

# NOT A STRANGER ANYMORE

## SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND THE POLITICS OF THE ARAB WORLD AFTER 1950

ZIAD ABUSHALHA

### INTRODUCTION

*Hamlet* is considered as one of the most often reworked western plays in the Arab world, particularly after 1950. The play has been exposed to divergent degrees of alteration, contraction, and extension by Arab playwrights and stage directors in an attempt to make it more appealing to Arab audiences. Still, the Arabic reworkings of *Hamlet* were mainly influenced by the geopolitical crises that happened during the last seventy years. During that time, the presence of *Hamlet* on Arabic stages was highly impacted by three major historical periods that witnessed significant political incidents; i.e. the Age of Nasserism (1952-1970), the Age of Post-Nasserism (1971-2008) and the Age of the Arab Spring (2009-2018). The study sets two major points that should be taken into consideration to understand the journey of *Hamlet* in the last seventy years; first, Arab *Hamlets* have always been political dramas and should be examined within the political changes in the region. Second, they are more concerned with generalities than particularities, and with the communal versus the individual problems.

Although the play arrived to the Arab region in the mid-nineteenth century, it did not register a frequent presence until the second half of the twentieth century. The rationale behind that was the smaller popularity of theatre in comparison to other literary genres

in the region before the 1950s,<sup>1</sup> and the long history of the colonization of Arab countries that busied Arabs and indulged them in serious wars to gain independence<sup>2</sup>. After WWII, most of the Arab countries gained their independence, and many cultural, economic, and artistic aspects of life began gradually to prosper. Arabs showed a great interest in theatre as Jamal Abdu Nasser, the Egyptian leader (1952-1969), supported theatres and Opera houses as part of his development plan for Arab countries.

Arabs borrowed *Hamlet* from different European contexts; especially after many of them had migrated to Russia, Germany, and France at the end of the nineteenth century. They translated the play into the Arabic language, and it was introduced to Arabic audiences with slight changes at the beginning. However, it is not until the 1960s that considerable changes in the play could be noticed. They reworked and reproduced fifteen theatrical plays with clear alterations to suit their spectators. What distinguishes the Arab *Hamlets*, again, is the fact that all of them are mainly political plays, meant to be commentaries on political realities in the region. Hamlet, as a character, became a signifier of revolution, the one who “ever was born to set it right” at a “time ... out of joint”.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Arabs seem to have borrowed and reworked such a masterpiece as a tool of staging back<sup>4</sup> to the colonizer. These plays were supposed to be instruments by which Arabs could fight back, deconstruct all binary oppositions, and utilize universal stories to introduce their own stories and their bards to the globe.

This study traces the history of reworking Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the Arab World during the last seventy years. It divides the period into three main transitional stages: Arab *Hamlet* in the age of Nasserism (1952-1970), in the period of Post-Nasserism (1971-2008), and during Arab Spring (2009-2018). The study introduces Arab *Hamlets* as political dramas influenced by the geopolitical conflicts of the region. It briefly analyzes these reworkings and examines the similarities and differences between them.

---

<sup>1</sup> There has always been an argument about when Arabs came to know theater and dramatic performances. For some, ‘The Shadow Theatre’ (Masrah Khayal al Thel), which was borrowed from China and India in the eleventh century, is an example of dramaturgical practices occurring in the region.

<sup>2</sup> For 650 years, Arab lands were ruled by successive colonial powers, starting with the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923) and ending with British and French colonialism (1830 to 1950).

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (London: Macmillan Collector's Library, 2010), I. 5.190-191.

<sup>4</sup> I am inclined to use the term ‘staging back’ more than ‘writing back’ since colonial discourse always circulated in texts and overlooked a long history of verbal and performative arts in the pre-colonial history of the indigenous people. Staging back implies linguistic and bodily presentation and re-presentation, and it exceeds the textual limitations that the West perceived in the East.

