

Sa'dallah Wannous: New Aesthetic Sensibilities and Permanent Socio-Political Themes

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(Received 1 / 2 / 2016. Accepted 31 / 7 / 2016)

□ ABSTRACT □

Sa'dallah Wannous's oeuvre is divided into three major phases. The third or final phase is marked by aesthetically adventurous theatrical techniques and a new attitude towards human beings, which gives prominence to the individual self, undergoing overwhelming traumatizing experiences. In this paper, an attempt is being made to scrutinize two plays derived from Wannous's third phase in which history is re-enacted in order to address current burning issues. In *Historical Miniatures*, the Tamerlane's invasion of Damascus is depicted, through an epic form, and *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, set in 19th Century Damascus, addresses taboo issues, through an experimental structure. In both plays, Wannous has depicted a panorama of a city, with its social spectrum, facing a critical socio-historical reality.

Key Words: Wannous's Third (Final) Phase, Historical Setting, Individual Self, Experimental Drama, Aesthetical Vision

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سعد الله ونوس: حساسيات جمالية جديدة وموضوعات اجتماعية - سياسية دائمة

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(تاريخ الإيداع 1 / 2 / 2016. قبل للنشر في 31 / 7 / 2016)

□ ملخص □

يُقسَم نتاج سعد الله ونوس إلى ثلاثة أطوارٍ رئيسة، يميّز الطور الثالث أو الأخير بتقنيات مسرحية مغامرة جمالياً وموقفٍ جديدٍ حيال البشر يمنح الأهمية لأفرادٍ يتعرّضون إلى تجارب عارمة عظيمة الأثر. في هذه الورقة محاولة لرصد مسرحيتين مأخوذتين من الطور الثالث يتمّ فيهما إعادة تصويرٍ للتاريخ في سبيل تناول قضايا راهنة ملتهبة. ففي ((منمنمات تاريخية)) يتم تصوير غزو تيمور لنك لدمشق ضمن قالبٍ ملحمي. وتتناول ((طقوس الإشارات والتحولات)) التي تدور وقائعها في دمشق القرن التاسع عشر، موضوعاتٍ محرمة من خلال بنية تجريبية. في كلا المسرحيتين، قام ونوس بتصوير بانورامي لمدينة، بطيفها الاجتماعي الكامل، وهي تواجه واقعاً تاريخياً - اجتماعياً مفصلياً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطور الثالث لدى سعد الله ونوس، الخلفية التاريخية، الذات الفردية، الدراما التجريبية، الرؤية الجمالية

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Introduction:

Sa'dallah Wannous's dramatic oeuvre is evidently divided into three phases¹, almost identical in terms of socio-political preoccupations but markedly different in terms of theatrical techniques and aesthetical sensibilities. Much ink has been spilled, myriad essays have come out, and several volumes have been published on this third (or final) creative phase. To assess this whole phase in the space of one paper is like pouring the ocean into a cup. Wannous launched his writing career in 1964 with a collection of short one-act plays, in which Western artistic trends, such as existentialism, expressionism, surrealism and theatre of the absurd, prominently featured. In 1968 Wannous was to develop what he eventually termed "theatre of politicization"² or what the non-Arab cultural circles could term as "agitprop", theoretically advocated and acclaimed in a chain of studies by Wannous, and practically demonstrated by a series of plays stretching well to 1978. Oddly enough, Wannous abruptly gave up writing plays, although he remained active on the literary scene editing cultural supplements and translating French theatrical critiques and dramatic texts into Arabic. This interval of staying away from the theatre ended in 1989 with *The Rape*, a shockingly adventurous work, both thematically and aesthetically.³ This play inaugurated the third phase in Wannous's dramatic works that was to stretch well to 1996, his death year, after 5 years of suffering from cancer, marked by his prolific creative output, new theatrical forms, and universal perspectives of viewing human beings in general. The current paper intends to analyze two plays derived from Sa'dallah Wannous's third (final) phase as illustrative examples of investing historical frameworks as vehicle to address modern socio-political preoccupations, nicely cast in an adventurously experimental style, unprecedented in Arab drama. Here, focus is upon individuals making their own choices, and, therefore, facing their inevitable destinies. The two plays under consideration are *Historical Miniatures* and *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*.

Body:

To begin with, Wannous underwent a revision process of his dramatic experience in terms of perspective and medium. It was the 1990s with all its socio-historical features, reflected through consumerism and the media-impact, which transformed the rhythm and quality of people's life beyond recognition. It is against this background that Wannous has attempted to maintain a new perspective apparently broader than the previous one. "The main initiative with regard to life in society, shaping human psyche, and setting incidents and developments in motion," according to Wannous, "has become in the hands of corporations and powers controlling TV channels."⁴ This increasing influence of the media is likely to leave lasting impacts on all aspects of human condition: social, psychological, and cultural. Intellectuals and other liberal-minded circles find themselves under siege

¹ Several critics have maintained this division. See Mustapha Abdou, 'Sa'dallah Wannous from World to Self-Dramaturgy: A Basic Approach', *The First Echoes of the Departure* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1997), p. 270. 274, 277; also see Riyadh Ismat, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: The Visionary of Yamamah', *The First Echoes of the Departure* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1997), p. 213. All citations unless otherwise indicated are translated from the Arabic by the current writer. In this paper, documentation is according to the MHRA Style Sheet.

