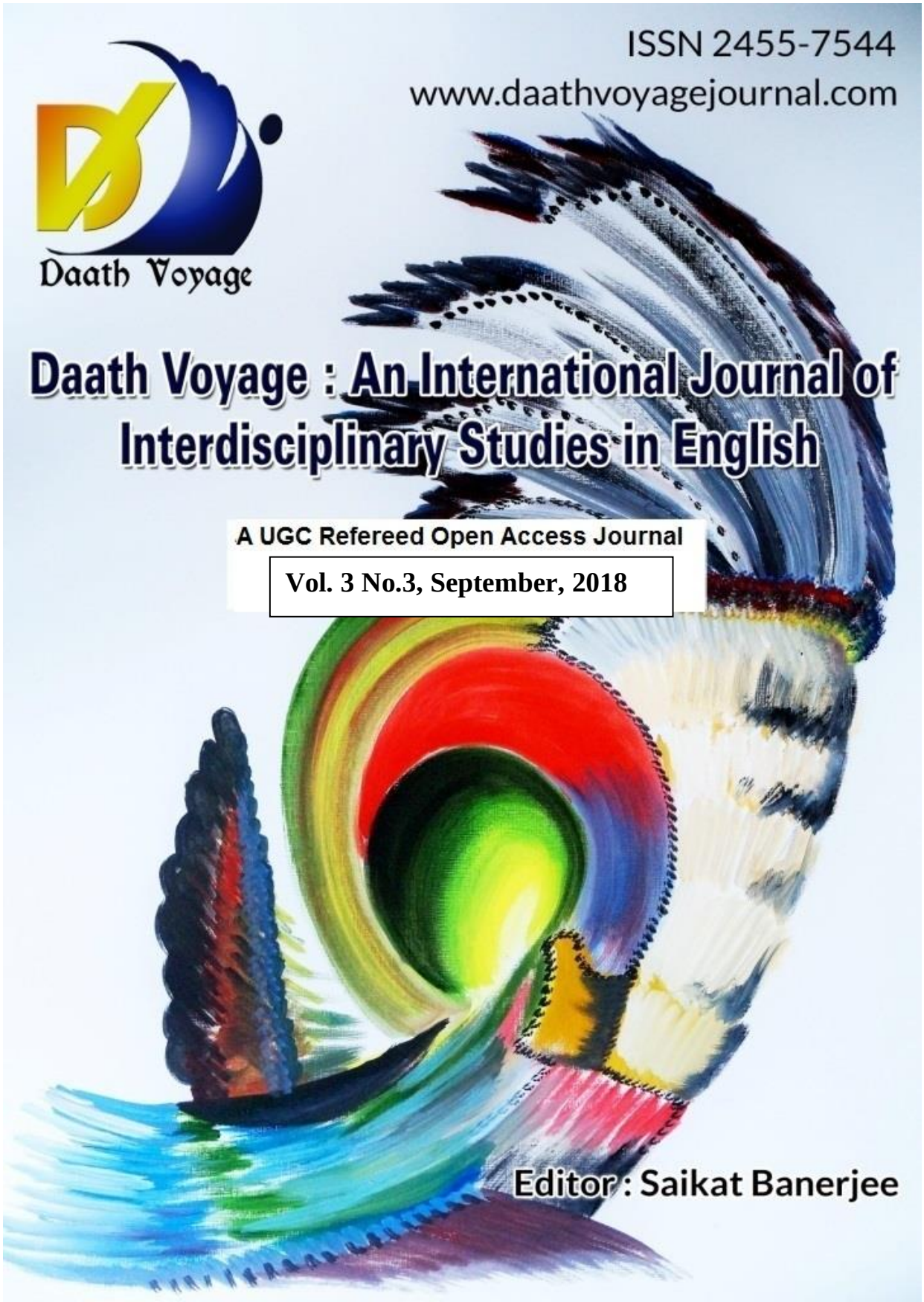

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Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English ISSN 2455-7544
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349
www.daathvoyagejournal.com *Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018*

