

The Status of Satire in Arab Theatre

Ali Salem's *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* as a Case Study

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Abstract

The play *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* (*The School of the Misfits*) scrutinizes the state of schooling after the 1967 defeat. Ali Salem addresses the audience's unconscious, giving voice to a bleak, troubling reality marked by generational conflict and by social and moral questions characteristic of adolescence. He does so with a lyrical sensibility that invites a rereading of lived reality and human types in Egypt, making almost everything—and at times nothing in particular—an object of laughter.

Consequently, this research embarks on a profound exploration of the depths within the pages of *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* (*The School of the Misfits*) laying bare the silenced aspects through the prism of Semiotic and structural criticism. To what extent can these Western and Arab literary methodologies be harmoniously assimilated, each bearing their own cultural and ideological freight?

Keywords: Arab Theatre, satire, The play *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* (*The School of the Misfits*), Semiotic and structural criticism

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Introduction:

Theatre belongs to the performing literary arts. It aims to implant ideas in the audience's mind, on the understanding that it functions, first and foremost, as a pedagogical institution, while also providing entertainment. Its ambitions expand to become a marker of a nation's advancement. It seeks, as many practitioners hold, to celebrate heritage and to cultivate awareness so as to foster intellectual development and to correct conduct through its effect on spectators.

Arabic theatre is written in both Standard Arabic and colloquial varieties and deploys varied modes including satire and objectivity. A well-known example is *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* (*The School of The Misfits*), a politically inflected comedy that depicts an educational reality in Egypt during the post-defeat and post-infitah periods, when shifts in values touched schools, among other institutions, and fed moral decline. The title and Ali Salem's stance toward education and authority already announce this critical orientation.

I. Subject of the Play

Madrasat al-Mushaghibin is a comic play by the Egyptian writer Ali Salem. It is not adapted from an American film of the same name; rather, it is a preparation and reworking of a French play by Roger Ferdinand (ref. 3). The United Artists troupe staged it in the summer of 1971 under the direction of Galal El-Sharkawy¹; the premiere was on 20 October 1971. The cast of the United Artists troupe included: Sa'id Salih (Mursi al-Zanati), 'Adel Imam (Bahjat al-Abasiri), YunusShalabi (Mansur), Ahmad Zaki (Ahmad al-Sha'ir), Hadi al-Jiyar (Lutfi 'Abd al-Wahhab), 'AbdallahFarghali (Ustadh 'Allam al-Milwani), Suhayr al-Babli ("Iffat 'Abd al-Karim," the teacher, also called 'Afaf), NazimSha'rawi (Dr. al-Abasiri, Bahjat's father), Hasan Mustafa (the headmaster and Mansur's father), and Samir Wali al-Din (Jabir, the caretaker).

The action unfolds in a single class that contains five unruly students whom the headmaster cannot control. A panoramic set of scenes follows, marked by constant mischief, weak administration, and the breakdown of dialogue between students and headmaster. The district superintendent sends the teacher "Iffat to discipline the five. They try to toy with her at first. She persists, however, and attempts to reform them by applying the theoretical propositions articulated in her doctoral dissertation, beginning from the premise that "the human being is not criminal by nature." In the end, the teacher achieves her aim, brokering a kind of reconciliation between the students and the conditions of their lived reality.

Ali Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* [The School of Troublemakers] (Cairo: Madbouli¹ Bookshop), p. 5.

II. The Play's Artistic Construction

1. Time

Time binds life with a tight thread. Philosophically, it is treated as an abstract category that operates in nature while remaining independent of it, shaping subjective experience and objective events without regard for them. It is a ceaseless flow that escapes capture or concrete representation². The dramatic text, moreover, functions—following Foucauldian insights—as a disciplinary discourse and a material power that traverses both subject and institution to constitute an autonomous order³.

Dramatic time oscillates between the written script and the staged performance. In this play, three temporalities are in play.

1.1. Time of Writing.

This is the moment of composition and it matters for linking the work to its historical, social, and political context. In *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* (*The School of the Misfits*), Ali Salem situates the text in the time of the “naksa.” He maintains that the play mirrored a period during which traditional values in Egyptian society—and in the Arab world more broadly—collapsed, known as the post-defeat and post-infitah era, when many norms themselves became objects of ridicule⁴. The date therefore carries interpretive weight.

The core wager of the play is to speak to the audience's unconscious after the defeat, opening a space for laughter and satire. It also offers a sharply observed portrait of a generational rift. The unruly students appear in clothing that imitates the fashions of the 1970s, with matching hairstyles, performance styles, and rhythm, including the lyrical “dance of fire.” The staging signals revolt against what the students perceive as vacuous paternal authority. The elder, as a figure of power, restrains the young for trivial reasons. The dream scene makes this visible. The students refuse the dominance of elders:

Bahjat: “The problem is not five deviants.”

