

**Dramatizing Modern American and Arabic Poetry  
A Study in Selected Poems by Kenneth Koch and Yousif Al-Sayegh**

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**Abstract :**

The interrelatedness of drama and poetry introduces one of the most exceptionally robust examples of trans-genre literature. It is further characterized by a deep-rooted tradition that dates back to ancient Greek and Roman drama, as well as a sense of circumstantial and ad hoc necessity-driven, age-oriented adaptability. The present paper assumes that this well-established sensitive relation of poetry and drama rests upon some circumstantial time-specific cultural forces or motivators that impact the ebb and flow, the expansion-contraction movements which are directly related to the temporal necessities and requirements of the textual and contextual poetic discourse. To this end, and to verify the accuracy of these assumptions, the paper limits itself to some representative examples from the *oeuvres* of two representative poets of the dramatic poetic tradition in modern American and Arabic poetry, namely Kenneth Koch (1925-2002) and Yousif al-Sayegh (1933-2006).

**Keywords: Dramatic poetry, Modern Arabic poetry, Modern American poetry, Comparative literature, Yousif al-Sayegh, Kenneth Koch.**

## مسرحة الشعر الامريكي والعربي الحديث

### دراسة في قصائد مختارة من شعر كينيث كوك ويوسف الصائغ

تعد وشائج العلاقة بين جنسي المسرحية والشعر من اقدم وابرز الأمثلة على تجاوز الاشكال الأدبية حدودها التقليدية، كما أن لهذه العلاقة جذور موعلة في القدم منذ عصور الاغريق والرومان حيث تزوج هذان الجنسان لينتجا إرثا مسرحيا شعريا غنيا. كما تتسم العلاقة بين الشعر والمسرح، فضلا عن العراقة والقدم، بكونها مستجيبة للحالة الظرفية والقدرة على التكيف مع المتغيرات الزمانية والمكانية والضرورات الحضارية. وتفترض الدراسة الحالية أن العلاقة المتينة ما بين الشعر والمسرحية تستند إلى، وتتأثر ببعض القوى أو المحفزات التي تؤثر على تقلباتها واتساعها أو انحسارها، وهي عادة ما ترتبط بالمتطلبات والاحتياجات الظرفية المؤقتة، نصية كانت أم سياقية، للخطاب الشعري. ولهذا الغرض، وبغية برهنة دقة هذه الافتراضات، تقتصر الدراسة على دراسة عينة ممثلة من المنجز الشعري الذي تركه شاعران بارزان في مجال الشعر الدرامي في العصر الحديث، هما الشاعر الامريكي كينيث كوك (1925-2002)، والشاعر العربي العراقي يوسف الصائغ (1933-2006).

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر المسرحي، الشعر العربي الحديث، الشعر الامريكي الحديث، الأدب المقارن، يوسف الصائغ، كينيث كوك.

### 1.1 Introduction

The interrelatedness of drama and poetry presents an exceptionally robust example of trans-genre literature. It is further characterized by a deep-rooted tradition that dates back to ancient Greek and Roman drama, as well as a sense of circumstantial and ad hoc necessity-driven, age-oriented adaptability. In other words, this relation of drama and poetry, however traditional and historical, is modernist and responsive to the requirements of the immediate era. This is evident in a series of turning points and landmarks witnessed by dramatic poetry in its very long journey as it has developed since the times of ancient amphitheaters in Greece and Rome, through the English medieval miracle and morality plays; Chaucer's dramatic narrative poems; the Elizabethan golden age of poetic drama; Dryden's neo-classical revival of the Roman version of poetic tragedies; Robert Browning's epoch-making dramatic monologue of the Victorian Age; to the serious modernist experimentations on dramatizing poetic forms, subjects and techniques at the hands of Eliot and others.

However, this long journey of development and interrelations between these genres was not devoid of confusion, overlaps and ambiguity in terminology, as with many literary genres, concepts and movements. There is a common misconception in the interchangeable use of "dramatic poetry" and "poetic drama": each is clearly distinct and independent of the other, as shown in the main noun and the modifier that precedes it. The former is poetry which is 'dramatic' whereas the latter is drama that is 'poetic', quite simply articulated. Still, the two main components of each category are 'poetry' and 'drama', which have continued to collaborate since classical times.

The present paper assumes that this well-established sensitive relation of poetry and drama rests upon some circumstantial time-specific cultural forces or motivators that impact the ebb and flow, expansion-contraction movements which are directly related to the temporal necessities and requirements of the textual and contextual poetic discourse. It further assumes that the same collaboration of dramatic and poetic textures in twentieth century poetry is necessitated by some other elements than those of 'literariness' and literature *per se*, elements related to the development of new multimedia discourses, such as the cinematic and TV dramas which boomed more and

more in the second half of that century. Another assumption is that such heavy reliance on and experimentation with the dramatic elements in twentieth century poetry is part of the quest for innovation and breaking with conventionality within the context of modernism. Last, this paper assumes that this reliance on drama in modern poetry is true not only of English and American poetry, but also of Arabic poetry of the twentieth century, with due regard for cultural and historical differences. For this purpose, and to verify the accuracy of these assumptions, the paper limits itself to some representative examples from the poetic *oeuvre* of two representative poets of the dramatic poetry tradition in modern American and Arabic poetry, namely Kenneth Koch (1925-2002) and Yousif al-Sayegh (1933-2006).

