

Pharaohs and Playwrights between Fiction and Reality: Controversies in the Egyptian Cultural Field

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Abstract Going through the controversies involving pharaohs as fictive characters, this article focuses on the life and works of four Egyptian playwrights (Ya'qūb Ṣanū', 'Alī Aḥmad Bākaṭīr, Alfred Faraḡ and Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm). Deeply engaged in the politics of their time, playwrights' experiences with 'pharaohs' are studied here with the aim of highlighting the different perceptions of the character of the pharaoh in Egypt and in the West, retracing the implications of the common pairing of pharaohs with presidents, as well as showing how literature can affect politics and how the collocation of pharaohs in the Egyptian cultural field remains problematic, but is changing.

Keywords Pharaohs. Egyptian playwrights. Ya'qūb Ṣanū'. 'Alī Aḥmad Bākaṭīr. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm. Alfred Faraḡ. Pharaonism.

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Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted	2021-01-22
Accepted	2021-04-08
Published	2021-06-30

Open access

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Citation Potenza, D. (2021). "Pharaohs and Playwrights between Fiction and Reality: Controversies in the Egyptian Cultural Field". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 57, 69-90.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2021/01/004

1 Pharaohs and Pharaonism

In the Qur'an and in early Muslim traditions, the Pharaoh is the epitome of tyranny and disbelief (Tottoli 1996).¹ Such a resolutely negative attitude is only partially mirrored in Arabic literature: even if some works show the marvel and wonder surrounding the monuments Ancient Egyptian civilisation was able to build, literature generally did not focus on them (Haarmann 1980).² The great discoveries and study of Ancient Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century revived interest in Ancient Egypt; as a response to Western colonisation, Ancient Egypt began to be referenced as constituting the source of an authentically Egyptian corpus of modern art and literature. Chief among the proponents of this idea was Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888-1956), an eminent writer, journalist, politician and Minister of Education, a field he reformed, making a contribution towards the creation of a national identity.³ Elliott Colla sums up the cultural implications of Ancient Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century in Egypt (2007, 163):

In memoirs and *Bildungsroman* novels from the 1920s and 1930s, the themes of shame and ignorance, knowledge and resurrection, the ancient Egyptian past and the emerging Egyptian modernity came together to form a new literary culture, commonly referred to by its Arabic name, *al-Fir'awniyya* (Pharaonism). Much of this body of work forms the foundation for the canon of modern Egyptian Arabic literature for the period of the *Nahda* (renaissance).

Proudly nationalistic Pharaonism was central to Egyptian responses to growing European power in the Middle East even before direct colonial rule, in the work of Rifā'a al-Taḥṭāwī (1801-1873) and 'Alī Mubārak (1824-1893). During the British occupation of Egypt (1882-1956), a new generation of intellectuals conceived that the integration of ancient Egypt in their own culture was crucial to national liberation (Colla 2007, 163). Through his poetry about Ancient Egypt, the poet and playwright Aḥmad Ṣawqī (1869-1932) clearly alludes to the present and articulates the despotism of the British viceroys while also insisting upon the superiority of Egypt's ancient past over

1 I wish to express my gratitude to Professors Casini and Ruocco, who provided me with remarks and notes that improved the quality of this paper.

2 Tottoli 1996 maintains that early reports showing little respect for the Pharaoh were circulated as part of a polemic which aimed to counter opposing positive conceptions of the Pharaoh.

3 Casini 2019 shows that Haykal's Pharaonism, especially in his articles, responds to a coherent project of anti-Enlightenment highlighting the social function of religion and the limits of rationalism.

its colonial present (Colla 2007, 220). And so, Pharaonic themes proliferated throughout the arts and literature of this period. In addition to Haykal and Šawqī, “most of the leading lights of Egyptian letters, at one point or another, wrote in the pharaonic idiom: Aḥmad Ḥusayn, Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, Naḡīb Maḥfūz, Salāma Mūsā, ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, and Tāhā Ḥusayn” (Selim 2001,12).

Based on a pre-Islamic past, Egyptian nationalism grounded on Pharaonism transcended and reconciled existing class, regional, and, especially, sectarian difference (Colla 2007, 164). In the late twenties, a group of liberal Muslim Egyptian intellectuals that had pioneered Pharaonism started to have doubts about it and, after 1930, intellectuals like Tāhā Ḥusayn repudiated it (Walker 2005). At any rate, even in the good days of Pharaonism, it was difficult for intellectuals to harmonise and synthesise the splendid findings of modern European Egyptology with the negative Qur’anic stereotype of the rulers of Egypt in pre-Islamic times (Haarmann 1980, 56); and so, this trend left little space to Pharaohs themselves, who have remained controversial characters. Proof of this is attested in the Arabic language, where from the noun *fir’awn* (pharaoh) derived the verb *tafar’ana*, meaning ‘act arrogantly/act as a despot’ (see *Mu’jam al-ma’ānī al-ġāmi’*).

At the same time,

in exalting Pharaonic institutions, spirituality and aesthetic achievements, [Pharaonism] denied the title of Westerners to color the intimate psyches of Egyptians: this did help prepare the way for the Islam-tinged pan-Arab anti-imperialism voiced under Nasser. (Walker 2005, 228)

In this article, by Pharaonism I mean both the intellectual trend that was hegemonic in the twenties of the nineteenth century and a more generic trend of employing elements coming from the Pharaonic past that occurred also later on. Indeed, a new wave of Pharaonism invested Egypt after the crisis in nationalist thought that followed Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war:

the revived symbols and trappings of a putative pharaonic splendor [are] appropriated and recast as part of a continuing counter-narrative that seeks to pry open the discursive cleavages between state, nation, and people and to interrogate, in the process, the ideologically and politically loaded project of writing national history and identity. (Selim 2001, 22)

