

Exploring Affective Justice in Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Song of Death* (Ughniyat al- Mawt)

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Abstract

This research is an attempt to explore the formation of the assemblage of justice in Tawfiq al-Hakim's The Song of Death (Ughniyat al- Mawt) (2008). The play is Al-Hakim's rendition of a rural tragedy. Alwan, the son returning from the metropolis, remains caught up in a centuries' long tribal blood feud. Urged on avenging his father's murder, and failing to do so, Alwan dampens his mother's thirst for blood with his own. This paper looks at the play with reference to K. M. Clarke's merging of the affective theory with the fabric of justice. In this way, the portrayal of both tribal and new formations of systemic justice rising in Nasser's Egypt will be explored within the play. Furthermore, this research investigates the role past traces and remnants of encounters with justice play in the structuring of justice within the rural scape of modern Egypt. The paper explores and dismantles various binaries presented in the text: tribal and modern, justice and vengeance, and shame and honour. It analyzes the ways in which emotional expressions and affects are articulated and institutionalized by the characters. In addition, the possibility of new imaginaries and cartographies of justice will be explored in order to reframe the debate around the binary of tribal and modern judicialization of violence.

Keywords: Affective Justice, Proto-affect Shame, Affective Attunement, *The Song of Death*, Al-Hakim

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Introduction

This research paper sheds light on the dynamic structure of justice in Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Song of Death* (*Ughniyat al- Mawt*) (2008). The play is Al-Hakim's rendition of a rural tragedy where a young man, Alwan, returning from the city, is caught up in an age-old blood feud. His mother's thirst for blood and justice leads to his demise. This paper aims at extending K. M. Clarke's affective theory to the fabric of justice, both tribal and new formations of systemic justice, in Nasser's Egypt. This research investigates the ways in which past encounters with justice affectively alter the future formations of justice. Moreover, it explores Al-Hakim's depiction of the ways in which his characters vocalize their inner and vulnerable affects. The paper focusses on revealing the mapping of new structures of justice and reformulating of the binaries present in modern Egypt. This research stems from a dearth of criticism on Al-Hakim.

Al-Hakim was writing in a period when Arabic literature was dominated by poetry and novel. He too experimented in fiction and poetry. However, he earned fame for his theatre. He penned down seventy full-length plays during his lifetime;

thus, becoming the precursor for modern Arabic drama. Al-Hakim composed plays that were "based on themes culled from Greek legend, the Qurān, and Middle Eastern history" to create art that was "acceptable to the critical establishment in Egypt and beyond, particularly with regard to its merit as "literature"" (Ahmed, p. 240).

During the 1930s, Egyptian drama was largely confined to the "popular commercial stage", as the "Egyptian theatre world was shrinking rapidly" due to the economic crises (Badawi, 1987, p. 6). The Egyptian drama evolved during the Arab cultural revolution and awakening, "nahda", which was caused by political movements - the desire for social reform and freedom for women (Pormann, 2006). Al-Hakim's dramatic range expanded to the theatre of the absurd, social plays, and reinterpretations of the classical theatre. His oeuvre has been critically explored through the lens of his philosophical themes, the individual's struggle with temporality and space, and man as the prisoner of his past (Starkey 1977; Long 1969).

Al-Hakim was introduced to live theatres in Cairo, while he was "opposing the British rule in Egypt to compose songs in defiance of the

colonial authority” (Attar, 2010, p. 91). After completing his law education from Paris, he reportedly worked as a “deputy public prosecutor in the countryside” (Attar, 2010, p. 91). This provided him insight into the workings of the assemblage of justice that he explores in *The Song of Death (Ughniyat al- Mawt)*.

According to Whittingham (1976), Al-Hakim’s “characters are always engaged in delicate balancing acts, often seeming to be on the brink of taking decisive action, but usually retreating to safety behind philosophical generalities” (p.16). He is often criticized for not playing an active role in the Egyptian political revolution, for opting to remain secure in his ivory tower, and for compromising his artistry to appease the elite rulers. In post-Nasserist Egypt, rural life was a point of discussion in the political and economic spheres, in particular, the agrarian reforms impacting the rural areas.

