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# Manifestation Of Myth In Algerian Theater – The Play Al-Hawat And Al-Qasr As A Model

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## Abstract:

This study aims to examine the integration and expression of myth within Algerian theater, with a specific focus on the play Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr. Here, mythological elements imbue the narrative with profound symbols and layered meanings, showcasing how the playwright, Omar Fatmouch, ingeniously weaves various myths into the fabric of his theatrical exposition. Notably, the Greek mermaid myth, the Egyptian tale of Isis and Osiris, and narratives of sacrifice and deified heroes are adeptly incorporated to cultivate a sense of wonder and spectacle, captivating the audience with a tapestry rich in mythological resonance.

Mythology serves as both a foundational framework and a creative instrument through which the playwright articulates diverse messages that mirror the political, economic, and social climates of the era, thus revealing the multifaceted nature of political figures and addressing the pivotal inquiry of this study: How is myth manifested in Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr? This inquiry further extends into various sub-questions concerning the characteristics of myth, the essence of theater, and their interplay.

**Keywords:** Manifestation, Myth, Algerian Theater, Play, Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr.

## 1. Introduction:

The integration of mythological heritage into contemporary Algerian theater represents a significant trend, reflecting not only the aesthetic allure of myth but also its profundity in articulating human and spiritual values. The invocation of myth within theatrical productions unleashes evocative values and profound meanings, enabling the articulation of various societal and real-world issues. Consequently, the theatrical script evolves into a dynamic vessel that embraces and leverages mythological narratives.

The playwright's profound engagement with mythic traditions infuses the play with symbolic richness and evocative power, creating an atmosphere filled with enchantment, allure, and excitement. This

not only instills a sense of thrill and suspense in the audience but also taps into the deep-rooted meanings and complex implications of myths, which possess an inherent capacity to resonate emotionally and captivate the imagination, thereby imbuing the theatrical performance with a unique charm and enchantment. Such magical qualities are pivotal for the success and enduring appeal of the play.

Our analysis confronts the research problem: How is myth manifested in Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr? We delve into several subsidiary questions including the intrinsic nature of myth, the essence of theater, and the intricate dialectic between theater, myth, and narrative.

We explore the conceptual and terminological foundations of myth and theater, discuss the dynamic interplay between theater, myth, and narrative, and subsequently illustrate how myth is portrayed in Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr, elucidating the thematic focus of our study and enhancing the comprehension of its complexities, particularly as the use of myth in theater has become a prevalent theme in contemporary literary and critical discussions.

## **2. Fundamental Concepts:**

### **2.1 Myth:**

#### **Linguistically:**

In linguistic terms, the notion of "myth" does not deviate from the meanings associated with a row or line of items, writing, and the composition of fabrications. As articulated in Al-Qamoos Al-Muheet: "The line: a row of things such as books, trees, etc. Plural: lines, writings... and to write it down is to compose it. Myths: are narratives without coherent order, a collection of fabrications," <sup>1</sup>and from this comes the verse in the Quran, Surah Al-Furqan, Verse 5: "And they say, 'Legends of the former peoples which he has written down, and they are dictated to him morning and afternoon.'"

As stated in Majmu' Al-Ra'id by Jubran Masoud:

"The myth (in Arabic 'Asateer') blends the inventions of imagination with folk traditions and reality. It encompasses what is written and tales with no factual basis." <sup>2</sup>

Thus, from a linguistic perspective, a myth signifies fabrications and embellished, ornate tales that lack a foundation in truth, representing a deviation from the norm.

#### **Myth: Terminologically:**

A myth is traditionally a narrative where gods and demigods are central figures. "Originating in the earliest phases of human history, these stories did not consider their fantastical images (gods, mythical heroes, monumental events, etc.) as anything but attempts to generalize and explain various natural phenomena,"<sup>3</sup> attributing them to supernatural forces.

