

Tawfik al-Hakim and the Social Responsibility of the Artist

Tawfik al-Hakim and The Social Responsibility of the Artist by Majeed Mohammed Midhin

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In a short piece written in 1972 on the occasion of Tawfik al-Hakim's 74th birthday, the artist reported:

My life has been reduced to dry ink cast upon paper. I do not know how much longer it is to last, but I do know that there is nothing left on the horizon before me to augur contentment or a happy ending. Nothing is crueller to one who has been given the gift of life than that he should feel, towards the end, that his life has been not so much a boon as a penalty, and that he has not been able to do his duty for the good of his country or of the people[\[1\]](#)

With these words, al-Hakim opens a consideration of the polemical relation between the artist and society. He also draws our attention to the difficulty this artist faced in fulfilling his mission. He was convinced of the duty of the artist to dedicate his writings to the good of his fellow human beings.

Looking at al-Hakim's long life, which spanned two generations, we can see that his writing career passed through different distinct orientations. Those writings include a large number of articles and essays on varying topics. However, the major literary works were in the field of drama. Over the last phase of his career, al-Hakim showed a new fondness for experimentation, both in dramatic form and technique, and drew upon inspiration from Brecht, Beckett, Ionesco, and others.

Early in his life, al-Hakim discovered the theatre and was dazzled by it. But for the Egyptian public of that time, the theatre was a mere frivolous pastime, an activity unworthy for an intellectual to preoccupy himself with. This view was shared by his very strict parents who encouraged him, instead, to study law. Nevertheless, Al-Hakim started a literary career in the early 1920s by writing a number of plays and some articles for *al-Tamthil* which were published under the pseudonym Husayn Tawfiq.

As has already been mentioned, al-Hakim's frame of mind as an artist owes its inspiration to his encounter with Western culture. As Rasheed El-Enany has observed:

The three years he spent in Paris in the twenties of his life and the century's were crucial in forming his

consciousness as a young artist and reconciling him to a career in writing at a time when society's esteem rested with other professions. The encounter with Europe was to lead to unending probing of the self and the Other in his journalistic writings in the thirties and forties, now scattered in numerous collections of essays.[\[2\]](#)

In contrast to the limitations of the Egyptian scene, his Paris experience led al-Hakim to discover the secrets of theatre which was not taken seriously in his country. It was in Paris, where he was sent in 1925 to study law, that he discovered not only how refined an art form the drama could be, but also how seriously it was taken as a vehicle for the dissemination of ideas by a mature public and by important critics.

Among the many opportunities which Paris provided for him, al-Hakim found himself strongly drawn to the performances of works by such intellectuals and avant-garde writers as Ibsen, Pirandello, Maeterlinck, Shaw and others. It was under the influence of these dramatists that he wrote his masterpiece, *Ahl al-Kahf* (The people of the Cave, 1933) which is based on the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, briefly referred to in the Holy Qur'an. Al-Hakim's new enthusiasm for technical experiment from the West helped him to bridge the gap that existed in Egypt between the theatre and general public, by importing new ideas and new techniques from the Western, avant-garde theatre.

In *Tahta Shams al-Fikr* (Under the Sun of Thought), published in 1938, al-Hakim speaks in admiration of Western civilization, but he also argues that Eastern and Western cultures cannot live independently. The culture of the East (*al-thaqafa al-Sharqiyya*) cannot advance without catching up with Western culture, which he felt had added greatly to what it had inherited from earlier civilizations. So, like most intellectuals of his generation, al-Hakim was an enthusiastic admirer of the West. He found there an inspiration which formed a center of enlightenment for his entire life.

To understand al-Hakim's idea of the social responsibility of the artist, then, it is important to consider a few of the Western views of the responsibility of the artist and the implication these might have had for the Egyptian artist.

In an article on the Irish drama published in 2009, Csilla Bertha argued that the central place which an artist occupies within a work of art gains an additional dimension to plays since the fictional artist's point of view, attitudes to the world and evaluation of phenomena may double or multiply the layers of the connections between art and life. She adds:

If an artist is chosen to be the protagonist of a play or novel, that choice naturally leads to the thematization of questions and dilemmas about the existence of art and the artist; relations between art and life, art/artist and the world; the nature of artistic creation; differences between ways of life, values, and views of ordinary people and artists; relations between individual and community, between the subject and objective reality; and many other similar issues.[\[3\]](#)

With the advent of modern literary schools and theories, it is hard to conceive the dilemma of the artist without paying attention to the interrelations between art and life in which the ideal and reality, subject and object constitute sharp contrasts. Traditionally, these dialectical relations are expressed in binary oppositions. Accordingly, one of the most painful dilemmas of the artist is social: How can the artist function as a member of a certain community and at the same time retain the distinctiveness of her/his

role as an outsider whose social usefulness is based on his chronic estrangement from the ordinary concerns of society? This is the perplexing dilemma in which the artist finds himself as he struggles to reconcile private concerns with public expectations.

