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the Literature of Ali Ahmad Bakathir**

Case studies of *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* and *al-Duktur Hazim*

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The University of Melbourne



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The Significance of Qur'anic Verses in the Literature of Ali Ahmad Bakathir

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Ali Ahmad Bakathir was a prolific Arab playwright, novelist and poet of the 20th Century who contributed immensely to the development of Arabic and Islamic literature. But despite his contributions, Bakathir has received considerably less scholarly attention than more celebrated figures such as Taha Husayn, Tawfiq al-Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz, both in the Arab-Islamic world and in the West. Bakathir was a committed Muslim who strove to portray and champion Islamic ideals through his works. He desired to illustrate the importance of following Islam as a complete way of life as a means of reforming the self and the society. He wrote his works during a long period of ideological conflict in the Arab world, when Islamic, Communist, Marxist, Liberalist and Secular ideologies were at loggerheads. In light of this, Bakathir endeavoured to show the Arab Muslims of his time – first and foremost – that following the Qur'an faithfully was the only means to achieving a moral society.

This paper attempts to explore the significance and impact of Qur'anic verses on the literary works of Bakathir, especially the plot and the protagonists. It does so by studying two of Bakathir's prosal plays, *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* (The Chain of Sin and Forgiveness), an allegorical play, and *al-Duktur Hazim* (Dr. Hazim), which is one of ten of Bakathir's plays that dealt with contemporary social issues. Based on the findings of these two case studies, this paper also discusses the role of Qur'anic verses in Bakathir's other novels and plays.

In this paper, I argue that Qur'anic verses play a major role in the novels and plays of Bakathir. The verses, handpicked carefully by Bakathir himself, often form the basis for the whole storyline, including the plot, the characters and Bakathir's intended message to his audience and the wider society. Bakathir always tries to convey an Islamic message via his highly 'Islamicised' works, and these works are but a reflection of his strong religious ideals and Qur'anic mindset through which he evaluates society. They depict a zealous commitment to work for Islam and the Arabs, as well as the ideal that remaining faithful to Islam is the only means to attaining success in this world and the Hereafter.

Introduction

Ali Ahmad Bakathir (1910-69) was a prolific Arab playwright, novelist and poet who contributed significantly to the field and development of Arabic and Islamic literature in the 20th century. However, in contrast to the likes of Taha Husayn, Tawfiq al-Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz, who have attracted considerable attention in Western studies on Arabic and Islamic literature, Bakathir's name tends to pass relatively unnoticed; this is ironic in itself, considering that Bakathir is regarded as the pioneer of 'Islamic literature' in Arabic literary circles.

Bakathir displayed strong Islamic ideals and used his literary talents in order to further the cause of Islam in society, politics, education and economics. He sought to instil an awareness of the teachings of Islam amongst Muslims through his literature, often informing his audience of their religious obligations and drawing inspiration from the annals of Islamic history. In essence, Bakathir sought to establish a Qur'anic mindset via his works, using Qur'anic verses and teachings as a basis for his plots, the rationale and motivation for his writings, as well as the main thrust for his ideas. However, to this end, there has been no specific study dedicated to the importance of Qur'anic verses in Bakathir's works.

As such, this paper seeks to explore the significance and impact of Qur'anic verses on Bakathir's literary works, in particular, the plot and the protagonists. Among its other key objectives are to: 1) add to the relatively small corpus of academic study on Bakathir and his works whilst providing further avenues for research; 2) reignite interest to study his literature; 3) evaluate the strong Islamic influences and tendencies in his works; 4) appreciate his contribution to modern Arabic literature; and 5) understand his status as an Islamic literarist.

In this paper, particular attention is given to two of Bakathir's prosal plays namely, *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* ('The Chain of Sin and Forgiveness') and *al-Duktur Hazim* (Dr. Hazim). Studies on these two plays appear minimal at this stage and I have selected them as case examples due to their relevance to the topic of discussion. Notwithstanding, Bakathir was also a verse dramatist, novelist and poet, with notable works in all three genres. But whilst some of his other works are also discussed whenever appropriate, I have chosen not to include his poetry due to the following reasons. Firstly, the Qur'anic verses occur predominantly in his plays and novels. Secondly, poetry is of a very different style and structure, whilst plays and novels are cognate genres – the only main differences are that plays are restricted by time, place and theme.

Excluding this introduction, this paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, to help contextualise the research, I present a brief overview of Bakathir's life, background, contextual setting, main influences, works, significance and contribution to Arabic literature. Next, I analyse the literary impact of the Qur'anic verses Bakathir cites in the two chosen plays on the plot and the characters. However, as I have also discussed some of his other plays and novels, the conclusions of this paper are generally representative of all of his works in both these genres. Finally, I end this paper with a summary of its most important findings.

Ali Ahmad Bakathir: His life, background and influences

Ali Ahmad Bakathir was born in 1910, in Surabaya, Indonesia, to Arab parents from Hadramawt, Yemen. At the age of eight, or ten¹, his father sent him to Saywun, in Hadramawt, where he grew up studying Arabic and traditional Islamic disciplines from the local teachers at *Madrassa al-Nahda al-Ilmiyya* (lit. 'The School of Intellectual Uprising'), the first school to be established in Saywun. Consequently, this led to a strong attachment to his blood, heritage and religion. Bakathir began his literary career at the age of thirteen by writing poetry, immediately catching the eye of his teachers. From a young age, he took a particular liking to the works of Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi, the famous Arab poet.²

Bakathir married young in Hadramawt. After the death of his wife, he felt estranged and migrated to Eden, in 1932. After spending a few months there, he moved to Somalia and Ethiopia. He arrived in Hijaz later the same year and spent a year there. In Eden, he met a number of its scholars and writers, such as Shaykh Muhammad Salim al-Bihani and the poet, Muhammad Ali Luqman, whom he stayed with. Bakathir wrote a number of odes in Eden and was also a member of the Islamic Reform Club there. In Hijaz, he visited Mecca and Medina and met the local Arab writers who used to hold gatherings in Taif, where they would recite poetry, study each others works and become acquainted with news of other Arab writers. Bakathir came across the plays of Ahmad Shawqi³ (1868-1932) in Hijaz and was immediately attracted to his arrangement of poetry. It was Shawqi's influence that led him to write his first verse drama, *Humam* ('Gallant'), also known as *Fi Bilad al-Ahqaf* ('In the Land of the Dunes'). Other writers who have significantly influenced Bakathir include the famous poets, Hafiz Ibrahim and Khalil Mutran.

Upon his arrival in Egypt in 1934, Bakathir initially wanted to further his Arabic and Islamic studies at al-Azhar University, but having heard of the legacy of English literature (especially Shakespeare), he began to study English language and literature at what is now known as Cairo University, graduating in 1939. Whilst still a student, he attempted a translation of *Romeo and Juliet* into an experimental type of Arabic verse, *al-shi'r al-mursal* (blank verse), a metrical form which became the principal style of 'modernist' Arabic verse after the Second World War.⁴ He also argued with

¹ This appears the stronger opinion (although the other is more well-known) based on the recorded date of his arrival in Hadramawt (4th April 1920). See Abd al-Hakim al-Zubaydi, 'Bakathir fi Suttur', available 19 March 2004, <http://bakatheer.com/sotor.htm>.

² See al-Zubaydi, 'Bakathir fi Suttur'.

³ In the opinion of M. M. Badawi, Shawqi ranks as the best Arab verse dramatist. See M. M. Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 140. Although Shawqi was not the pioneer of Arab verse drama, it can be said that he perfected it and, along with Tawfiq al-Hakim, established it as a respectable genre within Arabic literature. For more information, see M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 207-15; and M. M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 29-42.

⁴ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 112.

his English professor in class who accused the Arabic language of being inflexible.⁵ After obtaining a teaching diploma in 1940, Bakathir married an Egyptian widow and worked as an English teacher until 1955. He was later employed by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of National Guidance, where he continued to work until his death in 1969. A year before his death in Egypt, Bakathir visited his beloved Hadramawt for the last time after which he rejected offers to run cultural centres in Kuwait and Lebanon. Apart from Arabic and English, Bakathir was also adept in French and Malay.⁶

Bakathir lived in a time of ideological conflicts between the traditional and modernist-reformist schools in the Arab-Islamic world. The reformist school called for an end to the alleged stagnation and decline in scholarly thought that had afflicted the Muslims since the 11th century CE due to the abandonment of *ijtihad* (independent scholarly endeavour), and a stilted and restrictive approach to the four major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).⁷ The *Islahiyya* (reformist) movement was established and developed in Egypt by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani⁸ (1839-1897), who spread his ideas at al-Azhar University, and his contemporary (and student), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905).⁹ Bakathir was introduced to their ideas by two of their most prolific students, Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935)¹⁰ and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib. He immediately developed a liking for the reformists who called for a return to the spirit of Islam and the implementation of its teachings in the face of

⁵ Ali Ahmad Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya min Khilal Tajaribi al-Shakhsiyya*, Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1964, pp. 7-8.

