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The logic of absurd—*Murād III* by Al-Ḥabīb Būla‘rās

Two years ago the National Theatre of Tunisia celebrated the centenary of creation the Municipal Theatre in Tunis. On this occasion the present director of the National Theatre of Tunisia, Muḥammad Drīss decided to stage the play *Murād III* by Al-Ḥabīb Būla‘rās. This choice was described by Drīss himself, as a tribute paid to the drama which played very important role in developing Tunisian theatre. On the other hand the presentation of *Murād III* gave us also an opportunity to have a look at the play in a new context and try to reinterpret it.

Murād III was published for the first time in 1966. It has to be stressed that the drama appeared as an outcome of constant cooperation between Būla‘rās and an eminent Tunisian actor and director ‘Alī Bin ‘Ayyād. It was also dedicated to this great artist. Būla‘rās had been working on this play for a quite long period of time intending to write a text, which could express the actual problems of contemporary Tunisia. At the same time he tried to present universal truths through the original local colour.

Beyond any doubt the first-night of Arabic version of Albert Camus’ *Caligula*, which took place in 1961 in Tunis, gave Būla‘rās an inspiration for his artistic searching. The drama was translated by Ḥasan az-Zimirlī and it is to be mentioned that the spectacle was a great success not only in Tunisia but also in France. Many theatrical critics compared ‘Alī Bin ‘Ayyād who performed a part of eponymous hero to unforgettable Gérard Philippe.

Murād III was premiered in 1966 and from the very beginning it was considered by the critics as a turning point in the history of Tunisian theatre. According to Maḥmūd al-Māğarī *Murād III* due to its original form and artistic conception initiated a new stage in Tunisian drama.¹ The play by Al-Ḥabīb Būla‘rās is an historical drama deeply enrooted in the tradition

¹ Cf. Maḥmūd al-Māğarī, *Dirāsāt fī al-masrah at-tūnusī*, Tūnus 1995, p. 23.

of this genre of Arabic theatre. Nevertheless events from the past become here just a background. Būla'rās like many other Arabic writers in that period took the history as a cover to talk about the present situation. Arabic scholar Muhammad 'Azīza summed up this artistic method saying: "The historical literature is a very good hide. Even the most dangerous reflections on, for example, power or domination become acceptable when placed in the past."²

Al-Ḥabīb Būla'rās very thoroughly studied the history of Tunisia especially the period when this country was under the rule of the Mouradit Beys dynasty. He pointed out even in the preface to *Murād III* that he wanted his drama to be as close to the historical truth as possible. From 1640 up to 1705 Mouradits – the dynasty founded by Ḥammūda Ibn Murād, ruled over Tunisia. Formally they were dependent on Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul but in the course of years they managed to obtain a large autonomy. Each of Muradit rulers held the title of *Bey*, which was initially used by tax collecting troops commanders. The last ruler of this dynasty was called Murād III and his biography inspired Būla'rās.

The drama begins in the Tunisian palace of Bardo where the court and gathered crowd of Tunisians are waiting for arriving from Al-Qayrawān Murād who is to be sworn to the office. Such atmosphere of uncertainty and suspicions prevail the whole play.

Murād as a child witnessed fratricidal fights for domination over Tunisia between his father and his uncle Muḥammad, and then his uncle Ramaḍān. Finally in 1696 Ramaḍān came to power. Many Tunisians expected that the new ruler would restore peace and order in the country, but they were quickly disappointed. It appeared that Ramaḍān was unable to exercise such demanding position. Moreover, he remained under strong influence of an opportunist, singer Mazhūd who on behalf the Bey indulged himself in any kind of abuse. In these circumstances Tunisians remembered about young prince Murād who survived the fratricidal wars and who could eventually replace Ramaḍān. The Bey quickly realized that his position is threatened. He ordered to kidnap and then blind his nephew Murād. Thanks to the prince supporters intervention a French doctor who was supposed to carry out the sentence faked the operation and saved Murād's eyes.

The prince managed to escape from the prison in Souse where he had been detained. He found many supporters in Ġabal Wasalat region and

² M. Azīza, *Regards sur le théâtre arabe contemporain*, Padoue 1982, p. 103.

quickly was proclaimed as a new Bey. Soon after that, Ramaḍān, deserted by his partisans was captured and sentenced to death.

The last one from the dynasty of Mouradit beys was only 18 when he entered in glory the palace of Bardo. Unfortunately during the reign of Murād III stabilization and order were not restored in the country. The new Bey became a merciless tyrant. His only aim was to fight against Ramaḍān supporters and revenge his father's death. The chronicles call him *Bu Bala*. This nickname is derived from the name of his sword—*Bala*. It is also said that this sword had to taste human blood every day.

First, Murād got rid of his opponents in the country. Then, trying to revenge his father he prepared a military expedition against Dey of Alger. Initially his troops were victorious. But in 1700 Tunisian army was defeated in a very important battle of Constantina. Murād decided to send his trusted commander Ibrāhīm aš-Šarīf to Istanbul and ask there for support. The Ottoman Sultan preferred to put an end to the conflict without armed intervention and offered his arbitration. Murād rejected Sultan's proposal and prepared another expedition against Alger. Meanwhile Ibrāhīm aš-Šarīf in accord with Istanbul organized a plot against his Bey. In 1702 Murād III was assassinated by his most trusted commander Ibrāhīm aš-Šarīf who took power in Tunisia.