All: “Then what is it?”

Bahjat: “The problem is the society behind the five deviants.”

Lutfi: “Indeed.”

Ahmad: “Grown-ups lie.”

Mansur: “They cheat.”

Rabia Badri, “The Narrative Structure in the Novel *Steps in the Other Direction* by² HafnawiZager,” Master's dissertation, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Mohamed Khider University of Biskra, 2014–2015, p. 191.

Baghoura al-Zawawi, “Discourse Between Society, Power, and Resistance,” *Ibdaa* 18, no. 16 (June³ 2000): 138.

Mahmoud Qasim, *Encyclopedia of Feature Films in Egypt and the Arab World*, vol. 2 (Cairo: ⁴ General Egyptian Book Organization, 2006).

Lutfi: "They deceive."
 Mansur: "They steal."⁵

With comic lightness, Salem breaks the paralysis on stage and gives form to the students' revolt. Dramatic time therefore appears as layered and processual, and within it the events are framed and transformed across phases:

**Surrender → Awakening/Uprising → Attainment of the Aim
 Before → During → After**

From this, it becomes clear that the play's text interacts with the historical moment of its composition, at times overtly, at times only in the grain of its scenes.

1.2. Time of the Events

The temporal architecture of *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* is linear. Narrative time advances in step with the action, from opening to close, without analepsis. There is no dramatic return to the past to stage earlier incidents or to reconstruct the characters' histories in scenes that dominate the stage picture. Past states appear only as memories and dreams voiced by the characters. These do not alter stage time; rather, they allow the audience to summon the past through dialogue. The absent past therefore remains present in symbolic form: props, décor, costumes (notably those of older figures), and lighting. Certain figures embody that past and its ideological loadouts and attempt to impose them on the present represented by the students: Bahjat al-Abasiri's father, the headmaster 'Abd al-Mu'ti who is also Mansur's father, Jabir the caretaker, and the teacher 'Allam. The playwright's message, intended to settle in the audience's unconscious, is straightforward: moral values have eroded in response to a failed, domineering paternal authority that seeks to arrest development and threaten the present. Reconciliation requires openness to the other and acceptance of the temporality of change in habits and dispositions.

The first scene presents the students' distress and the guardian authority that occupies center stage as the playwright's focus. He marks time explicitly, "Time: now ... or any time,"⁶ and moves across past and present forms in the characters' speech: "It cannot be ... it happened ... nothing good came of it ... five years, and in the School of Good Morals no one has passed."⁷ The effect is of time that persists into the present.

The playwright also furnishes a precise scenographic description of place— "the headmaster's room ... the furniture is formal yet comfortable ... a large central door opening onto a corridor that leads to the classrooms ... a large glass window overlooking the corridor."⁸ This exactness binds time to space and to personal

Ali Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*, pp. 49–50⁵

Ibid., p. 7.⁶

Ibid., p. 8.⁷

Ibid., p. 7.⁸

trajectories, reinforcing for the audience the sense of temporal continuity. The image echoes the wider revolt of angry youth that swept much of the world in 1968, particularly in France and Germany, and in Egypt as a refusal of hollow conventions and political hypocrisy. Time is specified here through the interweaving of *chronos* and *topos* from the first scene to the last.

2. Setting (Place)

Place is a constitutive stratum of the dramatic text. It is the field within which characters move to generate action. Unlike physical space, stage place is verbal; it exists only through language and is built from words that make it a cultural space⁹. In this play, place is predominantly closed and appears in two principal loci.

2.1. The Headmaster's Office:

Ali Salem locates the action precisely, beginning with an open marker, Alexandria, which indexes Egyptian social life and customs and anchors the drama in the historical context outlined in the discussion of time. He then narrows to a closed place, the headmaster's office, the site of the opening action: "Place: Alexandria. The headmaster's room ... the furniture is formal yet comfortable ... a large central door opening onto a corridor that leads to the classrooms ... a large glass window overlooking the corridor."¹⁰ The office—a shut, dim space—signals closure, the absence of serious dialogue between children and parents, and estrangement from the new terms of life (formal furniture). It suggests a loss of temporal attunement, evident in al-Abasiri's insistence that his son study hard to enter the pharmacy track although the son's aptitudes place him in philosophy and literature.

2.2. The Classroom:

As events unfold, the locus shifts to the classroom—"in the classroom, a large glass window ..."¹¹—another closed space that concentrates isolation and rigidity. The classroom shapes the students' conduct, frames the play's contours, and channels its phases. Later, the same space is described otherwise: "the classroom now looks beautiful; colored ribbons hang from the ceiling; Ahmad arranges some flowers with admiration, reties some ribbons, and adds finishing touches to the space"¹². These markers of color, ornament, and careful arrangement index relief, hope, unity, calm, and a measure of freedom. The phrase "adds finishing touches to the space" sketches a reconciliation between the students and the lived world and hints at acceptance of the other through their own imprint.

