Act play. The first Act describes the effort of Cockroaches to liberate themselves from the existential threat pose to their being by Ants. However hard Cockroach King and his *cabinet members*, who were cockroaches as well, try to come together to solve the Ant's problem, they disagree and argues endlessly with their attempt yielding no result. The cockroach Minister's son slipped and falls on its back; as it struggles to turn over, Ants comes in to drag him away into their village. The sight angers Cockroach King, Queen, Minister, Savant and they resolve to put an end to the threats of Ant. They contemplate on forming an army to resist and attack Ants, Savant, the cockroach scientist and philosopher unravels that it is not in the personality of Cockroaches to assemble in one place over what, as he said, science have not been able prove or some natural disaster that destroys cockroaches when they assemble. As they watch Ants sing and pull Minster's son away, they muse over what action to take. They attempt to mobilize other cockroaches but fail. The Cockroach King foot slipped – he falls into the lake and wakes up on the bathtub (that is, the lake) of *Mortals*, Samia and Adil. He struggles to climb up severally but fails. Samia notices Cockroach King and calls for Adil. As Samia goes to bring insecticide to destroy Cockroach King, Adil, who has been awed by the relentless effort of Cockroach King to escape his fate, locks her out. The personality of Cockroach overwhelms Adil. Samia, disgusted over the sudden affection for cockroach by her husband calls Doctor to examine Adil's sudden change. Doctor, after series of attempts to understand the situation, falls for Cockroach King's untiring persistence to escape his fate, despite his failures. He joins Adil in the quest of understanding himself critical of Cockroach King's experience. Cook, Umm Atiya enters and unawares of the existence of Cockroach King or the topic it has generated, kills it brutishly and throws it away. Procession of Ants came and drags Cockroach King into the cracks on the wall.

*Fate of a Cockroach* juxtaposes two sets of characters; one human and one allegorical. They both work out their respective plays, almost unaware of one another until each play reaches its climax, in a Cairo apartment. At the centre of these two is the pursuit for freedom through a revolutionary agency brought about by the awareness of 'self'. The introduction by Johnson-Davies (viii) brings out dodgy issues such as justice and truth, good and evil and, above all, freedom.

### **Dogmatism and Power Relationship in *Fate of a Cockroach***

In *Fate of a Cockroach*, man's refusal to despair in the face of adversity, are exemplified in the cockroach's struggles to climb out of the bath into which the cockroach King has fallen. Ironically the humans in the play demonstrate no

such survival instinct. While the husband, who identifies with the hopeless plight of the cockroach, simply watches the creature struggle, the wife demands *its* death. Neither seems capable of compassion or love to salvage the dilemma of either the cockroach or one another. Ultimately, the Cook draws a bath for the wife and drowns the Cockroach, removing 'it' from the water with a flick of her fingers. It immediately becomes a prize of the ants that inhabit the apartment although the Cockroach is too large to fit through the crack they use for entrance and exit. Again, the humans in *Fate of a Cockroach* watch without intervening, Samia undermines the angst of Adil (73) and mutters:

Having finished with the heroism of cockroaches we've now started on the genius of ants!

More, the Cook takes matters into her own hands, mopping up the stream of ants.

The play forcefully sets out a revolutionary prototype by the conclusive remarks of Adil, who having risen to self-apprehension of his essence of being, becomes strong-willed to revolutionize his own existence. Adil's (76) last line in *Fate of a Cockroach* is memorable and it impels revolution thus: "Bring the bucket and rag and wipe me out of existence".

The play, *Fate of a Cockroach* displays two important dynamic elements in the society; power, political and religious, its interpretation and demystification. Another important factor is nurture versus nature. The beginning of *Fate of a Cockroach* displays power in the King and Queen's marriage. The discourse of power is further deepened in the relationship between cockroaches and ants. The imbalances of power relations between Cockroaches and Procession of Ants are rooted in their worldviews, belief and religious institutions. As a solution to defeat the ants, Minister (cockroach) suggests that they brainstorm on what Ants do and do not do. He unravels; "Ants have discipline, they sacrifice and cockroaches do not" (Cooper, 596).

