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Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad: A Reconsideration of the Iraqi Sectarian Conflict through the Eyes of Shakespeare

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A B S T R A C T

For the last years, Shakespeare has been the subject of considerable critical and artistic scrutiny —a matter that situates his dramatic heritage far beyond its original Elizabethan context and places it within a spectrum of different historical and cultural contexts. This paper aims at examining Romeo and Juliet as a universal love story that is labeled so because of its timelessness and its relevance to all ages, societies, and conditions. The following study argues that the Iraqi version of Romeo and Juliet is a political drama that echoes a collective traumatic experience engendered by the aftermath of 2003, namely the sectarian conflict. It attempts to answer the following question: how does Monadhil Daoud Albayati recontextualizes the Shakespearian version of Romeo and Juliet to dramatize the collective Iraqi experience that is drenched in a bloody sectarian conflict. Theoretically, the paper draws on two different theories which significantly echo the different aspects the play indicates implicitly or explicitly. It draws on the theory of intertextuality, trauma theory, as well as other aspects related to the determination of Iraq's collective consciousness. The following paper, in fact, identifies the interrelated magnitude of the Iraqi overwhelming sectarian experience in the aftermath of 2003.

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روميو وجولييت في بغداد: إعادة النظر في الصراع الطائفي العراقي من وجهة نظر شكسبير

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الخلاصة:

يتناول البحث احداث الصراع الطائفي في العراق في الفترة التي تلت احداث 2003. اطر الكاتب العراقي المسرحي مناضل البياتي مسرحية روميو و جولييت في بغداد ضمن اطار الدراما الشكسبيرية التي رسمت قصة حب روميو وجولييت وصراع الحبيبان ضد العداء والكراهية بين عائلتيهما. استوحى البياتي ذلك الصراع لكنه اراد ان يفكك النص الاصلي لينشأ خطابا جديدا، اراد ان يتحدى خطاب الطائفية

بخطاب اخر مناهض له الا وهو خطاب السلام والحب.

Introduction

Narrating war's wounds and its aftermath is the process of bearing witness to an overwhelming experience. This is echoed by Monadhil Daoud Albayati's testimonial drama *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* whose conflict dramatizes the tragedy of the Iraqi sectarian dispute in the aftermath of 2003. Albayati, as a matter of fact, is verbalizing and recalling the unspeakable and unrepresentable traumatic conflict of sectarianism through the lenses of Romeo and Juliet's love story. Unlike Shakespeare, Albayati locates the two lovers in the bloody strife of modern traumatic Baghdad and thus recontextualizes the Shakespearean love story within a new context that suits the cyclic tragedy of violence and revenge between Shia and Sunni in Iraq after 2003. However, both Shakespeare and Albayati places love upon any conflict, being feudal or sectarian and suggest it an avenue towards peace and reconcilialtion.

Graham Allen, in his *Intertextuality*, states that "literary texts are built from systems, codes, and traditions established by previous works of literature." (Allen, 2000, I) interestingly enough, the referential relationship that links the Shakespearean tragic text, namely *Romeo and Juliet*, to Albayati's *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* is inevitably categorized under the theoretical framework of intertextuality. As a productive and creative process, intertextuality entails the mechanism of deconstructing an original text so as to establish a new structure that borrows certain element from the original one. This finds its echo in David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction* which states that " all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts whether their authors know it or not." Focusing on Shakespeare, he himself mastered, intentionally, intertextuality and adaptation in a sense that he borrowed from variable sources and crafted them into a new artistic structure. Albayati, likewise, consciously borrows from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* the love story, the name of the characters, and the conflict between two families; however, he places them within the context of a sectarian discourse to suit the message he wants to convey. This is recognized in Scene One, particularly the setting, where the events of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* are set: **"The sound of gunfire and explosions. The scene conveys the atmosphere of a civil war. Young people run in all directions, carrying weapons."** (Albayati, 2017, 75). Albayati, in this sense, recontextualizes

Shakespeare by means of deconstructing the plot, character, setting, and even language, so as to give resonance to the political conflict between the two binary oppositional sectors in the aftermath of 2003. In other words, the characters of the original *Romeo and Juliet* prominently figure and shadow the new born one; however, dramatizing the accidental nature of the love story is more closely connected with another discourse and thus another aura that cropped up and haunted Iraq in the aftermath of 2003.

