

Sulayman Al-Bassam's Adaptation of Shakespeare's Richard III: A Politico-Cultural Analysis

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Abstract: Born in 1972, Sulayman Al-Bassam is a renowned Kuwaiti-Britain dramatist and theatre director whose vigorous style and diction shape the contours of his plays. He founded Zaoum Theatre in London in 1996 and is well-known for his drama entitled The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy, which includes three plays that adapt Shakespeare's works to the context of the Arab world: *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* and *The Speaker's Progress*. Being a Kuwaiti playwright is undoubtedly exciting, particularly when bringing a Shakespearean drama that launches the themes of tyranny and invasion to Middle Eastern audiences. By so doing, Al-Bassam manages to intertextualize Shakespeare's plays, modifying and redirecting the context to the Arab world. The current study, however, examines Al-Bassam's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, which has strong political connotations and discursivity. The study is divided into two sections and a conclusion. The first section provides an overview of Al-Bassam's literary and socio-political backgrounds as well as Shakespeare's original version of *Richard III*. On the other hand, the second section sheds light on the intertextuality theory and its application to the chosen play. Furthermore, the conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

Keywords: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Political Analysis, Richard III, Shakespeare, Sulayman Al-Bassam

Introduction

Sulayman Al-Bassam is a Kuwaiti playwright, director, and actor who has significantly impacted the global theatre scene with his innovative and thought-provoking works. He is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential contemporary Kuwaiti playwrights. Born in 1972 in Kuwait, Al-Bassam has been fascinated with the power of theatre to shape public opinion and challenge social norms from a young age. His unique blend of traditional Arabic storytelling and modern Western theatrical techniques has earned him international recognition and critical acclaim. He has made a significant impact on the global theatre scene. Through his plays, of course, Al-Bassam comments on the Middle East's ongoing struggles while exploring universal human themes, showing that theatre can be a powerful tool for social change and politico-cultural understanding.

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His academic credentials, including a Master's in English literature from the prestigious University of Edinburgh in 1996 and a Ph.D. from the esteemed University of Hertfordshire in 2018, underscore his scholarly approach to theater. His doctoral thesis, "Adapting Shakespearean Drama for and in the Middle East: Process and Product," was a comprehensive study of his previous well-known work, *The Arab Shakespeare trilogy*. These credentials demonstrate his deep understanding of literature and theater and instill confidence in his ability to provide a nuanced analysis of his adaptations. Sulayman Al-Bassam is trilingual; he speaks and writes in Arabic, English, and French. In an interview, Al-Bassam asserts that "The work I make questions prejudices and a priori positions both from an Arab-Islamic perspective and from a Western secular perspective," he wishes to discern transitions to Kuwait's culture's technical and social infrastructure that will enable Kuwaiti artists to glow. "I admire their patience and determination," he explains. "Things are changing." (1).

Al-Bassam's works are presented at leading worldwide venues, such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Holland Festival, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and La Comédie-Française. His plays have been widely recognized and celebrated internationally. He has received numerous awards for his plays, including the Best Play award at the 2007 Edinburgh Festival Fringe for "The Speaker." His plays have also been performed at numerous festivals and theatres worldwide, including the Royal Shakespeare Company in London. (2).

Al Bassam focuses on the themes of explorations of war, identity, politics, language, and culture with particular attention to the contemporary Arab World and the interstitial rooms between the Arab-Islamic world and the Western nation. Similarly, his works are pretty critical of political patterns and regressive forces within the Arab realm, which questions the adverse preconceptions encircling Arab and Muslim society nowadays. It advocates the Arab Voice worldwide and establishes an intercultural room for Arab culture in the world theater. (Ibid).