The Kantian concept of art for art's sake, has created much debate concerning the role and function of the artist in society. Adorno, for example, argued that “‘art for art's sake’ denies by its absolute claims that ineradicable connection with reality which is polemical *a priori* of the attempt to make art autonomous from the real. Between these two poles the tension in which art in accounting for the role of the artist and art in real life, Jean-Paul Sartre insisted upon the social responsibility of the artist and the intellectual in general. This is quite clear in his rejection of “art for art's sake.” Today, he insisted, the writer “should in no case occupy himself with temporal affairs. Neither should he set up lines without meaning nor seek solely beauty of phrase and imagery.”^[4]

Al-Hakim's view of the social responsibility of the artist finds perhaps its fullest expression in the extended 1995 essay of equilibrium/equivalency (*al-Ta'aduliyya*) which he advances as a lifestyle and a doctrine that can be maintained and applied to life, thought and art. He supposes that there are two disharmonious powers which move in contradictory directions. Here the role of equilibrium is to retain the stability or balance between these two conflicting powers by resisting the attempts of one to consume the other. For al-Hakim, if one side of a conflict becomes more powerful than the other and tries to absorb it, it means that the stronger side behaves in an imbalanced way, outside the proper standard of relationships. To apply his philosophy, al-Hakim presents five main principles of “equilibrium.” Firstly, things only exist in relation to others: without the other there is no existence. Secondly, “thought” and “action” are separate entities which must not be allowed to interfere with each other. “Good” must balance “evil” as the heart must balance the mind. While in art, “expression” must balance “explanation.”^[5] It is interesting to note here that al-Hakim's first principle of equilibrium has a close affinity with Sartrean existentialism as proposed in his work, *L'Etre et le N?ant*.⁶⁷ Starkey maintained that “al-Hakim's first principle of equilibrium ‘without the Other there is no existence’ is almost certainly derived from Sartre's doctrine.” But the difference between al-Hakim and Sartre lies in the fact that al-Hakim does not contend that a committed writer “can retain his integrity while remaining a member of a political party.”^[6]

As far as the function of the artist in society is concerned, al-Hakim sees that through the history of mankind there is an everlasting struggle between the power of thought, represented by intellectuals and the power of action, represented by political system. As in the past, the politicians try to utilize the power of the artists for their own purposes. Should this happen, the artist will become a mere tool in the hands of others to achieve particular aims without paying attention to the immediate needs of the multitudes. This situation of the submissive artist is completely rejected by al-Hakim who thinks that the man of thought must not succumb to the temptation of joining a political party, since this will upset the equilibrium between thought and action. This does not mean that the artist should cut himself off from society, but he must preserve a certain degree of equilibrium to not be swallowed up by action.

Al-Hakim's concept of “equilibrium” can also be applied to the field of literary criticism. For him, literature and art are also governed by equilibrium: between “expression” (*al-ta'bir*) and “explanation” (*al-tafsir*). Accordingly, al-Hakim observes that “explanation” alone may lead to “art for art's sake” if too much attention is given to formal considerations, while if the artist pays heed exclusively to the content of his work, [the result will be] “committed art.”^[7] In both cases, the artist is hindered in the delivery of his

full message because of the lack of freedom. Therefore, commitment, in al-Hakim's perspective, is connected with the freedom that the artist should enjoy. Yet there is no accurate definition of commitment in al-Hakim's philosophy. When he talked about commitment, he did not distinguish between different genres of literature. For him, the function of art is the same, whether the artist is a novelist, dramatist or poet. Sometimes, the same artist writes plays, novels, and short stories as did al-Hakim himself.

Although the concept of commitment gained in importance for him after the Second World War, especially after the spread of modern socialism, al-Hakim felt that the issue of commitment was as old as art itself. He argued that the artist was born committed in old ages. The first poets, for example, were at the service of their tribe, and their poetry was devoted to praising its virtues.