Theoretically, adaptation, appropriation, and intertextuality are pioneered by many theoreticians who elaborate thoroughly on the mechanism of these three systems. One of the most influential essays is that one of Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." The expression "when we dead awaken" denotes the way one takes on canonical texts and thus transcends their boundaries to be a creator of new spaces. Creativity can never be fostered without re-visioning, that is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." (Rich, 1992, 369). On the light of Rich's context, Albayati re-visions the Shakespearean tragedy of Romeo and Juliet by means of different alternatives. For example, the feudal conflict is replaced by a sectarian one, Verona is replaced by Baghdad, the hot summer day is replaced by winter, the death of Juliet's cousin is replaced by the death of her brother, and Verona's church where the Shakespearian Romeo and Juliet die is replaced by Baghdad's church, Sayyeda al-Najat, where Albayati's Romeo and Juliet die because of an explosion.

These alternatives are means by which Albayati diverts from Shakespeare. In his *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom elaborates on such diversion through the lenses of his theory of poetic influence. Bloom states that there is an intra-poetic relation between authors of new texts and these of their literary forefathers. Authors of new texts struggle against their anxiety of being influenced by the literary texts of their procedures; they try to overcome this struggle by means of six revisionary processes which are: *Clinamen, Tesserae, Kenosis, Demonization, Askesis, and Apophrades*. (Bloom, 1997, 14-5) Clinamen or poetic misreading indicated the way the writer "swerve" from the direction of the original text so as to presents a new discourse. While Tesserae means completing what the original texts fails to go far enough, Kenosis indicates "discontinuity with the precursor" (Ibid.) Daemonization suggests the idea that the uniqueness of an earlier text is derived from a source that is far beyond the genius of its author, the source is either divine or non- human. Askesis is achieved when the author of new text curtails himself from the

original text so as to stress his own individuality. Apophrades, which is defined as the return of the dead, indicates the intentional desire of the author of the new text to show the influential impact of his procedures.

Shakespeare, according to Bloom's theory of poetic influence has an "irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him. We have, almost all of us, thoroughly internalized the power of Shakespeare's plays, frequently without having attended them or read them." (Bloom, 1997, xviii) Albayati, according to this context, consciously internalizes the tragic power of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. However, this internalization entails the meaning of misprision in sense that he employs the tragic atmosphere to present a new context within a new text that bears witness to the collective suffering of Iraqis in the aftermath of 2003. Accordingly, the Shakespearean tragedy functions as a test bed highlighting how Iraqi drama "bring[s] pain into consciousness so [Iraqis] are able to mourn…A "we" must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger." (Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese, 2011, xii-xiii) Albayati in his political drama of Romeo and Juliet reflects on the Iraqi collective traumatized consciousness engendered by different forces like invasion, occupation, and sectarianism. In other words, his drama is a political testimony that bears witness to a national volcano that shocks the foundation of the Iraqi society. Sectarianism, as an event, "traumatizes a collectivity because [it is] an event that has such an explosive quality that it creates a disruption and radical change within a short period of time." (Alexander, 2004, 3)

Performing trauma by means of theatrical staging is not Albayati's concern only, it is the concern of other Iraqi dramas' like Rash Fadhil's *Ishtar in Baghdad*, Abdel-Nabi Al-Zaidi's *Summer Rain*, and Awatif Naem's *Me, Torture and Your Love*, and Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai's *A Strange Bird on our Roof*. In fact, narrating and performing the national trauma that captured Iraq in the aftermath of 2003, have an enlightening effect upon the Iraqi's social structure in a sense that "it stabilizes not only collective memory but also the contemporary sense of social reality, pointing the way forward in a confident way." (Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese, ed. 2011, xxx) In this sense, Iraqi dramatists, who tried their best to break the taboo of representing the repressed suffering, have dealt with the dynamics that transformed Iraqi trauma from its pre-linguistic sphere to an artificial performative concept; they significantly aim at restoring the collective health of the social texture by means of breaking the silence and restoring memory. They collectively undo repression and allow the

pent-up traumatic feelings of loss and mourning to be expressed and represented. By doing so, they aim at reconstructing the collective identity and thus pave the way for the emergence of "calming down" period. Accordingly, Iraqi dramatists have acknowledged certain domain in staging trauma: The nature of suffering, the nature of the victimized, the attribution of the victimizer, and the bridge between the victimized individuals.

Monadhil Albayati's Romeo *and Juliet in Baghdad*.