² This phase is insightfully addressed in Roger Allen, 'Arabic Drama in Theory and Practice: The Writings of Sa'dallah Wannous', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, (1984 - Part 15) pp. 105-7.

³ Mohammad Dakroub specifies this phenomenon. Previously, he has published 7 plays in 12 years (1965 – 1977). For 13 years, he published nothing. In 1990, he published *Rape* paving the way for a flourishing stage in his career from 1990 on. Mohammad Dakroub, 'This Volume: A New Dialogue with Dramatist Sa'dallah Wannous and His Discourse', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1, (Jan – Feb 1996), p. 94.

⁴ Sa'dallah Wannous in Mary Elias, "Sa'dallah Wannous: What Is the Significance of Theatre Now?", *Al-Tareeq*, No 3, (May – June 1997), p.8.

against which a sort of cultural crusade should be launched. "Nowadays, in the siege we are undergoing," Wannous has stressed, "politics might not be a priority in the current struggle. *It could rather be more fruitful and important to fight for enhancing culture, and stressing its role in the life of all societies* [Wannous's emphasis]. In my view, this is the currently pressing need."⁵ The first striking point in the previous statement is underplaying the significance of politics and giving prominence to culture in the new socially complicated scene somehow shrouded in mystery. This is clearly a far cry from Wannous's "theatre of politicization" of the 1970s and 1980s with all the entailing artistic and ideological options. "Therefore, any avant-garde art in this respect can be part of a reaction against all prevalent and fake reality overwhelming us," Wannous has argued. "It can also be a protest against undermining culture. Have you noticed that amid hours on end of TV broadcast only a few minutes per week, not per day, is devoted to cultural issues?"⁶

The new revision goes further to point out the disadvantage of play writing in a backward society "the Arab World". This society, Wannous has illustrated, is a combination of several characteristics, such as backward social structures, superficially modern features, and lack of any clear vision of socio-political reform. Of course, any dramatist or intellectual has to settle for calling for more liberal structures that give the public big margins and more democratically oriented relations between society and state.⁷ The final feature of this revision or new phase in the playwright's career is the artistic medium in terms of form, style, and characterization.⁸ It will be difficult to envisage the whole future of Arab society, intellectually and artistically, without placing much emphasis upon the individual "self":

On the one hand, I concluded that I had not sufficiently focused on the backwardness of social structures in our land, and only slightly had linked such backwardness to the sort of political regimes that history bestowed upon us. On the other hand I had also to conclude that national renewal, encapsulating liberty, progress, and modernity, should not by any means necessitate we deny ourselves as individuals, having passions, motivations, obsessions, and needs for freedom and asserting the "I" unashamedly (God forgive me for the letter "I"). On the contrary, this national renewal will not succeed or materialize, unless this "I" flourishes and maintains its liberty, expresses itself, in a blunt, daring, and uninhibited manner.⁹

As previously stated, in Wannous's new phase, the free, apparently not ideologically-oriented, individual is the writer's main priority, given that the Arab World's dilemma is not confined to backward political structures and elites, but involves the whole pressing existential question about the Arab soul, or as Wannous has termed it the mysterious "I". The considered plays in this paper are all revolving around this "I", through its survival strategies, intellectual options, moral attitudes and passions as well as vulnerability. Dakroub has stressed the ambitious dramatic form portraying specific individuals operation through a traumatic historical era as marking this phase of Wannous's works:

The issue is not attributed to the prolifically and frequently published plays, but rather, more importantly, to the fact that these plays stand for an aesthetically, thematically, and stylistically, new and distinctive phase in Wannous' theatrical oeuvre.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ Sa'dallah Wannous in Mary Elias, 'Wannous Commenting on his New Writings: Interviews with Sa'dallah Wannous', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 3, (May – June 1997), p.96.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

This is reflected through the characters' human depth, individualism, richness, changeability, and contradictory conditions and transformations. There is also an amazing structure and dialectical integration of the speed and frequency of scenes and of altogether the panoramic vast range of spatial setting (encapsulating a whole city) and temporal setting of events (involving critical historical eras as well as the historical features of ages and transitional periods).¹⁰

The historical backdrop can be viewed as an aesthetical and theatrical strategy to reflect a grand perspective of a completely socio-historical panorama, displaying human beings, undergoing unusually dramatic and crucial conditions, dictating precariously existential and fatal options, as individuals or as community members. As will be demonstrated in the following argument, "History and subjects from the past generally provided a good source for Wannous. His focus was on the Arab defeat in history and on the exposure of the negative sides of celebrated historical figures."¹¹ In *Historical Miniatures* and *Rituals of Signs and Transformation*, there is a dramaturgy of two historical eras, although the themes dealt with are currently relevant and urgent.

