



A Contemporary Adaptation of Shakespeare's Plays in Al Bassam's The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy

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Abstract: This study examines Sulayman Al Bassam's adaptations of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Richard III, and Twelfth Night, analyzing how his reworkings critique political leadership in the contemporary Arab world and deconstruct the Western discourse on Islamic terrorism. Al Bassam utilizes the disruptive elements in Shakespeare's original works to engage with issues of religious extremism, Western opportunism, and authoritarianism in Arab/Muslim societies. His adaptations strategically challenge Orientalist stereotypes while exposing the hypocrisy of both Western powers and Arab political elites who manipulate Islam for personal and political gain. The study employs adaptation theory, particularly the perspectives of Linda Hutcheon and other scholars, alongside postcolonial analysis, drawing on Edward Said's Orientalism. Unlike previous research, which has primarily focused on Western productions of Shakespearean adaptations, this study examines Al Bassam's work as a distinct case of cross-cultural adaptation. Findings reveal that Al Bassam both affirms and critiques Western portrayals of Islam, demonstrating that radicalism and political corruption stem not from religious doctrine but from individual and systemic exploitation of faith. By adapting Shakespeare within an Islamic context, Al Bassam provides a counter-narrative to dominant Western perceptions of Islam and terrorism. This study concludes that Al Bassam's trilogy serves as a powerful denunciation of politically driven religious authoritarianism, urging a reconsideration of how Islamic identity and governance are represented in both the West and the Arab world.

Keywords: Islamic Representation, Adaptation Theory, Postcolonialism, Orientalism, Political Authoritarianism, Western Discourse, Islamic Terrorism Deconstruction

1. Introduction

A wide range of studies have examined how Islam is represented by Arab writers in their literary works. The West's prejudice against Muslims and its perception of them remain major and persistent themes, particularly after the events of 9/11, which intensified negative portrayals (Gana, 2008). In response, Arab and Muslim writers have actively challenged these stereotypes, seeking to counter the misrepresentations that have circulated globally, particularly in the West. Amrah Abdul Majid (2015) asserts that Arab writers, particularly Muslim ones, aim to dismantle these distorted images and instead present a more accurate and balanced portrayal of Islam. He describes this effort as the propagation of "a clean image of Islam" for the West and the broader world (Abdul Majid, 2015, p. 40).

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) offers a foundational critique of how Western cultural representations have shaped perceptions of Muslims and Arabs. Said defines Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1978, p. 13). His work argues that the West has long constructed an oversimplified and often prejudiced image of the East, Muslims, and Arabs—an image that was further amplified following the events of September 11 in the U.S. and the 7/7 attacks in the UK.

Despite the increasing Muslim population in the West for various reasons, Western societies still struggle to fully comprehend Islam and its adherents. One of the primary challenges Muslims in the West face is the deep-seated perception and prejudice held by many Westerners. Fauzia Erfan Ahmad (2010) notes that Islam has become the fastest-growing religion in the Western hemisphere due to the continuous rise in the number of Muslims (Ahmad, 2010, p. 32). However, this demographic shift has not translated into widespread acceptance, as Muslims continue to be marginalised and viewed as outsiders (Idriss & Abbas, 2011; Santesso & McClung, 2017). Both native Arabs and diasporics have sought to challenge these misrepresentations of Islam. Santesso & McClung (2017) highlights the emergence of numerous literary works since 9/11 that aim to present an authentic depiction of Islam (Santesso & McClung, 2017, p. 9). However, while some authors strive to correct these misconceptions, others continue to reinforce distorted portrayals (Abdul Majid, 2015, p. 9). Among those committed to deconstructing the Western image of Islam is the Kuwaiti-British playwright Sulayman Al Bassam.

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Al Bassam critically engages with the representation of Muslims on the Western stage through his three-part adaptation of Shakespeare's works. Born in Kuwait and later moving to London, where he founded the Zaoum Theater in 1996, Al Bassam situates his plays within Arab settings to reflect the realities of dictatorial and bureaucratic regimes (Holderness, 2007). In *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (2014), he frequently references Arabian oil, reinforcing the notion that the Arab Gulf serves as his primary setting—a perspective supported by Graham Holderness (2007), who notes the presence of burning oil wells in Al Bassam's plays (Holderness, 2007, p. 144). Despite their varied narratives, the three plays in this collection share a common theme: Islam. Unlike some authors who place blame on Islam itself, Al Bassam takes a more humanistic approach, attributing acts of evil to individual motivations rather than religious doctrine. His adaptations—*The Al Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, and *The Speaker's Progress*—reimagine Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Twelfth Night*, respectively.

This research contends that by linking canonical Shakespearean plays to contemporary political settings and antagonists, Al Bassam both exonerates Islam from the accusations frequently perpetuated in Western media and redirects blame toward individual actors, their motives, and their actions. More significantly, the study argues that Al Bassam's primary objective in crafting this trilogy is to denounce the political leadership structures in the contemporary Arab world that use Islam as a cover for authoritarianism.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

According to Holderness (2007), Arab dramatists have favored adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare's plays since the late 19th century. Shakespeare's works have long served as a source of inspiration for writers seeking to address contemporary issues (Khadim, 2024). Behir Ahlam & Lemmouchi Hakima (2018) argue that authors continuously revisit and rewrite Shakespeare's plays to enrich modern world literature (Ahlam & Hakima, 2018, p. 11). The persistent adaptation of Shakespearean works can be attributed to both their widespread popularity and their engagement with real-life issues while offering moral lessons to audiences (Thanky, 2017, p. 362). Shakespeare's plays also contain "political dimensions devised to idealize and/or demystify specific forms of power" (Camati, 2005, p. 341), making them adaptable to different cultural and historical contexts. Marowitz (1991) further asserts that Shakespeare's works have repeatedly been taken "as 'material' to be refashioned" (Marowitz, 1991, p. 5), demonstrating their continued relevance across diverse regions and time periods.