Whilst the cockroaches argue over how to resist the ants that are so organized and dependent on one another, the undoing of the cockroaches rest on their inherent self-reliant nature. The dialogue among the cockroaches shows the reactionary elements that de-cogs the wheel of revolution.

**Minister:** You know the ants attack us with their armies. If we also were able to mobilize an army of twenty, or even ten, cockroaches with which to attack them, we would be able to destroy their towns and villages.

**Savant:** Then mobilize ten cockroaches!

**Minister:** The problem is how to gather these cockroaches together.

**Queen:** Inform us, Savant has it ever happened that you have seen ten cockroaches gathered together in one spot? (*Fate of a Cockroach and other Plays*, 11).

Wa Thiong'O (2-3) notes that there are two very important struggles in the life of man and animal kind: the struggle with nature; and the struggle with other men for the control of power or other material produced from the struggle of nature. These credos are exhibited in *Fate of a Cockroach* by the Cockroaches, Procession of Ants and Mortals. Between these creatures are the pursuit of power to dominate; either for food, as it is with Ants or for resistance as it is with the cockroaches. Savant (11) continues thus:

Yes, I once saw – a very long time ago, in the early years of my youth – several cockroaches gathered together at night in the kitchen round a piece of tomato.

**Queen:** Tomato?

**Savant:** Yes.

**King:** An extraordinary idea – this matter of tomato!

Tomato in the above dialogue represents a revolutionary totem; a unifier and call to action (Cooper, 597). It represents the colour, red and in *Fate of a Cockroach* it is use as a symbol to mobilize Cockroaches to protest Ants' invasion. Ihidero (87) goes further to refer to the 'tomato' symbol as an edgy political-economic system. He pins down the dilemmas of Africans and Arabians to the indifference of the economic system subtly forced on them with the promise of a better world in heaven. Using the self-appointed Cockroach King as a study, Cooper concludes that operating within an economic system that recognizes 'one' rather than 'many' shrinks the force of revolution or any impact it will have in society. The idealization of "everyone for the self" is set in motion by the attitude of the cockroaches in the first Act (12).

**Savant:** I mean, Your Majesty, from the practical point of view it's all neither here nor there, because the cockroaches assembling round the food won't make a bit of difference – they'll just eat and fill their stomachs, then each will take himself off.

**King:** That's true. It has happened before. Remember how after I was *installed* as King a number of cockroaches happened to assemble round a piece of sugar we found – it was sheer good luck – and I seized the opportunity of this gathering to deliver the speech from the throne. I rose to my feet to speak, with them having eating their fill, and hardly had I uttered two words than I found each one of them waving his whiskers and going off on his own. They left me shouting into thin air.

The innate inability of cockroaches to unite or take a decisive action against the powers that oppress the essence of their being, is largely dependent on their will to chart their course independently. Revolutionary struggle, as the cockroach King shows in striving to climb out of the bath, stems from the willpower to revolutionize the condition that confines *it*. Adil (37) says:

**Adil:** I think it's better to leave it as it is so that it can solve the problem by itself.

**Samia:** Until when?

**Adil:** We cannot – either you or I – decide when. That depends on its willpower – and up until now it has shown no intention of discontinuing its attempts. Look! So far it is showing no sign of being tired

More so, the household of Adil and Samia; and that of cockroaches provide the archetype for ensuing revolution. A line to note here is the lyrics of the music:

'The attainment of desires is not by hoping; Things of this world are gained by striving.' (*Fate of a Cockroach and other Plays*, 30).

