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Alterity in the Arabic and Near Eastern Puppet Theater

By Marvin Carlson

Abstract: The theme of alterity has been prominent in the theater ever since the Greeks, who delighted in portraying the strange attitudes, costumes, appearance, and language of the *babaros* (barbarians). Indeed, the Other has always been a subject of fascination and ridicule in theater around the world. This has been particularly true of puppet theater, where the concept of Otherness takes on a powerful extra dimension in a world inhabited by the profoundly Other figure of the puppet itself. I explore some of the ways the shadow puppet theater of the Middle East, one of the great puppetry traditions, has dealt with this theme. My examples come from two widely separated sources, the trilogy of the Egyptian poet Ibn Dāniyāl, from the late thirteenth century, and a collection of the popular *karagöz* plays from modern Turkey.

I begin by discussing the complex interrelationship between the puppet and alterity, a theme that is foundational to both of these examples, and, I would argue, to puppet theater generally, even when not directly addressed. This theme is much more fully and explicitly developed in the Ibn Dāniyāl trilogy, especially in the first play, but, as I will suggest, it is part of the worldview of both examples. The most obvious use of alterity in both puppet and living theater is the appearance of a “barbarian” character or characters whose departures from cultural norms and misuse of language are a long-established comic tradition. Such characters appear in both plays, and—a somewhat surprising commonality, across 700 years—is a similar depiction of the uncivilized Sudanese, who appears very little changed from medieval to modern presentations. The other barbarians or other barbaric practices vary considerably, but alterity itself remains a common concern and device throughout.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, paraphilia, hunchbacks, karagoz

If, as theorists as diverse as Aristotle, Hegel, and Brunetière have argued, conflict stands near the heart of the drama, then alterity as a condition holds a similarly central position, since the tension between self and Other provides a universal condition of conflict. Alterity, however, is at the root not only of dramatic action, but in another dimension, at the root of the theater as a phenomenological experience, since this experience is based on the creation of an alterity between ourselves and those creatures on stage whose activities must be accepted as occurring in an alien reality. What is true for human actors, then, is even more powerfully true for puppets, whose alterity is grounded not only in their alternate world but in their very way of existing in that world and in ours. Alien as the human actor may be, the alterity of the puppet has always been more profound and thus more unsettling. Hence, we have the frequent association of the puppet with the uncanny.

Although archeological evidence shows puppets in use for several thousand years in such diverse locations as Egypt, China, and India, their tradition has almost everywhere been a non-literary one, their stories and dialogues passed down (as they still are in many parts of the world today) within an oral tradition. It is not until 13th-century Egypt that we see a literary text created for puppet performance—in fact, a set of three such plays written for an Egyptian aristocrat by the court poet, Ibn Dāniyāl. Ibn Dāniyāl claims that these shadow puppet plays mark a new and more refined direction in the genre, and there is no reason to dispute that claim.

Shadow puppetry is known to have existed in Egypt for at least two centuries before his innovations to the genre. Scholars agree, however, that such entertainments were not native to Egypt but had been brought there from the Far East, apparently into Persia along the Silk Road, and then into Egypt, which, at that time, was a part of the Abbysaid caliphate, which extended from Baghdad to Cairo. Ibn Dāniyāl was a native of the city of Mosul, not far from Baghdad, and when both those cities were menaced by the Mongul invasions of the 13th century he, like many of his fellow citizens, sought refuge in the culturally compatible but safely distant city of Cairo. There, before his literary skills gained him admission to more elevated circles, Ibn Dāniyāl settled among the Cairo bohemians, in the Husayniya quarter, many of whom, like himself, were refugees, entertainers, or both. The second play in his trilogy is essentially a series of vignettes of street performers from this group, presenting their professional appeals or their particular performative skills, giving us an unparalleled glimpse into the street life of medieval Cairo.

Ibn Dāniyāl thus began his career as an “Other” for respectable Egyptian society, both as an inhabitant of the Husayniya and as a refugee from far-off Mosul. The puppet narrator of the first play of the trilogy, the eponymous Shadow Spirit, clearly has much in common with his creator—a witty, multitalented, highly verbal inhabitant of Husayniya, recently arrived from Mosul. His profession, residence, and outsider status all reinforce his shadow alterity, but he has another feature that adds another significant reinforcement. He is a seriously deformed hunchback. This feature is so important that a discussion of it opens the play and the trilogy. The presenter of the performance begins the plays by summoning up its narrator, Tayf al-Khayal, whom he describes as “a witty humorous hunchback who, in physical appearance, looks like a shining crescent” (Ibn Dāniyāl 2013, 5). As the hunchback appears on the screen and exhibits his deformity with a low bow, the presenter delivers the opening lyrics of the play proper, a eulogy to humps—in nature and in men.