Shakespeare in Arabic Translations and Adaptations: The Search for Dramatic Canon

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Received 21 July2018
Revised 4 August 2018
Accepted 5 September 2018

Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to highlight the corpus of Shakespeare in Arabic translations and adaptations. More recently, *Hamlet* and *Richard III*, for instance, have been re-cast, re-set and recreated in the Arab world in numerous adaptations and appropriations; attesting to the multiplicity rather than the uniqueness of a Shakespearean text. Although *Hamlet* and *Richard III* seem to do nothing with colonial/postcolonial discourse, the paper aims at finding out the curiosities behind and the growing interest in translating and appropriating such texts. Seemingly, by invoking Shakespeare, Arabs do not necessarily respond to a former colonizer or intend to be part of the postcolonial model of writing-back; rather they use Shakespeare as a text- a case to be examined whether such use is in pursuit of canon or it signals the inequality between languages. Beyond a binary relationship between the original texts and the rewritings, the paper also problematizes and questions the validity of appropriating Shakespeare and using his works as a vehicle to muse in contemporary issues of the Arab world.

Key Words: Global Shakespeare; Adaptation; Arab Hamlet, Dramatic Canon, Political Agency.

Arabs and Shakespeare

Shakespeare, in the Arabic culture, has been received well both as a poet and a playwright. Like any other people, Arabs read Shakespeare, the crown jewel of western civilization, with great fascination. In his article "Arab Shakespeare: Sulayman Al-Bassam's The Al-Hamlet Summit"(2007), Graham Holderness explicilty pointed out that "although Shakespeare touched the Arab world astonishingly early (the famous 1608 performance of *Hamlet* by the crew of the East India Company's ship Red Dragon took place at the entry to the Gulf of Aden, off the island of Socotra, now part of the Republic of Yemen), it was not until the nineteenth century that Arab

culture began to open up to Shakespearean penetration" (141).This was only due to the presence of the British empire in the port city of Yemen, Aden, which was administered by 'Bombay Presidency' in India. The cultural interaction between the British and Yemenis was of no significance, as their main concern was to protect their shipments and secure a refueling station. Consequently, it was only in the last century that some Arab writers, translators, and critics devoted their life to translate and introduce Shakespeare to the Arab audience. The Lebanese writer Michail Nuayma went so far as to say that "Shakespeare remains a *'Ka'ba'* to which we make pilgrimages and a *'Qibla'* to which we turn in prayer" (Gadonski 65). In some way or another, Shakespeare, for some Arabs, seems also to function merely as a foreign literary curiosity, and by engaging with his works or translating him some want to solely look clever by securing an entry to Shakespeare's prestige. In the last few decades, the situation changed markedly, and the interest in translating Shakespeare was no more a personal adventure but a collective quest as the Cultural Committee of The Arab League in the mid-1950s commissioned a group of writers and translators to officially translate the complete works of Shakespeare.

However, one thing that is to be pointed out is that "Arab audiences, as Margaret Litvin stated in her article "Sulayman Al-Bassam in the Arab Shakespeare Tradition", first encountered Shakespeare just as Elizabethan audiences did: by watching his works come alive on stage, rather than as classroom readings on the page". Unlike India and other countries, Shakespeare's works were initially introduced into the Arab world through French and Russian translations. There was no direct reception of Shakespeare, and his works were incorporated into university syllabuses much later. The first Arabic-language productions of Shakespeare's plays appeared in the late nineteenth-century in Egypt with the contributions of Syrian-Lebanese immigrants who adapted French translations of Shakespeare's plays. Other adapters and appropriators made use of Russian translations of Shakespeare's works. Graham Holderness explains that "Shakespeare's absorption into Middle Eastern culture was not, therefore, by any means a simple process of imperialist transmission and passive colonial reception" (143). Arabs, after absorbing Shakespeare's texts,