### ARAB HAMLETS AND NASSERISM (1952-1970)

The Age of Nasserism was named after the Egyptian ruler, Jamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled Egypt from 1952 till his reassignment and death in 1970. The period was marked by cultural prosperity, political reforms, and the growing Arabism. Nasser headed the Free Officers Movement that gradually seized power in Egypt after the revolution against King Farouk on July 23, 1952.<sup>5</sup> For two decades, the political system created by the Nasserists received broad popular support not only in Egypt but in most of the Arab countries. Nasser and his regime were able to create an aura of glory around them, and they represented hope for a broad spectrum of students, intellectuals, and farmers. In 1952, the Nasserists reached out to the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Movement in Syria, and the two parties decided to establish the United Arab Republic: a confederation between Syria, Egypt, and Yemen where Jamal Abdel Nasser became the head of the state and Cairo became the central capital.

Nasser achieved a wide reputation because of his nationalist attitudes concerning the interference of the West in the Arab region and his resistance to Western cultural hegemony. His policies, during the Cold War, damaged ties between Egypt and the West over the right of the West to use the Suez Canal. As a reaction, the West withdrew the funding for the High Dam that Nasser was planning to build.<sup>6</sup> Nasser responded to this by nationalizing the Suez Canal Company in 1956. Consequently, Britain, France, and Israel occupied the Sinai region in North Egypt, but they were forced to withdraw under international pressure. After Nasser's political standing against the West hegemony, his popularity grew among Arabs and this period was later considered as the heyday of Arab nationalism.

Nasser showed a great interest in literature and arts since his childhood. In school, he wrote an article about the French philosopher Voltaire, entitled 'Voltaire, the Man of Freedom.'<sup>7</sup> On November 13, 1935, Nasser led a student demonstration against the British authority, and in the same year, he acted the role of Julius Caesar in the performance of his school. His interest in theatre had grown, and during his reign, many

---

<sup>5</sup> Erik Be'eri, *Nasserism: The Hope That Failed* (Tel Aviv: World Labour Zionist Movement, 1969), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Yaser Jamal, *Abdul Nasser, High Dam, and Arab Nationalism* (Cairo: Almustaqbal Alaraby, 1982), 66.

<sup>7</sup> Azzab, Kalid, *By the Pen of Jamal Abdul Nasser: Analytical Study* (Cairo: Atlas for Publishing, 2010), 18.

professional theatres were opened: e.g. the Egyptian Modern Theater, Abu Alhawl Theatre – where Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* were staged – and the Theater of Arts and Music.<sup>8</sup> A new generation of dramatists and directors, such as Lotfi el-Kholy, Youssef Idris, Noman Ashour, and Alfred Faraj, appeared and worked to produce their plays.

One of the most popular translations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* occurred during this period was by the Palestinian Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1960). The translation influenced later performances of *Hamlet* for its fidelity to Shakespeare's text. One of these performances was by the Iraqi Hameed Jawad, who directed the performance for The Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad (1967). He loaded the show with surreal scenes, placed a 'big question mark' in the middle of the stage, and used heavy black curtains to block some scenes from the spectators. Jawad also emptied the play from its supernatural parts, the ghost scene, in a try to comply with the Ba'athists' anti-religious attitudes. Despite this surrealism, Hamlet maintained his position as a protagonist who acts among all obstacles in Jawad's play. Another performance was *Hamlet of Arabia* by Sami Abdel Hamid (1969). It was staged at The Theater of the Modern Art in the same country. Hamid's goal was to create privacy for the Arabic theatre by creating an atmosphere similar to the Arabic Sahara. He employed a scenography of Arabic tents and mattresses, and he omitted many allusions to Denmark in the play.<sup>9</sup>

These *Hamlets* were celebrating the dream of Nasser, the Arab prince, who came to "put things right" in "the rotten" region, and to end colonization. Margret Litvin (2011) comments on this:

To understand their work will require a closer look at the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 and its leader, Jamal Abdel Nasser. For if 'to be or not to be' is the defining slogan of Arab politics, as I have argued here, then Nasser is the figure most deeply and persistently associated with that slogan. The Arab Hamlet tradition, with its emphasis on collective political agency, responds directly to Nasser's anticolonial revolution.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Adel Ghunaym, *Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir wa-'aṣrahu* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 2013), 342.

