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**Development of the Palestinian Theatre**

**(1948-1975)**

**A Socio-Political and Stylistic View**

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE

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**Abstract**

From its very beginnings, the Palestinian Theatre set its sights on the establishment of its national identity versus the Western Theatre that came over it under difficult political circumstances. The missionary and national schools and the associations and the public clubs played an important role in pushing the Theatrical Movement in Palestine. This theater came into being under emerging cultural changes, whose roots were activated and strengthened by magazines, journals, translations, newspapers, printing machines, and the broadcasting service.

The Palestinian Theater attempted to build itself on its homeland, motivated by its duty to resist the invasion and settlement, and aimed to internalize the national and cultural identity. In the course of this attempt, the Palestinian Theatre faced a lot of obstacles and difficulties, which are not different from the obstacles and difficulties that the Palestinian people faced.

The effects and results of the political events and social fluctuations obliged the Palestinian poets and authors to talk about those changes and deal with them in their poetic and prose plays, through the preservation of the special styles and structural forms that constituted the elements of the Palestinian play. The nature of the Palestinian Theatre, which was busy with various political events and social changes and fluctuations lent it a distinguishing characteristic, which is the domination of the political contents on the social contents because the theater is considered an effective instrument in the national advancement and one of the forms of resistance.

The political fluctuations played a negative role in deactivating the national bodies and a lot of life priorities remained a concern that constituted a big obstacle in the way of the active theatrical life in Palestine, which constituted one of the causes of obstructions that hampered the advancement of the theatrical movement in Palestine. In addition to the suffering of Palestine from severe and unfair censorship, free expression was also banned and the authors were forced to introduce their texts to the censor before printing or performing them. If any theatrical group tried to change anything in the theatrical texts during the performance or did something different from the texts that the censors approved, the group would be punished harshly.

The period from 1973-1975 is considered a period of prosperity for the Palestinian theatre. As the theatrical movement spread and prospered during these years. New theatres and theatrical groups appeared and theatrical performances increased. The audience favored the performances and demanded more of them after they found that the plays address their feelings and their reality.

The study consists of three chapters. The first two chapters introduce a historical theoretical description of the theatrical movement, and the third chapter is an applied chapter that applies the theoretical background on ten Palestinian plays that were chosen from the period of 1948-1975.

**Chapter One** describes the beginnings of the theatrical art in Palestine in the first period. The emergence of the Palestinian Theatre was connected to the evolution and growth of the Arab Theatre in general, especially in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon but it did not gain sufficient interest from the specialists and critics. The study also found that the Palestinian theatergoers benefited from the close interaction between the international and the Arab heritage theatre and started deriving their plays from their reality, mixed with history and the popular heritage. Thus, they started feeding their thirsty society with this kind of art at schools, clubs, and associations. Consequently, Palestine witnessed the appearance of several theatres where a lot of performances were introduced. It is worth mentioning that Jaffa, Haifa, and Jerusalem played a significant role in the theatrical movement.

The Palestinian Theatre faced several difficulties, which were related to the political unrest, absence of the responsible national authority, the governmental rules, and text censorship. However, the factors that affected the movement of the Palestinian Theatre included: missionary schools, national schools, translation, foreign and Arab groups, literary associations, and clubs, magazines and newspapers, the Palestine Broadcasting Service, and the theatrical festivals.

Chapter One also deals with the Prose-Theatre and the Poetic-Theatre in three stages: the *first stage* extends from the First World War in 1919 till the Nakba in1948; the *second stage*, extends from 1948 till 1966; and the *third stage* extends from 1967 till 1975. The chapter ends with a discussion of the differences between the theatrical works from the point of view of their trends, contents, and styles.

**Chapter Two** continues the description and discussion of the development of the Palestinian Theatre in its second stage from 1948 – 1966. As said above, Chapter One deals with the most prominent political events in Palestine and shows how those events affected life in Palestine in all forums and fields, especially from the social and literary perspectives. The 1948 Nakba left its negative impacts on the rising theatrical advancement in Palestine. The authors and poets were evacuated from their homeland and lots of their theatrical works were lost. The Palestinian movement weakened and lots of the theatrical efforts were lost, too. Consequently, the individual efforts that had existed before weakened but the desire for defiance and resistance increased, and the daily life pain became an active source of creativity.

In 1967, the political Naksa (setback) took place as a result of the Six Days War between Israel, Egypt and Syria, and Jordan and it led to new political and social developments and the military Occupation of Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. Under these circumstances, the Palestinian Military Revolution emerged as a reaction to the great shock of the Palestinians, who believed at that time that the Israeli Occupation of Palestine would disappear. In 1973, the October War/ Tishrin War/ the War of Atonement took place and left its negative effects on the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular. However, the spirit of resistance continued to impose itself and produced a new stage.

