

## Arab Shakespeare: Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper offers an analysis of Anglo-Kuwaiti dramatist Sulayman Al-Bassam's celebrated adaptation *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, and situates the play into the history of Arabic appropriations of Shakespeare. Despite the uneven development of theatre as a medium in Arab cultures, Shakespeare has been a familiar point of reference for Arab dramatists since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Received in the Middle East as a great icon of classical theatre, Shakespeare is there for writers to admire, emulate, imitate or challenge. Arab productions of *Hamlet* have taken different forms over the years: early productions produced a romantic Arab national hero, while later works from the 1970s onwards cast Hamlet as an impotent intellectual. Al-Bassam's play fuses these traditions to bring Hamlet right up to date, as both a freedom fighter and a suicidal martyr. Al-Bassam's adaptation modernises Shakespeare, demonstrating the capacity of his plays to speak about urgent issues of the present as well as indispensable meanings from the past.

**Keywords:** Hamlet, Arab Shakespeare, adaptation, globalization, crosscultural dialogue.

**RESUMEN:** El presente artículo propone un análisis de la popular adaptación, *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, realizada por el dramaturgo anglo-kuwaití Sulayman Al-Bassam, en el contexto histórico de las apropiaciones árabigas de la obra de Shakespeare. A pesar del desarrollo desigual del teatro como medio entre las culturas árabes, Shakespeare ha constituido un punto de referencia habitual para sus dramaturgos desde finales del siglo XIX, cuyo status como un icono del teatro clásico lo ha convertido en modelo a seguir, imitar o subvertir. Diferentes representaciones árabes de *Hamlet* se han sucedido a lo largo de los años: las obras iniciales reflejaban un héroe nacional romántico, mientras que a partir de los años 1970 se muestra a Hamlet como un intelectual impotente. La obra de Al-Bassam amalgama ambas tradiciones para actualizar el personaje de Hamlet: luchador revolucionario y mártir árabe. La adaptación de Al-Bassam pone de manifiesto la capacidad de sus obras

para abordar temas candentes de actualidad en conexión con las temáticas significativas del pasado.

*Palabras clave:* Hamlet, Shakespeare árabe, adaptación, globalización, diálogo cultural.

## 1

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 Arab Republic of Yemen) it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Arab culture began to open up to Shakespearean penetration (see Holderness and Loughrey, 2006: 24-26). It was then that Shakespeare re-entered the Arab world as theatre, with the plays translated and adapted specifically to form the repertoire of dramatic companies in Egypt and other Arab countries.

*Hamlet* was first performed in Egypt around 1893. The Egyptian theatre was, as Nadia Al-Bahar (1976: 13) puts it, «void of indigenous plays», so would naturally have turned to a writer who represented, in Thomas Cartelli's (1999: 1) words, a «privileged site of authority» within a number of «national formations». The main Arabic translation of *Hamlet* was that of Tanius Abduh, who is thought to have taken his text from the French version of Jean-Francois Ducis, premiered in 1769 (Abduh's translation, long thought lost, has recently been published in Egypt, see Hanna, 2005 *b*). Ducis spoke not a word of English, and worked from a French synopsis, leaving very little of Shakespeare's play intact. He even apologised to Edward Garrick for the result.

So when *Hamlet* first appeared in Egypt it was in an 18<sup>th</sup> century version, with whole scenes and characters deleted, and with a happy ending (see Hanna, 2005 *a*). Hamlet is not wounded in the duel, but remains unharmed to receive a blessing from his father's ghost: «Hamlet, may you live a joyful life on earth, pardoned in heaven. Ascend the throne formerly occupied by your uncle. This throne was most appropriately made for you to accede» (quoted in Al-Bahar, 1976: 16).

Other adaptations were made to suit local cultural conditions. Audiences expected a play to be more like a revue, with plenty of music and song, so Hamlet courted Ophelia in the language of Arab love poetry. Thus in Egypt in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, *Hamlet* flourished as a stage show in radically revised, rewritten, and reconstructed adaptations. Mahmoud Al-Shetawi (1999: 46) writes: «Overall, the early stage productions of *Hamlet* were crude, vulgarizing

Shakespeare's masterpiece in order to please the illiterate audience». Many have made the same criticism of Restoration Shakespeare; and indeed Alexander Pope said much the same of the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

Shakespeare's absorption into Middle Eastern culture was not therefore by any means a simple process of imperialist transmission and passive colonial reception. *Hamlet* was «assimilated», said Al-Shetawi (1999: 60), thoroughly woven into the «fabric of Arab creative processes». «Shakespeare» wrote Nadia Al-Bahar (1976: 13) «was transplanted into Arab soil». «Transplanted» indicates not a simple exporting but a cross-cultural migration across borders, in which the artefact becomes rooted in different soil, and there adapts itself to the local climate and conditions.

