

**Historiography in Mansoor Rahbani's**  
***Abu Tayeb Al Mutanabbi and Zenobia***

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**Abstract:**

The aim in this paper is to explore those aspects of historiography in Mansoor Rahbani's *Abu Al Tayeb Al Mutanabbi and Zenobia* shedding light on Ibn Khaldun's concept of the historian's task. I also tend investigate Mansoor's aims in retelling the history of national icons living in Baghdad and the Levant. Striving to regain Arab Glory and independence through the means of solidarity are major themes in the two musical histories where poetry, song and Souk are significant. Human and social predicaments are generated by political constraints.

**Keywords:** Historiography; Arab Glory; Independence; Solidarity; Souk

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## 1- Introduction:

Rahbanis' musicals won fame since the fifties in the twentieth century. Rahbanis are the trio, Assi (1923-1986), Mansoor (1925-2009) and Assi's wife, Fairouz, (b.1935). They are recounted by Said Akl as "the best Lebanese product in the last century." Rahbanis are writers, directors and music composers in plays staged in in the Arab world and in some Western countries.

Rahbanis' theatrical and film productions are among those considered by Louis-Joseph Lebret as "totally dedicated to the public welfare" to "solve the multiple problems of" even the "human progress." (Nasnas: 2007) While weaving predominant social and political conflicts with music, song and folkdance, Rahbanis tend to give solutions embodying "ethical, intellectual, national, humane principles" within the "aesthetic, philosophical, social, political and historical dimensions." (Najm: 2004: 38, 119)

Rahbanis' musicals are concerned with developing "an outlook on life and the world." Aiming at "endurance and solidarity," their songs never cease during the civil war but chanted by Lebanese who tend to "select, compare, assess, negotiate or reject." (Trabulsi: 2006: 12-7)

After the outbreak of Civil war, Rahbanis began to summon the evading of the oppressive ruler in addition to the reconstruction of the city. The cease of war in Lebanon marked a new turn in Rahbanis' musicals when Mansoor Rahbani carried on Lebanese earlier theatrical tradition delving into history which started in the mid nineteenth century at the hands of Joseph al Hasan bin Ya'cob, Habib al Shemali, Mikhael Dallal. (Hamadi: 2007:52) Those early Lebanese playwrights turned to Arabic history and chose to feature phenomenal leaders in the Arab heritage maintaining rhetoric descriptive style, rhymed songs along with narratives in Classical Arabic, 'fusha'. After the death of his brother Assi, Mansoor revives the Lebanese historic tradition composing and producing such musical histories as *The Last Days of Socrates* (1998), *Abu Al Tayeb Al Mutanabbi* (2001), *Gibran and the Prophet* (2005), *Zenobia* (2007) and *The Return of the Phoenix* (2008).

## 2- Literature Review:

Abido Basha is a Lebanese theatre critic. His books on Rahbanis' theatre constitute prolific critique. Basha devotes one chapter to "The Two

Assis and the Two Mansoors and Fairouz al Rahbani” in his book *They [Hom]*. Basha analyzes Rahbanis’ language, poetry and song in their musicals which are “for and about the people.” (Basha: 2008: 32-42)

In *Death of The Stage Manager: A Record of the Political Song* [Mawt Mudeer Al Masrah: Thakerat el ‘Ughniah al Seyaseyyah], Basha argues the role of the song in Lebanese theatre. It used to claim for “identity in a fragmented and splintered country.” The “Public Choral” is established in 1975, after the outbreak of the civil war, to promote the communal performance sustaining the political spirit of unity, solidarity and diligence. The song is the means which “addresses the consciousness” tending to “fill the emptiness in the general humane aspiration.” (Basha: 2005, 31-2, 96)

Rahbanis’ musicals are deliberately studied in Basha’s book *Aquarium*. He argues that Rahbanis’ songs are misinterpreted by opponent culture critics. Relying on their own subjective speculation void of logical evidences, those critics assess Rahbanis’ songs as instigating rather than soothing the sectarian conflict. (Basha: 2011: 287, 301)

Not only the opponents, but also exponents might be forceful constraints to human development. The powerful impact of “families, groups, societies” is argued in *Ultimate Questions* by Bryan Magee. He explains in “The Human Predicament” that “their structures and rules, their own general modes of being and ways of behaving” not only “empower” but also “shape” and “yet “limit” individuals. (Magee: 2016: 34)

In “Personal Reflections,” Magee discusses the bearings of music in making “the experience” rather “more direct and immediate than ordinary experience”. There is the “else-ness,” in itself, “a this-ness” which seeks to bring the inside out “communicating itself directly” to the outward. (Magee: 2016: 88-9)

### **3- Aim of the Study:**

The aim in this paper is to explore those aspects of historiography in Mansoor Rahbani’s *Abu Al Tayeb Al Mutanabbi* and *Zenobia* shedding light on Ibn Khaldun’s concept of the historian’s task. I also tend to investigate Mansoor’s aims in retelling the life of the well-recognized poet Abu Al Tayeb Al Mutanabbi, living in Baghdad and the renown Queen Zenobia, living in Tadmur. Themes will be explored when techniques of music, song and dance persist to serve significant roles.