Since Sadat’s death in 1981, political discourse has remained hostile to a glorification of a Pharaonic past. Although Sadat tried to distance himself from the Pharaonic past, his assassins were still able

to identify him as a non-Islamic tyrant, and at their trial they were crying out “We have killed the Pharaoh” (Wood 1998, 186). Interestingly, in 1985, the late Nağīb Maḥfūz wrote *al-‘Ā’iš fī-l-ḥaqīqa* (Akhenaten, Dweller in Truth, literally: ‘he who lives in reality/truth’), a novel about the Pharaoh Akhenaton in which Miri-Mon, a young scribe intrigued by the ruins of Akhenaton’s palace, investigates the story of this controversial pharaoh. Seeking truth, Miri-Mon encounters different people who met Akhenaton in life, he listens to their stories and reports them, giving space to polyphony, so that the reader can build his own opinion on the collected data. The word (*imbrātūriyya*) that Maḥfūz employs to define the pharaoh’s reign (2007, 19) creates dissonances with the Ancient time of the pharaohs. Likewise, the sentence *Amūn, al-‘arš, Miṣr wa-l-imbrātūriyya* (Amon, the throne, Egypt and the Empire, 2007, 19) recalls the Modern motto *Allāh, al-malik, al-waṭan* (God, the King and the Country) and sounds very contemporary. Indeed, with his enigmatic life and death, the character Akhenaton clearly conceals President Sadat, who Maḥfūz supported.⁴ Maḥfūz, whose first novels showed a true interest in Pharaohs, but who did not follow the Pharaonist movement and who did not write about pharaohs for more than forty years,⁵ decided to defend his beloved President depicting him as a pharaoh, using the same metaphor as his enemies, a pairing that Sadat himself had tried to discard. At the same time Maḥfūz was questioning the metaphor itself: is ‘a pharaoh’ always negative?

In light of the complex phenomenon of Pharaonism, examining intricate debates involving pharaohs as fictive characters often corresponding to real persons, this article will focus on the life and works of four eminent Egyptian playwrights who dealt with the con-

⁴ Maḥfūz wrote also *Yawm maqatal al-za‘īm* (The Day the Leader was Killed, 1985) about President Sadat.

⁵ Maḥfūz’s first book-length work was a translation of a children’s book on ancient Egypt by the Egyptologist James Baikie (*Peeps at Many Lands: Ancient Egypt*, 1912), and his first novel experiments were historical romances set in Pharaonic times: *‘Abat al-aqdār* (Mockery of the Fates, 1939), *Rādūbīs* (Rhadopis of Nubia, 1943), and *Kifāḥ Ṭība* (The Struggle of Thebes, 1944).

Maḥfūz dealt with Pharaonic subjects in an original way: he did not depict the Pharaonic period as a Golden Age or an idealised model. Instead, he represented it as a faraway time where internal and external political issues could be paired to Egyptian contemporary history (Amaldi 1988, 416). Despite the efforts of King Farouq’s supporters to construct an image of him as a young Pharaoh who would free his people from foreign oppression, *Rādūbīs* shows a king interested in his own pleasure and expresses the sentiments of the Egyptian people in the early forties in their disillusionment with their youthful king (Moussa-Mahmoud 1989, 157). Similarly, *Kifāḥ Ṭība* is about the conflict between ancient Egyptian kings and the invading Hyksos of the north. Represented as “fair and blue-eyed” the Hyksos symbolise the modern British forces (Moussa 1989, 157). From this period, worthy of note is only one other novel that centres on a pharaoh: ‘Ādil Kāmil’s *Malik min šu‘ā’* (1945), on the life and beliefs of the Pharaoh Akhenaton, which won a prize for historical fiction.

roversial characters of pharaohs: Ya'qūb Ṣanū', 'Alī Aḥmad Bākaṭīr, Alfred Farāġ and Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm. Deeply involved in the politics of their time and strictly dependent on the cultural politics of their presidents, both in terms of benefits and censorship,⁶ Egyptian playwrights' experiences with 'pharaohs' are studied in this article within their context of production and later developments to highlight the different perceptions of the character of the pharaoh in Egypt and the West, to retrace the heritage of Pharaonism and the implications of the common pairing of the pharaoh with the president, as well as to show how literature can affect politics and how these aspects let us rethink the difficult relationship of the Egyptian cultural field with pharaohs in modern and contemporary times.

2 Ṣanū' and *le pharaon* – Pharaohs and/in the West

In the formation of the first Egyptian troupe of players, the political satirist and playwright Ya'qūb Ṣanū' (known also as James Sanua, 1839-1912), "the Father of Modern Egyptian drama" (Badawi 1985), benefitted from Ismā'īl Bāšā's favour, who appreciated his theatre. Ṣanū' believed that the theatre could have a social role in Egypt's nationalism, and he was keenly aware of the need to arouse the interest of the average non-westernised Egyptian who came to see his works. Inspired by the French and the Italian theatre, at the beginning of his career he cleverly adapted some of Molière's masterpieces, appropriating their characters, formal techniques and plots (see Ruocco 2010, 43). Acting as a 'fortunate heir' (*héritier heureux*, Bencheneb 1970, 13), Ṣanū' also selected Molière's plays so that their subjects could be relevant to the Egyptian context and, most of all, so that they would not disturb or offend his public. For instance, he avoided translating *Dom Juan*, *Tartuffe* and *Le misanthrope* (The Misanthrope). It is reported that Ismā'īl Bāšā himself appreciated his work, nicknaming him "The Egyptian Molière" (Badawi 1985, 134).⁷

The reason that brought Ismā'īl Bāšā's patronage of Ṣanū' to an abrupt end in 1872 and the closure of Ṣanū's theatre is not clear. The dramatist's political criticism was certainly more explicit in his journal than in his plays (Badawi 1985, 134-5). Indeed, in 1877 Ṣanū' created *Abū nazzāra zarqā'* (The Man with the Blue Glasses, 1877 to at least 1882), the first magazine produced by an Egyptian, where he satirised the Khedive. Only fifteen issues of the journal were print-

⁶ On censorship and culture in Egypt, see for example Stagh 1993; Jacquemond 2006; Mehrez 2010.

⁷ On Molière's adaptation in Arabic theatre, see Fertat 2014; on Ṣanū's idea of theatre, see Ruocco 2010, 46-7; 'Ānūs compares Ṣanū's plays with Goldoni's (1984, 164-90).

ed in Egypt before the Khedive expelled Ṣanū' from the country and the journal was banned. Ṣanū' moved to Paris, where the journal was printed for decades and, despite the ban, was smuggled into Egypt.