Myth is a sacred narrative with profound content, comprehended by humans, revealing meanings related to the cosmos, existence, and life. It "narrates a sacred history, an event that occurred in primordial, mythical time, the time of beginnings. In other words, myths tell us how a certain reality came into being through the deeds of supreme beings,<sup>4</sup>" representing "a form of pristine human expression in its initial adventure with nature and life."<sup>5</sup> It is humanity's first attempt to interpret the diverse phenomena of the universe by imparting a philosophical layer to its experiences.

Moreover, a myth "constitutes a comprehensive intellectual system that encompasses human existential anxiety and the eternal quest to decipher the mysteries presented by the surrounding world and the challenges posed by the cosmic order." It seeks to impose order where there is none, to offer answers to pressing questions, and to paint a holistic picture of existence. <sup>6</sup>Rooted in customs, rituals, and beliefs, mythology precedes the emergence of philosophical thought, which later evolved from mythical thought, representing the first leap towards knowledge.

## **2.2 Theater:**

### **Linguistically:**

The term "theater" conventionally refers to a venue designated for the staging of plays. According to the Al-Ra'id Dictionary, 'theater' (from the Arabic roots S R H) encompasses several definitions: 1- A pasture, 2- A raised wooden area within a hall or an open space for narrative enactments, 3- A hall designed for the display of plays, 4- The collective body of narrative plays produced by a writer (e.g., Shakespeare's theater, Shawqi's theater).<sup>7</sup>

Further detailed in Al-Miftah Dictionary, 'theater' signifies a place or building specifically equipped for the performance of narratives, and more broadly,<sup>8</sup> it connotes 'a place of seeing', where an audience gathers to witness real or imagined events unfold before them. <sup>9</sup>The etymology of "theater" (theatron) traces back to the Greek for 'a place of seeing' or 'spectating.'

Theaters, as some of the oldest entertainment forms known to humanity, provide a stage where actors perform live, not only to entertain but also to offer moral instruction in an artistically indirect manner. Entertainment, thus, remains a fundamental objective of the theater, aiming to evoke emotional responses and furnish the audience with a uniquely enjoyable experience.<sup>10</sup>

From a linguistic perspective, 'theater' narrowly refers to a place for viewing performances, typically comprising two distinct areas: one for the actors and another for the spectators<sup>11</sup>, thus serving as an essential venue for live performances.

### **Terminologically:**

The conceptualizations of theater are diverse and multifaceted. Scholars concur that theater embodies the essence of a nation, serving as a barometer of its progress and cultural magnitude. Within the confines of its space and upon its stage, communities articulate their social and political dilemmas,

delineate their dreams, and project their aspirations.<sup>12</sup> As the art form most intimately connected with the self, theater vividly captures the human experience through both action and dialogue, portraying life with unaltered realism<sup>13</sup>. In this light, the impact of theater is deemed more profound than other art forms, resonating deeply within the human psyche.

Theater is fundamentally a simulation of the world in all its natural and intellectual expanses, offering a reenactment of life and a framework for shaping human behavior. It serves as a dynamic expressive tool that mirrors life within the very parameters of life itself, addressing societal issues directly through societal contexts and suggesting resolutions.

Moreover, theater functions as an intricate medium of communication, delivering a message to its audience. It comprises a complete communicative system where various forms of interaction, face-to-face, personal, and collective, are observed. Through these communicative processes, a sense of unity or emotional identification is fostered, experienced by the individual through both emotional and rational responses to the play's dramatic peaks and tensions, as perceived by viewers on the stage<sup>14</sup>. Hence, theater is a visual art form, characterized by vivid and explicit imagery, where both sender and receiver enrich the setting with a tangible presence through physical engagement.

Theater also epitomizes an art form with rich aesthetic and cultural dimensions, often regarded as the progenitor of human civilization. It is not only an art but a celebration of beauty, which is intrinsically linked to love. It imparts moral, social, artistic, and literary education and fosters an appreciation of beauty and the arts.