Free adaptation from French models continued to be the norm in Arab cultures: Abduh's translation, in which Hamlet kills Claudius and ascends the throne, remained popular in Egypt for many years. But this performance tradition did not on the other hand produce a consistent «Arab» interpretation of *Hamlet*. Appropriations were sharply divided between heroic and anti-heroic Hamlets:

With the exception of early productions [...] Hamlet has always been viewed as a romantic hero who sets out to fight corruption and dies for the cause of justice [...] Other Arabic productions of *Hamlet* present Hamlet as an Arab intellectual, impotent to cope with the realities of his society. (Al-Shetawi, 1999: 49)

Margaret Litvin (2005) addresses this contradiction in Arab Shakespeare between Hamlet the hero and Hamlet the intellectual, and posits a chronological break in the tradition of Arabic appropriations of *Hamlet* some time in the late 1970s. Hamlet the romantic freedom fighter of the postcolonial tradition gave way to a series of Hamlets disarmed, impotent and emotionally crippled by the weight of their destiny. Litvin cites productions and adaptations from Egypt, Syria and Tunisia to demonstrate this reorientation. All these plays deploy technical devices to challenge the norms of conventional theatrical representation; all are sceptical about the power of words to achieve change. Claudius is invariably the powerful Arab despot, while Hamlet is the «Arab intellectual, a figure who is commonly portrayed as impotent when it comes to responding positively to the miserable conditions of his country» (Al-Shetawi, 1999: 48).

## 2

This complex tradition was one of the starting-points for Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, first performed in English as part of the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, in August 2002, where it was awarded

the Fringe First Award for excellence and innovation in writing and directing. It was subsequently presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre, in September 2002, where it won Best Performance and Best Director Awards. Subsequently it moved into Arabic and played at the Riverside Studios in London (March 2004), the Singapore Arts Festival (June 2005), Elsinore Castle in Denmark (August 2005), and other festival venues around the globe (Seoul, Tokyo, Warsaw, Tehran).

Al-Bassam's play maps a Middle Eastern political tragedy onto the template of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet's father, the old ruler, has been poisoned, and his position usurped by Claudius his brother, a dictator with more than a passing resemblance to the late Saddam Hussein. Gertrude and Ophelia, Polonius and Laertes all play roles comparable to those of their Shakespearean namesakes, but redomesticated into an Islamic Arab context. The regime is threatened, as Denmark is threatened at the beginning of *Hamlet*, by Fortinbras's troops lining the borders, and internally by the «People's Liberation Brigade», which has been distributing leaflets claiming Old Hamlet was assassinated.

The play was staged as a high-level political summit meeting, with desks and nameplates. The conference-hall housing this «summit» meeting became the locus of the closet drama. At the same time large video screens carried images of current events in the world beyond, such as burning oil-wells and scenes of fighting. The microcosm of the play was thus linked to the macrocosm of the Gulf region, a site scarified by the impact of global geopolitics.

In the light of those burning oil-wells, and in a scene which is the equivalent of *Hamlet* 3.3, instead of displaying remorse and praying for forgiveness, Claudius voices what is virtually a religion of oil and dollars:

Oh God: Petro dollars. Teach me the meaning of petro dollars. I have no other God than you, I am created in your image, I seek guidance from you the All Seeing, the All Knowing Master of Worlds, Prosperity and Order [...]. (*The Al-Hamlet Summit*: 70)

The actor undressed to his underwear as he delivered this speech, the powerful despot revealing himself naked in his vulnerable dependency.

The god he prays to, the covert power of the West, appears in the play in the shadowy persona of the Arms Dealer, who spoke English in the Arabic version, and was played by a woman in the English version («The Arms Dealer» says Al-Bassam (2006: 25) «is a ghost, companion, grave-digger, man, woman or child»). The Arms Dealer converses with Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius and finally Fortinbras, and provides weapons to anyone prepared to pay, even if arming opponents. He/she remains very much in place, walking downstage, at the end of the play.

