

The Rise of the Underdog: The Anti-hero in Two Plays by Sadallah Wannous

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Abstract

Sadallah Wannous (1941-1997), the leading Syrian dramatist, reflected in his plays the condition of the downtrodden fellow-countrymen. He captured the essence of the average Syrian citizen, not as an innately timid soul, but as one cowed by political and economic oppression. This paper provides a case study of two anti-heroes; Hanzala in *Hanzala's Journey from Unawareness to awakening* (1978) and Farouk in *A Day of Our Time* (1993), who go on two journeys of discovery of the roots of their problems. The journeys in both cases lead to awakening and protest. This study attempts at analyzing the significance of the underdog figure in the light of dramatic and textual analysis and Wannous's own views communicated in his non dramatic writings and the interviews he gave in his lifetime. As a result, the author of this paper concludes that Wannous' anti-heroes delineate the collective psyche of the oppressed civilians. The awakening process delineated in the said plays is an attempt to raise political awareness in the masses of Wannous's audience.

Keywords: anti-hero, political theater, protest, Syrian drama, Wannous.

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Introduction

The Middle East witnessed the onset of massive protests against various regimes in several Arab countries in 2011. The people's quest for democracy and freedom during what was called the *Arab Spring* came as a surprise to many, for the citizens of many Arab states had long been silent about their exclusion from political discourse. The researcher contends that Arabs are not innately passive but have been made so by regimes that marginalize and incapacitate them. For decades, Arabs were made spectators of their own destiny, and responding to their seeming helplessness, they developed a psyche filled with fear and debility.

Perhaps literary texts, in contrast to opinion pieces of political pundits and maybe even in contrast to the work of academic experts on the “realities” of the Middle East, can offer a more compelling perception of the inner feelings and experiences of individuals living under and responding to the daily indignities that one confronts in oppressive societies. Sadallah Wannous, (1941-1997), the leading Syrian dramatist, was very responsive to the influence of oppression on the individual. His drama confronted suppression within an overall scene of silence. “He manifested a brave conscience that has become very rare”. (Salama. n.d, p. 3) His work, as it explores the forces that have brought about this enfeebled state, opens such a perception of the mental and social debility experienced by the average Syrian. Though his protagonists suffer oppression and humiliation at every turn, they stumble toward engagement in the political arena.

All of Wannous's 26 plays are informed by the will to freedom. He coined the term “Theater of Politicization” to describe work that aims at educating the masses and helping them to identify the connection between their own sense of helplessness and the political corruption that envelops them. Wannous (2004) defines his goal in the “Statements for a New Arabic Theater” (1970) printed in *The Complete Works*. He contends that the Theater of Politicization must have:

a progressive political content. Needless to say, the people who need to be politicized are the commoners, since the ruling elite, whether those in the government or financial corporations, are already politicized. The class of people addressed by the theater of politicization is the masses who are conspired against by the ruling class in order to remain ignorant and politically marginalized. It is hoped that such classes will, one day, be the leaders of revolution and change. (p. 92)

Wannous (2004) wants his plays to reach his audience that:

has already been robbed of its sensibility. Its aesthetic taste has been destroyed. Its means of expressions has been falsified. Its folk culture has been confiscated and recycled in pro-government literary works that, in their turn, reenact the same ignorance and backwardness. (p. 92).

In order to demonstrate the debased condition of too many of his fellow citizens, in many of his plays, the leading figure is an underdog, a representative of the blindfolded commoner. He

is a person who is so confounded by multiple social and political injustices that he is utterly stupefied. This paper focuses on two of his underdogs, Hanzala in *Rihlat Hanzala Mina-l Ghafla Ila-l Yakaza (The Journey of Hanzala from Unawareness to Awakening, 1978)* and Farouk in *Youm Min Zamanina (A Day of Our Time, 1995)*. These two characters project the experience of the average citizen who has been dehumanized by multiple factors, all of which poignantly point to despotic regimes and consequent corruption. They go through a sequence of situations in which they repeatedly experience or witness injustice, but are immediately suppressed. However, they eventually arrive at an awareness of the factors that cause their degradation. As a result of what they endure and come to understand, the protagonists move from inaction to protest against their oppressor.