As for the confusion pervading the combination of drama and poetry, dramatic poetry, simply put, refers to “any lyric work that employs elements of drama such as dialogue, conflict, or characterization, but excluding works that are intended for stage presentation” (Bonn 49). This clarifies two inherent issues. First, it is basically lyrical, though not exclusively so as narrative poems can also employ such dramatic elements as those stated in the definition. Second, it is not intended for stage performance, it is rather meant for other modes of communication, or else it would be a drama that incorporates some lyricism and narrative episodes, as can be seen in any of Marlowe’s or Shakespeare’s tragedies. The most important attribute of dramatic poetry, according to Michael J. Bugeja (1994), is that it characterizes. If narrative poetry tells stories, and lyrical poetry sounds like music (249), dramatic poetry has this process of characterization, which means developing characters with personalities, convincing motives, viewpoints, actions and reactions which, as in fiction, is the “core of dramatic work” according to Bugeja, who adds that: “although all poems feature narrators or storytellers who don masks when speaking, characters in a dramatic poem are invented (fictive), historical (real—past or present) or composite (part invented, part real)” (249).

Characterization alone cannot, however, make a dramatic poem: a poem can describe a character in some manner of character sketch, a static picture that never exceeds appearance, which never renders it dramatic. Dramatic poetry borrows from both the narrative and the lyrical and combines both. It further employs the expository function of narration as well as the highly intense emotional touches of lyrical poems to present a

poem which features a highly dramatic situation in which characters are engaged in some sort of dialogue, conflict, etc. In other words, dramatic poems use exposition and narration at certain points to relate a story or incident and make time references so as to make the reader aware of the passage of time.

The relation of poetry and drama is said to be governed by some “forces of considerable consequences to our civilization” (Gowda, xi), forces that are incessantly engaged in a pull and push paradigm, sometimes bringing poetry and drama together and sometimes pulling them apart. This is further enhanced by some intrinsic needs of poets and playwrights that prompt them to borrow from in one or the other direction, leading to what can be described as the poetic imagination of playwrights and the dramatic sensibility of poets. Playwrights may aim at the refinement of expression and symbols that are far from what is seen in commonplace, everyday language, and this they find in poetry. Poets may find the realm of drama highly attractive to step into for many purposes and in pursuit of many functions.

Covering these purposes is the need for modernizing, revitalizing the poem and taking it out of the realm encompassing lyricism and subjectivity in which it has long been anchored. Poets, at some pivotal moments, felt the need to step out of the self and embrace viewpoints other than that of the subjective ‘I’, and this they found in drama, which enables them to create a persona, or don a mask, and articulate different voices within the context of a poem which would otherwise start and end in nothing but personal feelings, speculations or lamentations. In this regard, Richard Wilbur states that one of the major virtues of a dramatic poem is that “while it may not represent the whole self of the poet, it can [ . . . ] give free expression to some one compelling mood or attitude” (122). This need to go towards objectivity, assume various views and presents multiple voices is the core of modernism which sought to abandon the rigid conventions of the past and find new ways of expression, to expand the poetic perspective to embrace objective reality, not only egocentric matters. This is what drama has and can provide to poetry. However, as Mary Kinzie believes, we should not go far in our expectation that “objectivity permits greater range” because “it also provides less excitement” (200). Sometimes, excessive objectivity would take poetry down to the realm of ordinary or commonplace discourse. That is why the relation of poetry and the

stage is very controversial: poetry is basically a matter of words that invoke a multiplicity of emotions and ideas whereas the stage employs a wide range of tools in addition to language. The stage is “ideal platform for man who employs spoken language as an artist” (Gowda xi). It offers an exceptionally favorable medium for the exploitation of man’s most distinctive and glorious attribute, namely speech. The stage provides an indispensable platform for poets who wish to be heard, but they do not necessarily make the poetic drama choice, they resort to a more accessible option of dramatic poems in which they can create a stage of their own. In the context of this relation between poetry and the stage, and how essential it is in drama, T. S. Eliot’s view expressed in *Poetry and Drama* (1950) is worth quoting:

if poetry is merely a decoration, and added embellishment, if it merely gives people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time that they are witnessing a play, then it is superfluous. It must justify itself dramatically, and not only merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form. (12)

This view is also applicable in reverse, that is to say, if the employment of dramatic elements in the poem is artificial and decorative, intended to provide those readers who fans of drama with a chance to imagine a play as they read the poem, then it is greatly unnecessary. It will be a drama shaped into a poetic form. It would be a closet drama, intended not for theatrical performance but for solitary reading (Mikics, 61), a genre less favored as being the dreariest kind of literature, most boring and secondhand experience, in Robertson Davies’ view (quoted in Mikics, 61).

A major art such as poetry and drama, says H. H. A. Gowda, should approach “a comprehensive view of a culture” (xi), and having one art that is completely committed to subjectivity and the other to an objective perspective on life seems thoroughly unsustainable, if not impossible. Here comes the need to combine and join elements of both, and this trend of conjunction rather than separation has gained momentum throughout the modernist experiments of the twentieth century. This is largely justifiable since almost all modernist movements experimented with drama, whether in form, techniques, language or subject matter. This experimental tendency found its way

to poetry, among other artistic mediums, and it enriched the latter not only with the elements of dialogue, conflict and characterization, but with irony, stage-consciousness, dramatic titling, objectivity and realistic actions and reactions, not to mention dramatic suspense and climatic conclusions. Hence, drama is one of the most significant sources of poetic renewal and modernization witnessed by Western literature in general. The robust interrelation of drama and poetry has continued unabated since the earliest classical dramatic texts of ancient Greece, and is expected to remain constant for the foreseeable future. Here, H. H. A. Gowda has a remarkable observation, stating that the movements of poetry and drama are sensitized to each other:

Insofar as poetry draws further away from the stage, it becomes increasingly obscure, esoteric and egocentric; insofar as the theatre draws away from poetry, it becomes more prosaic and less imaginative. In each case the better genius of the times contends for their closer relation; in each case the evil genius of the age contends for their alienation. (ix)

This observation is fully adequate as far as English and American literature are concerned, though the problem, Gowda assumes, is international in character. When it comes to modern Arabic poetry, it still applies, but to a lesser extent, given the cultural differences related to the dramatic tradition, which is relatively recent in comparison to the Western classical tradition of dramatic literature. The short lifespan of drama as a genre in Arabic literature does not exclude the poetry of the language from major dramatic influence, not necessarily coming directly from Arabic drama, since Arabic literature was largely exposed to European literary works of fiction and drama which were made available in translation with the advent of the so-called modern Arabic renaissance which followed the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798. For this reason, this paper seeks to explore some selected examples from the poems of two renowned poets-dramatists of the twentieth century, namely the American Kenneth Koch and the Iraqi Arab Yousif al-Sayegh, to investigate the literary and cultural dimensions of their employment of dramatic elements therein.

## 1.2 Drama in Kenneth Koch's Poetry

Kenneth Koch (1925-2002) presents one of the most visible examples of dramatized poetic experiences in modern American poetry. Koch is a most prolific poet, avant-garde playwright, and fiction writer, and one of the best-known literary figures of America from the 1950s until his death. As a poet, Koch is strongly associated with the New York School, along with Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schulyer and Barbara Guest (Mikics 207). According to David Lehman, Koch's poetry is characterized by a heavy presence of drama – comedy in particular — combined with long narrative poems, and this did not appeal to the critical circles of his age which favored short, personal, autobiographical episodes (204). Koch employs dramatic elements in his poems to defy this common trend of personal confessional and autobiographical lyricism, and resorts to some sense of objectivity in dealing with his poetic subjects.

He is largely concerned with the process of creative writing *per se*, and this makes most of his poems meta-poetic and self-reflexive, and in this regard, he also expresses his views on the functionality of elements of drama in the context of poetry. In such poems as “The Art of Poetry” (1975), and “Days and Nights” (1982), he theorizes, criticizes and satirizes some of the conventions and clichés related to poetry, and articulates his views regarding poetry and drama. In the latter he says:

The lyric adjusts to us like a butterfly, then epically eludes our grasp.  
Poetic drama in our time seems impossible but actually exists as  
A fabulous possibility just within our reach. To write drama  
One must conceive of an answerer to what one says, as I am now  
conceiving of you. (*Collected Poems*, 262)

In the post-WWII era, with the advent of various artistic and literary *avant-garde* movements, poetic drama, said Koch, “seems impossible”, and that is why he endeavored to find some new possibilities to meet the needs of an age prone to embracing motion pictures and cinema films at the expense of written texts. Also, the elite nature of poetic drama makes it rather dreamy and unrealistic in the midst of the age of growing consumerism and down-to-earth style. For this reason, in his plays, especially those in *One Thousand Avant-Garde Plays* (1988), he exemplifies his



assumption that he “must conceive” of an appropriate reply to what one may say, so as to write appealing, albeit humorous, dramas. Along with his numerous *avant-garde* plays, and next to his theoretical remarks included in such poems as that cited above, Koch actually exploited his dramatic skill in many of his poems, where he implicitly challenged the aesthetic formalities and seriousness of mid-twentieth century poetics that he and his colleagues in the New York School repudiated (Perkins 529).

Koch’s use of dramatic elements in his poetry is not limited to that of characterization, conflict, setting and dialogue. He also employs such techniques as dramatic irony, soliloquy and dramatic titles for his poems, along with the elements of suspense and multiplicity of short snapshots of scenes and speeches. Although comedy is a common feature of most of Koch’s dramatic poems, the ones selected for the purpose of this study are some of the more serious and less humorous poems, though he always combines both the comic and the serious in one poem, meaning that his approach is neither purely comic nor solely serious and tragic (Spurr 348).

The comic element inserted in such serious poems is not downright hilarious, it is rather a matter of ironic touches that interpose a light sharp sarcastic remark in a solemn situation. For example, in “A Momentary Longing to Hear Sad Advice from One Long Dead,” the title is long enough to inform the reader of much of the subject-matter. In fact, this title is dramatically employed in such a way that, together with the first sentence of the poem, it makes a complete and meaningful statement. The poem opens: “Who was my teacher at Harvard” (666). Hence, the “One Long Dead” whose advice the poet is longing to hear was his teacher at Harvard. Apart from this very unusual employment of title, the poem renders a moment of longing for a dead teacher, who was very caring for the speaker, who is evidently the poet himself. This moment starts with an advice given to him:

Did not wear overcoat  
Saying to me as we walked across the Yard  
Cold brittle autumn is you should be wearing overcoat. I said  
You are not wearing overcoat. He said,  
You should do as I say not do as I do. (666)