Al-Hakim adapted European plays for popular musical theatre. For his farce, he borrowed plots from French theatre. In his later years, the nationalist struggle against the British and the emancipation of women became recurrent concerns in his

works. The inspiration for his “theatre of ideas” and “theatre of mind” came from the French avant-garde theatre (Pirandello, Ibsen, Shaw) (Badawi, 1987, p. 13). Furthermore, he created *Masrah al Mujtama* (Plays on Social Themes), and introduced his concept of the “Third language” portraying the diglossic nature of modern Arabic (Badawi, 1987, p.68).

The Song of Death belongs to the period when Al-Hakim penned down his *Masrah al-Mujtama* (Plays on Social Themes). These were observations of the social problems rife in the post-World War II Egypt. In the *Conflict between Tradition and Modernity in Tawfiq Al-Hakim’s The Song of Death* (2015), Ramesh Shrestha explores Al-Hakim’s depiction of conflicts and disparity, and the rift between the West and the East portrayed through the divide between modernity and tradition in the plays.

The Affect Theory in Perspective

Philosophy has been embroiled in the mind-matter divide for ages. The turn to affect wishes to synthesize this divide. Affects involve, both passions and reasons, and body and mind. Affects are like forces, prior to intentions, pre-subjective, autonomic,

and visceral. They are often confused with emotions, but in fact, precede emotional states. They belong to “the realm of causality” (Hardt, 2007, ix). According to Baruch Spinoza (1994), both the body’s power to act and the mind’s power to think are autonomous, yet they work in parallel to each other. Spinoza’s (1994) second proposition claims that there exists a correlation between the power to act and the power to affect. Therefore, affects straddle this divide.

The foundation of affect theory is laid by Silvan Tomkins in *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962, 1963, 1991). For him, affect is not time or object constrained; thus, it is beyond spatial and temporal constrictions. Tomkins laid down six negative, two positive and one neutral affect: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, anger-rage, fear-terror, shame, disgust, and dismal. Affect is related to abstract possibilities and futuristic imaginings of the material. It is additionally defined by cultural abstractions and material reality, as “affect as a whole, then, is the virtual co-presence of potentials” (Masumi, 2015, p. 5).

The research explores the “potentials” of affect on justice, and as

affect of justice. Justice has continuously been mapped out through philosophy, analytics and practice. It is K. M. Clarke (2019) who for the first time brings together the two spheres considered previously in opposition to each other. Affective justice is employed for understanding the way “people’s embodied engagements with and production of justice” become possible, and are cemented “through particular structures of power, history, and contingencies” (Clarke, 2019, p. 5). Furthermore, Clarke states that “affects, as embodied responses, constitute publics by dislodging identity from its classification domain and relocating it to a domain of practice and regimentations of feelings” (Clarke, 2019, p. 5). Divorced from an identity, justice is posited within emotions, feelings, and the realm of affect. Affective Justice is “recognizing the relevance of affects in shaping how justice is materialized; key to understanding how justice is made legible, institutionalized, disentangled, and also remade anew.” (Clarke, 2019, p. xxvii).

In this research, the notion of justice is entirely taken as the legal protection of those who have been victims of violence. Traversing these lines, it is imperative to comprehend

“how legal order operates, it is important to note what it displaces and how those forms of displacement ignite affective responses to other conceptualizations of justice, such as redistributive justice or substantive equality.” (Clarke, 2019, p. 17). It is through affective justice that people challenge and influence legal orders, together with their affects, interjections, and social actions.

In his seminal work, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (1985), Daniel N. Stern suggests that mother and infant share affective states and experiences via the phenomenon of “affective attunement”. Mothers sense and react with affect-laden responses to the child. Infants learn these “affective attunement[s]” and understand that their meaning is cemented in a system where they comprehend emotion through their mother’s subjective states. For Stern, “affective attunement” is the mother’s cross-modal transformation of the baby’s affective state. He states that this “translation” of one’s behaviour to another’s feelings requires “the transmutation from the perception of timing, intensity, and shape via cross-modal fluency” into felt vitality affects in ourselves (Stern, 1985, p. 159).

Furthermore, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling* (2003) traces “proto-affect shame” as the moment when “affective attunement” is thrown into disarray. It is the moment when “shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication.” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 36). Upon recognizing and distinguishing the face of their caregiver infants begin to reciprocate and mirror expressions. The moment the adult face refuses to comply and mirror their expression babies become aware that the circuit of expression is now broken. That unbroken bond is broken.