Theater thus becomes a confluence where various art forms meet, stimulating and sustaining their principles.<sup>15</sup> It encapsulates the history of humanity, reflecting its movement, rhythm, civilization, culture, and thought. As a composite of diverse arts, including music, dance, singing, architecture, painting, sculpture, poetry, performance, and expression, theater confirms its status as a hub of creativity governed by its own distinct rules, writing, preparation, acting, craftsmanship,<sup>16</sup> and direction, encompassing elements like scenery, costumes, songs, and music.

The objectives of theater are manifold: to nurture a spirit of innovation, uplift noble values, refine the human spirit, and cleanse it from malice and impurity. It seeks to alleviate the weariness of daily life, providing entertainment that rejuvenates the spirit, equipping individuals to confront life with renewed vigor and vitality. <sup>17</sup>Theater thus functions as a purifying force, elevating the soul to the zenith of human expression.

Additionally, theater is a potent cultural medium that strives to instill the highest human values in its audience, enlightening society and challenging corruption in all its manifestations. It aims not only to provide intellectual and artistic enjoyment but also to achieve quality and education through the process of delivering its noble messages by embodying them on stage. As a cultural phenomenon, theater plays a pivotal role in facilitating communication between the cultural movements and the broader society<sup>18</sup>, significantly enhancing cultural understanding and solidifying societal values.

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### **3. The Dialectical Relationship Between Theater, Myth, and Narrative:**

Myth, as a distinctive cultural system, offers a highly specific form of human expression. It functions as the repository of human memory, an intellectual vessel, and an inexhaustible cultural storehouse. Myth is revered as a "treasure of invaluable knowledge," grounded in the rich tapestry of human history, its comprehension of the world, and its conceptual frameworks.

Therefore, it stands as a profound resource for exploring the patterns of human thought, visions of the universe, and stances on perennial issues that have engaged and troubled humanity for ages, such as death, immortality, and the sacred.<sup>19</sup> Myths represent the zenith of millennia of human contemplation and serve as the inaugural creative venture of the human imagination, crafting enchanting and marvelous adventures that reflect the cognitive, aesthetic, and perceptual development of human beings.

From the wellspring of myth, the vibrant hues of literature have emerged, freeing human thought to forge various literary forms. No tradition precedes myth in narrating human dreams and hopes, or in depicting a world brimming with aspiration and a thirst for knowledge. From its inception, myth has served as a fountain of literary inspiration, eventually catalyzing the development of many modern scientific disciplines such as anthropology, ethnology, and psychology.<sup>20</sup> This foundation laid by myth also paved the way for the emergence of philosophy and other scientific fields.

The connection between theater and its pre-civilizational roots through myth is profound. Religious and ceremonial rituals are recognized as the primary sources from which theater emerged. Anthropologists and theater historians trace the origins of theatrical phenomena to the influence of myth on humans and the primitive practices of dance rituals and gestural performance in ceremonial celebrations.

These include fertility and hunting rituals, among others, which are related to controlling and interacting with natural phenomena, interpreting and rationalizing the unknown and mysterious. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence of primitive theatrical practices at several ancient human settlements. These findings, which include masks, drawings, statues mimicking humans and animals, ornamental tools, wigs, and various musical instruments, all point to the theatrical characteristics of these rituals.

The drawings indicate that these practices involved distinct gestures and masked dance movements, along with gestural (pantomime) positions. It is believed that these ritualistic actions gradually became codified, evolving into a celebratory form that later acquired a special dramatic character, particularly in ancient Greece and India.<sup>21</sup>

Primitive rituals are considered the earliest forms of drama and the initial cradle for the emergence of theater. A prevailing theory regarding the origins of theater and pre-theater views it as a gradual worldly transformation of ancient rituals and celebrations. For instance, Walter Benjamin traces the

foundation of theater back to rituals that encapsulated the original and primary utility value, which, in his view, underlies all aesthetic forms, including the most mundane.<sup>22</sup>

He describes theater as a ritual that became secularized. Since ancient times, religious celebrations have included joyful rituals and practices aimed at providing relief to practitioners and entertaining the audience. This likely originates from the primal crisis returning to the first religious celebrations where myths of world creation were recited, accompanied by theatrical scenes that reenacted the movements of gods and the act of creation. This path dominated the Dionysian celebrations in Greece, where the chorus initially engaged only in chanting,<sup>23</sup> which then evolved into performing scenes of dialogue accompanied by dance and varied gestures.