This cynical reply, says the poet, was not a well-known American saying in the late 1940s; his teacher, Delmore Schwartz, not himself, was aware the fact: "Just how American it was and how late Forties it was / Delmore, but not I, was probably aware" (666). As stated earlier, dramatic characters can be 'invented' or 'historical' – from the past and present. Koch's character here is a real one: Delmore Schwartz (1913-1966), one of America's most famous poets and short story writers in the 1940s, under whose supervision Koch was studying. In fact, Koch was a big fan of this poet, who was a literary superstar when Koch started writing. He regularly read his poems in the *New Directions* anthologies, and most of his excitement about joining Harvard after WWII was because Schwartz was teaching there: "I knew that poets went there: Wallace Stevens had gone there, Eliot had gone there, Cummings had gone there, Delmore Schwartz was teaching there" (quoted in Zavatsky, 1977). Though the occasion of the poem is lyrical — the lament over the death of the late poet, though it is narrated from a personal viewpoint, and though it heavily relies on real incidents, what makes it an outstanding dramatic poem is the way Koch combines all elements to make the poem a piece of drama, with a naturally flowing dialogue, with literary and cultural allusions typical of the intelligentsia, such as the references to James Joyce and his *Finnegans Wake* and to the cartoonist Walt Kelly and his Pogo. Delmore, the poet says,

Believed Pogo to be at the limits of our culture.

Pogo. Walt Kelly must have read Joyce Delmore said.

Why don't you ask him?

Why don't you ask Walt Kelly if he read *Finnegans Wake* or not. (666)

The scene of Delmore's apartment reveals another aspect of Koch's dramatic touches as he forms fast cinematic snapshots of the furniture and the photograph of his parents, and his question if they look happy, and the several wonderings left unanswered till the death of the former, as well as the table where his idol write his poems:

In his New York apartment sitting on chair

Table directly in front of him. There did he write? I am wondering.

Look at this photograph said of his mother and father.

Coney Island. Do they look happy? He couldn't figure it out. (666)

Delmore's questions should have been directed to the related individuals. Instead of wondering whether Kelly may have read Joyce or not, he should have asked him since they knew each other. Instead of asking others whether his father and mother look happy in the photo in Coney Island, he should have asked them. His tragedy lies in the fact that he could not voice many of his concerns and anxieties, and his tragic life, which started from the top and went down, from fame and success to alcoholism and mental illness, to die in seclusion in a hotel room not to be found till two days had passed after his death (Britannica). Koch found in such a tragic life the material for a tragic poem. His poem starts from a memory of that casual conversation one autumn day with Delmore, then goes to his cultural concerns and references, then visits his apartment and voices his insistent questions as stated above. Koch's light, humorous start ends with a very serious and doleful conclusion. Now that Delmore is in his grave, Koch misses his voice, his advice as stated in the title. The late poet and teacher has meant a lot to him: in brief, he said once that Delmore "gave me the image of a real poet" (quoted in Zavatsky, 1977).

In "Meeting You at the Piers," a short dramatic monologue, Koch presents a dramatic encounter with a little boy whom he seems to have met at the piers. The 'You' of the title refers to this silent addressee of the poem, which starts *in medias res*, without introductions and descriptions. The speaker opens with a voluntary proposal to tell the boy about *Amerika*, an incomplete novel by Franz Kafka (1883-1924) published in 1927, and without waiting for the boy's reply, he starts:

I should like to describe *Amerika* to you,  
Little foreign boy, the hideously frightening novel by Franz Kafka.  
A child comes to America, much like you,  
And after many tragic games in hotels  
Finds himself seeing two men on a balcony—  
It is too dreadful, I cannot go on. (*Poetry*: vol. 89, No. 2, p. 90)

He addresses the boy as "little foreign boy" and compares him to the protagonist of Kafka's novel, Karl Rossmann, a sixteen-year-old immigrant who arrives at New York and encounters many troubles (Kafka, 3). The 'two men' are definitely Delamarche and Robinson of the novel, the drifters who are responsible for most of Karl's problems

(Kafka, 107-115). The speaker directly refers to the similarity of the situation of the addressee of the poem with that of Karl who is 'much like' the Foreign Boy of Koch's poem. However, this enthusiastic desire on the part of the speaker to narrate the story of *Amerika* to the submissive boy immediately and abruptly dies out, with an excuse that the story is 'too dreadful' and he cannot complete it. This dramatic change in the mood of the speaker creates a sense of suspense in the reader as to what the speaker is planning to do. What is left unsaid is much more than what is said, and what is hinted at is more than what is stated. The poet inserts a note between brackets stating that "(*Amerika* is a hideously frightening book)" (ibid, 90). Koch's play on the word America as is and as written in Kafka's title, i.e., *Amerika*, increases the sense of uncertainty and dramatic suspense, whether Koch really means the novel only as he claims, or the United States, as being 'hideously frightening.' The outcome of this sense of uncertainty appears in the conclusion of the poem, which leaves it unsettled whether the book or the country is meant by his description. The speaker stops telling the boy what happens in Kafka's novel and prefers to take the boy in a tour through New York, to see reality first-hand, rather than through works of fiction. He may be insinuating that reality is still worse

Come, put your hand in mine (why, it is no bigger than a quarter)

Perhaps rather than discussing *Amerika*, you would

prefer to take a walk through New York.

