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# African Intellectuals and Challenges of Nation Building: Tawfīq al-Hakīm's *Masīrus-Sārsār* (The Fate of a Cockroach) as a Case Study

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**Abstract:** Intellectuals have been the conscience of different African nations most especially since the second half of last century when the continent started gaining independence from colonial rule in quick succession; they were very alive to moulding their different societies through their creative writings by which they were constantly putting the political leaders on their toes. This paper therefore aims to unravel reasons for the contemporary intellectuals taking the back seat and losing the awe and impacts the first generation writers made on their different young nations. After using judgement sampling technique to select Tawfīq al-Hakīm's *Masīrus Sārsār* (The Fate of a Cockroach) and text-based ethnography to collect data, the study adopted a qualitative design that employed descriptive analytical method to analyse and interpret the chosen play. This study found out that the situation has considerably waned owing to very intolerant political climate and the intellectuals themselves flocking to manoeuvre ways at becoming political gladiators. This paper concludes that intellectuals can be more relevant in nation building only when they continue playing the role of being the conscience of their different nations and distance themselves from mad rush for political power.

**Keywords:** Intellectual, Escapism, Allegorical, Depiction, Governance

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## 1. Introduction

Literature, being a mirror of the society, is undoubtedly a very effective tool for leadership and national development. The early African writers clearly understood the value of what their work could implant in the psyche of pioneer leaders of their various young nations as they boldly took up the challenge to write so as to educate, sensitize or correct the society for the purpose of building virile nations. Tawfīq al-Hakīm is one of the Egyptian, and hence African, forerunners in using literature as a tool for constructive criticism that can improve governance. *Masīrus-Sārsār* is one of his works that target nation building by calling on the intellectuals to be alive to their responsibility as the pivot of social sensitisation and watchdog of government activities, and by exhorting that they should desist from the attitude of sitting on the fence or what is called *sidon look* in Nigeria parlance. Their involvement in fostering good governance should not

necessarily be participating in active politicking since their status of being possessors of reason is of equal importance in ensuring good administration. This paper intends to present the results deducible from this work symbolically presented by the playwright. It should be mentioned that this write-up is based on the original Arabic text of the play and not on its translation.

### 1.1. A Brief Note on Tawfīq al-Hakīm

Tawfīq al-Hakīm was born exactly a century after the first contact of Egypt with the West through Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion. Precisely, he was born in the year 1898 as against 1902 claimed by some people [1]. He was born in Alexandria to an Egyptian father and a Persian mother who was more known to be of Turkish descent; Tawfīq personally confirmed the fact of his ancestry himself [2]. With his father working in the judiciary and constantly on the move, Tawfīq mostly stayed with his mother.

He started education very early with the traditional system of attending elementary school called *kuttaab* from where he proceeded to enrol in a modern primary school at age seven in the village of *Damanhoor* [3]. He moved to Cairo for secondary education because his father felt coming to the city would provide him with better education and exposure. On finishing his secondary school, he was registered at the school of law. He graduated from law school in 1924 after which his father sent him to France for further studies in law. Unable to complete his law course in Paris because of his penchant for literature and literary activities, the father had to ask him to come back to Egypt; this he did in 1928. His literary experience later became very useful in his judiciary job; and he was able to impact positively on his society and became globally respected.

### 1.2. Short Background Information on the Setting of the Play

Published in 1954 [4], the play was set in a turbulent period in the national history of Egypt when tension enveloped every sphere of life – culture, education, politics, et cetera. It was a period of sweeping transformation that brought intellectuals, most especially writers, face-to-face with huge challenges. The rulers were trying to fully adapt to the newly embraced style of administration after the sack of the monarchical system by the revolutionary army.

Prior to this scenario of military rule, the nation had gone through a long period of negotiating independence from the imperial colonialists; during this period, political parties struggled to outdo one another; and in most cases, the apologists of royal rulers or the sympathizers of oppressors emerged victorious. The hopeless situation encouraged the military to take over the mantle of leadership [5]. The intellectuals became targets of state persecution, as airing genuine views became seriously restricted. This vulnerability made the adoption of symbolical expressions very suitable as writers have to depict the society, and this Tawfiq made use of in this play.

### 1.3. Synopsis of the Play

The characters in the play are: King, Queen, Secretary, Scientist, Priest, °Ādil, Sāmiyat, Cook and Rāfit (Doctor).