Just as in *Hamlet* Claudius recognises that the real enemy of his regime lies within, so Claudius and Polonius in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* are vigilant against signs of domestic subversion. Opposition and dissent are read as fundamentalist terrorism. In practice both Hamlet and Ophelia conform to this stereotype and become Islamicised, adopting traditional Muslim costume; and both become, from the perspective of the ruling regime, «terrorists». Ophelia is associated, as Yvette K. Khoury (2005) has observed, with the Palestinian cause, and dies as a suicide bomber; Hamlet (who adopts a «*short white thowb, with a long beard*» (*The Al-Hamlet Summit*: 81)) shoots Polonius, and at the end of the play is seen leading the liberation army. The equation between Islamic fundamentalist and terrorist militant is one that Hamlet also internalises. This is the equivalent of both Hamlet's revenge and his madness, a vindictive fantasy bloodbath that deliberately echoes (or even parodies) the language of the Holy Koran:

I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammad is his messenger [...]

I will clean this land, I will make it pure, I understand, I do understand, but I will cleanse it for you, I will prepare it for your return, even if it costs me my life, I will clean it, I will purge it, blood will flow, I will make blood flow in torrents, I swear in my father's name, I swear in the name of Allah. (*The Al-Hamlet Summit*: 82, 61)

### 3

Where does this adaptation sit vis-à-vis both Arab Shakespeare and dominant theatrical interpretations of the play in the West? Margaret Litvin argues that Al-Bassam has discarded the impotent intellectual Hamlets of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and re-established a link with the romantic figure that dominated performances of *Hamlet* in the Arab theatre from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Al-Bassam's Hamlet is «not the fractured non-protagonist of recent Arab plays but rather recalls [...] the hero Hamlets of the 1960s and 1970s» (Litvin, 2005). In this analysis Al-Bassam has by-passed the previous two decades, and reconnected with an older Arabic tradition. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is divided into sections corresponding to the Islamic times of prayer («the names of the Acts [...] are the names of the five daily prayers in Islam (Al-Bassam, 2006: 25)), which seems to echo Riyadh Ismat's 1973 Damascus production, where the play was divided into three parts – *huzn* (sorrow), *al-thawra* (rebellion), *al-shahadah* (martyrdom) (see Al-Shetawi, 1999: 48), and where Hamlet appeared as a rebel against corruption and tyranny.

Compared with other recent Arab adaptations such as Iraqi dramatist Jawad Al-Asadi's *Forget Hamlet*, Al-Bassam's version of Shakespeare's tragic hero is certainly much stronger, more assertive, more positively defined (see Al-Asadi, 2006). On the other hand the figure of the Islamic militant which Al-Bassam's Hamlet grows to resemble, cannot be so easily identified with the heroes of a previous century. Though he is certainly an active crusader against corruption and a militant for justice, Hamlet becomes wholly a man of action, rejecting language and the intellect, committing himself unequivocally to material violence:

HAMLET: [...] the time for the pen has passed and we enter the era of the sword [...] No more words [...] words are dead, they died on our tongues [...] council is the weakest form of faith, now we must mouth meaning with our flesh. (*The Al-Hamlet Summit*: 82)

Nothing could distance the character from the author more decisively than this uncompromising rejection of language and letters in favour of physicality, materialism and violence. Nor does *The Al-Hamlet Summit* end with anything approximating the heroic conclusions of the earlier Arabic adaptations. Al-Bassam's Hamlet does not like his romantic predecessors *succeed*. Although his death is a significant gesture of martyrdom («I hurry to the dignity of life and the eternity of death» (*The Al-Hamlet Summit*: 83)), it is only one detail in the final scene of universal carnage, where a failed coup d'état, the converging of Western power and Fortinbras's assumption of authority are all presented with the excited objectivity of a media event. Hamlet does not «clean this land»: he only creates an empty space into which Fortinbras can move his troops. «Religious dogma», writes Al-Bassam (2006: 24), «invades the piece from all sides. It is the mask of the ruler, the battle cry of the oppressed and the strategy of the revolutionary. Doubt and debate are hounded out of existence». Islamic militancy has not provided a solution, only a dramatic denouement: «FORTINBRAS: I have biblical claims upon this land, it is empty and barren and my presence here is a fact that has not been invented» (*The Al-Hamlet Summit*: 85).

#### 4

Insofar as there was a separate, local Arab tradition of adapting and appropriating Shakespeare, Al-Bassam's work is obviously part of it. But by writing in English, Al-Bassam has also chosen to work partially inside an Anglophone culture (or set of cultures), which is, as Michael Neill (1998: 184) phrases it, «saturated with Shakespeare». Al-Bassam has explicitly confirmed that the work is «cross-cultural», speaking from an Arab perspective but also to an English-speaking audience.

The script was written from a contemporary Arab perspective. It carries many concerns and issues of today's Arab world and its relationship to the West. At the same time, it addresses these concerns to an English-speaking audience. The cross-cultural construction of the piece creates a sense of implication in the affairs of the other. (Dent, 2003: n.p.)