Sulayman Al-Bassam's version of *Richard III* is a pioneering demonstration of cultural translation and adaptation in Arabic theatre. The performance achieves a distinctive amalgamation by blending aspects from diverse cultures and languages, resulting in a fusion that profoundly resonates with local audiences while preserving its link to the original text. The play's inventive narrative methods and captivating setting have distinguished it as an exceptional production in Arabic theatre, fostering opportunities for future partnerships and artistic interactions with artists

from many places. The play reimagines William Shakespeare's classic tragedy in a modern-day Kuwaiti context. In this adaptation, the titular character, Richard III, is transformed into a corrupt and ruthless ruler who uses wealth and influence to manipulate the country's political system. The play explores themes of power, corruption, and social inequality, which are all too relevant to contemporary Kuwaiti society. Al-Bassam's use of Shakespeare's original text as a starting point allows him to comment on the Middle East's ongoing struggles while highlighting the universal human themes that transcend cultural boundaries. By setting the play in modern-day Kuwait, he indirectly criticizes the country's social and political structures.

Results and Discussion

There is no denying that William Shakespeare (1556-1616) is one of the canonical writers of all time; however, his works are a landmark of the world's literature in general and English Literature in particular. *Richard III* is one of Shakespeare's most famous historical plays. It was probably written in 1592-93; however, it also was his last in a sequence of four history plays (the others are Henry VI, Part 1, Henry VI, Part 2, and Henry VI, Part 3) known altogether as the 'first tetralogy,' dealing with fundamental events of English history at the late 14th and early 15th centuries. The CNN news asserts that discovering the remains of the historical Richard III beneath a Leicester car park in 2012 provoked new interest in one of England's extensively debatable kings. He was accused of killing his nephews, the Princes in the Tower. Richard's reign remained only two years (1483-5); his region came to an end after his death when he was overthrown by Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond (later Henry VII), at the Battle of Bosworth on 22 August 1485. (3). Richard was, after that, demonized in Tudor historiography, probably most famously by Sir Thomas More in his "History of King Richard the Third" (1557). It is to More, for example, that we owe the famous image of *Richard III* as a "croke-backed" and "malicious" villain (4), an image which Shakespeare has been involved in further codifying and popularizing in his play, *Richard III*. However, there is no question that Shakespeare's Richard is (like More's), in numerous aspects, a villain who committed abundant horrible actions. (Ibid).

The play attracts us to observe Richard and his fantasy of complete control of self and sovereignty of others. At the beginning of the play,

Richard introduces himself as an ambitious villain as he successfully intends to eliminate his brother Clarence. Richard accomplishes related success in conquering the woman he selects to marry. He paved his way to the crown through assassination and executions. It is worth mentioning that modern viewers of Shakespeare's *Richard III* tried to defend the historical king. They tried to illegitimate the King's actions by arguing that his actions were a normal reaction in terms of politics. According to these modern views, politically speaking, he just tried to defend himself and get his rights. "Today, the historical king's champions and defenders argue for recognition of King Richard's talents and achievements in power and criticize early writers such as Sir Thomas More and Shakespeare for demonizing and caricaturing Richard unfairly." (3). Similarly, it is indeed that the prominence of Shakespeare's play, *Richard III*, has demonstrated something dilemmatic for modern defenders of the dead King, as Dominic Shellard has previously stated, "For those seeking to rehabilitate the reputation of Richard III from centuries of opprobrium (...), Shakespeare's play offers a significant and, at times, irritating challenge" (5).

Keenan says, "Shakespeare's Richard is a confessed villain, but he is far from a typical stage Machiavelli and a more complex character than is often acknowledged, especially ethically" (3). He continues, "Shakespeare's Richard does not reject the validity or supremacy of virtue. On the contrary, although he chooses its opposite, he sometimes expresses admiration for goodness and the ideal it represents in a fallen world" (Ibid). Richard is like Shakespeare is later tragic heroes; he is flawed, yet he also retains tragic stature in the face of his fall, which might explain why the play in its first publication was under the title *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third* (1597), in lieu a merely a history of the king.