#### 4-Methodology

I opt to refer to definitions of historiography to dissect the historian tools employed by Mansoor. Using diagrams help analyze themes and techniques incorporated. Those diagrams will draw attention to affinities and discrepancies in the two historical musicals.

I tend to translate words and lines quoted from Arabic text plays and Arabic theatre critique into English to communicate the Source Text to the English-speaking researchers and readers.

My reference to Mansoor Rahbani, the playwright, and Abu Al Tayeb Al Mutanabbi, the protagonist and the play text, will be through their first names, Mansoor and Abu Al Tayeb.

The two plays are investigated throughout chronologically.

#### 5- Historiography:

In “britannica”, historiography is defined as writing history by the means of the synthesis of select details in history “into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination.” Both *Abu Al Tayeb* and *Zenobia* represent a period in the history of The Levant and Mesopotamia.

Mansoor seems to rely on the significance of history recounted by Ibn Khaldun when “history makes us acquainted with the conditions of past nations as they are reflected in their national characters. It makes us acquainted with the biographies . . . the dynasties and policies of the rulers.” (Rosenthal: 2005:11) Abu Al Tayeb (915-965) is “the man universally esteemed the greatest of all the Arab poets.” (Arberry: 2009: 1) Zenobia, the Queen of Tadmur, is no less celebrated in the Arab heritage.

Ibn Khaldun argues that the historian needs to avoid those “slips and errors” in the past with the sustenance of “a good speculative mind and thoroughness.” (2005:11) The historian’s speculative mind is underlined by John Cage as well. Cage declares “I once asked Arragon, the historian, how history was written. He said, ‘You have to invent it.’” (1993:237) The historian’s inventive attitude is cherished in historiography studies asserting that “the ethical imperative of historians to make themselves visible in the narrative” is primarily “to counter the belief that they are writing what actually happened” giving “heuristic value” to evoke “unconsidered insights and possibilities.” (Bromfield: 2009)

The heuristic presence of Mansoor, the historian in the two musicals in this paper, is accentuated through showing dilemmas experienced in the past. Depicting those policies and slips onstage would warn against their

persistence in the present day. Themes of reclaiming Arab Glory, independence and solidarity are still significant current issues in the Arab world Today.

*Abu Al Tayeb* and *Zenobia* are staged in several playhouses in Lebanon and in some Arab countries. *Abu Al Tayeb* is performed in Dubai, in Baalbeck, in Syria, in Forum de Beyrouth and in Amman as well. *Zenobia* is staged in Dubai, in Byblos International Festival and in Forum de Beyrouth.

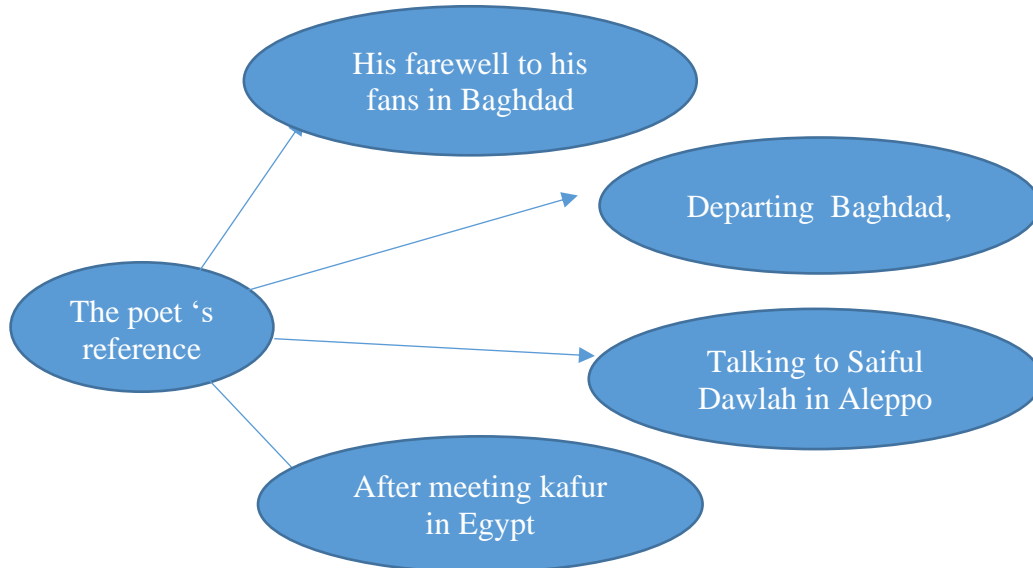
*Abu Al Tayeb* casts the life of the gifted poet who is well known for his famous resounding couplet “For the horsemen know me and the night, and the desert, /and the sword, and the lance, and the paper and pen.” (Arberry: 2009: 14) Mansoor’s play text is preceded by a two-page introduction written by Henry Zughuib. The Lebanese critic, Zughuib, argues that Mansoor writes to commemorate Abu Al Tayeb, the Abbasid poet, who has been “a nation in the figure of an individual.” By doing so, Mansoor aims at enlisting the poet in theatre collective memory both, visual and audio by staging his implicit and explicit tragedy.” (*Abu Al Tayeb*: 5)

