

The Village of Tishreen



The Village of Tishreen

A Review by Ahmad Mahfouz

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The Village of Tishreen is one of the most important modern political plays, not only in Syria, but in the whole Arab world [author Mahfouz' English translation of *The Village of Tishreen* appeared in Volume 3

of *Arab Stages*]. This is due to the depth of its meaning and its controversial messages that are still relevant today, thirty-eight years after its first staging. It was written by Muhammad Al-Maghut with the help of director Duried Lahham. The idea of this play came after a meeting between the two writers in 1973. However, it is easy to see that the play reflects mainly Al-Maghut's style of satire, which can also be found in his essays and novels. As Lahham reports in the study of Al-Maghut, *I Will Betray My Homeland: Hallucinations about Freedom and Horror*, first published by the Almada Publishing Company in Damascus in 1987:

My first meeting with Muhammad Al-Maghut was by chance after the 1973 war. I met him in the artists' union building and this was the first time I met him as I did not know him before. I sat with him on that day and talked about the 1973 war, how it was different to the 1967 defeat and what the change was between the two wars that led to victory.

As you know, in the 1967 war the Arab soldiers ran away and did not fight while in 1973 they did face the enemy. So we talked in that meeting about the reasons for that change and then we decided that we should transfer this change that happened between the two wars into a play that would reflect this issue. After that meeting we spent the next three months together and we wrote our first joint work which is the play called *The Village of Tishreen*. And of course we named the play with this title, *The Village of Tishreen*, after the *Tishreen* (October) war of 1973.

They wrote this play by recording incidents and things that they had experienced or seen and turning these into the theatrical work. They utilized what they heard, and what was happening every day in the streets between real people. That explains why their plays were popular; they reflected real people's situations.

The Village of Tishreen was popular during the seventies in different Arab countries and it is regarded as a classic now because it is aired several times a year on different Arabic TV channels along with the plays of Adel Imam, since these remain among the most important theatrical figures in the Arab world. People still like and ask for Al-Maghut's or Imam's old plays from the seventies and eighties.

The play was first staged at a unique moment in Arabic history, right after the 1973 war between Syria, Egypt and Israel. This added to its success, as people at that time were desperate to know what caused their defeat in the war. The play answers that question by portraying an Arab as a human being defeated from inside. This helps to explain why, although it has been nearly forty years since the first staging of this play, it is still popular today.

The Argument of the Play

The Village of Tishreen is a complex tale about a village and its people. It speaks about the life of the village people, starting from when they obtained independence in the forties until the 1973 war with Israel. It speaks of the corruption of their leader and their simple life and how their land is stolen. This is followed by different coups in the village which later reveal the first leader is much better than the ones that follow him. Towards the end, the people of the village are deceived by the new leader who had appeared to be a good leader, but changed after time, tempted by his new position. He turned out to be similar to the other corrupt leaders, with the only difference being his ability to make his people fear him by using intelligence agents to eavesdrop on all their conversations. The play ends when a good leader

assumes power and inspires confidence in the people, which helps them to win the war against their enemy. He saves the village and helps its people to achieve victory in their war against the thief.

The play takes place in an imaginary village called Halloum, which stands for the whole Arab world. The Moktar stands for any president in the Arab world, while the policeman is a symbol of oppression and corruption found in the army, intelligence forces or the police in the Arab World. These metaphorical levels were interpreted differently according to the audience's levels of either thinking that it speaks about their country or meant to address the whole Arab world and its problems. The play opens in the 1930s or 1940s when the Arab people were living peacefully after gaining their independence from French and British rule. We see that the teacher is trying to teach them but they refuse and the Moktar, in a way, encourages them, as he wants them to stay ignorant in order to maintain his power over them. We see the Moktar as a corrupt person who only wants to make money through smuggling goods through the borders. However, he was not aggressive or a dictator like the ensuing Moktars as there was no prison or intelligence agents spying on the people during his era. Ghawar is one of the main characters in the play; he is a womanizer who would love to get married. Another character is Abou Nara, who is the owner of the only shop in the village. It is a bookshop, which is also a reference to the fact that Arabs at that time, in the 1940s and 1950s, were more literate than later in the 1970s and 1980s. Additional characters include Nayef and Zenah, who are in love and want to get married and Abou Samra who is a simple middle-class man.

