

Appropriating *Hamlet* in Arabic: Youths, Revolutions and Socio-cultural Criticism

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Abstract This paper examines Jawad Al-Assadi's and Zaid Khalil Mustapha's representation of the generational clash in perceiving the future of the Arab world. In *Forget Hamlet* (2000) and *Hamlet Ba'da Hyn* [*Hamlet a While After*, my translation] (2018) both playwrights show how Arab youth revolt against old governments that keep limiting their visions of a democratic state. The blind Laertes in Al-Assadi's play represents the spirit of revolution in his words and condemnation of Saddam's Iraq. In Mustapha's play, Ophelia is a young actress who represents the voice of a young Arab woman who keeps accentuating the importance of change. This paper shows the Arab youth's journey of self-assertion in the MENA region and their struggle against the old government that radically represents the opposite of their value system.

Keywords Youth; Arab Spring; Ophelia; Laertes; generational conflict.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the Arab world has witnessed a massive change in its internal structure that eventually led to overthrowing major political leaders in the MENA region. Even if these changes might have taken action from 2010 onward by what is now termed the Arab Spring, the representation of the political, social and cultural

malaise of the region began from the 1970s, the decade that started with Nasser's death and the population's concern that the "fear that even the more sincere effort could not bring unity to the Arab world" (Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey* 147).

This article projects the representation as well as the role of Arab youth in forging a transformation to the MENA region. We argue that William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* offers a proper intellectual space for Arab writers to reflect on the generational clash between two different worldviews of the next step to creating a new aura for the Arab world. As a case in point, we shall put the representation of Laertes in Jawad Al-Assadi's *Forget Hamlet* (2000) and Ophelia in Zaid Khalil Mustapha's *Hamlet Ba'da Hyn* [*Hamlet, A While After*] (2018) at the core of this paper to investigate their journeys of self-assertion while highlighting the generational clash in terms of ideas and beliefs between the old system of government and the youth's new vision of a new Arab order.

Recent critical research dwells on the appropriateness of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to the modern and contemporary context. Martin Scofield writes that Shakespeare's text opens new possibilities of rewriting and interpretation (5). The puzzling characterization of Hamlet, he affirms, and the themes the play treats relate to the "fragmented modern life" (6). Geraldo U. de Sousa investigates the way Shakespeare's texts assemble different cultures of the world. The cross-cultural encounter, for the critic, is characterized by "distortion, caricature, exaggeration, and a profound sense of accentuated cultural difference" (3). Thomas Cartelli argues that writers from Third World societies tend to use "confrontational appropriation" to Shakespeare's original text by attributing a new social and political agency (17). Michael Scott argues that the twentieth century has shown that writers/dramatists do not have complete authority over their works especially in terms of their reception which unleashed a phase of consistent interpretations of Shakespeare's tragedy (2-3).

The universal themes developed by Shakespeare transcend both time and place. Playwrights from different parts of the globe appropriate his ideas to reflect their countries' cultural and socio-political concerns. Arab writers, whether at home or in diaspora, created an "Arab *Hamlet* Tradition" that rewrites Shakespeare's tragedy in the light of the tragic situation the Arab world faces from 1970s till nowadays. As Awad and Dubbati succinctly put it, "*Hamlet* has always had a strong presence in contemporary Arab literary and cultural productions" (3).

Graham Holderness argues that the Arab world's encounter with Shakespeare was in the nineteenth's century (142). Furthermore, he states that the appropriations of *Hamlet* in the Arab world had two distinctive phases: those of praise (1950s-1960s) and others of attack namely from 1970s onward as some represent

Hamlet the hero while others attack the passive role of Hamlet the intellectual (143). Localizing the appropriation of Shakespeare in Third World societies, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin argue that “reinterpreting” Shakespeare became a means of providing an interpretation of the present world (3).