Zenobia (240-274 AD), the queen of Tadmur recounted as the Empire of Palmyra, has been a resourceful inspiration for researchers in Syrian culture and history. “An Invitation to Tadmur”, for example, is one of those articles written by Kawther Rustum, a Syrian researcher who saw Zenobia’s statue in London Museum and Ruins of Tadmur in Damascus Museum. In her invitation, Rustum visualizes Zenobia the host who receives tourists and takes them in a tour to see sights in Tadmur telling them about the magnificence of the land provided with information cited in such Arabic books as *The Arameans*, *The Tigers in Ancient Arabs History Book*, *History of Arab Literatures*, Al Hamawi’s *Dictionary of Countries* and *Al-Masudi’s Meadows of Gold*. (Journal of Culture: 1982)

Mansoor’s *Zenobia* is a historical account of the Queen of Palmyra, Tadmur. The play text is preceded by a prologue recounting the physical and intellectual features of the Queen of Tadmur. Zenobia who “derives her love of freedom from the vast desert becomes the first cry of independence in the Orient and says no to the largest empire in history telling us that women enjoy miraculous power in leadership, decision making wisdom and determination.” (*Zenobia*: 7)

## 6-Arab Glory in *Abu Al Tayeb*:

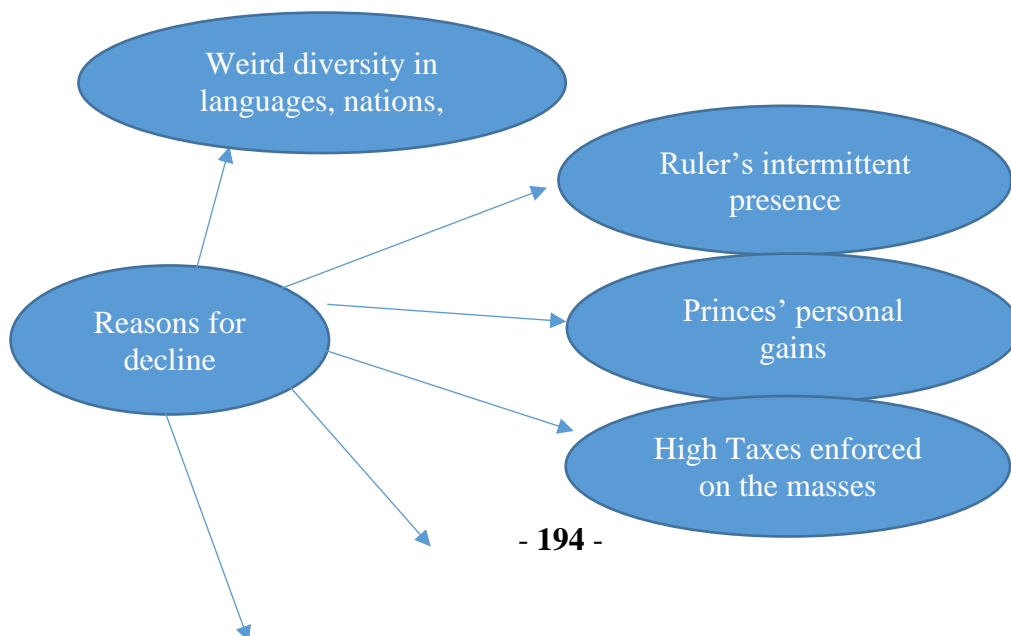
Abu Al Tayeb proceeds in the play mainly occupied with Arab Glory. He articulates his concern with the decline of Arab glory in the Abbasid Caliphate in different occasions.

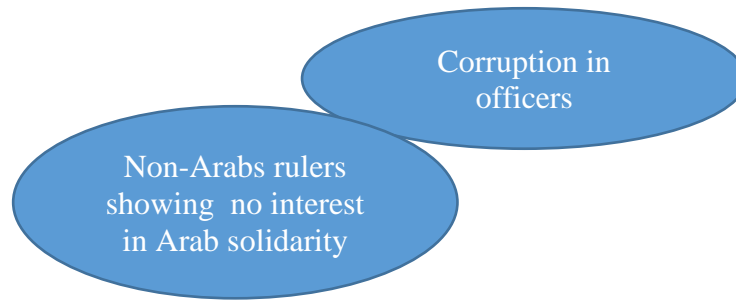


Whenever Abu Al Tayeb summons Arab Glory, he nominates himself to sovereignty. Abu Al Tayeb declares his power of oratory before the crowds:

Nobody except me  
 Poetry sent me  
 a sword of fervor  
 there to return to Arabs grandeur  
 and call upon troops  
 to go back to anger. (*Abu Al Tayeb*: 15)

He recounts the reasons for the social, political and ideological unrest. He articulates those slips in policies in the Abbasid dynasty which pave the way for the loss of Arab Glory as the following diagram shows:





Abu Al Tayeb was “appointed chief panegyrist” by Sayful Dawlah al Hamadani, “the heroic and bountiful” poet-prince of Aleppo. (Arberry: 2009: 1) He acknowledges Abu Al Tayeb’s impact on the Crowd, Sayful Dawlah takes Abu Al Tayeb to the battlefield because he fights robustly and wages vigor and valor in troopers. The prince declares to Abu Feras that this illustrious poet commands men and they immediately impersonate heroism and consequently win the battle.

Being exhilarated by the prince of Aleppo and the masses who memorize his poetry, Abu Al Tayeb expresses to his wife the "growling roar in him, the spreading greatness all over his inner self" before departing to Baghdad. He asks her “Am I not fit for ruling? . . . I want to rule a state.” He leaves since he is disappointed by her reply: “you are not going to rule. You will have an endless state. You shall be honored in the coming days and your name will thrive when names of kings fade away.” (*Abu Al Tayeb*: 17)

Prior to meeting Saiful Dawlah, Abu Al Tayeb praises not only his grandmother but also his ancestors asserting through poetry his pride and hatred of injustice. Before going to the battle with Saiful Dawlah, Abu Al Tayeb is highly self-empowered:

I am the mystery,  
swords and the men  
and the cry of heroes  
My poems support the royals  
and grant them permanent sovereignties (*Abu Al Tayeb*: 27- 35)

When the prince, Saiful Dawlah boasts his competency in battles, Abu Al Tayeb boasts his “charging the troops with wrath buffing them like swords to cut men’s throats.” (*Abu Al Tayeb*: 45)

The gifted poet explains his strategy of truthfulness that he never praises but he dresses heroic traits to those who will be stirred to enact them. He



argues that he owns both verbal panegyric and physical power in battles which qualify him to rule a state. His tour from Baghdad to Aleppo, then to Egypt are mere attempts to gain a governing status. (Abu Al Tayeb: 65)

Later and after ignoring his promise to assign Abu Al Tayeb a state to rule, Saiful Dawlah would summon upon the remarkable poet and hero only when encountered with defeat in the battlefield. Abu Al Tayeb is the judicious and truthful who has been undervalued by princes and rulers in Baghdad, in Aleppo and in Egypt. Whatever his strife is, Abu Al Tayeb is highly recognized, by Mansoor, in the closing poem in the play for the aim of upholding Glory in the Orient. (*Abu Al Tayeb*: 126)

To historicize those futile attempts in Abu Al Tayeb to sustain Arab Glory through word and action, Mansoor seems to anticipate the lack of optimism vowed by Samir Kassir (1960-2005). On malaise in the Levant, Kassir highlights Arabs' "refusal to emerge from" their malaise. He observes:

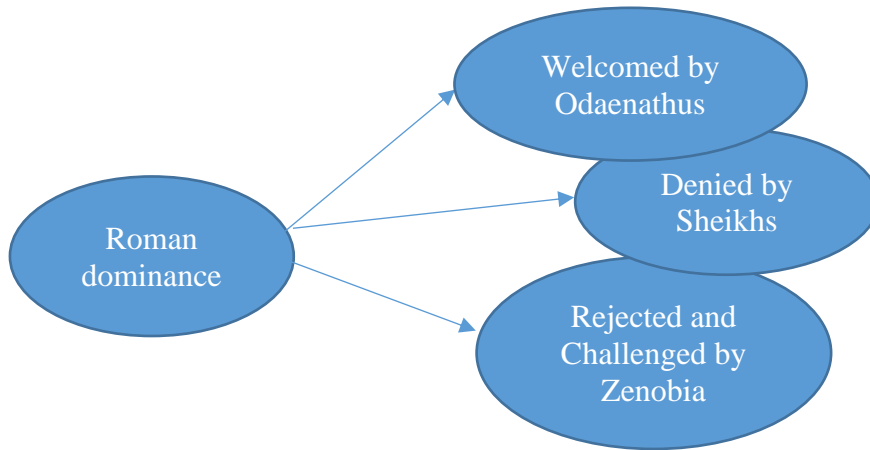
But there's no talk of optimism. The Arab world, the  
Levant in particular, remains the prisoner of a political  
and social system that may allow diversity to express  
itself, but never allows it to translate into any change  
in the decision-making processes. (Kassir: 2006: 79-91)

