

## Reader's Response Theory in Hamlet: Oriental Readings

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Accepted 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2016.

The cultural fame that Shakespeare gained world-wide in general, and in the Orient in particular has been due to the universality of events that reflect the common daily experience, and which can be contextually applied to all facets of life, across time and within diverse cultures. By delving into the cultural reception of Hamlet, the paper will investigate how and why Shakespeare has come to be a renowned cultural icon in the Orient and Arab homeland. Also, it will focus on literary reception by looking at the mechanism of the modern reception and reader-response theory and their effects upon the transplanting of literary works across linguistic, geographical, and individual boundaries. Every culture has been able to lay claim to Shakespeare by making him representative of their unique socio-cultural beliefs, and this has occurred so often that he has come to be looked upon as representing 'universal' man. It is the playfulness of this text that has allowed him to be appropriated by most nations. For the Arabs, the appropriation of Shakespeare's texts has been colored by commercial, social and political considerations that have a close connection to their own specific culture. الألف كار هذه وتة نوع مسرد ياتة في المطروقة والذيمات الألف كار لة نوع ن تاج هي الأدي به شكسبير أعمال وعالمه انه تشار مسرد به وت دليل القاري نظريه تط بيق سديتم الدراسه هذه في . العالم ب قاع جميع في ان تشارها سهل وس ياسه اذ تماعه ماب بين العرب في الواقع على وت تط بيقها عرب يامعاجتها تمت وك يف العرب في الوطن في العرب والأدياء انقاد منظور من "هملت" شكسبير العديد وت عكس كما .مجمتمعه في المعاصر العرب في الفرد معاناه ت عكس ان بامكانها التي والمعاناه بال صراعات غنه هملت مسرد به ان الخصوص وجهه على والعرب به الدول جميع في وانما ان كل ترا في في قطل يس السله به الظواهر من

**Keywords:** Cultural, oriental readings, linguistic, Shakespeare.

### INTRODUCTION

Shakespearian worldwide, culturally based tropes and topics, gain considerable attention and interest in Oriental world. Indeed, Shakespeare's reception in Arabia has developed according to the needs of its public and the abilities of Arabic dramatists and their theatrical background as well as the historical make-up of the region. Reception studies, according to Lorna Hardwick, are concerned with investigating the routes by which a text has moved and "the cultural focus" which has helped in the manner that the text is regarded (4). That is, it is the study of how the text is received and reinterpreted by the artist, and the purpose for which the appropriation of ideas or values is made (5).

The Arabs applied Shakespeare's works to reflect the social upheavals resulting from the clash between tradition and the advent of modernity, and the political dissatisfaction which governs their emotions regarding their own governments and the west's interference in their affairs, whether through acts of

colonialism or imperialism. . As for the latter twentieth century Arab adaptations of this play, they will very forcefully remind us of Kott's argument that "twentieth century history has re-equipped us with the political violence of Shakespeare" (6).

As for the reception theory which arose in the sixties, in response to the social and political changes in Germany and the Western world, it destroyed the naïve view that literature is a passive reflection of the real world. It placed the reader at the centre of text and time, and revealed the role of literary texts in shaping and reshaping the consciousness of readers. This theory appeared to initiate a new interest in the historical dimension and the communicative aspects of the literary text. Thus, literature is an entity that can play a role in our society which can be progressive, repressive, or affirmative. So Hans Robert Jauss' 'horizon of expectations' appeared to emphasize the historical importance of the reader's interpretive inclinations which ultimately "explain the significance of a text" subject to

the “models, paradigms, beliefs and values” of the reader/viewer (5). Therefore, modern Shakespeare drama did not seek to recover past meanings, but rather reflect the present moment of the reader/viewer/critic’s own social, political and historical situation.

Reader-response theory is another approach that focuses on the role of the reader in making meaning of written texts. This approach deals with the ‘reader’ as the interpretive character of a written text. This theory, developed in the 1970s and 1980s by Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and many others, placed even more emphasis on the reader, who belonging to an “interpretive community,” creates the meaning in the process of reading (Speers). The application of these approaches has in effect been what the Arabs and many other nations made use of in appropriating Shakespeare’s plays to reflect certain practices and attitudes, and not necessarily to signify meaning in the accepted customary manner.