Through his journal, Ṣanū' continued his theatrical activity, publishing short and sardonic social comedies in which he used metaphorical language and nicknames to disguise criticism. For instance, *al-Qirdātī. Lu'ba tiātriyya ḥaṣalat fī ayyām al-Ġuzz sanat 1204 H.* (The Monkey Showman. A Playlet that Took Place in the Time of the Ġuzz, in the Year 1204 H/1789 AD; 1878) seeks to portray the oppression of the poor people in Egypt and the Khedive's disrespect for people's life and property, but takes as his setting Egypt a century before, under the Ġuzz, who were notorious for their ruthless and unjust rule (Moosa 1974, 419). Likewise, the dramatic sketch *Ṣayḥ al-ḥāra* (Chief Man of the Quarter, s.d.) also depicts the Khedive, but using a nickname (Moosa 1974, 419-20). Sarcastically, Ṣanū' referred to Ismā'īl Bāšā as *ṣayḥ al-ḥāra* especially in his caricatures.

In the issues of the journal printed in Paris, French was added as a translation of colloquial Arabic comments of the caricatures. A master of translation and adaptation, Ṣanū' did not literally translate from Arabic into French. Particularly, the French 'pharaon' of the translation rarely corresponds to the Arabic *fir'awn*. For instance, "le jeune pharaon" (the young pharaoh, referring to Tawfīq Bāšā) or "le pharaon" corresponds to *al-wād al-ahbal* (the foolish lad; Ṣanū' 1974, 17 and 40); "le vieux pharaon" (the old pharaoh, referring to Ibrāhīm Bāšā) corresponds to *ṣayḥ al-ḥāra* (49). Conversely, in another caricature, Ismā'īl Bāšā is depicted on a throne with a crown in modern clothes. While the Arabic describes him as *fir'awn*, the French translation simply calls him by name, "Ismā'il" (129).

Employing in his journal the word 'pharaon' more often than its equivalent in Arabic, Ṣanū' must have considered that, for a Western reader, it was a metaphor for the Khedive clearer than the many others an Egyptian could understand. Extensive use of the metaphor of the pharaoh to depict the nation's leader in Pharaonic garb both for a local public and European readers ironically reflect on the impact of Egyptology on Egyptians. Such an impact would become more widespread a few years later, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, when it also took a nationalist turn, leading to Pharaonism.

3 Bākaṭīr's Drama – Pharaohs as Antagonists

'Alī Aḥmad Bākaṭīr's "first attempt at writing drama proper" (Badawi 1987, 112) dealt with pharaohs, in the play *Iḥnātūn wa-Nifirtiti* (Akhenaton and Nefertiti, 1940, reprinted in 1967). The famous writer, who was born in Indonesia from Yemeni parents, grew up in Hadramawt, and then moved to Egypt (in 1934), experimented in this play with

al-naẓm al-mursal al-muntaliq (the running blank verse), that he had already used in a translation into Arabic of *Romeo and Juliet* (1967b, 6-7; 1964, 11-17) and of which he was particularly proud (1964, 12).

The play opens with the priests of Amon commenting on the government of the Pharaoh (Amenhotep III)⁸ and especially the treacherous behaviour of his wife, Queen Tiy. They express their fear regarding the little prince (*al-amīr al-ṣaġīr*, 1967b, 23), who will later become Akhenaton. After the death of his wife Tādū,⁹ the prince thinks often about the afterlife (*ḥawāṭīru-hu fī-l-samāʾ*, 23). Priests know that, with his new religion, centring on Aton instead of the traditional polytheism, Akhenaton may be their enemy (27) and so, they conspire against him. In the meanwhile, Queen Tiy comforts her son who is enraged with Aton for the loss of his beloved wife. Amenhotep III disapproves of his son's melancholic behaviour and the two do not talk to each other. To soothe her son, Queen Tiy has a plan: she has found that a beautiful girl called Nefertiti looks just like Tādū. Dressed up like her, the girl is shown sleeping during a ceremony where a priest of Aton awakes her. The prince believes it is a miracle that Nefertiti looks like Tādū and welcomes her as his wife. However, over time, Nefertiti does not accept the fact that the prince always mentions Tādū when he is with her. When Amenhotep III dies, the prince becomes Pharaoh Akhenaton. Believing strongly in Aton, he builds a new town in his name, Akhetaton, and is proud of it. However, the city will not survive for long. When the Hittites are about to invade Egypt, Akhenaton does not prepare for the war as his commitment to his new religion of love and peace forbids him from hating. Broken and weak, before dying he swears eternal love to Nefertiti.

Revolutionary and idealist, Akhenaton does not govern by his *fīrʿawniyya*, but with his religion (*dīn*), as he explains to a priest of Amon during a discussion about egalitarianism:

High Priest of Amon: [...] You excel us because of your sublime *fīrʿawniyya*.

Akhenaton: Your brother does not excel you because of his *fīrʿawniyya*, but his religion. (115)

The neologism *fīrʿawniyya* in this extract is used as an equivalent of *malikiyya* (majesty, monarchy), coined upon the word *fīrʿawn* through a *nisba* (adjective of relation) in the female form. This singular use of the word *fīrʿawniyya* remarks the specificity of ruling as a pharaoh, not as any other king, and maybe also wants to highlight the negative

⁸ Bākaṭīr uses the Hellenized name “Amenophis”.

⁹ In the original: *zawġu-hu al-mitanniyya* (lit.: ‘his wife from the Kingdom of Mitanni’) (23).

connotation that its stem, *fir'awn*, bears in religious traditions. This explanation makes sense if we consider that in the dialogue Akhenaton opposes the idea of *fir'awniyya* to the idea of *dīn* (religion).