### **7-Independence and Solidarity in *Zenobia*:**

Zenobia's struggle to free her kingdom from domineering systems in Rome is prior in the play. Tadmur and Rome are observed "among those first civilizations fighting one another." The clash between those two civilizations may be ascribed to the agricultural nature in the Levant. Zenobia expands Tadmur Empire reaching "around the Mediterranean, Egypt." By embracing "the trade movement," which thrives, Zenobia generates "financial surpluses." (<https://mawdoo3.com>)

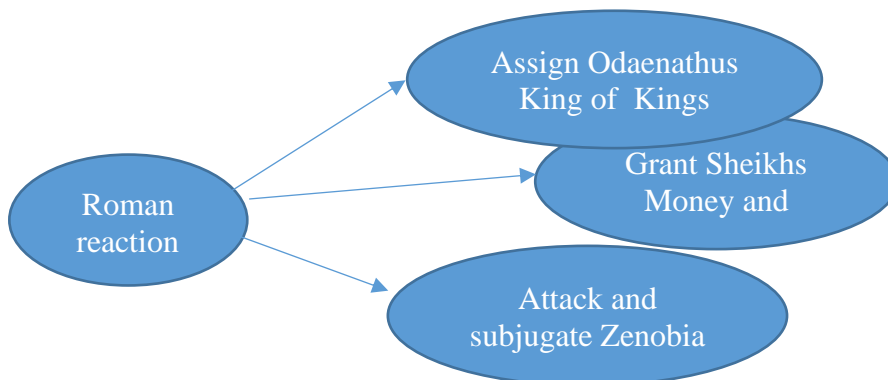
This clash has been dealt with variously in Mansoor's musical. It has been accepted by Zenobia's husband, Odaenathus, in the form of alliance with Rome but denied by those Sheikhs in tribes. The dominance of Rome has been rejected abhorrently by Zenobia even before her reaching to authoritative power. She asks her husband, the King, "Why would your troops fight Persia for the sake of Rome?" (*Zenobia*: 14)





Mansoor's Zenobia is introduced as the one who "taught us that women enjoy a miraculous power in leadership, bravery, wisdom and determination." She recognizes the unsurpassed geographical Location of Tadmur where "the gold of trade caravans flow." She seeks to liberate the Kingdom of Tadmur by terminating the Roman presence in the Orient. Mansoor observes that the "heritage of all women for honor, dignity and civilization run in her blood." She is the woman who liberates Syria, Egypt and Anatolia. She scorns the submission in Arabs to Rome or Persia. (*Zenobia*: 2008: p. 7)

Roman reaction towards their alliances and opponents in Tadmur is explained as follows:



Following the steps of Rahbani's political tendency, Mansoor depicts the troublesome state and its source. Zenobia ascribes her rejection of the Roman empire to several reasons. First, they in Tadmur "belong to the Deserts of Damascus and Homs." Second, "the Orient and the Occident never meet" even though Rome is "the empire of grandeur and architecture." (*Zenobia*: 2008: p. 29)

Reaching the throne, Zenobia's rejection of Rome decreases, and she begins to consider bringing up her children on the basis of "friendship rather than enmity with the Romans." The heuristic presence of the historian playwright explains this changing attitude in Zenobia through her avowal to nurture her kingdom with "culture, thought and philosophy on the land where all creeds prosper." (*Zenobia*: 2008: 31-44)

She loses hope in the support of native tribes. When Zabadaï recommends to unite with Arab Sheikhs, Zenobia discloses that Arab tribes "will always appeal either to Persia or to Rome offering their land fortunes to others." When Heraclius reaches the Palmyran land, Zenobia grows determined to control water channels in the Mesopotamia, Egypt and Abyssinia. She is determined to "starve Rome taking revenge for the children in all nations." Yet, her visit to Afqa in Byblos is to pronounce her love and indebtedness to the Goddess Ashtrout and to the sacred water in Ashtrout Lake reciting prayers to bless Tamur and the residents. (*Zenobia*: 2008: 45, 55, 70)

Zenobia not only rejects the greatest power in Rome but also initiates projects to prosper the land of Independence in Tadmur and voices her claims for liberty. Upon receiving the Roman request to surrender, Zenobia avows her rejection. Under siege, she reconciles to admit her failure realizing that the Orient, the land of culture, dialogue and knowledge always loses against Rome, the empire of artillery, killing and destruction. However, she is the cry of liberty offering her "blood for freedom." (*Zenobia*: 2008: 82-95)

### **8- Music and Song:**

Mansoor is the historian and the musician who acknowledges the significance of "music as a form of communication." Music is usually composed to "invoke feelings of pleasure, beauty, shock, excitement" when the "personal and subjective" is linked to the "collective, public experience." (2013: 1-3) Through music, song and Souk, Mansoor implies his own inventive ideas in the historical medium.