While theater has increasingly differentiated itself from its ancient origins, it has never fully severed its ancestral connections. Contemporary theater frequently revisits these primordial sources, extracting from the mythological heritage and reinjecting it into modern theatrical texts. This reintegration adapts the ancient narratives to reflect and engage with current social and societal issues.

Many contemporary playwrights utilize myth as a foundational component in their scripts, drawing from mythological content and symbols to craft narratives that respond to the civilizational and aesthetic needs of their times. This approach allows for a resonant blending of myth into the structural and thematic framework of theatrical compositions, whether these myths serve as direct sources or are dramatized from literary works that themselves are steeped in mythological traditions.<sup>24</sup>

The novel as a literary genre notably builds upon this mythological foundation, wherein myth significantly shapes the narrative discourse, infusing it with creative vitality within its structural and artistic weave. Playwrights, captivated by the depth and malleability of such narratives, often adapt these novelistic works into dramatic presentations.

A prime example is the novel *Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr* by Algerian writer Tahar Wattar. This novel employs mythological elements to explore and express political and social realities, reflecting the author's intellectual and philosophical perspectives. The narrative, rich with mythical, fabulous, and marvelous elements, has been transformed into a dynamic and impactful theatrical production staged at the Regional Theater of Constantine "Mohieddine Bachtarzi."

This process of adaptation and dramatization is vividly exemplified in the play *Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr*, adapted by Omar Fatmouch from Wattar's novel and directed by Aziz El Din Abar. The play intricately weaves mythological heritage into its narrative, enriching the script with dense, symbolic content. Among the prominent myths utilized in the play is:

#### **4. The Presence of Myth in the Play "Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr":**

The mythological heritage prominently features in the text of the play, suffusing it with its symbols and dense significations. We find that the playwright, Omar Fatmouch, has adeptly employed a

collection of myths, integrating them into the fabric of his theatrical work. Among the most notable are:

#### **4.1 Myth of the Mermaid (Sea Bride):**

Mermaids, mythologically depicted as mesmerizing entities possessing the upper body of a woman and the tail of a fish, reside in the ocean's depths near islands. These creatures have been vividly portrayed in various cultural narratives, including *The Arabian Nights*, where their allure and beauty are extensively detailed, and in Homer's *Odyssey*, particularly during Odysseus's epic return from the Trojan War.

In his perilous maritime journey, Odysseus encounters the island of the mermaids, whose inhabitants are capable of capturing sailors with their melodious and enchanting songs. These songs, noted for their profound sweetness, possess the power to eternally captivate any who listen, touching the soul, stirring deep emotions, and delivering profound delight. Many of Odysseus's sailors succumbed to these irresistible melodies, losing themselves entirely and becoming eternal captives of the island. To escape this fate, Odysseus took precautionary measures by blocking his and his remaining crew's ears with wax and securing themselves to the ship to prevent any from being drawn to their enchantment.

The play *Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr* leverages such mythological narratives, integrating them seamlessly into its fabric to enhance the thematic resonance and deepen the audience's engagement with the unfolding drama, illustrating the enduring power and relevance of myth in contemporary cultural expressions.

This mythological creature, the mermaid, features as a pivotal character in the play, portrayed by actress Najla Nazli. Within the narrative, Ali Al-Hawat, the hero of the play, ensnares her within a colossal seashell. He subsequently presents her at the village square, much to the astonishment of the local populace, declaring her as his tribute to the king in recognition of his narrow escape from an assassination attempt. This mermaid accompanies him on his formidable and mystical journey, as he navigates through seven villages to arrive at the king's palace.

Incorporating this mythological figure into the play creates a spectacle of wonder and fascination, positioning her as an iconic figure within the collective imagination of the audience, and drawing them into a realm of the supernatural and the extraordinary. Her presence also injects excitement and suspense into the performance, enhancing the theatrical experience with her beauty and the dense array of symbols and meanings she embodies, each resonating with implications for both reality and society.