Historical Miniatures (1994) recalls a significant turning point in Arab history: Tamerlane's seizure and ransacking of Damascus in the 15th century along with the traumatic developments engulfing almost the complete social spectrum of Damascus at that time. Even the title implies historical connotations. Moreover, the word "miniature" is connotatively peculiar in Arab culture and history. Any assessment of the play, therefore, necessitates familiarity with the concept of "miniature". According to Yumna Al Eid,

As an artistic form, the miniature is knowingly distinguished for assembling details, featuring an ornamental and decorative pattern. The miniature belongs to an Arab age, during which the dominant ideology forbade drawing pictures, or in other words embodying meaning through the physical and materialistic. In the light of its relations to its own era, this miniature is apparently a portrait in which the ornamental pattern functions to generate its meaning either from space or from lines weaving the absence of meaning and erase it so that it would transpire in space. It erases it and implies its signifying absence.¹²

Meaning is, then, implicitly rather than explicitly conveyed, whereby symbolic and suggestive means of expressions are used in order to trace this meaning. One would ask, however, whether this sort of artistic option is feasible in the case of writing a play depicting historical events in which flesh and blood human beings are involved and with which they have to adapt and adjust physically, emotionally, psychologically and intellectually. The framework adopted by Wannous consists of three tableaux "miniatures", each of which is divided into a historical narrative, functioning informatively to familiarize the audience with the historical incident and theatrically to prepare the audience for the developments engulfing the characters. The narrative is followed by a detailed depiction of slight or major events or characters. The play is then a blend of semi-documentary elements intersecting fictional dramatization of human beings adapting, in the Brechtian sense, to overwhelming developments.

There are three striking features in *Historical Miniatures*: symbols, characterization and linguistic discourse. With regard to symbols, Wannous has made use of the Barada,

¹⁰ Mohammad Dakroub, 'This Volume: A New Dialogue with Dramatist Sa'dallah Wannous and His Discourse', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1, (January – February 1996), p. 94.

¹¹ Manal A. Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre (<http://www.aljadid-wannous-life-theater>) accessed on 30.4.2013. [In English]

¹² Yumna Al-Eid, 'Historical Miniatures or the Miniatures of Wannous'. *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1 (January – February 1996), p. 137.

Sha'ban the Simpleton, and the dumb girl. In the opening episode of the play, the Barada waters are at their lowest level. However, when the troops of Sultan Faraj Bin Barqooq had marched from Egypt in order to encounter the Tatars' invasion, the Barada waters rose up "The Barada waters flooded up as never had Damascus witnessed for many years."¹³ Despite the Sultan's troops' pull out to protect his seat of power in Egypt, the seizure of Damascus, its clerics and elite's surrender and humiliation, and its ransacking, the Barada maintained its high water level. "The water rise and swell continue," Mahmoud Amin Al-Alem has maintained. "In my view, it (the Barada) is the developing symbol indicating the continuity of Damascus and its eventual triumph, despite its temporary defeat. Here, nature, eventually, symbolizes the victory of history."¹⁴ It is one of the significant tools in establishing a symbolic connection between natural aspects and historical developments.

Another significant symbol in the play is Sha'ban, the simpleton. Throughout the play, he is dressed in tatters, walking about, repeating clichés and phrases addressed to his mum. His repeated words simply and exclusively express that he was hungry, thirsty, scared, and helpless. His appearance, moreover, materializes at the critical phases of the play. Despite his apparent helplessness, he made a gesture of hospitality towards the Allepian refugee who, along with his daughter, fled Aleppo to escape the massacres of Tamerlane's armies. This gesture, couples with his repeated call to get his mother's breast are "symbolically parallel and intermingle with this water which will rise and swell in the Barada, as Damascus undergoes further deteriorations and collapses."¹⁵ This is a reminder of the miniature design, whereby several features, shapes, lines, curves, etc are identically repeated in order to emphasize and complete the integrated tableau under consideration.

The third symbol is the dumb girl, daughter of the Allepian refugee. Her fatal disease was a result of witnessing the atrocities of Tamerlane's troops. Her refugee-of-a-father, being unable to feed either her or even himself, sold her as a concubine to the ever money-thirsty Dulama, the merchant who named her Rayhana. Oddly enough, she put up stiff resistance, when Dulama tried to take her by force. She became able to express herself through her utterance "T-T-R-S...Tatars". According to Al-Alem:

The Tatars are not only the familiar ones, but all [people] are Tatars. Dulama is a Tatar. The father who sold her is a Tatar. Her folks are Tatar. And so are the Tatars. Her transformation, from dumbness at the beginning to articulation, resistance, and exposing the true enemy, parallels the Barada condition: its waters change from shallowness to swelling and flooding.¹⁶

However, these two marginalized figures meet again. Rayhana appreciates that he once has offered her along with her father bread and a quince. Now, Rayhana hugs him in a motherly manner making her disturbing statement. "Sha'ban! They're all Tatars," she says. "They've slaughtered us. You and I are strangers."¹⁷

Amid the Tartar aggression and its repercussions, varied individuals representing the Damascene social spectrum are depicted adjusting to the current situation and the impact it has left on them psychologically and intellectually. One of the major protagonists

¹³ Sa'dallah Wannous, *Historical Miniatures*, 2nd Edition, (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 2000), p. 148.