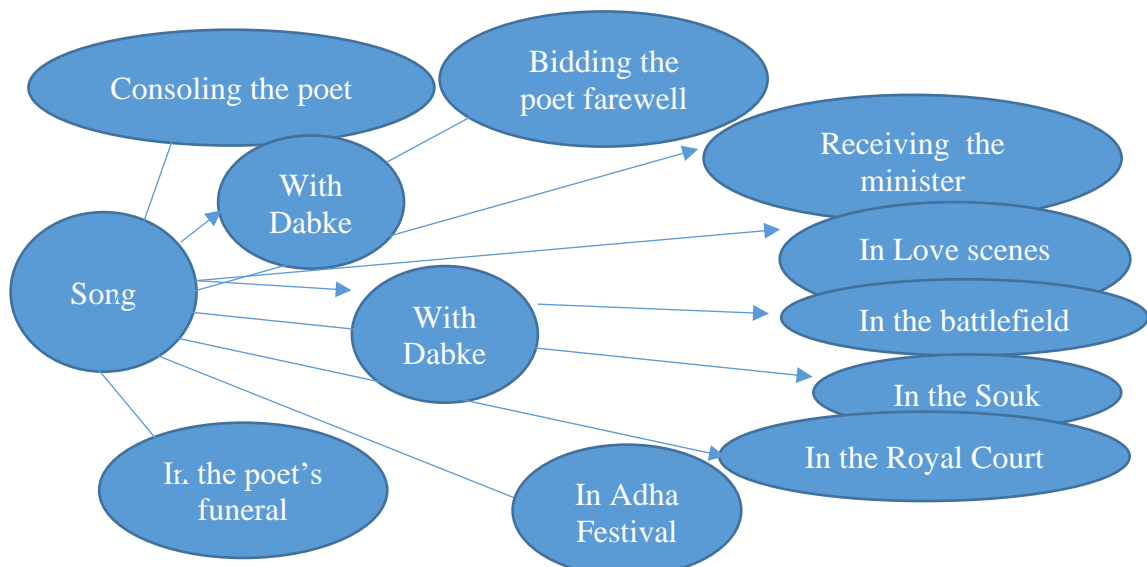
If Basha argues that Rahbanis raise "big questions which generate further questions," Mansoor proceeds to anticipate the outcome when the individual is undervalued and, yet, confined by superiors. This means any possibility for change, social or political, is restrained and condemned. However, equilibrium, in the musical histories, is sustained by the audio and visual vividness in songs and dance. (Basha: 2011: 287)

Mansoor incorporates music, song and dance in the Royal Court, the Souk and the battlefield. Those verbal melodious vibrant representations are performed by lovers, relatives, friends, or opponents to unfold those policies and circumstances experienced not only by Abu Al Tayeb and Zenobia but also by their descendants in the first decade in the third millennium.

Song is the verbal emotional medium of expression and dance is the visual physical communal merriment practice. Dabke, the folk dance, performed by locals holding swords moving in forceful steps. In both *Abu Al Tayeb* and *Zenobia*, the song serves almost similar purposes to allow the historian's reflection on hopes and worries in the rulers and the crowds.

Songs in *Abu Al Tayeb* are varied in their themes and aims. For example, the welcoming song in the presence of the minister, Al Muhallabi is ironically knitted to unfold the complaints of the poor crowds against poverty, starvation and high taxes. Acclaimed merriment in the song is eliminated when the masses are forced to pay taxes. The song here is endeavored by Mansoor to strengthen the bond with the contemporary life where taxes are paid to reconstruct the city after the civil war.

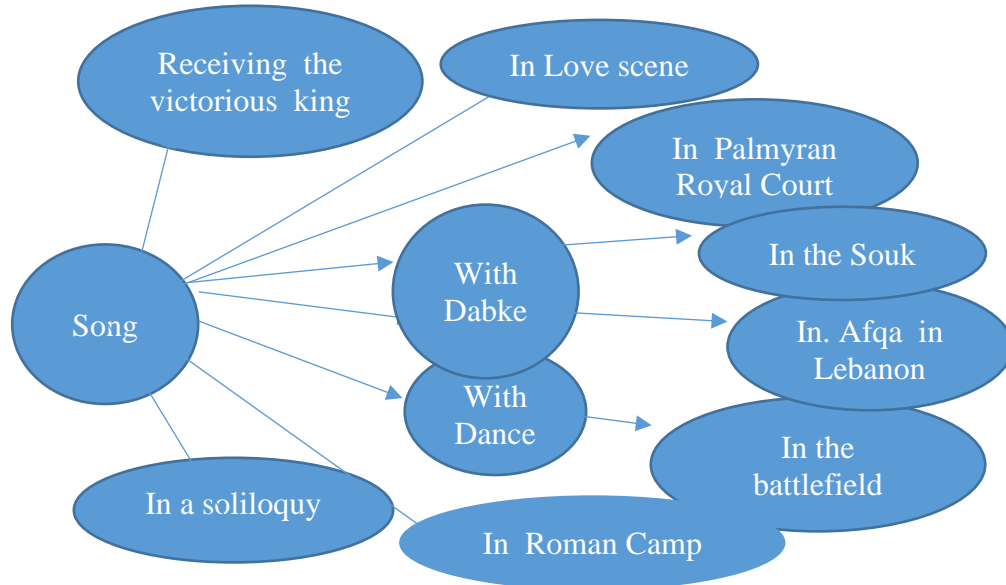
When songs are accompanied with Dance, the emotional and communal impact is intensified. Dabke is not the only dance performed in the play. In the Battlefield, the Byzantine forces are busy with drink and folk Armenian, Russian and Balkani dance.