Mahmoud Al-Shetawi argues that Shakespeare’s appropriation has always been a subject of research, however, his appropriation in the Arab world was not thoroughly investigated (*Arabic Adaptations of Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory* 8). He writes that appropriating Shakespeare in Arabic relates to three “positions”: imitating the Bard and paying him homage, revising Shakespeare’s text to write back to colonization, most importantly, using Shakespeare to condemn governments and criticize the intellectuals who fail to aid the country and its people to grow (Ibid. 9). Elsewhere, Al-Shetawi writes that *Hamlet* appeals to Arab theatergoers more than other plays due to supernatural elements that relate to Arabic folklore, revenge and lastly madness (*Hamlet in Arabic* 44). Al-Shetawi concludes that Arab adaptations of Shakespeare are “adapted to suit the conditions of local Arab theaters and native cultures” (Ibid. 48).

Another researcher who has made a breakthrough investigating the Arab *Hamlet* tradition is Margaret Litvin. Litvin in *Hamlet’s Arab Journey* points to the parallel between Gamal Abdel-Nasser and Hamlet. She illustrates that the theatre became a tool to appeal to audiences’ emotions while addressing political matters on stage and criticize the “regime” (147). However, after Nasser’s death, they came to realize that achieving Pan-Arabism and “justice” in the Arab world is harder than it has ever been and “would kill the hero who attempted it” (147-148).

Arab Youth in the MENA Region

Since this article focuses on the role of youth and their journeys towards self-assertion in the MENA region, it is significant to offer a glimpse on the field of youth studies. Mark Cieslik and Donald Simpson argue that young people of the contemporary society are caught up in a state of “injustice and disillusionment” which makes them consistently “challenging” the government” (xiv). Moreover, they state that the revolts happening in the Arab world and the manifestations led by young people are mainly done due to “lack of freedom” in their countries’ authoritarian regime. The critics insist, furthermore, that the post-modern society makes young people in a consistent search for their identities. Youth labour markets offer little possibilities for youth to achieve themselves in a consumerist society which eventually leaves them in a “cycle of dissatisfaction with the self” (xvii).

In defining youth, Cieslik and Simpson describe it as an “interstitial

phenomenon- existing ‘in between’ the dependency of childhood and the autonomy of adulthood” (Ibid. 3). This definition serves the purpose of this article as both Laertes and Ophelia are caught up between assumed dependency from the father figure on the one hand, and an independency to achieve themselves outside father dominance on the other. Cieslik and Simpson argue that the “transition” from one phase to another, i.e. from childhood to adulthood is marked by a series of factors, namely: employment and education (Ibid. 3).

The present article focuses on the significance of *Hamlet* in terms of the demographic appeal to the Arab world. In the past twenty years, there has been an increase in the number of young people. According to the Arab Development portal “with 115 million adolescents and youth the region is endowed with key resources for advancing its social and economic development.” Despite this, it appears that local Arab governments are not able to equip themselves to innovate new ways through which satisfaction of all ages is achieved. Hesham Youssef maintains that even after five years from the start of the revolutions, these young people “still stand fragmented” thinking that their revolution was “hijacked” by the new generation under power that fails to “satisfy” their dreams and “ambitions” (Ibid.16).

Mulderig comments that the revolutions that the Arab world has witnessed over the past decade, should be examined closely as “an expression of a powerful socio-cultural frustration: the inability of youth to achieve adulthood, held back by governments and markets that stall youth engagement” (3). Silveira states that the Arab youth’s inability to access jobs and education, adds to their failure to contribute to “the working community and often lacking future prospects” (18). Luhrmann argues that Libyan youth believe that their elders possess “too much power” which renders the concept of “transition” in youth studies a period of “waithood” as the revolution against Gadafi’s regime did not reach its desired objectives (32).

Another political analyst, Nur Laiq, writes that Arab youth in their revolutions have been able to found a “repertoire of resistance” which fuel both political as well as civic action (Ibid. 70). Sawani argues that the Arab Spring represents a revisitation of the ideals of Pan-Arabism of the 1950s and 1960s in which Arabs are reunited in their “broad demands for social and political rights” (383).

Delving in the history of the MENA region, it is no surprise to see the in-depth frustration of youth over decades. After the region suffered extreme cases of colonization and imperialism, it became a “penetrated system” prone to external intervention (Hinnebusch 3). Here, the very structure of the region gained a superficial independence, while being at the same time dependent on “core states” to survive its challenges with “small economies” (Ibid.). Again, Hinnebusch argues

that political regimes in the MENA are prone to excessive “threats at home than abroad” for the simple fact that the MENA follows the “low state formation” which takes leaders of paramount importance (Ibid. 7).