¹⁴ Mahmoud Amin Al-'Alem, '[A Critical] Reading of *Historical Miniature* and its Depiction of Ibn Khaldoun', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1, (January – February 1996), pp. 105-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁷ Sa'dallah Wannous, *Historical Miniatures*, 2nd Edition, (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 2000), p. 107.

in the play is Sheikh Tazily, the resistance movement leader and its symbolic hero. His heroism is simply based on religious ideology. One of his dreams, in which Prophet Mohammad featured, had transformed him beyond recognition. "This city," the dream Prophet maintains, "is highly cherished in my heart. Rise up and defend her. I swear by Almighty who commissioned me as a messenger and hosted me in his paradise, you would never ever stand on your feet again, if my enemy Tamerlane seized her."¹⁸ From that point on, Sheikh Tazily spares no effort in mobilizing the masses to take to arms and fight the invaders. All the way through, he has been aware of his inevitable end "martyrdom". More importantly, he views the clergy's opportunism and indulgence in worldly pleasures and half-hearted attendance to their religious and social duties as major factors in the social decline and failure in dealing with the invasion and defending their city. However, Tazily turns out to be a hardcore fundamentalist. When he discovers that the reverent Sheikh Jamal Eddin Bin Al-Shraiji simply puts forward a rationalist understanding of fate, adopts the so-called infidels' philosophical treatises and reads the books of Qadi Abdul Jabbar and Ibn Rushd, Al-Tazily's brands him a heretic and apostate, who must be severely punished and eventually given clemency, should he shed all his beliefs and attitudes. He is then a flawed hero, combining sacrifice and self-denial along with fundamentalism and inquisitiveness.

Another major figure in the play is Ibn Khaldoun who features in Wannous' depiction as a controversial scholar of contradictory characteristics i.e. scientific and technical efficiency on the one hand and individual opportunism mixed with indifference towards human suffering and national ordeals on the other. In the Second Ornament "Miniature" Secretary or Disciple Sharafuddin astonishingly asks his Boss and Minder whether the geo-historical pamphlets on North Africa [Maghrib] written by Ibn Khaldoun upon Tamerlane's commission can be used militarily in that area. "Sharafuddin. You've disappointed me. As long as you're preoccupied by such concerns and illusions, you'll never be a scholar."¹⁹ Ibn Khaldoun's pragmatism and technocracy know no bounds, where human, moral, and patriotic considerations are shelved:

This homeland you're lamenting is decaying, and invaded before the invaders' arrival. Can I bear joining the Tamerlane's camp? Yes, why not? I'm eager to explore and record. I want to enrich my experience, and expand my knowledge with perfection and precision. I had followed princes who were not worth a pair of shoes worn by Tamerlane. Had I confined myself to such concerns and obsessions, I would have neither developed such an experience nor pioneered a branch of science unheard of throughout human history.²⁰

This is one of the major themes in this play, in the sense that an intellectual should supposedly have some role in the dramatic historical developments one way or the other. However, Ibn Khaldoun views himself simply and exclusively as a cool and, absolutely, neutral and even indifferent scholar to all human considerations. Through the figure of Ibn Khaldoun, we are faced with Wannous's subtle and amazing protagonist, who, from a human perspective sounds rather unpleasant, although his logic and discourse are amazingly appealing. Knowledge is far more important than all other moral values. Ironically, Ibn Khaldoun still represents an icon of human knowledge, with his odd moral attitudes consigned to oblivion.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.15.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.99.

²⁰ Ibid., p.100.

Wannous's depiction of the Damascene social elite features through the figure of Dulama the merchant. In a moving scene with his assistant Baha who complained about Dulama's fully packed warehouses, while the whole community is in dire need for tiny amounts of foodstuffs, Dulama sounds philosophical about the concept of profit and wealth accumulation as godly inspired. His philosophy is somehow persuasive, despite its apparent nonhuman tone and opportunistic perspective, in the sense that profit is primarily the main motivation driving any successful merchant:

God Almighty is the merchant's guide, whom he tries to emulate. He simply uses a scale, a record, calculation, profit, and loss. Business is an image of the whole world. It is the origin of activity, settlement, and civilization. Oh, my son! Had merchants been rulers, prosperity and peace would have prevailed, and society would have become as systematically organized as the prayer times.²¹

Capitalism is viewed as a holy and religiously endorsed system, whereby it would justify and perpetrate all sorts of immoral means involved in the process of wealth accumulation. Capitalists and entrepreneurs are allegedly the saviors and even the indispensable redeemers of the community. Dulama is a typical icon of the nasty, yet attractive capitalist.