2.0 Writing-Back Shakespeare: The Theory of Intertextuality

Shakespeare influenced many writers from different parts of the world to write his plays back at different times as they offered a fertile ground to discuss universal issues and topics. Al-Bassam, arguably speaking, adapts some of Shakespeare's plays, producing a book entitled *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy: The Al-Hamlet Summit; Richard III, an Arab Tragedy; The Speaker's Progress*. Adaptation, however, is a literary technique that comprises dialogic interactions between Cultures. Aldoory and Al Shetawi (6) argue that adaptation can best "echo the principles of multiculturalism through omitting cultural spaces and permitting a Self/Other dialogue." It is, of course, a postmodernist technique of

intertextuality that intersects with Harold Bloom's paradigm of creative influence. That is, adaptation is a process of textual recycling that conveys an overt connection to previous texts, "revealing called sources" (7).

It is essential to know that no literary work is isolated by itself. It is suggested that every literary work might share an intertextual relationship, even though this relationship is not invariably discerned. "Intertextuality is a theory offering new ways of thinking and new strategies for understanding and interpreting texts. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts" (8). "The current term intertextuality includes literary echoes and allusions as one of the many ways in which any text is interlinked with other texts." (9). According to Arwa Al-Doory and Awfa Al-Doory, "Intertextuality is a process of textual remolding which entails an artistic revisiting of canonical literature. It is a technique of textual apparatus that invokes insightful questions such as "why" and "how" canonical texts are revisited" (6). However, as a phenomenon, it has sometimes been defined as a set of relations that a text has with other texts and discourses belonging to different fields and cultural domains. Here, we have two types of intertextualities: positive and negative. Some writers borrow from other texts without adding or changing their context; this is called negative intertextuality. Nevertheless, when writers borrow and add or change things from the original text, that is a positive intertextuality. In this respect, positive intertextuality is productive and creative. Intertextuality, however, is a process of textual apparatus in which the Indian-American critic Gayatri Spivak illustrates it as a "network of politics, history, society, sexuality." (10).

Intertextuality offers a wide range of links between a text and other texts evolving in varied forms like "a direct quotation, citation, allusion, echo, reference, imitation, collage, parody, pastiche, literary conventions, structural parallelism, and all kinds of sources, either consciously exploited or unconsciously reflected" (11). In so doing, an intertext alters or reproduces the texts that precede it. In this context, Gayatri Spivak, in 1987, argues that intertextuality engenders a "network of politics, history, society, and sexuality" that functions against the ideological supremacy of certain manipulating cultures. (10). The goal of intertextuality, therefore, seems to be multidisciplinary as long as it launches issues such as gender, culture, race, conflicts, history, economics, geography, and politics. The concept of intertextuality, however, traces back to ancient times when the first human history and the discourses about texts began to appear. Nevertheless, the

foundation of intertextuality as a literary theory and an independent method of texts was created by pioneers such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes. The term intertextuality, in fact, was coined by Julia Kristeva in her essays "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966) and then in "The Literary Work," where she asserts in "Word, and Novel" is "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings" (12). Discussing Bakhtin's literary language, she says that "each word (text) is an intersection of other words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (Ibid).

Bakhtin's theory of language and the poles of literature can be considered a predecessor of an effect on the expansion of later approaches to intertextuality. Gérard Genette's approach to the theory of intertextuality can be seen as an attempt to delineate the definitions of intertextuality put by Kristeva, Derrida, Barthes, etc., as they have been perceived as awkward to apply to the comprehension of texts. "This contrasts with Bakhtin's and Kristeva's wide interests, which are linguistic but also social, political, and philosophical. Genette focuses essentially on the literary text in the strict sense of the word" (13). The concept of intertextuality requires us to understand texts not as self-contained entities but rather as dynamic and evolving entities that are influenced by and leave traces of other texts. The transformation of diverse textual structures plays a significant role in shaping them. The notion of intertextuality challenges the New Critical principle of textual autonomy by asserting that a text cannot exist independently. It, hence, does not operate as a self-contained system (14). Zengin (15) asserts that T. S. Eliot, the poet-critic, is a precursor of the theory. Eliot explores the relationship between work, tradition, and culture, highlighting the extensive network of texts in which all other texts coexist simultaneously. This facilitated the emergence of the quasi-intertextual presumptions that every writer possesses and ought to possess historical awareness.

