



Shakespeare in Contemporary Arab Drama: A Study on Adaptation of Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to explain how Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* was adapted for the modern Arab world to demonstrate ways in which various human societies can communicate or engage in dialogue and the importance of building bridges of communication with other human societies. So, how Al-Bassam's adaptation helps to set one cultural moment apart from others, Using Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation as a background and a framework to compare Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* with that of indigenization. The adapted play reflects a distinctive cultural imaginary—the prevailing set of fantasies, values, desires, and assumptions that distinguish one cultural moment from others that have come before or will follow. The result showed that by adding terms from Arab culture, religion, and language, the adapted play provides a full comprehension of the contemporary Arab world and paints a complete picture of an Arab tyrant who seized power and overthrew it. The play also reflects the current reality of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

Keywords: Arab Spring, indigenization, Richard III, intercultural adaptation, Sulayman Al-Bassam

Introduction

Sulayman Al Bassam_(1972-) a Kuwaiti playwright, and director is regarded as one of the key figures who revived Shakespeare in the Arab World by adapting his plays and works and staging them in Arab theaters with a fresh cultural perspective to fit the religious and cultural milieu of the Arabs. Through his writings, Al Bassam attempted to portray the political and social climate that the Arab world was and is still experiencing. *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (2007) gave the audience a complete implicit picture of the state of the Arab world today while also clearly illuminating Arab customs, attire, ideas, and beliefs in a contemporary dramatic literary work.

The history of Shakespeare's translation and adaptation in the Arab world is similar, in a general sense, to that of the majority of non-English Shakespeare traditions, including a large number of Latin America and Eastern Europe. Arab audiences, as Hennessey (2019, p. 2) observes, have been familiar with Shakespeare's plays since the late eighteenth century. Shakespeare's tragedies came to Egypt via French, where Francophone Syro-Lebanese immigrants adapted them to fit the tastes and theatergoing customs of a quickly forming urban middle class. They were not literary works but script material for the Egyptian stage.

Previous studies, on the other hand, show how Shakespeare traveled all over the world with different times and generations. Firstly, an article written by Mahmoud F. Al-Shetawi (2013) "Arabic Adaptations of Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory". The article compares, using the postcolonial theory, 'Shakespeare's', and Arabic appropriations. Secondly, the work is an MA thesis entitled "The Adaptation of William



Shakespeare's Drama and Poetry in the Arab World Case Study: The Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam and the Lebanese Poet Jawdat Haydar" by Kraichi Hamza (2017) which explains the way some Arab writers adapt Shakespeare's plays and sonnets to show how Arab people receive the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare. Thirdly, the article "Othello in Oman", by Ahmad al-Izkī (2019), talks about the events interweaved Shakespeare with Classical Arab Epic. Fourthly, Within the Iranian context a study by Ramin Farhadi (2020) "Adapting Shakespeare's *Richard III*: A political reading of Hamid-Reza Naeemi's Richard" sheds light on the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* aims to critique the state power and restriction of freedom in the 1970s. Fifthly, a study written by Fazel Asadi Amjad, and Salam Hasan Makki (2021) under the title "Al-Bayati's Romeo And Juliet in Baghdad and The Call For Love and Harmony: A Study In Adaptation And Its Concept Of Indigenization". This article analyzes the political, social, and ideological indigenization of Dawood's Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad and elaborates on how the adapted play reflects the political, social, and ideological Iraqi conditions after the Invasion of 2003 in his adaptation.

the present shows the gap by different in that the adapted play- of Al-Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* reflects not only differing viewpoints on Shakespeare's play and classical literature in general, but also a distinct cultural imaginary—the prevailing set of fantasies, values, desires, and assumptions that serves to distinguish one cultural moment from others that have come before or will follow.

The methodology of the present study is as follows; Since the object of the study is the intercultural adaptation reflected in Sulayman Al Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (2007) Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation will be used to analyze the collected data in terms of religion, customs, language, and other cultural practices. Intertextuality,

according to Julia Kristeva and Machel Bakhtin is also used to clarify how both texts, adapted and original, are interested together in terms of discourse and conversation in which both reflect the times of unrest, how the cultural moment of England is being related to that of Arab context in terms of politics, culture, and religion.