Awareness Leading to Proactive Protest

Hanzala, an insignificant man of slight figure, is unjustly incarcerated, robbed of his savings, job, and wife. His timidity has made him the perfect target of victimization. A cashier who counts coins in a bank, Hanzala can instantly be replaced by another unskilled worker. His life motto reveals his timid non-commitment, and his behavior, as suggested by the dramatist, mirrors the essence of several famous Arabic proverbs such as "Walk closest to the wall and seek God's protection;" "Hide your white penny for your black day"; "Between you and your neighbor, set up a thick wall;" and "The window that brings wind, jam it and relax" (Wannous, 2004, p.8). All of these are proverbs that reverberate culturally throughout the whole of the Arab world and display a collective psyche that is unnerved. They betray not only a pacifist tendency, but an inclination toward escapism and defeatism.

A pathetic doormat, Hanzala becomes the easy victim of the kind of injustice too familiar to those who live in societies without the rule of law, where justice is arbitrary. The opening words of the chorus figure are "Misery and dejection" which describe succinctly his state (Wannous, 2004, p. 7). His lot is to suffer ever increasing crises, but remain unaware of their origin. He is arrested and incarcerated, but not for any offence he has committed. In order to secure his freedom, Hanzala must give his meager savings to his jailer. He cannot understand why he does not merit, instead, an apology for the harm that has been done to him. He repeats: "Misery is threatening me and obscurity is engulfing my perception" (Wannous, 2004, p.12). The play asks us to envision him as the cypher that the regime has created, a man lacking in assertiveness.

To show the effects of his character's emasculation, Wannous returns him to what should be the security and warmth of his home. In a surrealist scene, there are two large feet sticking out from under his bedcovers, a sign of his wife's infidelity. But he is so totally vanquished by what he has endured that he is oblivious to the presence of her lover. Instead of expressing remorse or embarrassment, she assails him for failing to meet her needs. Like a witch she uses a broomstick to drive him from his home.

In order to restore his financial security, he visits the bank where he worked for many years before he was jailed. At the bank, he is shocked that he is not even remembered. He was

instantly replaced by another clerk. The boss asks the guard to "dispense with him together with the waste in the street" (Wannous, 2004, p. 26).

The only cure for his feeble state is a visit to a doctor, which turns to be a harlequinade. The doctor diagnoses his disease as a sense of oppression, but the treatment is outlandish; a brain wash and lubrication is suggested to help him with his hallucination. A new branch of medicine is coined by the dramatist; "psycho-media" which is suggested to help him tolerate misery and boost a more placid demeanor. This points critically to familiar government propaganda which aims at keeping people subdued. However, the treatment fails and Hanzala seeks counselling from the Darwish, a hermetic pious man. There, he receives instructions to be stoic, to pray for contentment, and ask no questions. It is insinuated that religion acts as an opiate to help people tolerate pain, but does not address the root of the problem.

The last refuge for Hanzala to retrieve his lost dignity is to bring his complaints to the government. Upon explaining his ordeal to a set of governors, he starts to comprehend why he has been derided and conspired against. The statesmen, portrayed as being reverently important, are engulfed in smoke and are busy having muffled discussions. They agree not to listen to a whining complainer and to be callous toward him. He finally understands that precautionary arrests help terrorize the masses and keep them under control, "as the police baton is the best way to rule" (Wannous, 2004, p. 54). The life savings he had paid as a bribe to his jailors is a necessary sacrifice expected from all patriotic citizens. Complaining about his wife, he is answered that the government looks favorably upon wives who are strict toward their suspicious husbands. Above all, as a citizen he should show contentment, for the government frowns upon the disgruntled. In this case "he will lose us ... he who loses us will be found by the police and be locked in jail" (Wannous, 2004, p. 57). It is here at the government office where Hanzala becomes aware that the root cause of his multiple humiliations is the autocratic government that does not only rob the civil society of its wealth but more importantly of its will and dignity.