It is this and multiple other minute details and affects that an individual is daily confronted with. They exist prior to the point where these two terms are distinctly defined. In simpler terms, affects are always productive. They exist outside the binary of active or passive, and transpose the meanings assigned to both terms. Massumi (2015) defines these minor events, circumstances, utterances, and emotions, all piled upon each other to create microperceptions, as “something that is felt without registering consciously. It registers only in its effects.”

(Massumi, 2015, p. 53).

A memory according to Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory* "is just the intersection of mind and matter" (1990, p. xii). The present moment for Bergson is both a mixture of the embodied matter of the past, the perception of the present, and detains within itself the possibility of the future. Similarly, memory for Massumi has a two-fold function: it acts as a bridge between the past and the present, it simultaneously holds the potential of the future, and the effects of the past. Massumi states that it is "an adaptive potential unfolding for the situation. It comes into the present as an inheritance of the past, but only to the extent that it is readying a future" (Massumi, 2015, p. 59). Matter becomes the place for memory to be stored "the body becomes a memorial, a ghosted bodily matter" (Clough, 2007, p. 7).

According to Massumi, abduction is in C.S Pierce's words, "thought that is still couched in bodily feeling, that is still fully bound up with unfolding sensation as it goes into action but before it has been able to articulate itself in conscious reflection and guarded language" (Massumi, 2015, 9). Abduction is the moment before sensation grasps the

affect and registers it into consciousness. For Massumi, abduction comes right before the instance when perception descends upon an individual. Massumi postulates that within tendency every possibility of a new beginning is present. An individual's body has a particular tendency that is activated when a person moves through various situations. According to Massumi "tendency" has two poles: "a physical pole (defined as the tendency of an event to conform to the ordering it inherits from the immediate past) and a mental pole (defined as the tendency to surpass the given, to produce the new and generate surprise)" (2015, p. 214). Therefore, tendency pertains to the material domain and the psychic realm.

Discussion

This paper explores the subjective processes and the structuring of the affective field through which the characters respond to social injustice and reinforce their conceptualizations of justice. Assemblages of justice are built on embodied affects, but most importantly they reveal the hegemony of knowledge forms. Affects in Al-Hakim's play are understood, expressed, reflected, and

sentimentalized. Most importantly, the traces of past encounters and memories are brought into the present and taken as potential futurities. The aim is to recognize and identify how affects shape the materialization of justice leading to its legibility, institutionalization, and eventual disentanglement. Justice is considered objective and not prone to prejudice, not beyond society, culture, and politics. However, this play cements the actuality that justice is entangled with an individual's feelings and emotions. That which is ultimately considered justice is shaped by social expectations and affects, as well as personal perceptions, reflected in *The Song of Death (Ughniyat al-Mawt)*.

The first instance in which Al-Hakim reveals affects is in naming his characters. A non-Arab reader might not be able to identify their meaning. Asakir translates into the “army of soldiers” (smp2, 2016). This woman of strong countenance is military-esque: she is intent on obtaining her end despite the means. Whereas Mabruka, which in Arabic means “blessed”, will be blessed, for it is her son who will avenge the family’s honour and restore its pride (smp2, 2016). Moreover, Sumeida “the stonelike” is the last option Asakir takes for achieving her goal of

restoring her family’s honour (smp2, 2016). Sumeida will wipe away the disgrace of Alwan’s refusal to take revenge. Alwan, on the other hand, is the city boy, the ‘transcendent’, and the literate one (smp2, 2016).

The first fissure in the previously attained grasp of justice is caused by the crack in affective attunement between Asakir and Alwan. In so many ways, spinning the tale of his death by “drowning in the well at the water wheel”, Asakir has signed his death certificate (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 219). Badawi astutely points out that the pace at which the play unfolds “emphasizes the enormous gulf that separates their two positions and enforces the utter lack of communication between them” (1987, p.57). The first fissure between a seamless relationship that would eventually affect Alwan’s perception of justice is unthreaded here. Asakir pines for her son solely for the restoration of justice he will provide:

*Bring him quickly, train,
quickly, for I have waited
so long!*

*Seventeen years! I have
counted them up hour by
hour. Seventeen*

years! I have milked them

*from Time's udders drop by
drop just as the*

*milk drips out from the
udder of an old cow. (219)*

Her long wait has been only to lift off the shame that has descended upon her and the family. "The Azizis have nothing but women left". This rumour infantilized and emasculated the Azizis (2008, p.219). In Asakir's eyes the shame that engulfed her is the inability of her family to play its part in the centuries' long feud. Alwan never returned home. He educated himself, in sharia law, at the prestigious and oldest university of Egypt, Al-Azhar University. Affected by the eye-opening and revolutionizing discussions there, along with his exposure to city life, it is only expected that his reaction to the news of his father's murder is not in accords with Asakir's enforced affective attunement.