### **Power and the Religious 'Other' in *Fate of a Cockroach***

*Fate of a Cockroach* is a savage satire of the shallowness of organized religious beliefs, dogmas and a meditation on man's existential isolation. The play examines the subject of nothingness, worthlessness and existence of man hinged on religion rather than the value of human existence. Hence, the use of the rhetoric, "wipe out", "destroy", runs through *Fate of a Cockroach*. Adil embarks on a voyage of self-examination and having juxtaposed the will and

self-determination of the Cockroach King with his own personal conviction he reaches a revolutionary conclusion with a tone of finality:

(Shouting)Umm Attiya, bring the bucket and rag and wipe me  
out of existence! (*Fate of a Cockroach and Other Plays*, 76)

The declaration above shows the fatalistic end of humanity in a religiously tensed social order. The debate among *Cockroaches*: King, Queen, Minister, Savant and Priest is one which breeds fear for the existences in the play. The fear of being attack by the powerful 'Other': Ants, Cockroaches and *Mortals*. The religious conviction of Priest and the indifference of Savant verify the alienation and the fate of the cockroach race. For *Ants* and *Mortals*, the fatal termination of the spirited Cockroach King becomes habitual as its destructive agent draws its pretext from certain religious conviction. The dogmatism of the characters in the play is fueled by religion. Doctor (72) says:

Let the matter rest, Mr Adil. What's happened has happened. In  
any case you wanted to leave *it* to its fate, and this is its fate.  
(Emphases are mine).

Adil, Samia and Doctor belong to one class of racial and religious empathy. The only voice of dissent whither the existence of the struggling Cockroach King in the bathtub, Adil, is not strong enough to resist the threat poise by the destructive force of the religious or racial inclination of Samia or Doctor. The objectification of the Cockroach King points to the dogmatic beliefs of Ants, Samia, Doctor and Attiya. They along with Ants perceive the fate of the Cockroach King as worthless and as a result desire to wipe out his existence in the play.

Another subtle intellection in *Fate of a Cockroach* is the disturbing anxieties and binaries operating within dark part of the human mind. The play fables the destructive engine on the human heart and solicits one's humanity in relations to the other. The dialogue between Adil and Samia in Act Two (39) embodies the introspection that is needed to restrain the brutal tendencies of human existence.

**Samia:** Don't annoy me – define your attitude!

**Adil:** You define yours!

**Samia:** Mine's clear – very clear.

**Adil:** In relation to whom?

**Samia:** To you of course.

**Adil:** I'm not asking about your attitude in relation to myself,

I'm asking about your attitude in relation to it.

**Samia:** What's it?

**Adil:** The cockroach.

**Samia:** No, you've really gone mad!

This exchange establishes the relationship between the material and existential world, self-examination and personal conviction; and cross-examination between the rhetoric that binds and separates *one* from the *other* without losing the grip of divinity. Halkon (98) relates the dark spaces under the bathtub, the realm of the cockroaches as the dark area that governs the gray area of human temperament. The realm of the cockroaches, Halkon (98) affirms, represents the trampled upon masses, the oppressed, defeated and silenced by religion majority who are faced by the perpetual threats of moral invasion by the powerful.

Queen and Samia are the quietly controlling wives of Cockroach King and of Adil, the only, though arguable, indoctrinaire character in the play. Faced with the Ant problem; the cockroaches discuss the merit of socialism, freewill and the existence of God. Queen proposes intercession for the fallen Cockroach King (41) accordingly:

**Cockroach King:** Then let us all pray.

**Priest:** Pray! Lift up your hands with me! Oh gods!

**All** (*lifting up their hands and calling out*): Oh gods! Oh gods!

Samia (42) goes further to ask thus:

What's to be done?

**Cook:** Leave it in the hands of the Almighty. We'll let him be for a while until he gets fed up of his own accord

The divergent doctrinaire nature of Cockroaches and Mortals play out here. The dialogue identifies the influence of dogmatism over human will which threatens the existence of the humanity of the other. The refrain of Adil lends credence to the destructive forces that stare at the Cockroach King. Adil (38) asks:

You're going to destroy the cockroach?