The fact that the oldest known puppet text begins with an association of its title character with humps and moreover with a eulogy celebrating the hump in man and nature as a feature of unusual beauty and attractiveness not only reminds us of the importance of the hunchback in Western comedy in general, and puppet theatre in particular, but also is one of the most obvious physical indications of alterity. Not surprisingly, an essential part of aristocratic or royal households around the world has been the jester or fool, who very frequently was a dwarf, hunchback, or both. At the heart of the classic Hindu theater are the aristocratic hero and his jester companion, the *vidushaka*, who is described in some detail in the classic work of the Hindu theater, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, as being a dwarf with protruding teeth, bald, and a hunchback with a funny gait and incoherent speech. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* even notes that in real life dwarves and hunchbacks make the best court jesters.

Those interested in puppetry are well aware of how often the alterity of the puppet figure is emphasized by a humped back. The most obvious example in the West is, of course, Punch. But behind Punch is a whole congregation of humpbacked clowns that have been traced around the globe and back thousands of years.

It should be no surprise, then, that we find again this familiar figure when we look to the other end of the trajectory of puppetry in the Islamic world, going from medieval Cairo to the modern *karagöz* shadow theatre of Turkey. Although it is not so central nor so inevitable an attribute as it is in his British cousin, Punch, a humped back is in fact a common feature in the

figure from which the karagöz takes its name. It is, generally speaking, as much a part of his image as his tattered clothing, his bare feet, and his oddly long right arm. His modest hump might be best regarded as a vestigial reminder of his performance heritage, although it does help mark him as a lower-class clown type, especially in contrast to his almost invariable companion Hacivat, a much more sophisticated and socially respectable figure. Among the smaller satellites that circle around these central figures are a variety of eccentric characters typical of this comic tradition and extending outward its interest in alterity. There are comic Others of different nationalities, races, religions, and physical abnormalities, including from time to time even a more extreme hunchback figure, the dwarf Bebe ruhi or Altikulaç (six fathoms), who often wears a top hat to make up for his diminutive size. Like many karagöz figures, his alterity also is reinforced by a distinctive way of speaking—in his case, he has an impediment that causes him to pronounce “r” and “s” as “y.” He also has a distinctive speech pattern, asking the same questions over and over again until Karagöz or others become so tired of this that they beat him off the stage.

Although the relationship between the shadow puppet tradition represented by the work of Ibn Dāniyāl and the modern karagöz has been much discussed, no direct lineage has yet been established. There are many intriguing suggestions of such a connection, and clearly the Egyptian and Turkish puppet traditions drew upon a common body of techniques, traditions, and references.

For both, as for much of the farce tradition to which they are closely related, one might legitimately characterize their offerings as performances of alterity—figures separated from common humanity by physical deformity, strange patterns of speech, unusual religious beliefs, or ethnic backgrounds. Much of the humor in such works arises in scenes where this alterity leads to confusion, misunderstanding, frustration, and even physical violence. There are countless arrangements of plot that bring about these confrontations, but one very common type can be seen in both Ibn Dāniyāl and the karagöz tradition. This I might characterize as the alterity revue, significantly utilized by both.

Since, as I have proposed, the display of alterity is a central concern of this dramatic tradition, one of the simplest and most efficient ways of carrying out this display is to place the protagonist of the action in such a situation that, in the course of the action, they encounter a series of Others and the different confrontations that result make up the action. In the dramatic tradition, this structure is similar to that of the pilgrimage drama *Everyman* or the episodic form of a work like *Peer Gynt*, and it has been often used in the puppet tradition, where the presentation of a variety of

caricature Others has long been a basic source of humor. An excellent example can be seen in the karagöz play *The Boat* (Carlson 2019, 1–17). Karagöz plays are made up of number of fairly predictable elements, although they are subject to great variation. The plays almost always begin with a traditional Arabic poem, a *gazel*, based on alternating lines that fit well with the traditional interchanges of Hacıvat and Karagöz. These opening interchanges, often composed of arguments, misunderstandings, and insults, rarely have any direct connection with the actual subject of the play, and, indeed, can easily be moved around from only play to another, as can their various elements.