As a matter of fact, Akhenaton is an atypical Pharaoh. Between the two Pharaohs who appear in the play - Amenhotep III and Akhenaton - the father is the Pharaoh *par excellence*. Indeed, the title *fir'awn* is used by the priests who speak of Amenhotep III in his absence (69) and in official salutations (114), while other characters of the play generally address Akhenaton as *mawlāya* (my lord, 110, 112, 115, 117) and in the *dramatis personae* he is defined as *al-amīr* (the prince). According to Bākaṭīr, the main feature of Akhenaton is that he is a poet (*šā'ir*): "he is a poet in his words, in his actions, in his manners and in his vision of life" (150). His father, the Pharaoh, is less depicted, and there are no hints about his government, but it is clear that he cannot understand Akhenaton's love for one woman, as he appreciates many women, each for her different (skin) colour (44-5). Such misogynist features attributed to the character of the Pharaoh serve to depict him as an anti-hero. But there might be more. As Nağīb Maḥfūz criticised through his historical novels the love affairs of King Farouk (Fārūq al-Awwal, r. 1936-1952; Amaldi 1988, 416), Bākaṭīr might be doing the same thing through his Pharaoh.

Apart from the depiction of the Pharaoh and the anti-Pharaoh, what is interesting in *Iḥnātūn wa-Nifirtīti* is that some years after Bākaṭīr wrote it, as an affirmed author and a professed apologist for Islam and Arab nationalism, he felt the need to defend his position towards the Pharaonic topic of his play. In *Fann al-masraḥiyya min ḥilāl tağāribī al-šahṣiyya* (The Art of Drama through my Own Experiments, 1958), the author admits that he was interested in Arab nationalism and, according to this, he chose the subjects for his plays. He explains that, when he arrived in Egypt, in 1934, many Egyptian writers enthusiastic with Arab nationalism were blaming Egypt's pride on its ancient Pharaonic history. However, he considers that Ancient Egypt is well known all over the world and it is certainly a part of the history of the Middle East (*al-šarq al-'arabī*), and so, "every Arab should be proud of it" (*yanbağī an ya'tazza bi-hi kullu 'arabī*) (1964, 42). Moreover, in the preface to his play, Bākaṭīr had quoted the following verse from the Qur'an: "There are messengers whose stories we have told you already and others we have not" (IV, 164) followed by a verse from al-Mutanabbī inciting the Egyptians to recognise the pharaohs as their ancestors (1967, 11). Together, the two quotes sound like an invitation to see Akhenaton's story not only as a part of Arab heritage, but as a part of the Islamic tradition.

A few years later, referring to Bākaṭīr's apologies for Arab nationalism, Badawi states that Bākaṭīr defended his choice of a theme from ancient Egyptian history "on the naive grounds that the history of a region inhabited by modern Arabs must be regarded as part of Ar-

ab history" (1988, 112). And if in the preface to the second edition of the play, in January 1967, Bākaṭīr no longer felt the need to justify his choice and focused instead on the fortune the running blank verse he used for his play has had with time in the Arab poetry, I presume that the play was reprinted not only for its aesthetics, but also because the utopian projects of President Nasser (Ġamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir, p. 1956-1970).

Another play by Bākaṭīr written at the beginning of his career focuses on the character of the Pharaoh: *al-Fir'awn al-maw'ūd* (The Promised Pharaoh, 1945). Bākaṭīr introduces his play with a quote from the Qur'an (XCI, 7-10), mentioning also the source he took for his play, *Adab al-farā'ina* by Muḥammad Ṣābir, and even provides the plot of the famous "story of the two brothers", Anbū (Anubis) and Bātā, in which the two of them fight because of Anubis's wife's jealousy, but eventually reconcile and Anbū helps his brother come back to life and fight the pharaoh who had tried to kill him.¹⁰

Magic from the legend is kept in the play in Bātā's rebirth from a tree and in his rebirth as Sīrūnā's son, but Bākaṭīr reduces the gods' influence in the story and substitutes it with men's action. Less attention is given to "the story of the two brothers", Anubis and Bātā, who were separated by Anubi's wife as the play focuses instead on Bātā's love story with the beautiful Sīrūnā. In the hypotext, Sīrūnā becomes the pharaoh's wife against her will, while in the play, she deliberately lets ambition prevail over the sentiments of love and fidelity. Her sister-in-law influences her in developing the ambition to become *malikat Miṣr* (the Queen of Egypt) and leaving her husband to marry the Pharaoh. The promised pharaoh indicated in the title is Bātā. However, he becomes pharaoh only at the end of the play, after he kills the former pharaoh. Indeed, in the *dramatis personae*, the pharaoh (*fir'awn*) is the former pharaoh, while Bātā is *baṭal al-masraḥiyya* (the hero of the play). In the text, the word *fir'awn* is used without any positive or negative connotation, as it simply designates the person by his political function (Bākaṭīr 1945, 37, 42-4, 49, 50-2).

As a drama, this play may be considered "of indifferent quality" (Badawi 1987, 114), but the subject of fair governance is finely developed throughout the work. The absolute power of the pharaoh is reflected in his arrogant behaviour and his fear of being dethroned. Sīrūnā's ambition grows with time and particularly after the couple moves from the country to the city, to the point that it becomes an obsession, when she repeatedly asserts, like a refrain, that she wants to be *malikat Miṣr* (Bākaṭīr 1945, 81). The hero, Bātā, acts with respect for his wife and his brother, and even when they contrast his will, he

¹⁰ The papyrus is kept at The British Museum.

accepts their decisions. His return to life is the sign that he deserves his position, and this was his fate, like the prophecy had announced, *al-fir'awn al-maw'ūd lā yuqtalu* (the promised pharaoh is not killed, Bākaṭīr 1945, 105-6). His vengeance is owed to him.

Mirroring its hypotext, the end of the play does not merge with the former events, where Sīrūnā has killed Bātā to follow her ambition to become queen. In the last scene, when Bātā resurrects and kills the pharaoh, Sīrūnā is looking for her son, whom she cannot find. She finds Bātā instead; she recognises him as her son and the play closes with Bātā and Sīrūnā hugging each other. Despite this confusing end, the play is a clear hymn to the rightful governor, who will eventually triumph. At the same time, it points out the (former) pharaoh's corruption, which is an innovation from the hypotext and could be a reference to the corruption of King Farouk, who would be dethroned a few years later. Two other plays that Bākaṭīr wrote in the same period have clearer references to the present: *Šaylūk al-ġadīd* (The New Shylock, 1945) discusses the Zionist danger to Palestine, predicting the rise of the Israeli State; while *'Awdat al-Firdaws* (Paradise Regained, 1946) was inspired by Indonesia's struggle for independence (Badawi 1987, 113).