This sounds like the cultural «hybridity» that occurs when an imperial discourse penetrates a post-colonial culture and merges with local and native materials to produce a synthetic fusion. But *The Al-Hamlet Summit* does not fit so easily into this or any of the available models provided by post-colonial criticism. Any writer who so deliberately places his work on a cultural or national margin, or seeks to work across territorial and historical borders, is seeking a difficult and precarious balance, and is likely to find himself challenged from all sides, as Al-Bassam (2003: 86) himself confirms:

For some *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was the work of a Westernised traitor that falsely approximated between Islam and the propagation of violence. For others, and I'm happy to say the majority and particularly the young, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* gave vital and much-needed expression to today's Arab concerns and presented them to the West in a sophisticated and human form.

These critical responses are all however testimony to *The Al-Hamlet Summit's* capacity to generate dialogue across borders, dialogue that challenges and questions and enters reservations, but remains fundamentally an international conversation. As such it offers an alternative, an urgently imperative alternative, to mutual misunderstanding and reciprocal violence. What Al-Bassam called the «cultural symbiosis» manifest in the play was clearly designed to form a ground of dialogue between East and West.

## 5

The writing of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* began with the experience of globalisation:

I was in Cairo with an exiled Iraqi theatre director and a Palestinian theatre troupe from Ramallah drinking coffee in the bazaar when a boy came running past us, chanting: «Al-Kull murtabit / Am-reeca qarabit» («Everything is linked / America just got closer...»). It was September the 11<sup>th</sup> and news from New York was just beginning to stream across the television screens. In all the confusion of that night, I remember the words of one of the Palestinian actors: «The hell in New York today will bring hell to Ramallah tomorrow». (Al-Bassam, 2003: 85)

9/11 is the supreme instance of globalisation, a single event affecting all differentially. The boy celebrates with a certain triumphalism the shrinking globe and the ease with which Islamic terrorism can reach to the very heart of America's political and economic institutions. The Palestinian actor thinks ruefully of the consequences, immediate reprisal not from America but from Israel, and against the Palestinians. Global events know no barriers of time and space.

In an article on 9/11 British Prime Minister Tony Blair echoed these sentiments exactly. 9/11 «brought home the true meaning of globalisation»:

In this globalised world, once chaos and strife have got a grip on a region or a country, trouble is soon exported. [...] It was, after all, a dismal camp in the foothills of Afghanistan that gave birth to the murderous assault on the sparkling heart of New York's financial centre. (Blair, 2002: 119)

From Blair's perspective globalisation also provides the potential solution to such problems. Blair (2002: 121) reflects that the West can «use the power of community to bring the benefits of globalisation to all» in the form of truly universal values: «values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights and a pluralist society [...] Values that are “universal and worthy of respect in every culture”». The vehicle for disseminating these values globally is economic penetration: increased trade flows, and greater involvement of the private sector in public finance (Blair, 2002: 122).

Al-Bassam clearly intended *The Al-Hamlet Summit* as an intervention into this fraught conversation, but from a very different perspective:

The globalisation of politics is deceptive. Every Arab knows that George Bush said «either you are with us or you are against us» and everyone in the West now knows that Saddam is bad. This is globalisation of politics, but it does very little to increase dialogue between cultures. All it does is promote vacuous «world views». This is where culture and theatre become vital. They permit complexity and difference and they permit the weak to be other than pitied and the cruel to be other than hated. Theatre challenges the accepted world views and breaks the mirrors of authority. Shakespeare understood that power very well. (Dent, 2003: n.p.)

Globalisation is not only inevitable but desirable, since it is the only route to mutual understanding and a stable world. Everything really is linked, as the Arab boy recognised. The problem is how to develop those links without conflict and violence; without the supremacy of the West; without the suppression of alternative cultures and consequent global homogenisation. In this process theatre has a critical role to play:



The events of 9-11 and the political fallout since have drawn to light the inextricable intertwining of the fates of Arab peoples and those of the West. Everything is linked and the much-touted «clash of civilizations» simplifies and tries to obscure what is a complex series of overlapping and interpenetrating cultural realities that are tied together in fatal symbiosis. (Al-Bassam, 2003: 85)

## 6

Between 1608, when Shakespeare's lines echoed emptily from the deck of the *Red Dragon* around the Arab world, and 2002, when Al-Bassam's adaptation found a common acceptance across both East and West, empires rose and fell. But one thing changed. In 1608 Shakespeare was virtually talking to himself. In 2002 Shakespeare was the substance of a global conversation. «Everything is linked» in the globalised world, either through violence or through an acceptance of reciprocal «implication». *The Al-Hamlet Summit* opens a conversation over the ground of our reconciliation.

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