2.1 Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*

In 2007, the Kuwaiti theatre maker Sulayman Al-Bassam was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company to adapt Shakespeare's *Richard III*. It was the first time an Arab state production performed in the birthplace of Shakespeare. The characters of Richard III are the last no strangers to the Arab World; the ruthless schemer, the pious charmer, and the bloodthirsty tyrant have walked the courts of kings and rulers in this region since immemorial. The play's first title was 'Baghdad Richard,'

which is an undeniable reference to Saddam Hussein, but Al-Bassam's changing of the events led him to change the title, too. In his interview, Al-Bassam asserts that "With the rapid change of events in the region and also as I delved more deeply into it to make that comparison really work, I reached the conclusion it would be selling both histories a bit short in trying to make a foolproof comparison between Richard III and the rise and fall of Saddam Hussein." (16). Although the play's final title is about King Richard III, nevertheless, it is evident that it is not about the hunchback British King of York of the 15th century. Even the title itself is a paradox because we have Richard III, whose identity is Western, and the other part of the title, which is an Arab tragedy. "The Arabic text actually spoken by the actors was formed from Al-Bassam's English adaptation of Shakespeare's play, and the English subtitles read by the audience derived from the Arabic version (Al-Bassam adapted the play in English, then had it translated into Arabic" (17).

Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III* is a unique and thought-provoking adaptation of Shakespeare's classic play. As a Kuwaiti playwright, Al-Bassam brings a fresh perspective to the story, infusing it with Middle Eastern cultural and political themes. Here is an analysis of his production: Al-Bassam's *Richard III* is set in the aftermath of the Gulf War, which had a profound impact on the region's politics, economy, and society. The play responds to the devastation and chaos caused by war and the ongoing struggles for power and control in the Middle East. By reimagining *Richard III* in this context, Al-Bassam highlights the destructive nature of power and the devastating consequences of war.

Shakespeare, according to his contemporary and fellow dramatist Ben Jonson (!), "was not of an age, but for all time!" That is, Shakespearean plays have always been a vital source of motivation for ensuing dramatists ranging from the seventeenth century to the present day. Shakespearean plays open a window for contemporary playwrights to rewrite their dramatic works in the light of their precursors of the sixteenth century. Of course, one could ask why modern dramatists adapt Shakespeare rather than dramatize entirely new plays. As Holderness argues, Shakespeare's worth and brand are frequently identifiable as sophisticated, vital, knowledgeable, and so on. Shakespeare's absolute fame is also why contemporary dramatists adopt him, as Dennis Kennedy once declared: "Shakespeare is now a machine to make theatre, to reveal other cultures, to observe their constant change" (18).

The play explores several themes that are relevant to the Middle East. T Richard's ambition and lust for power are reminiscent of the corrupt leaders ravaging the region. Al-Bassam criticizes how power can be used to manipulate and control others. Richard's deformity and his desire for recognition are mirrored in the experiences of many Middle Eastern people who have been displaced or marginalized by conflict. The play explores the tension between one's sense of self and the external forces that shape identity. The play examines the complexities of loyalty, particularly in the context of family ties and political alliances. This theme is particularly relevant in the Middle East, where family ties and tribal loyalties often significantly shape political dynamics. The play highlights the devastating effects of war on civilians, including displacement, trauma, and social breakdown.

Al-Bassam's adaptation is notable for its innovative staging, costumes, and music. The play combines traditional Arabic music and dance with modern electronic elements, reflecting the blending of cultural traditions in the Middle East. It takes place in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, reflecting the destruction caused by war and the displacement of people. The characters are not necessarily Westernized versions of Shakespeare's original characters. Instead, they are reimagined with Middle Eastern cultural and social nuances. The play employs a range of languages, including Arabic, English, and French, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the Middle East.