The concluding declamatory rhetoric by the statesmen is written as a satirical travesty of familiar presidential addresses in the Middle East:

We have declared, and we are declaring now, in this stage that is heavy with responsibilities and perils, we must be like a tight structure. We should be made firm by the stable values. We will not allow a disruptor or a lunatic to harm the society and its institutions. The government is above the people. It will go on being reverberating till all the great hopes are fulfilled. (Wannous, 2004, p. 56)

At the end of his journey, Hanzala perfectly comprehends that the sequences of oppression are inter-connected. He had been oblivious to the political oppression which made him a fit victim of it, but Hanzala has now awakened. It has been a strenuous journey but it is worthwhile, for, finally, he understands that he himself is responsible for his pains, that his life course can only be changed by his new found sensibility. His motto changes, "Everything

around me is relevant to me because it affects my destiny.” (Wannous, 2004, p. 58). He understands that maintaining a marginal existence is not conducive to his well-being. Hanzala emerges as a politically aware citizen and starts a new journey of liberation.

Perhaps Hanzala’s stupor and consequent awareness are remotely similar to Wannous’ own. Having been an extremely sensitive idealistic thinker, Wannous, the dramatist, was overwhelmed by the successive failures of the political system to regain land lost to Israel, to fight local corruption or to alleviate oppression. In the wake of the defeat in 1967 war between Israel on the one hand and Egypt, Syria and Jordan on the other, Wannous suffered severe depression. Consequently, his creativity was severely stifled, and he was unable to write for the stage for 10 years in the eighties (Jaber, 2008, May 15, p.1).

In order to provoke the audience to think and find connections between Hanzala's case, and the dilemma of the average citizen, Wannous detaches the audience from completely empathizing with Hanzala. Although Hanzala is a weak blameless victim, he is not allowed enough empathetic characterization; rather, he is conceived as a tragicomic character in an absurd situation. His awkwardness, his wide sliding pants, torn belt, huge shoes, and the way he walks, stumbles, and falls bring to mind the comedian Charlie Chaplain (1889-1977), and the tramps Estragon, and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Thus the empathy with his pitiful situation is checked by his comic caricature. Furthermore, in order to better achieve an effect of alienation, Wannous creates the chorus figure Harfoush, who acts like a circus ringmaster and introduces him in a declamatory tone of voice: "This is no longer the time of gigantic heroes. Every era has its prominent character, and this slight figure is the epitome of the period" (Wannous, 2004, p. 7). Thus, the dramatic action seems to be a play within a play, in which the audience are invited to see the events from the presenter's critical point of view. Harfoush watches and comments on the action but is unsympathetic toward Hanzala's misfortune. Most of the time, he is carelessly swinging on the dangling ring which takes center stage. His circus-like actions and lack of empathy help set the mood for a certain detachment from Hanzala. Thus the audience is enabled to see through Hanzala's pathetic ignorance and think analytically about the causes of such a dilemma. Wannous makes his intention clear by having Harfoush express clearly his meta-dramatic intention as he addresses the audience: "No doubt some tenderness and sympathy will help him a little, but what will help him more is to get him to know more" (Wannous, 2004, p. 14). Through the use of the chorus figure, Wannous uses a Brechtian alienation technique in order to break the theatrical illusion and to guide the response of the audience.

The choice of Hanzala's name is suggestive. The name means a bitter herb, but, more significantly, it is associated with a famous cartoon figure by the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali (1939-1987). The 40,000 satirical cartoons of a little boy by the same name presented a running commentary and derision of the policies of Israel and Arab regimes from 1967 until 1987. The cartoon figure of Hanzala presented a ten year-old boy with ragged clothes and bare