Wannous has used all recorded historical details, suitable to the script structure in developing the plot, which may encourage one to categorize this play as historical. Its documentary orientation in depicting the historical and sensational events of Damascus' seizure is graphically evident. Still, it breaches this form through tracing the reasons of this occupation, rather than only documenting the catastrophic event. The playwright has not simply copied ready-made or semi-ready-made historical items, arranged in a specific order, despite the fact that he, through the dialogue of the play, has adhered to the date of imaginative incidents and events as well as the city's conditions. "Rather, he has exceeded that and given these aspects (events and characters) functions and associations in this new script different from the previous 'historical' ones."²² More importantly, the structure of the play has posed technical and production challenges for directors. The first is the concept of miniature that can be defined as "a tableau in the depth of the stage," according to Nayla Al-Atrash, the renowned Syrian director, "comprised of multi-level gaps. Each detail features separately in one of the gaps, through focusing a light spot on this very gap, while the others remain pitch dark. At another moment, all gaps can be lit, whereby we get the whole sense of the miniature."²³

All in all, *Historical Miniatures* has marked a milestone in Wannous's theatrical oeuvre, through his sharp focus on characterization. Characters, even auxiliary ones, are now flesh and blood human beings whose depths and psychological motivations are explicitly addressed. Even the short episodes shed light on such aspects through the characters of Sha'ban, Marwan and Khadejah. Apparently, the play is historical or even documentary, yet the writer has simply used this incident in order to explore the social, economic, human, ideological, cultural and other aspects of human life in Damascus at the time, as a microcosm of the whole Arab world. Its grand epic structure, symbolically-toned dialogue, and graphic portrayal of human vulnerability and contradiction were sufficient to

²¹ *Ibid*, pp.31-2.

²² Watfa Hamadi Hashem, 'Historical Miniatures between Historical Accounts and Modern Creative Vision', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1, (January – February 1996), p. 148.

²³ Nayala Al-Atrash in Maysoun Ali, "Features of the Direction Plan in the Due *Historical Miniature* Performance: An Interview with Director Nayla Al-Atrash," *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1 (January –February 1996), p.157.

make this play a unique piece of original dramatic art. It also attempted "to provide, through a dramaturgy new in Wannous's theatre, a kaleidoscopic multiplicity of voices, each revealing its own struggle, tragedy, or triumph. The 'pictorial space' of these miniatures is, dramatically speaking, a kind of open forum where each actor speaks his or her own truth."²⁴ It was even ambitious in establishing a new relationship with the audience, in the sense that the latter were required to reflect on the conflicting views, details, discourses, and characters in order to develop their own perspective of a universal issue: how can human beings adapt, confront, or even escape existential and historical dilemmas. Abedo Basha has convincingly summed up the qualities of this play:

In this script, not for a single moment does Wannous stray away from his ultimate objective in urging the audience to think and take appropriate action. Thus, he gives the audience a wide margin to compare the points of view and make a choice. The message of the script is clear: when the rulers neglect their duties, clerics knuckle under, intellectuals sell out, and merchants mainly seek their own interests, cities and fortress are conquered, and the defeat era prevails.²⁵

All the previous factors have made this play nonpareil in terms of content, form, and discourse. The author is also faced with a sort of aesthetical and intellectual challenge that he was to take up in his future works.

History is also recalled in *Signs of Rituals and Transformations* (1994) set in the 19th century (Ottoman) Damascus (1850 as stated in the script). Again, a city-life is being internally scrutinized through its socio-political structures. This play combines Brecht's epic design and Shakespeare's tragic notion of outstanding characters undergoing radical changes, "transformations," because of their human vulnerability in the face of socio-political hierarchy. There are soliloquies and an episodic structure. The writer has also breached the three unities and poetically and grandiloquently phrased the dialogue. He has assembled a set of characters as well, frequently present in his other plays, that is the ruling class representatives vis-à-vis those of the ruled. The opening is rather climactic depicting Abdullah (the Chief Notable) making merry and indulging in a flirtatious ritual somewhere in the Oasis of Damascus with the dancing girl Wardah. To his dismay, the Gendarme Chief Izzat Beyh spots, arrests and organizes an 'open show' to scandalize them. This hullabaloo seems to have destabilized the social order of the city given that the guilty party is a member of the top hierarchy. The enormity of the disturbances has demanded the involvement of the Grand Mufti, Qassem, an opponent of Abdulla, who devises a plot to set Abdullah free, replacing the dancing girl Warda by Mumina (pious one in Arabic), Abdullah's wife, whose condition was to get divorced from her husband upon finalizing the proposed settlement. This step entails a series of consequences leading Mumina to the world of call girls, taking the name of Almasa (diamond in Arabic). Likewise, all the parties involved in the conspiracy/game undergo shockingly radical transformations.

The exchange between the Mufti and Mumina is subtle and cleverly indicates the dire consequences brought about by the conspiracy. While the Mufti views the exchange trick as a ploy to diffuse and gloss over the scandal –humiliation of the Chief Notable -

²⁴ Ali Al-Anezi, *An Analytical Study of the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous, with Particular Emphasis on the Plays Written after the 1967 War*, Ph. D. Thesis (The University of Sheffield 2006), p. 231. [In English].

²⁵ Abedo Basha, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: the Trans-planter', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1, (January –February 1996), p.192.