This traditional opening finished, the actual subject of the play is introduced. In the case of *The Boat*, Hacıvat has purchased a boat and oars and proposes to Karagöz that they set up a business taking rides to various parts of Istanbul, always a major trade in this city. After some misunderstanding, Karagöz agrees, and the play proper follows, which consists essentially of a series of brief scenes, each involving a different prospective customer. What is of interest to us here is that the humor and flavor of each scene is based some form of alterity represented by each of these customers, an alterity manifested in their language or dialect, their mode of interaction with Hacıvat and Karagöz, and their physical appearance. Essential to the audience reception of these interchanges is the fact that each customer is a familiar karagöz character, who appears, although sometimes with different names but always with the same basic characteristics, in countless karagöz plays.

The first to appear is named Bey, a Turkish honorific roughly equivalent to “sir” in English. The figure is much more familiar to audiences, however, as Çelebi, a highly educated dandy, womanizer, and prodigal, rather like the English fop. He has distinguished manners and often uses elaborate speech with an Istanbul accent, though not in this particular play, full of Arabic or Persian learned phrases. The next customer is an equally familiar karagöz regular, the opium addict Tirkayi, whose name means “smoker,” and who always carries a pipe in one hand and a fan in the other. His most striking characteristic is abruptly falling asleep, which he does no less than three times during the eight lines that make up his scene here.

I have already mentioned the next customer, another familiar karagöz figure, Beberuhi, the hunchback with a speech impediment, which does not prevent his incessant chatter. He is followed by the first non-Islamic customer, Frenk Rum Doktor, a European doctor whose name suggests both Greek and French backgrounds. He has trouble with even the most basic Turkish, as is noted

and remarked upon in this scene. Problems in speaking the language is both a source of humor and a clear mark of alterity in theater around the world. The word barbarian comes from the Greek word *barbaros*, a designation for those who were not Greek, derived from a term for stammerer or stuttering, an onomatopoeic term for the unintelligible sounds (*bar bar bar*) presumably made by non-Greek speakers trying to speak Greek. Aristophanes, at the very beginnings of the Greek drama, employs this device, for example, in depicting the alien deity Triballus, in *The Birds*, whose lines are a mixture of Greek and nonsense syllables.

The next customer, Kastamonulu, is Turkish, but his name reveals that he is an outsider in Istanbul, a native of a coastal town on the Black Sea. His main attribute is his extreme height, making him a visual counterpart to the dwarfish Beberuhi. The written text does not reveal any accent, but before leaving the scene (and after capsizing the boat due to his great size) Kastamonulu sings “several ballads of his hometown,” which would clearly mark him as a provincial outsider to Istanbul audiences. The Arab who follows also confirms his alterity musically, entering singing a traditional Egyptian type of popular ballad, a Mahwal. Once finished, he delivers the traditional Arabic greeting, “As-Salamu Alaikum.” The Arab is another regular visitor to karagöz plays and speaks moderately acceptable Turkish, although with scattered Arabic words and a distinct Egyptian or Damascus accent, confirming his Otherness. Indeed, he is often depicted as a traveling trader of such items as coffee, pistachios, or baklava. He is called only “Arab” in this playlet, but Karagöz addresses him as Hadji Baba, and the Arab himself refers to his brothers Hadji Şamandira and Hadji Fitol, both Arabic names given to this character in other plays. Hadji is a common honorific title in Arabic culture, originally given to one who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, but more generally applied to any older person deserving respect.

The Arab is followed, perhaps predictably, by the Jew. Often in the karagöz, his name is Bezirgan or merchant, but in this text he is simply called Yahudi, which is Turkish for Jew, so this play in fact gives both the Arab and Jew generic outsider names. The Jew, like the Arab, speaks a heavily accented Turkish, in his case with a Ladino dialect. Ladino originated among the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula, and, with their expulsion, spread with the Sephardic Jewish population eastward through the Ottoman Empire. One amusing feature of Yahudi’s dialect is that it often (consciously or unconsciously) turns names or inoffensive words into insults. For example, Yahudi pronounces “g” as “y” and thus addresses Karagöz as Karyüz (crow face) or Kara Uyuz (black scab). He is unwilling to part with any money, and while the Arab at last manages to bargain his way across by

offering a prayer instead of a fee, Yahudi typically manages to bargain his way into paying nothing. Not included in this particular play but common in karagöz are other similar generic outsiders, such as the noisy and insolent Albanian watchman, the sly Armenian moneychanger, and the effete Persian poet who recites his poems with an Azerbaijani accent, which has traditionally been used by Turkish comedians for comic effect, rather like a Brooklyn or deep Southern accent in the United States.