Many questions have been raised in this study and they could be summarized as follows; How do Arab audiences, such as Iraqis, Kuwaitis, Tunisians, and Syrians, receive the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, To what extent does the adapted play, Sulayman Al Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, serve to distinguish one cultural moment from others that have come before or will follow, what is the nature of Al Bassam's contribution to intercultural discourse, and how the adapted play is being similar or different to that of the original.

The study's first aim is to show how the "indigenization" of 16th-century England culture interacts with Arab culture, and how the adapted play works as a means of communication and dialogue among different human societies. Another aim is to show how *Richard III* applies to different times and places, specifically how this play reflects the Gulf War and the Arab Spring.

The outcome of the study demonstrated that the modified play gave a thorough understanding of the modern Arab world and portrayed a complete image of an Arab dictator who grabbed power and overturned it by including terminology from Arab culture, religion, and language. The contemporary reality of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria is also shown in the play.

1.1. Theory of Adaptation



Linda Hutcheon discusses the theory of adaptation and how every adapter from a different country approaches the same story uniquely and shapes it to fit their particular art form. Regarding the importance of adaptation in daily living and in everything we read, see, or hear, Linda Hutcheon (2006) believes that “[a]adaptations are everywhere today: on the television and movie screen, on the musical and dramatic stage, on the Internet, in novels and comic books, in your nearest theme park and video arcade.” (p.2).

Adaptation is the act or process of altering something to make it fit into a particular environment or culture and to assert a particular goal or situation. Due to the connections and bridges that the adaptations provide between the old culture and the newly adapted production, their significance is extremely high in familiarizing the intended audience with the original literary material. According to Linda Hutcheon (2006). “a text can not only survive the shift from one form to another, but it can also thrive in ways not previously possible in the original form” (p.32). Therefore, she adds that “adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society, and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum”. (p.142).

Linda Hutcheon's influential theoretical model of adaptations incorporating reasonably stable texts in the forms of print media, audio, and video recordings (2006) is most suited for the study of the adaptations examined in this study. She gives some of the most significant insights into how Shakespeare's influence expanded into non-Anglophone cultures. So as a well-known writer Shakespeare is a widely adapted writer. She argues that adaptation “is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text. (p.21).



The process of adaptation, as Cartell and Rowe (2008) argue, reflects not only differing viewpoints on Shakespeare's plays and classic literature in general, but also different cultural imagery—the dominant set of fantasies, values, desires, and presumptions that serve to define a particular cultural moment and set it apart from moments that have come before or will come after it (p. 25). Transcultural adaptations, on the other hand, as Hopetoun believes, refer to the process of adapting a cultural work (such as literature, film, or theater) from one culture to another. During this adaptation, there are instances where changes in racial and gender politics occur. She adds that the “adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or controversial; at other times, the adaptation “de-represses” an earlier adapted text’s politics.” (2006, p.148) This can involve eliminating or altering racial or gender-related themes, characters, or perspectives that may be sensitive or offensive to the audience of the adapted culture.

Literary adaptation is a well-known branch of literature; its importance consists of enabling global access to local literary works and erasing geographical and cultural barriers between literary works from various cultural backgrounds. Without these adaptations, English and Shakespeare's literature would never cross the borders of the Arab world. As many other writers from around the world have done while adapting their works of literature, Arabs have also contributed to these Shakespearean adaptations. Shakespeare's tragedy Richard III is the original script.

Al-Bassam's adaptation is one of the best adaptations of Shakespeare's dramas in the Arab world, which makes the drama more in line with Arab culture and society. This and other Shakespearean adaptations by Al-Bassam and others helped to create the bridge between cultures that connected the Arab audience to Shakespeare.