Although he did not restrict "commitment" to any particular political system, al-Hakim felt that it required a certain degree of freedom. Commitment is conditioned by the artist's freedom to criticize and this commitment should not remain unchanged for a long time since "for long-lasting commitment to a particular view leads to faith; and faith leads to a suspension of thought."^[8] Although al-Hakim agreed that many of his own works were committed, he was careful to maintain a distinction between commitment in *ta'bir* and commitment in *tafsir*. In his commitment, the writer must be responsible to himself, not to any outside pressures. Thus, the artist must detach himself from politicians rather than from politics. In other words, the artist must distance himself from political parties rather than from society as a whole. In having such a concern, al-Hakim is almost unique among Arabic writers in that he consistently refused to identify himself with any political party. He insisted that the writer should be independent so that he could preserve his moral authority.

His attitude towards politics was also founded on the basis of constant equilibrium. He always adopted a position of detachment, never surrendering totally to particular political developments or acting as a propagandist for a particular system. Although al-Hakim ostensibly was at peace with some regimes, he repeatedly called for an equivalent relation between the ruler and his people. Accordingly, al-Hakim argued that within the state the relationship between the power of the ruler and the power of his subjects must be kept in a state of balance.^[9] This is needed even during the rule of an absolute sovereignty. He saw the conflict between different parties in parliamentary democracies as an embodiment of a healthy state that manifests itself in sound political rule since two powers balanced powers would inevitably emerge: a legislative ruling power and an opposition power that tried to replace the first.

As mentioned before, one of the prominent themes that al-Hakim discussed according to his theory of equilibrium was the dialectic relation between the executive authority and the intellectual authority. While the executive authority is represented by the state, the intellectual authority is represented by artists, free scholars, scientists, and philosophers who write about society as a result of their care for that society, and not because they wish to serve the executive authority or submit to its desires. Al-Hakim found that it was necessary to separate these two authorities to avoid collision and violent confrontation since executive authority constantly tried to manipulate intellectual authority, to recruit and integrate the intellectuals into its ranks.

In al-Hakim's *Praksa* (1939), this political conflict between those two powers is represented by the politicians Praksa and Heronimus, who take over the government and represent one side, while the other side is represented by the philosopher, Abuqrat (Hippocrates). Here we see that the executive power tries

to destroy the intellectual power in different ways: sometimes by suppressing it, or imprisoning it, or isolating it from the rest of the society. Conversely, the power of the intellect neutralizes itself by only watching and giving advice.^[10] However, this negative neutrality leads to oppression and anarchy since it paves the way for the tyranny to continue. Therefore, we see the philosopher at the end of the play standing against authority by arousing and stirring up the people, and abandoning his devotion to thought in order to join with the revolting crowds.^[11] This is one of the responsibilities of the artist that al-Hakim wants to convey. Likewise, in the words of the central character of *Al-Ribat al-Muqaddas* (1944), al-Hakim asserts that the writer's duty is "to instill in mankind the belief that men can rise above themselves" and that this duty "imposes on him the obligation to lead a blameless and irreproachable life himself."^[12]

Another play which reflects al-Hakim's idea about the social responsibility of the artist in society is *Isis* (1955). At the outset of the play, Tut refuses to make use of his skills to help the peasant women, who are suppressed by Shaykh al-Balad. When he is asked by Isis for his assistance in the search for Osiris, who represents the intellectual isolated from the field of activity and politics, Tut is fearful of being placed in opposition to Tayfun, a tyrannical ruler. He declares that his pen is "for recording, not for war."^[13] Here Tut's view of art represents the attitude of "art for art's sake," while Mastat represents the opposite side, that of "art for life." However, through a close examination of the character of Tut, we see that his character reflects his creator's changing views of art in the early and later stages. When Mastat begins to struggle against Tayfun, he is surprised to find a supporter in Tut, who proclaims that:

Today I am not what I was yesterday. In the past, I was content with reading, observing, and recording. But now my position has changed, because everything, as you yourself said, has become clear to our eyes. Yesterday there was no clear cause in front of but now we are faced with a cause which is our cause before us it is Osiris's cause... We either surrender to the usurper as the others have done, or we struggle.^[14]

This conclusion reflects al-Hakim's revolutionary view of the social responsibility of the artist as a human being who affects and is affected by his society. Furthermore, like Sartre, al-Hakim sees that it is his duty as the artist to carry weapons and defend his country from external and internal threat.