Alwan's life in the city and his enlightening education have instilled in him the notion that he should prepare for "something great", and his return to his village is to share that greatness (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 224); "something great" involves the transformation of the village. As opposed to 'ada' (tradition) that is inherited and consistent, Alwan

belongs to 'tamaddun' (civilization) implying "the force of a movement that stimulated embracing new patterns of behavior" (Uksa, p.51). This affective behavioural change is another factor that lays heavy on the already fragile perceptions of justice Alwan has gathered from his mother.

Alwan's first utterance upon the revelation is: "What proof is there? Was this crime investigated?" (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 225). This query is backed by the conviction that "today my mind wants to be convinced" (al-Hakim, 2008, p.225). Terrified with the idea of foreign intervention, Asakir states that false testimonies were given to the district attorney, and any complaint would have been shameful. This is done so that she could provide her family with the ability to "take vengeance into our [their] hands" (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 225). Alwan questions the origin of the feud and is exasperated at the "rivers of blood" flowing; he asserts that this cycle of retribution has borne nothing fruitful (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 226). Upon returning to his home, Alwan realizes how intensely his mother prayed for justice being exacted by the right individual.

Having absorbed the effects of Al-Azhar University, Alwan believes

in divine justice: “The Mighty Avenger was merciful to us when He wanted to take from us this burden without paying a price” (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 228). Another fissure in affective attunement is caused by his vocal assertion that “I bring you life” and not death. His refusal to carry out his mother’s plan coupled with his allegation that his family deceived the authorities, is fortified with his refusal to comprehend forms of tribal justice. He proclaimed: “It is you who have failed him by hiding it from the government—reprisal is for those in power” (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 230).

Shame and honour are two dominant affectual forces behind which tribal justice is formulated and institutionalized. Embroiled deep within this is Asakir’s desire to “rend the garment of shame and put on the robes of self-respect” (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 223). She wants to absolve her family from this shameful act by committing a similar act. Embedded within Sumeida’s song is the censure and the shame a son is intended to encounter and express through physical, non-verbal cues and passionate utterances:

*“Friend, what excuses have
we given,
What assurances that we’d*

*repent?
And when your blame you
yet continued
Our shirt and outer robe we
rent.
When of the father I did
hear
My shame no bounds did
know,
And both mine eyes did
open wide
And copious tears did flow
(al-Hakim, 2008, p. 223)*

Sumeida’s song, the crux of the play’s ethos and tribal justice, anticipates and legitimizes that the only authorized affect worth experiencing is sorrow and grief. The rented robes are robes of shame, and till the blood is spilled and the order restored there must be no repose.

Asakir depicts that injustice permeates the physical body and outer clothes, or coverings; furthermore, shame is also an affect that will be dispelled by finally holding a funeral for the dead and slaughtering animals. Here, rustic ecology emulates in affects the restoration of an equilibrium. The hour of release, as Mabrouka says, is upon them. With this overwhelming shame, Asakir is unable to see Alwan as anything more than an extension of a justice restoring

instrument.

The second poignant affecting shame is caused by Asakir's realization that her bond with Alwan is forever untethered. This is due to her placement of her child in Cairo, away from herself, and his refusal to comply with her ministrations. This affect, absorbed and deflected, results in her ultimate decision to free herself of the second stain of shame, arising from the moment when the relationship between the child and parent has been severed:

If you're a man, Sumeida, don't let him dishonor the Azizis! After today you will not be able to walk like a man amongst people; they will whisper about you, will laugh up their sleeves at you, will point to you in the market places saying: "A woman hiding behind a woman!" (Al-Hakim, 2008, p. 234)

For Asakir, the moment of mourning and waiting is over; her son has returned home, and he will exact revenge on his father's murder, as is expected of him. However, the anticipated mirroring moment is shattered, resulting in a reversal of proto-affect shame. Here, the mother's

fear creeps out into the open: the fear that this shame will be made public; injustice will be made public. Her fear of this shame becoming a public spectacle, a cause of rebuke from the community, and a fatal sign that the men have perished, thus calcifies the shame of the death of masculinity. The son she gave birth to, and purposefully kept away from herself, is "nothing but a mark of shame that has befallen our tree, just as the blight attacks the cotton bush" (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 235).