A cockroach proclaimed himself king over the others by virtue of his having longer moustache than them; this much he told his wife when he says: "...my moustache really impressed me that I instantly stood up and challenged all the cockroaches to compare their moustaches with mine; if mine appears longer I will be king over the rest". Very surprised at this simplistic means of ascending to leadership, his wife asked: "And they accepted the challenge?" He then responded saying "No...they instantly surrendered saying they have got no time for comparing moustaches." [6] His cabinet comprised of people whose credentials were merely closeness and constancy to the king; they were: Secretary, Priest, Scientist and Queen.

The major challenge confronting the kingdom, which

enjoyed serious attention, was that of ants feasting on any unfortunate cockroach that falls on its back, as was the case with King's son. Out of the many suggestions proffered, it was agreed that the ants be paid back in their own coin: moving en masse, the cockroaches were to trample on the ants to eliminate them. Although a very noble idea, the suggestion was difficult to implement, as disaster always visited cockroaches in numbers; hence, it was jettisoned owing to its difficulty. Another suggestion was that of Priest who opined that sacrifice be offered to God to prevent recurrence of tragedies in the kingdom. The advice was also rejected because the priest insisted that God cannot be approached without a sacrifice. In the end, Secretary's view of moving to trample on the ants was tried but failed. King was of the view that everyone needed to be careful and avoid falling on his or her back. Determined to put an end to "cockroaches-becoming-food" syndrome, the kingdom adopted Scientist's suggestion to survey their surrounding for the purpose of discovering a lasting solution to the problem.

Their search uncovered a river that dries in the night but gets filled in the morning; this happened to be family bathtub of a couple named Ādil and Sāmiyat. King cockroach in company of Scientist and some other members of his cabinet were moving round the tub and all of a sudden disaster struck – King fell into the slippery tub and could not get himself out. At this point of struggling, Sāmiyat got to the bathroom and shouted on seeing the cockroach; her shout attracted her husband to the bathroom who became very fascinated with the sight of a struggling cockroach. They both agreed on the need to get it out of the tub but differed on how to do it; the wife wanted it removed and killed while °Ādil wanted it to get out on its own. They were on this until their telephone rang and the wife went to pick it giving her husband the chance to lock himself up in the bathroom; he did not open until Rāfit, the medical doctor, came. Rāfit, after thinking his friend needed medical aid, joined °Ādil in watching the amusing scene of the struggling cockroach. There was suddenly another phone ring which prompted °Ādil and his guest out of the bathroom. Cook, who had just come to resume her duty, rushed into the bathroom to kill the cockroach, removed it from the bathtub and cleaned the entire place. It was said by °Ādil that: "the most important thing was his struggle for his survival."

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Design

The general research approach and design adopted in this study was qualitative since it is the one that allows for subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and behaviour and it is a function of the researcher's insights and impressions [7]. The approach and design is apt given that the researcher attempted to examine behavioural/attitudinal characteristics of African intellectuals. Similarly, this choice of qualitative approach and design influenced the adoption of a descriptive analytical method, which favours studies that

seek to conduct critical evaluations [8], for analyzing and interpreting the text under study.

## 2.2. Sampling Technique

Judgement sampling technique, which uses the researcher's judgement to select the sample deemed to be representative of entire population [9], was adopted to select both the author as well as the text under study. The researcher's judgement that Tawfiq al-Hakim was a paragon of the African intellectual class and that his *Fate of a Cockroach* is seminal influenced the choice of the playwright and the play.

## 2.3. Data Collection Procedure

Although observation is seldom used as a data collection instrument for researches in literature, it is adopted herein in conformity with Annim and Mattah's submission that it could be used if the researcher seeks to consider the blend between literature and society [10], just as was done in the present study. Specifically, the type of observation adopted in the study was text-oriented ethnography. Text-oriented ethnography converts literary or non-literary texts which are not naturally written to be used as a source of data for research analyses into primary data for research purposes [11].

## 2.4. Theatre of the Mind

The play is better read than staged as it could be classified as a philosophical play and not a play meant for the theatre; this is true of most of his plays as he personally expressed that his theatre is in the minds of his readers. This stance of his, he clearly stated when he says:

*Today I am attempting to establish the theatre of the mind: I turn the actors into free-flying ideas clad in symbolism. This is why a gulf has opened up between me and the theatrical stage. I have not been able to find a conduit to make these works reach the people other than through printing press* [12].