Monadhil Daoud Albayati, an Iraqi theatre director, playwright, and actor, was born in Basra in 1960. He has a PhD in Art Performance and a High Diploma in Theatre Directing from the Academy of Theatre in Saint Petersburg, Russia. He acted in different plays including The *Great Wall of China*, *The Court*, *The Dramatic Wedding*, *Hamlet's Conference*, *Richard III*, and *Tartuffe*. As a playwright, he has written more than one play such as *Here is Baghdad*, *Time of the Mill*, and *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*.

Elucidating Albayati's version of Romeo and Juliet, there are two matters that bridge the gap between Westerners and Iraqis. First, it received production at the World Shakespeare Festival in 2012. Second, Westerners approach Iraq through the lenses of Shakespeare. This is supported by the way Albayati transforms the love story of Romeo and Juliet from its universality to a more local sphere. In addition to the use of Baghdad in the title of the play as well as a location of the conflict, the dialogue is fueled by colloquial words and certain signs and symbols that belong to the Iraqi folklore as well as tradition—a matter that enhances the empathetic responses among Iraqis.

The play significantly "present[s] multifaceted about the consequences of US military involvement in Iraq; it also skewers the bureaucracy that impeded meaningful engagement with the very people that the United States proclaimed to be helping." (Mantoan, 2018, 120) This is implicitly supported by the History Professor at the very beginning of the play: **"A long time would pass before we would comprehend the magnitude of what had happened. Alas, our homeland had become an arid wasteland unable to support our ambition."(**Albayati, Scene One, 75) The play, in this regard, crystalizes an intense collective suffering as well as recognition of traumatic realities. It is through the sectarian conflict which the play tackles, that Albayati fosters the problem of how to aid relieve suffering, and thus how to comprehend the nature of suffering.

Understanding what kind of truth we are dealing with in *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* categorizes the play under the umbrella of testimonial literature. This particular genre is an authentic narrative that bears witness to an overwhelming experience or event. Shoshana Felman in her "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" elaborates on the meaning of bearing witness as follows: "To bear witness is to bear the solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude." (Caruth ed. 1995, 15) In this sense, Iraqi dramatists in general and Albayati in particular dramatize the crisis of sectarianism whose traumatic results explode any capacity for illustration or rational assimilation. Albayati's choice of the History Professor as a privilege representative of bearing witness may suggest that the capacity to such act is central in fostering the accumulative pain and suffering of Iraqis. History Professor says:

> **I want to inhale the fragrance of palm tree, not the stench of war. I crave the lover's night, the night of those deeply in love. I am water of life. I am the legal heir of this country. Bear witness. I Belong only here in Baghdad, and only to Romeo and Juliet. (75)**

Thus, testimony, according to Albayati, is historical in a sense that its responsibility is to record and document events of historical occurrence. However, testimony has another dimension which is clinical in a sense that to bear witness is to heal the wounds:

> **Your sons are fighting each other because you don't like each other. I would love to see them play together. Go to school together, hand in hand. Why? Why do you encourage your sons to be enemies? Do you like the sound of gunfire and the color of blood? Alas! Listen, this is your last warning. What times we live in, when a brother hates his own brother. (75)**

Accordingly, the whole text of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* is a speech act that aims at confessing and demystifying suffering and consequently reconciling with the overwhelming experience of sectarianism and its trauma.

The Testimony of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* tackles the legitimacy of power relations; it is tackled through the conflict between Sunni and Shia. Though words that refer to certain sector are not mentioned, they are implicitly indicated and thus recognized by Iraqi readers. Juliet's father, Capulet, is

represented as a Sunni individual by his red and white keffiyeh. On the other hand, Romero's father, Montague, is represented as a Shiite individual by his black and white scarf. Moving beyond their physical representation, their dialogue entails the will to power which is manifested through the lenses of a sectarian discourse whose pivots are these of Self and Other. This particular discourse is based on a systematic epistemology that crystalizes a battle between forces:

Juliet's father: Don't forget, I can demolish you completely.

Romeo's father: I'll stop at nothing to destroy you.

Juliet's father: **I will cut you to pieces and throw your head to the dogs.**

Romeo's father: **you've already done your worst, and here I stand in front of you**

(Scene Two, 77)

The structure of such power relation is a matter of re-engineering of morals and social cultural bases:

Romeo's father: I'm tired. All my life, you've been my boss. I want to stand on my own two feet….I've been suffocating all these years. I need to breathe. I want to be happy. Things have to change; I want to change.