Al-Bassam's *Richard III* has received widespread critical acclaim for its innovative storytelling, powerful performances, and thought-provoking themes. The play has been performed in various countries, including the UK, France, and Egypt, and has been praised for its ability to transcend cultural boundaries. The play can be seen as a form of cultural translation, where the play's themes and characters are reinterpreted through the lens of Middle Eastern culture. This process involves a deep understanding of the cultural context and the ability to translate the original text into a new language while maintaining its essence. The adaptation combines elements from Arabic and Middle Eastern cultures with the original Shakespearean text, creating a unique fusion of styles. This blend is not limited to language but incorporates music, dance, and visual elements. The play's setting, costumes, and music are all designed to reflect the Middle Eastern context while maintaining the original play's core themes and characters.

Adapting a classic play like *Richard III* for an Arabic-speaking audience poses several challenges: Shakespeare's language is often complex

and difficult to understand, especially for non-native speakers. Al-Bassam's adaptation uses Arabic language and dialects to make the play more accessible to local audiences. The Middle Eastern cultural context vastly differs from the English Renaissance setting of Shakespeare's original play. Al-Bassam's adaptation must navigate these differences to create a meaningful and engaging performance. The play's power, corruption, and conflict themes are highly relevant to contemporary Middle Eastern politics. Al-Bassam's adaptation must balance these themes with sensitivity towards local audiences and avoid any potential political backlash. Al-Bassam's adaptation uses innovative storytelling techniques to engage audiences: The play's narrative structure is non-linear, jumping back and forth in time to explore different themes and characters. The production incorporates multimedia elements, such as projections, music, and dance, to enhance the storytelling experience. The play's setting is designed to immerse audiences in the world of the play, using sounds, smells, and visuals to create an immersive experience. It has significantly impacted Arabic theatre: The play has helped break down cultural and linguistic barriers between Arabic-speaking countries and Western cultures. The production has facilitated cultural exchange between artists from different regions, fostering collaboration and mutual understanding. The play's innovative approach has inspired new works in Arabic theatre, encouraging experimentation and creativity in storytelling.

Spectators of Sulayman Al-Bassam's play at the Swan Theater in Stratford in February 2007 experience from the start a direct disruption of convention and assumption since the primary individual on the stage, the first to talk, is not Richard, yet a woman who is Queen Margaret:

I am Margaret ...

You needn't be concerned about me ... We lost...

It is your right to ignore me. I would ignore myself if my history let ... I do not want your loans, your gifts, your reconstruction grants.

I do not want you to pity me. We lost ...

All I ask from you is not to question my thirst for revenge ...

It is not because I am Arab ...

I have a degree ...

Anyway, my name is not Margaret ...

But our history is so awful that even the victors have changed their names
(19).

Al-Bassam started his play with a woman who declared herself an Arabic individual. He identified Margret as a refugee who has lost her country and

even her identity. She speaks of vengeance, but she is currently ignored by history and political power. She has lost even her name, but she is still proud enough that she does not want someone to feel pity for her. This image is widely familiar in Arabic societies, especially in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. It also might be a reference to a Kuwaiti woman during the Iraqi-Kuwaiti war since many political interpretations linked the play to the Gulf War.

An analogy may be observed between Margaret and Richard in both the play and the documentary about its production. Richard finds Margaret's characteristics to be enigmatic. In the opening scene, the woman's presence is disregarded outside the castle as she utters the words, "We are lost." This parallels the subsequent scene where Kazak, holding a package of food, informs the interviewer that he, too, was lost. When asked where he got lost, Richard responds, "I don't know. If I did, I wouldn't have gotten lost." The analogical perspective of both characters represents their struggle to navigate and establish their identity, both on stage and in their actual lives (20). Margaret's claim at the beginning of the play that she is lost in the dilemma of identity or history reflects not only her own predicament. Richard experiences disorientation when he is relocated to a different territory. Richard dons a military uniform, showing his delight in donning a garment that evokes pleasant memories from his time on military duty. This act serves as a reflection of the political history in the region. During an interview, Kazak freely shared his reservations about visiting Washington, citing his discomfort with the political landscape of the United States. He emphasized his aversion to visiting the country due to its government and presidents. This mirrors Richard's disposition towards the Western world, as evidenced by his oration before the Bosworth battle (16).