Love song is common in the two musical histories. Both Abu Al Tayeb and Zenobia express emotional pains of being captivated by love. It is the platonic love voiced in

meetings among Abu Al Tayeb and Khawlah and also between Zenobia and Zabdas. Their love is suppressed by state affairs.

Unlike Abu Al Tayeb, whose commemorative funeral's song end the play, Zenobia, sings in her reconciliation pondering her deeds with regret and despair.

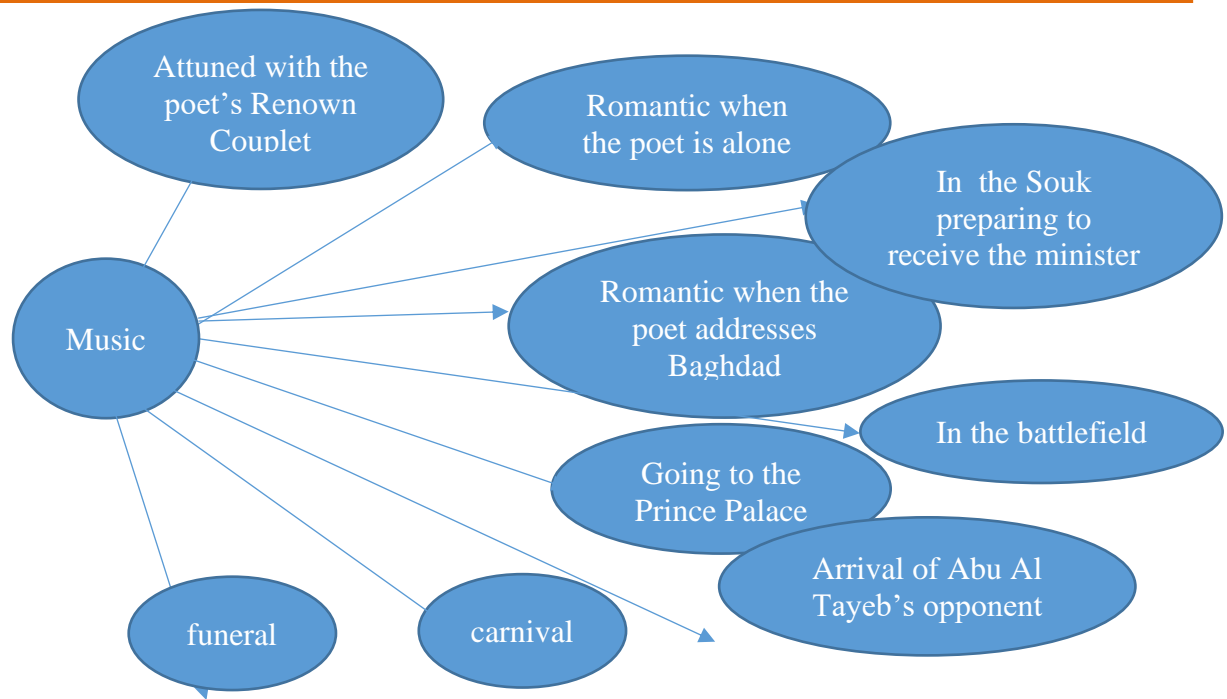


The song chanted in the official visit to Afqa is an outstanding expression of prudence and cunning in the queen who treads those routes to peace and prosperity. She goes to Afqa seeking the support of the Goddess and to run water channels in the land.