followed two opposing paths. Some insisted on reading him aesthetically regardless of the imperialist interpretations that might be derived from some of his texts. On the contrary, Shakespeare's tragedies *Othello*, *The Tempest*, and *The Merchant of Venice* are the most critiqued plays as they fall within the postcolonial paradigm. Othello, as a moor and hence Arab, invited much scholarly discussion and generated heated debates. In 1945, the renowned Cairo-based Yemeni poet and playwright `Ali Ahmad Bakathir adapted *The Merchant of Venice* into a trenchant political allegory called *Shayluk al-Jadid* ("The New Shylock") revolving around the role of Zionism in the Middle East, and Ahmed Shawqi, a great Egyptian writer, in 1927 wrote *Masra Khylubatra* ("The Fall of Cleaopatra") in which he made her a nationalist heroine. Nonetheless, the interest in these plays faded away and Arabs began to see Shakespeare as a global figure.

Generally, Arabs find Shakespeare as a cultural monument and a site of rich and volatile material for more artistic and literary creations. Unlike Western critics, writers, and translators, "Arabs were never troubled by an adaptation's fidelity to an original source (and therefore were not talking back to a core from a postcolonial periphery) because they rarely relied on original sources when working with Shakespeare plays" (Holderness 141). More importantly, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *King Lear*, *Romeo* and *Juliet* seem to do nothing with colonial and postcolonial discourse. Such plays, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Richard III* in particular, have recently dominated the Arab literary arena and political theatre. Recently, *Hamlet* and *Richard III* have been re-cast, re-set and recreated in the Arab world in numerous adaptations and appropriations; attesting to the multiplicity rather than the uniqueness of a Shakespearean text. A tradition with more than four versions, *Arab Hamlet* has gained currency in today's Arabic lexicon with "to be or not to be" and its political rhetoric as a defining slogan in Arab politics, and in some instances, it sheds off its political rhetoric and become a mere supplication to God to save the people from the atrocities of regimes. *Arab Hamlet* is seen as a historical, political, and sociological phenomenon, and thus adapters and appropriators invest in the construction of different 'Hamlets' rather than reproducing or fetishizing the original one. In their edited book "Four Arab Hamlet Plays"(2015),Martin Carlson and Margaret Litvin incoproprated a sample of Arabic appropriations of Shakespeare's play

Hamlet.The book features plays written by Nabyl Lahlou (Ophelia is Not Dead, Morocco, 1968), Mamduh Udwan (Hamlet Wakes Up Late, Syria, 1976), Nader Omran (A Theatre Company Found a Theatre and Theatred "Hamlet", Jordan, 1984), Jawad al-Assadi (Forget Hamlet, Iraq, 1994). These were the early adaptaions of Shakespeare's play, forming a major part of Arab Hamlet tradition and canon. Margaret Litvin stressed that "*Hamlet* did not arrive in the Arab world only or mainly through Britain's colonization of Egypt, nor was Shakespeare's work first packaged as a single colonially imposed authoritative set of texts; instead, Arab audiences came to know Shakespeare through a kaleidoscopic array of performances, texts, and criticism from many directions: not just the "original "British source culture but also French, Italian, American, Soviet, and Eastern European literary and dramatic traditions, which at times were more influential than Britain" (2). Hence, Shakespeare, in the eyes of Arabs, is never British but a universal icon of world literature. They drew much inspiration from his dramatic genius in establishing the Arabic dramatic form.

Since drama was a new genre in Arabic literature, "the first translations of Shakespeare, as Ferial Ghazoul points out, were undertaken at a time when a nascent theatrical movement was taking place in the Arab world" (2). Therefore, by invoking Shakespeare, Arabs don't necessarily respond to a former colonizer or intend to be part of the postcolonial model of writing-back; rather they use Shakespeare as a text. The Egyptian theatre was, as Nadia Al-Bahar (1976) puts it, void of indigenous plays (13). This precarious status of Arabic drama permitted Arab playwrights, directors, and translators simultaneously to adapt and appropriate Shakespeare's works more freely. Recently, a number of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays resurged in the Arab world and gave much momentum to the Arab political theatre to address the most critical issues of power and authority in the region. There are some adaptations that emerged from Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, and Egypt, and they all reflect the status quo in each country respectively. What can firmly be stated is that Shakespeare and the contemporary Middle East seem to share a lot of common grounds both in terms of quest of individuals for identity, and the quest of nations for identity. Arabs, after a turbulent period of failures and setbacks, are utterly disappointed. The dreams of pan-Arab unity all