<sup>9</sup> Manṣūr Nu'mān Najm Dulaymī, *Dialogue Problems between Text and Performance: Ishkālīyat al-ḥiwār bayna al-naṣṣ wa-al-'arḍ fī al-masraḥ* (Irbid: Dār al-Kindī lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1998), 63.

<sup>10</sup> Margret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 33.

Throughout this period of high Arabic nationalism, *Hamlet* was performed with excessive alterations that made it more Eastern. Nevertheless, in 1969, this celebration of the heroic Arab prince (Nasser) came to its end as a result of two significant factors. First, the Arab United Country between Syria, Egypt, and Yemen was disintegrated after Karim Nahlawi's coupe d'état in Syria against the Ba'athists. This coupe d'état was a nail in the coffin of Nasser's dream. Second, the 1967 Arab - Israeli War, in which Arab countries lost large parts of their lands, made the situation even worse. Nasser resigned from his position as a leader after the defeat. He died in 1970 and around seven million people attended his funeral.

#### HAMLET AND POST-NASSERISM (1971-2008)

After Nasser's death, the political situation in the region became much more complicated. In Syria and Iraq, the Ba'ath Party became more radical and more excluding for other parties, and during the following three decades (the period of Post-Nasserism), the Arab world entered a stage of political crises, oppression, unemployment, cooperation with the Western powers, and massive wars such as The Gulf War1 & 2, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Saudi-Yemen War. Other kingdoms, like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, were partially stable but had their problems of state corruption. A sense of common frustration and dissatisfaction occurred between Arabs and their leaders and which has led to frequent unsuccessful uprisings.

Concerning the production of *Hamlet*, five central reworkings were produced, but this time, they were not meant to celebrate a hero, but, on the contrary, to ridicule the new Arab leaders who forgot the dream of their father, Nasser. New Hamlets are born again on Arabic stages, but this time as hapless and suitable for nothing characters. Litvin says:

The time has been most painfully 'out of joint' in the ideological vacuum left by Nasser's 1970 death; the crisis of whether 'to be or not to be' has arisen most sharply after the failure of Arab nationalism. This is true not only for Egyptians but for the generation of Arabs all over the Near East who spent their youth listening to Nasser's radio broadcasts and sharing his dreams.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Litvin, Margret, *Hamlet's Arab journey*, 33.

The first of these plays was *Ophelia Is Not Dead* (1968), by the Moroccan Nabil Lahlou. This two-act play, staged in Marrakech in 1987 then at the Goethe Institute of Rabat in 1999, was widely applauded by audiences for dramatizing a collection of major political themes such as colonialism, state corruption, and artistic censorship. Lahlou has sarcastically merged two of Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* where the two characters appear in a state of paralysis, symbolized by the wheelchair positioned in the middle of the stage. They decided to communicate through puns to escape police surveillance after they were tortured by the authority for acting political plays.

The wheelchair, by its performativity with all its apparent abstraction and presence, arrests the visual attention of the audiences and makes them feel the same state of paralysis while sitting in their chairs. It remains on the stage as a visible reminder to the degradation of Arabs by their leaders, and it develops into a political stigma of oppression. The performativity of the wheelchair is not only on the level of the physical pain of the characters, but its significance is also on the level of the general pain of the Arabs at that time. The physical pain makes *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* forging this voluntary state of physical immobility as a way to condemn the physical torture inflicted on them by the police as *Hamlet* explains, "I paralyze my body to keep my conscience from causing me any pain."<sup>12</sup> He was severely tortured after he was jailed in a separate cell with other actors: "one evening, in my gray cell and on my iron bed, I awoke to find myself unable to move even my little toe. I can't stop asking about the cause of my paralysis."<sup>13</sup> After this torture, *Hamlet* is haunted by the state's trackers more than his father's ghost. He became algophobic,<sup>14</sup> and always warns *Macbeth* that their words and movements will be recorded: "don't do anything. They'll slaughter you."<sup>15</sup> It is not only that, this algophobia will grow into a permanent reality that stays with them to the end of the play with 'no metamorphosis' as *Macbeth* says. Additionally, this physical torture gradually persists, inflects their conscience, and creates long term physiological problems. The corollary of this physical punishment also has ravaged their sense of

---

<sup>12</sup> Nabeel Lahlou, "Ophelia Is Not Dead," in *Four Arab Hamlet Plays*, trans. Marvin Carlson, Margaret Litvin, and Joy Arab (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2015), 245.