The new reality after the 1967 War contributed to the activation of the theatrical life, especially after the meeting and communication between the Palestinian artists in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with their brothers in the occupied territories in 1967. Besides, new theatrical works from the Arab world and translated works from world literature started pouring. Other assisting factors in this period such as the spread of academic education, the appearance of several political and intellectual trends enriched the Palestinian theatrical movement.

The study found out that the whole period between1948-1975 was characterized by a theatrical life that was full of the spirit of resistance. The theatre in the West Bank and Gaza Strip faced hard circumstances because the authority of the Israeli Occupation was strict in its attitude against any gathering in the clubs, associations, unions, and theatres. The purpose of the authorities of Occupation was to shake the structure of the Palestinian society and the Palestinian citizen but the result was the emergence of angry groups that refuse the negativity of life in their homeland.

However, concerning the Theatre in Israel, though it lived in tragic conditions as a result of neglect, terror, poverty, persecution, and harassment but by resisting all these circumstances, it survived and managed to develop so that it would remain an original Arab theatre.

The study also found out that the theatrical groups continued their performances despite the strict rules that were imposed on them by the Occupation authorities and despite the policy of persecution against the artists and players from 1948-1975. Despite the ups and downs of the Palestinian theatrical movement, the theatrical groups succeeded in continuing their performances, challenging all the difficulties and obstacles, and the harassments, persecutions, and censorship that the Occupation authorities exerted till they become an active movement within the Palestinian villages and cities in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Israel.

In the course of its treatment of the types of Palestinian plays, the study revealed their developments and innovations stylistically, linguistically, technically, and thematically. It also pointed out the effects of the Western schools on them and uncovered how they described the bitter reality in Palestine and how they started calling for work and sacrifice, for resistance and martyrdom to regain the Palestinian homeland, the return of the refugees and the evacuees to their homes.

**Chapter Three** is an applied chapter that applies the theoretical background arguments that are introduced in the first two chapters on ten Palestinian plays that were published between the years 1948-1975. The study points out that the themes and issues that these plays deal with are mainly political and social ones including: the Palestinian Catastrophe, the Nakba in 1948, the Arab setback of the 1967 Naksa, which resulted from the Six Days War and their negative effects, the refugees and their life in exile and diaspora, the preservation of the grandfathers' land and the family relationships.

Chapter Three also discusses the development of the structural features of the Palestinian plays including the idea of the play, its plot, characters, events or dramatic actions, conflict, language of narration or dialogue, and setting of time and place. The study found out that the artistic structure of the Palestinian plays in their beginning stage (till 1948), was influenced by the heritage forms and translated works, away from awareness and mastering the elements and principles of the theatrical art, its rules and theories.

In its second stage (1948-1966), the study investigates the artistic foundations of the structure of the plays but at a low scale. This stage suffered from plenty of artistic shortcomings due to the dependence of its pioneers more on description and exposition than on analysis and interpretation, and more on light reviews than on focusing on the complex plot, and more on the lexical conflict than on motion. Therefore, the subjects focused on the Palestinian conflict, attachment to the land, and disagreement to give it up, urging the citizens to resist, to be resilient and steadfast, and to love their homeland and defend it.

In its third stage (1967-1975), the artistic structure of the Palestinian plays started depending on the structural features or principles. This approach started to appear after the writers and poets studied the art of the theatre and became open to other cultures, which, in turn, provided them with the opportunity of being acquainted with every new thing that is relevant to it. This new development enriched their theatrical works, deepened their vision, and consequently, the ideology of each writer or poet became clearer.

**Chapter Three** also deals with the modernist technique of Intertextuality, which constitutes a distinctive specificity in the Palestinian Theatre because it is a largely adopted technique in most Palestinian plays, mainly the types of heritage intertextuality and religious intertextuality.

The last part of the study introduces a **summary** of the following conclusions:

1. The Palestinians challenged all their difficult political and social circumstances and continued looking for different ways to activate the cultural life in Palestine, refusing to submit and remain within the reality that was defined and limited to them. Thus, it was natural that this conflict should produce angry groups that refuse the negativity of life within their homeland. The Palestinian theatre was one of these groups that expressed the issue of the people and their intractable problems. Here lies the secret of the distinction of the Palestinian Theatre from other theatres.
2. The Palestinian Theatre was connected to all the issues of the Palestinian people, which were mostly documented in the Palestinian plays, especially the difficult political problems and the severe social circumstances which resulted from the Nakba and Naksa. The Palestinian Theatre committed to perform and spread these plays, through which it crystallized its special identity through employment of components and techniques that are specific to it, especially the clothes (the theatrical costumes) and the Palestinian decors, which make the Palestinian Theatre distinctive in its identity and committed to its cause.
3. After the Catastrophe / Nakba of 1948, the theatrical activity varied between a surge and abundance of production to lukewarmth and decrease in creativity, besides the disappearance of a large number of theatrical groups, which is attributed to lots of obstacles that the theatrical movement faced, including strict censorship that the Israeli Occupation imposed, impediments that the occupation put against the freedom of movement of the players and banning of performance of a lot of plays.