By the final movement, the same closed space carries signs of release and the ebbing of authority: "lights rise gradually; 'Iffat and Ahmad are in the classroom;

Mohammed Bouazza, *Analyzing the Narrative Text* (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2010), p. ⁹ 101.

Ibid., p. 7.¹⁰

Ali Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*, p. 49.¹¹

Ibid., p. 85.¹²

she is reviewing some lessons with him¹³.” The teacher appears in concord with a student, who receives explanations to the cadence of brightening light, a signal of openness alongside a cheerful atmosphere and restored equilibrium.

3. Events

The action, grounded in its historical context, dramatizes a conflict between children and parents, or between an emergent generation and authority. The students carry the dramatic knot. Their schooling proceeds in disorder, shaped by ideological contention and resistance to elder domination, and it embodies the moral collapse of the period. Teacher ‘Iffat is assigned to reform them, to remove the obstacles to their awareness, and to cultivate deference to elders as a precondition for considering and respecting their views:

Headmaster: “No one knows whether these are students or smugglers or suitcase-traders or thieves.”

al-Abasiri: “If you mean the car incident, it was only the harmless fooling of some youngsters. It is good they returned the car¹⁴.”

Headmaster: “My poor eyes ... Sir ...” (*he pulls items from the bag*) “wool ... cigarettes ... whisky ... pullovers ... cocoa ... tea ... This is no longer the School of Good Morals. This is the School of Good Mustaches¹⁵.”

“Welcome, miss. Of course the district superintendent does not agree.”

‘Iffat: “He agrees.”

Headmaster: “He is free to agree for himself. I will not be responsible for you sitting in one room with these beasts.”

‘Iffat: “Part of my job is to sit with beasts.”

(*Resigned.*) “Miss ‘Iffat, I shall agree, but not for the money. I shall agree out of respect for your great faith in the teacher’s vocation and your confidence in yourself.” (*Imploring God.*) “O Lord¹⁶.”

Through the exchange between the headmaster and Bahjat al-Abasiri’s father, the playwright sketches the students’ situation and the state of education. The headmaster’s dialogue with the teacher registers the gravity of the crisis and the seeming impossibility of stability. The successive exchanges between the students and ‘Iffat in the following scenes track, step by step, the gradual improvement, sustained by her resolve to change their condition.

4. Characters

The dramatic figure moves from abstraction to material presence on stage, presenting itself through dialogue and through the narrator’s descriptive cues. In this play, the characters function as follows.

Ibid., p. 103.¹³

Ibid., p. 9.¹⁴

Ibid., p. 14¹⁵

Ibid., p. 44.¹⁶

Primary characters

The unruly students: Five figures: Bahjat the Captain, Mursi the Boxer, Lutfi the Musician, Mansur the Painter, and Ahmad the Poet. Bahjat leads them under the banner of revolt against the lived order embodied by adult authority: parents, the headmaster, and even the teacher, despite her relative proximity in age. Their stated aim is to break the dominance of elders who claim purity and rectitude contrary to appearances. The play voices this stance:

Bahjat: “The problem is not five deviants.”

All: “Then what is it?”

Bahjat: “The problem is the society behind the five deviants.”

Lutfi: “Indeed.”

Ahmad: “Grown-ups lie.”

Mansur: “They cheat.”

Lutfi: “They deceive.”

Mansur: “They steal.”

Mursi: “Ask me. Five years ago my father had one lorry. Now he has thirty. From where?”

Bahjat: “Bravo. Then who among us is deviant?”

All: “They are.”

Bahjat: “And who is good?”

All: “We are.”

Bahjat: “Then we must discipline them. Any elder we meet, we must discipline him¹⁷.”

Bahjat al-Abasiri fronts the group. He appears confident and impulsive, though not physically strong. He raises the stakes with calculated wit and allies with his classmate Mursi al-Zanati, whose brawn lacks prudence:

Bahjat: “I am the brain and you are the muscle. If you move away from me, I become weak and you become a donkey.”

The line frames a sardonic claim about collective power through solidarity.

The teacher (‘Iffat). Elegant, poised, and confident in her ability to reform the students. She proceeds from the premise that the human being is not criminal by nature, a stance that equips her to reach her goals.

The headmaster. A figure of paternal and political authority marked by hypocrisy, failure, rigidity, domination, and a degree of naïveté. Despite repeated measures, he fails to run the school effectively before the teacher’s arrival.

Secondary characters

al-Abasiri (Bahjat's father). Another instantiation of paternal authority in its closure, severity, naïveté, and hollowness. Nevertheless, he persists in seeking a remedy for the youths' rebellion and failure.

Teacher 'Allam al-Milwani. The first victim of the students and a type of the classical generation unable to accept change, driven toward mental imbalance as shown by signs of forgetfulness, anxiety, and agitation across the play's incidents.