Mumina understandably views the act as the beginning of a slippery slope leading to the unknown:

MUMINA. The dilemma of the Chief Notable will be over, but mine will begin.

MUFTI. I don't understand. Don't you want to help your husband get out of his ordeal?

MUMINA. Why should I? In order to keep him for call girls!

As a matter of fact, this is not my main concern. I may even ignore it. There is something more serious. What you're asking me to do is a scary gamble. It is walking on the edge of the abyss of seduction. How do you feel while standing on the abyss-brink.²⁶

Mumina sees replacing the belly dancer symbolize a brink she is eager to reach and a turning point in both her status as a wife and her identity as a woman. Apparently, she enlightens the Mufti about the repercussion of his plan. The Mufti views this notion as a sign of jealousy expected of a woman insulted by her husband's disloyalty. Mumina is certain that signs of her future existence (being) only occur in her soul and "echoes of future transformations are only repeated in her anxious heart and alert body."²⁷

The second major dramatic line is the shift from a customary apparent world into another internal one marred by excitement, secrets, mystery, and contradictions. Thus materializes the master's stroke of the playwright. The play operates on three levels. The first involves the representatives of power: the Mufti (Qassem), the Gendarme Chief (Izzat), and Chief Notable (Abdullah), who transform the Governor (Wali) into a stooge to serve their own interests. The second level involves the world of seduction and desire functioning as a vent out for the previous lot. The third involves the tools of power and ordinary men, manipulated and tossed about by the ruling elite. Amid this hierarchy, each of the characters has their own contradictions, and bear the seeds of their demise going underway with the first step in the process of transformation. They all seek self-discovery only to reach deadlock. They also form a fragile and fragmented world despite its apparent solidity imposed by the ruling class.

The title "rituals of signs and transformations" is a third major component in the play as it ushers the audience into the internal realm of the play, hints to the characters' experience along with their individual and social dilemmas. Each episode of the play is a ritual in its own right: some of them are implicit and others explicit. These rituals lead into others whereby each character undergoes radical transformation. This is the artistic equation or core of the whole script. There are artistic tableaux where each character removes one mask to be replaced by another. In the words of Fatimah Al-Muhsin:

The playwright has also employed the binary pattern in arranging his characters, whereby each one encounters its opposite number or partner in developing the action-details. On the political events level, there are three 'wills' at work: the Local Governor, Chief of Gendarme, and the Mufti, and there is the object of the event involving the two protagonists: the Chief Notable, the perpetrator of the mistake, and his wife. The latter ones have also another dimension. One would imagine it would begin and end with their

²⁶ Sa'dallah Wannous, *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1994), p.37.

²⁷ Mahmoud Nesseem, 'Rituals of Signs and Transformations: The Rise or Downfall of Individualism? What Lies beyond the Brink?', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1 (January – February 1996), p.168.

wills and destinies. Then emerges the second more effective level with regard to specifying the characters' main psychological features, and forming a new ritual within the theatrical game: a virtuous woman, having transformed into a prostitute, reaches physical liberty; and the Chief Notable, having become an ascetic, seeks seclusion on the margin.²⁸

The Chief Notable goes into jail and meets his wife, Mumina/ Almasa, then leaves jail perplexed, bewildered, totally lost, finding refuge in mystic reveries, and total detachment from the world of materialism and desire, indulging in passionate delusion verging on madness. It is an escape from the physical burden of the flesh and a drift into the world of absolute freedom.

In a Shakespearean Hamlet-like scene, Abdullah, the Chief Notable undergoes the first sign of his ritualistic transformation. An apparition of a mysterious saint or "Sufi" guide visits Abdullah dressed in a white mantle like a shroud standing in the middle of a halo. It is a somber and moving scene suggesting varied indications:

ABDULLAH. When I think of my debasing condition, obscene acts,
and immoral attitudes, I get introverted and lose any hope in God's mercy.

SAINT. Don't be hasty! Keep in mind, everything has a start.

ABDULLAH. Here lies the problem. Where shall I make the first step,
and how?

SAINT. Your first step is a naked body and an empty stomach.

Tear your clothes off. Then dress in a patched costume.²⁹

This exchange illustrates an individual change. Intellectual and psychological factors are at play in this regard. In an echo of Shakespeare's ghost, Wannous used the saint as a vehicle for leading his protagonist along the path of transformation. He has given Abdullah the sign or cue. Similarly, the new tattered costume is meant to reveal Abdullah's new identity so to speak. From this moment on, Abdullah is a sort of a "Sufi" disciple ready to humiliate his body and oppress his desire in order to release his spirit from the shackles of worldly pleasures. This scene is, audio-visually, well- accomplished through a well-measured dialogue and moving moments of dramatic tension.