Juliet's father: you can't do it; it's not your thing. You spend your life crying, you're sad when you eat, sad when you drink, sad when you sing, even sad when you pray, and you collapse in your bed every night, defeated. You want to command the ship while you're sad, it doesn't work that way.

The dialogue between the two forces is not a Bakhtinian one in a sense that it is not based on the acceptance of one another; it is rather based on a total refusal and enmity. Furthermore, power relations in this play are not a governmental powers; it is rather social powers which ingrained the ability of one sector to coerce social formative force over the other.

Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and punish: The Birth of the Prison* states that when knowledge is linked to power, it possesses the authoritative power to make itself the most dominant truth that "regulate[s] the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice." (Foucault, 1977, 27) In fact, the relationship between knowledge, power and history is an

interrelated one in a sense that once certain group has power, it controls channels of knowledge and thus rewrites history. This finds its echoes in what Friedrich Nietzsche identifies as the will to power which is believed to be the main driving force in human relations. All this is manifested in the character of Paris, Juliet's cousin as well as her suitor in Albayati's version of Romeo and Juliet. Paris represents the Jihadist movement which tries to impose an extremist knowledge of Islam above the whole world. This current uses the power of terror to subjugate others into a particular knowledge and thus behaviors, expecting to transform the correlation of forces of power in its favor. Paris forces of enmity are motivated by his clash against any surrounding that cripples his personal growth, triumph, and perfection. In order to fulfill this aim, he makes an agreement of union with Juliet's father, they conspire together for power:

Paris (quoting the Quran): Let's "corporate in righteousness and piety."

Juliet's father: How?

Paris: My money is your money and your honor is my honor.

Juliet's father: Corporate? How?

Paris (referring to a hadith or saying by or about Muhammad): Believers should stick together. Agree my brother.

Juliet's father: Are we back to the same subject?

Paris (referring to another hadith): Oh youth, if you are capable of getting married, then do so.

Juliet's father: Money isn't everything. Do you know who Juliet is?

Paris: Yes, I do. She is young and beautiful. I am mujahid, in the name of God. She will be honored and you will defeat your enemies.

(Scene Four, 78-9)

What is distinguished about this scene is that it opens with Juliet's father who sits in a wheelchair and pushed by Paris. Symbolically, the wheelchair represents Juliet's father's inability to move far beyond his position without the aid of another powerful force. That's why, quoting Nietzsche's words, Juliet's father "encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement ("union") with those of them that are sufficiently

related to it."(Nietzsche, 1888, 186) Accordingly, Juliet's father and Paris's relationship can be understood as the dubious equilibrium in a structure of forces relationships.

Reflecting on power, violence and lingering between life and death, the play presents Baghdad within the frame work of two concepts that are bare life and *homo sacer*. While bare life represents the unconditioned capacity for killing, homo sacer emblematizes the cursed whose slaying is unpunishable. The two terms are identified by Giorgio Agamben in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Agamben's book, in its identification of the two terms, draws heavily on the connection between sovereign power (suspending law and exposing people's life to violence) and biopoliticts (controlling people and their life). Reviving the figure of Homo Sacer from Roman law, Agamben explains that homo sacer is excluded from both divine law and human law and thus his death is worthless to gods. Agamben places this figure in a modern context and links it with what he calls "bare life". This particular form of life is embodied when sovereign power suspends law and abandons the natural life of individuals to a forceful violence. In other words, "Bare life is a life exposed to violence [and] what is bare about the life of homo sacer is that it can be taken by anyone and that this is to be done without sacrificing that life [and without any] punishability of killing." (Masmoudi, 2015, 4) According to this context, Baghdad is fueled by violence of bare life and Iraqi criticizes, from all different sectors and religions are homo sacers in a sense that they are easily murdered by any deadly conditions, namely explosions, revengeful battles, or the like; their death will be unpunishable. Albayati's tragedy refers implicitly to bare life and homo sacer frequently. The last scene in the play, for example, takes place in the church of Sayyeda al-Najat where Romeo and Juliet die because of an explosion achieved by Paris, one of Mujahideen and Romeo's revengeful enemy. In that last scene, Paris functions in two dimensions. First, he represents the current of fundamentalist Islam that aims at improving man and a creating a type of society where cadres are ready to spill blood: **"Paris: I came here to save the people of the two rivers from the filth of those others, which means I am a project in martyrdom. Life, for you and for me, is in Paradise with *houraeen*, by the side of the prophet."** (Scene Four, 80) Second, he represents the sectarian conflict in which there are "a lot of Massacres, a lot of bloodshed." (Scene Six, 84)