Jabir the caretaker. The second victim of the students.

It follows from the foregoing that the text rests on paired oppositions such as success versus failure and morality versus deviance. All the figures are social types that propel the action, because the play stages a concrete social condition: the deterioration of education in a particular period as a consequence of the collapse of moral values.

5. Language

The dramatic text is built upon language. It is the vehicle through which characters' ideas and emotions are articulated. Ali Salem composes his play in both Standard Arabic and colloquial Egyptian, charging the phrasing with affect and thought so that it reaches the audience with ease and fluency. He selects words and expressions with great precision, dense with connotation and symbolic resonance. Scenes of dialogue appear in the vernacular to heighten realism, whereas descriptions of places and characters are rendered in Standard Arabic.

6. Dialogue

Dialogue is the backbone of the dramatic text. It materializes conflict as the play's central structure. Salem employs two modes:

- **External dialogue:** exchanges between characters that disclose their ideological profiles and position them vis-à-vis one another, the lived social reality, and surrounding issues. Here, speech frequently becomes deed, as expressive resources are mobilized to propel the action and generate situations on stage.
- **Internal dialogue (monologue):** the character's address to self, through which inner viewpoints and latent ideas are declared.

These compositional elements work in concert with technical devices—set design, costume, and lighting—to carry the playwright's message and deposit it in the audience's unconscious. Earlier sections have addressed these stagecraft components in relation to time and place.

III. Manifestations of Satire in the Play

Satire has appeared across human societies as a means of expressing the self and releasing sadness, pain, dejection, coercion, and humiliation encountered in life. In this vein, Nietzsche maintains that because the human being is the most deeply afflicted creature, he needed to invent laughter; therefore, the most miserable tends, paradoxically, to display the greatest cheer¹⁸.

1. Paradoxes of Authority through Satire

Literary scholars have approached satire as a verbal art rather than a philosophical category, focusing on its linguistic and semiotic components. One component is affective: it manifests as derision that entails laughter or the inclination to laugh, and as disapproval or a simple sense of incongruity. Another component is structural-linguistic: it appears in semantic irony and the ambiguity that follows from it¹⁹. The logic of satire, therefore, rests on semantic irony shaped by an oppositional structure between an overt meaning and a latent one, with laughter as its outcome.

Madrasat al-Mushaghibin comprises three principal movements:

1. the failure of authority to tame the troublemakers;
2. the appointment of the teacher 'Iffat to take over the class;
3. the eventual taming of the students through the teacher's seriousness and rectitude, after considerable struggle.

The first actant is the headmaster. He appears aggrieved, unsettled, and at a loss. Unable to change the situation, he summons parents and teachers to meetings in search of a remedy for the crisis. In doing so, he becomes a sender who sets a process in motion to secure a rapid solution²⁰, re-linking the community to a value-object, namely the disciplining of the unruly students as a symbol of restoring social balance and correcting moral deviance. This value-object then functions as amodal object, enabling the executing actant—the teacher 'Afaf/'Iffat—to establish a junction with a higher value-object: achieving social balance and parity.

'Iffat: "Is this not the School of Good Morals?"

Headmaster: "I do not know exactly. God alone knows what my school has become now. Miss 'Iffat, the school here is for boys, not for girls."²¹

"Welcome, miss. Of course the district superintendent does not agree."

'Iffat: "He agrees."

Headmaster: "He is free to agree for himself. I will not take responsibility for you

Soha al-Satouhi, *Satire in Modern Arabic Literature—'Abd al-'Aziz al-Bishri as a Case Study*¹⁸ (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization), p. 55.

Mohammed al-'Amri, *The New Rhetoric Between Figuration and Pragmatics* (Casablanca: 19 Afrique Orient, January 2005), p. 87.

Groupe d'Entrevignes, *Analyse sémiotique des textes: Introduction, théorie-pratique*, 4e éd.²⁰ (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1984), p. 52.

Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*, p. 25²¹

sitting in one room with these beasts.”

‘Iffat: “Part of my job is to sit with beasts.”

(*Resigned.*) “Miss ‘Iffat, I shall agree, but not for the money. I shall agree out of respect for your great faith in the teacher’s vocation and your confidence in yourself.” (*Imploring God.*) “O Lord.²²”

At this point the headmaster shifts from executing actant to activating operator. He is tasked with preparing the second actant—the subject, the teacher ‘Iffat—and equipping her for performance by granting her a modal object of competence: obligation to act, will to act, capacity to act, and know-how. Yet the mere presence of competence does not guarantee *Performance*. The uprising led by Bahjat al-Abasiri intervenes. Driven by a desire to dominate the clique and rebel against authority (the headmaster and the parents), Bahjat establishes a counter-narrative program that links him to a modal object of revolt and insurrection. He possesses obligation and will, and, with the headmaster’s mismanagement and the failure of some teachers, he acquires capacity by plunging the school into disorder—disorder that reaches the district superintendent, who then appoints ‘Iffat as an alternative solution. The students’ conduct in the classroom during her tenure further complicates the task:

‘Afaf: “If you are beasts, I have learned to tame beasts. If your minds are closed, I hold the keys to closed minds. If your hearts are black, I am able to purify them.²³”

The phrase “five years” in the headmaster’s line—“Five years, and in the School of Good Morals no one has passed²⁴”—signals the durability of the counter-program led by Bahjat. Becoming the leader of the rebels and the sower of chaos does not suffice for him. Satirical postures toward authority, its values, and its falsity activate him to pursue the transformation of governing systems and the breaking of their shackles as a value-object connected to the modal object of sustaining the uprising.

Bahjat emerges as a leader. The school turns into an environment of moral and axiological chaos, a source of deviant behavior. The principal program set by the headmaster and the teacher—taming the students to re-establish social balance and parity—is deferred.

Bahjat seeks his peers’ trust. Continuing the uprising as a modal object promises a junction with a latent value-object—achieving balance and parity—although, at the level of appearance, he treats deviant conduct and satirical attacks on authority’s hypocrisy as crucial steps toward changing reality and ending the crisis. Here satire functions as an auxiliary factor for the counter-program prosecuted by Bahjat and his companions, and as an opposing factor to the teacher ‘Iffat’s principal program. In Greimas’s terms, he thus occupies a state of falsehood: appearance with non-

Ibid., p. 44²²

Ibid., pp. 47–48.²³

Ibid., p. 8²⁴

being. His leadership and the success of the group in producing failure for five years do not coincide with his deeper being. As disorder widens and authority's anger and denunciation threaten his revolt and leadership, hope collapses and he moves to nullity: non-appearance with non-being. With the authorities' eventual conviction and reconciliation with the other, he moves into truth: appearance with being. This sequence can be situated on the veridiction square:

Veridictioncategory	Appearance	Being	Bahjat'strajectory
Falsehood	Present	Absent	Early leadership and chaos that do not reflect inner being
Nullity	Absent	Absent	Collapse under mounting anger and sanction
Truth	Present	Present	After reconciliation and acceptance of the other
Secret	Absent	Present	Latent potential prior to recognition and junction with the value-object

In short, satire mediates the paradoxes of authority, at once empowering the counter-program and, ultimately, clearing a path for the principal program's resolution.

The teacher's persistence, seriousness, and conviction in her cause chart her path to success by attaining the value-object, namely the disciplining of the students. In consequence, Bahjat al-Abasiri's leadership ends and his purported rule collapses. Reconciliation is concluded between the students and authority, which now opens space for them to voice their views and to assert presence. The guardian authority, for its part, signals acceptance of the other and willingness to change:

Bahjat: (*in despair and indifference*) "... You will only waste your time for nothing. We are not good at this."

Afaf: "On the contrary. The point is simple. You do not trust the school. You do not trust the headmaster. You do not trust any adult around you. You are in far too much of a hurry for your age. You imitate the grown-ups. You imitate them at their worst. The truth is that you are not like that at all. You are a group of the utmost kindness, of the utmost delicacy. What a pity I do not have the chance to teach you."

Bahjat: "Miss Afaf, no one has ever said this to us." (*He looks down, embarrassed.*) "Miss Afaf, do not leave us²⁵."

The principal program can be represented as follows:

Sender: the authority (district superintendent; headmaster) → **Value-object:** disciplining the students → **Receiver:** the students; the authority

Helper(s): Afaf's cultural capital; her command of dialogic engagement

Subject: the teacher Afaf

Opponent(s): Bahjat's politics of rebellion and satire; the hypocrisy and falsity of authority

2. Stylistic Manifestations of Satire

2.1. The title's irony

The play opens under the title *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin* (School of Troublemakers), a phrase that departs from convention and invites estrangement. It is built from two core units: *madrasah* (school) and *al-mushaghibin* (misfits), i.e., a singular noun plus a sound masculine plural. The pairing produces semantic dissonance that courts ambiguity: how can terms from two opposed semantic fields be joined. The school denotes instruction, socialization, and ethical formation; troublemakers index disorder and deviance. Such "juxtaposition of elements that do not naturally co-occur in ordinary usage or according to habit"²⁶ reads as a form of satiric paradox that anticipates an abnormal world, already signaled in the opening: had the title been "School of Morals," "of the Virtuous," or "of the Gifted," it would have satisfied grammar and logic. Ali Salem intentionally chooses otherwise, welding logic to the illogical and aligning disorder with school in a single frame, in keeping with the play's diegesis as voiced by the headmaster at the outset, with his nod to the eclipsed official name, "School of Good Morals."