Holderness stated that Al-Bassam has formally differentiated various notions of history at work in his play. Richard stands for a 'linear' teleology of history, planning, setting, and seizing objectives; the iron will proceed inexorably against barriers to achieve its targeted purpose. Buckingham, Richmond, and all the various political agents and tools stand for an 'East-West' historical paradigm, which is still bifurcated by the empire and its contemporary editions and history as manipulation and conspiracy, assassination, and show trial. In Margaret, however, Al-Bassam discerned a distinct kind of history: history as a cyclical recurrence, in which the past emerges to engage the present, the dead wake, ghosts haunt the living, curses are effectual, and the enthusiasm for vengeance never sleeps. A

scene where Margaret casts bones to foretell the future symptomatizes this history of omen and portent, the dark shadows of a buried past and undisclosed futurity (21).

However, one can see a giant portrait in the middle of the stage during the play. However, when the audience sees the portrait, they wonder about the man in it. Is he a specific Arabic ruler? King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, maybe? Or the dead prince of Kuwait? Or Bashar Al-Asaad? Or even any other Arabian ruler? However, the surprise was that the person in the portrait was Abu Mazen, the production manager. Nevertheless, though the portrait belongs to a commoner, it certainly holds a compelling pragmatic implication for most Arabic rulers who like to be in such a god-like image. Al-Bassam, indisputably, did not intend to direct his play for a specific country nor to a specific ruler; he was so adequate in this matter in order to give the spectators the ability to have their own interpretation. At the same time, he does not over-generalize the layers of interpretations. However, he somehow narrows these layers by making the play's title an Arab tragedy, not a human tragedy.

More generally, the modern Middle East, like so many of Shakespeare's tragedies, offers a painful plethora of examples of how not to rule. Modern imperialism, tyranny, barbarism, oppression, plots, assassinations, and civil wars are sadly becoming the rule, not the exception, in our region. The players in this grim game of politics, natural resources, and strategic power are many, and like all the characters in *Richard III*, none are innocent; all have bloodied their hands. (Sulayman Al-Bassam xii).

The clash of the thrones is perfectly portrayed in the play; however, when it comes to this matter, Al-Bassam portrays what most inside the Arabian ideology: a traitor, or more specifically, a secret agent. Buckingham here is a double agent, privately cooperating with the Americans, sending e-mails to the ambassador, telling him the latest conspiracies (what many Arabian politicians do nowadays) as he supposedly supports Richard's endeavor for the throne. This, however, almost reminds us of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) and how America, at the same time, supports both countries only to keep the war going. In Shakespeare's original version of the play, in Act 1, the scene of the murder of Clarence. Clarence says to Brackenbury that he had a dream of his assassination. In the dream, Clarence finds himself in the underworld and is reprimanded by the ghosts of his victims. The killers then come and admit that his brother, Gloucester, sent them. He begs them

for mercy, but they eventually kill him by striking him in the wine butt. It is worth noting that Al-Bassam shapes this event differently; Clarence here is a pious Muslim who quotes the Holy Qur'an and descriptions from the Islamic scholarship against the unjust and the unusual murder. He was killed by drowning in the sacred water that he usually used in his rituals.

-I swear there is no God but Allah.

God forgive my sins In God's name, what art thou? A man as you are.

-If you are hired for money, go back again, and I will send you to my brother Gloucester ...

... He shall reward you better for my life than the King for news of my death.

-You are deceived; he hates you.

-Do not slander him. He is kind and merciful.