evaporated, and this particularly doubled their agony. Besides, the invasion of Iraq, and the uprising of two thousand and one all poured oil on troubled waters. The counter-revolutions and the conflict between the rulers and the ruled destabilized the relationship between the individual and the nation. Thus, Arab adapters and appropriators find in Shakespeare's plays a panacea for all ills. Moreover, Arabs find in Shakespeare's plays something to ponder on the nature of power and kinship, authority and politics.

The Search for Dramatic Canon

From a linguistic and literary point of view, incorporating Shakespeare into Arabic literature is something unquestionable. Yet, when the matter becomes as a sort of obsession and over-exaltation, there must be something wrong that has to be identified and set right. What is ascertained is that the translations and retranslations, adaptations and appropriations all reflect the anxiety and the unsettling crisis in the Arabic drama that it failed to overcome throughout the past century. As a new genre that was introduced into Arabic literature in the nineteenth century under the European influence, any attempts to search for textual dramatic precedents in Arabic literature in the premodern era, analogues to that in the western canon (Greek drama), would all go in vain. It would also be difficult to identify a tradition of theatre buildings and theatre troupes that would run in parallel to that of the West. Though there were some traditional ritual performances and indigenous dramatic forms prevalent in the region, they almost eclipsed and were dismissed in favor of western forms. It is, therefore, feasible to say that by using Shakespeare as a reference point Arab playwrights are in search for dramatic canon.

Theatre in modern sense entered the Arab world very late. According to Abdul Latif Ansary, "the theatre Napoleon had established in Egypt in 1798 to entertain French troops made no impression on the Arabs mainly because the performances were not in Arabic" (127). Consequently, Arab audiences remained in an ambiguous situation about the essence of drama; not knowing whether it was part of literature or basically entertainment. In response to such lack of dramatic tradition, there emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century an urgent need for plays that would contribute to and constitute the overall makeup of drama as a

literary genre. Mainly in Egypt and under the French influence, modern Arabic drama began to seek existence in the world literary scenario, and, to create dramatic literature, Arab writers started by translating and incorporating Greek tragedies, and they later moved to creating historical plays drawn from the history of the Middle East. Arab students and scholars who received their education in Europe made a step forward in the Arabization of world masterpieces. They not only translated but also authored their own literary works, including dramas.

Obviously, the perceived need to create dramatic tradition necessitated that Arabs turn to great playwrights for inspiration, and Shakespearean plays were the most viable option. "It was not until the nineteenth century that Arab culture began to open up to Shakespearean penetration" (Holderness 2). A purist may ask "why Shakespeare at all?", and hence it is pertinent to state that the early Shakespearean plays that were translated and adapted in the Arab world contributed to the formation of the dramatic repertoire needed by the theatre companies in Egypt and other Arab countries. The search for dramatic canon becomes more obvious when we consider the status of tragedy in Arabic literature. For many critics, tragedy in Arabic literature is considered a neglected genre. According to Safi Mahfouz, none of Arab modern prominent dramatists is called tragedian and the academic studies of Arabic tragedy are insubstantial (368). Safi Mahfouz believes that "tragedy, in classical sense, plays a minor role in Arabic drama; the tendency of Arab dramatists has been towards comedy or melodrama" (368). As drama is not a native Arabic art form, a crisis in the formation of dramatic canon emerged and eventually led to the lack of authentic tragic hero. This is evident even in the early adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which mostly ended happily with Claudius killed, and Hamlet married Ophelia and received the blessings of the Ghost. Arab audiences and the appropriators themselves could not consume Shakespeare's tragedies as they are. They consciously rendered them into melodramas in order to appeal to the audiences. The absence of tragic hero does not, however, signify that Arabic literature is immature or arid. Classical Arab writers have produced world masterpieces; the famous Arabian Nights is just one prime example. Apparently tragedy has not received much attention from Arab dramatists. It has remained exclusively the terrain of Anglophone hybrid dramatists, such as Sulayman Al-Bassam. Al-Bassam,