The second collection of essays in which al-Hakim expounded his view about the nature of the artist and the intellectual is *Min al-Burj al-Aji* (From the Ivory Tower), first published in 1941. Although al-Hakim is known as the artist in the ivory tower, he was not an isolated figure. On the contrary, he was interested in the social issues of his time and the transformations his nation had undergone. This is quite clear in his output which includes, besides his literary works, articles, opinions, dialogues, and public discussions. Al-Hakim's *Min al-Burj al-Aji*, which was later re-titled *Min al-Burj al-Aji al-Khalqi* (From the Ethical Ivory Tower) marks his changing belief from "art for art's sake" to art for life.

Al-Hakim's *Pygmalion* (1942) is another good example of his views about the function and responsibility of the artist in society. Pygmalion's dilemma, as he hesitates between life and art, forms the crux of the play. From the beginning Pygmalion appears to be a symbol of intellectuality and immortal art in its purest condition. Here Pygmalion is introduced as a human being who devotes his life to art. The artist has poured the spring of his own life, experiences, and his wisdom in his statue. This approach by the artist represents a subjective expression of a psychological dilemma that he suffers from, namely that he confines his life to abstract contemplation. Pygmalion's creative art, which is embodied in his statue of

Galatia, has not satisfied his aspiring soul. Despite her ideal beauty, there is still need for something alive. So he transforms the statue into a woman who represents life. From this moment, Pygmalion starts descending from the peak of his art into everyday life to find a balanced scale between life and art. Therefore, living in an “ivory tower,” for al-Hakim does not imply that the artist should cut himself off from mankind, but rather that he should retain his freedom, like a prophet, to rise above his fellow-men and their petty conflicts. So, at the end of the play, Pygmalion deliberately rejects his own handiwork in favor of life.

In contrast with the view that art and life can exist together, Richard Long, in his book *Tawfiq al-Hakim: Playwright of Egypt*, argues that “art and life cannot co-exist; the true artist must not allow himself to become involved in life.”^[15] But al-Hakim's own experience convinced him that there is no artist who can get rid of his responsibility towards his age and his society. In his *The Revolt of Youth* (1975) he asserts that the period of the youth is the most suitable age for revolution in literature and life respectively. Young persons should be guided to achieve democracy not as a political system but as a “human principle.”^[16] Therefore, one of the obligations of the artist is to encourage the youth, who represent our hope for the future. For al-Hakim, creativity is a movable living thing in time and place; it is not only concerned with the past. Thus, the relation between generations is continuous. Each one completes the other. The old paved the way for them to go on living. One amazing thing in al-Hakim's writing is that the different issues considered by him are not governed by time. He looks at them comprehensively outside the framework of time and place. This feature keeps his works alive and their timeless dimension inspires people from generation to another.

Majeed Mohammed Midhin Al-Aubaidy was awarded a BA in English Language and Literature in 1996 and received his MA in English literature from the University of Baghdad - College of Languages in 2002 with his thesis, "The Concept of Justice in Selected Plays of William Shakespeare." Since then, Majeed has published multiple papers on Shakespearean and modern drama. In 2011, Majeed received a scholarship to pursue a PhD in English Literature in the United Kingdom and is a current PhD student at the University of Essex. Under the supervision of Dr. Clare Funburgh, he is working on his PhD proposal entitled, "The Dilemma of the Artist in Contemporary British Theatre." Majeed has a strong interest in modern drama and its ability to touch the immediate needs of people in society.

^[1] *Al-Ahram*, Oct. 8, 1972, 7.

^[2] Rasheed El-Enany, “Tawfiq al-Hakim and the West: A New Assessment of the Relationship,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 2 (Nov., 2000): 165.

^[3] Csilla Bertha, “Visual Art and Artist in Contemporary Irish Drama,” *Journal of English and American Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 347.

^[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Routledge, 1978), 18.

^[5] Tawfiq al-Hakim, *al-Ta'aduliyya* (Cairo, 1935), 65.

[6] Paul Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower: A Critical Study of Tawfiq al-Hakim* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1989), 97.

[7] Tawfiq al-Hakim, *al-Ta'aduliyya*, 70.

[8] *Ibid.*, 86.96.

[9] *Ibid.*, 76.

[10] Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Praksa, wa Muskilat al-Hukm* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1988), 161.

[11] *Ibid.*, 79.

[12] Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Al-Ribat al-Muqaddas* (Cairo, 1956), 5.

[13] Al-Hakim, *Isis* (Cairo, n.d.), 111-12.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Richard Long, *Tawfiq al-Hakim: Playwright of Egypt* (London: Ithaca, 1979), 52.

[16] Tawfiq al-Hakim, *The Revolt of Youth* (Cairo:al-Fjala Library, n.d.), 20.



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