⁶ Al-Zubaydi, 'Bakathir fi Suttur'.

⁷ There is a debate as to the so-called closure of the gates of *ijtihad*. Quite a number of Muslim scholars now argue that the gates were never closed and a decline in thought is an erroneous proposition. See, for instance, Wael Hallaq, 'Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1984, pp. 3-41; Shaista P. Ali-Karamali and Fiona Dunne, 'The Ijtihad Controversy', *Arab Law Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1994, pp. 238-57

⁸ Al-Afghani may have actually been an Iranian Shiite, although it is commonly alleged that he is Afghani and a Sunni. See Hazim Muhyi al-Din, 'Tayyar al-Islah al-Dini fi Misr Madrasa al-Shaykh Muhammad Abduh', translated chapter of a book by G. Delonoue, *L'Egypte D'aujourd'hui: Permanences et Changements 1805-1976*, available 19 May 2004, <http://www.almultaka.net/web/m00-p8.htm>.

⁹ Their essentially modernistic ideas sought to combine Western philosophy with Islamic thought and elevate the human mind to a level equal to Divine revelation. The intentions of al-Afghani later became suspect due to his involvement with the Masonic movement seeking to establish new branches in the Middle East. See Arthur J. Arberry, *Religion in the Middle East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, vol. 2, pp. 128-9. For a more detailed discussion, refer to Muhammad Hamid Nasir, *al-Asraniyyun*, Riyadh: Maktabat al-Kawthar, 1996.

¹⁰ Reflecting a more orthodox Salafist trend, Rashid Rida was not as extreme as his mentors in his modernist thinking though he was still influenced by them to a large extent. His exegesis of the Qur'an, *Tafsir al-Manar*, is a popular and rigorous work; its modernist trends are evident in parts. See Abu Ammaar Yasir Qaadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan*, Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah, 1999, p. 338.

modernity.¹¹ He based his Islamic thought on the anti-colonial *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* ('The Firm Handhold'), an international Islamic organisation and periodical established by al-Afghani and Abduh in Paris, in 1883.¹² Furthermore, the magazines *al-Manar* ('The Beacon'), by Rashid Rida and *al-Fath* ('The Opening'), by al-Khatib had reached him in Hadramawt. He even published a number of odes (*qasa'id*) in *al-Fath* and was already known in Egypt before his eventual arrival. In fact, it was Rashid Rida who encouraged him to migrate to Egypt and arranged for his eventual arrival there. As a result, Bakathir's modernist tendencies led him to clash with several traditional scholars of his time.¹³

In addition, Bakathir's religious ideology may not have been restricted to the reformist school. In fact, he lived through one of the most dynamic periods for Islamic movements in Egypt. The most notable of these movements was the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*), the brainchild of Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949) and infamously supported by Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). The main ideology of this movement was Muslim solidarity under the common goal to establish the laws of God on earth. Although it is not known to what extent Bakathir was influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, one may postulate that he may have at least sympathised with its ideas since the reformist movement was one of the main catalysts behind the Brotherhood's formation. In fact, based on circumstantial evidence, there is reason to believe that Bakathir was even a supporter of this movement; a collection of his political dramatisations, later published under the title *Masrah al-Siyasa* ('The Drama of Politics'), first appeared in the *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* ('The Muslim Brotherhood') and *al-Da'wa* ('The Call') magazines, in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁴ Both magazines are closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Finally, due to his staunch religious mindset, Bakathir constantly found himself at odds with Marxist and Liberalist Arab rulers, intellectuals and supporters.¹⁵

Bakathir's works and contextual setting

Some notable observations from Bakathir's works are that they display: 1) the styles and influences of the writers he admired; 2) a self-professed commitment to Islam

¹¹ See Abdulla Basibrin, 'Ra'id al-Adab al-Islami Ali Bakathir Wajib al-Adib al-Arabi Tabsir al-Umma bi al-Akhtar allati Tatabadduha', *Al-Ayyam*, 28 June 2003, p. 8.

¹² Muhyi al-Din, 'Tayyar al-Islah al-Dini'. Only 18 of the periodicals were ever published.

¹³ Muhammad Abu Bakr Hamid, 'Riyada Bakathir li al-Adab al-Islami wa Tatbiqatihi', Islamic Literature World League lecture, transcribed by Muhammad Uqda. Hamid mentions that Bakathir was affected by the Salafi school of thought. Salafism advocates a return to understanding and practising Islam according to the Qur'an and way of the Prophet (*Sunna*), as understood by the early generations of Muslims. He seems to consider the reformist movement of al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh as Salafi. However, this is a point of debate amongst the scholars of Islam. Therefore, I have chosen to use the term 'reformist', which is more neutral, instead.

¹⁴ See <http://bakatheer.com/collect.htm>, available 5 May 2004.

¹⁵ Basibrin, 'Ra'id al-Adab al-Islami', p. 8.

and the Arabs; and 3) some of the common mindsets of Egyptian writers during his time.¹⁶ Although Egypt was a non-combatant during the Second World War, the War did have a deep social, political and economic impact on the country. Egyptian society was changing at a rapid rate – Naguib Mahfouz described it as a social, political and economic state of flux – so naturally, many writers (including Bakathir himself) decided to record the symptoms of this process.¹⁷

The development of modern Arabic literature in Egypt, since the appearance of Husayn Haykal's acclaimed novel, *Zaynab* ('Zaynab'), in 1912,¹⁸ can roughly be divided into four phases, namely: (1) prior to the Second World War; (2) between the War and the coup d'état of 23 July 1952; (3) the early years after the 1952 revolution; and (4) the late 1950s and thereafter, with each phase displaying unique thematic and stylistic characteristics.¹⁹ As a testament to his prolific writing as well as his penchant for addressing pertinent and contextual societal issues, Bakathir produced works in all these phases. Literature from phase one is generally characterised by an attempt to address Egyptian life, its people, surroundings, customs and manners. There are also some romantic trends as well as criticisms of Egyptian culture via direct or indirect (comical and satirical) means.²⁰ Phase two works deal mainly with social justice, including socio-political and psychological issues,²¹ while phase three works focus on patriotism, populism, visions for a brighter future, as well as religious and nationalist commitment.²² Finally, literature from phase four display both pre-modernist and post-modernist trends which include elements of existentialism, revolt and absurdity. In this phase, Arab writers employed new techniques from the West, such as 'point of view' technique, free verse poetry (*al-shi'r al-hurr*), plot sequence rearrangement, narrative variation and structural complexity and obscurity.²³

Bakathir wrote a total of six novels, six verse dramas, around 45 prosal plays, and a large number of odes and poems (reaching a thousand pages in manuscript form).²⁴ These works were never published in a complete collection during his life and some were published after his death. Up to eleven plays remain unpublished.²⁵

¹⁶ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 112.

¹⁷ See Fatma Moussa Mahmoud, 'The Novel as a Record of Social Change', in *The Arabic Novel in Egypt (1914-1970)*, Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organisation, 1973.

¹⁸ According to Hamdi Sakkut, *Zaynab* is the first Egyptian novel that may be judged according to the accepted criteria for novel writing – no earlier work can be counted as a novel. Hamdi Sakkut, *The Egyptian Novel and its Main Trends from 1913 to 1952*, PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, Cairo: The American University Press, 1971, p. vii.

¹⁹ Ali B. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel 1912-1971*, London: Ithaca Press (for The Middle East Centre, St Anthony's College, Oxford University), 1983, pp. 17-18. Modern Arabic literature actually started developing from the later half of the 19th century but it only attained literary merit after *Zaynab*. See Jad, *Form and Technique*, pp. 1, 17.

²⁰ Jad, *Form and Technique*, p. 26. Exceptions to this observation include, for instance, Tawfiq al-Hakim's first play, *Ahl al-Kahf*, which was based on myth, not Egyptian social life.

²¹ Jad, *Form and Technique*, pp. 147-51.

²² Jad, *Form and Technique*, p. 211.

²³ Jad, *Form and Technique*, pp. xii-xiii, 260, 293.

²⁴ Hamid, 'Riyada Bakathir'; and Al-Zubaydi, 'Bakathir fi Suttur'.

²⁵ Hamid, 'Riyada Bakathir'.

Bakathir constantly implies the inadequacy of all ideologies in comparison to the principles of Islam, and that the solution to the problems of the Arab and Islamic world lies only in the return to Islamic principles. Somewhat idealistically, he saw Islam not only as a religion, but a means to building a complete civilisation.