The revue of eccentric comic characters is an ancient comic device and a particularly efficient way of utilizing alterity as a theatrical device, since it provides the opportunity of displaying a variety of eccentricities within a brief time without developing an elaborate plot to tie them together. Again, we can find the device going back as far as Aristophanes and the very beginnings of dramatic comedy. Most Aristophanic comedies possess a similar if complex structure. So predictable was this structure that each section was given a name, still used by scholars today: the prologue, parados, agon, parabasis, episode, stasimon, and exodos. Each comedy is based upon what has been called a “happy idea,” a proposal, often utopian or ridiculous, for the improvement of society. This idea is introduced in the prologue, debated in the agon, and explored in practice in the episodes. Here we are concerned primarily with the episodes, a series of short scenes in which various characters, who appear individually and only in these scenes, react to the play’s happy idea. This arrangement allows Aristophanes to employ the scheme of the alterity revue in play after play, introducing a variety of eccentric and/or stereotypical characters to react to the same given circumstances, just as the various characters do in the karagöz play *The Boat*. In Aristophanes’ *The Birds*, for example, the happy idea of establishing a bird kingdom, Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, draws a series of humans and gods, each pursuing their own agenda in relation to this development—a priest, two poets, one fictional the other historical, a prophet, a land surveyor, a government inspector, a dealer in decrees, a minor goddess (Iris), a parricide, and an informer.

Very few later dramatists have utilized the complex structure of an Aristophanic comedy, but prominent among them is the Egyptian puppeteer Ibn Dāniyāl, who apparently became acquainted with the work of the Greek dramatist through Byzantium. When Ibn Dāniyāl was active in the Cairo royal court, that court had a close cultural, political, and mercantile relationship with the ruling dynasty in Constantinople, the Palaiologians. Many Byzantine and late classic Greek scholars have remarked on what one of them calls the “amazing popularity” of Aristophanes in late-13th century Byzantium, surpassing that of all other Greek dramatists. His style and language were

much admired, and his notorious obscenity was fully in accord with Byzantine literary taste of this period.

Indeed, Ibn Dāniyāl has the somewhat ambiguous distinction of being surely the only major world dramatist more obscene than Aristophanes, a feature that has close ties to folk farce and the world's puppet theater. More directly relevant to our concern in this collection, however, is that Ibn Dāniyāl's final play, *The Love-Stricken One and the One who Inspires Passion*, strictly adheres to Aristophanic structure, and thus features, in its second half, an Aristophanic alterity revue similar to that of *The Birds* (Ibn Dāniyāl, 147–97). In the puppet drama, a series of eccentric figures visit the home of the protagonist who is hosting a large banquet, and after a brief scene introducing each, they leave the action, joining a growing pile of inebriated guests.

In each of the Aristophanic comedies, the participants in the alterity revue are drawn into the action because of their relationship to happy idea—as those in *The Birds* seek to use to newly established bird kingdom to further their own concerns or obsessions. The happy idea varies a good deal among the surviving plays, and thus, the figures drawn to it vary accordingly. Despite his wide use of obscenity, however, in only one Aristophanic play is the happy idea specifically a sexual one, in *Lysistrata*, where the happy idea comes from Greek women who decide to refrain from sex until their men stop their continuous wars. The revue shows the suffering of the various victims of this action.

Although the sex-driven characters who fill Ibn Dāniyāl's plays speak from time to time of leading more chaste lives, the plays never show this, and a play like *Lysistrata*, concerned with sexual restraint, would be quite outside his theatrical world. The happy idea of *The Love-Stricken One* is that the eponymous protagonist, Al-Mutayyam, seeks to create a situation where he can have sex with a handsome young man he has seen in the public baths. One of his strategies is to sponsor a lavish banquet, to which the whole city is invited, in hopes that the lad will be impressed by his munificence and generosity. Like the establishment of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, this project attracts participants of what becomes an alterity revue, but one particularly suited to the strategies of this dramatist. Although they are attracted by the food and drink, it soon becomes clear that, as is common in this structure, each guest presents a particular alternative to what may be considered the normal. We have seen how alterity revues are often based on presenting vignette characters of different races or ethnicities, languages or dialects, physical appearance or social proclivities as they are in *The Boat*. Like most puppeteers, Ibn Dāniyāl uses this familiar trope. The only character

repeated in his plays is Nato, a crude and vulgar Sudanese clown, the Sundanese having been treated as a comic Other by the Egyptians for centuries.