<sup>13</sup> Lahlou, "Ophelia Is Not Dead," 40.

<sup>14</sup> Algophobia is the abnormal fear of pain. It happens after one goes through an extreme painful situation like torture (Wikipedia).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

gender, identity, time, and being. Hamlet keeps asking, "how old do you think I am?" and at the end, he asks, "who am I?"<sup>16</sup>

Jawad Al-Assadi's *Forget Hamlet* dramatizes Hamlet as lethargic and bookish intellectual, an apathetic persona whose cold reaction to his father's murder agitates resentment and cynicism. The play begins as Claudius and Gertrude execute king Hamlet. The murder is seen by Ophelia, who informs Hamlet, Laertes, and Horatio about the murder, but Hamlet appears aloof, phlegmatic, and callous. Hamlet becomes the 'sophist' who empties "[his] guts in prayer,"<sup>17</sup> and busies himself in reading theologies instead of figuring out a plan to revenge his father. The play was staged in Cairo, in 1994, under the title *Ophelia's Window* that recalls the window of Ophelia's room from which she has seen the murder. Al-Assadi changed the title later to *Forget Hamlet* to imply a dramatic irony and to attract the audience's attention to an intellectual dilemma. He wrote the play after he had fled the torture of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq, which was headed by Saddam Hussein at that time. The Ba'athists oppressed the Iraqis in general and religious men, journalists, and academics in particular, and the period was marked by an excessive exercise of political subjugation that targeted Arab opponents and activists who demanded political and social reform. Religious men, writers, and artists were charged with disloyalty and unpatriotism, and many of them were executed or exiled. The illusion of the jailing and poisoning of Socrates in Act one is a parallel to the jailing and execution of those intellectuals. Other intellectuals were denied access to national universities, prohibited from the political assembly, and establishing private press. On the contrary, the regimes created their supporters from utopian nationalists, scholars, and university academics who advocated the brutality, championed maltreatment, and assisted persecution under the guise of national Arabism. Al Baath University in Syria is an example of how the state funded and subsidized their projects, universities, religious agencies, hospitals, and courts where such defenders can be institutionalized.

Hamlet's detachment comes out of his insensitivity to his case, to his friends, and to his society. He announces, "I was alone, and that is how I will stay, without princely dreams, without trumpets sounding my arrival."<sup>18</sup> He is aware of his annihilation "I am

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Jawad Alssadi, "Forget Hamlet," in *Four Arab Hamlet Plays*, trans. Marvin Carlson, Margaret Litvin, and Joy Arab (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2015), 264.

<sup>18</sup> Alssadi, "Forget Hamlet," 264.

in a moment in which the self is completely annihilated in its vision,"<sup>19</sup> and he is aware of the changes between his past and his present time:

There were two Hamlets living in one body: one vicious, pledged to the dagger, dreaming of salvation and killing Claudius and revenge; the other, a Hamlet disillusioned and full of anxiety. There was a clash and a struggle between the two Hamlets, and the winner was the disillusioned Hamlet! The resigned Hamlet!<sup>20</sup>

Hamlet's retardation evokes resentment and annoyance in other characters. Laertes describes him as "the spiritually pious Hamlet, the rat with his books and poems and dedication to stillness."<sup>21</sup> Ophelia, who abandons Hamlet's love, ridicules his passivity and how they "murder his father in front of him, and he does not budge from all his wisdom and composure."<sup>22</sup> He turns "his back on the murderer and keeps contemplating and philosophizing."<sup>23</sup> Even his friend Horatio resents his passivity as he tells him, "where are your wild cries, where is your madness, where are the words of love and texts of justice you were boasting of?"<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, all these words have never changed the mood of Hamlet who considers revenge a sinful act that might redeem him in hell. In the end, Hamlet, himself, is assassinated by Claudius' soldiers who stabbed him to death in his room. However, no one shows sympathy for Hamlet's death. Instead, his death evokes the cynicism as he forgot his duty and refused to stand by the Danish revolutionaries.