Al-Bassam adapted Shakespeare to create and build an intercultural bridge which helped in making Shakespeare, his drama, among the most famous English literary figures in our Arab world. Concerning the cross-cultural perspective, Trimmer (2022). states that Literary intercultural “is the study of literature and culture beyond national, regional, and disciplinary boundaries; the politics of knowledge production, circulation, and institutionalization.” (p.11).

1.2. Intertextuality and Cultural Adaptation in Al-Bassam's *Richard III*

The domain of literature is thought to be the largest, in which literary characters, writers, authors, poets, and playwrights exchange impact and influence. This process has never been constrained or limited by cultural or geographic borders. So, making a connection between the ideas of the author, text, reader, society, and history is an important study by Mikhail Bakhtin (2011). *The Dialogic Imagination*, every literary work comprises numerous discourses and conversations that give the work its "hybrid construction" status. (p.304). In *Speech Genres and Former Essays*, Bakhtin (2011) claims that literary writings do not only follow, but also amend, or rewrite earlier texts, rather they both inform and are informed by those earlier texts: "Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances"(p. 304).

Graham (2011). Also argues that intertextuality provides a significant role in the adaptation process, claiming that “Intertextuality as a theory and an interpretive practice has played a significant role in the recent development of adaptation studies as a new academic discipline (p.204). In *Revolution of Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva (1984) observes that a literary text is a form of cultural interconnection, always formed by the



conversion of other textual utterances and structures. For her the term intertextuality, “denotes this transposition of one sign system into another” (p. 60). It discusses how different texts influence one another and how different readers may interpret the same article, poetry, or novel based on their reading preferences. (Emil, 2012, 1)

History is also important in the process of adaptation. It provides examples of how human societies have adapted to social, political, and environmental changes throughout time (Harari, 2015, p.60). Since texts are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures, the concept of intertextuality necessitates that we understand texts as differential and historical, rather than as separate systems. It is as if intertextuality is informing us that there are no literary current products originating from nothing; rather, they must originate from something, whether consciously or unconsciously, and some prior ideas must be present either directly or implicitly in that work. Like the original drama of Shakespeare, the adapted play questions of identity, power, revolution, freedom, love, and the future were powerfully present within these delicate historical twists that the play dealt with as a moment inside the contemporary reality in the Arab world.

Political intertextuality with the original story is omnipresent as the audience draws a direct relationship between the political conditions of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* with that of modern Arabs. The power of lust is growing above the lake of blood, but it is still a brittle, rootless rose, uprooted by the cries and curses of the victims. Shakespeare, who moved the text to its extent in meaning, sense, and wisdom, is subject to interpretation through the lens of the director Suleiman Al-Bassam, who subjected Richard III to dissection and deconstruction and clothed him with the Arab mantle.



Religious intertextuality, also appear on the stage where a group of revolutionaries can be seen in the background, ready to fight in the name of Islam, and they were yelling "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar" as Richmond, the American general, recited his speech, speaking the play's final words in English with the haughty accent of the dominant ruling army, concluding with "God say Amen" (IV, ii). Al Bassam has given it new life by updating work from the 17th century to reflect the circumstances of the 21st century. Clarence's persona in this play was created to resemble a devout, cautious Muslim who has been quoting passages from the Holy Qur'an and Hadiths to protest unjust killings, unfair treatment, and other atrocities.

Shakespeare's sentences are mixed with hadiths and verses from the Quran and also well-known Arabic poems. Gloucester presents his point of view, saying:

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Bounteous, and peace onto the Sire of Messengers our prophet and adored Muhammed (PBUH) the royal tree has left us royal fruit which will, no doubt, make us happy by his reign. ... As for me, as you see, I am devoted to worship and reflection upon Divinity and thanks be to God. (2007, iii, iii)

In the above quotation, the Arab Islamic heritage is entwined in the adaptation of that indigenization. The character of Clarence, for example, was portrayed as a devout, prudent Muslim who has been quoting Hadiths and verses from the Holy Qur'an to condemn unlawful killing and other unfair practices. The wine barrel in Shakespeare's original play was replaced by a barrel of water when Clarence was getting ready for his ablution to perform his daily prayers, and Clarence drowned in this barrel and died. This

scene of Clarence's murder was accompanied by playing an old Arab song with colloquial Gulf language.