feet, symbolizing the cartoonist's allegiance to the poor displaced Palestinians. The poor boy is depicted as always turning his back clasping his hands behind his back as he witnesses the plights of Arabs and gives insight to their imperfection. Haifaa Khalafallah, (1984, Sep 21), describes him as "the nearest thing there is to an Arab public opinion". The early cartoons of Hanzala show him observing political events, while the later cartoons depict him actively participating in the action. Although Wannous's Hanzala is conceptually different, he shares many similarities with the cartoon figure. Both are conceived with a great deal of bitterness toward the long lasting oppression practiced against humanity. Both boy and adult are innocent. The cartoon is a child while the play's Hanzala, although an adult, is a blameless non-committal underdog. Both of them are made to witness events conducive to injustice and both change from being observers to involved participants. Borrowing the famous name of the cartoon, Wannous is adequately effective in dramatizing the effects of oppression on innocent fellow countrymen and their consequent rise to get involved in the political decision and to alleviate injustice.

Awareness Leading to Despair

It is interesting to draw a trajectory of the awakening and actions of Wannous's underdogs throughout his dramatic production. Doing so, a reader can detect a growing pessimism in the way Wannous' s doormats evolve. Although Hanzala (1978) is able to remove his blindfold and is willing to become proactive and regain his dignity, Farouk, in *A Day of our Time* (1994), experiences series of shocks and decides that he cannot adjust to the dissolution of ethics. As an act of protest, he commits suicide. Wannous' later protagonist, Farouk, does protest, but in a more helpless way.

Like Hanzala, Farouk has to discover the truth about the modern world. An idealistic, sharp-tempered math teacher, Farouk goes through painful disillusionment as he witnesses corruption invading all corners of his life. It is through his portrayal of shocked naivety that the play criticizes the educational, religious, social, and political institutions because they have traded values for commercialism. His heartbreak begins with his discovery of the pragmatic nature of the school principal, who is more concerned about keeping his job than caring for the education and ethics of his students. The school faculty encounter two alarming situations on the same day. The first occurrence is a fight among female students; girls are reported to have exchanged accusations which revealed that many of them have been led to prostitution by a fellow classmate, Maisoon, who acts as a pimp to the infamous Madam Fadwa, the owner of a brothel. The second alarming situation is the anti-president graffiti discovered on the restroom walls. The principal's recourse is to ignore the prostitution accusations as transitory. Instead, he feels that the more important issue to deal with is the political graffiti. He cannot even pronounce the written statement for he believes that "One's death can be caused by what one says" (Wannous, 2004, p.196). According to the principal, the mother of all virtues is "love and allegiance to him," pointing with awe to the portrait of the president (Wannous, 2004, pp. 198-99).

The innocent and rather naïve Farouk feels compelled by his duty as an educator to follow up with the prostitution issue. Despite the financial hardship and marginalization of teachers, he still regards the "protection of ethics" as the top priority of an educator. (Wannous, 2004, p.198). The principal, on the other hand, is primarily protective of his position; he may easily lose his job in spite of his seniority if he does not identify and punish the graffiti writer. It is noteworthy that the principal's phobia of the anti-government graffiti has its resonance in the real world, as the Syrian Revolution in 2011 and the ongoing war in Syria were originally initiated by the graffiti written by a 13 year-old kid, Hamza Alkhatib, on his school wall in the southern city of Daraa. (Alexander, 2011, June 5). According to Farouk's principal, the purpose of education is to "Protect the students" from the "germs of politics" and to teach them "loyalty and obedience" because "the highest degree of ethics is love and loyalty to the president. Any other unethical behavior is a minor one" (Wannous, 2004, pp. 197-99).

The lack of freedom of thought is presented in this play as one of the vices of the time. After an exhaustive investigation, a book by the late nineteenth century free thinker Abdurahman Al Kawakibi, *The Nature of Despotism* (1902), is found in the possession of a school girl who is eventually accused of writing the graffiti. The book had been banned from the school library, and the principal is appalled as he reads parts describing the absolute despot:

The absolute despot is aware that he violates rights. He stamps with his heels on the mouths of millions and gags them in order to prevent them from claiming their rights. The despot is the enemy of right. He is the enemy of freedom. (Wannous, 2004, p. 205).