Similarly, and in a flagrant challenge to Arab theatrical conventions, Wannous opted to depict a homo-sexual, Al-Afsah, as one of his protagonists, giving him a wide margin to air his grievances as an outcast, despite his apparently normal and tough physique. One of the apparent bully aides of the Mufti, he goes through his signs and rituals. Having shaved his moustache and wrapped it up in a bundle, he offers it as a gift to his fellow bodyguard Abbas. "My exterior is my interior," says Al-Afsah, "and vice versa. Haven't you said once that you detest any one having exteriors and interiors. All I have done is expose my interiors. I've got nothing to hide."³⁰ "Time is up for frankness even if it could bring about my death."³¹ As a frank and straightforward homosexual, he cannot put up with Abbas's indifference or duality. Abbas's survival strategy of concealment further enhances Al-Afsah's frustration or even humiliation. This internal struggle between honesty (expressing one's homosexuality) and hypocrisy (concealing mutual love on the part of Abbas) leads Al-Afsah to the climax, dangling his body from the ceiling. Freedom knows no compromises and death is a price worth paying in this regard:

²⁸ Fatima Al-Muhsen, 'A Reading of *Rituals of Signs and transformations: the Duality of Body and Soul in Taboo Arab Memory*', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1, (January – February 1996), p. 179.

²⁹ Sa'dallah Wannous, *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1994), pp. 68-9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.87.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.87.

AL-AFSAH [. . .]. When I approached him, as transparent as glass
with no shape or hypocrisy, he despised and abandoned me. He is the symbol
of hypocrisy and cowardice. He failed to comprehend my courage and the trauma I had
been through in order to reach self-fulfillment and transparency. I can't afford regret,
retreat, or go ahead. All doors are closed. This world is unjust where only crooks and liars
survive.³²

The writer's priority is definitely to stress the notion of honesty and transparency in
the face of social concealment and hypocrisy. The protagonist, more importantly, seeks
salvation through death. Homosexuals are after all honest and straightforward human
beings worthy of sympathy. He has his own rituals. However, individual freedom and self-
fulfillment simply bring about destruction. Al-Afsa is, one way or the other, a tragic hero
whose honesty and desire can be viewed as a tragic flaw that brings about his downfall and
eventually annihilation.

The Mufti (Qassem) goes along a rising dramatic line with varied twists and turns.
Apparently, he endeavours to cover up the scandal of Abdullah and the call-girl Warda, in
order to maintain the might of authority and the stability of the regime (hierarchy).
Replacing Warda by Mumina / Almasa, is not out of appreciation of the Chief Notable, but
rather in order to avoid the dire consequences that could destabilize society, whose top
hierarchy is comprised of him (the Mufti), merchants, and Wali (Local Governor).
However, the deal he has struck with Mumina, to divorce Abdullah, causes him a great
deal of headache. Her indulgence in prostitution to the brim started to undermine social
stability. Thus, he undergoes his transformation through the ritual of issuing several
religious edicts intended to reduce the impact of Almasa's activities on the community. The
edicts forbid alcohol, subject suspected prostitutes and brothel customers to flogging, and
ban singing along with reading secular books. Nonetheless, his anguish is far from over
and relief is an elusive aim. Oddly enough, to the audience's dismay, he meets Almasa
expressing his burning desire towards her:

MUFTI. Feel pity for me Almasa, I'm wearing out in illness.

You're the severest ordeal I've ever faced. You're the ordeal after which death is the
final one. I didn't know either how fortune had manipulated me or where such desires and
fires had hidden. Yet, can one ever escape his heartbeats and spiritual quivering?³³

The Mufti gets involved in a ritual of a different sort: he takes off his official uniform
and joins Almasa in a rakish party of dancing and drinking. He is now transformed into a
human being, a sort of King Lear figure in the wilderness of sexual indulgence. Power and
religion are no more than masks glossing over human desire, passions and affection.
Symbolically, the writer exposes authority figures and unravels their vulnerability. Thus,
religion and politics are no more than means for gaining personal interests one way or the
other. As an individual, however, the Mufti seems to reach no salvation.

The most radical transformation in the play is undergone by Mumina / Almasa
Abdullah's wife and the daughter of Haj Mohammad who transformed Warda, the then
house maid in his house, into a prostitute, by sexually abusing her as an adolescent. He
also suppressed his daughter's (Mumina) desires and emotions while peeping at her
physical charms. This turbulent childhood, the disturbing reminiscences about male family
members and Abdullah's disloyalty have altogether driven her to take advantage of the first
opportunity –deal with Mufti– to unleash her "sexual" jinni out of the bottle, and liberate
her fresh and oppressed body. Thus, she transforms into Almasa with reluctant assistance

³² Ibid., p.109.