Islamic chants in the production add another layer of religious symbolism to the play. These elements serve to underscore the themes of morality and justice that are central to both Islam and Christianity, highlighting the universal Nature of these concepts across different cultures and religions. for one. This gives the play a distinct Arab flavor. In the play, the terminology may switch from sober English to classical and straightforward Arabic to the spoken vernacular, yet the message always stays the same and repeats itself throughout all authorities and eras.

1.3. The Indigenous in Al-Bassam's Adaptation

Indigenization is an important process in the world of theater and the arts, as it allows for cultural exchange and the sharing of ideas and perspectives across different cultures. It also helps to promote diversity and inclusivity, as it allows for different voices and perspectives to be heard and represented on stage. Al Bassam's adaptation of Richard III can be seen as an example of indigenization, which refers to the process of adapting a foreign cultural product to fit the local cultural context. In this case, Al Bassam has taken Shakespeare's play, which is a product of English culture, and adapted it to fit the cultural context of the Middle East, specifically Arab countries.

Al Bassam has created a version of *Richard III* Through the use of indigenous perspectives that is more accessible and relevant to audiences in the Middle East. he has made the play more relatable and meaningful to local audiences, while also preserving its universal themes and messages. The casting of Middle Eastern actors in traditionally Western roles helps to challenge and subvert the dominant cultural narrative. This



representation not only reflects the diversity of the universality of themes such as power, ambition, and betrayal. Al-Bassam's adaptation also incorporates elements of local history and culture, such as references to the Gulf War and the Bedouin traditions of oral storytelling. These additions help to ground the play in a specific context and create a deeper connection with the audience allowing them to relate to the characters and story in a personal way. The following are examples of indigenization in Al-Bassam's adaptation:

Al-Bassam uses the Arabic Gulf dialect discourse to convey the characters' emotions and motivations. Despite using a relatively simple form of Arabic, he added regional languages, particularly Bedouin, demonstrating that the message is intended for all Arab nations and not just classical poetry that appears in the dialogue between Richard and Buckingham:

RICHARD: Do you not learn Arabic poetry, Buckingham?

BUCKINGHAM: Your promise of the oilfields.

RICHARD: 'And teach him how to bow the arrow every day and when his arm was strong ...' Finish the verse! Go on (2007, iv, ii)

Richard adds:

RICHARD: 'The foxes will piss on you!' Do you want to make me weep, Buckingham; why don't you learn poetry? (2007, iv, ii)

The play is performed in Arabic, which is a significant adaptation of the original English language. The modern Arabic language highlights the way the idea can be used

to subvert traditional gender roles. The adapted play highlights woman's independence and strength. Unlike the original, not Richard, Queen Margaret was the first person to enter the stage and speak. This shows the power of her discourse as an Arab woman, saying: "I am Margaret...I don't want your loans, your gifts, your reconstruction grants. I don't want your pity. We lost, all I ask from you is not to question my thirst for revenge, it's not because I'm Arab, I have a degree." (2007, i, i).

Indigenization refers also to setting, the play is set in the modern Middle East, specifically in Kuwait, which is a departure from the original setting of England. This change in setting allows Al-Bassam to explore themes that are relevant to modern Arab societies, such as corruption, power struggle, and the struggle between the traditional and modernization.

Time of adaptation, Sen (2022), argues that both the synchronic aspect of adaptation creation at any given time and the diachronic aspect of Shakespeare's works will help better to comprehend adaptation as a cultural process. On the other hand, to study an adaptation as a product is to place it within the culture in which it was produced in terms of both aesthetic (such as its use, or subversion, of literary, theatrical, or performance-oriented conventions on the receiving culture) and political (such as its subversion of either the ideological content of the Shakespearean "source" play or the dominant ideology of its own culture). Within the time frame, the original play was set in the time of the War of the Roses time in England, whereas Al-Bassam's adaptation is set in the consequences of the Gulf War.