As a necessary measure, the principal deems the possession of this censored book to be a felony and instructs that a report be prepared and sent to authorities. The principal's selfishness and internalized fears are testimonies to the demoralizing effect of dictatorship that the innocent Farouk is witnessing. The lack of freedom creates slavish hero worshippers who, in their turn, suppress any will to freedom in others.

Furthermore, the debasement of education under a despotic regime is mourned by Wannous in this play, and is considered another instance of the debasement of all values. The author is enraged by this state of affairs; for him education is the foundation of true progress and its deformation is "a crime against the people" ('Anezi, 2006, p. 240). Wannous's resource for this is an interview with his friend Anton Maqdisi, a former professor and a literary scholar. In the interview with Maqdisi in 1991, the latter sounded very pessimistic about the future of education in Syria:

Our schools are being used to inculcate glorifying propaganda and shallow slogans. Our teachers have become dead souls. From Primary school teachers to university deans, they are all dead souls now. They are shackled by fear and hypocrisy. They lack the courage and pride of the teaching profession. (Wannous, 2004, p. 26).

In the play, Farouk is heartbroken over the banning of the free thinking book and the punishment of its reader. He is more burdened by the fact that the principal prioritizes the issue of anti-government graffiti over the prostitution scandal. His grief points poignantly to the play's message that political despotism deforms logical reasoning and crushes ethics.

Having been horrified by the ethical degradation at school, Farouk seeks counsel at the religious institution. His conference with the mosque cleric, Sheikh Mitwally, shocks his common sense deeply. After the preacher gives a sermon full of pedantic details about cleanliness after toilet functions, his advice to Farouk is equally nonsensical and removed from reality. He is an ignorant fanatic for he is against schools and enlightenment. According to him, schools propagate sin. When he is told that Madam Fadwa is recruiting prostitutes among school students, he refuses to listen. He considers Farouk sinful because he is exposing the girls to scandal. He considers Madam Fadwa to be a philanthropic business woman; after all, she has donated a generous amount to construct and decorate the mosque minaret and dome. The religious institution is revealed to have completely lost its true essence and is only preoccupied with marginal details. Therefore it cannot be trusted to guarding ethics or protecting the society from social disease

Searching for more support for his cause, Farouk discovers that the political corruption is the culprit in spreading insanity and destroying values. At the government bureau, he finds that the governor, father of Maisoon, is in the know of his daughter's prostitution, is delighted with the gold lighter she had given him as a gift, and proud of his daughter's "pragmatic thinking". There, Farouk comes to the root of the problem. He learns that the "obscene transformations" of the past two decades have created a culture in which all humane values are "prostituted and polluted" (Anezi, 2006, p. 237). People must offer full allegiance to the despot and to comply with the rules of the market. The policy of economical openness (*infatih*) has replaced all the old values. The new values call for flexibility and adjustment in order to achieve prosperity. "We are living in the midst of a changing world," says the governor. "I am not exaggerating if we are experiencing a deep revolutionary change...The real revolution is becoming open to the modern age and its achievement, to the world and its markets" (Wannous, 2004, p. 222). This materialism has proliferated all areas of Farouk's life, and even infected his wife. He is finally shocked to learn that his own wife works for Madam Fadwa and has exhibited the same will to flexibility and financial gain.

This is the final blow to Farouk's ideals. He is now adamant at looking vice in the face and pursue his quest for the root of the problem. At Madam Fadwas's brothel, he meets a woman with a capital appetite for business and life. Fadwa had been the victim of gender bias and male greed, although it is not clear how she found, in prostitution, the vindication for her diminished humanity. The play does not call for a realistic interpretation for the case of prostitution. Rather, prostitution should be viewed here as a literary device symbolizing the extreme form of corruption in multiple aspects of society. Societies in the Middle East uphold female chastity as

the sign of her and her family's honor. The honor of chastity has been often emphasized as a fundamental value encapsulating all other values of integrity, dignity, and truthfulness. Thus, the violation of the female body either through rape or prostitution is the ultimate signifier of humiliation and debasement in Arabic literature. At this point, Wannous is adeptly using a stock common dichotomy of honor and defamation often connected to female chastity in Middle Eastern societies in order to draw an extreme image of corruption of all values.