This discussion will demonstrate that the iconic status that Hamlet has gained in the Middle East has been highly responsive to socio-political circumstances. Though in the early period of appropriations of Hamlet, the play was manipulated to reflect the social conditions and expectations of the Arab public, both Shakespeare and Hamlet have come to be pivotal figures, in what can only be termed as the “theatre of politicization,” which aims to attack Arab governments and incite audiences to revolt against existing political ideas. This aesthetic of reception shifted the attention away from the producer of the text and from the text itself toward a dialectic of production and consumption, which maintained that the “changing horizons of a text’s many readers explain the history of the work” (Goldstein 9).

#### READER-RESPONSE THEORY IN HAMLET

The fact that Hamlet mirrors a number of political problems, not least of which is that justice is unavailable and that civil war is a permanent risk, caused many Arabs to empathize with Hamlet’s dilemma since these conditions have been basic to many an Arab intellectual’s ideas about his/her world at least since 1967 if not during the early periods of Western Colonialism. Such was the case with regards to Mamduh Udwan’s redaction of Hamlet; he sought to reflect the political corruption prevalent prior to the 1967 war. Hamlet states the corruption when talking to his mother in act 111.iv.95-102:

A murder and a villain, a slave that is not twentieth part of tithe  
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings; A cutpurse of empire and  
the rule  
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,  
And put in his pocket.

Directors have constantly engaged with Shakespeare’s play-texts in the production of unique performative texts, which reflect their individual, social, and political environments. Thus, whether through citations, allusions, interpretations or adaptations, the play has come to be employed to stimulate the reader’s/viewer’s intellect to draw a connection between the play and the main protagonist with an overtly contemporary political reality. In fact, citing Shakespeare “has become a normal part of the Arabic language for self-described liberals, [and] Islamists” (Litvin 5).

The fact that the Arabs are descendants from various Bedouin tribes, whose lifestyle is controlled by a strict code of traditional rules, foremost among them being revenged, which it is shameful (eib) to break, could not but have influenced the choice and popularity of the play Hamlet. Arabs were adamant

about the unquestionable law of revenge; a disgrace must be avenged no matter what the consequences, and revenge was the sole cause of the incessant pre-Islamic tribal wars. One of their poets expressed this cultural fixation thus:

I shall wash disgrace with the edge of my sword,  
No matter what this may bring about. (“The Arab Psyche”)  
Equals to be or not to be” To be, or not to be; ay, there’s the point  
To die, to sleep, is that all? Ay, all;  
No, to sleep, to dream. Ay, marry, there it goes,  
For in that dream of death, when we awake.  
And borne before an everlasting judge. 111.i.56

Therefore, the fact that Hamlet, is very close to the socio-cultural traditional mentality and nature of the Arab individual – the revenge motif: ‘al-ainbi’lain, wa al-sin bi’l sin’ (an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth) (Awad, Shikisbir fi Misr84). Though Nohad Selaiha, in investigating the reasons behind the choice and popularity of Hamlet amongst the Arab public, ascribes its choice and popularity to the Christian allusion of Jesus, the Savior, she herself ends up saying that the “individual moral revenge is transformed into collective, political revenge” (Shikisbiri147).

The revenge tragedy, which is characterized by a reluctant avenger and the absence of a clear plan of revenge, and which is further complicated by the machinations of Claudius in his attempts to be rid of Hamlet, has traditional religious and political allusions. Selaiha believes that the use of the old principle of biblical revenge, which governs the Old Testament and so assigns the role of savior/avenger to Hamlet is counterbalanced by the presence of the term ‘Father,’ which in Christianity, refers to God who places upon the ‘son’ the task of cleansing the world and saving humanity from damnation, and which therefore changes Hamlet’s role to that of savior/victim, an idea found in the New Testament (129). This is further affirmed by Hamlet himself:

I do repent; but heaven hath pleas’d it so  
To punish me with this, and this with me,  
That I must be their scourge and minister. [3.4.173-175]

Also, the play thematizes two further main tropes, namely corruption and treason; they are clearly stated in the play in the sense that the link between the corrupt Denmark and the world is affirmed when Hamlet tells his friends, Rozencrantz and Guildenstern, that “Denmark’s a prison,” upon which Rozencrantz replies “then is the world one”(130). Hence, Hamlet’s role changes from the retributive justice of the Old Testament to one of sacrifice. According to Selaiha, this movement from savior/avenger to savior/victim is a trope that is not limited to the Christian faith, for it is reflected in a number of myths, folktales, and old pagan ceremonies to be found in James Frazer’s text, *The Golden Bough* (146). Thus, Arab audiences, Christians and Muslims alike, will not fail to interpret the spiritual conflict agonizing and paralyzing Hamlet:

Rosencrantz: both your majesties  
Might, by sovereign power you have of us,  
Put your dread pleasures more into command  
Than to entreaty.  
Guildenstern: but we both obey, and here give up ourselves,  
In the full bent, to lay our services freely at your feet,  
To be commended. 11.ii.61

This was further affirmed by the advent of the Islamic faith which directs people to do justice, be charitable, merciful and tolerant, even as it acknowledges the unavailability of violence

in the defense of the faith. Thus, Islam promotes this idea of savior/victim as opposed to the pre-Islamic acceptance of the role of savior/avenger, and the play therefore becomes one which echoes the sentiments of both the Arab pre-Islamic tradition of revenge, as well as the Islamic traits of justice at the cost of sacrifice. This cannot but lay the groundwork for the aspect of martyrdom which was to color the role of Hamlet in latter twentieth century adaptations and re-creations of the play. As for the political allusion inherent in the play, it revolves around the use of the hero's constant procrastinations to enact his oath of revenge. Selaiha believes that Hamlet's unwillingness for bloodshed in the course of acting upon his father's behest is tantamount to questioning the concept of revenge and to seeking an alternative:

The hero's intentional passivity, his hesitation and brooding and indifference to the game of revenge and repeated bloodshed raise doubts about the legitimacy of the principle of revenge and retribution ... (146) Selaiha, therefore, believes that "besides its clear religious dimension, Hamlet contains an important political dimension" in that it "includes a deep political condemnation of the system of rule inherited from the Middle Ages, which is based on an alliance between the monarchy, the religious establishment, and feudalism" (146). These are features that dominate most Arab countries, therefore, the play may signify an obvious condemnation of Arab nations practicing hereditary or single-party dictatorships (e.g. Iraq, Syria, Saudia Arabia, Egypt, etc.). As for the idea of revolt manifested in:

They cry "Choose we! Laertes shall be king."  
Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds,  
"Laertes shall be king, Laertes king." (IV. v. 106-8)

It is a "revolution [that] does not lead to change" because its main player is essentially part of the ruling regime and can quickly be swallowed back into it (148). Therefore, only by revenge ceasing to be a personal activity can the real threat of popular revolt achieve any form of change. Yet in later twentieth century adaptations of Hamlet, even this meager hope dwindles to become one which is swallowed up by a sense of futility, and the Arabs, therefore, resort to the politicized act of martyrdom to enact their vengeful justice. Hamlet to his friends:

Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks; but I think you.  
And sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear halfpenny.  
Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining?  
Is it a free visitation? Come, deal justly with me. 11.ii.73

Not only the play's allusions to the revenge and political motifs no doubt made Hamlet a successful theatrical performance much appreciated by Arab audiences, but also the religious and mythical allusions inherent in the play must have influenced the pioneers of the Egyptian theatrical field in their choice. One religious allusion they would have noted, is the age-old religious story of Cane and Abel, which Shakespeare himself points to in Claudius' speech after he abruptly leaves the mis-en-scene that suggest this guilt, whereupon he compares his act to the oldest and most vile act in the history of mankind – the killing of a brother [Act III, scene 3, line 37] Ghost to hamlet (128):

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand  
Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatched. [...] Oh, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible. 1.v.43  
Ghost: revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.  
Hamlet: murder!!!! [...] O my prophetic soul! My uncle! 1.v.41

Selaiha also links the appeal of the tragedy to the ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris, which talks of Set killing his brother, King Osiris, who is the much beloved ruler of the land, and who in turn is avenged by his son, Horus, aided by his mother, Isis, and the god of wisdom, Tut (Ions 50-70). This myth, which embodies the father-figure motif is one which further affirms the traditional Arab interest in genealogy and its imposed loyalties especially as it pertains to status amongst members of an Arab community. Al-Shetawi notes another reason for the early popularity of Hamlet in the Arab world which is manifest in the melodramatic touch of madness and emotionalism which attracts the character of the Arab ("Hamlet" 44).