The costumes are adapted to reflect the cultural context, with characters wearing traditional Middle Eastern clothing. With the past, and dialogue interaction, Al-Bassam

is inspired by that and sees it in the mirror of the present, and reloads it with Arab features. So, we see the king wearing" the cloak and the Arabic cover (Bisht). The traditional Arab dress helps to add sense and visuals to the original play while also preserving its universal themes and messages.

The Music, the play features original music that is inspired by traditional Arabic music. The music is inspired by the Gulf Sea heritage and the songs of the land, along with electronic music. So the music used in the play is composed by Arab musicians and features traditional Arab instruments such as oud, qanun, and darbuka. This adds an indigenous atmosphere to the play.

1.4. Performing Power: *Richard III* and Arab Spring

The main idea of the adapted play is to present the injustice and the tyrannical power of an Arab leader (Saddam Hussein) who attracted Kuwait in 1990 and committed the genocide against Iraqi people after the First Gulf War in 1991. Al-Bassam's adaptation, therefore, presents to his Arab audience a satirical vision that reflects the ideologies of the ruling regimes with their control and authority. The play transposes Shakespeare's original story to a contemporary Middle Eastern Context, drawing parallels between the political turmoil and power struggles in 15th-century England (The War of the Roses in England) and the Modern-Day Conflicts in the Arab world. It explores themes of employment, tyranny, and betrayal through the lens of the Arab Spring uprisings, and features a cast of characters that include dictators, rebels, and foreign invaders. Themes and motifs, also, explore the nature of power and the human cost of political ambition. (Darragi, 2019, p. 142).



Bushrui & Malarkey (2014) write that most news histories of Arabs focused almost exclusively on never-ending issues: brutal violence, in which Arabs are either the perpetrators or the victims; political negotiations that almost always fail (p.24). Hopes have undoubtedly been increased by the political protests after 2003, which some have named the "Arab Spring" or the "New Arab Renaissance." However, the result of these events is a picture of an Arab world rife with unrest, carnage, and instability; democracy and prosperity are never achieved. Thus, propagandists have used Richard as a symbol of political invective ever since Milton; more recently, he has started to adopt "the imagery of the twentieth-century fascist dictator." (Litvin, 2007, p. 88).

the political similarities, of the play on hand, with the original story are omnipresent. Lust of power is growing above the lake of blood, but it is still a weak, rootless rose, uprooted by the cries and curses of the victims. Shakespeare's original play is subject to interpretation through the lens of the director and the playwright Al-Bassam, who subjected Richard III to analysis and deconstruction and clothed him with the Arab garment. The terminology may switch from sober English to classical and straightforward Arabic to the spoken vernacular, yet the message always stays the same and repeats itself throughout all authorities and eras.

The portrayal of agitation and political strife was completely addressed in Al Bassam's theatrical production, which also immersed the audience members in the Arabic political arena. Shakespeare's tragedies had a warm connection to the current Middle East situation, the corruption of the ruling regime, modern imperialism, globalization, assassinations, suicide bombings, civil wars, and many other aspects of corruption and the underdevelopment of our Arab world. So, the adapted play highlights

the issues of corruption, violence, and the struggle for democracy that were at the forefront of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

Al-Bassam's adaptation, the Character of Richard is Portrayed as a corrupted dictator who uses violence and manipulation to keep his grip on power like Saddam Hussein in his time. However, this characterization draws a parallel to the autocratic leaders who were being challenged by protesters during the Arab Spring.

Richard orders the execution of two princes who pose a threat to his rule this is one example from the play. This scene echoes the real-life Events of the Arab Spring, where authoritarian leaders often resorted to violent means to suppress opposition.

RICHARD “If? Speak you to me of ifs? You degenerate face-wipe. Traitor: off with his head. Gatsby, you will do it.” (iii, vi).

portrayal of the media in the play. In the Arab Spring, social media played a crucial role in organizing protests and spreading information. Al-Bassam incorporates this by depicting a group of journalists who document Richard's crimes and share them online, exposing his crimes to the world.