-Merciful as rain on mud huts. He sent me to slaughter you. Pray now, for you must die. Dare you to counsel me to pray to God yet would war with God by murdering me?

... He who kills without due reason, it is as though he kills the whole of humanity

-Pray!

-Moreover, do not shed blood that is sacred by Allah's law (Q.); Pray!

-Al Rawandi, in the sources, says: beware of shedding innocent blood

-Pray!

-Pray!

(19).

Al-Bassam, in this context, mentions two wars' names: "Badr" and "Al-Qadisya." Both wars have a profound political reference for the spectators. However, the battle of 'Badr' carries the great victory of the Arabic Muslims against the Arabic army of Quraish. Richard called 'Badr' to show himself as a union leader of righteousness, like most tyrants want to show themselves. Whereas the other war, Al-Qadisya, has two interpretations. The first refers to the battle in which the Muslims defeated the Persians, while the second might refer to the Iraqi-Iran war (1980-1988), known as "Qadisiat Saddam."

In his adaptation of *Richard III*, Al-Bassam has established his play and filled it up with different topics, including custody, punishment, dictatorship, disloyalty, severe political instability, censorship, ongoing surveillance, hostages, hypocrisy, torture, coup d'états, assassinations, and civil wars. All these issues, in one way or another, belong to a Middle

Eastern sphere, an “unnamed oil-rich Kingdom or Emirate.” (Ibid). That is, the play is re-contextualized to disclose the circumstances that form the culture and politics of the Middle East. The playwright gives his characters the opportunity to depict the chaotic situation of the Middle East, as evidenced by Buckingham, a double agent who seems to support Richard’s quest for authority while secretly initiating contact with the Americans. In the same vein, Richmond, who is given the role of a US general whose speech reminds us of President George W. Bush’s speech in 2004 in which he declared that “special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi and Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi should be members of Iraq’s new interim government. In this way, Al-Bassam re-writes the events of Bosworth Field in 1485 to represent the modern wars in Afghanistan or Iraq” (20). That is, the play adapts from Shakespeare’s original *Richard III*; as Sarra puts it:

The sequence of Shakespearean plays to which *Richard III* belongs follows the chronicle history of the Wars of the Roses. The function of the play in that historical cycle is to show the dramatic outcome of the evils of civil war in the cathartic death of Richard III. But Shakespeare developed his character beyond this purely instrumental function and developed his Richard III into an individual piece of theatre. The text exposes the underpinning war, violence, cruelty, and brutality to which society is exposed, but it also traces these evils in the human soul (Ibid).

Al-Bassam, however, re-shapes Shakespeare’s character of Richard III in the pre-2003 Iraqi context, imagining it as a parallel to Saddam Hussein. This parallel springs from the brutal dictator’s history during their regimes. The author traces the Middle East’s history before and after the regime of Saddam Hussein, which seems to be chaotic: the overthrow of the Ottoman Empire during WWI, the European and US efforts to regulate the Middle East, Abdul Kareem Qassim’s coup d’états in 1958, the Iraqi-Iranian war, Iraq’s invasion to Kuwait, the American invasion of Iraq, and sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shia. All these substantial political events constructed the atoms of modern history and prepared the context for Al-Bassam’s adaptation of *Richard III* (Al-Bassam 66).

Al-Bassam, in the context of his play’s cross-cultural elements, compares the dictatorship that ruled the Middle East in the 15th century to that which rules the region today. Simultaneously, the playwright was acutely aware of the risk that Richard’s persona could feed into Arab orientalist fantasies, re-centering the blame on the oppressed, who are really the principal targets of Arab authoritarianism and Western

interference. To support his claim that Saddam Hussein and Richard III share similar character traits, Al-Bassam demonstrates that the origins of the twentieth-century dictatorship can be traced back to the events surrounding the Roses and the ascent of Gloucester, beginning with the history that led to Saddam Hussein's rise to power. Al-Bassam understood that the spotlight on Saddam was probably an attempt to associate the Arab world with immorality and exoticism. Therefore, the play reinforced the Western's prejudice against Arabs. King Richard III's physical deformity is contrasted to the claimed deformity of Arabian nature as well as his style of kingship is similar to the kingship of Arab kings (20).