Bakathir began writing odes and poetry before producing novels and plays. His odes written before his departure from Hadramawt were entitled *Azhar al-Rubba fi Ash'ar al-Sibba* ('Flowers of the Hills in the Poems of Captivity'), those written in Eden were suitably entitled *al-Adniyyat* ('Those of Eden'), whilst those written in Hijaz were likewise aptly called *al-Hijaziyyat* ('Those of Hijaz'). He also continued to write a large number of odes and poems while in Egypt. Other than his verse dramas, Bakathir's poems were not published during his lifetime with the exception of *Dhikra Muhammad* ('The Memory of Muhammad'), also known as *Nizam al-Burda* ('The Arrangement of "the Mantle"'), which was written during his stay in Hijaz and later published upon his arrival in Egypt.²⁶

Bakathir wrote three verse dramas before attempting his first novel and prosal play in 1944. His first verse drama, *Humam*, published in 1934, dealt with the situation in under-developed and under-educated Hadramawt. His largest work, spanning 19 volumes, and most famous prosal play is *al-Malhama al-Islamiyya al-Kubra Umar* ('The Great Islamic Epic: Umar'), a play based on early Islamic history in the time of the second Caliph, Umar b. al-Khattab. Among his most famous novels are *Wa Islamah* ('Oh Islam!') and *al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar* ('The Red Revolutionary') and his most famous verse drama is *Ikhnatun wa Nafirtiti* ('Akhenaton and Nefertiti'). Although *Ikhnatun wa Nafirtiti*, which is part of ancient Egyptian history, seems to have nothing to do with Islam and the Arabs, Bakathir argued that the history of a region inhabited by the Arabs in the present day should be regarded as part of Arab history.²⁷

Unlike Husayn Haykal and Taha Husayn, for instance, who were influenced by European critiques of Arab culture and religion, Bakathir's works clearly manifest a strong tendency and commitment towards Islam and his people. Therefore, any controversy he caused was due to this mindset and not out of external European influences. For example, due to their strong religious overtones, *Wa Islamah* and *al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar* caused hatred amongst Egyptian communists who wrote numerous articles criticising him. Bakathir also portrayed the idea of pan-Arabism and emphasised the Palestinian cause in many works; his stance on the Arab-Israeli issue was often critical of the Arab states and anti-Zionist.²⁸

²⁶ See <http://bakatheer.com/diwan.htm>, available 24 May 2004. *Al-Burda*, or *Qasidat al-Burda* ('Ode of the Mantle'), is an ode of praise from Prophet Muhammad composed by the great Sufi figure, Imam Hasan al-Basri (1212-1296). The actual title of the ode is *al-Kawakib al-Durriyya fi Madh Khayr al-Bariyya* ('Celestial Lights in Praise of the Best of Creation').

²⁷ Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, pp. 6-7.

²⁸ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 129.

In his plays and novels, Bakathir constantly implies the inadequacy of all ideologies in comparison to the principles of Islam, and that the solution to the problems of the Arab and Islamic world lies only in the return to Islamic principles. Somewhat idealistically, he saw Islam not only as a religion, but a means to building a complete civilisation.²⁹ To demonstrate this, he uses the grandeur of the Arab-Islamic past (in contrast to its shortcomings) so that his intended audience may take lessons from it. Bakathir's works are also particularly audience oriented, which could explain his greater affinity towards the production of plays. Furthermore, he probably realised the greater effectiveness and appeal of this genre as a vehicle for his ideas.

His significance and contribution to Arabic literature

Along with Mahmud Taymur and Fathi Radwan, Bakathir is considered by some as one of the successors of Tawfiq al-Hakim,³⁰ one of the best known and most important figures in the history and development of Arabic drama due to his ingenuity and output.³¹ Bakathir is essentially an Islamic playwright, novelist and poet, and is even considered as one of the pioneers of Islamic literature, Arabic free and blank verse, political drama, historical novels, and an innovator of several styles.³² In addition to his numerous works, he also received a number of prizes and medals including, the State Prize of Egypt in literature for *Harut wa Marut* ('Harut and Marut'), in 1962, and an exclusive medal from Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1967.³³ Bakathir was also a member of The Publication Committee for Academics, which included such famous names as Naguib Mahfouz, Adil Kamil and Abd al-Hamid Juda.³⁴

Despite the above, Bakathir never seems to garner as much attention as other prolific writers of Arabic literature. There are several possible reasons for this, including:

- 1) Due to an idealistic Islamic mindset, Bakathir's works particularly attract the attention of those with a similar ideology. Thus, at times, his works have little appeal to people of different faiths and ideologies. This occurs despite his contributions and stature in modern Arabic and Islamic literature.
- 2) Ignorance concerning his works may be unintentional and partly due to Bakathir's nature to avoid the spotlight.³⁵

²⁹ Usama al-Alfi, 'Da'wa li l'ada Qira'a A'mal Mubaddi' Kabir wa Nashr Turathihi Bakathir min Ruwwad al-Shi'r al-Hurr wa al-Masrah al-Siyasi wa al-Riwayat al-Tarikhiyya', *Al-Ahram*, 2 December 2003.

³⁰ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 88.

³¹ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 88; Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, p. 140.

³² Basibrin, 'Ra'id al-Adab al-Islami', p. 8; al-Alfi, 'Da'wa'. This has been verified by several scholars such as Dr. Abdulla al-Ghadhdhami, Dr. Ahmad al-Sa'dani, Dr. Abu Bakr al-Babakiri and Dr. Isam Bahi.

³³ For a full list, refer to <http://bakatheer.com/prizes.htm>.

³⁴ Al-Alfi, 'Da'wa'.

³⁵ Al-Alfi, 'Da'wa'.

- 3) There is a dichotomy of opinions on the works of Bakathir amongst scholars of Arabic literature. The first group, due to their Islamic inclinations, are favourable towards his works. Their analyses tend to revolve around the Islamic ideology of Bakathir and the effectiveness of his works as a vehicle for instructing and admonishing Muslims. The second group, coming purely from a critical literary approach, are less favourable. They regard Bakathir's idealistic Islamic worldview as a form of 'tunnel-vision' that significantly inhibits all aspects of his work, causing predictability, blunting sensitivity and limiting creativity.³⁶ Academics of this type prefer the ideological freedom that is virtually non-existent in Bakathir's works. Yet, at the same time, they do acknowledge some of the outstanding works of Bakathir in terms of ingenuity and style. Naturally, biases are witnessed from both groups and both approaches form an integral part of literary analysis. Nonetheless, it is an essential part of literary analysis to be able to appreciate the writer's context, background, ideology, intentions and implications.

At any rate, due to his acclaimed contributions towards Arabic and Islamic literature, Bakathir certainly deserves more readership and academic study, at least by his intended Muslim audience. Currently, there are very few published books devoted entirely to Bakathir and various aspects of his work. It appears that all of these have been written by academics with Islamic inclinations, such as Abdulla al-Tantawi and Abu Bakr Hamid. As to the small number of recorded postgraduate research on Bakathir's works, almost all of these were conducted at Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar, the International Islamic Universities of Islamabad and Malaysia, Imam Muhammad b. Saud University, and a number of other Middle Eastern institutions.³⁷ Abu Bakr Hamid's dissertation completed at the University of Illinois, in 1988, however, is an exception.³⁸

***Al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* and *al-Duktur Hazim* as case studies**

Before proceeding any further, I shall clarify the reasons behind giving particular attention to the plays *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* and *al-Duktur Hazim*. First of all, as mentioned previously, the differences between plays and novels are relatively minor in a literary sense. Hence, focusing on two plays, instead of a play and a novel, for instance, has had no significant side-effects on the findings of this study. Secondly, *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* ranks as one of Bakathir's most stark portrayals of devout religiosity at a personal level as a core component to effecting social change. It also displays the Arab-Islamic historical elements that are not uncommon in Bakathir's works. Finally, *al-Duktur Hazim* was one of ten of Bakathir's plays dealing with

³⁶ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 129.

³⁷ See <http://bakatheer.com/univ.htm>, available 19 April 2004.

³⁸ See Mohamed Abu Bakr Hamid, 'Two Plays by the Islamic Dramatist, Ali Ahmad Bakathir, Translated into English with Critical Commentary', dissertation, University of Illinois, 1988.

contemporary social issues.³⁹ Thus, it gives an important insight into a possible application of Bakathir's religious ideals within his contextual setting.

The significance and impact of Qur'anic verses in *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran*

Bakathir wrote *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* in 1949 for which he received an award from the Egyptian Ministry of Education the very same year.⁴⁰ However, the play was only printed in 1951.⁴¹ It is regarded as a socio-historical play,⁴² and though it is set in medieval Egypt, during the reign of Ahmad b. Tulun (d. 884 CE),⁴³ it deals with a universal Islamic theme unrestricted by time and place, i.e. the need to seek forgiveness, repent and perform righteous deeds in order to break the chain of evil deeds sparked by a single immoral act. Thus, unlike *al-Duktur Hazim*, the social elements of this play are not necessarily restricted to the contemporary social problems existent in Bakathir's time.