These challenges have resulted an increasing level of wars either civil ones or external which affected the growth of youth’s identity, thus their self-assertion in a natural pattern. More than physical damage (death, dismemberment, injuries), youth suffer psychologically from a troubled identity being raised in a war prone area that roams in insecurity. This lack of peace in their country of origin adds to their frustration and inability to assert who they are as individuals since they cannot possibly fulfill their needs and interests.

Consequently, youth in early 2011, launched a series of protests for reformation through organized labor unions, strikes, and non-violent protests in North Africa, Egypt and Jordan (Laipson 5). Laipson writes that youth dissatisfaction is a result of: first, the unfulfilled promises of the regimes towards the population either in providing civil services or maintaining safety, secondly, the distrust in government policies, and lastly, the restrictions on reforms in press that made it impossible for youth to tolerate the regime (Ibid.5).

Nabil Lahlou’s *Ophelia is Not Dead* (1968) is one of the texts that highlight the socio-economic malaise of Morocco, and by analogy, that of Arab countries. For Khalid Amine, Lahlou describes the traumatic experience of postcolonial Morocco by “the impasse” to designate the characters’ state of “stagnation and futility” (57). Mamdouh Adwan’s *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* (1976) is another example from Syria that voices the cruelty of the Arab regime. While Bedjaoui and Abu Amrieh argue that Adwan’s text voices the “hypocrisy” of Arab regimes (88), Litvin maintains that Adwan’s text “alludes” to the contemporary political sphere after the loss of the six-day war with Israel (*Hamlet’s Arab Journey*, 180). While everyone in the state is filled with corruption, Hamlet is an alcoholic, unable to see the truth of the “rotten” state of Denmark (Ibid).

F. Georgy Gause III argues that the stability of the oppressive authoritarian regime in the time from 1970s to 2010 was helped by a series of institutions mainly the military which put an end to every attempt of revolution (13). We believe that the political values held by the old generation are those of dictatorship rather than democracy. Even if some countries pretend to be democratic, most of them end up being authoritative, aiming at maintaining their rule while oppressing revolutions. In several cases seen over decades even now, after the Arab Spring, some systems still follow the same pattern of functioning that the younger generation already overthrow earlier. This intensifies the argument that achieving democracy in the

MENA region is one of the biggest challenges for the younger generation as they fight against an entire structure of beliefs and values that oppose the ideals they fight for.

Al-Assadi's *Laertes*: a Replica of Iraq's Repressed Revolution:

After the revolution of 1960s in Iraq, Saddam Hussein's path into the government started to take place. Being a significant member of the Ba'th Party, which controlled the entire country, his reign seemed to be inescapable. By 1976, Saddam Hussein was the head of the security service. Iraq back then roamed in an atmosphere of "fear" as a series of executions and kidnapping were held (Arnold 45). For Arnold, 1970s Iraq was a place where "men vanished, and their friends were too frightened to inquire what had happened to them; people arrested on trivial charges 'committed suicide' in prison; former officials were mysteriously assassinated; politicians disappeared" (quoted in Arnold 45).

Saddam's period was characterized by terror and fear as most Iraqis feared the leader's "boasts and threats" (Arnold 72). Saddam's attempt to disorient his people from rebellion fell short. The end of the Operation Storm saw the rise of a "rebellion" against Saddam's authority (Ibid. 74). An eyewitness describes the situation in Karbala as: "With makeshift weapons and our bodies, we began to confront the Iraqi soldiers who had entered the town [...] years of anger within me came pouring out" (quoted in Arnold 76). The depth of the Iraqis' frustration against the leader's authoritative system was their only weapon to create change and regain their stolen lives after being oppressed for decades.

Jawad Al-Assadi is an Iraqi theatre director, playwright, theatre researcher and poet. He was born in Karbala in 1947 and lived most of his life in exile from his country (from 1976) especially after Saddam Hussein became a president. His life and education in Eastern Europe earned him a PhD in theatre studies. His coming back to Iraq in 2003 was not that successful which led him once again to leave the country and establish his theatre in Beirut. As a writer, he is known for his collaborations with several Arabic theatres as he attempts to renovate the vision of Arabic theatre and encourage freedom of expression (Joubin 4).