The term adaptation has been defined and discussed by many theorists. Sanders (2006) defines adaptation as "an interpretation or re-reading of a canonical precursor." This may sometimes include "the movement into a new generic mode or context" (Sanders, 2006, p. 2). Sanders further proposes that "adaptation can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts 'relevant' or easily comprehensible to a new audience and readerships via the process of proximation and updating" (Sanders, 2006, p. 19). Similarly, Homi Bhabha argues that "ideas are repeated, relocated, and translated in the name of tradition" (Bhabha, 2006, p. 207).

Another key theorist, Linda Hutcheon (2006), presents a modern approach to evaluating adaptation. Hutcheon asserts that "[the reasons behind adaptation] should be considered seriously by adaptation theory, even if this means thinking [about] the role of intentionality in our critical thinking about art in general" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 95). She considers adaptations as "deliberate, announced, and extended re-visitations of prior works" and discusses adaptation both as a product and as a process of creation and reception (Hutcheon, 2006, p. XIV).

Sulayman Al Bassam adapts three of Shakespeare's plays, presenting them in a manner that detaches the themes of violence, corruption, dictatorship, and sexism from both Muslims and Christians. Instead, he highlights how these issues are universal, and applicable to people regardless of religious affiliation. Through his reworking of Shakespeare's plays, Al Bassam challenges the stereotypical portrayals of Muslims and seeks to refute the accusations levelled against them.

Al Bassam states, "Extremism, corruption, power, kingship, identity, authoritarianism, and sexuality are but a handful of the themes that attracted me to these texts [Shakespeare's plays], themes that gave promise of their potential as vehicles for politically charged, contemporary theatre pieces" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. xviii). By juxtaposing 16th- and 17th-century Christian England with modern-day events in the Islamic Middle East, he reframes the narratives of violence, corruption, dictatorship, and sexism. Through this approach, Al Bassam challenges the Western discourse that associates Islam with terrorism, arguing instead that such acts stem from individual intentions rather than religious doctrine.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining all three plays in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, emphasizing their collective role in deconstructing the notion of Islamic terrorism and denouncing the political structures that exploit Islam for authoritarian purposes. By exploring the adaptation of Shakespeare's works in relation to these themes, this research offers new insights into Al Bassam's engagement with contemporary sociopolitical discourse.

2. Methodology

This study is analyzed through the lens of adaptation theory, particularly the views of Linda Hutcheon, and postcolonialism, with a specific focus on Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism. Said asserts that the representation of the East, Muslims, and Arabs has been greatly amplified following September 11 in the U.S. and

the 7/7 attacks in the UK (p. 13). These frameworks were chosen because adaptation theory allows for an exploration of how Al Bassam reinterprets Shakespearean texts to engage with contemporary sociopolitical issues, while postcolonialism, especially Orientalism, provides insight into how his adaptations challenge dominant Western narratives about Islam.

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, focusing on thematic and structural adaptations in Al Bassam's plays. It critically examines how the playwright repurposes Shakespearean texts to comment on modern political regimes and Islamic representation. Through a close reading of the scripts, supplemented by secondary sources on adaptation and postcolonial critique, the study highlights the tensions between Western perceptions of Islam and Al Bassam's counter-narratives.

The analysis focuses on three plays: *The Al Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, and *The Speaker's Progress*. These were selected because they offer a representative range of Al Bassam's engagement with Shakespearean texts while tackling issues of power, authoritarianism, and the political instrumentalization of religion. Additionally, while *The Al Hamlet Summit* and *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* have been widely discussed, *The Speaker's Progress* remains relatively underexplored, making its inclusion an important contribution to the study of Al Bassam's adaptations.

Al Bassam sets his plays in the Arab world, reflecting dictatorial and bureaucratic regimes, and frequently references Arabian oil, reinforcing the political and economic dimensions of his critique (Holderness, 2007). Unlike some authors who blame Islam itself for terrorism and oppression, Al Bassam adopts a more humanistic approach, portraying violence, dictatorship, and corruption as consequences of individual actions and political structures rather than religious doctrine. His adaptations of *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Twelfth Night* are thus not merely cultural transpositions but political interventions, challenging Western discourses on Islam and authoritarianism.

3. Analysis

Beginning with *The Al Hamlet Summit*, much like Shakespeare's original *Hamlet*, the play merges modern-day political concerns with timeless themes of ambition, betrayal, and the consequences of power. In this adaptation, however, the central figure is an Arab despot who has recently seized the throne by committing regicide against his own brother. The aftermath plunges the country into chaos, attracting international intervention aimed at restoring order. Anyone familiar with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* will recognize the core elements of the story, but Al Bassam's adaptation gives it a distinctly Arab-Islamic twist, leading him to describe his work as a "charged, airless, and perverse relationship between the Middle East and the West" (Al Bassam, 2018, xviii). He further explains that "extremism, corruption, power, kingship, identity, authoritarianism, and sexuality are but a handful of the themes that attracted me to these texts" (Al Bassam, 2018, xviii). These themes are not coincidentally fitting for a 21st-century Arab context.

Some critics argue that, in the original Shakespearean version, Claudius bears "more than a passing resemblance to Saddam Hussein" (Al Bassam, 2018, x). Holderness (2007) comments that Al Bassam's adaptation "illustrates a Middle Eastern political tragedy onto the template of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (Holderness, 2007, p. 144). In his interpretation, Claudius represents Saddam Hussein, embodying his dictatorial powers (Holderness, 2007, p. 144). Hussein's controversial legacy—where he is viewed by some as a ruthless despot and by others as a heroic leader—adds complexity to the play's themes. Kevin M. Woods & Mark E. Stout (2010) further highlight the varying perceptions and misperceptions surrounding Saddam Hussein (Woods & Stout, 2010, p. 7).