The combination of paternal power and the son's control significantly increases the pitfalls associated with dynastic rule. Following two months of his rule, the alliance between Saudi Arabia and 10 other nations resulted in the ongoing and devastating conflict in Yemen. Furthermore, King Salman commanded the bombing of the Shia Houthis and the military forces loyal to the former president of Yemen, who was overthrown during the revolt in 2011. The main parallel between the realm of Richard III and the present Gulf monarchies resides in the succession dilemma. Richard's actions in his quest for the throne - his manipulative planning and collaboration with Buckingham, the assassination of Clarence, and the overthrow of the two young princes - demonstrate the inherent tendency of monarchical succession to result in deliberate acts of sabotage. By reimagining *Richard III* in a post-apocalyptic setting, Al-Bassam highlights the destructive nature of power, the struggle for identity, and the impact of war on society. This production is a testament to the power of theatre to engage with contemporary issues and challenge our understanding of complex cultural dynamics (23).

Although the play mostly treats Richard's and Saddam's paranoia about a Western-Zionist conspiracy against the Islamic people with a satirical tone, it is given some credibility when Buckingham admits, just before he is executed, that he is a "secret employee of the Mossad-CIA." In the Middle East, according to Al-Bassam, there are no heroes, just criminals and victims, due to the political instability of all sides. Buckingham describes his influence as a king-maker:

You kidding? I can redraw the map of the globe with my finger; invade foreign lands with a flick of the wrist; flatten countries with the cock of a brow; I can make a mockery of the judiciary; thread an axis of evil through the eye of the press; turn a democracy into

tyranny and keep it all as clean and transparent as a Security Council resolution. (24).

Buckingham's role represents the situation of Iraq during the time of Saddam Hussein and how spies played a role in the war between the US and Iraq. In addition, the play makes very clear how powerful the media is in creating and exploiting the chaos for their own self-interested motives. Other characters wield political power in the play, including some women like Queen Elizabeth. She helps Richmond bring about Richard's downfall by arranging a meeting between the leaders of the tribes and Richmond to bring more warriors and allies to stand against Richard's army (Ibid).

Conclusion

Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III* is a groundbreaking adaptation that challenges traditional notions of Shakespeare's play while offering a powerful commentary on the Middle East. By reimagining Richard III in a post-apocalyptic setting, Al-Bassam highlights the destructive nature of power, the struggle for identity, and the impact of war on society. This production is a testament to the power of theatre to engage with contemporary issues and challenge our understanding of complex cultural dynamics. One of the most striking aspects of Al-Bassam's adaptation is its use of contemporary settings and imagery to illustrate the play's themes. The production features a cast of characters drawn from the Middle Eastern experience, including soldiers, politicians, and intellectuals. The use of Arabic language and customs adds depth and authenticity to the performance, making it feel more immediate and relevant to contemporary audiences. The play's setting, which takes place in a fictional country torn apart by war and political instability, is a powerful metaphor for the real-world conflicts ravaging the region.

The characterizations in Al-Bassam's adaptation are also noteworthy for their nuance and complexity. Richard III, played by Al-Bassam himself, is a masterclass in acting. His portrayal of the character is both terrifying

and mesmerizing, capturing the full range of Richard's emotions from cold calculation to seething rage. The other characters in the play are equally well-developed, each serving as a reflection of the darker aspects of human nature.

Through his adaptation, Al-Bassam raises essential questions about the nature of power and its impact on society. He highlights how those seeking power will stop at nothing to achieve their goals, even if it means sacrificing their humanity. The play also serves as a powerful warning about the dangers of unchecked authoritarianism, reminding us that even in the most seemingly stable societies, some would exploit and manipulate their way to power.

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