2.2. Blame in the guise of praise

Classical Arabic rhetoric records a well-known device: "the speaker intends to blame a person yet employs expressions whose surface is praise while their substratum is dispraise, creating the illusion of commendation while in fact satirizing."²⁷ The play abounds in such antiphrastic turns. Examples include:

Headmaster(*shouting from the window*): "Catch that boy, Jabir... catch him... a thief... a thief... a thief."²⁸

Headmaster: "So you work as a suitcase-trader, sir"²⁹.

al-Abasiri: "You are truly mad. I will tell your mother, Bahjat"³⁰.

Headmaster: "Finished...? Finished, you gang...?"³¹

al-Abasiri: "It seems to me this is what ruined my boy's morals. He came here like a blind kitten."³²

Abdelkader Bouzida, "Irony in Some Short Stories of al-Sa'idBoutajine," in *Proceedings of the 26 Fourth Colloquium "AbdelhamidBenhadouga": Studies and Research* (Algeria: Ministry of Culture and Communication, Directorate of Culture of BordjBouArréridj Province, 1st ed., 2001), p. 167. Ahmad Matlub, *Dictionary of Rhetorical Terms and Their Development* (Beirut: MaktabatLubnan ²⁷ Publishers, 2000), p. 493.

Ali Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*, p. 15.²⁸

Ibid., p. 16.²⁹

Ibid., p. 22.³⁰

Ibid., p. 29.³¹

Ibid., p. 34.³²

Headmaster: “Fine.” (*grabbing the letters*) “Our next trip to SidiKrir will be Friday morning instead of Thursday, because cutting school will be difficult... since al-Darfil is very alert³³.”

Here the nominal compliments and mock-formal address carry the opposite judgment.

2.3. Praise in the guise of blame

A complementary device is “affirming praise by what resembles blame.³⁴” Salem multiplies descriptions that, in context, reverse their apparent polarity:

Bahjat: “I suppose it is not appropriate, Headmaster, to enter your office with a bag.”

Headmaster: “What fine manners. What exquisite morals³⁵.”

Afaf: “They look very charming, very calm, very well-behaved.”

Headmaster: “Indeed, the very picture of innocence, the very picture of meekness. They are, in truth, beasts... beasts in suits.”

Headmaster: “The leader... the chief... very calm... nerves of steel... fears nothing... cares for nothing... an expert³⁶.”

Afaf: “And who is this pleasant young man?”

Headmaster: “Mursi al-Zanati, son of the largest fleet owner. He wants to become a boxer. He eats ten eggs and two chickens³⁷.”

Headmaster: “Mansur ‘Abd al-Mu’ti, my son... a simpleton... I do not know whom he takes after. He has scribbled all our walls with foolish drawings like himself. Lutfi ‘Abd al-Wahhab is the singer of al-Anfushi quarter. If he hears of a wedding in Kafr al-Dawwar he will walk there to sing³⁸.”

Headmaster: “Very charming, Ahmad... poet... artist³⁹.”

2.4. Contradiction

“Contradicting oneself in two poems or two statements—praising a thing well, then censuring it well—and not being faulted for it, provided the praise and the blame are well wrought. This, in my view, signals the poet’s mastery of his craft.⁴⁰” This device recurs in multiple scenes. The teacher consoles and encourages Ahmad through a string of antithetical phrases that signal her perspective: “You are very

Ibid., p. 34.³³

Ahmad Matlub, *Dictionary of Rhetorical Terms and Their Development*, p. 611³⁴

Ali Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*, p. 11³⁵

Ibid., p. 44.³⁶

Ibid., p. 45³⁷

Ibid., p. 46³⁸

Ibid., p. 68³⁹

Ahmad Matlub, *Dictionary of Rhetorical Terms and Their Development*, p. 423⁴⁰

sensitive, and that is a great quality in a human being. But there is no reason to keep feeling poor. You are very rich. You are a poet.⁴¹”

It appears elsewhere when Bahjat joins his father’s meeting with the headmaster, carrying a bag whose contents do not match those of a student. He first pleads that his own bag was lost and mistakenly exchanged for another, then slips into a performance of regret and grief over what happened: **“Bahjat:** What am I going to do in the exam now... how will I study...? Why, Lord, would You do this? The books, the notebooks, the summaries... even the *barsham* I prepared for the exam [crib sheets]... all of it gone in a moment...? I cannot fail again this year. I cannot. Impossible. Unless this is Your will, O Lord. If You want me to fail, I do not object... O Lord, I have no objection... Thy will be done, O Lord.⁴²”

2-4) Insinuation

“Insinuating at someone by saying something that faults him... The Arabs use it frequently, achieving their aim by a mode subtler and finer than direct disclosure.⁴³” The device surfaces when the students lay bare the motives for their rebellion and deviance by exposing authority and its falsity:

Bahjat: “The problem is not five deviants.”

All: “Then what is it?”

Bahjat: “The problem is the society behind the five deviants.”