One of the major divergences between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Al Bassam's adaptation is the way Claudius handles external threats. In the original, Shakespeare's Claudius prefers diplomacy, while Al Bassam's Claudius resorts to brutal force (Al Bassam, 2014, x). This conscious shift reflects Western stereotypes about the Middle East, reinforcing the perception that Arabs and Muslims are inherently violent, rage-filled, and incapable of diplomacy and democracy.

On this matter, Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, asserts that Western Orientalists describe the Arab world as inherently "evil, totalitarian, and terroristic" (Said, 1978, p. 27). This stereotype is unmistakably present in *The Al Hamlet Summit*, where "Hamlet becomes a jihadist, and Ophelia a suicide bomber" (Al Bassam, 2014, xi). Holderness (2007) describes how Ophelia and Hamlet are "Islamicized, adopting traditional Muslim costume; and both become, from the perspective of the ruling regime, 'terrorists'" (Holderness, 2007, p. 145). In this context, Caroline Corbin (2017) raises a crucial point: "When you hear the word 'terrorist,' who do you picture? Chances are, it is not a white person. In the United States, two common though false narratives about terrorists who attack America abound ... The first is that 'terrorists are always (brown) Muslims.' The second is that 'white people are never terrorists'" (Corbin, 2017, p. 455). This bias plays directly into Al Bassam's adaptation.

From the opening lines, Al Bassam imprints an Islamic atmosphere onto the play. When Laertes welcomes Prince Hamlet back following his father's death, he says:

"My condolences; may Allah increase your wages in heaven."

Similarly, Al Bassam modifies Claudius's speeches, making them overtly Islamic. At one point, Claudius declares:

"In the name of Allah, The Bounteous, The Merciful" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 6).

This phrase is unmistakably Islamic, as it is traditionally used by Muslims at the beginning of speeches.

Another notable transformation in *The Al Hamlet Summit* is the portrayal of Hamlet and Ophelia's madness. In Shakespeare's original, Hamlet's mental instability is often debated, as he frequently pretends to be mad in his scheme to avenge his father's murder. For example, he claims:

"And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes, then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it. Who does it, then? His madness" (Shakespeare, 2020, p. 273).

Similarly, Queen Gertrude describes her son as being "mad as the sea and the wind" (Shakespeare, 2020, p. 189), while Ophelia's insanity is described as her being "divided from herself and her fair judgment" (Shakespeare, 2020, p. 211).

Al Bassam deliberately selects these unstable characters to become a jihadist and a suicide bomber, implying that only the mentally unstable commit acts of terror in the name of Islam. In doing so, he exonerates Islam itself from the false perception of inherent violence. Instead, he suggests that such individuals are manipulated or struggling with their own psychological battles, much like Shakespeare's Hamlet and Ophelia.

Al Bassam also incorporates a critique of Arab political leadership, highlighting the false promises of democracy that accompany regime changes. This is reflected in Claudius's speech when he ascends the throne:

"The dawn has risen upon the people of our nation. The New Democracy begins today" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 6).

This mirrors the rhetoric of many Middle Eastern leaders—who often use Islamic discourse to justify their rule. In most Arab nations, Islam is intertwined with governance, leading political leaders to begin speeches with phrases such as "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Most Compassionate."

Thus, Al Bassam deliberately aligns the deceptive promises of Claudius with real-life Arab leaders, suggesting that they, too, use religious rhetoric to manipulate the masses. This adaptation serves as a warning: leaders who invoke religion and democracy in their political speeches often turn out to be liars and murderers—just as Claudius was.

In this context, Gschwandtner (2004) argues that Islamic leaders frequently "Islamize" various political issues, asserting that anything not inherently Islamic can be rebranded under religious authority to serve political agendas (Gschwandtner, 2004, p. 27).

The usual cunning rhetoric used by Muslim leaders when addressing their followers can also be observed in the words of Al Bassam's Claudius when he declares: "We ride on the crest of a great wave, born of the will of the people and the needs of History: I am not its leader: I am its lamb" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 6). Orientalism claims that Muslims lack individuality, suggesting that they gullibly accept everything their leaders tell them without question. On this matter, Edward Said argues in *Orientalism* that "in newsreels or news photos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences" (Said, 1978, p. 287). This is relevant because the audience Claudius addresses in his speech consists entirely of Arab Muslims, who continue applauding mindlessly, with the exception of Hamlet, the revolutionary figure. Hence, Claudius pointedly asks, "Hamlet, you do not clap? Hamlet?" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 6). More evidence of Orientalist stereotyping can be found in the collective obedience and enthusiastic approval of Claudius' audience, which Al Bassam deliberately reaffirms as a critique of the Western perception that Arabs and Muslims are easily manipulated and naïve.

In addition, it is crucial to note that Claudius, in the original Christian version of *Hamlet*, ascends the throne by murdering King Hamlet. Such accessions to power through violent coups are not exclusive to the Arab world but have been observed in various political landscapes throughout history. For instance, similar events have occurred in Arab countries like Qatar, yet Al Bassam's preservation of this theme in both Islamic and Christian settings challenges the notion that dictatorship is uniquely Arab or Islamic. Alasdair McKay asserts that, during the so-called Arab Spring, people "were actively taking the initiative to overthrow their autocratic governments" (McKay, 2007, p. 4). By retaining this theme across both cultural contexts, Al Bassam demonstrates that dictatorship is a universal phenomenon, not one confined solely to the Arab/Islamic world, but rather a recurring pattern throughout European and global history.