Suddenly, while Zenah and Nayef are preparing to get married, we hear that the orchard, which represents Palestine, has been stolen from them. We see the corruption of the Moktar and his policeman in that they only care about smuggling and making money and they do not care about how to get back the stolen land or make the people's life better in the village. Nayef and Zenah's wedding is postponed because he is not able to give her a dowry now that his land is stolen. Hence, the people start to demonstrate against the Moktar, trying to change him, but he only makes superficial changes in order to keep his position.

Later we see many defeats and the appearance of new Moktars, representing the military coups that happened in the Arab world and in Syria in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, resulting in a different president each time, but with the same approach. That is why we see the same Moktar appearing every time but in different clothes. We also see Abou Samra, who is a symbol of the middle classes, and how he becomes a very poor person, begging for money because of the politics of these dictators. This unstable political situation continues until one of the characters becomes the Moktar who, while appearing to be good in the beginning and one of the ordinary people, eventually changes to become a merciless dictator, hiring intelligence agents to spy on his citizens and not allowing them to criticize anything. This demonstrates how a dictator is created; he starts as an ordinary man making a lot of promises, but after feeling powerful in his new position he will do anything to keep his position, abandoning his old friends and other people, spying on them and putting them in prison.

Moreover, we see how torture and oppression have changed the people, becoming indifferent and drinking all the time to forget their misery. Abou Nara is a symbol of an indifferent citizen who puts a framed picture of each Moktar in his shop to show his support. He does not care about anything except trying to live his everyday life safely. The last Moktar stands for the socialist party, which ruled Egypt from the 1950s until the 1970s and began ruling Syria in 1963. Al-Maghut here is criticizing these socialist regimes by showing their bad politics such as when the Moktar nationalizes a cow and hires ten people to milk it. Al-Maghut believes that communism is a flawed system that aimed to create a perfect

society in theory but without practising it in reality. Al-Maghut says in the book *I Will Betray my Homeland*:

The look of one Arabic leader speaking about the agony of his people while patting his dog's head that has just been washed or seeing a child relaxing inside a luxurious car outside his school while there are hundreds of other children waiting for the bus outside the school cancels all the theories, lectures and songs that glorify socialism and its ideal society.

When the Moktar finally decides to begin a war to get his land back, the people are defeated from inside. They do not feel their dignity anymore and are defeated. He tries to convince them that they have won because he is still their leader. Subsequently, we see the people start to drink even more excessively to try and forget their miserable situation and to criticize the government without being taken to prison because they are drunk. Suddenly the teacher returns, after twenty years away, to gradually change the people until they get rid of the dictator. They have a real war this time to get their land back. The name of the village is changed in the end to Tishreen (October) to commemorate the victory of the 1973 war.

Importance of the Play

Although *The Village of Tishreen* was first staged in 1974, it still raises important political questions about Arab regimes and dictatorship. Many of the problems shown in the play are still found in Arab nations; Politicians are still reiterating the same static and meaningless speeches, corruption is widespread from the lowliest official to the president, and oppression and tyranny are still the major characteristics of the Assad regime and others. Thus, this has led to the current Syrian crisis as an outcome of that long oppression since 1963. Al-Maghut predicts this ongoing crisis in his play by criticizing the dictatorship and corruption and encouraging the people to reject that regime.

The play sheds light on the corruption of the Arab regimes and how rulers and people surrounding them enjoy a luxurious life while people are struggling to have the food necessary to live. Thus, we see that the policeman tells Nayef that he is lying when he could not find bread or other essential things, since the Moktar's house is loaded with rice, oil, bread, lentils, whiskey and meat. Everything. Is that true or not?" The majority of these regimes have pretended to be serving their people and defending them against their enemies while the main purpose of their assuming power is to make a lot of money through corruption and stealing from the country's resources.

As a result of this corruption, injustice and humiliation, the people of Syria ceased to have a connection with their home country. Thus, when the oppressed citizen is sent to war he will not fight, because he does not have anything or a cause to defend; there is no reason to fight for the ruler and his fellow assistants to enjoy living in the country and deprive him of his most basic rights. The Moktar asks Ghawar why he did not defend his land in the war and Ghawar answers him in one of the most powerful and important messages of the play, asking:

What do you want us to defend? Do you want us to defend prisons that have increased to become more numerous than schools? There is always a place for a prisoner but there are thousands of children without a place in schools. What do you want us to defend? We only dare to open our mouths when we visit the dentist. People defend happiness and schools in their country, not sadness and prisons. We only care now about how to survive; we do not want that miserable life anymore.