At first glance, the historical setting of *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* appears to have little significance and is rarely referred to. However, upon closer inspection, there are several possible reasons behind Bakathir's choice of context. Firstly, he often used notable Islamic personalities and occurrences from Arabic and Islamic history as a means to relive the grandeur of Islam. In doing so, he attempted to foster a positive reaction from the audience to seek to reestablish Islam's supremacy in human society. In this regard, Badawi comments:

Bakathir had a distinct preference for subjects drawn from history, myth and legend as well as folklore, a preference for which he tried to find an aesthetic justification. Even when he wished to make a comment on the modern world, he often found it

³⁹ Out of the ten plays dealing with contemporary social issues, two, *Shalabya* ('Shalabiya', or 'Gorgeous') and *Arayis wa Irsan* ('Brides and Grooms'), remain unpublished to date. The eight published ones in chronological order are *Humam* (1934), *al-Duktur Hazim* (1946), *al-Dunya Fawda* ('The Chaotic World', 1952), *Aghla min al-Hubb* ('Dearer than Love') published in *Al-Gamhurya* newspaper in 1954 and as a book in 2006), *Qitat wa Fi'ran* ('Cats and Mice', 1962), *Gulfadan Hanim* ('Lady Gulfadan', 1962), *Habl al-Ghasil* ('The Washing Line', 1965) and *Qadiyyat Ahl al-Rabi'a* ('The Case of the People of Rabi'a', 1990).

⁴⁰ Abd al-Hakim al-Zubaydi, 'Al-Da'wa ila al-Tawba wa Fada'il al-A'mal fi Masrahiyya al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran', available 19 March 2004, <http://bakatheer.com/zubaidi/assilsilahwalghufran.htm>.

⁴¹ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 117.

⁴² See <http://bakatheer.com/silsila.htm>, available 1 May 2004.

⁴³ He was a Turkish soldier sent to Egypt as a deputy governor in 868. Within a year, he established his own military and a financial foothold in the province. This led him to establish the first local dynasty, the Tulunids of Egypt (868-905 CE), and later jointly of Egypt, Palestine and Syria. He had a powerful army and navy, and developed a strong economy. See H. U. Rahman, *A Chronology of Islamic History 570-1000 CE*, London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1995, pp. 197-98; Imad al-Din Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1998, vol. 14, pp. 53-5.

easier to use the past as a metaphor for the present. His passionate commitment to Islam made him turn naturally to Islamic and Arab history...⁴⁴

Secondly, and more specifically, Ahmad b. Tulun was known as a successful and prosperous Egyptian ruler who was extremely generous to his people. He used to invite both dignitaries as well the masses to his daily banquet, and used to give a thousand dinars of monthly charity from his own wealth. In addition, he was amongst the best in preserving the Qur'an and reciting it in a beautiful manner.⁴⁵ Through this example, Bakathir clearly implies that a successful rulership lies in being just and in observing the Islamic injunctions. In essence, this was an implicit criticism of the state of politics in the Arab-Islamic world during his time. Thirdly, by framing the plot within a 'real' socio-historical context, Bakathir appears to try to avoid the hypothetical, giving a sense of realism to an otherwise idealistic storyline.

Plot

Al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran is a play divided into three parts and comprises a total of seven scenes. As an epigraph to the play, Bakathir uses the following Qur'anic verses:

Hurry towards your Lord's forgiveness and a Garden as wide as the heavens and earth prepared for the righteous, who give, both in prosperity and adversity, who restrain their anger and pardon people – God loves those who do good – those who remember God and implore forgiveness for their sins if they do something shameful or wrong themselves – who forgives sins but God? – and who never knowingly persist in doing wrong.⁴⁶

In the first part of the play, we are introduced to the protagonist, a man by the name of Abd al-Tawwab, who cares for the welfare of his widowed sister, Asiya, and her daughters. Likewise, he helps his miserly brother, Abd al-Jawwad, who constantly demands that a similar treatment be given to him and his children. Although Abd al-Jawwad works and obtains more than sufficient wealth, he never ceases to demand support from Abd al-Tawwab, who, in turn, always responds with kindness.

Shortly after, we realise that Abd al-Tawwab had earlier committed adultery with the wife (Ghayda) of his best friend, Qasim, while the latter was serving a prison sentence on account of his debts. Qasim's mother in-law, Umm Mastur, had earlier appealed to Abd al-Tawwab to settle her son's debts and help him out of prison. Whilst attempting to do so, Abd al-Tawwab became acquainted with Ghayda. He has an affair with her and she falls pregnant. To keep the matter discreet, Umm Mastur gives her daughter some medicine aimed at an abortion. During this abortion attempt, Ghayda dies of a haemorrhage.

⁴⁴ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 117.

⁴⁵ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ Qur'an, 3:133-35. I have used Abdel Haleem's Qur'an translation throughout this paper.

With the death of Ghayda, the inner conscience of Abd al-Tawwab awakens causing him to thoroughly regret his immoral actions. His remorse and sense of guilt leads him to sincere repentance and brings about a striking change in character. He spends his wealth in an effort to release Qasim from prison and continues to act kindly towards Umm Mastur. Upon Qasim's release, Abd al-Tawwab hands him some jewellery to sell for profit. This enables Qasim to further his business exploits in Sham with the later joining him in a partnership. In the third scene of part one, Abd al-Tawwab marries Kawthar, a young woman who has been pampered by her father, Isma'il. This prevents her from performing her duties as a wife, spending her days either sleeping or visiting her father. This occurs to the extent that Abd al-Tawwab does not have any sexual relations with her. Nevertheless, Abd al-Tawwab remains patient and hopes for a change in her character. At the end of part one, he travels to Sham upon the request of his business partner; their business has expanded and Abd al-Tawwab is required to help out.

In the second part of the play, Abd al-Tawwab returns to Egypt after a year and half and immediately finds his wife ill in her family's house. When he requests to move her to his residence for treatment, her family refuses. In addition, they reject his suggestion to bring a doctor to examine her on the pretext that it is forbidden for a male doctor to see her. They provide other excuses and dismiss the illness as something normal. Abd al-Tawwab begins to have doubts and suspects that his wife is pregnant. Eventually, Umm Mastur informs him that his wife had committed adultery with her son, Mastur. The malice of Umm Mastur becomes evident as she rejoices at Abd al-Tawwab's demise and it becomes clear that she deliberately encouraged the affair as a payback for what he did to her daughter, Ghayda. Abd al-Tawwab accepts this and returns to the family of Kawthar. He requests to move her to his residence yet again so that she may give birth there. He assures them that he will not expose her sin. Isma'il and his wife, Maymuna, are grateful and can hardly believe Abd al-Tawwab's forgiving attitude. In the same part, Mastur weds Qasim's sister. After only two weeks of marriage, he is called to join the army of Ahmad b. Tulun advancing towards Aleppo.

Seven years later, Abd al-Tawwab is seen leading a peaceful and happy life with Kawthar and their children, Usama and Shafi'a. But whilst Usama is Kawthar's illegitimate child, Abd al-Tawwab and his sister love both children and treat them equally. In fact, they appear to pamper Usama more since his own mother neglects him and treats him harshly as he reminds her of her sin. In scene two, Mastur kills his wife upon his return thinking that she is pregnant after having an affair. As a result, he is captured and imprisoned. Lamenting the fate of both her children, Umm Mastur begins to act irrationally and threatens to expose Abd al-Tawwab's secret to Qasim. Abd al-Tawwab begs her not to do so for the sake of her late daughter as well as Qasim, who remains emotionally affected by her death and continues to do good to Umm Mastur. Instead, Umm Mastur threatens to expose Kawthar's secret. However, Abd al-Tawwab succeeds in discouraging her from doing so by threatening to bring the matter to the Sultan. This would have resulted in certain punishment for she would have been found guilty in procuring the affair. Instead, Abd al-Tawwab promises to plead to the Sultan to reduce her son's punishment on the grounds that she has nobody to look after her.

In the final scene, we witness Abd al-Tawwab on his death bed. As a result of Abd al-Jawwad's pestering, he calls upon a religious scholar and seeks a verdict concerning Usama's right to inherit from him.⁴⁷ The scholar informs him that Usama is like his own son and therefore has the legal right to inherit. Abd al-Tawwab then calls for Umm Mastur and seeks forgiveness from her. She pardons him and he informs her that he was always aware of her vengeful attitude towards him. Similarly, Abd al-Tawwab informs Qasim of his previous affair with Ghayda and seeks his forgiveness. After saying a final supplication, Abd al-Tawwab dies peacefully at the end of the play.