This parallel between Arab and Western political struggles continues in Al Bassam's characterization of Laertes, the son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia, who voices a sense of helplessness in international affairs when he proclaims: "I cannot do diplomacy. We sit and talk like drunkards, waiting for others to solve our problems" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 11). Here, Al Bassam draws an analogy between the modern Arab world and the Danish kingdom in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the Danes, despite facing imminent threats from Norway, remain paralyzed and unable to act. By making this comparison, Al Bassam refutes the Orientalist belief that helplessness in international relations is an inherent trait of Arabs. Instead, he argues that both Christian and Muslim societies throughout history have been subjected to political stagnation and external interference. This places Muslims and

Christians on equal footing, portraying both as victims of deceitful leadership rather than inherently weak or passive.

The Western stereotype of male dominance and female subjugation in the Arab world is another theme that Al Bassam explores in *The Al Hamlet Summit*. A United Nations-sponsored paper titled *Empowerment or Subjugation* states that “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is a group explicitly committed to the segregation of the sexes, the promotion of a rigid social order premised on control over women’s bodies, and the enslavement of women” (Lahoud, 2018, p. 1). Al Bassam critiques this stereotype of female oppression through his characterization of Laertes, who harshly reprimands Ophelia, using vulgar and aggressive language to warn her about the dangers of unchecked desires (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 11).

However, in Shakespeare’s original *Hamlet*, Laertes is not as oppressive or overbearing. Rather than dictating his sister’s actions, Shakespeare’s Laertes advises her with affection and concern, encouraging her to be cautious of her emotions:

*“Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,
And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire.
The chariest maid is prodigal enough,
If she unmask her beauty to the moon:
Virtue itself ’scapes not calumnious strokes:
The canker galls the infants of the spring,
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent.
Be wary then; best safety lies in fear:
Youth to itself rebels, though none else near”* (*Hamlet, Act I, Scene III, 41*).

This passage reflects brotherly love and concern rather than strict patriarchal control. By altering Laertes’ tone and making him more domineering, Al Bassam seems to be confronting and exaggerating Western perceptions of Arab-Muslim misogyny. This revision suggests that such oppressive behavior is not inherently Islamic, but rather a distorted projection reinforced by global political narratives.

Looking at both dialogues, one can clearly see that Al Bassam once again reinforces the well-worn stereotype of the domineering Muslim male subjugating the innocent Muslim female through threats of violence. This is in addition to his earlier portrayal of Arabs and Muslims as naïve masses. In this second instance, he generalizes the Orientalist accusation that all Muslim men beat their wives, which is simply not the case. These two instances—depicting Muslims as both gullible and inherently violent toward women—serve as a reaffirmation of Orientalist rhetoric in Al Bassam’s work (2014), which only exacerbates negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims. Such generalizations worsen global perceptions of Muslims and Arabs, reinforcing false narratives that subjugating and abusing women is exclusive to Islam, when in reality, domestic violence is a global issue transcending religious and cultural boundaries. The focus on this issue when discussing Islam raises an important question: why is such behavior magnified and sensationalized when it involves Muslims, while similar actions elsewhere are overlooked? Gschwandtner (2004) asserts that if Islamic teachings on male-female relationships are properly applied, women would be satisfied and protected (Gschwandtner 2004, p. 2). Indeed, Islamic doctrine mandates that Muslim men serve as supporters, providers, and protectors of their female relatives (Gschwandtner 2004, p. 4).

One could argue that Al Bassam’s (2014) primary motive in adapting this play is to deconstruct the concept of “revolution”, a term that carries infinitely relative meanings in the Arab world. Every time a new movement, party, or regime rises to power, it initiates a so-called revolution, yet its true purpose remains ambiguous. The conventional definition of “revolution” suggests the replacement of something worse with something better. However, Al Bassam (2014) exposes how autocratic political systems manipulate this term for their own benefit. In his introductory notes to the adaptations, Al Bassam himself contends that one of his main challenges in appropriating *Hamlet* was “how to render *Hamlet* a story about the birth of Islamic religious fanaticism fueled by domestic corruption and Western opportunism” (Al Bassam, 2014, p. xix). This suggests that in Arab/Muslim nations, any revolutionary attempt against despotic rule is often labeled as an act of Islamic fundamentalism, aimed at destabilizing a country drowning in corruption, indulgence, and vice.

Al Bassam highlights this idea in his play when Prince Hamlet finds a letter written by King Claudius. The letter states:

“Hamlet, the late King’s son, continues to lead the life of the murtad [apostate], dissolute, gambling and whoring the nation’s millions in the playgrounds of Europe” (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 13).

However, Shakespeare presents Hamlet’s own reflections on the debauchery of royalty, as seen in the following passage:

*“But to my mind, though I am native here
And to the manner born, it is a custom
More honour’d in the breach than the observance.
This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduced and tax’d of other nations:
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition” (Hamlet, Act I, Scene IV, 49).*

Here, Shakespeare portrays external criticism of royal corruption, with other nations judging the Danish court for its indulgence. In contrast, Al Bassam shifts the source of condemnation to an internal Arab/Muslim setting, making it King Claudius himself who condemns the morality of his own people. This difference in framing highlights how narratives of corruption and immorality are presented differently in Western and Arab contexts—while Shakespeare depicts it as a critique from outsiders, Al Bassam portrays it as internalized rhetoric used by rulers to control and discredit their opposition.

It should also be noted that both Shakespeare and Al Bassam focus solely on a royal family in their respective plays. There are no commoners depicted, which suggests that Al Bassam believes the challenges of leadership in an Islamic nation can only be resolved by the ruling elite. In other words, Islamic governance is portrayed as being dominated by those blinded by their own desire for power and wealth. As a result, they exploit Islam (in Al Bassam’s adaptation) or Christianity (in Shakespeare’s original) as tools to justify their political ambitions.