The Arab belief of a 'fine dividing line between madness and genius' is reflected in the assumed madness of Hamlet, which allows him to utter 'pearls of wisdom': witness Polonius' description of Hamlet's madness – "Though this be madness, yet there is method isn't" [Act II, scene 2, line 203-4]. Even in the feminine figure of Ophelia, one can draw some Arabic interests as well. Ophelia offers, because of her social conditions, potential affinities with a normal Arabic woman, and with similar fate and tragedy. As for Ophelia, prior to her madness, she is nothing but a puppet in the hands of both her brother and her father, and that is why they succeed in corrupting her to become a spy against her lover, Hamlet. Yet, with her madness, the bond which links her to the corrupt world surrounding her is broken, and she withdraws to the world of nature, an Eden, which is innocent of man's corruption (Selaiha 164). Laertes himself attests to the lucidity and logic in her madness:

Hads't thou they wits and didst persuade revenge,  
It could not move thus.  
This nothing's more that matter. [4. 5. 168-69, 173]  
As for the metaphors which reflect Hamlet's reality of pain and suffering, embody  
nothing if not Arab emotionalism:  
O, that this too sold flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew! [1. 2. 129]

No doubt there were a number of reasons why Egyptian theatre directors brought Hamlet to Arab stages, but perhaps foremost among those was also the Arab audiences' inclination and disposition for melodrama through which they expressed their deep rooted ancient and modern traditional belief that the West seeks to usurp the riches of their nation. These emotions were and remain inherent Arab characteristics which allow them to appreciate excessive verbal expressions of emotion, especially those of pain and suffering as stated by Hamlet in his soliloquy about the treason of his mother:

Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him,  
As if increase of appetite had grown  
By what it fed on. And yet, within a month-  
Let me not think on – frailty, thy name is woman!-  
A little month; or e'er those shoes were old  
With which she followed my poor father's body, [...] Would have mourned longer-married with my uncle,  
My father's brother, but no more like my father. 1.ii.19

Hence Hamlet's soliloquies reflect his inner mental pain and conflict. They allow the Arabs to identify with his lamentations that he "was born to set it right." For there is a nation (Umma) that had been usurped and dominated by non-Arab nations and races (Persians, Turks, French, British) for decades; that these foreign nations had employed countless intrigues to keep

the Arab world weak, divided, and lacking confidence in itself and its potential was what the Arab individual believed. Thus, he came to interpret events, and attribute his failures and problems to "a cause which is external to the Arab personality: namely, a foreign plot" fabricated by the foreign enemy, i.e. the West ("Arab Psyche"). Therefore, it was up to the Arab citizen to become a 'Hamlet' and "set things right." Therefore, Abdu's deviations from the original text was in response to the aforementioned traditional Arab expectations which in turn reflect their socio-cultural traditions (Badawi, "Shakespeare and the Arabs" 186).

## CONCLUSION

Reader-Response Theory proves to be highly applicable in both Arabic theater and society, but with a main difference: Arabs seem to be interested in the thematic dimensions, threads, and intellect that Shakespeare's plays like Hamlet exhibit. Being worldwide, culturally based, Arab is attracted and fascinated by the Shakespearian content rather than form. The Oriental intellectuals, therefore, in appropriating Shakespeare's works to reflect on their contemporary disordered social and tyrannical political reality, were in fact adhering to Kott's premise that Shakespeare is to be interpreted in terms of cultural production such that this work question and interrogate the existing order. This will become quite obvious as we discuss the Shakespearian translations of the tragedy Hamlet

In investigating the birth of modern Arabic drama and the motivations behind the translations of Shakespeare's texts, it might be said now that the cultural-political environment and audience taste unabashedly play dominant roles in the productions of these early dramatic fragments of Egyptian drama as well as in modern Arab dramatic representations. The fact that there is a fascination with finding political and social motivations behind a text, along with the Arab traditional belief that a literary text is a structure that constructs human identity are also factors that are conducive towards Arabizing Shakespeare's works through relying heavily on the applications, practices, and impacts of Reader-Response Theory.

One cannot ignore the numerous interpretations made of Hamlet throughout the Western historical experience, which even though it shares the same literary characteristics, has demonstrated countless socio-historical interpretations. Moreover, the social and political turmoil surrounding the Orient during the later nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century has been very instrumental in impelling the manner and intensity of Shakespeare's appropriation and thematization.

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