Both *Ihnātūn wa-Nifirtīti* and *al-Fir'awn al-maw'ūd* show how unjust pharaohs are substituted by new, rightful pharaohs, who are also the heroes of the play and, for this reason too, they are called more by name than by their title. Direct references to the actual king of Egypt confirm the trend initiated by Šanū' to use the pharaoh as a metaphor for a despicable ruler, but, through his pharaohs, Bākaṭīr seems more interested in showing a tragic conflict between the new good and the old bad systems rather than practicing satire. Likewise, he does not manifest an interest in exalting a Pharaonic past.

4 Faraġ – Pharaohs Fall, a Playwright Arises

In 1955, Akhenaton was the protagonist of another Egyptian play, Alfred Faraġ's (1929-2005) *Suqūt fir'awn*, performed two years later and for twelve nights by the National Theatre Troupe in Cairo (Faraġ 2009, 98).¹¹ This time, dealing with the fall of a pharaoh could have put a young author's career at risk. First, a play on a pharaoh did not fit with Nasser's syncretic Egyptian Arabism and was viewed with scepticism, as with Bākaṭīr's apologies for his play *Ihnātūn wa-*

¹¹ Apart from sharing the same subject, *Suqūt fir'awn* and *Ihnātūn wa-Nifirtīti* have little in common. Bākaṭīr's Akhenaton never doubts his religion, moving towards mysticism despite the criticism from his father and the priests of Amon. Faraġ's source too is different than Bākaṭīr's source for *al-Fir'awn al-maw'ūd* as Faraġ consulted *al-Adab al-miṣri al-qadīm*, by Salīm Ḥasan Faḍl (Faraġ 1989, 163).

Nifirtīī in its 1958 production. At that time, above all else, the word 'pharaoh' had started to acquire precise political implications and the young Faraġ still had to learn how to deal with the state's censorship.

Considered now one of the most eminent Egyptian playwrights, when *Suqūt fir'awn* was performed, Faraġ had written only one other play, *Ṣawt Miṣr* (The Voice of Egypt, 1956), a patriotic one-act piece designed for the masses celebrating the struggle of the people of Port Said during the 1956 Anglo-French invasion and performed at the old Opera House. Since at that time Israel referred to Nasser as the pharaoh of Egypt, the censors took the play as a critique of Nasser's leadership, while critics disapproved of its eight-scene structure and declared its theme obscure.

To defend himself from negative criticism, in December 1957, after the critics had calmed down, Faraġ wrote an article published in *al-Ġumhūriyya*: "*Taġribat Suqūt Fir'awn*" ("The Experience of *The Fall of a pharaoh*", 14 December 1957), where he expressed his point of view on the matter. In the previous three weeks, Faraġ had counted almost forty articles on *Suqūt Fir'awn*, most of them berating him (2009a, 64-5). He declared that many of his friends criticised his play, while people in the streets were asking him the reason behind all that noise about his play, and he was not able to answer. He could not understand why his effort in making experimental theatre was not appreciated, but then he felt he was not alone as there were others engaged in experimentation in the arts and in their writings struggling like him. Ultimately, he stated that he would continue to write and that he had come out of this event stronger than before as he started to welcome the words of his friends, the writers who understood 'the pharaoh' (69).

So little used by Bākaṭīr, the word 'pharaoh' (*fir'awn*) appears already in the title of Faraġ's play. However, in the text of the play the word *fir'awn* is not recurrent. Indeed, the title of the play in a first instance was *Ma'sāt Iḥnātūn* (Akhenaton's Tragedy). It was only after the journalist Ruṣḍī Ṣāliḥ, who was Faraġ's friend, suggested that the title *Suqūt fir'awn* could be more appealing for a potential audience, that Faraġ changed it (2009b, 33). In the *dramatis personae*, Akhenaton is described as *al-malik* (the king, 1989, 167). And the few times it appears, the word *fir'awn* is used with a neutral meaning, as a synonym of 'king of Egypt' (205, 217, 236, supposing a certain esteem). Akhenaton is commonly called by his name or *ṣāḥib al-ġalāla* (your Majesty, more than 25 occurrences). More rarely, he is called *malik al-arḍayn* (king of the two lands, 217, 218).

In Faraġ's play, Akhenaton is shown facing a moral dilemma: being a good king or being consistent with his pacifist religion. Eventually, he decides to abdicate in favour of his son-in-law to devote himself to the task of teaching the new religion. Central to the development of the drama, the topic of religion is nonetheless diluted

with other issues, like external conflicts compromising the safety of the realm, familiar love and support, and the importance of the intellectuals in the transmission of knowledge. Bik, the king's painter, is one of the protagonists of the play. His role is fundamental in the developments of the story: he comforts and advises Nefertiti (205), dissipates the rumours about the king (220), benefits from Akhenaton's trust (231), and reassures him (234, 256-60). Bik is a friend of Akhenaton and calls him by name, besides appreciating him as his king (236). Akhenaton needs Bik since he needs "a story that History can keep alive" (263) and cares about his *kalimat al-salām* (a word of peace) enduring through time (306). Bik's words addressed to the fallen pharaoh close the play:

your word will be in every heart, my friend... like the seed in the earth of Thebes, like the flood that always comes. (310)

A focus on the role of art in shaping and keeping the memory of a story could also be intended as a self-referential element, most of all if we consider that Akhenaton is haunted by the idea of having his story depicted in his tomb to be spread through time and that Nasser was promoting the arts to act as a mouthpiece of the regime. Akhenaton's idealism, which is harshly compared with a different reality (see especially Faraġ 1989, 306-7) could also be considered similar to Nasser's utopia. In conclusion, the struggle between the high priests of Amon and Akhenaton is used to discuss the question of peace (Allen 1979, 109) and the main point of the play seems to be the need for action in the running of affairs in human society (Badawi 1987, 172).¹² As Faraġ himself declared in the preface to his play, dating from 1989, *Suqūṭ fir'awn* is an historical play as it takes from History its story, its main events, and its artistic influences.¹³ He adds:

And it is [also] contemporary, as it looks at that very ancient epoch from history through a modern eye and a modern mind involving contemporary intellectual contents [*maḍmūn fikrī 'ašrī*]. (1989, 153)

Faraġ overtly admits that the play reflects upon contemporary matters. As transpires from the play and as he affirms, those matters are "the ideas of positive neutrality [*fikrat al-ḥiyād al-īġābī*] and of armed peace" (*al-salām al-musallaḥ*, 153 and Mandūr 2020, 122-3). Akhena-

¹² On the play, see also Mandūr 2020, 125-33 and al-'Inānī 1990.

¹³ Faraġ defines his play a *masraḥiyya ġinā'iyya bi-l-naṭr* (a play set to music in prose), meaning that it could be accompanied by a background music (*musiqā ḥaḥfiyya*) inspired by Ancient Egyptian literature (1989, 159).

ton's choice of absolute peace will bring him and his reign to a fall. No matter how much Akhenaton's characterisation could recall Nasser. Being constantly called "Pharaoh" by the Israeli press, the parallel with the President of Egypt was too clear to be ignored by censors. But what could have irritated them more is certainly the explicit title, focusing precisely on the Pharaoh's defeat. Ironically, the controversy *Suqūṭ Fir'awn* stirred amongst critics brought Faraḡ fame overnight and in the same year he was awarded the Art Medal from the Egyptian Arts Council.¹⁴ As Faraḡ suggests in the few lines about the pharaoh quoted above, the negative campaign against *Suqūṭ fir'awn* was motivated by political reasons. Indeed, when in 1958 Faraḡ denounced the harsh treatment of local communists by the Egyptian government, his position, together with the controversy surrounding *Suqūṭ fir'awn*, made him a victim of one of those periodic campaigns traditionally inflicted on the so-called 'communists'. Together with other members of the *intelligentsias*, Faraḡ was thrown into prison for four years, without trial, subjected to physical and moral inhumanities involving bodily torture, hunger, and hard labour (Amin 2008, 9).

This time too, Faraḡ came out stronger than before and his engagement in the politics of his time continued both through his theatre and his work as a journalist and for the Ministry of Culture, as the first director of the Mass Culture Division (*al-Taqqāfa al-Ġamāhiriyya*). Despite the success of his several plays, in February 1973, together with sixty-two other prominent writers, Faraḡ found himself again out of favour with the State, whose president at the time was Sadat (Anwar al-Sādāt, p. 1970-1981). He left Egypt and started returning to the country only under Mubarak's presidency (Ḥusnī Mubārak, p. 1981-2011), when his works first began to be printed in collections. Only then, in 1989, could *Suqūṭ Fir'awn* be printed. In 1998, in an article entitled "Riḥlat al-qalam" (The Pen's Journey, 2009b), Faraḡ would explain that he remembered that his play was bitterly criticised by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Šarqāwī, Faṭḥī Ġānim, Šalāḥ 'Abd al-Šabūr, Idwār al-Ḥarrāṭ. The prominent critiques would alert the censors who returned to their study of the play (which had posed no problems for them before its production) and found hidden meanings in it, interrupting the show not even two weeks after it started (Faraḡ 2009b, 34).¹⁵

This article, written in 1998, and the article Faraḡ had written in 1957 have been included in a small collection of Faraḡ's writings edited by his brother, the scholar and critic Nabīl Faraḡ in 2009. In 2010,

¹⁴ Years after, in his book about Arabic theatre, al-Raī quotes the play only in terms of the polemics surrounding it (1999, 92).

¹⁵ See Mandūr's critique on the play, which he considers unfinished and dramatically weak (2020, 122-3).

an article by Nabil Faraġ was dedicated to the play and the unjustified controversy it had stirred. Such a high level of interest on the matter, which endured over time, signals that the fact left its mark in the author's life. In his article, Nabil Faraġ (2010) clarifies that *Suqūt fir'awn* is not about a specific time or event, but it is a reflection about a matter.¹⁶ He reminds us that the play is almost unknown to the new generation as it was reprinted only in 1989 and was never subsequently represented on stage. And so, he invited readers to look for the play and read it. Maybe it is not by coincidence that the article is dated 30 November 2010, a couple of months before Mubarak's fall, when the president was ironically called 'pharaoh'. Interestingly, the play was reprinted in 2016 by the state-owned publishing house al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-āmma li-l-kitāb. Was this a message to confirm the fall of a 'pharaoh'?

5 Al-Ḥakīm and Nasser – Pharaohs in and Outside Fiction

Known as 'the giant of Arabic theatre', Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987) wrote more than fifty plays, only two of which are set in Pharaonic Egypt: *Aminūsā* (1922), an adaptation of Alfred de Musset's *Carmosine*, and, more than thirty years later, *Īzīs* (Isis, 1955), a reinterpretation of the myth of Isis. *Īzīs*, in particular, caused a considerable controversy amongst his critics: as al-Ḥakīm introduced several significant changes to the myth, some critics, like Luwīs 'Awaḍ accused him of distorting the myth and destroying its deeper religious or metaphysical meaning, while others, like Muḥammad Mandūr and 'Alī al-Rā'ī, defended him (Badawi 1988, 63). According to Badawi the accusations were unjustified because the author declared that he wanted to reinterpret the myth (63).

In al-Ḥakīm's reinterpretation, no gods or goddesses appear but Osiris, the virtuous King (*malik*, in the play) of Egypt, and his wife, Isis. Reflecting upon problems peculiar to human society, such as the relation of politics to ethics; the relation of power and government to knowledge; the extent to which the end justifies the means; and the question of the writer's commitment in an unjust society (Badawi 1988, 63), unlike many other plays by al-Ḥakīm, *Īzīs* was a big stage success. History, (Greek) myth and legends were major sources for his theatre but, even if he was "a die-hard Pharaonist" (Walker 2005, 8), there is little trace of the Pharaonic heritage in his theatrical production.