**Samia:** Right away

The choice of "destroy" over "kill" reduces the sanctity of the perceived life of the Cockroach King or its essence. The life of the Cockroach King does not

meet the religious standard sets for Samia and Cook thus 'destroying' Cockroach King or its countrymen becomes normal. However, Tewfiq Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* introduces a penumbra into the dogma and undogmatic proclivity. Tewfiq Al-Hakim leads his readers in the play into "the brightening light" that serves as effective parallel transition between the Cockroach and the Mortal worlds. The brightening light illumines the willpower of Cockroach King which only Adil can see and in turn helps him to appreciate the nature of Cockroach King. He alone is mesmerized by the Cockroach King's repeated yet vain struggles to escape his fate in the bathtub. He tries to find inspiration from the heroic insect to continue his own struggles with life.

### **Scenery, Imageries and the Metaphor of 'Arab Spring' in *Sultan's Dilemma* and *Fate of a Cockroach***

The scenery and general setting in *The Sultan's Dilemma* and *Fate of a Cockroach* constitute important dimensions and images of present day Cairo. To begin with, the description of the opening scene in *The Sultan's Dilemma* is a picturesque of modern day Tahrir square, the centre and beginning of the African (Arab) Spring before its diffusion to parts of the Middle East. The district square in the play is a cynosure of major political activities. The square represents the melting pot of the people and a place for mass mobilization. The square, though inorganic, breathes out the frustration on the Egyptian mind and its social confinement inherent in *Fate of a Cockroach*. It may apply to state that the use of allegorical characters like cockroaches substitute for the being and strivings of the ordinary Egyptian masses who *Mortals*, with the temper of Samia and Cook, or better, the ruling class treats with nothingness despite the efforts to determine their own fate.

The question of the Ant's problem and the military arrangement of Ants in attacking Cockroaches graphically illustrate the nature of the existential relationships between Arab-Israeli divide. Tewfiq al-Hakim used the innate nature of Cockroaches to represent the Arabian disposition to struggle not minding the predicament the Arabian mind finds itself. The destruction of Cockroach King in *Fate of a Cockroach* clinically shows the probable fatal end of the Egyptian struggle but if when managed, as it is in *The Sultan's Dilemma*, could lead to a perfect state.

The opening scene of *The Sultan's Dilemma* for example is of extreme significance, because the scenery lays bare the grounds upon which the whole action of the play is established and from which it develops. For example, the opening scene captures in vivid terms the resonance of contemporary Egypt in

the eighteenth day mass protest that unseats Hosni Mubarak. The scene describes what the audience is to expect from this point onward. The opening reads:

An open space in the city during the time of the Mameluke Sultans. On one side there is a mosque with a minaret; on the other, a tavern. In the centre is a house with a balcony. Dawn is about to break and silence reigns. A stake has been set up to which a man, condemned to death, has been tied. His Executioner is nearby trying to fight off sleep

What is striking about this scene is the fact 'death sentence' has been placed on Condemned man. His sin, we are later told, is speaking the truth about the illegitimacy of Sultan to rule. The vigilance of his Executioner symbolizes the watchfulness of state's proxies to carry out any command to exterminate any opposition. But this time, religious institution is subconsciously involved in the process of extermination as it is with most executions of dissidents in the Arabian cape.

The Executioner paints an image of the fate that awaits Condemned Man with a song which he specially composed to soothe his pains whilst beheading him and sung at his pleasure. The lyrics of the song read:

O flower whose life is but a night,  
Greetings from your admirers!  
Plucked at dawn of day tomorrow,  
The robe of dew from you will fall.  
In a firewood basket you will lie  
And all around my tunes will die.  
In the air the deadly blade will flash  
Shining bright in gardener's hand.  
O flower, whose life is but a night!  
On you be peace, on you be peace!  
(*Fate of a Cockroach and Other Plays*, 104).

The song is an allegory that pictures the lethal end of Condemned Man. The metaphors of plucking a flower, that is, beheading Condemned Man, is further revealed in the dialogue between Executioner and Condemned Man (104-105).