(*Poetry*: Vol. 89, No. 2, p. 90)

The dramatic significance of this poem lies in the fact that it poses many wonderings and questions; it creates an air of suspense at many levels. It articulates a real need to experience life immediately to know what it is really like, away from the distorted, sometimes beautified, imitation of reality. Also, there is some implied possibility of violence and child harassment as the speaker takes the boy's hand, which is 'no bigger than a quarter' and takes him for a walk in the city. This assumption might be foreshadowed in the speaker's reference to the two men on a balcony and his abrupt stop. Such big issues as America as the 'land of dreams' and the destination of freedom and prosperity seekers, as well as other sensitive issues, are dramatically alluded to,

rather than explicitly exposed, and this is a *par excellence* point in Koch's dramatic poems.

Koch's most sophisticated and advanced employment of dramatic elements in poetry is revealed in his "What People Say About Paris", which combines performative and narrative elements to present a panoramic view of a variety of opinions regarding Paris. The poem offers a cultural survey of how people of different backgrounds react differently to the city. This poem does not allude only to literary figures and famous novels, as with the previous ones. Rather, it reports ordinary people's reactions, as well as those of famous figures such as Baudelaire and Apollinaire. Again, Koch starts the poem *in medias res*, in the midst of action, without referring to the setting or scene, reporting several characters as they express what they think about Paris:

They often begin by saying, "Paris! How I wish I were there!"  
 Someone said, "Paris is where good Americans go when they die."  
 "Pit pat, pit pit patter," say the raindrops  
 Falling on Paris in Apollinaire's poem "La Pluie."  
 "I was so happy in Paris," I said. "It was like  
 Loving somebody. The first three times I left there, I cried."  
 "I don't like Paris," say some. And others, "Paris is getting nice again."  
 "If you don't meet anyone but concierges and waiters,  
 How can you like any place?" Another says, "The French do not have  
 friends,  
 They have relatives." (*Poetry*: Vol. CLI, No. 1-2, p. 80)

Such a lively and natural scene, expressed in a simple style, encompasses a variety of characters and articulates many attitudes, ranging from unidentified persons to the poet himself, who never gives preference to his own view over others, then to famous poets; it uses different styles and tone that reflect the different characters. Besides the variety of voices, there is an array of little scenes or pictures that parallel the auditory aspect presented above with some visual and kinesthetic touches that combine to make the presentation of the city cinematic, rather than static. For instance, "the girls were clustered on the street corner / And the boys were moving toward them" (*ibid*, 80), the automobiles move past in the scene, the tramway, the various costumes and perfumes of

women who pass by, etc. are detailed. After this panoramic scene, the poet introduces another dramatic episode to the poem, that of the French mother, which arouses an air of suspense:

“Come into the telephone kiosk with me,”  
Said the French mother to the blue-short-clad boy.  
“I am your son,” he gallantly whispered,  
“And I shall do as you say.” Later the mother’s breasts popped open  
To her lover, on the avenue Marc Chalfont. The boy played with an owl.

(*Poetry*: Vol. CLI, No. 1-2, p. 81)

This character of the mother creates more doubt and ambiguity in the poem than expected, revealing Koch’s mastery of the art of drama as employed in a poem. The mother drags her boy to a telephone booth, he obediently follows her order, ‘whispering’ to her rather than saying because, as it seems, she is dating a lover, and taking her son with her. From here, the poet follows the boy’s future years, touching upon a very sensitive psychological issue, which is the impact of such harmful and shameful acts on the life of the child who has managed to make a future, yet still feels wounded in his pride because of his mother’s ‘fooling around’:

Later the mother’s breasts popped open  
To her lover, on the avenue Marc Chalfont. The boy played with an owl.  
Three years later he entered the Lycee Formentin  
From which we see him carrying a yellow notebook now  
On his way home to the rue Descaligues, where his little family,  
Still together, despite his mother’s fooling  
Around. . .

(*Poetry*: Vol. CLI, No. 1-2, p. 81)

No further reference is made to this boy and the poet stops his episode at this, with no clue as to whether this character is fictitious or is based on a real figure. This painful experience conveys the fact that Paris is not an imaginary city of dreams, not a utopia, as in some of the views reviewed at the outset, it is a real cosmopolitan city with all possibilities of pain, poverty, disgrace and suffering. As with most of his poems, Koch combines the serious with the comic in this poem, making it a tragicomic dramatic poem, when he uses irony and sarcastic remarks, and mocking juxtapositions, especially in the last part of the poem, which wraps-up with another range of views and opinions

of what people say about Paris, to achieve the goal of the poem, as stated in the title. The poem's finality consists of a sharp sarcastic remark: "Paris is the largest Arab city in the world."

The above-discussed poems are by no means the only dramatic poems to be found in Kenneth Koch's *oeuvre*. Rather, they are merely a sample that shows the employment of dramatic elements in the context of his lyrical-narrative poems. Such poems as "To My Father's Business" (CL 996), which presents a dramatic autobiographical episode of a visit he made as a child to his father office, and how the secretary welcomed him and loved him; "To Life" (CL 594) in which he personifies Life and how the people who surrounded a dead animal reacted and spoke about the spark of life; "Talking to Patrizia" (CL 481-84) which dramatizes the inner thoughts and feelings of love; and many others, place Koch among the most prominent dramatic poets of modern America.

### **1.3 Dramatic Elements in Yousif Al-Sayegh**

In the context of modern Arabic poetry, the impact of drama is totally different, simply because drama as a genre is relatively recent there, in comparison to the Western tradition. Arabic literature is mainly poetic, and Arabic poetry has long been lyrical and personal, with few exceptions when some narrative episodes appear within its texture. Drama as a distinct literary form has no established traditions in Arabic culture, which might seem strange given the presence of the Roman Empire which ruled large territories of what is now the Arab world, i.e., North Africa, Asia Minor and the Levant, and built several amphitheatres whose ruins are still in existence. In other words, the adjacency of the Roman culture with that of the Arabs, which lasted for centuries (from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC till the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD) (*Encyclopædia Britannica*) did not suffice to attract them to the art of drama. However, the language barrier may have hindered the charm of drama from coming through, quite apart from cultural differences in general.

