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## Ashour, Nu'man Sa'd al-Deen

By: Abdul-Latif, Emad

**(1918–1987),**

playwright, was born to a well-off family in the city of Meet Ghamr in Al Dakahlia governorate in Egypt. His father, S'ad al-Deen Ashour, was passionate about literature and the arts, especially the theater. His mother belonged to a wealthy family from the countryside. For primary and secondary education, Ashour moved between different schools in Dakahlia, Alexandria, and Cairo. His admiration for the Egyptian writer Taha Hussein and his desire for a career in literature led him to study in the Department of English at Cairo University in 1938. However, upon graduating he worked as a bank employee for ten years. In 1952, he quit this position and joined the Ministry of Social Affairs as a supervisor of some of the government's cultural activities. This job afforded him close ties with artists, especially dramatists. When the Ministry of Culture was established in 1958, he served as a censor of artistic productions. But his work at the Ministry of Culture did not last long, as he was expelled from the government in 1961 along with a number of intellectuals who faced persecution for their leftist views. A few years later, Ashour resumed his work in the press with the *Al-Jomhoreyya* newspaper, then at *Akhbar Al Youm*, where he worked until his death. He married Huda Hakim in 1954 and had a son and two daughters.

In his autobiography, Ashour mentions that he was influenced by socialist thought in his early life. Despite confirmation that he never participated in any communist or socialist organizations, which were widespread in the late 1940s, he was arrested in 1945 and again in 1946 on charges of belonging to a communist organization. He acknowledged that he hesitated to support the July revolution until Gamal Abd Al Nasser issued the Agrarian Reform Law (9 September 1952) and nationalized the Suez Canal (26 July 1956).

Before he became a professional playwright, Ashour worked as a journalist in several Egyptian newspapers, and in the late 1940s he served as editorial secretary at *Sout Al Umma* and *Al Wafd* newspapers. During that period, he published many articles in which he showcased books and autobiographies of renowned figures. He collected some of these articles in his first book, *Boys of Freedom* (1956). Other books such as *Images of Gallantry and Heroes* (1964) and *Egyptian Heroic Tales* (1973) covered autobiographies of prominent figures in both Eastern and Western cultures. In addition, Ashour contributed to the genre of short stories with the publication of four collections: *Am Farrag's Tales* (1956), *Lanterns* (1963), *Race with a Rocket* (1968), and *A Crisis of Ethics* (1976). He was also interested in writing for children; in his twenties, he published *The Curlew*, a magazine for children that lasted only six months. Despite his multiple interests, the theater was Ashour's obsession. Therefore it is unsurprising that he entitled his autobiography *The Theatre of my Life* (1975) and wrote therein about his experience with the theater both as a playwright and a critic.

In 1950, Ashour wrote his first play, *The Magnet*, but kept it locked in his desk until it was staged in 1955. The play's success motivated him to write more significant plays, namely *People Downstairs* (1956) and *People Upstairs* (1958). By providing theatrical treatments of the transformations that occurred to the lower and middle classes after World War II, those two plays became hallmarks of the Egyptian realistic theater. *People Downstairs*, in particular, marked the beginning of a series of realistic plays that made marginalized characters their theme and presented a perspective influenced by the Marxist view of class struggle. The value of Ashour's plays lay in two of their features. First, he intertwined comedy and tragedy to offer an ironic critique of Egyptian society. Second, he made a significant development in the language of the theater by using the Egyptian colloquial language that imitates the everyday

language of Egyptian society.

Ashour's theatrical productions extended over more than thirty-three years. In 1958, he wrote *Cinema Awwanta* (Bad Cinema), which tackled the problems of the cinema industry, and *Sanf Al Harim* (Categories of Women) (1960), which dealt with family problems in general and male-female relationships in particular. The sixties marked the zenith of Ashour's theatrical creativity; he wrote six plays in that decade: *Al Doghry's Family* (1963), *Attwa Effendi: Public Sector* (1965), *Three Nights* (1966), *Wabbur Al Tahin* (1967), *Foreign Countries* (1968), and *The Secret of the Universe* (1969). The majority of these plays tackled the problems of applying socialism to Egyptian society. During the 1970s and 1980s, Ashour wrote four more plays: *The Coming Generation* (1972), *The Tower of Tanneries* (1976), *The Time Game* (1984), and *Following a Tragic Accident* (1985). His interest in the theater was not confined to writing; he also began to teach criticism in the Institute of Performing Arts in 1964 and was head of the Centre for Theatre Studies and Experiences. In addition, he translated a number of plays from English into Arabic, including the Irish writer Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*.

Nu'man Ashour's literary productions received widespread acclaim from ordinary people and critics alike. He was granted a number of prizes: the First Prize for Drama (Egypt) in 1946, the Theatre Incentive Award (Egypt) in 1970 for his play *Foreign Countries*, and the Egyptian State Incentive Award for Literature in 1968. On 5 April 1987, Ashour died in one of Cairo's hospitals. [See also Hussein, Taha and Nasser, Gamal Abd al-]

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