Based on the above, the significance and impact of the Qur'anic verses cited in the epigraph is thoroughly evident. In fact, the whole plot seems to be built upon these verses; from the fact that adultery is chosen as the major sin that constantly repeats itself, to the central theme of forgiveness and righteous deeds as the cure. The verses significantly enhance the plot and are central to all its events. Even the title of the play is directly related to these verses. The term *al-silsila* (lit. chain), as clarified in the play, refers to the chain of sin committed by man that cannot be broken except through the seeking of forgiveness (*ghufran*).⁴⁸

However, from another angle, this aspect of the play is seen as its main shortcoming. Some critics consider the whole construct of the play as being too mechanical as a result. They argue that there are 'too many improbable parallelisms and coincidences, and the point which the author wishes to make is far too obtrusive.'⁴⁹ This criticism is, of course, solely based on the critical literary approach mentioned earlier. It is, in essence, a question of hermeneutics. As such, a different audience, such as the dogmatically religious, would most likely appreciate what they would consider a poignant storyline.

In the play's opening scene, Abd al-Tawwab recites several Qur'anic verses, which also have a significant bearing on the play. The following verses shall be discussed in the subsequent sub-sections:

People, be mindful of your Lord, for the earthquake of the Last Hour will be a mighty thing: on the Day you see it, every nursing mother will think no more of her baby,

⁴⁷ Abd al-Jawwad wanted to inherit Abd al-Tawwab's wealth. If Abd al-Tawwab had no son and only daughters, his brother could inherit from him. Abd al-Jawwad thought that he would inherit as Usama was only an adopted son of Abd al-Tawwab. Out of his ignorance, he convinces Abd al-Tawwab to call on a religious scholar. But as Usama is Abd al-Tawwab's legal son, the scholar affirmed that he had the right to inherit.

⁴⁸ Ali Ahmad Bakathir, *Al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran*, al-Fallaja: Dar Masir li al-Tiba'a, n.d., pp. 104, 111.

⁴⁹ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 117.

every pregnant female will miscarry, you will think people are drunk when they are not, so severe will be God's torment.⁵⁰

At the end of the play, in Abd al-Tawwab's final supplication, where he says: 'I shall meet you my Lord with a tranquil soul, I shall return to you my Lord well-pleased and well-pleasing (unto You),'⁵¹ several verses of the Qur'an are explicitly alluded to, which also have an important role. These verses are: '[But] you, soul at peace: return to your Lord well pleased and well pleasing; go in among My servants; and into My Garden.'⁵²

Protagonists and characters

The protagonist, Abd al-Tawwab, is nothing short of a glaring representation of the Qur'anic verses found in the play, to the extent that the cardinal sin he commits is adultery. From one angle, his character never seems to develop throughout the whole play, especially since his sinful past is only mentioned in the present and is never reenacted. However, from another perspective, his character evolves according to the stages mentioned in the verses: repentance, spending in both prosperity and adversity, restraining anger, forgiveness and performing righteous deeds.

Abd al-Tawwab is the near-perfect personification of the concepts of forgiveness, repentance, charity, repression of anger, pardon and performing righteous deeds found in the verse cited in the play's epigraph. Even when his wife considers herself unworthy of him after committing adultery, he forgives her and embraces her. He embodies the concept of patience in Islam, i.e. patience in obeying God, patience in avoiding the disobedience of God and patience in the face of adversity. His enduring piety and God-fearing character is aptly reflected by his emotional response to the verses he recites during the opening scene; he immediately sheds tears and implores God for forgiveness. This attitude bears an unmistakable resemblance to the following verses:

True believers are those whose hearts tremble with awe when God is mentioned, whose faith increases when His revelations are recited to them, who put their trust in their Lord.⁵³

In addition, Abd al-Tawwab's constant invocations and advice to do good render him as a person of *taqwa*, with *taqwa* defined as 'obeying Allah so that He is never disobeyed, remembering Him so that He is never forgotten and being thankful to Him so that He is never disbelieved'.⁵⁴ One of the verses in the epigraph mentions the *muttaqun* (those who possess *taqwa*).

⁵⁰ Qur'an, 22:1-2.

⁵¹ Bakathir, *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran*, p. 132.

⁵² Qur'an, 89:27-8.

⁵³ Qur'an, 8:2.

⁵⁴ Qaadhi, *Sciences of the Qur'aan* p. 13.

Abd al-Tawwab's intentions to obediently follow the laws of Islam are witnessed even on his death bed when he calls for a religious scholar to seek a verdict concerning the rules of inheritance for Usama, his adopted child. One can only conclude that Bakathir's use of a Prophetic narration as evidence for the final ruling displays the strong religious ideals mentioned in the verses. We often get a sense that he is thoroughly at peace with himself, despite his earlier misdeeds; his final words are a clear reflection of this and complete the portrayal of an ideal Islamic character and an ideal repentance.

To ensure continuing parallels between the protagonist and the concept of repentance mentioned in the relevant Qur'anic verses, Bakathir purposefully gives him the name of Abd al-Tawwab (servant of the One who accepts repentance). In fact, the term *tawwab* itself (without the 'abd', meaning 'servant') would be most appropriate in describing the protagonist, which, when used for human beings, refers to their sincere and constant repentance. With an almost flawless hero, albeit after his repentance, one may be led into thinking that some of the minor characters are simply designed to fill in the gaps and are somewhat superfluous. However, this is not the case; for instance, Umm Mastur plays an important role in the consequences of events and Abd al-Jawwad is the epitome of a greedy person who exploits his brother's generosity. And, to Bakathir's credit, the characters are sufficiently distinguished from one another; no two characters think alike, they are Islamically flawed, and have conflicts with one another. As a result, this creates an interesting social setting designed to enhance the strength of the protagonist's Islamic character; he is the only one who does not succumb to conflict or hatred but finds the ability to forgive instead.

Style and intended meaning

According to Isam Bahi, *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* is the first allegorical play in Arabic literature; behind an obvious storyline, the play carries another meaning with the purpose of instructing or admonishing.⁵⁵ At first glance, the main principle behind the play appears to be 'do unto others what others have done unto you'. One critic, Mutawalli Salah, opposes this by mentioning that the play implies that fate shall eventually do justice to the evildoer. The one who commits wrong shall ultimately be wronged against.⁵⁶ However, this was not Bakathir's intention; rather, the underlying theme stems directly from the epigraph; it is calling the people to hasten towards repentance, to desist from the disobedience of Allah, and to perform good deeds. The *silsila* referred to by Bakathir is the chain of sin committed by man; it is part of his nature to be susceptible to it. Thus, it is his duty to take heed of the verses and repent. As a direct consequence of sincere repentance, man is forgiven and the chain of sin is broken. The common conditions for repentance in Islam are: (1) immediate abandonment of the sin; (2) feeling remorse; and (3) making a resolve not to repeat

⁵⁵ Al-Zubaydi, 'al-Da'wa ila al-Tawba'.

⁵⁶ Cited in al-Zubaydi, 'al-Da'wa ila al-Tawba'.

it. However, if the sin involves another party – such as is the case with adultery – one must seek the other party's pardon and reconcile. If this is not done, the chain of sin will continue and the opposition will harbour a vengeful attitude, as demonstrated by Umm Mastur's feelings towards Abd al-Tawwab.

Al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran is hence an allegory for the continuous sinning within society and its distant relationship with God. Bakathir implies that if individuals within society were to hasten towards repentance and forgiveness after every act of disobedience, they would eventually be freed from the chain of sin and be merciful to one another, as demonstrated by Abd al-Tawwab's seeking of forgiveness from Umm Mastur and Qasim. Although idealistic, Bakathir's intentions with his portrayal of the protagonist are clearly dictated by the epigraph. Furthermore, revenge is discouraged, with Umm Mastur as the metaphor for the vengeful attitudes that often plague society.

Evidently, Bakathir has ingeniously used an allegorical play to reveal the need to implement the teachings of the Qur'anic verses he cites in the epigraph to the play. In addressing society's inevitable problem of constant sinning, Bakathir uses repeated occurrences of adultery as a metaphor. However, his seemingly lenient attitude towards adultery in the play – where it occurs often yet no one is trialled or sentenced to death – seems to imply that sin can never really be avoided. Rather, it is an individual's attitude in the face of sin that matters since the door for forgiveness, repentance and righteous deeds is always open in Islam. One may conclude, yet again, that the verses were the source of inspiration for Bakathir's views. The verses do not mention punishment but encourage repentance from the sinner instead.

Intended audience

Due to its strong Islamic overtones, there is little doubt that Bakathir intended *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* for a Muslim audience. The fact that he customarily uses Qur'anic verses as epigraphs for all his plays and novels lends support to this observation. Although devout Muslims with similar mindsets would be most affected by a play based heavily on Qur'anic principles, Bakathir clearly intends widespread change amongst all Muslims, i.e. the devout are reminded of Qur'anic teachings through the play while all Muslims in general are admonished about their religious duty.