The play therefore is more about him presenting his observations in respect of the prevailing situation of things. The play, thematically, contains his opinion on the roles intellectuals, including him, should play in building virile and viable nations.

## 2.5. Nationalist Plays

Going by the classification of contemporary African Drama [13], this play falls in the class of nationalist plays which focus on pre- and/or post-colonial Africa; in the case of this play, the focus is on the post-revolution national issues of Egypt. Tawfiq is of the view that intellectuals are the conscience of the nation; and, that, since they have equivalent importance and status with the political leaders; they (the intellectuals) should never belittle their prominence by seeking power.

## 2.6. Symbolic Characterisation

It is understood that the characterisation employed in the

play is mostly anthropomorphic; that is ascribing human characters to nonhuman things. What informs this style is the allegorical nature of the work as a result of the vulnerability of writers to persecution in the period during which the play first appeared. It is true that there are few human beings in the play but the protagonist is an insect and its species; real people are only used to explain the course of King's tragedy. Using the mechanism of symbolism, the play analyzes, (in respect of his nation), that the situation remains almost the same as then and is true of many African nations.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. X-raying Post-revolution

The young revolutionary army that took over the reign of governance in 1952 Egypt was enthusiastically welcomed as it was viewed as a huge relief from the hitherto imperial and monarchical overlords. The masses expected a lot from the new entrants onto the corridors of power but their hope was dashed as it became clear that the army only took over power but was not well prepared for meaningful governance. The young officers might have good intentions but their gross incompetence was exposed after just a short while. This is alluded to in the case of King who pronounced himself leader for simply assuming he has longer moustache; just like the officers who came to power through the might of gun, without thoroughly preparing or being prepared for governance. The result is catastrophic chaos and confusion as the required wherewithal was seriously lacking with the masses bearing the brunt of misrule and good governance transmuted to maladministration. This happened to be the common immediate experience of most African countries after their independence.

### 3.2. Defects of Post-revolution Administration

The legitimacy of the military rulers is being questioned by even the closest to it as portrayed by Queen asking her husband about the competence and qualification that make him suitable to enthrone himself as king over other cockroaches [14]. Just like in the real life, the rulers have to embark on programmes and projects that have a direct bearing on the generality of the subjects to gain their consent as said by former self-styled military president of Nigeria Ibrahim Babangida in his maiden broadcast "...a government, be it civilian or military, needs the consent of the people to govern if it is to reach its objective" [15]. In order to gain the consent of his subjects, King decided to put an end to the challenges confronting them – the major of which is the disaster of becoming food for ants whenever any of them falls on his or her back. King, just like in real life situation, is bedevilled with ignorant and sycophant associates who are in a state of total disconnect from the masses. Secretary, Priest and Scientist advanced suggestions that mostly tilted towards their personal interests and not seriously relevant to the masses' needs. The then Egyptian government, like we have been having in Nigeria and many

African countries, relied on pieces of advice offered by the personnel in the civil service as well as appointed political associates; the suggestions these advisors come up with, most of the times, result in incalculable disasters, such as the one that befell King who tried out Scientist's advice but fell into a deep slippery bathtub.

### 3.3. Reaction to Governance

The reaction of people to any given government or style of governance is best sampled through the importance and respect people accord such rulers and their styles. People's attitude towards administration, could be discerned, to be nonchalant, as depicted in actions and inactions of the other cockroaches in the kingdom. This is because when a system cannot cater for and protect citizens under it, such a system loses credibility and with it obedience and followership go to the wind [16]. This is aptly portrayed when a cockroach bluntly shunned the call to join hand in solving a communal problem [17]. Frustration could lead to anarchy and chaos; this is what is being alluded to in that music aired on Radio while <sup>C</sup>Adil and Sāmiyat were arguing over bathroom and the Radio was echoing a tune saying:

*Demands are not met by wish*

*But needs are forcefully obtained* [18].

A situation will come when frustration reaches its apogee and people will react in a way least expected as <sup>C</sup>Adil did against his wife Sāmiyat.