Al Bassam draws inspiration from the Islamic writer and theorist Sayyid Qutb, who once proclaimed: “Vast oceans of savagery consume the world, false authority towers from Mecca to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to the Americas, and man is on the brink of a great precipice” (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 13). By incorporating this quote into his play, Al Bassam emphasizes that cruelty, hypocrisy, and corruption are not exclusive to Islamic nations but are global phenomena. He further argues that such issues are present in Mecca and Jerusalem (predominantly Muslim regions) as well as in the Americas (often associated with Christian democracy). Through this perspective, Al Bassam directly challenges the Western narrative that attributes political oppression and extremism solely to Islamic societies. Instead, he posits that despotism and corruption exist across both Christian and Islamic nations.

Despite residing in London, Al Bassam does not shy away from criticizing the West for its role in the division and destabilization of the Arab world. He illustrates this in his characterization of the West, embodied by the cunning and manipulative Arms Dealer. This figure deceives both King Claudius and Prince Hamlet, mirroring the role of the United States in Middle Eastern conflicts. Through the Arms Dealer’s manipulative words and his practice of selling weapons to both warring sides, Al Bassam suggests that Western interference is at the root of the Middle East’s turmoil—both physically and psychologically.

For instance, the Arms Dealer cunningly approaches Prince Hamlet, attempting to gain his trust and manipulate him, saying:

“I was thinking, perhaps, we could be friends. You need someone to confide in, and I know what it is like to be isolated. You have a great future, we would like to develop something with you, and promote your agenda” (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 21).

These deceptive words highlight the West’s strategy of using diplomatic rhetoric to coerce and influence leaders and factions, ultimately turning them against each other. Additionally, King Claudius also purchases weapons from the Arms Dealer, further escalating civil war within the nation. By arming both sides of the conflict, the Arms Dealer is depicted as the catalyst for the very terrorism that the West later claims to combat—a critique of the Western “War on Islam” narrative. The only logical outcome of such Western hypocrisy is destruction.

Elsewhere in the play, Prince Hamlet declares that his rule will end corruption, hypocrisy, and immorality, restoring his cities to the righteous path of Allah. He proclaims that the time for merely writing about these injustices has passed and that action must be taken. He delivers a chilling statement:

“The time of the pen has passed, and we enter the era of the sword.”

This statement is a direct quote from Osama bin Laden, reinforcing the Islamic association with violence in Western discourse. Despite this, the Arms Dealer still agrees to assist Hamlet in his supposed mission of moral rectification. Hamlet even inquires about acquiring white phosphorus, a highly destructive weapon, to which the Arms Dealer readily agrees, offering to sell it to him (Al Bassam, 2014, pp. 21–22).

This exchange suggests that the weapons used by so-called Muslim fundamentalists are, in fact, supplied by the West, exposing who is truly responsible for the bloodshed and for perpetuating Arab/Muslim stereotypes.

To further expose the Arms Dealer's sinister intentions, Al Bassam also depicts him attempting to recruit Polonius, King Claudius' most trusted advisor and a fierce opponent of Hamlet. In Act III, the Arms Dealer seeks to indoctrinate Polonius with Western ideology, aligning it with terrorism. Al Bassam presents this exchange through Polonius' speech:

"The treacherous enemy [Prince Hamlet and his supporters] are dwarves. They spit at the giant, but the giant picks them up and crushes them. They are traitors, pirates, and mercenaries."

The Arms Dealer then interjects, reinforcing Western narratives, saying:

"We call them terrorists."

This moment serves as a stark commentary on how the West labels resistance movements in the Middle East as acts of terrorism, regardless of their political or ideological motivations. Polonius expresses approval of the term, asking the Arms Dealer to write it down for future use. He later appears to inform King Claudius about it, labeling Hamlet a "terrorist, terrorist, terrorist" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 45). He further asserts that he will not allow a "terrorist" (meaning Hamlet) to destroy his nation, ultimately leading to Hamlet's exile. Through this, Al Bassam suggests that the term "terrorist" was coined by the West in its association with Islam, and that Arabs and Muslims have blindly adopted the accusation against one another without considering its correct meaning or appropriate use.

Toward the end of the play, Al Bassam reinforces this perspective with the American Arms Dealer proudly declaring that his mission is complete. He revels in his accomplishment, having left the kingdom in ruins while enriching himself from the Arab world's oil wealth. His satisfaction highlights Al Bassam's critique of Western intervention in the Middle East, implying that foreign powers manipulate internal conflicts for economic and political gain, leaving chaos in their wake.

After the play's events unfold, it becomes evident that King Claudius' portrayal of Prince Hamlet was entirely misleading. In both Shakespeare's and Al Bassam's versions, Hamlet's primary goal is avenging his father's murder, which is a deeply personal motivation rather than an act of sabotage. Al Bassam suggests that Arab rulers frequently label anyone seeking change or justice as a traitor or a saboteur, even if their actions stem from personal grievances rather than political dissent.

Furthermore, Al Bassam does not shy away from explicitly presenting this as a religious war. He portrays Fortinbras at the border, claiming Biblical justification for his territorial claims. Fortinbras states that although they have yet to defeat terrorism, his true mission is to complete his oil pipeline, bringing prosperity to his country (Al Bassam, 2014, pp. 55–56). Here, Al Bassam argues that the conflict is not genuinely a war between Christians and Muslims, but rather a war waged by political and economic opportunists who exploit religion to advance their own interests.