The play seems to be a practical explanation of the verses in the epigraph that society can easily relate to. As every individual sins and needs to repent according to Muslim belief, Bakathir attempted to promote change within individuals in light of the verses so that they may ultimately effect change within the wider society. In an attempt to achieve that aim, Bakathir seems to have employed the method of *targhib* (arousal of desire towards righteousness) and *tarhib* (intimidation through the threat of punishment) in his selection of verses for the play. The verses in the epigraph and those alluded to in the final words of the protagonist correspond to *targhib*, while those included in the opening sequence correspond to *tarhib*. *Targhib* and *tarhib* are

considered effective means for motivation amongst Muslims; it features in Islamic religious works and is a method often employed in the Qur'an.⁵⁷

The significance and impact of Qur'anic verses in *al-Duktur Hazim*

Bakathir wrote *al-Duktur Hazim* in 1946 and published it in the same year. It ranks as only Bakathir's fourth attempt at writing a play in prose form. Like *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran*, it is regarded as a social play but with comical and satirical elements.⁵⁸ Being one of ten Bakathir works dealing with contemporary societal issues, there are no themes from history, myth or legend, unlike many of his other dramas and novels. Therefore, *al-Duktur Hazim* occupies a niche among Bakathir's numerous works and demonstrates an application of Bakathir's Islamic ideals in a contemporary setting.

Al-Duktur Hazim is a domestic drama in seven scenes. According to Badawi, it addresses 'the disastrous results of the undue influence of parents and parents-in-law on their children and their interference in their children's lives and marriages.'⁵⁹ But, if one uses the Qur'anic verses Bakathir cites as an epigraph to the play as a guide, it is clear that whilst this is likely a sub-theme, it was certainly not Bakathir's primary intention. Rather, the verses state:

We have commanded people to be good to their parents. Their mothers carried them, with strain upon strain, and it takes two years to wean them. Give thanks to Me and to your parents – all will return to me. But if they strive with you to make you join in worship with Me others that of which you have no knowledge, then obey them not, but behave with them in the world kindly...⁶⁰

Hence, it appears that the main lesson of the play is that children should be dutiful to their parents regardless of their shortcomings, which, in the case of *al-Duktur Hazim*, the parents and in-laws have interfered too much in their children's lives such that it leads to tensions within families. However, obedience to parents is not unconditional, as also implied by the verses; but so long as parents do not call to the disobedience of God, they should be treated with respect.

Plot

The play begins with the protagonist, Dr. Hazim, engaged in a conversation with Buyumi, the chief clerk of his father, Sharif Bik. The conversation revolves around

⁵⁷ See al-Husayn Jarnu Mahmud Jallu, *Asalib al-Tashwiq wa al-Ta'ziz fi al-Qur'an al-Karim*, MEd dissertation, University of Kuwait, Beirut: Muassasat al-Risala; Damascus: Dar al-Ulum al-Insaniyya, 1994.

⁵⁸ See <http://bakatheer.com/hazm.htm>, available 23 April 2004.

⁵⁹ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 123.

⁶⁰ Qur'an, 31:14-15.

Hazim's salary and how his father has demanded it from him. When his father arrives, the two engage in a long argument. His father argues that Hazim's salary is needed to help out with household expenses. On the other hand, Hazim intends to buy his fiancée, Nahid, a gift for Eid⁶¹ as well as some new clothing for himself. Hazim argues on the grounds of unfair treatment as his lowlife half-brother, Abbas, always seems to get his way while he is ordered to contribute his monthly income, as well as his clinic's revenue towards household expenses.

Hazim's step-mother, Hikmat Hanim, also mother to his half-sisters Ihsan and Layla, uses her position as Sharif's wife to exploit Hazim's hard-earned wealth. Both she and her husband are parsimonious and wasteful at the same time; they never seem to be able to make ends meet. As a result, Hazim's income is constantly taken away from him and this prevents him from marrying Nahid. Nahid's parents, Sabri Afandi and Amina Hanim grow increasingly impatient although they are aware of Hazim's predicament. Finally, Sabri's patience runs out and despite desperate pleas from Hazim for more time, he severs Hazim's engagement with Nahid. Although Sabri recognises Hazim's integrity, he argues that his daughter will never be able to achieve happiness as Hazim's wife as long as Hazim relinquishes control of his life to his parents. As a result, both Hazim and Nahid are heartbroken.

Later, Hazim is seen in a bar with Buyumi where he drowns his sorrows and disappointment. His close friend, Ahmad, as well as his father and Ihsan attempt to persuade him to return to his job and his home. Sharif informs him that Hikmat has changed her ways and wants him to return. Likewise, Sabri has changed his mind and wants to marry his daughter to Hazim. With renewed hope, Hazim abandons his sinful ways and returns to his clinic. However, he still refuses to return home despite his father's financial strife. His whole family begs for him to return, including Hikmat, who noticeably regrets her past treatment of Hazim and has kicked Abbas out of the house. But even when they ensure him that he will be given complete control of the household, he is reminded of the past and refuses to yield. Even his father-in-law is not able to convince him. Later on, to add a further twist to the plot, Hazim's father, Sharif, develops a mild form of paralysis.

In the penultimate scene of the play, Hazim is happily married to Nahid. In his father's household, things have changed for the better; Hikmat has changed her ways and the household no longer suffers from debt; Abbas has turned over a new leaf; and, meanwhile, Layla is married to Ahmad. Everything appears in order and Hazim has resumed supporting his father's household with devotion.

However, Amina, Nahid's mother, is not pleased with the fact that Hazim continues to simply make ends meet and is thus unable to have a house or a child. She does not like the fact that Hazim's devotion is still split into two. This causes a heated argument between Amina and Hikmat. Amina ends up clashing with Hazim who tells her not to interfere in his household affairs since it is his responsibility to

⁶¹ Culturally, there are two main Eids (festivals) in Islam, the *Id al-Fitr*, which occurs after the fasting month of Ramadan, and the *Id al-Adha*, which occurs during the month of Hajj (pilgrimage). Linguistically, Eid comes from the Arabic verb *ada*, meaning 'to return'. Hence, Eid is something that returns (annually).

look after two households. Amina is hurt by Hazim; she leaves and orders her daughter to do likewise. Nahid, who is hurt by Hazim's words, leaves as well.

In the final scene, Sabri tells Nahid to return to Hazim and blames his wife for interfering in Hazim's family affairs. Amina starts debating with her husband but he argues that he chose Hazim as a son-in-law on the basis of his stature, dignity and character, not his wealth. He mentions that Hazim's treatment of his family is a sign of his integrity and that Nahid has to obey her husband. Amina yields to this argument but questions Hazim's refusal to bring Nahid home. Sabri refutes by saying that Nahid should return to her husband as she was the one who left him. Upon realising her willingness to return to her husband, Sabri initiates a plan to bring Hazim to his house. He calls Hazim and informs him that Nahid is sick. When Hazim arrives, he realises that Nahid is not sick and that it was all a plan to bring them back together. In a light-hearted section, Hazim pretends to examine his wife and then takes her home. The scene ends with Sabri playing a joke on his wife.

As every individual sins and needs to repent according to Muslim belief, Bakathir attempted to promote change within individuals in light of the verses so that they may ultimately effect change within the wider society.

Based on the above, the verses in the epigraph clearly have a direct relationship with the plot. Despite early problems, Hazim ends up looking after his father, his step-mother and her children despite financial difficulties. He sees it as his duty to his own father, who has grown old and weak and cannot afford to look after the household. Likewise, Nahid always obeys her parents and never neglects them. This occurs to the extent that she obeys her mother when ordered to leave Hazim's residence although this act is atoned by her returning to her husband's house in the final scene. Through this, Bakathir seems to imply that once a woman is married, her primary duty is towards her husband and not her parents anymore.

Two additional verses are also quoted within the play. The first, 'husbands shall take full care of their wives',⁶² has a considerable bearing on the characters, style, intended meaning and intended audience. The second, '[some] say the sleepers were three, and their dog made four',⁶³ was for comical purposes with an important implication aimed at instilling a Qur'anic mindset.

Protagonists and characters

Unlike Abd al-Tawwab, who, despite previous wrongdoings, appears almost saintly throughout the play, Hazim's character has some initial flaws. For example, he argues with his father, appears to disobey him, drinks and gambles. Obviously, these 'un-Islamic' traits have no direct relationship with the verses in the epigraph. However, after regaining new hope, Hazim applies himself diligently to the service of his father by continuing to look after the household even after starting his own family and this

⁶² Qur'an, 4:34.

⁶³ Qur'an, 18:22.

relates directly to the Qur'anic verses in the epigraph. Even his name, Hazim, is a reflection of his determination and strong-will to serve his father despite personal difficulties. Throughout the play, one senses that Hazim can never really neglect his father despite their previous problems. He simply goes through a stage of denial from which he emerges as a dutiful son.

The play is set essentially in a domestic setting. Of the twelve characters, three of them were initially outsiders. But after Ahmad marries Layla, the number reduces to two, Buyumi and Christo, the bar owner. To enhance Hazim's strength of character and the effect of the verses, Bakathir portrays him as the only one with a different mother. Thus, although he has no specific obligation to Hikmat and her children, he ends up looking after the entire household on the basis of being dutiful and obedient to his father.