Al-Assadi's *Forget Hamlet* (2000) was first staged under another title *Ophelia's Window* in 1994 in Cairo. The play displays the country in a state of fear after the old king's death. While the regime finds its way into tyranny, Hamlet remains passive to act against corruption. Claudius, as a representative of dictatorship, orders the torture of Laertes, death of Hamlet and seduces Ophelia. For Al-Shetawi, the play connotes how humans can become "victim of crime unless we stand up to

stop it” (*Hamlet in Arabic* 48). He argues that Ophelia “has witnessed the crime, but keeps silent out of fear. Ironically, she will see the liquidation of Hamlet and also her brother through the same window, and she cannot escape death herself” (Ibid). In his commentary on the play, Al-Assadi insists that his intention behind writing *Forget Hamlet* is to bring focus on other characters in the play.

This reminds us of Linda Hutcheon’s *Theory of Adaptation* in which she argues that an adaptation is a “palimpsestuous” creation that is related to other works or texts (6). She writes: “An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context [...] it does not exist in a vacuum” (142). As a statement, this coincides with our belief that in the Arabic contemporary rewriting of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Laertes and Ophelia as secondary characters are more appealing to Arab youth than Hamlet himself. Considering the fact that Hamlet already has the advantage of being inherently part of the system as a prince, Laertes represents the voice of the oppressed Iraqis whose freedom of expression has been chained by Saddam’s dictatorship.

For Al-Assadi, *Forget Hamlet* “pull[s] the curtain from some characters suffering the edge of madness and open[s] the door of the text to their desires and their rancor, postponed in the face of Claudius, the state barbarian” (Carlson and Litvin, *Four Arab Hamlet Plays* 223). For Margaret Litvin, even if Al-Assadi’s Claudius epitomizes Saddam Hussein, the text’s purpose is larger as it reflects “the psychological reality of dictatorship” known all over the world (Ibid. 227).

Al-Assadi’s play starts with a state of disillusionment and fragmentation. He describes the situation by “an atmosphere of mirrors and masks. All the dramatis personae seem lost; their facial expressions indicate confusion and anticipation” (Carlson and Litvin, *Four Arab Hamlet Plays* 231). Allegorically, this environment entails the Iraqis’ fear of Saddam’s regime as it is previously explained. The first reference to Laertes in the text describes him as “the blind man” who “stumbles and falls” and is helped by Ophelia, Hamlet and Horatio.

One may convincingly argue that Al-Assadi’s allegory in the display of the blind man refers to the fact that the blind Laertes is the one who is able to depict the chaotic situation of the country. As if Al-Assadi insists that blindness is not in the eyes but in the lack of consciousness and the unawareness of the socio-economic malaise the country faces under Saddam’s regime.

Here, we would like to suggest, that Laertes represents the voice of Iraqis who have been oppressed by the old governments represented by Claudius and Polonius. This generational clash between the old authoritarian regime and the new trend of democracy practiced by youth is illustrated in the tension between these characters.

Laertes's political commentaries on the country and his vicious attacks on the authoritarian regime distinguish him from other young characters as Hamlet and Horatio as an effective participant in spreading awareness in the country.

We believe that Laertes's fear as a young political activist is not only from Claudius, i.e. Saddam, but also from Hamlet himself who is a part of the authority. He clearly tells Hamlet not to take advantage of his blindness and seduce his sister to which Hamlet responds that Laertes's inability to see the light enables him to dance with his sister in day light. Laertes then, asks Horatio to be a witness of this incident and the latter silences him. It appears, therefore, that Laertes's fight against the old government is not only political but also psychological as his inability to defend his sister doubles his loss as her protector and an ineffective contributor to society.

Laertes seems to be the political activist Al-Assadi created to denounce the misdeeds of Saddam's regime. For Litvin, Laertes "takes on Hamlet's function as court dissident, exposing the regime's corruption and meeting a sinister end" (*Hamlet's Arab Journey*, 208-209). For Geert Hofstede, the expectation of dependence of the older generation from the younger one is the very base upon which large power distance groups are built (32). He defines power distance as "*the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power to be distributed unequally*" (Ibid, italics in original). Laertes accuses his father of being so hateful and conspiring against him. Polonius, from his part, affirms his son's madness. Laertes tells Polonius of his will to live and be buried abroad rather than living in "walls of treachery" (235).