born to a Kuwaiti father and a British mother, with his award-winning adaptations, has helped in popularizing the Arab theater in the Gulf region in particular. Since 1990s, his works have revived a mushrooming interest in casting Shakespeare in new molds in response to the recent issues in the region. In his play *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (2002), Al-Bassam maps a Middle Eastern political tragedy onto the template of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Holderness 144). Moreover, by emphasizing on "Arab Tragedy" in his play *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (2007), Al-Bassam attempts to narrow down the gap that has been left wide open by earlier playwrights. Despite all this, "Arabic trans-adapted tragedies were merely hybrid imitations of an imported commodity" (Mahfouz 368). Indeed, Al-Bassam and many other gifted playwrights have done a great job in appropriating Shakespeare's plays and introducing them to Arab audiences in new shades and hues, but they have not succeeded in relating Arabic drama to its cultural traditions. More specifically, Al-Bassam's concern seems solely to inform rather than to represent. By inserting 'terrorist' into the Shakespearean sphere he is not doing service to Arabic literature at all. He is perhaps doing business, utilizing the wide public interest in the Middle Eastern discourse for fame and gain. In fact, there are no serious attempts for more clever appropriations and innovations.

Arab Shakespeare and the Search for Political Agency

For many years the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have been the source material of the modern Arab theatre. In the last few decades, most of the adaptations tended to be severely political, and it is this tradition of political adaptations that has brought out the outmost of Arab Shakespeare. As most Arab countries became independent by the 1960s, Arab theatre turned its political eye inward, emphasizing more and more on the 'rotten states' and 'dynastic rule' at home. Since then, the most frequently adapted plays have been *Hamlet* and *Richard III*. It is after that period that we find the adaptations of *Hamlet* no longer get happy endings. "Since the early 1970s, it has been read as a play about tyranny; its protagonist is presented not as the self-conscious dreamer familiar to western audiences but a nationalist revolutionary, a fighter for justice brutally martyred by the oppressive Claudius regime, and by the late 1970s, this agitprop interpretation gave way to darker satire, as the region's dictatorships entrenched themselves and dreams of pan-Arab unity faded" (Litvin).

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English ISSN 2455-7544
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349
www.daathvoyagejournal.com *Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018*

Following a vehemently satirical and farcical approach, there emerged a number of 'Arab Hamlets' across the region; battling against dictatorship and voicing people's political anxieties. In almost all the adaptations, 'Arab Hamlet' is mostly deployed as voiceless, un-heroic, politically impotent, and often alcoholic; with no potential to restore confidence and challenge the monarchical rule and tyranny.

In the Arab world, the contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Richard III*, all attempt to satisfy the anguish and go along with the moods of the nation. The people's impotence along with reluctance towards abusive and exploitative rulers is implied in the adaptations of *Hamlet*, while the adaptations of *Richard III* expose the vaulting ambitions and vicious intentions harbored by royal families. Arab adapters invoke Shakespeare in their adaptations in order to abstract the major questions of religion, power, and authority. As it is realized that 'the Time-is-out-of-joint', the adaptations of *Hamlet* and *Richard III* are mostly desperate calls for collective political agency and identity. The increasingly growing interest in adapting *Hamlet* shows how Arabs have seen themselves in Hamlet, and how the unquenched thirst for power in *Richard III* runs in parallel with the issues of crowning and ascending the throne in the Arab countries.