The birth of drama in Arabic literature came as late as the mid-nineteenth century, according to many scholars who deem Marun al-Naqqash (1817-55) the father of Arabic drama; his first play, *Al-Bakheel* [The Miser], was performed in his house in Beirut, Lebanon, late in 1847 (Lovisa, *Routledge Encyclopedia*; Al-Daqaq et al. 122; Abdul-Ghani 195). This play, inspired by Moliere's *The Miser* (1668), was followed by others by the same author, such as *Abu al-Hassan al-Mughaffal* [The Idiot Abu al-Hassan]

(1849) and *Al-Hasood al-Saleet* [The Impudent Envious] (1853), and by others who tried their hands at drama in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. These first attempts were followed by a flood of dramas, by such writers as Abu Khalil al-Qabbani (1833-1903), Abdullah al-Bustani (1819-1883), Ibrahim al-Ahdab (1826-91), Qaseer Maaloof (1874-1964), Saleem Naqqash (died 1884), and others (Al-Daqaq et al. 122). The first poetic drama in modern Arabic literature is Khalil al-Yaziji's (1856-89) *Al-Muroo'atu wal Wafaa* [Gallantry and Loyalty] (1876), unanimously acknowledged as such (Al-Disoqi 43; Al-Hajaji 32; Abdul-Ghani 198). Afterwards, particularly in the second and third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a remarkable rise in the art of drama, especially poetic drama at the hands of Ahmed Shawki (1868-1932) and other poets and scholars who returned from Europe where they had finished their higher studies. They brought with them the impact of drama and presented it as a new genre to Arab readers and spectators.

This relatively short life story of Arabic drama has left a big influence on the poetry written in the subsequent decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the rise of the first modernist movement witnessed by Arabic poetry in the late 1940s and early 1950s, namely that of the Pioneer Poets of Iraq, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-64), Nazik al-Malaika (1923-2007), Abdulwahab al-Bayati (1926-99) who invented and developed the *al-Shir al-Hurr* [Free Verse] Movement. The most important change that occurred in the history of classical Arabic verse, which dates back more than sixteen centuries, is liberating it from the monopoly of one single rhyme and meter throughout the poem, moving to that multiplicity of rhymes and meters introduced by al-Sayyab and his followers as far as the poetic form is concerned. In content, the presence of dramatic elements within the texture of the poem is the most important feature that characterizes modernist Arabic poetry. The departure from the overwhelming personal lyricism and overtly subjective lamenting tone sets a course towards a multiplicity of voices, detached objectivity, masks and personas, as well as the introduction of various characters and viewpoints within the poem. This dramatization of Arabic poetry started

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<sup>1</sup> For a sufficient overview of the beginning of drama in Arabic literature, see: Omar al-Disoqi, *Drama: Its Rise, History and Origins* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi, ND) pp.17-42; Ahmed Shams al-Deen al-Hajaji, *Poetic Drama in Modern Arabic Literature* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1995), pp. 24-48.



with the Pioneers and continued in the poetry of the 1960s, reaching its culmination at the hands of Yousif al-Sayegh.

Al-Sayegh is a well-known, prize-winning and much-celebrated Iraqi-Arab poet, novelist and dramatist. He is known for his renowned plays, *Al-Bab* [The Door] (1986); *Al-Awda* [The Return] (1987) and *Desdemona* (1989), which were awarded the first prizes at the Carthage Festival of Drama (1987), Iraqi Theatre Festival (1988) and Carthage Festival of Drama (1989), respectively (Al-Talib 501). As a poet, al-Sayegh's legacy includes *Intadhirini inda Tukhoom al-Bahr* [Wait for me at the Seashore] (1970), *I'tirafat Malik bin al-Rayb* [Confessions of Malik bin al-Rayb] (1971); *Sayidat ul-Tufahat al-Arba'a* [The Four Apples Lady] (1976); *Al-Muallim* [The Teacher] (1986) and *Al-I'tiraf ul-Akheer li Malik bin al-Rayb* [The Last Confession of Malik bin al-Rayb] (2008). All of these can be safely considered dramatic poems; some of them are actually short pieces of poetic drama, where the author uses chorus, identifiable characters, dialogue, action and irony. In his long poems, he interweaves narrative and dramatic elements, using masks and dramatic irony to an extent that proves him a dramatist under a poet's guise. Hence, al-Sayegh is a major modernist and modernizer of Arabic poetry due to his contributions which dragged poetry towards new realms of human experience, voicing the other more than the self.

Al-Sayegh's employment of drama in his poetry is clearer and more evident than that of Kenneth Koch. In his longer and shorter poems alike, readers would not miss the explicit, and occasionally the implicit, dramatic presentation of the subject, the unravelling of the plot and character's thoughts and concerns through dialogue, let alone the significant titles. In "*Liqaa*" [Meeting], he presents a unique dramatic irony, starting with the title which prepares the reader and leads him to expect a meeting that never happens. The dramatic irony lies in the fact that the readers know a fact unknown by the characters

A dumb gentleman

رجلٌ أخرس

And a pretty woman . .