Additionally, the Qur'anic verses in the epigraph seem to form the basis of the parent-child relationships within the play. Nahid is a good example of obedience throughout the play. Despite being heartbroken after her father severed her engagement to Hazim, this did not lead her to rebel. Although mistaken, she even obeys her mother when ordered to leave Hazim's house. The verses mention both parents but place an emphasis on the mother. This is somewhat highlighted in Nahid's hasty decision to leave on the basis of obedience. Similarly, Layla and Ihsan are dutiful and respectful children. More significantly, although Abbas is largely portrayed as manipulative and of bad character prior to turning over a new leaf, there are no distinct signs of disobedience to parents on his part. His bad traits mostly occur outside the household and are not actually portrayed within the play.

The verse, 'husbands shall take full care of their wives' (*al-rijal qawwamun ala al-nisa'*), has an entirely different effect on the characters. Based on his understanding of the verse, Bakathir appears to render the female characters as subordinate to all the men, a reflection of the socio-religious perceptions of gender roles in Egyptian society during his time. Although the women also voice their opinions, they make very few, if any, vital decisions and the men are seen as their protectors and maintainers. Any decisions the female characters make are portrayed as abrupt, hasty and irrational.

On the other hand, Bakathir portrays the male characters in a mixed fashion. The strongest characters are Hazim, Sabri and Ahmad, although Hazim did have his personal problems in the play. Sharif is the authoritative type who mellows as the play progresses due to illness and old age. Abbas eventually changes his ways and Buyumi is the loyal servant. Hikmat, Hazim's step-mother also changes; she regrets her previous misdeeds and persuades Hazim to return home to look after the household.⁶⁴ The first four display the kind of authority that may be understood from the verse. The final scene is a glaring example of how the men (Sabri and Hazim) easily outfox the women (Amina and Nahid). Since this is the concluding scene, and the scene in which the verse is quoted, Bakathir's intentions are quite clear, i.e. he wishes to justify a particular interpretation of the verse in question.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Bakathir, *al-Duktur Hazim*, p. 87.

⁶⁵ See Ali Ahmad Bakathir, *al-Duktur Hazim*, Egypt: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, n. d., p. 139.

Finally, Amina is Bakathir's epitome of the 20th century woman who fights for her rights to the extent that she disagrees with Hazim's devotion to his father's household. She believes that a man should be fully devoted to his wife. In this sense, she appears to be a minor antithesis to the verses in the epigraph. Bakathir's satire towards such characters who may exist in real life is evident when Hikmat refers to her as a '20th century lawyer'.⁶⁶ This also appears to be a sarcastic remark towards what Bakathir considered to be modern values that oppose important religious principles. At any rate, this was based on a particular interpretation of the verse that seems to have been influenced by the societal context.

Style and intended meaning

Unlike *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran*, which is a pioneering allegorical play, Bakathir employs a much more direct approach for *al-Duktur Hazim*. As mentioned earlier, Badawi believes that the main theme of the play is the disastrous affects of parents interfering with their children's lives. He seems to have missed the main point. The play has to be understood in the light of the verses in the epigraph and the verse which states that husbands shall take full care of their wives. Taking everything into consideration, that play appears to address two important aspects of domestic life: (1) the requirement to be dutiful to parents and obey them regardless of their shortcomings; and (2) that men, as heads of households, have a specific role to look after women. The minor themes of the play include the one identified by Badawi, obedience to the husband, the need to be strong-willed and determined in the face of life's challenges, the need to repent and the need to choose a spouse on the basis of religion, integrity and character, not wealth.

Clearly, this play attempts to address all the primary relationships in a domestic setting namely, between parent and child, spouse and spouse, sibling and sibling and relations with in-laws. Bakathir was himself aware that he had attempted to tackle too many issues and that, as a result, the play may be perceived to lack unity and effect.⁶⁷ This is despite the fact that Bakathir himself tried to focus on two key issues, namely: 1) who should take responsibility for the household if the father is weak and irrational while the son is otherwise; and 2) whether a mother-in-law has the right to interfere in her son-in-law's affairs.⁶⁸ Indeed, the themes and characters change incessantly throughout the play, but since this was Bakathir's first attempt to write on contemporary social issues, it appears to be a case of simply trying to say too much the first time. The other three of his works on such issues, *al-Dunya Fawda* ('The Chaotic World', 1952), *Qitat wa Fi'ran* ('Cats and Mice', 1962) and *Gulfadan Hanim* ('Lady Gulfadan', 1962), were written much later. Nevertheless, the play is sufficiently held together by the verses and the playwright's intentions are still conveyed as a result (provided that one understands the significance of the verses in the first place).

⁶⁶ Bakathir, *al-Duktur Hazim*, p. 117.

⁶⁷ Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, pp. 31-34.

⁶⁸ Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, pp. 33-34.

Bakathir seems to be addressing the social problem of children neglecting their parents who may have wronged them in certain ways. Through the Qur'anic verses and the play, he attempts to convince his audience that they shall always have a religious obligation to their parents no matter what; a duty that is often coupled with the worship of God in the Qur'an.⁶⁹ Even after one is married, this obligation continues as even the character Amina, reluctantly acknowledges.⁷⁰ The elements of repentance, commitment and strong will – the main themes of *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* – simply reflect the religiosity present in all of Bakathir's works. The issue of choosing a righteous husband is linked directly to men who know their responsibility towards their parents. Hikmat says that if given a choice, between a man who looks after his father and his family and one who does not, she will choose the former for her daughter.⁷¹

Bakathir portrayal of women as weak and requiring the protection of men may be seen as a little far-fetched at times. His staunch opposition to the growing influence of feminism as well as a patriarchal reading of 'husbands shall take full care of their wives' appears to have been the cause. In the final scene of *al-Duktur Hazim*, the women appear gullible, irrational, manipulated and mocked. For example, Sabri admires the fact that Hazim does not allow women to play around with his affairs.⁷² When he quotes the verse, after outfoxing his wife and daughter, he says: "All praise is due to God, we are victorious. All praises belong to God, He has spoken the truth. [Indeed, that is why] husbands shall take full care of their wives."

The above element of comedy is not entirely innocent and could have worked against Bakathir. Essentially, he is being critical of the modern woman and seems to imply that a woman will always be a woman, that is, her role is different to that of men. She should not seek to change her role in society. However, that being said, it was not Bakathir's intention to mock women; rather, he was attempting to emphasise the different roles men and women play in society. Additionally, Bakathir was being critical and dismissive of feminism, which he would expectedly oppose due to his Islamic mindset. Next, the relevant verse merely states the responsibility of men towards women and should not be exploited. Rather, men should realise the extent of their responsibility towards women. In fact, Bakathir seems to imply that if men have the 'upper hand' in this matter, then women, as evident in the verses he cites in the epigraph, have a greater right as a mother. At any rate, Bakathir's overall concern for the status and role of women was highlighted in his first play, *Humam*, as mentioned previously.

Intended audience

Al-Duktur Hazim play was directed at contemporary Arab society and suggests that the many problems within the society are a direct result of numerous domestic

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Qur'an, 31:13-14.

⁷⁰ Bakathir, *al-Duktur Hazim*, p. 114.

⁷¹ Bakathir, *al-Duktur Hazim*, p. 117.

⁷² Bakathir, *al-Duktur Hazim*, p. 129.

problems. This may explain why Bakathir attempted to address so many domestic issues in one play. More specifically, however, Bakathir intended this play for a Muslim audience. The verses discussed previously are used to outline the rights and responsibilities of key members within an ideal Muslim family. Bakathir wants parents, children, husbands and wives to take heed of these verses and understand their respective roles. Likewise, concepts such as repentance and choosing the right spouse on the basis of Islamic values appeal to a devout Muslim audience. Even the verse mentioned by Buyumi in a comical setting has a deeper connotation;⁷³ firstly, it clearly reflects Bakathir's strong Qur'anic mindset to the extent that he uses it for lighter elements of a play and, secondly, he seems to be demonstrating how Muslims should think using the Qur'an in all situations.

A brief evaluation:

The significance and impact of Qur'anic verses in the literary works of Bakathir

Since his first play, *Humam*, Bakathir invariably used Qur'anic verses as epigraphs to his plays and novels. Even for stories based on events indirectly related to Islam or those that occurred before Islam, he would still do so. Bakathir often drew inspiration from myth, legend, folklore and Arabic and Islamic history in order to comment on the modern world. He used the past as a metaphor for the present and preferred this approach to dealing with contemporary issues in a direct manner. Due to his commitment to Islam, Bakathir generally avoided colloquial Arabic in his published works, which made his expression somewhat stilted and turgid for modern themes, lacking 'the immediacy of spoken speech'.⁷⁴ Bakathir himself admits that due to this concern, he did not feel like writing many plays on modern social themes.⁷⁵ However, to address this problem, Bakathir used to write his plays on contemporary life twice; the first time in colloquial Egyptian Arabic and the second time in classical Arabic for publication. An example of this is *al-Dunya Fawda*.⁷⁶

For works based on myth, legend or folklore, Bakathir uses verses in the epigraph to provide Islamic interpretations for his chosen themes.⁷⁷ For example, in the play *Ikhnatun wa Nafirtiti* (1938), he ends up portraying Akhenaton (also, Ikhnaton) as an Islamic character who calls to the worship of One God. However, his main shortcoming was that he refused to use force when required to defend the

⁷³ Bakathir, *al-Duktur Hazim*, p. 106.