Fadwa is not given enough time to develop her persona on the stage and is not convincing as a round character. She is significant in as much as symbolizes an extreme state of corruption deplored by the author. On the whole, she is a foil to Farouk. Through her pragmatism, Farouk's idealism and inadequacy are emphasized. She describes Farouk as the "vulnerable expensive monument that will break if he is faced with the real world" (Wannous, 2004, p. 246). Fadwa is significant in as much as she highlights the ironical new value system. She is the well-respected successful business woman, while Farouk the math teacher is demoralized because of his meager salary and moral tenacity. So, although the phobia of Fadwa's profession dominates the play from its opening scene, the play at the end stresses the plight of the innocent individual who is crushed by the immorality that is caused by despotism and the lack of freedom in the first place.

Finally Farouk's disillusionment is complete. "The mask has fallen off from the face of this world. It is an ugly and deformed world" (Wannous, 2004, p. 246). His final action is to allow himself and his wife be gassed to death while making love to each other. An act of suicide is normally viewed by most as the utmost example of withdrawal and weakness. However, this case invites an alternative interpretation. Al-'Anezi (2006) notes that "Farouk and Najat's suicide can at best be read as a romantic gesture uniting in death of two lovers who have recaptured their love" (p. 238). On a second note, Al-'Anezi, considers it to be an act of despair since Farouk is incapable of fighting against "the ta'rees [whoredom] that encompasses him in all its ugliness" (p. 238). However, Wannous himself argues- in his article "Cultural Margins (2) (1994, April 26)- for a positive reading of this suicide in terms that seem like a defense of his own reasons for attempting to kill himself after the defeat in the 1967 War. In his article titled "Cultural Margins", Wannous explains his intentions:

The status quo is more bleak and immoral than we can imagine. However, does this mean that the horizon is blocked? Surely, hope is faint and I do not intend to propagate false hope. But I say that recognizing the reality and being able to protest it, even in death, are in themselves innate signifiers of hope. (Wannous, 2004, p. 691).

Farouk and Najat's suicide may mean a spark of protest for the audience implicated by this tragedy. Modern history has provided a similar example in the self-incineration of the famous Tunisian, Bouezizi, who initiated the recent Arab Spring in 2011. (Abouzeid, 2011, January 21) Therefore, Farouk's suicide, hopeless as it is, can well be read as an act of protest, the utmost

expression of an oppressed underdog like him in the face of multiple crushing factors. This suicide is his last statement to uphold the values of integrity.

Conclusion

As the critic Sweileh (2015, May 15) puts it in his article in *Al Akhbar* newspaper:

After many defeats, Wannous turns to . . .dramatize oppression starting from the smallest cell of the Arabic brain, revealing the individual's pain, glimpsing the suppression deeply latent in collective psyche. We are confronted with an intellect that is historically defeated, a lost justice and tyrannical authority that has transformed the Arab citizen into an oppressed being living in a cage. (p.2)

Hence his anti-heroes are defeated, but faintly gain a small voice of protest. Hanzalah and Farouk are only two examples of many anti-heroes who represent the suffering of the oppressed contemporary Arab citizen. In the first case, Hanzala unwittingly experiences injustice. His transformation marks a growing awareness of his own oppression and will to become accountable for everything going around him. Here, the solution lies in the enlightenment that will change the dormant masses from passive to proactive citizens. Similarly, Farouk, the idealistic math teacher, is exposed to the demoralizing effect of despotism and commercialism. Being shocked, he refuses to surrender to the domineering trend and protests by his own death. However bleak this death is, it is hoped to he will inspire the masses to fend for their own integrity. Wannous does not expect heroic miracles from his underdogs. At best, the trodden anti-hero gains a little more awareness which is enough to transform him and make him protest. The new found knowledge and the faint signs of protest are the ultimate victories of the writer who intends to educate the host of audience and plant the seeds of social and political rebellion.

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