The alterity revue in *The Love-Stricken One* is typical in structure, but not in participants. Here, hardly surprisingly for this author, the revue characters represent various alterities not of ethnicity or language, but of sexuality, beginning with the fact that each speaker presents a variant of the homosexual experience, itself already in the realm of the Other. Once the feast is laid out, the guests immediately begin to arrive. The first is a hermaphrodite, Narjis. Ibn Dāniyāl, like Aristophanes, is fond of giving his characters what have been called descriptive or speaking names, and Narjis literally means Narcissus. His singing and dancing have an immediate effect on the easily aroused Al-Mutayyam who promptly demonstrates the ability of a puppet to instantly produce a fully erect penis, an effect of which Ibn Dāniyāl is very fond. It might be noted that Aristophanes was also, a dangling phallus being an essential part of the classic Greek comedic costume.

The next guest goes even further in this direction, described in the stage directions as looking “like long erect penis.” His shape is somewhat deceptive, however, because he explains that his sexual proclivities are more passive than active, hence his speaking name Abū al-Sahl, Mr. Easy Penetration. The next guest, physically distinguished only by his excessive slimness, had a name without clear sexual overtones, Abū al-Buaish Ibn al’Khannāqa (Digger, Son of Choker) and is in fact distinguished by his rejection of such matters. Clearly, however, he enjoys observing if not participating, and the still erect penis of his host leads him to an extended but ambiguous plea to be spared the employment of it. The next guest has no such sexual misgivings. He introduces himself as Baddāl, or Swapper, and explains that his practice is to offer himself to rejected lovers in exchange for their lost loved one, a service that he feels sure will appeal to the thwarted Al-Mutayyam.

The process of finding sexual partners presents no problem for guest Omayr Al-Jallād, (Omar the masturbator), who brags of his ability to copulate mentally with anyone he fancies, even ghosts and spirits. Thus, neither legal restraints nor a potential lover’s indifference offer any obstacle to his pleasure. He assures Al-Muttayam that this practice is the ideal solution to his host’s thwarted love. The next guest offers a much less respectable means of sexual gratification. This is Nabham al-Dabbāb (the Clever Crawler). Making, he claims, even less sound than walking pigeons, he creeps into other people’s houses in the dead of night, either to watch them having sex or satisfying himself more directly should he come upon an attractive and soundly sleeping young lad.

It is hardly surprising that we find the presentation of alterity a central device in both the earliest known shadow plays from the Arab world and in those of their contemporary cousins, nor that this device has been used to call attention to almost every conceivable way that humans can categorize fellow humans as Others—by race and ethnicity, physical or mental variations, nationality, color, religious beliefs, language or dialect, sexual orientation, or vocation. Comedy thrives on incongruity and the mental, physical, sexual, religious, racial, national, or linguistic Other provides an embodiment of incongruity. The puppet in general, and the shadow puppet in particular, provides a reinforcement of this alterity, since it is already situated in that realm. Even the presumed normal characters in the puppet world are figures of alterity, and the figures they encounter and relate to as Others take us deeper into that incongruity. All puppets, like all dramatic Others, are involved with a certain measure of exaggeration, stylization, and caricature, and this is of course particularly true of shadow puppets, who must make their visual impression by outlines and a hump, a large nose, an erect penis, or diminutive stature as dominant features.

When we compare the use of alterity in these two major examples of shadow theater from the Islamicate world with other shadow traditions to the East and to the West, we find that while cultural details obviously change, alterity remains a reliable source of audience engagement and amusement. The ethnic, racial, and linguistic Other, presented and utilized as such, remains much the same, although the details of the Otherness naturally vary. One even finds, not surprisingly, that comic dramatists of Asia, like those of the Islamicate world, find the Westerner a popular figure of stereotypical ridicule, just as the Oriental, especially the Turk or Chinese, has long held a similar position on the stages, puppet and Other, of the West. A pleasure in the depiction of alterity, somewhat ironically, ties together comic theater, puppet and non-puppet, around the world.

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