On the contrary, Claudius turned into "a winged buffalo sitting on all of us, crushing us one by one without paying attention to any of us,"<sup>25</sup> as Laertes illustrates. The "guillotine" that "has crushed people near and far, the scholars and wise people, women and men"<sup>26</sup> horrified his opponents, including Hamlet, and possesses them with fear, incarceration, and deportation. Laertes has been sent to 'sanatorium' where he was mutilated because he castigated Claudius publically. Claudius's rhetoric of power in

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 275.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 264.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 264.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 264.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

front of civilians is dehumanizing and demoralizing, making Denmark more suffocating and “protected by the guillotine from any who would tell lies or go fishing in dirty waters.”<sup>27</sup> His speech, like the speech of Arab leaders, lacks “ [tolerance] and permissiveness that crept in with [his] good, tender brother.”<sup>28</sup>

The Syrian Mamdouh Adwan’s play, *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* (1976), is a two-act play that shows Hamlet in a weak position like the previous plays. It started by announcing the death of Hamlet after his combat with Laertes. Before his death, he asks Horatio to tell his story to other people, and the whole play goes on as Horatio tells the real story of Hamlet in flashback. However, instead of making Hamlet a hero, Horatio announces that Hamlet was reluctantly fragile. He, as Horatio reports, does not suffer from vacillation or the problem of choosing the right time to act, but he consciously keeps a blind eye on the truth. Like the Arab regimes, Hamlet is detached from everything: reality, people, the court, Ophelia, and his mother. By presenting Hamlet as fragile, Adwan does not intend to change the chief incidents of the play, but he de-familiarizes the old image of Hamlet, the hero, and casts him in a state of anti-heroism.

Hamlet’s lethargy, as Horatio recalls, became functional when he had intentionally avoided meeting the ghost and listening to his commands. The ghost’s presence disturbs his physical and aesthetic pleasure as he always complains: “I couldn’t stand it anymore. Nothing was doing me any good. If I drank, I saw him, and if I slept, I saw him and if I embraced a woman I saw him.”<sup>29</sup> This indifference to the reason why the spirit summons from its purgatory, and why it is “doomed for a certain term to walk the night”, compelled the ghost to appear many times waiting for Hamlet’s response, but Hamlet does not dare to say: “speak, I will follow thee’ neither had he shown the eagerness to know why Denmark became a ‘prison.” Instead, he asks Horatio “why does not [the ghost] speak?”<sup>30</sup> Horatio is not deceived by Hamlet’s lethargy, but he informs him that “ghosts only speak when you speak. He’s a message from you to yourself. He’s your conscience, your feelings of responsibility.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

<sup>29</sup> Mamduh Adwan, “Hamlet Wakes Up Late,” in *Four Arab Hamlet Plays*, trans. Marvin Carlson, Margaret Litvin, and Joy Arab (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2015), 81.

<sup>30</sup> Adwan, “Hamlet Wakes Up Late,” 83.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

He intoxicates himself by drinking alcohol as a way to forget the ghost's frequent appearances, or the nagging of Horatio and Lorenzo who keep urging him "to move [and] to avenge." Still, he is distressed by his incapability to take revenge which other characters do not know how fatal and 'huge' it is, or how killing is a damnable act that would redeem him in fire even if he kills a murderer like Claudius. Even the time Hamlet decides to 'wake up'; his words speak louder than his actions. He readjusts the play several times in a try to 'turn it into a stab' as he says, but 'a play' cannot stab' as Horatio believes. After meeting Claudius and Fortinbras, Hamlet attacks them with verses from the gospels "beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves."<sup>32</sup> Horatio denounces him that he is "wasting [his] time and showing off [his] mastery of the Gospels."<sup>33</sup> He urges him that "the crime that has taken place around you is too big to be cured by such treatment."<sup>34</sup> However, Hamlet does not listen to Horatio's warning. He is convinced that each time has its appropriate weapon. He contends with verbal threatening for the time being. Horatio asks him about "the weapon [he] stabbed with" when he met Claudius alone in the room, and Hamlet answers "words, words, words."<sup>35</sup>