The Arab-Shakespearean canon is largely understood in political terms. As stated by Margret Litvin, "Arab theatre has been skewering tyrants since its nineteenth-century beginnings" (13). More clearly, the current adaptations of *Hamlet* demonstrate the search for political agency and the desire for the determination of one's own fate and to be an active player in history rather than a victim of it. "To be or not to be" has become a collective call for arms, and 'Hamlet' has been invoked in reference to nearly every major and minor political crisis touching the Arab world in the past decade" (Litvin 9). For Arabs, Hamlet constantly functions as an allegory for decades of turbulent Arab politics. Claudius is seen as the powerful Arab despot, while Hamlet embodies the image of the Arab individual today, a figure who is commonly portrayed as impotent when it comes to responding positively to the devastating conditions of his country. While Hamlet has slept, Claudius has certainly stolen the show; filling the vacuum created by Hamlet's impotence. Therefore, in the Arab adaptations, Hamlet is seen as shorthand for existential trauma, while

Richard III is regarded as shorthand for evil.

The problem in the Arab world is mostly related to power and authority. For instance, Al-Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (2007), which was commissioned in Arabic by the Royal Shakespeare Company, dramatizes the nightmare of a succession crisis; reflecting power struggles, petrodollar systems, religious demagoguery and the meddling of foreign power(s) in the region. But why just *Hamlet* and *Richard III*? The choice to frequently adapt and re-adapt these plays is simply due to the political parallels that are drawn from the plays and which invariably correspond to the corrupting influence of power in the region. The adaptations of these plays hold a mirror up to the political situation in the Middle East as a whole. Moreover, the classic status of Shakespeare offers a kind of shield that protects and masquerades those bold dramatists who might face danger in a region where the word 'democracy' does not exist in people's memory. More importantly, Arab playwrights opt for such Shakespearean plays because the mentality of the people, not only their governments, is rotten. They are part of the dictatorship in the region, and, consequently, the *Arab Hamlet* will remain impotent in the face of dynasties and dictatorships unless he is awaken and scourged forward.

Conclusion

Though he was introduced late to Arabs either directly or indirectly, there is no foreign author that has enjoyed much celebration and looked upon with great veneration in the Arab world than Shakespeare. His sonnets are read voraciously and translated with passion, and his plays function as a springboard for more creative adaptations and re-creations. By going through the various adaptations that Arab directors and authors have recently released, there is certainly something in Hamlet's character that resonates powerfully in the Arab psyche. Politically impotent, unable to determine one's fate, and more hesitant when it comes to the question of identity, that is what an Arab shares with Shakespeare's Hamlet. In *Richard III*, Arabs see the conspicuous usurpers and relive the dilemmas that followed the Arab uprising of 2010/2011.While it is highly praised by some critics, the unparalleled excitement in adapting and appropriating Shakespeare especially in the Gulf region reflects nothing but the fragile theatricality under the rule of totalitarian regimes

where everything is well-scrutinized before being presented on the stage. Moreover, the over dependence on Shakespeare's canonical status to provide material for Arabic tragedy implies that the crisis is severe and is also deepened by the censorship of the states in which theatre is strictly regulated. As it is political in essence, Shakespeare should not often be used as a shield in the Arab theatre. There should be a solid base for a more productive and effective theatre rather than making sporadic and shy appearances. More importantly, there is no genuine interest in tackling the issues of the region in original creative works. There would definitely be no advantage from resorting to the playable surface of Shakespeare to meditate and scratch. What is more striking is the fact that some playwrights and adapters utilize the widespread public interest in the Middle East; acting as representatives of the region and producing adaptations of Shakespeare mainly in English in which the target audience is the West. In this way, they just work as cultural informants, and by remaining under the shadows of Shakespeare, they will not help but hinder the efforts exerted towards establishing an Arab indigenous tradition of dramatic art. The native dramatic tradition is not given any weight when it simply requires a dynamization from within. Indeed, Arab Shakespeare scholarship has grown steadily, yet it, beside many other local factors, curbs the native literary imagination and diminishes the role of the local elements; suppressing any attempts to establish indigenous dramatic canon.

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