### 3.4. The Intellectuals and the State

Like their counterparts in many African nations, Egyptian intellectuals have, for long, been accused of escapism as a result of their isolating themselves from the society and sitting on the fence when they are supposed to get involved in national struggle and governance. This, the writer thinks, is what is being pictured by this playwright in the conversation between <sup>C</sup>Adil and Sāmiyat. <sup>C</sup>Adil's keen interest in the struggling cockroach was wrongly perceived by his wife and the doctor that he was interested in the cockroach because it was mirroring him and his weak personality, hence his sympathy for the insect. They were, however, wrong because that is not the case. It was later suggested that he should rescue King by bringing it out of the tub but he declined and said that is none of his interest and that the cockroach be left to face its fate [19].

It is therefore inferred that the elite scholars in Africa as a whole are like the ones this play depicts: they stay away from the ruling oligarchy because of difference in perception of issues between the two; for there can be no mutual relationship and understanding when opinions are not the same. Thus, it seems Tawfiq is giving excuse for his and his likes' non-involvement in the governance of the nation. This neutral stance is, however, the real approach Tawfiq was clamouring for because, according to him:

*Any ruler wants loyal, not honest, opinions from his intellectuals. He wants to hear words of support, not opposition, but it is truth and freedom that constitute the*

*essential message of an intellectual, who might make mistakes, mislead or lose consciousness, but who will never consciously betray his message. I always worry that too close friendship or affection for someone, or even hatred or resentment, can stop one being able to set things as they really are* [20].

## 4. Discussion

Creative writings should be employed as means of raising the awareness of the citizens as regards their needs from the government, and should, at the same time, serve as the conscience of the nation always reminding the leaders of their responsibilities to their people. It is so because as Al-Aswany earlier in his paper earlier quoted:

*Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society*" [21].

This has been the stand of al-Hakīm vis-à-vis literary works from his earlier works as can be seen in one of his novels *Yaomiyātun-Nāibi fil-'Aryāf* where he detailed the injustices the *Fallāhīn* (peasants) were subjected to in the rural areas. This novel raised a lot of concern in the government circle especially in the judiciary where the author was an employee; he was seriously frowned on for expressing personal views in so openly a manner that it was deemed unethical. This experience, the writer believes, made him adopt allegorical means in many of his literary works.

This task of writers using their literary works as mirrors through which governments and citizens assess themselves resonates across African nations from their early struggle for emancipation from imperial colonial domination. In Nigeria, for instance, one of the pioneer influential writers, Chinua Achebe, says: "the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration ... in fact he should march right in front" [22]. It is therefore crystal clear that literature should be employed by creative writers as "a forum of education, a means of opening the eyes of the audience not only to the world as it is, but also as it is capable of being" [23]. A literary writer should always be abreast of the happenings as they affect people to be able to discuss, analyse and suggest feasible solutions to foreseen challenges because "literature is of course primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and the values governing human relationship" [24]. Tawfiq, in this play, expresses his views with respect to the role intellectuals should play in building a nation by transmitting his opinions through the characters of his work. His message and stance could only be understood via thorough scrutiny and high sense of hindsight on occurrences in his country because everything was symbolically presented.

Many of the earlier African intellectuals, most especially the creative writers were alive to this responsibility with many of them brazenly pointing out the flaws in the governance styles in their different countries. The prevailing

situation in Egypt then did not encourage criticism as such but at the same time a writer has to express his/her views and this is why Tawfiq, representing others, adopts allegory to express the role intellectuals should play in nation building. He is of the opinion that the consciousness of the rulers has to be aroused to the needs of the society; consequently, intellectuals should not nonsensify their lofty position of checking the excesses of leaders by seeking involvement in day-to-day running of the state. On this he says:

*The possessors of reason should as a result of this not involve themselves in hunting for power; otherwise they will lose their freedom. The moment this is done, power lacks conscience which reason gives that is always a check. Possessors of reason are the conscience of the nation and as such thinkers (intellectuals) must not let down the nation. They must therefore jealously guard their freedom by turning down invitations to power [25].*

The prevailing political situation in Egypt, as earlier stated, did not give room for very open airing of political views; hence, the adoption of allegorical expressions in respect of social happenings. It is understood from the efforts of this playwright that he, like other African writers, is playing the role of *re-education and regeneration* of the citizens. The environment was very close to a state of anomie as a result of which writers became very vulnerable; nonetheless, an intellectual should talk because according to Wole Soyinka "...the first step towards the dethronement of terror is the deflation of its hypocritical self-righteousness" [26].