Sulayman AlBassam in *Al-Hamlet Summit* (2002) revolves around many issues like state corruption and the cooperation of Arab leaders with the western powers against their people, the appearance of the English speaking character as a friend and adviser for the king is an indicator to the role of the colonizer in oppressing Arab people. The play captures Hamlet as an extremely fundamental religious character dressing in Islamic cap and gown. Hamlet also has a sharp tongue making everyone angry including his mother, but Hamlet here dwells on verbal threatening more than actions, and this verbal combat does not lead him to anyway but makes his intention clear to Claudius. Later, he becomes verbally manipulated by Claudius and other characters. In the end, a civil war was declared between Hamlet's Islamic troop and Claudius' army, but this war is very destructive in that it destroys Claudius, Hamlet, Gertrude, and many people. Fortinbras, a non-Arab prince, comes eventually to find all dead bodies scattered on the stage. He announces his easy control of Denmark.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

Al-Bassam's performance is an example of the Stage of syncretism: "a combination and amalgamation of indigenous performance forms within the framework of the Western notion of theatre."<sup>36</sup> This process of decolonizing the stage comes by merging the Arabic and Western cultural and linguistic codes and signs.<sup>37</sup> In AlBassam's play, Arabic and English are intentionally merged with more concentration on Arabic. However, he included many Arabic words and songs that were difficult to be transcribed for the English speakers. Also, there was a word-play between the characters like when the English ambassador insists that Ophelia should say the word 'Kubla' in Arabic, which means Kiss, she changed the word into 'Kunbula' which means an explosive bomb in Arabic. By using such untranslatable Arabic words, AlBassam intends to create linguistic gaps to deconstruct the traditional Western connection between the signifier and the signified. This technique of keeping some words in the indigenous language untranslatable will force the white audiences into an active engagement with the indigenous culture.

The previous examples show how *Hamlet* in the Post- Nasserism was reworked to criticize many of the Arab leaders who oppressed their people and forgot Nasser's dream of making Arab countries strong in front of the western hegemony. During this time, Hamlet has gradually immersed in the Arabic consciousness and culture as a signifier for the anti-heroic Arab leaders who ruled Arabs after Nasser's death.

#### HAMLET IN THE ARAB SPRING (2009-2018)

Arab Spring, الربيع العربي, refers to the Arab revolutions started in Tunisia (2009), then moved to Egypt (2011), Yemen (2012), Syria (2010-2018), Libya (2012), and Algeria (2018). Arab youths rose against their leaders seeking political reform and jobs. In 2009, the Tunisians revolted against Zian Alabedeen's regime in solidarity with Mohammad

---

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 1 .

<sup>37</sup> The term 'syncretism' is usually used in comparative religious studies that means a combination of two different religions into one religion, or the process whereby elements of one religion are absorbed into another. The term was taken into theatrical terminologies by post-colonialists as a way of decolonizing the stage. This amalgamation of course includes commixing of the imperial theatrical traditions with the indigenous one in a given performance to entertain cultural hybridity without any imposed hierarchy. in Christopher B. Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage*, 2-3.

Booazeezy, a young Tunisian peddler who set fire to himself after the police had confiscated his food-selling cart the day before. Massive media coverage and press were reporting the incidents to other Arabs who were eagerly yearning for the success of the Tunisian uprising, and Alabedeen eventually fled the country to Saudi Arabia. This successful revolution inspired and encouraged the Egyptians then the Libyans to revolt later, and these uprisings became infectious and traveled from North Africa to the Middle East in countries like Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This general uprising, named later as the Arab Spring or Arab Youth Uprisings, resulted in thousands of lives lost, millions of refugees, and massive destruction. What was remarkable about these Arab revolutions was the fact that they avoided ideological differences (Islamism, leftism, Marxism liberalism, socialism...etc.) which had divided the Arab World before. They united to eliminate corruption, to finish radicalism, and to end internal military dominance and external Western hegemony.