³³ Ibid., p. 137-8.

from Warda, the professional belly dancer and prostitute. In a ritual of singing, drum beating, and wearing the new costume of a whore or belly dancer: "Almasa is almost naked, with only her underwear on. The Maids let her hair down, comb and smooth it. Warda applies proper cosmetics. When becoming ready, they put on her the new costume of seduction to the company of dancing and singing."³⁴ At this frolic, Mumina liberates her body from the mantle of chastity and virtue, only to reveal the mantle of desire, sexuality, and dissipation, becoming a professional and seductive prostitute, for the simple reason that she is eager to satisfy her sexual desires, avenging herself against family conventions, rather than out of economic or social degradation. It is the opposite of the spiritual transformation of Abdullah involving body-marginalization, so to speak. Through this unconditional body-liberation, adoption of nudity to the degree of transparency, Almasa has become a sort of "tsunami" threatening the city's social security and stability, dispensing with the virtuous family's masks, and tarnishing its image. In response to the family's humiliation by Mumina / Almasa's behaviour, her young brother Safwan decides to murder her, and carries out his decision. In a moving episode, Almasa stoically faces her destiny, for it is simply another ritual of transformation. "Safwan! I'm a tale, and tales are never killed," says Almasa. "I'm an obsession, seduction. Daggers can never kill obsession, longing, and seduction."³⁵ This statement indicates a new philosophy acquired through her traumatic, but exciting and rich, life experience. Having fulfilled her sexual liberation and become her own person, free of all social and religious taboos, Almasa can be seen as a tragic heroine, for the simple reason that individuals should never reach the degree of undermining social security and order. While dying, she further enhances her transparent form, "Oh brother! You've done nothing. Like the Damascus Oasis, my tale will flourish. Almasa will mushroom and grow. She will mushroom through thoughts, obsessions, and tales. Tales.. Ta.."³⁶

All characters have attempted to shape their own existential destinies, only to end up in a quagmire. Their transformation was no less painful than the dilemmas from which they endeavoured to find their way out. This transformation is a matter of individual identity crisis. "Therefore, in forming its tiny details and the whole structure, the script relies on shifting from an exposed and apparent case to a concealed and mysterious one. With the concealed depths exposed and mysteries unraveled, the scenes acquire their final form, culminating in the characters' suicide, murder, asceticism, and madness."³⁷ The overall message is apparently alarming: in a society founded on oppression, hypocrisy, and false social masks, an individual is unable to look in the mirror or undergo some sort of self-appraisal, subject to collapse in the face of any crisis and unable to find a way out of its weaknesses and contradictions, always being glossed over. In the words of Usama Ghanam:

The uniqueness of his current script lies in his characterization as part of the eventual object, shaping a city. Thus, his characters enjoy momentum and distinction, leading the script to polyphony, which artistically indicates mastering of theatricality and thematically

³⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁵ Ibid., p.150.

³⁶ Ibid., p.150.

³⁷ Mahmoud Nasseem, 'Rituals and Signs: *Rituals of Signs and Transformations: The Rise or Downfall of Individualism? What Lies beyond the Brink?*', *Al-Tareeq*, No. 1, (January – February 1996), p.170.

a deeper vision and dialectics, all producing an open text and generate the recipient's hermeneutical response.³⁸

This characterization undoubtedly has become one of Wannous's main characteristics in this phase of his career. Similarly, Sami Sueidan argues "In this combination of the personal and social [...], this script has reached totally new horizons sought by a modern script, maintaining both, the personal and social lines, simultaneously and concurrently, at the centre of classical theatrical masterpieces, clearly matched by the current play."³⁹ Despite the classical feature in the text, in terms of characterization, this play has undoubtedly a modern discourse that turns freedom at all costs into a make or break issue. Thus, the protagonists' transformation from self-delusion to self-discovery is considered as inevitable, despite all dire consequences be they madness, death or social demise. They simply reach the point of no return which should be willingly accepted and from which evasion is simply betrayal to one's own self. This quest involves a worthwhile suffering. According to Ali Al-Anezi, "in the play's redemptive scheme Wannous is recapitulating his own journey of discovery from the internal censorship of the theatre of politicization to the joyful creative freedom of the 1990s, most fully realized in *Rituals* itself."⁴⁰

In the light of the previously considered plays and their characteristics, one would clearly observe that Sa'dallah Wannous's final (third) phase is strikingly marked for its focus on the individual's psyche, mood, and interiors. Female protagonists (Almasa) prominently feature and their sexuality is almost graphically emphasized. Male protagonists take their options and face all dire consequences: Tazily, Al-Afsah, and the Mufti, to mention but a few. The considered plays are artistically structured in a combination of epic and cinematic modes, dotted with narratives. The action of both plays, more importantly, develops along private and public lines. Skillfully, the writer has managed to employ a historic framework in order to draw the audience's attention to the here and now, for Arab society still maintains outmoded socio-political structures. All the previous faculties have made Wannous' plays in this third and final phase unprecedented in the history of Arab theatre and transformed Wannous into an international dramatist.

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³⁸ Usama Ghanam, 'Rituals of Signs and Transformation', *Issues and Testimonies 7: Sa'dallah Wannous, Man, Intellectual, Artist*, Ed. Abdulrahman Munif (Damascus: Kanaan Publishing House, 2000), p. 266.

³⁹ Samy Suweidan, 'Rituals of Signs and Transformations: the Dialectic of the Exterior and Interior / Signifier and Signified', *Al-Adab*, Vol. 45, No. 11-12 (December 1997), p.15.

⁴⁰ Ali Al-Anezi, *An Analytical Study of the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous, with Emphasis on the 1967 War*, Ph. D. Thesis (The University of Sheffield 2006), p.261. [English]

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