وأمرأة حسانا . .

Meet each other. .

يلتقيان . .

He smiles. .

يبتسم . .

The woman smiles..

تبتسم المرأة ..

He waves to her . . . يومىء .  
 She waves as well. . . تومىء .  
 He rises. . she does the same . . . ينهض . . تتبعه . .  
 He walks . . she follows . . . يمشي . . تمشي معه . .  
 Till they reach the end of this . . . حتى يصلوا آخر هذي الدنيا . .  
 world. .

(Poems 361)

(قصائد 361)

The characters are presented, a dumb man and a pretty woman, the fact that she is pretty is relatively easy to discover, but his dumbness is not. That is why it is the basis of dramatic irony in the poem, and that makes the choice of adjectives given to the characters very significant to the understanding of the situation. The woman is pretty, and the gentleman is dumb. Then, the smiles, gestures, standing up and walking away, one after the other, make it more like a pantomime show. Reaching the end of the world means that they went far in their expectations of what would come of this unrealized meeting; the poet, then, as an omniscient narrator, goes inside each of them, to voice their inner thoughts:

Perplexed, the gentleman stops,  
 Wondering:  
 -Shouldn't she by now understand  
 That I am a dumb man?

. . يقفُ الرجلُ الأخرسُ، مرتبكا  
 :يتساءلُ، في سرِّه  
 - ما أن لها أن تفهم  
 أني رجلٌ أخرس؟  
 في حين تظللُ المرأة، قربةً واقفةً،  
 تتساءلُ:

Meanwhile the woman remains, standing nearby,  
 Wondering:

- ما أن له أن يفهم،  
 أني امرأة خرساء . .

-Shouldn't he by now understand  
 That I am a dumb woman. .

(قصائد 361-362)

(Poems 361-62)

The last line in the poem reveals the dramatic irony upon which the entire poem is built. Al-Sayegh keeps the climax moment of the poem till the end, as he articulates the inner feelings of the women. This makes the poem one of the typical examples of dramatic poetry in Arabic.

Another example of Al-Sayegh's use of drama in his poetry is to be found in "*Hiwar un . . Ibra al-Hatif*" [A Dialogue via Telephone] which is entirely rendered through an ordinary telephone call, a man and a woman, as it seems from the feminine pronoun used, he calls, she picks up, and no comment on the part of the poet is made, till the end of the poem, where a comment of three words is made. The poet, or the narrator, assumes a position that enable him hear both sides of the call:

-Hello..	- هلو . .
-Oh! Hello . .	- يا هلا . .
-Did you recognize my voice..?	- هل تبيّنت صوتي..؟
-Yes. . . Take care. .	- أجل . . كن على حذر. .
-No worries . . I'm speaking from a public payphone,	- لا تخافي. . أنا أتكلم في التليفون العمومي،
-You made a mistake . .	- أخطأت . .
-But I . . .	- لكنني . .
-Never . . . They are . . .	- أبدا . . إنهم . .
-Listen . .	- إسمعي . .
-Hello . .	- هلو . .
-Honey! Do you hear me?	- يا حبيبي أسمعني؟
-Speak up . . I can't hear. .	- اصرخي . . لست أسمعُ . .
-What do you say?	- ماذا تقول؟
-I love you . .	- أحبك . .
The line got disconnected. .	ينقطع الخطُ

Silence. . .  
(Poems 369-70)

صمتُ . .  
(قصائد 369-70)

This might be a very normal phone-call conversation and nothing is special about it. But for an Iraqi-Arab reader, well acquainted with the cultural and political setting of Iraq in the 1970s and after, it is not. The abrupt questions of the caller and the careful and incomplete answers given by the women he loves indicate a sense of fear and discomfort.

As she told him to be careful, he said that he is calling from a public phone. In the era of the Baath Regime (1968-2003), the rule of the government was extremely authoritarian and oppressive, with zero tolerance for opposition. Phone calls are all under surveillance and mostly recorded. This explains the succinct questions and discontinuous replies. The woman is concerned about him, she blames him saying that he did wrong, and the moment he starts to justify, she stops him, saying "Never. . . They are..". The sense of fear and discomfort, and perhaps the risk of making this call aims for a larger goal,

which is to tell her he loves her, and this is the thing secret services, police and others cannot prevent or arrest. Love survives oppression and dictatorships, and the poet concludes his poem with the silence that follows the disconnection of the line, to give an open ending to this dramatic episode, open to several possibilities.

In “*Attab*” [Defect], al-Sayegh presents another dramatic scene, but this time supported with exposition and narration. Again, a man and women are in love with each other. He tells his readers that three days ago, he was dancing with her, and as his lips came close to her ear, he whispered “I love you.” She responded with a smile and avoided him after the dance was over. Then, the narrator resumes

Three days later

As we sat in the bus, she whispered

- I love you

My ears confused . .

I said:

-Pardon! I didn't catch it . .

She replied:

-Nothing . .

I just wondered if there is defect in the bus

I said:

-Yes. .

There is a defect in the bus. .

We resorted to silence . . . the story is

over.

بعد ثلاثة أيامٍ

همست، حين جلسنا في (الباص)

- أحبك

فاضطربت أذناي . .

وقلت لها:

- عفوا . . لم أسمع ما قلت . .

أجابت:

- أبداً . .

أتساءل، إن كان (الباص) به عطبٌ

قلت:

- أجل . .

إن الباص به عطبٌ . .