Al-Maghut points out that dictators are all similar. Hence, he asks the same actors to play the different dictators, simply changing his clothes, to indicate that all dictators are the same underneath. We even find that, after each coup, each new Moktar repeats the same speech which is full of promises that are never fulfilled, to the degree that the people can memorize every word of it and even are able at last to complete the speech on their own.

In suggesting that rulers are corrupted by gaining power, Al-Maghut is criticizing the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad as he came from a very poor background and people were happy when he assumed power in a military coup, but in the next few years of his rule he turned into a ruthless dictator. In this vein, we see that Wardeh is happy at first with the with the new ruler, whom he calls “one of us”. Soon even his closest friend cannot see the Moktar, as the guards forbid him from entering the ruler’s home.

One of the most important objectives of the play is to point out that corrupt and ruthless regimes are not able to change. An example of this is when the people of the village have their first demonstration. The Moktar responds immediately by announcing a series of valueless changes. Corrupt officials are dismissed but then moved to other positions, the Moktar will change his dwelling (to a more luxurious one), and will part his hair on the other side.

An important technique used by a dictatorship when in trouble is to cause problems between the people so that they fight with each other. This distracts their attention from their leader. The play points to this technique towards the end of scene seven when the Moktar provokes a problem between the two main families in the village in order for them to forget about the orchard. This scenario played out in several cases of the Arab Spring. In Egypt, after Mubarak stepped down, it was revealed that his regime was responsible for blowing up churches in order to create a civil war between Christians and Muslims in Egypt so that they would forget about him.

In Syria, after the revolution, the regime formed illegal militias from certain sects in order to fight the Sunni majority. The different sects fighting with each other led to a civil war and the people forgot its original cause, just as the regime had planned. Thus, Assad turned this revolution into a civil war between different sects, using his media to spread rumours that there were Islamic extremists among the fighters who were killing people. Thus, at the beginning of the revolution Daraa was peaceful and they only asked for general reforms, the regime forced people to carry weapons in order to defend themselves after killing peaceful demonstrators and arresting them. Gradually, armed civilians and soldiers who had defected from the Syrian army, refusing to kill their fellow citizens, formed the Free Syrian Army in order to get rid of the Assad regime. This has resulted in more than forty thousand people being killed, half a million arrested, millions of refugees inside and outside of Syria and a many houses and infrastructure being destroyed which will take billions of dollars to rebuild after the end of the war.

Most importantly, however, Al-Maghut predicts in his play that all dictators must be defeated one day. Thus we find at the end of the play that even the Moktar loses his real power when all of his people agree for the first time to reject him and this forces him to step down. This was reflected in the Arab Spring and particularly in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011. It can be seen that the collective rejection by the people of the village of the Moktar is similar to what happened in Egypt where the people demonstrated in the main squares and stayed there for twenty-eight days to protest against the regime for the first time in such large numbers. Thus, Mubarak with this huge public demand was forced to step down, which is similar to the

Moktar's situation in the play, as, after all, any ruler, whether a dictator or not derives his power from the support of his people and the control of army and judiciary. Thus, when people decide together to protest, he has to leave. The situation depends, however, on the degree of the dictatorship. In countries like Syria where there are extreme dictators, they would leave in the same way as in Egypt under public demand but it would also need a long and difficult fight before this could occur. Thus, thirty-eight years after the first staging of *The Village of Tishreen*, Arab people have decided to make the play a reality and say no to dictators like Mubarak and Assad who, ironically, ruled for nearly thirty years or more, the same age as the play. After all, nothing lasts forever. Al-Maghut once said that dictators are like world records that must be broken one day.

Ahmad Mahfouz received his B.A in English Literature from Damascus University, and an M.A in English literature from the University of Newcastle. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Sheffield under the supervision of Professor Steve Nicholson and Dr. Bill McDonnell. His research investigates the political theatre of the Syrian playwright Mohammad Al-Maghut, while also considering his other dramatic writings, journalistic articles and poems. Mahfouz has translated six of Al-Maghut's plays into English.



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