#### **4.2 The Myth of the Number Seven:**

The number seven holds a sacred position in Eastern culture and is universally revered across various human and primitive societies. This number has historically occupied a prestigious role in the early

thought processes of diverse peoples, manifesting in their customs, traditions, popular norms, magical practices, folklore, and religious beliefs.

This significant number appears in several verses of the Quran. For example, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:261) metaphorically describes charitable giving: "The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allah multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills. And Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing." Additionally, in Surah Yusuf (12:43), the king recounts his dream: "I saw seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean cows, and seven green ears of corn and others dry. Oh chiefs! Explain to me my vision if you can interpret visions."

In Islamic tradition, the number seven is deeply intertwined with several ritualistic practices: circling the Kaaba seven times during the Hajj, performing the sa'i, which involves walking between the hills of Safa and Marwah seven times, throwing seven pebbles at the Jamarat in a symbolic act of defiance against evil, and the concept of the seven gates of Hell. Each of these instances highlights the profound spiritual and symbolic significance of the number seven, underscoring its pervasive influence across cultural and religious contexts.

In popular culture, the number seven resonates deeply, embedded within a myriad of traditions and beliefs that highlight its profound impact on the human spirit. This significance is particularly evident in customs like "the Sabooh," which celebrates the seventh day after a child's birth, symbolizing a rite of passage and protection for the newborn. Similarly, the practice of "Tasbeeh" involves recitations that are believed to ward off the evil eye and envy, often performed in sets of seven for its believed greater efficacy. The number seven also features prominently in folklore, as seen in tales such as "The Ogress and Her Seven Daughters" and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," where it recurs as a motif of significance and magic.

Beyond its religious and cultural connotations, the number seven also holds a prestigious place in various societal domains: from the Seven Sages of Greece, embodying wisdom and philosophy, to the seven musical modes that form the foundation of musical theory, and even the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, which exemplify the pinnacle of ancient architectural and artistic achievements. Its frequent use in magical rituals and spells underscores the number's mystical and potent properties within mythical thought, where it often carries an aura of sacredness and profound influence.

In the play "Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr," the number seven is artistically represented through the seven villages that "Ali Al-Hawat," portrayed by actor Kamal Farad, traverses. Each village unveils its own unique and marvelous characteristics, weaving the number into the fabric of the narrative and enhancing the play's mystical and aesthetic appeal, while imbuing it with a sense of the sacred.

### **4.3 The Myth of Isis and Osiris (Pharaonic):**



The myth of "Isis and Osiris" is a foundational narrative in Egyptian mythology, encapsulating the perennial battle between good and evil. Osiris, the god of fertility and renewal, embodies the quintessence of virtue and altruism, while his brother Set, representing greed and malevolence, epitomizes the dark pursuit of power through nefarious means. The legend recounts Set's betrayal and murder of Osiris, an act that involves dismembering Osiris's body and dispersing it across Egypt, symbolizing the ultimate act of evil.

This myth not only narrates a tale of familial betrayal and the cosmic struggle between light and dark but also resonates as a universal theme across various cultures and religious traditions. In "Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr," the playwright intertwines this mythological conflict into the narrative fabric of the play, with "Ali Al-Hawat" embodying the virtues of goodness and communal service, akin to Osiris. Ali's life as a fisherman who sustains his village parallels Osiris's role as a deity who taught agriculture and stewardship to his people. Furthermore, Ali shares with Osiris traits of nobility, bravery, loyalty, and sacrifice, positioning him as a contemporary echo of this ancient deity.

The playwright adeptly leverages this myth to enhance the thematic depth of the play, using it as a symbolic framework to explore the dynamics of power and societal relations. The play is imbued with rich implications and laden with significant meanings, asserting that the themes of sacrifice and redemption following suffering are what ultimately unite "Ali Al-Hawat" with "Osiris," thus enriching the narrative with profound philosophical and ethical questions.