On the other side, al-Ḥakīm's novel *'Awdat al-rūḥ* (The Return of the Spirit, 1933) has been considered "the most emblematic text of

¹⁶ Faraġ wrote many plays on specific political matters, in which the audience could identify Nasser himself in the protagonists (Potenza 2020a).

the Pharaonist movement” (Colla 2007, 159). Al-Ḥakīm quotes from the Ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, and the resurrection of Osiris, also mentioned in the play, is a metaphor of the protagonist’s identification with the peasant nation of Egypt, the recovery of his authentic self and the nation’s uprising against colonial rule (161). In the novel, set during the 1919 Revolution, not only does al-Ḥakīm express his philosophy of life in which instinct and the heart are set above reason and intellect, but he also expounds his own view of the unity of Egyptian history and the permanence of Egyptian identity, from the times of the Pharaohs to the present day (Badawi 1988, 953). More specifically,

according to the novel’s conservative understanding of nationalism, the social behaviour of the citizens and the very spirit of the nation are determined by the environment. Al-Ḥakīm focuses only on the social behaviour of the Egyptian peasants who are regarded as the heirs of the Pharaonic spirit of Egypt. He describes them as willing to sacrifice themselves for their leaders just as the ancient Egyptians did for their Pharaohs when they built the pyramids. (Casini 2008, 5)¹⁷

Inspired by Ancient history and nurtured by the contemporary spirit of Pharaonism, al-Ḥakīm’s novel may well have in its turn encouraged a watershed moment in Egyptian (future) history: the 1952 Egyptian revolution. Al-Ḥakīm wrote that ‘Abd al-Nāṣir presented him with a copy of his *Philosophy of the Revolution* when it first appeared, alluding in the dedication to al-Ḥakīm’s book *‘Awdat al-rūḥ*, “calling for the return of another spirit [*‘awda li-rūḥ uḥrā*] in the age of the revolution” (al-Ḥakīm 1974, 109). The intensity of nationalist feelings struck a chord with many Egyptians, including President Nasser, who in his youth was profoundly moved by *The Return of the Spirit*, to the extent that al-Ḥakīm later believed his novel to have been an inspiration to him (Badawi 1988, 953).

Following Nasser’s death in 1970, al-Ḥakīm expressed his misgivings about Nasser’s presidency and the course of the Egyptian revolution in *‘Awdat al-wa’ī* (Return of Consciousness, 1974), a collection of memoir and political reflections the title of which closely recalls his earlier book *‘Awdat al-rūḥ*. Published in Beirut, not in Cairo, this book marks “the first public, published repudiation of ‘Nasirism’ to emerge from the upper-class, liberal, intelligentsian, Westernized sectors of Egyptian society” (Windler 1985, vii). According to Windler (vii), who translated *‘Awdat al-wa’ī* into English,

¹⁷ On *‘Awdat al-rūḥ* and his young protagonist’s *Bildung*, see Paniconi 2012.

[i]ts message is simple: We Egyptians were taken in by the promise of the revolution of 1952, and Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir, for all his personal charisma, imposed on us a police state which pursued failing policies in all directions. We, the intellectuals of Egypt, are to be rebuked for having accepted it all so passively at the time, but Egypt has now regained consciousness and can begin to move forward again.

The reaction in Egypt was tremendous for a volume of some seventy-five pages, to the point that in the second edition of the book (later, the same year) al-Ḥakīm included some samples of this outcry and his answers. The reasons for the harsh reactions, particularly loud from the left, can be retraced both to the still vibrant cult of Nasser in the Seventies and to what was felt to be a turncoat reaction towards the dead President from a writer who had publicly acclaimed him and who had largely benefitted from his admiration (xiii).

6 Conclusion

The experiences of playwrights with pharaohs all prove to be controversial, one of the reasons being (existing or presumed) references to presidents of the time, especially in the case of Farağ, whose career was ironically boosted by the controversy his play *Suqūt fir'awn* stirred in 1957. The play, almost unknown to the new generation, was reprinted only in 1989 and then, again, in 2016, by the state-owned publishing house al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-āmma li-l-kitāb, a few years after the fall of the 'pharaoh' Mubarak. While the author and his brother insisted on writing that the play is not about a specific time or event, but it is a reflection about a matter, the parallel with the President of Egypt (any president of Egypt) seems too obvious to be ignored.

This immediate pairing with presidents could also be responsible for the absence of pharaohs in the production of many other Egyptian playwrights, such as al-Ḥakīm, who manifested his interest in ancient history and myth throughout his career in his interpretations of legends and the Greek myths, and defended Pharaonism even when this trend was in decline, but who dealt with ancient Egyptian history in only two plays at the beginning of his career. On the other hand, al-Ḥakīm's interest in Pharaonism and in pharaohs elaborated in his novel *'Awdat al-rūḥ* established a dialogue with President Nasser that continued in another of his books – *'Awdat al-wa'ī* – leaving the writer in the midst of a veritable polemic.

Similarly, Bākaṭīr's plays about pharaohs, disguising some light criticism of the King and focusing on the classic tragic conflicts old/new and bad/good, still needed to be justified with an adherence to

Pharaonism for dealing with the controversial subject of the pharaoh. Both *Iḥnātūn wa-Nifirtītī* and *al-Fir'awn al-maw'ūd* show how unjust pharaohs are substituted by new, rightful pharaohs. Indeed, despite he set his plays in a Pharaonic past, Bākaṭīr does not manifest an interest in exalting it as he seems more interested in showing a tragic conflict between the new good and the old bad systems. Bākaṭīr's view of Akhenaton as the anti-Pharaoh, who does not govern by his *fir'awniyya*, also sheds some light on the presence of this particular pharaoh, rather than others, in the Egyptian literary field. In Bākaṭīr's plays, direct references to the actual king of Egypt confirm the trend initiated by Ṣanū' to use the pharaoh as a metaphor for a despicable ruler.