**Condemned Man:** Is this your tender Song, you ill-omened Executioner?



**Executioner:** Please – I'm no Executioner.

**Condemned Man:** What do you think you are then?

**Executioner:** I'm a *gardener*.

**Condemned Man:** A gardener?

**Executioner:** Yes, a gardener. Do you understand? A gardener.

I'm a gar - den - er.

Executioner relates its role to that of gardener who tenders flowers awaiting the time they will be plucked. The flower to be plucked here is Condemned Man, and the gardener to carry out the duty of plucking – for his master – is Executioner.

Another significant scene of note that is relevant to contemporary Egyptian politics is the popular gathering at the auction sale of Sultan in Act two. The Mass gathering evokes image of democracy in Athenian Greece. But this time, the gathering is a Cairene method of self-determination and of determining who leads them. The conditions that led to the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi and the protests that surround the emergence of General Abdulfata al-Sisi is reflected on the collective will of the people to determine who governs them. The sale of Sultan throws to the people the decision to choose from either to accept his rule or to reject it. Hence, whoever buys him must forfeit him. This reinforces the old socialist believe that the best way to own property is not to own any. The dialogue between Lady and Cadi (141-142) reveals thus:

**Lady:** Then, O Cadi, you make manumission a condition of possession, that is to say that in order to validly possess the thing sold, the purchaser must yield up that very thing.

**Cadi:** What? What?

**Lady:** You're saying, in order words, in order to possess something you must yield it up... or, if you like, in order to possess you must not possess.

This type of purchase goes beyond the ordinary buying and selling of *the* chattel. The auction sale of Sultan is a simile of democratic process where the people are allowed to express their acceptance and support for who rules them or better, for determining who rules them. The social status of Sultan as slave alienates him from the rest of the people. To gain the support of the masses he is compelled to choose, as Vizier or Cadi proffers, between “the sword that imposes but exposes” or the law that threatens but protects!” The deployment of religious

totems such as mosques, muezzin, sultan, minaret and their relatedness to images such as, square, court signifies the connection between religious practice and political institution and how they are used to gain popular support.

### **Characterization**

The use of a representative character also enhances communication in *The Sultan's Dilemma*. The identity of the characters reflects the belief-system and type of people the play portrays. The names of the major characters are Islamic and they represent characters with public responsibilities. Sultan, for example, is a Muslim sovereign ruler of an Islamic country. Vizier is a Muslim government officer of high ranking in an Islamic state. Cadi is an Islamic magistrate and of course, muezzin is a mosque official who calls prayer for Muslims. These characters underscore the religious elements in secular politics. Despite the fact that religious characters forms Sultan's cabinet and that majority of the masses, as the play suggests, are Muslims the pursuance of the tenets of the law is largely secular. Herein lies the intrinsic contradiction of the secular law that is inefficient, as Cadi and Sultan later realize; and the canonical law that disadvantaged Lady from participating directly at the public auction of Sultan. The play depicts the vile perception of majority of the people towards Lady who they see as prostitute. The 'society' even in its attempt to maintain secularity or religiosity reviles Lady and classed her activities with depravity despite its purity. The exchange between Lady and Sultan reveals the outside-in public opinion the society hold of women. Even Sultan falls within this public misconception. Sultan (156-157) says thus:

**Sultan** (*after listening for a while*): A delightful performance!

**Lady**: And I myself shall dance for you (*She rises and dances.*)

**Sultan** (*after she has finished her dance*): Delightful! It's all delightful! Do you do this every night?

**Lady**: No, Your Majesty. This is an exception. It's just for you, for I myself have not danced since being manumitted and married. On other nights it is the slave-girls who do the dancing and singing.

**Sultan**: To your *clients*?

**Lady**: My *guests*, rather.

She goes further:

**Lady**: I shall elucidate. When I was a young slave-girl of the same age as the slave-girls I have with me now, my master brought me up to love poetry and singing and playing on musical

instruments. He used to make me attend his banquets and converse with his guests, who were poets and singers; they also included intellectuals and men of wit and charm. We would spend the night reciting poetry, singing and playing music and conversing quoting and capping quotations from masterpieces of literature, and laughing from the depth of our hearts. But they were also innocent and chaste.... And when I later became his wife he did not wish to deprive me of the pleasure of those nights which used so to enchant me; he therefore allowed me to continue to attend, though from behind silken curtains...