Lutfi: “Indeed.”

Ahmad: “The grown-ups lie.”

Mansur: “They cheat.”

Lutfi: “They deceive.”

Mansur: “They steal.”

Mursi: “Ask me. Five years ago my father had one lorry. Now he has thirty. From where?”

Bahjat: “Bravo. So who is deviant?”

All: “They are.”

Bahjat: “And who is good?”

All: “We are.”

Bahjat: “Then we must discipline them. Any elder we meet, we must discipline him⁴⁴.”

Ali Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*, p. 47⁴¹

Ibid., p. 11⁴²

Ahmad Matlub, *Dictionary of Rhetorical Terms and Their Development*, pp. 379–380⁴³

Ali Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*, pp. 49–50⁴⁴

Insinuation also appears when the headmaster reduces Bahjat to “boy” and “thief,” presenting him in a humiliating frame: “**Headmaster:** (*shouting from the window*) Catch that boy, Jabir. Catch him. A thief. A thief.”⁴⁵”

It is evident as well in Mursi’s answer to the headmaster and his stated reason for traveling to Beirut “to study,” which operates as a critique of school curricula and the state of schooling, condensed in Mursi’s case:

Headmaster: “So you cannot study except outside Egypt, beyond the seas...?”

Mursi: “I do not have a geography book. I do not understand the ministry’s textbook. And my father will not give me a quarter pound to buy one. What should I do... fail...? I went to study with my friend.”⁴⁶”

A similar effect occurs when Ahmad mocks the exam prompts:

Ahmad: (*bitterly*) “I know them well, yet I still cannot answer, especially in poetry. They give the silliest essay topics... and I fail.”⁴⁷”

2.5. Onomastic irony (irony in names)

The play deploys the names of canonical figures of human creativity in a satirical key. This is most visible in the flippant treatment of Aristotelian commonplaces and the feigned ignorance of Aristotle himself, despite the students’ enrollment in philosophy and literature:

Afaf: “It is easy to imitate a donkey’s bray, but difficult to have its endurance, patience, and—yes—its wisdom.”⁴⁸”

Afaf: “Strength is a great thing, but however strong you are, do not forget that the bull will be stronger than you. Aristotle said that.”

Mursi: “I know him. He owns the restaurant at the beginning of Port Said Street.”

Afaf: “It seems you do not know anything at all.”

Mursi: “You must mean the other Aristotle—the one with the tavern.”⁴⁹”

The comic worlding continues at the level of place-names and local markers:

Afaf: “... If I want to go to the educational district, what should I take?”

Mursi: “If you keep walking with the sea on your right, there is a shop called *Athenos*...”⁵⁰”

The high-cultural reference collapses into neighborhood commerce; the philosophical tradition is reframed as a signboard. The irony turns on the disjunction between disciplinary capital and streetwise knowledge.

Ibid., p. 15⁴⁵

Ibid., p. 31⁴⁶

Ibid., p. 70⁴⁷

Ibid., p. 58.⁴⁸

Ibid., p. 46⁴⁹

Ibid., p. 28⁵⁰

2.6. Illogic (the logic of the absurd)

The text repeatedly engineers situations that violate ordinary plausibility and thereby produce comic effect:

Headmaster: “Make yourselves comfortable; it is almost over. (Pointing to Mursi.) This gentleman has been sleeping away from home for three days. His father has turned Alexandria upside down—hospitals, police stations, friends’ houses, relatives—everywhere. Where were you, sir?”

Mursi(*very calmly*): “In Beirut.”

Headmaster: “What were you doing in Beirut?”

Mursi: “Studying with a friend.”⁵¹

Elsewhere, the exchange inverts educational values:

Headmaster: “... And if you are a millionaire student, why are you still here tormenting me? Leave me alone.”

Mursi: “You are the first headmaster in the world to incite students against learning. Someone like me loves to study and collect diplomas. Do you want to force me, by sheer coercion, to leave school?”⁵²

Illogic also underwrites the students’ compact and their fierce defense of one another. Given their characterization as deviant and morally adrift, the heightened rationality of their collective stance jars productively:

Bahjat(*firm yet courteous*): “Please, Father, do not allow yourself to assess the situation without prior study, or you will reach a mistaken conclusion that reflects your initial desire to smear others. That will leave me no choice but to defend my friend, regardless of any family considerations that are far removed from lived reality.” (*The father stares at him, astonished.*)⁵³

Mursi: “What is this? What happened?”

Bahjat: “What did you do to the boy?” (*shouting*) “What did you do to the boy?”

Lutfi: “Are you ganging up on him alone?”

Mursi: “Are you picking on him?”