This hypocrisy is particularly evident in Fortinbras' claim that, as a Christian, he has a divine right to the land that the pipeline runs through, all while profiting from the very resources he justifies seizing. His actions contradict core Christian values, exposing the moral corruption behind such justifications. However, Al Bassam does not absolve Muslim leaders of the same behavior—he acknowledges that many Arab rulers similarly use Islam as a tool for personal gain. Ultimately, his adaptation of Hamlet conveys the argument that government corruption is not rooted in religion but in human nature itself.

In his other play, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, Al Bassam employs similar themes of ambition, deceit, and political corruption, once again set in an unnamed Arab-Islamic state. The deliberate absence of a specific country name suggests that Al Bassam intends to critique the political structures of any Arab Gulf nation that claims to be a democracy. As expected in contemporary adaptations, the plotline remains largely faithful to Shakespeare's original *Richard III*.

In the foreword to the play, Al Bassam asserts that his work depicts the "power vacuum inside a contemporary tribal, petro-monarchy" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 68). He further explains that he chose *Richard III* as a vehicle for his political critique because "frontal criticism of Gulf monarchs is illegal; it is a state security offense" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 68). His primary argument is that Richard of Gloucester appears to be a self-created force of history, rather than a byproduct of it (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 65). Although Al Bassam does not explicitly state it, he hints that *Richard III* represents Saddam Hussein, drawing parallels between the Shakespearean tyrant and the controversial Iraqi leader.

The opening scene of the play reflects the ongoing power struggle found in many Arab states, particularly between Islamist groups (known as "Akhwans") and more liberal factions that, on the surface, use Islamic slogans to promote their agendas. Richard's early monologue reinforces this, as he sarcastically describes the Akhwans:

"Grizzly brothers Akhwans who waged the valiant fight are clean-whiskered now, soft-skinned, loose-jawed on Armani beds, oiling whisper lusts with Snafi screams" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 78).

This passage mirrors real-world accusations exchanged between political factions in Arab states. Richard's depiction of the Muslim Brotherhood aligns with the Orientalist stereotype of Arab leaders as corrupt, indulgent, and hypocritical, reinforcing the idea that their religious rhetoric serves only to mask their true pursuit of power and wealth. If Richard is indeed an Arab Muslim in this adaptation, his statements reflect a form of self-religious racism, as he critiques his own people through the lens of Western stereotypes.

Al Bassam does not stray far from Shakespeare's characterization of Richard III. In both plays, Richard is manipulative, deceitful, and, most importantly, a master of rhetoric. By maintaining these traits, Al Bassam draws a deliberate comparison between Richard and contemporary Gulf leaders, suggesting that their ascent to power relies on the same tactics of deception and political maneuvering.

For example, Richard's rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamic inclinations in Al Bassam's version does not mean that he himself refrains from exploiting Islam for personal gain. At one point, he states, "Say no calamity will strike us other than what has been decreed," an English translation of a Quranic verse from Surah At-Tawbah. His strategic use of religious rhetoric, though insincere, enables him to deceive those around him and ultimately ascend to the English throne. The hypocrisy of Richard's speech is fully exposed when the audience realizes his true nature—he mercilessly commits multiple murders and engages in an incestuous marriage proposal to Anne, Queen Elizabeth's daughter. Through this representation, Al Bassam satirizes the misuse of authority by Arab leaders, suggesting that their sugar-coated religious discourse is often a means to advance selfish political agendas, and, more importantly, to serve Western interests. Again, by focusing on figures in power, Al Bassam condemns the widespread manipulation of Islam, not only by rulers but also within society at large.

The most defining trait of Richard's character in both versions of the play is his mastery of rhetoric. In both Shakespeare's and Al Bassam's versions, he attempts to seduce Elizabeth, then her daughter Anne, professing love for both. However, a deeper analysis of his language reveals that his true motivation is not love, but lust and a relentless ambition to seize the English throne. Al Bassam's inclusion of sexual attraction serves two purposes.

First, he counters the Western Orientalist stereotype that Arabs and Muslims are inherently "over-sexed". He highlights that this characteristic is not exclusive to Arabs or Muslims, but rather an intrinsic human trait, using Shakespeare's Richard III as a prime example. This argument aligns with Edward Said's critique in *Orientalism*, in which he rejects the Western depiction of Arabs as "over-sexed degenerates, capable of clever intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, and low" (Said, 1978, p. 287). By emphasizing the lust-driven nature of the original Richard III, Al Bassam directly challenges these Orientalist assumptions.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, his portrayal of Richard's lustful nature is a direct attack on Gulf Muslim leaders. These rulers not only practice polygamy but are also infamous for their sexual exploitation and hypocrisy. In both versions of the play, Richard's words, "Your breast encloses my poor heart and both are yours" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 84), closely parallel the Shakespearean line, "Look how my ring encompasseth thy finger; even so thy breast encloseth my poor heart. Wear both of them, for both of them are thine" (Richard III, Act 1, Scene 2, 37). Both express a superficial and deceitful romantic sentiment, revealing the predatory nature of Richard's character rather than any genuine affection. Thus, Al Bassam's critique is not directed at Islam itself but at corrupt leaders who manipulate religious values to serve their own desires.

As in *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, Al Bassam ensures that the term "terror" is prominently featured in this play as well. In Western discourse, the word "terrorism" is frequently and almost exclusively linked to Islam and Arab identity. Once again, Al Bassam cleverly exposes how this term is wielded to justify Western intervention in Middle Eastern affairs. He critiques the tendency to blame Islam for the region's turmoil while ignoring the West's role in perpetuating instability, as demonstrated in the following passage.

The phrase "The War on Terror" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 109), at first glance, appears to be a noble mission to combat extremism. However, the play quickly unveils its hypocrisy by portraying President George Bush as a dictator—a label typically reserved for Arab leaders. The term "The War on Terror" was heavily used by President Bush and American media following the 9/11 attacks, effectively framing almost any Arab/Muslim action as inherently linked to terrorism.