The repressive tendencies of many African nations immediately after independence was such that it was very difficult for intellectuals, especially writers, to freely express their opinions because "books and all forms of writing have always been objects of terror to those who seek to suppress truth". [27] The revolutionary officers imposed themselves on the people and this did not give room for any dissenting views. In a situation like this the intellectuals feel done in because

*When a dictatorship is imposed on your country, the very first thing you feel, the very first day – and it is a feeling that has a totally spontaneous immediacy, free from all mental elaboration – the first feeling is humiliation. You are being deprived of the right to consider yourself worthy of responsibility for your own life and destiny. This feeling of humiliation grows day by day, as a result of the oppressor's unceasing effort to force your mind to accept all vulgarity which makes up the abortive mental world of dictators. You feel as if your reason and your human status were being deeply insulted every day [28].*

The feeling described above is what made Tawfiq to subtly exhort the people to take their destiny into their own hands by struggling to rescue themselves from oppression as the cockroach was doing but must be careful not to suffer the same fate that befell King. He alludes to this when he says: "the important thing (about him) is his struggling for his life..." [29]. He as well alludes to resistance to oppression when Ādil shut the toilet door against his wife and refused to open it despite lengthy appeal until Rāfit and the cook came.

[30]

Literature is generally used to inform and educate in order to shape and socialize citizens to the needs and yearnings of the nations. This has been the stance of many African writers, including Tawfiq, as their works were used to "...reflect so very clearly the authors' satirical intention which we see in impassioned writing of fine irony" [31]. While most of the other African writers talk from their colonial experience, Tawfiq talks from the background of indigenous rulers who were grossly intolerant of opposition hence his adoption of allegorical means of expression. The intellectual instinct in him will not allow him to keep silent because "the man dies in all that keep silent in the face of tyranny" [32].

Tawfiq's stance is that intellectuals or writers should not become political activists so as not to lose the respect the society has for them. This is because no matter the good intention intellectuals have for becoming activists, it will be misunderstood, as was the case with many titan writers, such as Wole Soyinka – when he was made to head Federal Road Safety Corps in 1988, a certain Jimmy Johnson says: "Soyinka should be filling the National Theatre – not chasing cars" [33]. The same Soyinka was being viewed negatively as a result of his involvement in other social activities; as stated by James Gibbs, "He is a democrat whose outspoken criticisms of the army and of generations of self-serving politicians have made many enemies. There are also those who feel he is squandering his literary and dramatic talents by becoming involved as a social activist" [34]. Tawfiq al-Hakīm sees reason as being of equal importance as political power; the intellectuals should, therefore, not in any way engage in seeking power of any form. More importantly, Tawfiq al-Hakīm is strongly of the opinion that building a virile nation is hinged on both power and reason.

## 5. Conclusion

This write-up has pictured the importance and the influence intellectuals could have on nation building when they play the roles expected of them properly. Tawfiq al-Hakīm, doyen of drama and modern Arabic creative writing in Egypt, has positively highlighted various social challenges confronting governance in Egypt at the beginning of its modern nation building. Unlike many African writers who believe in walking the talk therefore allowing politics and power to consume them and by that surrendering the power of reason that is an essential check on rulers, Tawfiq tenaciously insists that equilibrium has to exist between reason and power for balanced and positive governance. Jettisoning the objective critical stance and position of the intellectuals has been impeding good governance, as intellectuals are also in a mad rush for power. This results in maladministration, strengthening the view that people are to be ruled and not governed. The involvement of writers in active politics is often misunderstood by many people; hence, the need to stick by the status of being the soul of the nation. This challenge before the writers as builders of the nation

exists in various African countries and was well embraced by old and modern writers, but non-involvement in active politics is wrongly seen as escapism of sorts by these writers. It is viewed that intellectuals are running away from responsibility, and this is the reason they are not partaking in active politicking.

Tawfiq, however, strongly maintains the stance that active politics is none of the writer's business. Writers should always talk truly and sincerely to the power; however, the vulnerability of intellectuals to persecution would not allow for that in some countries and this justifies the adoption of allegorical expression as the playwright does in the play under study. Direct activism creates misunderstanding of writers and that is why many misconstrue their genuine intention whenever they put on the garb of activism.

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