The choice of profession, the rustic environment surrounding him, and the feeling of intimacy and familiarity with butchery and blood would have prepared Alwan for the moment of reprisal. These micro perceptions would have all been stored in his affectual register. Daily ministrations, his mother's visits, his lectures at the university on justice and law, and the assemblage of a judicial system have all participated in creating an alternate paradoxical affectual register. He could not assemble his identity for that moment of equity. His sophisticated tutelage at Al-Azhar University, the center of Fiqh and Sharia learning, has conditioned him to reject his mother's plan, resulting in his opposing turn towards judicial law. The mother

always feared this end; she was acutely aware of the impact these minute banal events would have on him: “I told him: bring him up as a butcher so that he can use a knife well” (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 220).

Asakir creates a vacuum of temporality, affect is preserved here to keep the memory of the murder alive, to insulate it from any progression or continuation: “things are unchanged with us, Alwan. Our hopes lie in you” (al-Hakim, 2008, p. 220). The knife and the saddlebag have been kept in the same condition, since the night her husband returned; it is only the donkey, the one that brought home the dead body, who has died, and only because Asakir couldn't make it immortal. Ironically, Alwan is being the only individual granting his family relief from this cyclic revenge, and ultimately ending up as a victim. It is asserted, time and again, that once the cloud of shame, shadowing the family, is lifted, it will result in life returning in the present:

*My wailing, which I have
imprisoned in my throat all
these years, waits for you to
burst forth; my gown that I
have refrained from
rending all this time bides
your coming; everything in*

*our existence is lifeless and
stagnant and looks to you
to charge it with life (al-
Hakim, 2008, p. 227)*

This is a traumatizing moment for Alwan: he is now confronted with the question of truth, of representation, of the certainty of memory, and its repetitive return in the form of the blood feud. The knowledge of the past vastly influences justice and its formalization in a community's cognitive space. His environment becomes activated with remnants of the past, but at the same time that ecology functions as a stagnant and corrupted external memory storage.

The concept of justice is further influenced by that which is never articulated in words: abduction, which exists before language. Asakir's clear portrayal of this is in the very act of milking that hearkens back to her days of breastfeeding. This moment marks her assertive perception of tribal systemic justice: “My heart, too, my heart that is as sealed as a tomb, as hard as rock, has now begun to tell me things” (al-Hakim, 2008, p.222). This moment of abduction is where grief has cemented her knowledge and has permanently marked her relationship with vengeance. As Clough states “trauma is the engulfment of the ego

in memory"; Asakir has kept her ego alive through traumatic memory (2007, p. 6).

Al-Hakim portrays two vastly different poles and tendencies that are emerging within the newly shaping Egyptian socio-political landscape. Alwan's naive apparatus of justice is an abstract utopian vision in direct contrast with Asakir's bloody material vengeance. Perhaps a synthesis of two contrasting principles is what Asakir dreamt of, yet the confrontation does not result in positive affect. The shortcomings of both forms of justice are brought to the forefront. Asakir's hope that her son would "quench my [her] fire, water my [her] thirst for revenge" results in her son quenching this thirst with his blood. Asakir's wails and Sumeida's song, upon his return, and after committing Alwan's murder, still resonate. Thus, failing formations of justice, the weak assemblage of a systemic judiciary system, and the inability of tribal justice to accommodate personal emotions, affects and desires are acutely represented.

Conclusions

Confrontations of the affect theory with the structuring of justice reveal that traces of past encounters of justice are brought into the present as

affectual potentialities. These remnants of the past filter into the play through the performative utterances of the characters, the clothing they have adorned and wish to adorn, and the ecology they have surrounded themselves with. Emotional expressions and affects are articulated and institutionalized in the play through micro-perceptions, memory, "affective attunement", shame, and abduction. In *The Song of Death (Ughniyat al-Mawt)*, Al-Hakim portrays a drafting of new cartographies of justice. The only possibility of reframing the debate around the binary of tribal and modern judicialization of violence requires the dismantling of such frames, where both are posited against each other. Only with a sentient affective form of systemic justice, where emotions and bodily expressions find space, a synthesis of the binary emerges to take shape within *The Song of Death (Ughniyat al-Mawt)*.

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