As it was mentioned, in *Murād III* the historical events are only the background for deep philosophic analyses of mechanisms of power, responsibility of those who exercise authority in a state and difficult responsibility of those who are subjected. But first of all *Murād III* seems to be a psychological drama. Būla'rās from the very beginning fix our attention on the eponymous hero. His history is an axis of the play. Murād in the complexity of his experience is the main point of the artistic construction of this tragedy. From the very beginning through his eyes we see other persons in the drama. His inner struggle with the past, with himself becomes the foreground of the play.

We can find many common features in Camus' *Caligula* and *Murād III*, that is why it is perhaps easier to analyze the logic of the cruel Tunisian Bey. Caligula said: "men die and they are not happy"³.

That was the turning point of his life. He realized that in spite of the fact that he possesses the absolute power in the emporium, he is unable to assure everlasting life to the people and their sentiments. In this perspective he completely rejected the logic of this world. Murād did the same although

³ A. Camus, *Dramaty*, Kraków 1987, p. 23.

his motivation was different. He could not understand that people, who betrayed his father and were ready to kill him by Ramaḍān's orders, now praise him and welcome him as a new ruler. Murād discovered, to use Camus' terminology, "that people were slaves of the absurd"⁴ and that is why he rebelled against it.

Young prince brought up in the atmosphere of never ending war, watching death, hatred and treasons suddenly found out that God gave him a mission. He was saved from death or blindness at least and finally he got power in the country. This power in his logic means a task. According to Murād, God experienced him to make him stronger, to make him ready to carry out an exceptional mission. This mission is to liberate Tunisia from plots and hypocrisy. He says: "I have promised to fight against corruption in this country. My sword will be unique and it will be the sword of justice."⁵

Unfortunately good intentions became only pretext for horrible deeds. Murād quickly gets lost in his fury and his merciless thirst of revenge. He does not even ask who was guilty, who took part in plots, and who acted only as an instrument in Ramaḍān's hands. People must die because they were obedient to former ruler. The new Bey does not care about his own private life, about his happiness. He firmly rejects Ibrāhīm aš-Šarīf's idea of his marriage which according to the commander could guarantee the stability in the country. He repeats many times that he has a mission, which engages all his attention. When his cousin Fāṭima remarks that he should live a normal life he states: "Everything is just a mirage. There is no joy, no repose"⁶ and then he adds that the wound he got in his heart could never be healed.

Beyond any doubt Murād is an innocent victim of his days. He is a victim of spoiled relations in the Mouradit family. But it does not excuse the fact that he himself became also an oppressor. Again, the new young Bey turned out to be unable to stop the long period of hatred and fights within Mouradit family.

Al-Ḥabīb Būla'rās in the interview with Maḥmūd al-Māğarī said: "the word—a man does not mean necessarily a good man. Murād is not a good man, but it is not the most important here. Murād is a man who has problems and who is trying to rebel against fate and destiny."⁷

⁴ Ibid., p. 294

⁵ Al-Ḥabīb Būla'rās, *Murad III*, Tūnus 1999, p. 25.

⁶ Ibid., p. 43

⁷ Maḥmūd al-Māğarī, op.cit., p. 32

In his drama the author is trying to analyze thoroughly our human psychic. He is presenting the logic of hatred and destruction which seems to be the most difficult to understand. Nevertheless the construction of the play and the fact that Būla'rās presents here "only" historical events enable him to touch very complicated matters in safe, indirect way. That's why maintaining such a formal detachment from a given problem it is easier to reflect on it. Obviously it is difficult to understand Murād's logic. Caligula's rebellion against absurd led him toward madness and death. Such was also the case of the last Mouradit Bey. It is not easy to excuse his horrible deeds, which often surpass any moral limits. And in fact Būla'rās does not want us to seek such excuses. First of all the author shows us the example of man who is completely lost, who does not even understand what is actually happening around him and who at the same time holds very important office. Despite all his mental conditions he's got his logic. This is the logic of absurd, the logic which must lead him to destruction. That was also in reality his mission. Since he realized that he lived in the world of absurdity he decided to destroy it. Murād did not manage to find any other way to resolve his problem. He fought against phantoms that were in himself and this brought him only misfortune and death. But why he did not try to follow a different path? Why he did not try to build his new country on peace and forgiveness? We may only speculate on it.

Emmanuel Mounier wrote: "our human mission is to do our best to understand the other man".⁸ In his face like in a mirror we may see ourselves. In this perspective such distorted human image of Murād may be for us a challenge to look honestly at ourselves. That is perhaps the most important message that we can find out in *Murād III*. At the same time that also makes Būla'rās' drama so interesting, topical and universal.

⁸ Cf. E. Mounier, *Wprowadzenie do egzystencjalizmów*, in T. Terlecki, *Krytyka personalistyczna*, Warszawa 1987, p. 27.