At this point, Richard himself begins to mirror Bush, as he utters statements strikingly reminiscent of the former U.S. president:

"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 a tyranny and keep it all clean and transparent" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 109).

Through this passage, Al Bassam equates Bush's political strategy with Richard's dictatorial ambitions, depicting both as tyrants who manipulate rhetoric to justify their actions. The comparison serves as a scathing critique of U.S. foreign policy, implying that American intervention in the Middle East has played a direct role in damaging the image of Islam.

Buckingham, Richard's right-hand man and an obvious spy, further reinforces this theme. He represents the Western strategy of infiltrating and destabilizing nations by weaponizing Islam. A cunning manipulator,

Buckingham reflects the deceptive nature of Bush's administration, as he easily manipulates Richard's ambitions. His speech in Act III reveals his calculated approach to distorting the image of Islam:

"Catesby, you can play the mullah (a Muslim leader). Cousin Richard, you are distressed, you are no longer of or nor for this world; take this Quran in your hand, look morose, deepen your voice, play with these beads, and around you we'll build a very holy discourse" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 111).

A closer semantic analysis of this passage exposes the deliberate misuse of Islamic imagery for political purposes. Words like "play" and "look" emphasize the artificiality of Richard's religious façade, revealing how both Western and Arab leaders exploit faith to manipulate public perception and justify their agendas.

Another statement uttered by the tyrant Richard further reinforces the anti-Islamic ideology embedded in the minds of such leaders. After realizing that his reign as king is nearing its end, Richard declares:

"Onwards, then, since Allah has sent nature's wrath and dispersed the invaders [enemies on the border], let us move on. If not to destroy the invaders, then to squash the heretic-kafirs inside the land" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 125).

Ironically, despite all the evil and wicked acts Richard commits throughout the play—specifically murder and adultery—he continues to present himself as a devout Muslim. In doing so, Al Bassam highlights the stark contrast between true faith and religious hypocrisy, showing that figures like Richard are merely exploiting religion for personal gain. His portrayal suggests that such deceit is common among both Arab-Muslim rulers and Western Christian leaders like George W. Bush. Regardless of their religious affiliation, both figures operate as tyrants, distorting faith to serve their political agendas.

Al Bassam further exposes the traditional Western strategy of manipulating and dividing Islamic nations. After Richard secures his kingship—clearly with U.S. support—he becomes a target of the West himself. Modern political analysts argue that it is a common Western practice to install and support leaders in Arab nations, extract resources—particularly oil—through them, and then dispose of these figures when they are no longer useful. This pattern is evident in the cases of Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Al Bassam mirrors this political tactic in his play, as Richard acknowledges his inevitable downfall, stating:

"They saw you possessing oil and blessed with astonishing wives, and they would restrain the one and disdain the other" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 129).

As expected, Richard is assassinated by the end of the play—a fate eerily similar to those of real-world Arab leaders who were once backed by Western powers but later eliminated.

Ultimately, Islam is portrayed not as a guiding faith but as a tool for political manipulation. It is crucial to note that Al Bassam does not depict ordinary citizens in his plays; rather, his focus remains on figures in power—those consumed by greed, lust, and the insatiable desire for control. The relentless pursuit of material wealth and political dominance drives characters like Gloucester and Richard in Al Bassam's adaptations to deceptively wield Islam as a tool for propaganda and oppression. This underscores a critical message: these leaders are merely "Muslims by name," and their actions have nothing to do with the true essence of Islam.

3.1. The Speaker's Progress: Satirizing Political and Religious Hypocrisy

In *The Speaker's Progress*, an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* (alternately titled *What You Will*), Al Bassam once again finds fertile ground in Shakespeare's works to advance his critique of political and religious hypocrisy. This time, he uses comedy—a stark contrast to his previous adaptations, which were tragedies (or historical plays) like *Hamlet* and *Richard III*. One could argue that his choice of comedy serves to highlight the dire state of the Islamic world through the lens of black humor—a genre that presents distressing issues in a satirical manner.

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is a Christian play, named after January 5th, which marks the end of the Christmas season. Al Bassam, however, reconfigures this Christian celebration into an Islamic setting, maintaining the general plotline while introducing a sharp political critique.

In both versions, a king is infatuated with a young woman mourning the loss of her brother. The king sends messengers to proclaim his love, but she repeatedly rejects them. Eventually, he sends a young woman disguised as a man, who unknowingly captures the grieving woman's heart. In Shakespeare's version, the play ends on a happy note, with mistaken identities resolved and multiple marriages taking place—a hallmark of Shakespearean comedy.

In Al Bassam's adaptation, however, the outcome is far from lighthearted. Set in the 1960s on Islamic soil, his version reflects the ongoing political turmoil of the Arab world. Given the backdrop of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf War, the Iraq War, the war in Yemen, and the continuing violence in Libya and Syria, a peaceful resolution would seem unrealistic (Al Bassam, 2014).

One of Al Bassam's most striking deviations from Shakespeare's play is his portrayal of the Mullah, an Arabic Muslim cleric, as a deeply detestable character. Through this figure, Al Bassam remains consistent in his approach—he does not attack Islam itself, but rather the individuals who misrepresent and abuse it.

The Mullah's hypocrisy is made abundantly clear through his dramatic transformation. Initially, he appears as a devout, ultra-conservative Islamist, described in the stage directions as:

"A stock character from Arab comedy at the time, an Islamist with a long beard, shortened thobe, armed with a whipping stick" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 155).

However, when the Mullah believes he has received a love letter from Thuraya (Olivia in Shakespeare's version), his devotion to religion quickly disappears. He shaves his beard, abandons his religious attire, and adopts a more liberal appearance.