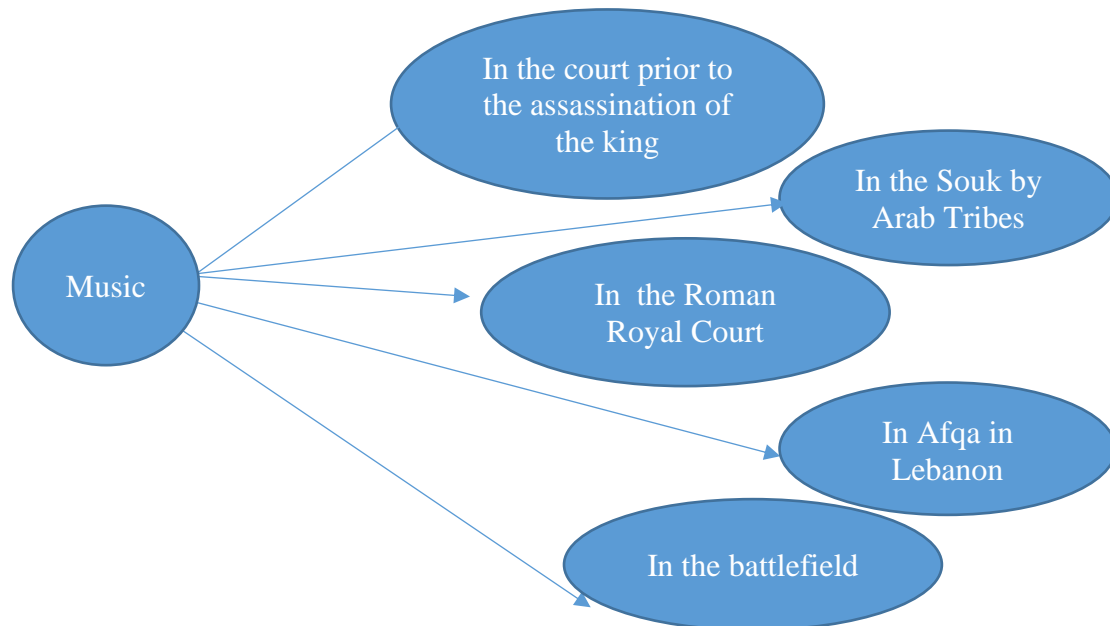
Songs in the musical histories are chanted by major and minor characters to convey the emotional undertones and create the balance between action and feeling. Songs are reflections on gains and losses in the protagonist's journey of life. Final songs win the sympathy of audience towards those would-be heroes and heroines if acknowledged and supported.

Although song is rudimentary in Mansoor's histories, music is intended to insinuate the immediacy and directness in the scene. Whether proud, romantic, joyful, cautious, weary, festive or sad, music proposes the visual and thematic turn in the plot.

The following diagram illustrates the types of tunes in *Abu Al Tayeb* serving different purposes. For example, the romantic tune indicates the poet's personal mood when he is alone or sad departing Baghdad. However, the tune is never specified when the scene reflects the collective action.



Music in Zenobia seems to play a further limited role preparing for significant incidents as assassination, intrigue, solemnity in the state or war.



Music is played before the Souk scene, but songs are chanted by Salesmen or visitors, males and females, selling and buying. Song is integrated in the Souk scene to communicate the inner feelings among people when “the voice, the dialect and the movement” unfold “the fundamental features of life.” (Basha: 2011: 297-300)

## 9-The Souk:

Souk in Arabic language denotes the market where textiles, perfumes and jewelry are displayed for sale. It is a highly appreciated technique used by Mansoor to bridge the gap between the past and the present. The Souk in Baghdad, Aleppo and Tadmur is a place where the ministers and the crowds meet. In the Souk the “wicked but good” locals assert their right for freedom and dignity in life. Mansoor is a Rahbani who seeks to weave the “humane” with the social, cultural, and political in the historical accounts. (Basha: 2008: 81)

By promoting trade in the Souk, the glorious goods of the past are cherished by locals who speak the current dialect in Lebanon today. In *Abu Al Tayeb*, Khawla, the princess, visits Aleppo Souk. She is invited via a melodious song to see the precious Chinese silk, Yemeni pounder and the Gulf pearls. Indian Spices and Babylonian wine are among those popular goods demanded by travelers and also the passersby. (*Abu Al Tayeb*: 53)

The argument on trade among the Arab and the Roman in *Abu Al Tayeb* is noteworthy. Abu Haitham, the Arab trader confirms to Goergeous that “Politics disperse while Trade unite. Trade never embraces enmity. It is the epitome of exchange and friendship among nations.” (*Abu Al Tayeb*: 118)

Souk in Tadmur is the meeting place for salesmen from Persia, Greece, Rome, Egypt, India and Aleppo calling upon people to buy carpet, perfumes, Kohl, fish, wine, spices, Chinese silk and geographical maps. Tadmur Souk is the place for female slave trade as well. Zenobia's son visits the Souk where the Roman officer, Serkesyan, buys an extremely beautiful slave and offers the slave girl to the young prince as a gift. The Roman officer praises the Souk in Tadmur as the Silk Road. Only in the Souk will the Orient and the Occident meet. (*Zenobia*: 24-7)

Such goods as sausages, Halabi kebabs and Barazek Shameyyat belong to current cuisines in Lebanon and Syria today.

## Conclusion:

In *Abu Al Tayeb* and *Zenobia*, Mansoor presents two highly acclaimed icons in Arabic history. They both enjoy a glorious life but end in demise. Through *Abu Al Tayeb*'s poetic claims, the need for maintaining Arab Glory is primary in a state overwhelmed by diverse communities, languages and occults. Zenobia strives to defy the Roman dominance to gain independence. Lack of solidarity in her Kingdom brings her doomed end. She

falls when betrayed by the insiders who receive money and gold from Roman opponents who are brilliant in leadership, artillery and architecture.

Mansoor presents those Arabic histories to contemporary audiences in order to explore those flaws prevailed in the Arab World where Baghdad and Syria are the most plighted.

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