Collective suffering places the characters in the same boat in a sense that their collective suffering is fuelled by individual experiences of bloodshed:

"We are suffocating. We are drowning in blood." (Scene Seven, 86) Eyerman in his *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*, states that the use of the pronoun "we" in tackling collective traumatic suffering stands for "the collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger. Perhaps thousands of people have been killed. Individuals have lost their lives, experiencing intense suffering and pain." (Eyerman and other eds. , 2011, xiii) Transforming individual pain into the sphere of collective trauma is a matter of cultural work that aims at ameliorating reconciliation among different social sectors. Calling for reconciliation comes through Romeo's mother who says:

Romeo's Mother: It is better to forgive than punish. Go reconcile with your brother…Happiness. Your son wants to be happy. We are tired of crying, we are tired. We're going to explode. I'm losing my son. I'm watching him wither away, day after day.

(Scene Three, 78)

In many parts of the world, reconciliation came to mean, more or less, boldness in confronting the past. The eagerness of peoples to discover what happened to them is expressed in the desire to learn the truth and to set the record straight, it is the right of victims to express respect for them, to have their suffering recognized, and to compensate them and their families. Facts must be established to prevent the reemergence of terror regimes.

Social reconciliation is implicitly suggested by Albayati when he reminds the two binary oppositions that death does not exclude anyone; the two are exposed to death by means of bloody civilian war. The collective memory is motivated by a story from the Iraqi tradition; it is namely the story of the beetle and the rat. The story is narrated by Mercutio to motivate the collective consciousness of both Shia and Sunna. The beetle loses her husband, the rat, when she finds him dead in the jar. He dies there because it is not filled to the top with date syrup. Weeping and crying, the beetle says:

> **All my life I've been hungry and looking for a man. Where are men, where are they? Do you know how many beetles don't have husbands? Do you know how many young women are in prison, without their men? Where are you? They spend their entire lives at war and as soon as we say goodbye to our neighbors, we start to fight them. Haven't you had enough of these wars? (Scene Five, 83)**

Iraqi's collective suffering is accumulative in a sense that the bloody sectarian conflict repeats itself in a form of eternal recurrence. In his *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche, influenced by a life full of vicissitudes and strife, constructs a case by which our attitudes to Iraq's accumulative suffering can be revealed:

> What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain …… will have to return to you... The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!. (Nietzsche, 1954, 101)

This is echoed by Romeo who motivates Bevolio and Mercutio's collective memory; he significantly recalls the long time they spend in wars: **"Have you forgotten the war that has lasted for nine years? Nine years stolen from my life? Nine years of hatred and resentment. Nine years of darkness, nine years of death."** (Scene Five, 81)

For decades, many Iraqis ask the same question: why that inherited death and why do we fight for? By means of dramatizing this question in *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, Albayati crystalizes Iraqi's collective perspectives on war and occupation whose impact will have a long-lasting outcome.

Conclusion

Placing the discourse of the Iraqi sectarian conflict within the framework of a famous Shakespearian drama paves the way for a deep sympathetic response directed from the western audiences towards Iraqis and their overwhelming experiences. As such the play's testimonial target aims at creating a relationship of call and response between East and West—a matter that enhances recovering the wounds of a long-lasted effect.

Though *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* follows the mechanism of intertextuality, it does not follow the Bakhtinian dialogical aspect in tackling its subject matter. The play, as a case in point, does not write back Shakespeare and thus being engaged in an anti-discourse. It rather reflects on the concept of

binary oppositions whose discourse is that of the self and other embedded within the Iraqi social texture. However, Albayati does not give his voice to one particular agent; he rather detaches himself from such discourse by means of disguising behind certain characters who call for peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

It is not only the discourse of the play that distinguishes Albayati's version from that of Shakespeare. Albayati is distinguished by his simple and easy going language that is colored by colloquial expressions and a story from Iraqi tradition. According to this, Albayati aim at fostering Iraq which is marked by a collective dramatized identity that is drenched in long years of violence and bloody strife.

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