This hypocritical transformation serves as a sharp satire on self-proclaimed devout Muslims who are quick to abandon their religious principles when faced with personal temptations. Al Bassam highlights the idea that those who project an image of extreme piety are often the first to succumb to vice.

This theme is reinforced by Suleiman (2009), who states that many Muslims adopt Islamic rules superficially, without genuinely embodying the faith:

"Some Muslims adopt Islamic rules without being real believers" (Suleiman, 2009, p. 53).

One should also note that it is a common theatrical device in Shakespeare's plays that the "fool" ironically serves as the voice of wisdom and righteousness. Al Bassam adopts this Shakespearean convention, allowing his fool, Feylooti, to describe Arabic poetry as "the flowers of paradise". He further asserts that "the flowers of paradise are not haram" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 160). These lines, spoken by the fool, satirically challenge the notion that drama contradicts Islamic teachings, as Al Bassam's adaptation portrays theater as a prohibited art form.

By comparing poetry to flowers, the fool—clearly serving as Al Bassam's mouthpiece—deliberately beautifies the true image of Islam, while simultaneously criticizing the restrictive practices that prohibit reasonable leisure activities in the name of religion. In this context, poetry and theatre are banned not due to Islamic doctrine, but rather as tools of political control. These restrictions are enforced by those in power who claim to uphold Islamic values in order to maintain their authoritarian grip on society under the guise of fostering peace.

This theme of conservatism versus liberalism, explored by Al Bassam, could be interpreted as prophetic, foreshadowing the ongoing transformations in Saudi Arabia. Just a few years ago, rigid governments upheld mottos such as:

"Civil harmony is strained from the moment we begin to play with theatre. It contaminates. It sours. It poisons" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 156).

However, in a stark reversal, these same leisure restrictions have now been abandoned and are ironically labeled as "servility." This shift is captured when a character, having supposedly been liberated from Islamic constraints, proclaims:

"Broken them! The chains of servility cast asunder" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 183).

This hypocritical shift in ideology highlights Al Bassam's central argument—that the strict version of Islam imposed by political elites in *The Speaker's Progress* is not authentic Islam, but rather a selective and oppressive interpretation designed to sustain authoritarian rule.

This theme aligns with Edward Said's Orientalism, reinforcing the notion that Western discourse often portrays Islam as inherently backward, when in reality, oppressive interpretations of Islam are deliberately maintained by those in power to suppress dissent.

Further evidence of this manufactured backwardness is seen in the Mullah's reactionary statement:

"Women and foreigners have deceived us all" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 187).

Hasan Majed (2012) argues that depicting an imam as helpless, passive, and indifferent toward Muslims perpetuates stereotypical images that link Islam to violence and regression (Majed, 2012, p. 167).

Al Bassam critiques the Mullah's hypocrisy, exposing his tendency to blame women and foreigners for his own ideological contradictions. Nishami—who assumes the role of Maria, the servant from Shakespeare's version—boldly challenges the Mullah's outdated rhetoric, responding:

"Will you speak of nothing but women and foreigners?" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 187).

Her sharp retort underscores the demand for genuine, competent, and ethical leadership within the Muslim world, rather than the deceitful religious figures portrayed by Al Bassam's Mullah.

3.2. Parallel Between Islamic Conservatism and Puritanism

Finally, Al Bassam ingeniously draws a parallel between Puritanism—a religious reform movement that emerged in 16th-century England and later influenced the New World—and conservative Islamic ideologies. He aligns both movements with a regressive mindset that is incompatible with modernity.

One character in the play observes:

"The Puritans, keen protectors of civic health and their nation's standing in the world, enforced the closures of all theatres that harboured the 'sinful' entertainment" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 173).

Another character recites a contemporary law from the unnamed Islamic nation in Al Bassam's play, stating: "All stage players are hereby to be, and are, and shall be taken to be Rogues, and openly and publicly whipt" (Al Bassam, 2014, p. 174).

Historically, the Puritans' closure of theatres in the 17th century was based on the belief that drama could be used to spread political propaganda, which could threaten the stability of England. Specifically, the stage provided a platform to expose the tyrannical rule of King Charles I.

Similarly, in Al Bassam's adaptation, the ban on theater in his unnamed Islamic state serves as a means of suppressing political dissent. Just as the Puritans feared that theater could expose corruption in the royal court, so too does Al Bassam's regime in *The Speaker's Progress* recognize the threat that drama poses to authoritarian rule.

4. Conclusion

By drawing a comparison between religions, Al Bassam highlights the idea that, just as Puritanism eventually faded due to its extreme restrictions on social practices, so too should—or will—excessively conservative interpretations of Islam. It is important to distinguish between the rigid, state-imposed versions of Islam and the more liberal, credible expressions of the faith.

Al Bassam's three plays—*The Al Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, and *The Speaker's Progress*—are adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Twelfth Night*, respectively. However, as demonstrated in the preceding discussion, Al Bassam's primary objective in these adaptations is not merely to modernize Shakespearean texts but to use them as a lens through which to critique contemporary Arab political structures. By situating these canonical plays within modern political contexts and reimagining their antagonists, Al Bassam exonerates Islam from the accusations often propagated in Western media. Instead of blaming the religion itself, he redirects responsibility to individual leaders and their self-serving motivations.

This study concludes that Al Bassam's primary goal in crafting this trilogy is the denunciation of political leaderships that exploit Islam as a façade for authoritarianism. However, it is essential to note that these conclusions are limited to the three discussed plays—*The Al Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, and *The Speaker's Progress*—which are all adaptations of Shakespeare's works.

As a result, there is significant scope for further research on the adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare's plays by Arab novelists and dramatists. Future studies could explore how Arab writers engage with Shakespearean texts to address broader sociopolitical themes beyond the works of Al Bassam.

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