Even before the interest on the Pharaonic past took a nationalistic turn, at the end of the nineteenth century, in his satirical journal *Abū naẓẓāra zarqā'*, Ṣanū' started to employ the metaphor of the pharaoh to depict the Egyptian leader both for a local public and European readers. Seen that in the French translations of his caricatures the word 'pharaon' appears more often than its equivalent in Arabic, we can deduce that Ṣanū' must have considered that, for a Western reader, the Pharaoh was a clear metaphor for the Khedive. It might be interesting to note that the trend of adding the word 'pharaoh' in Western translations of Egyptian texts continues until today. Naḡīb Maḥfūz's novel *al-Ā'iš fī-l-ḥaqīqa* is an example. In contrast with the original title, translations into the main languages spoken in Europe add to it the name of the pharaoh.¹⁸ It is evident that translations sought to specify the Ancient Egyptian topic of the novel already in the title, while Maḥfūz did not. However, the writer has no problems in using the word *fir'awn* in the text and does not attach to it connotations of any sort. Another example is the English translation of Zaynab al-Ġazālī's *Ayyām min Ḥayātī* (literally: Days from my Life, 1977), which introduces the word 'pharaoh' in the title (Return of the Pharaoh: Memoir in Nasir's Prison, 1994).

Likewise, Western media today are in the habit of depicting Egyptian presidents in the shape of pharaohs,¹⁹ more so than in Egypt, where many more are the instances of references to pharaonic past involving pharaonic iconography and symbols, such as pyramids,

¹⁸ The title of the English translation is: *Akhenaten, Dweller in Truth*, while in French: *Akhénaton le Renégat*. In Italian: *Akhenaton. Il faraone eretico*. In German: *Akhenaton, el rey hereje*.

¹⁹ See Avni 2010; Tisdall 2011; Hamad 2018 and Clausi 2021. Sisi rejected the accusations of being defined a pharaoh (Diab 2016). See also the Israeli press: Podeh, Giladi 2015 and 'Amūn 2012. The Egyptian press employs images of pharaohs created in the West ('Arafah 2011; Tawakkul 2019).

mummies and lotus flowers in cartoons, poems, and graffiti as well.²⁰ For instance, in the 2011 Revolution, Nefertiti's bust was more iconic than pharaohs.²¹ On the contrary, depiction of pharaohs by Egyptian artists might be included in a process of deconstruction of hegemonic national imaginaries that has started in the Fifties and continues until now, boosted by the recent Revolution.²² When, in October 2013, the cartoonist Andeel left *al-Maṣrī al-Yawm* out of frustration with having had so many of his cartoons rejected, he posted a cartoon depicting al-Sisī (Sisi, President since 2014) in the shape of a pharaoh to his nearly 40,000 Facebook fans, who also include foreign followers (see Andeel 2013).²³ Depicting the President as a pharaoh was certainly a way of venting frustration after having been oppressed for years by the self-censorship imposed by the newspapers.

20 See, for instance, the archive of songs, literature, plays, cartoons and visual art influenced by the 2011 Egyptian Revolution drawing on research by Nicola Pratt (University of Warwick), Dalia Mostafa (University of Manchester), Dina Rezk (University of Reading) and Sara Salem (previously, University of Warwick) available at <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/>. Under the tag #pharaonism, no pharaohs appear, but graffiti and cartoons showing Nefertiti (famous Zeff's Nefertiti, wearing a gas mask), mummies and Ancient Egyptian iconography. In 2012, pharaonic iconography accompanied poems written on walls in Cairo, where the Pyramids and the Sphinx are symbols of Egypt's greatness (see Canova 2012, 261-2). Lotus flowers have also been a common symbol in Egyptian graffiti since 2011 ('Abd al-Laṭīf 2012, 42). Moreover, scarabs, together with the Buraqs and angels, in the Revolution's graffiti attempt to recall the collective identity that the Egyptians created in opposition to the oppressive regimes all over their history (Hamdy 2014).

21 On 10 January 2021, Nicholas R. Brown held a Zoom lecture hosted by The American Research Center in Egypt, Northern California Chapter, and the Near Eastern Studies Department, University of California, Berkeley on "The Beautiful One Returns: Nefertiti and the Altered Identities of an Icon" discussing the use of Nefertiti as a symbol of Egypt, where she has been utilised to represent the country, people, and history of ancient Egypt to the modern state. Brown maintains that, though the Nefertiti bust is housed in Berlin, Modern Egyptians re-appropriate her identity for their political, social, and economic use.

22 On May 1, 2011, Egyptian people placed a banner depicting ousted President Mubārak as a pharaoh and calling for his trial in Tahrir Square in Cairo (News Desk 2011). In 2011 protest slogans - tantalizingly in hieroglyphics - were addressed to 'the pharaoh' ('Abd al-Laṭīf 2012, 38). 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī's poem *al-Midān* (The Square) as well as *Ya Maṣr hānit* (Egypt, Hang in There) by Tamīm al-Barḡūṭī, which were recited on television on 27 January and 4 February 2011 respectively, were then diffused online, using the metaphor of the Pharaoh to (negatively) depict Mubārak's rule (Casini 2014, 251). Anonymous graffiti in Cairo carried the visage of 'V' (from the famous film *V for Vendetta*) surrounded by Tutankhamun's mask (see CVA 2013).

Only one famous recent Egyptian novel deals with Pharaohs: *Fir'awn* (The Pharaoh, 2000, published by Dār al-Ġamal, Cologne). The novel - where 'pharaoh' is the nickname of a young teacher who lives as a fugitive - was published in Germany after the author, Samīr Ġarīb 'Alī, fled Egypt because his previous novel was banned there.

23 The cartoon can be seen in TheWorld 2013. Albaih 2018 presents another example of a cartoon depicting Sisi in the shape of a pharaoh published on Facebook and then spread by the Western online media. A few cartoons reported in Guyer 2015 show Tutankhamun: in this case the reference is clearly not the president.

Thus, the cartoonist chose one of the most controversial metaphors that exist in Egypt, that same metaphor that al-Ḥakīm had used in a serious spirit eighty years before, showing how Pharaonism is taking yet another turn.

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