This, we propose, is a direct attack on Saddam's regime that made Iraq a prison for all Iraqis. Deploying some factors as propaganda and teaching children to "glorify" Saddam (Arnold 84), young Iraqis were not able to speak freely because it would eventually lead to their deaths. Evidently, Laertes's words indicate Polonius's absolute faith in the old government's authoritarian regime. As a servant of Claudius/Saddam's rule, Polonius wants to maintain the reign of the leader even if it costs him the death of his child.

Ophelia's statement later in the play affirms this suggestion as she tells Polonius "you sent your son to die and now you're planning to sell me too, just to satisfy the king" (Carlson and Litvin, *Four Arab Hamlet Plays* 266). To Hofstede, young people are mentally trained by their societies to behave as expected by the older generation, any deviation from what is awaited is not seen as a norm thus is rejected. In accordance, any behavior that shows signs of individualism is not tolerated while collectivism is. In this respective sense, the norm is set by the

“parental authority” in collective societies (32). Laertes’s spirit of political activism can be a sign of individualism that would indeed enlighten other youth to revolt. For Polonius, even the thought of individualism and independence is pure madness.

This is evident in his attempt to silence Laertes because of his unconformity to the norms set by the father authority. Laertes’s sense of consciousness of the socio-political malaise of Iraq as a young Arab makes him transcend the period of childhood and dependency to a journey of independent identity assertion as a rebel in the state. Claudius’s desire to silence Laertes was out of fear that this sense of activism would trigger a youth uprising that later on is symbolized in Ophelia too. Therefore, the old generation aimed at silencing Laertes in order to preserve the country’s status quo.

Laertes’s journey of self-assertion in politics as well as social life seems to be quite challenging. After the death of the old king, he accentuates his feelings of insecurity in the kingdom. He directly comments on the corruption of the state and affirms that it was a result he already expected from a country that runs behind personal gains and preservation of dictatorship. He says: “take me away! Drive me, or my bitterness will explode!” (Carlson and Litvin, *Four Arab Hamlet Plays* 237) as a sign of an intrinsic rejection of the regime. He refuses to leave the country before showing Claudius’s murder of the “just king” and severely criticizes Hamlet for not being able to take a clear decision regarding the entire situation (Ibid. 242).

Laertes’s revolutionary stance towards Claudius is severe especially in the day of his coronation. He applauds “we attend your celebration and your coronation only to bear witness to your guillotine” (Ibid. 244). The freedom of Laertes is put into question after he challenged Claudius to “cut off [his] head” to which the king’s army complies and is taken offstage which is the last scene in which he appeared as a character.

Laertes’s revolutionary spirit was passed to Ophelia after his detention as she clearly renounces her father after he described Laertes as an “unsound man” (Ibid. 252). For Hofstede, in large power distance communities, some basic features are shown and “expected” from the young to the old and these include obedience, respect, and dependence (Ibid. 32). Ophelia’s rejection and her lack of respect to her father’s principles puts her in an independent revolutionary stance against her father as she identifies herself with her brother Laertes in saying “we’ll renounce you” (Ibid. 252). Indeed, this motivates us to say that Laertes as a political activist was able to insert certain values in the people that stimulate their consciousness towards rejecting the corrupt regime.

The notion that proves this argument stems from her rejection to Hamlet as

a passive participant in revealing the corruption of the regime and advises him to “get [himself] to a monastery” (Ibid. 255). The letter sent by Laertes shows that he is being tortured among other people as he writes “the death of sense and the freedom of appearance” (Ibid. 256). Kenan Makiya argues that the severe practices of criminality in Iraq are for the sake of maintaining fear in the country (quoted in Arnold 98).