⁷⁴ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 123.

⁷⁵ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 123.

⁷⁶ Bakathir mentioned this in a TV interview in April 1969 (details unavailable). As a result of this interesting approach, Bakathir left two plays, *Shalabya* and *Arayis wa Irsan*, entirely in colloquial Egyptian Arabic as he passed away before having the opportunity to rewrite them in formal Arabic for publication.

⁷⁷ Other works in this genre include *al-Fir'awn al-Maw'ud* ('The Promised Pharaoh', 1945), *Mismar Juha* ('Juha's Nail', 1951) and *Sirr Shahrazad* ('The Secret of Shahrazad', 1953).

truth.⁷⁸ This refusal to fight those who opposed him led to his eventual downfall. There are three major steps to note here. Firstly, the verses play a significant role in 'Islamising' the story for the intended audience (and, possibly, for Bakathir beforehand) but they may or may not be the basis of the story. Secondly, this then leads to a comment on the condition of the Muslims in the Arab-Islamic world. In the case of *Ikhnatun wa Nafirtiti*, Bakathir implies that faith is inadequate if one is not going to fight when required to defend the truth (similar to the views of the Muslim Brotherhood). And, finally, the audience is left with Bakathir's intended meaning (usually a comment on any issue involving the Muslims) which is always based on Islamic teachings.

The above is also the case with Bakathir's play, *Ma'sa Udib* ('The Tragedy of Oedipus', 1949), which is based on the Greek legend of Oedipus but is considerably adapted for a Muslim audience.⁷⁹ Thus, the significance and impact of the Qur'anic verses within this genre can roughly be described by the abovementioned three-step process. Hamid terms this as Bakathir's special exegesis (*al-tafsir al-khass*) of Qur'anic verses.⁸⁰ Bakathir also wrote a play, *Harut wa Marut* (1962), based on a Qur'anic story. Yet again, the Qur'anic verses may or may not be the basis for storyline; rather, the foundation may simply be Bakathir's motivation to address issues of interest from an Islamic perspective.

For works based on Arabic and Islamic History, such as *Wa Islamah* (1945), *al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar* (1948), *Sirr al-Hakim bi Amrilla* ('The Secret of al-Hakim bi Amrilla', 1947)⁸¹ and *al-Malhama al-Islamiyya al-Kubra* (1961), the processes and dynamics involving Qur'anic verses are different.⁸² For this genre, the process of Islamisation is not required; rather, the verses are quoted to enhance the real-life characters and stories. For example, in *al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar*, Bakathir focuses on the story of Hamdan Qarmat, a communist ideologue, during a time when there were raging conflicts between Capitalist, Communist and Islamist ideologies in Kufa. Eventually, through Abu al-Baqa' al-Baghdadi, who calls for a return to the application of just Islamic principles, Islam prevails in the land. Bakathir pays particular attention to working class dynamics in the novel, which makes it more applicable to Arab Muslim society.⁸³ The Qur'anic verses used in such works do not seem to form the basis for the plot. Instead, through these stories, Bakathir intends to: 1) portray the ideal application of the verses used in a particular work; and 2) educate the intended audience about the grandeur of Islamic history, implying that if Muslims of the past achieved success by following Qur'anic injunctions, so too will Muslims in modern times.

⁷⁸ Hamid, 'Riyada Bakathir'.

⁷⁹ See Hamid, 'Riyada Bakathir'; Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, pp. 118-9. Another work in this genre is *Uziris* ('Osiris', 1959) based on the Osiris myth.

⁸⁰ Hamid, 'Riyada Bakathir'.

⁸¹ Al-Hakim bi Amrilla was the common name for al-Mansur Abu Ali (996-1021), the first Fatimid Imam born on Egyptian Soil.

⁸² Other works include *Dar Ibn Luqman* ('The House of the Son of Luqman', 1960), *al-Fallah al-Fasih* ('The Eloquent Peasant', 1965) and *al-Duda wa al-Thu'ban* ('The Worm and the Snake', 1967).

⁸³ Sakkut, *The Egyptian Novel*, p. 71.

Finally, for works based on contemporary or 'time-neutral' issues, Bakathir's use of Qur'anic verses is even more significant; the verses may even be the basis for the storyline and characters as observed in the two plays analysed in this research. This is also the case for works dealing with political issues in the Arab world during Bakathir's time. In such works, Bakathir mainly touches on the Arab-Israeli conflict and is extremely critical of Zionism, Marxism and Communism whilst emphasising an Islamic alternative.⁸⁴

Bakathir personally argued that literature was first and foremost a work of art.⁸⁵ He advised his fellow Islamic writers to ensure that their zeal for Islam did not compromise this fact.⁸⁶ However, he may have fallen short in fulfilling his own advice to others; his strong religious commitment and heavy reliance on Qur'anic verses have such a significant bearing on his works, which is where Badawi criticises him.⁸⁷ However, from another perspective and contrary to what Bakathir wrote himself, a piece of literature can be a significant representation of an author's comments on aspects of the individual and the society, especially if s/he strictly abides by a particular ideology. If many writers choose to write for a specific audience, then surely Bakathir has the liberty to target a Muslim audience. And, it would be unfair to judge his works from within a different paradigm as Bakathir's literature is best understood from within the Muslim experience, particularly the context of the Arab-Islamic world during his period of authorship. From this perspective, the religious implications in his works are purely acceptable.

Finally, at times, the verses in the epigraphs provide an immediate expectation of the moral lessons and themes behind each work. On the one hand, the work becomes predictable, but from the perspective of the intended audience, this creates an immediate affection to the story and draws their attention.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has demonstrated the great importance and impact of the Qur'anic verses found in many of Bakathir's novels and plays, which are often social commentaries. In more glaring cases, such as *al-Silsila wa al-Ghufran* and *al-Duktur Hazim*, these verses may even form the basis of the whole story, including the plot, the characters and the intended message. In other cases, the impact of the verses may be less, but there is always an Islamic message that Bakathir wishes to convey, which is a reflection of his strong religious ideals and Qur'anic mindset through which he evaluates society. The strong Qur'anic influences in his works demonstrate his

⁸⁴ See Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, pp. 126-29. These works include *Shayluk al-Jadid* ('The New Sherlock, 1944), *Sha'bulla al-Mukhtar* ('God's Chosen People', 1956), *Ilah Isra'il* ('The Lord of Israel', 1959), *Imbiraturiyya fi al-Mazad* ('Empire for Auction', 1952), *al-Za'im al-Awhad* ('The Supreme Leader', 1959) and *Habl al-Ghasil* (1965).

⁸⁵ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 129.

⁸⁶ Hamid, 'Riyada Bakathir'.

⁸⁷ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 129.

commitment to work for Islam and the Arabs. He wanted them to realise the importance of remaining faithful to Islam as the only means to achieve success.

Certainly, some literary critics may consider Bakathir's unwavering use of Qur'anic verses and his strong religious mindset as distracting and a detrimental limitation to his works. But for devout Muslims, this is far from the case; rather, an immediate affection is formed when a recognisable Qur'anic verse is cited at key moments in the literature. However, this very nature of Bakathir's works may actually lend itself to a classic example of converting the already converted. If his main intention was to criticise, evaluate, comment on and initiate a change in society through his writings, his predictable approach and mindset may only appeal to a certain class of Muslims who may already share his views, not those who ascribe to a different ideology. Indeed, his recorded intellectual stoushes with the Marxist, Communist and Liberalist Arab groups, for instance, are a perfect justification of this point. Nonetheless, such ideological clashes are not surprising considering the religiously and politically motivated nature of Bakathir's works

As an Islamic dramatist and novelist, Bakathir has contributed greatly to its establishment and development, and he is often viewed as the pioneer of Islamic literature. His contributions to modern Arabic literature are manifested in the various styles he pioneered and experimented with. His prolific writing of plays, novels and poetry certainly deserve more attention, both in terms of readership and academic research. Finally, this study has paved the way for further avenues of research on the numerous Islamic trends and issues within Bakathir's literature. It was not merely his volume of output or strong religious influence, but at his prime, Bakathir produced works comparable to the best of his time. Identified as one of Tawfiq al-Hakim's successors, surely this prolific writer, who was undoubtedly passionate about his beliefs and his art, has to be given more attention.

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