RICHARD kills a friend of mine?

GATSBY I'd rather kill two enemies.

RICHARD Quick-witted Gatsby, two deep enemies: I mean those bastards in the Tower.

GATSBY Let me have open means to come to them, and I'll rid you from the fear of them (iv, ii).



Like the characters in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, none of the characters in this political game are innocent; they all have blood on their hands. This aspect was essentially the main consideration that drove the creation of this adaptation. Buckingham observes that:

Death for a man like me in a country like this carries no notes, no pertinent documents, no yea or nay votes. It's like the turnaround of a mildly soiled room in a well-run hotel. Turn, head, go find a door, and walk through it (iv, ii).

what is happening in the arena of Arab peoples' protests against their rulers confirms that there are a thousand dictators who are ghost clones of (*Richard III*), who wore his false mask and betrayed friends before enemies, and whose hands were tainted by killing young and old, so it is not surprising that it is happening now. It is the representation of an Arab daily reality in which the Arab world descended into disorder and contradiction.

Margaret's speech provides a link between the past of 17th century England and the present Arab Spring. She invoked the present suffering of Arab people because of the war and destruction. Margaret in the first scene appearance holding a suitcase is identified as a poor refugee in the time, marginalized, discriminated against, and ignored by history and the politics of power. She has changed her name, lost her identity, she got insulted and humiliated by the political ruling class. She says:

we lost, and it is your right to ignore me, I would ignore myself if my history let me. I don't want your loans, your gifts, your reconstruction grants. I don't want your pity. We lost... even the victors have changed their names. (i, i).



Al Bassam was attempting to convey the position of the Arab peninsula within the world through this and by imagining Margaret as a refugee, whether Lebanese, Iraqi, or Palestinian. This situation of marginalization, underdevelopment, and depression is widespread in the Arab world. This comes as a result of the unrest during the last two decades, within that time frame, the original play was set in the time of the War of the Roses in England time in England, whereas Al-Bassam's adaptation is set in the consequences of the Gulf War which is later reflected in the Arab Spring after 2003.

The closing end of the play in one of the most telling and expressive scenes, that scene where Al Bassam provided his Richard with a horse:

RICHARD: What is this horse called?

BUCKINGHAM: Al Umma RICHARD: Al Umma!? Ooh, let me ride you! O my battle of Badr! Victory sits on our helms. (2007, v, iii).

Richard has been offered to lead Arab Islamic nationalism, using the Arabic term "Al Umma," which means "the nation," by mounting and riding this horse, which was a declaration of authority, superiority, and dictatorship over the nation.

Conclusion

In summary, Al-Bassam, along with other Arab playwrights, effectively conveyed his viewpoint by combining themes that shed light on the concealed truth perpetuated by political and religious authorities. His adaptation of Shakespeare's Richard III not only provided audiences and scholars with a comprehensive understanding of the play within an Arab context but also tackled political issues prevalent in the contemporary Arab region. Through his adaptation, Al-Bassam expresses his disapproval of how Shakespeare's tragic exploration of the rise and fall of

a tyrant is applied to the complex cultural and political circumstances of modern Arab society. He raises thought-provoking questions about the nature of the Arab political system, which has historically been undemocratic and suppressive of critical voices.

Al-Bassam adorns the Shakespearean characters, engaging them in the language of struggle, thus effectively translating their emotions and actions into a modern reality that reflects the Arab experience. While using a relatively simple form of Arabic, he also incorporates regional languages, particularly Bedouin, to emphasize that the message is intended for all Arab nations rather than being exclusive to a single group.

Through this adaptation, Al-Bassam succeeds in bringing attention to the challenges faced by Arab societies and offers a different perspective on their realities. By incorporating terms, symbols, and references from Arab culture, religion, and language, he creates a bridge between the original work and the Arab context, enriching the understanding and appreciation of the play. Ultimately, Al-Bassam's adaptation serves as a powerful tool for social and cultural commentary, encouraging dialogue and reflection on the political climate and societal norms within the Arab world.

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