وسكتنا . . وانتهت القصة . .

- (قصائد 363-64)

(Poems 363-64)

Again, a love affair is the subject, but an air of uncertainty and fear is overwhelming the scene, as he approaches her in the party, she just smiles and goes away, and as she approaches him in the bus, he is not sure of what she says. Both sides use whispers to express their love and do not declare their feelings to each other, as if afraid of something or not yet sure this the right thing to do in such a conservative society as that of Iraq which bans public love affairs. The second part of the poem occurs in the bus, which is defective and not sufficient enough to transport them anywhere. She wonders if the bus has a defect, and he confirms, that is why it is not certain that she whispered “I love you” and he misunderstood what she said. When he asks her to say it again, she said she was wondering why the bus is not functioning well. She whispered that because of the overwhelming fear that permeated the life of people in Iraq at that time. The bus

is symbolic; it might refer to the regime that is driving the people to the unknown, which is why they both resorted to silence and the story, particularly the love story, ends at that moment, just before its birth.

The examples discussed above are only a small sample to show Yousif al-Sayegh's employment of drama in his poetry. In a dramatic poem by al-Sayegh, there are typically two characters, a woman and a man, usually in love, and this love is always threatened by some fears, surveillance and existential concerns. Still, there is always a political and ideological dimension implicitly introduced in the poem. Al-Sayegh is also known to be the master of the masks or personas he creates in his poems to speak through them. In "*I'tirafat Malik bin al-Rayb*" [Confessions of Malik bin al-Rayb] (*Poems* 51-70), the title-poem of his much celebrated book, he uses as his mask Malil bin al-Rayb, a classical Arab poet (641-677) (Dhaif 422), who wrote an unmatched elegy for his own death, being bitten by a snake, and died soon after. Al-Sayegh used Malik bin al-Rayb as a symbol, a mask and a parallel, and expresses through the latter his feelings of imminent death, war, fears and looming tragedy. In most of al-Sayegh's poems, readers encounter people, identified or otherwise, who speak for themselves, and there is always natural and ordinary dialogue, with little metaphoric style and almost no decorated style.

#### **1.4 Conclusions**

The expansion of the cinema and audio-visual arts; the proliferation of radio and TV productions of drama and the unprecedented rise of the entertainment industry in the mid-twentieth century resulted in a great deal of competition for the written texts. Traditional literary genres witnessed the strongly emerging art of the moving picture, which posed a challenge to the art of poetry in particular, which had to adapt to the growing visual arts. Such availability of drama and exposure to TV series and accessibility of movies left a permanent impact on the poetry of the mid-twentieth-century poetry in general.

In spite of the cultural, socio-historical, linguistic and contextual differences between American and Arabic poetry of the twentieth-century, both of them share an evident presence of drama and utilization of its potentialities to serve various functions. The presence of distinct characters, real and fictitious; the employment of dramatic dialogues and monologues; the action and suspense spread throughout; the use of irony,

verbal and dramatic, along with the elaborate scenery, are all used in such a way as to make the poem more like a little piece of drama performed on a virtual stage. Such elements are all frequently employed by both Kenneth Koch and Yousif al-Sayegh.

The relatively short history of drama in Arabic literature, in comparison to that of the Western tradition, has very little bearing on the dramatization of Arabic modern poetry. Drama is new to Arabic culture, yet as far as its employment in poetry is concerned, it marks the most important change in the history of Arabic poetry, since its employment enabled the poets to assume a sense of detachment and objectivity in their perspectives and step out of the overwhelming subjectivity which had characterized Arabic poetry since its birth. Dramatizing the Arabic poem came as a turning point in its development so that in order to be a modernist poem, one should present multiple viewpoints and voices, a sense of objective verisimilitude, and some new mode of expression that differs from the pitiful emotional and lamenting tone which characterized classical Arabic poetry. In other words, 'dramatizing' has been largely considered a synonym for 'modernizing' in the context of Arabic poetry.

As shown in the few poems discussed above, both Koch and al-Sayegh have intensively relied on drama in their poems, and this enabled them, among other things, to assume detachment from personal subjectivity and overt lyricism. Still, in both cases, the poet is still present in the scene, being a protagonist, as with Koch, or an omniscient narrator of episodes and dramatic situations which happen to others, as in al-Sayegh. Also, in comparison with Koch's dramatic frame of mind, al-Sayegh is very serious, grave and tragic in his dramatic poems, in which an atmosphere of fear, doubt and anxiety looms large. Koch's dramatic poems are generally light; there is a comic relief in them and some of them are highly sarcastic. The former's poems, particularly those discussed above, are mostly narrative and descriptive, with some dramatic scenes inserted within, such that they include narration and exposition along with performance of dramatic roles or exchange of conversational repartees. In the case of al-Sayegh, the dramatic poem is entirely dramatic, with absolutely no narration and commentary, as in "*Liqaa*" [Meeting], or an entirely conversational poem with one short comment as in "*Hiwar un .Ibra al-Hatif*" [A Dialogue via Telephone] and "*Attab*" [Defect]. In other words, al-Sayegh's dramatic poems are more purely dramatic than those of Kenneth Koch which

combine other elements within. Finally, experimentation with dramatic poetry is one of the reasons why both poets enjoyed acclaim and reputation in their respective nations, and it is hard to discern whether they were great poets experimenting with drama, or great dramatists employing verse as a way to articulate the intense human states of feeling and thoughts in their short poems, which are most like short dramatic pieces rather than short poems.

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