**Sultan:** And after his death?

**Lady:** After his death I was unable to give up this practice, so I continued to invite my husband's guests. At first I would receive them screened behind the silken curtains, but when the people of the district began spreading gossip at seeing men nightly entering the house of a woman with no husband I found it pointless to continue to be screened behind the curtains. I said to myself: seeing that the *people's verdict* has pronounced me guilty, let me make myself the judge of my own behavior. (Emphases are mine).

Apart from the dialectics between 'client' and 'guest', and the profession that determines the district's perception of Lady, it can be drawn from her narration that it is the people's verdict that determines legitimacy even though one has its own reservations.

The utilization of representative characters also augments communication in *The Sultan's Dilemma*. For instance, the characters Sultan, Vizier, Chief Cadi, Lady, Maid, Slave trader, Condemned Man, Executioner, Muezzin, Shoemaker, Wine Merchant, Unknown Man, Mother, Child, Guards, Townspeople etc should not be seen as individuals. Instead they should be seen as constituting the classes which they represent. This is with special reference to Mother and Child, who are characteristically the disadvantaged of the society. The characters Lady and Mother, though economically disadvantaged, is symbolic of the role of women and motherhood, as composite elements of society's endeavours, like the auction in this case. This is demonstrated when Lady undertakes in the buying of Sultan as chattel and taking him to her house as a goods. The 'illustrativeness' of these characters is part of the strategy of making it clear that the revolt against Sultan and his acceptance is popular and of mass appeal. The masses in the play, obvious of the destructive sword of Sultan, defies it and demands for a legitimate ruler. Sultan and Vizier try to chart their cause along the line of violence but meet a

very strong resistance mounted by the Masses and Chief Cadi. The revolutionary element in *The Sultan's Dilemma* climaxes when Sultan appears as a chattel and submits himself to the people for acceptance or rejection.

### **Conclusion**

It must be noted that the office of Cockroach King in *Fate of a Cockroach* operates with the same temperament with office of Sultan in *Sultan's Dilemma*. One thing ties them together. They both come in to power through unpopular methods. Nevertheless, to gain mass acceptance they submitted themselves to the will of the masses. Religious proclivities govern the actions or inactions of the plays' characters. It formed the basis of power relationships that runs through the plays and more, organized the manners and ways the characters of the plays are othered.

The protests in the plays are for the correction of the hitherto unpopular route to power which the Afro-Arabian universe is known for. The dissatisfaction of the plays' masses over the legitimacy of Sultan and Cockroach King in *The Sultan's Dilemma* and *Fate of a Cockroach* lead the reader to veer into the malleability of religious canons to suit the desires of its potentates. As seen in *The Sultan's Dilemma*, religious laws are fleeting and they serve the purpose of those who possess the intellect to interpret religious laws. Sultan, Cadi, Vizier and Muezzin typify the fleeting nature of religious laws and regulations. To sentence Condemned Man to be hanged at Muezzin's call to dawn's prayer peeps into the complex nature and relationship between religion and politics. Muezzin and Chief Cadi whose characterizations stand in for the religious purity are caught in a crossroad. Condemned Man is the only character with the temerity to question the legitimacy of Sultan. For speaking the truth which the religious laws teach, he is sentenced to be hanged at Muezzin's call. This puts Muezzin in a corner; whether to give the call to prayer that will lead to the death of a just man that tells the truth; or, to fulfill the command of an unjust political system, or to abdicate his religious duty. To wriggle out of the dilemma he finds himself, he resorts to reinterpreting the laws that govern the Arabic universe in order to free both Condemned Man and Sultan. This is not without the insurrection of the people to whom he called to prayer at an odd hour.

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