#### **4.4 The Myth of Sacrifice:**

The myth of sacrifice plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative arc of "Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr." Ali Al-Hawat's decision to offer a gift, a sacrifice to the sultan in gratitude for surviving an assassination attempt, becomes a significant motif throughout the play. The gift, which is the most precious and beautiful thing he could secure from the sea, eventually involves the inhabitants of the seven villages, who also begin offering gifts as sacrifices.

This act of vow-taking not only propels the trajectory of Ali's character but also serves as the catalyst for the unfolding events, defining and culminating the play's conclusion. Within this context, the theme of sacrifice permeates the entire theatrical text, casting a profound influence over it and intricately blending the mythical with the political in a dramatic tapestry where the two elements are inextricably linked. This thematic fusion reaches its zenith as Ali Al-Hawat offers his final sacrifice to authority, encapsulating the play's dramatic and thematic resolutions.

#### **4.5 The Myth of the Deified Hero:**

From a morphological perspective, the hero in mythology often represents an exalted version of the human self, embodying an ideal that reflects the pinnacle of human values and virtues. In "Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr," Ali Al-Hawat exemplifies this archetype, portraying a character who is selflessly devoted to the welfare of others, placing communal well-being above his personal interests. Initially taking on

the responsibility of nourishing his village, Ali's role evolves into one of a reformer, seeking to ameliorate the relationship between the people and their ruler, and spreading virtuous principles across neighboring villages.

Regarded by his own community as a saintly figure, Ali's persona transcends that of a mere village hero to become an epic character revered across the seven villages. His journey through these villages transforms into an odyssey of self-discovery and communal upliftment, engaging with the plight of the marginalized and oppressed, and epitomizing the myth of the deified hero who must endure a series of trials and tribulations to fulfill his destiny. Throughout this arduous journey, Ali not only confronts physical challenges but also navigates complex social and human issues, representing the collective hopes, dreams, and aspirations of his community.

Ali Al-Hawat's character is thus portrayed as a transcendent figure who exceeds the limitations of his immediate circumstances to champion positive values across broader horizons. His inherent qualities of sacrifice, forgiveness, loyalty, and endurance are augmented by divine support, miracles and marvels that underscore his heroic status and elevate him to a near-mythical stature. In doing so, the play not only celebrates the virtues of its protagonist but also resonates with universal themes of heroism, sacrifice, and the pursuit of justice, making "Ali Al-Hawat" a symbolic figure whose journey encapsulates the quintessential elements of mythic and heroic narratives.

Ali Al-Hawat's heroism and mission resonate with those of notable figures from Greek mythology. His self-sacrifice mirrors that of Prometheus, his perseverance echoes the eternal toil of Sisyphus, his kindness and benevolence reflect the virtues of Osiris, and his confrontation with an inevitable fate resembles the tragic story of Oedipus. Such parallels position Ali as a timeless hero, embodying ideals that continue to inspire and resonate across cultures and epochs.

Ali's heroic essence, which amalgamates both epic and tragic dimensions, permeates the play, casting a profound impact that aligns him with mythological figures like Osiris, Prometheus, and Sisyphus, who each sacrificed for a greater cause. This alignment not only deepens the thematic richness of the play but also reinforces the timeless relevance of these mythic paradigms.

## **5. Conclusion:**

The infusion of mythological elements into "Al-Hawat and Al-Qasr" profoundly enriches the theatrical experience, offering audiences a spectacle filled with wonder and a world dense with symbolic meaning. These mythological components, teeming with imaginative depth and diverse implications, enhance the narrative and thematic discourse of the play. Mythology serves as a vital artistic tool, enabling the playwright to weave intricate messages that reflect the multifaceted nature of political, social, and economic realities, while also exploring the elusive and deceptive aspects of power.

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**Footnotes:**

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<sup>22</sup> A Group of Authors, "Spectacle between Theater and Anthropology," p. 156.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp. 75, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Nidal Saleh, "The Mythological Tendency in Contemporary Arab Novels," no place, Dar Al-Alma'iyah, 2010, p. 6.