Bahjat: “Did your knees shake?”⁵⁴

Bahjat’s awareness of specialization, and of his own educational trajectory, is equally at odds with his rebel posture:

Bahjat: “Grandfather al-Abasiri the Elder never opened a pharmacy. It was a spice shop, and all of Alexandria knows that. You alone insist on not knowing. And if I pass the baccalaureate, I will not enter pharmacy. I am in the humanities stream.”⁵⁵

Ibid., pp. 30–31⁵¹

Ibid., p. 32⁵²

Ibid., p. 30⁵³

Ibid., p. 42⁵⁴

Ibid., p. 19⁵⁵

Ahmed, for his part, voices a lucid critique of curricular triviality, particularly examination prompts in literature, and prefers failure to complicity:

Afaf: “What do you fail in, Ahmad?”

Ahmad: “Arabic.”

Afaf: “Impossible. A poet who does not know his language?”

Ahmad(*bitterly*): “I know it well, yet I still cannot answer—especially in poetry. They give the silliest essay topics. I fail.⁵⁶”

2.7. Hyperbole

Hyperbole appears in the overdrawn presentation of situations that provoke anger or laughter. The headmaster repeatedly reminds Ahmad of his precarious social position and of the efforts expended to overcome it, using this as a prop to shore up an authority that evaporates in the face of the other students’ social standing:

Headmaster: “I hope you are not involved with them in their criminal schemes, because your circumstances require you to be cautious in your conduct for many reasons. You understand me, of course.”

Ahmad: “No, sir. I do not understand you.”

Headmaster:(*with a tenderness heavy with affectation*) “I know, Ahmad, that you are the eldest of your siblings, and I know how much your mother suffered and toiled to get you into school. Even so, the credit for all of this goes to the school, to the Parents’ Council, and to me. You do not pay a single penny of tuition.⁵⁷”

In another register, Lutfi introduces himself while protesting the headmaster’s contempt for his talent, in a deliberately magnified defense of change and of the new generation’s sensibilities:

Lutfi: “I am an artist, a musician. There is nothing shameful in becoming a musician. There is nothing shameful, either, in the fact that I love.⁵⁸”

3) Intertextuality

Intertextuality denotes the text’s openness to prior artistic models and to diverse fields of cultural knowledge. In this sense, “every text is an absorption and transformation of a plurality of other texts.⁵⁹” The play stages this through proverbial citations and cultural formulae. When the teacher asks for philosophy notebooks, the exchange unfolds as a chain of borrowed sayings:

Afaf: “Take out the philosophy notebooks.”

All: “We do not have any.”

Afaf: “Take out a piece of paper.”

Ibid., p. 70.⁵⁶

Ibid., p. 42.⁵⁷

Ibid., p. 46.⁵⁸

Julia Kristeva, *Science of the Text*, trans. Fouad al-Zahi (Casablanca: Dar Toubkal, 1st ed., 1991), ⁵⁹ p. 78.

All: "We do not have any."

Afaf: "Why did you not bring your philosophy notebooks?"

All: "We forgot."

Afaf: "What made you forget?"

All: "Only He who never forgets is God."⁶⁰

Other set phrases include: "I will make you walk on dough without disturbing it," "People are of different mettle," and "Soak it and drink its water," each importing folk wisdom into the dialogic fabric.

4) Feigned ignorance

Feigned ignorance is to ignore the obvious and to pose questions despite already knowing the answer, typically to deter suspicion or to exert pressure. In the text, this appears in the students' replies when the headmaster inquires about the letters and about the car theft:

Headmaster: "What are you saying, sir?"

Bahjat: "Nothing at all, Headmaster."⁶¹

Headmaster: "Before I bring ruin upon you, who stole the car of the head of the anti-car-theft office and parked it in front of his house?"

Mursi(playing dumb): "Which car...? The red Volkswagen, model sixty-six...?"

Headmaster: "Yes."

Mursi: "I know nothing about it."

Headmaster: "You know nothing about it." (to Bahjat) "And you, leader...?"

Bahjat: "I did not see it, and none of us knows how to drive."⁶²

Conclusion :

Conclusion: From this, it becomes clear that Salem adopts satire as a defining mode in *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*. Numerous passages arrest the viewer and elicit laughter to varying degrees. The effect arises from incidents and situations that compose a theatrical reality deliberately crafted from the contradictions of lived experience. Characters who are deeply embedded in their social milieu react within a specific environment. Through their reactions they seek to improve a strained condition and to restore balance and social parity by breaking the shackles of a failed patriarchal order in a context marked by disorder and the falsity of authority. In doing so, they assume a corrective and disciplining role. On this understanding, the purpose of comedy is not merely to provoke laughter, but also to correct, refine, and reform⁶³.

Ali Salem, *Madrasat al-Mushaghibin*, p. 56⁶⁰

Ibid., p. 16⁶¹

Ibid., p. 34⁶²

Abdel Aziz Sharaf, *Humorous Literature* (Giza: The Egyptian International Publishing Company—⁶³ Longman, 2nd ed., 1992), Introduction, p. 5.

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