Despite the severity of the conflict that happened between the Arab rulers and their unarmed people, the spirit of defeatism, which had lurked in the Arab consciousness during the previous decades, changed into a state of hope. Hamlet, in the post-2009 Arab world, became a hero who can perform actions. Yet, he became the absent-present hero, the always expected-to-come hero whose coming will liberate the oppressed, just like the coming of the Expected Messiah or the Expected Mahdi.<sup>38</sup> This image is explicitly apparent in the Iraqi Haider Abdullah Alshatri's *Fee Intezar Hamlet* (In Waiting for...Hamlet, 2009). Alshatri's play manifests a similar structure as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The ghost of Hamlet's father and The Actor are waiting for the appearance of Hamlet, whose coming will solve many problems. However, while Beckett's characters produce meaningless conversation, the characters in *In Waiting for... Hamlet* indulge themselves in more meaningful dialogue. The play begins with The Actor rehearsing Hamlet's monologue for future performance. During that time, the Ghost appears unexpectedly and informs The Actor that he is waiting for his son to deliver some news to him "I have to tell him something." Hamlet, according to the Ghost, has a timeless significance since injustice always exists: "as long as the criminals exist, Hamlet must also exist."<sup>39</sup> This absence-presence of Hamlet the hero is also seen in

---

<sup>38</sup> Mohammad al-Mahdi, different from prophet Mohammad, is an imaginary person in the Islamic tradition. He is expected to come at the end and spread justice as the expected Messiah.

<sup>39</sup> Haider Alshatri. "In Waiting for... Hamlet," In *Anour Foundation for Culture and Media*. 1st (August 2009), <http://www.alnoor.se/article.asp?id=55105>.

Mahmoud Farouq's *Goodbye Hamlet* (performed by Egyptian university students in 2012). The play's director and other characters spend the whole play searching for an actor who can play the role of Hamlet to revenge the old Hamlet, murdered by a group of murderers. The group symbolizes Hosni Mubarak's troops who killed many Egyptians in the Egyptian uprising between 2011 and 2012. However, the play ends while other characters are searching for someone who can play Hamlet the hero.

This resisting of the old picture of Hamlet, excavated in Post-Nasserism, is also shown in *Hamlet Leave My Head* (Hamlet Okruj Men Ra'see), a Saudi monodrama written by Fahad Al-Hawashy and directed by Subhi Yusuf in 2017. This solo performance is a dramatization of an actor who rebels against the oppressive director that keeps performing Shakespeare's text without any changes. Announcing that he is fed up with Hamlet's hesitation: "leave my head Hamlet,"<sup>40</sup> as the title indicates, the actor decides to reform the play to be more touching to the spectators and more indulged into a current political dispute as he thinks. Though the play focuses on Hamlet as his object of conflict, it conceals more objections to the exclusion of Arab artists from political life in some Arab countries. The work came as an outcry against a long history of the confiscation of rights, exploitation, and the abuse of art by the state.

Hamlet, at this time, is also directed to all Arabs, disregarding their ideological differences. This fact is seen in *Following the Footsteps of Hamlet* (Ala Kuta Hamlet), which was written by the Palestinian director Kamel ElBasha (2009). In this performance, eight actors playing the role of Hamlet are accompanied by eight actresses for Ophelia. All characters are dressed in black and roaming the stage in steady and counted steps as soldiers, and each one recites some part of Hamlet's monologues. The play distracts the audiences at the beginning since nobody knows who the real Hamlet is. What makes it more distracting also is the permanent presence of the enormous ghost which consistently exists on the stage. However, the play is full of hidden messages to Arab nations. The mixing of the Quranic and Biblical verses, for example, tells how Arabs should abandon ideological disputes and rally together against totalitarianism. It is not only that but the scattered bodies on stage, sixteen characters die at the end, remind the audiences of the mortal danger that will happen if they do not unify against the oppressive leaders.

---

<sup>40</sup> Fahad Al-Hawashy. (Director), *Hamlet Leave My Head*, هاملت اخرج من رأسي [Video file]. Retrieved February 25, 2017, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycn4rx6srsU>.