These restrictions made the Palestinian theatrical art unable to rise to the international level. Besides, there was no educational institute to teach and train the theatrical arts and give an opportunity to the professional and amateur players to develop their abilities and systematize them scientifically. Moreover, there was no infrastructure for the theatre to provide the necessary technical equipment.

The players suffered, too, from financial hardships that hampered them from having sufficient full-time devotion to their theatrical work as their urgent need was to provide for their families first. Besides, the women component was rare in the theatre under the circumstances of the control of the conservative groups and trends on the woman's freedom to participate in social life and arts.

1. The Palestinian poets and writers were concerned with introducing the Palestinian cause in their theatrical works because they considered it their daily pain that pressed their conscience and therefore, they gave it a priority to lots of their social and human life issues. Thus, they were occupied with it due to the political and social circumstances that were forced on them and due to their belief in the necessity to document its events in their writings. Consequently, the theatrical works bore the Palestinian imprint, which is represented in their expression of the national concern in all its forms and aspects. Some plays have telepathic thoughts and feelings despite the objective changes that the writer lived. Therefore, the Palestinian Theatre was able to formulate a special identity among the Arab theatres through the content that is connected to a national concern, which appears in all the introduced issues, whether they are political, social, or human.
2. Most of the Palestinian writers and poets before 1948-1975 resorted in their theatrical works to the technique of **intertextuality**, especially the heritage and religious types because of various reasons. Some reasons can be attributed to the following motives:
3. The desire of some writers to deepen the cultural approach in order to distinguish the Arab Theatre from the Western Theatre and grant it a special characteristic;
4. The writer's desire to describe the negative side in the Arab history, and consequently, to warn against making the same mistakes, which might lead the nation to defeat and collapse;
5. The easiness of dependence on the plot, the characters, and the events that exist in the heritage tales;
6. The writers' desire to make it a shelter where they can hide and express their opinions and thoughts about the reality that they live in without being accountable and punished as a result of the strict censorship, which controlled the Palestinian Theatre in its different stages;
7. The writer's desire to embody their thoughts and enrich them by connecting between the past time and the present time;
8. The desire to uphold the status of the writer's messages that he tries to convey to the reader;
9. The writers' desire to intensify the cultural integration;
10. the writer's desire to confirm the significance of the subjects that he dealt with;
11. The writer's desire to promote the inclusiveness of the subject within its definition and link them with the cultures of other peoples.
12. The spread of education, schools, universities and other educational institutes contributed to the advancement of the cultural-literary life in Palestine after 1970. A new generation of writers and poets became so brilliant in their writings and literary creations and theatrical works such as Mu'in Bsiso (1926-1984), Haroun Hashem Rashid (1927-2020), Samih al-Qassem (1939-2014). Their theatrical works found their way to the Arab theatres. Some Palestinians traveled to Europe in order to study 'Theatre', and when they returned, their influence was reflected on the theatrical life in all its branches.
13. This study clarified and revealed the existing relationships between the Palestinian Theatre, the social circumstances, and the difficult political events that Palestine has undergone. The study also showed that the Palestinian Theatre did not surrender to the circumstances and events. Actually, it challenged them and turned them into the main motive for its spread and expansion into the Palestinian cities and villages and the development of its theatrical works formally, stylistically, technically, and thematically.
14. In my view, this research will encourage researchers and critics to deal with plenty of other subjects that are related to the Palestinian Theatre in order to give it the research, investigation, and criticism that it deserves after it has been deprived of such studies for long periods and because it is an integral part of the Arab Theatre.
15. The study recommends the following subjects that are related to the Palestinian Theatre for future research:
16. *The Character of the Palestinian Woman in her Sacrifices and her Resilience*. The Palestinian poets and writers leaned on her in their theatrical works, taking her as an example of sacrifice and resilience in the roles that she played, challenging the difficult political and social circumstances
17. *The Palestinian Theatrical Groups between Acting and Writing*. In addition to the theatrical roles that the members of groups performed, they also composed tens of plays that are full of distinctive styles, contents, and political, social, and cultural messages.
18. *The Palestinian Plays between Loss and Documentation*. Betwwn1948-1975, about 320 plays were written in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel. Some of them are lost, others are still in manuscripts, and some have been published. It is time to look for them, document them, and study them because they constitute significant documentation of the circumstances through which Palestine has passed since 1948. Such documentation will motivate future generations to investigate them, study them and analyze them.
19. *The Literature of Resistance in the Palestinian Theatre*. The Palestinian writers and poets have documented in their theatrical works the resilience and steadfastness of the Palestinian people and its resistance to the authority of the Israeli Occupation in various ways and methods, and contents that are full of images of resistance and resilience and steadfastness. All these subjects can be fields of future research.