## CONCLUSION

This study finds that the diversification in the reworking of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the Arab region: the Middle East & North Africa is thoroughly reshaped by the political disturbances in the area. Arab playwrights, like others, acquainted themselves with the fact that such a play should not be taken as it is, but should be reshaped to conform to their interests. They had maneuvered in dramatizing *Hamlet* the way they liked: they owned him, celebrated and underestimated him at the same time, and cut or extended his monologues for their political purposes. By the end of the day, Hamlet became a tool to reflect on political issues in the region, and his speeches were adopted to end oppression, incite rebellion, or reflect passivity. The Arabic Hamlet was a signifier for madness, hesitancy, and illusion in a particular period, but he symbolized heroism, rationality, and certainty in another. The study concluded to the fact that Hamlet's existence in the region has always been political and for political purposes. Also, to approach the Arab Hamlets, one has to look at them considering the collective interests of the Arab nations, for those playwrights have never intended to particularize the play, neither aimed to discuss individual stories.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adwan, Mamduh. "Hamlet Wakes Up Late." In *Four Arab Hamlet Plays*, Translated by Marvin Carlson, Margaret Litvin, and Joy Arab, 63-154. New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2015.
- Al-Bassam, Sulayman, and Graham Holderness. *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy: The Al-Hamlet Summit; Richard III, an Arab Tragedy; The speaker's progress*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Al-Hawashy, Fahad. (Director). (2014). *Hamlet Leave My Head*, هاملت اخرج من رأسي [Video file]. Retrieved February 25, 2017, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycn4rx6srsU>
- Alshatri, Hiader. "In Waiting for... Hamlet." In *Anour Foundation for Culture and Media*. 1st (August 2009). <http://www.alnoor.se/article.asp?id=55105>.

- Alssadi, Jawad. "Forget Hamlet." In *Four Arab Hamlet Plays* Translated by Marvin Carlson, Margaret Litvin, and Joy Arab, 221-282. New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2015.
- Awad, Ramses. *Shakespeare in Egypt: A Documentary Study*. Cairo: Arab Centre for Research and Pub, 1980.
- Azzab, Kalid. *By the Pen of Jamal Abdul Nasser: Analytical Study*. Cairo: Atlas for Publishing, 2010.
- Balme, Christopher. *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.
- Be'eri, Erik. *Nasserism: The Hope That Failed*. Tel Aviv: World Labour Zionist Movement, 1969.
- Diamond, Larry and Marc F. Plattner. *Democratization and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- Dulaymī, Manṣūr Nu'mān Najm. *Dialogue Problems between Text and Performance: Ishkālīyat al-ḥiwār bayna al-naṣṣ wa-al-'arḍ fī al-masraḥ*. Irbid: Dār al-Kindī lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1998.
- ElBasha, Kamal. *On the Footsteps of Hamlet, على خطى هاملت* [Video file]. Jerusalem, Palestine: The National Palestinian Theatre, Hakawati. Retrieved August 25, 2019, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlyVxihpMqY>
- Farouq, Mohammad. *Goodbye Hamlet, وداعا هاملت* [Video file]. Egypt. Retrieved November 10, 2019, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru8v9af\\_-Eo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru8v9af_-Eo).
- Ghunaym, Adel. *Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir wa-'aṣrahu*. Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 2013.
- Gibson, Rex. *Hamlet, Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Houssami, Eyad. *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre*. London: Pluto Press, 2012.
- Hudson, Michael. *Arab Politics: The Search for legitimacy*. New York: Yale University Press, 1980.
- Jamal, Yaser. *Abdul Nasser, High Dam, and Arab Nationalism*. Cairo: Almustaqbal Alaraby, 1982.
- Lahlou, Nabeel. "Ophelia Is Not Dead." In *Four Arab Hamlet Plays*. Translated by Marvin Carlson, Margaret Litvin, and Joy Arab, 3-62. New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2015.
- Litvin, Margret. *Hamlet's Arab journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. London: Macmillan Collector's Library, 2010.