The end of the play is mesmerizing as Laertes’s ghost appears from the fog and slaughters Claudius. The scene is described as a battle between Laertes and Claudius which we interpret as a clash of generations. Al-Assadi’s reading of the revolution in Iraq entails the death of Saddam Hussein by Laertes who after slaughtering Claudius “sits on the throne as though it were a sculpture of a human body” (Ibid. 278). This connotes that the difficulty of Laertes’s mission symbolized in his blindness finely saw the light by justice prevailing in Iraq. We argue that Laertes’s ghost is a symbol of the masse’s revolution that had enough of Saddam’s dictatorship. Al-Assadi’s reading of the fall of Saddam’s dictatorship is a historical fact as the Iraqi leader was executed in 2006.

Mustapha’s Ophelia: The Arab Woman’s Revolutionary Voice

Mohamed Bouazizi’s decision to burn himself in protest against the injustice of the corrupt Tunisian political and social system of Ben Ali’s government at the early beginnings of 2011 is a point of departure in youth uprisings in the MENA region. The fire he lit in himself represents the fire burning inside Arab youth who had enough of being humiliated, frustrated and lost. This act was followed by a series of youth uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch argue that the aftermath of the Arab Spring’s revolutions varies according to a number of factors, namely the military’s stance towards it (4). They also insist on the idea that even after revolutions, democracy is not an evident result.

Julia Clancy-Smith’s reading of the Tunisian uprising led her to conclude that the revolution of 2011 had its roots in the “economic crash” of 2008 in which Ben-Ali’s “shameless corruption” and lack of employment possibilities resulted a “culture of suicide” of frustrated Tunisian youth (Ibid.16). Bruce K. Rutherford argues that Mubarak’s government by 2010 fell short to satisfy the population’s needs as an increase in political and economic tensions put the country under pressure as citizens with small salaries suffered an increase in food prices by thirty seven percent (Ibid. 38).

For Rutherford, Egyptian youth’s uprising holds features of “liberal democracy” that dates back to nineteenth century free Egypt in 1920s (Ibid. 46).

Some of these features include the call for a civil state that is neither influenced by the army nor religion, elections of representatives, distribution of state power, freedom of speech and the right to create assemblies (Ibid.). Libya's revolution, however, is completely different from this one as Gadafi's army attacked civilians in protests.

Deeb argues that the failure of Gadafi regime's "social paradigm" increased Libyans' will for a reformation (66). The same critic argues that the educated youth's request for a better life affirms the generational difference in views from their parents as the inside corruption affirmed that the country's richness "was concentrated at the top and that [those in power] were being prevented from sharing in it" (68).

Zaid Khalil Mustapha's *Hamlet Ba'da Hyn* [*Hamlet a While After*, my translation] (2018) is an appropriation of Adwan's *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* rather than Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. We argue that the generational clash in the play extends textual evidence to reach a clash between playwrights. To Harold Bloom, this entails a theory of intra-poetic influence in which the young poet (ephebe) "misreads" his precursor's work (5). The relation between Mustapha and Adwan implies the six revisionary ratios in Bloom's theory as the ephebe attempts to "correct" the precursor's text (Ibid.). Indeed, Mustapha "swerves" from Adwan's original appropriation to "complete" his precursor's work believing that the latter "failed to go far" in his representation of the generational clash between young Arabs and their elders (Ibid. 14). As a young poet, he "revises" Adwan's appropriation to update the struggle of Arab youth against dictatorship.

The play is written and directed by its playwright; and performed in 2020 by the Jordanian On-stage Troupe group. In this text, Mustapha emphasizes the importance of the theatre to achieve political awakening. Instead of taking Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a point of departure, the playwright's inspiration was from an already appropriated text in the Arab *Hamlet* tradition. This reading takes us to appropriate Litvin's comment on the emergence of the Arab *Hamlet* tradition to state that Arabic appropriations of *Hamlet* "engage with a whole tradition of Hamlet appropriations [...] rather, it draws on what I would like to call a 'global kaleidoscope' of sources and models" (*Vanishing Intertexts* 75).

Mustapha's focus on the character of Ophelia is interesting. In a Skype meeting for the Comparative Reading course at the University of Jordan, the playwright insists that his focus on Ophelia's character reflects the central role of the female agent in the making of revolution. In this play, Mustapha tries to bring a "re-consideration to the theatre, as it is related to the reality of people and the formation

of their culture, for art is the most capable of stimulating people's motivation towards change and breaking traditions" (Al'arabi Aljadid). The text also addresses the notion of "liberating art and culture from government" (Ibid). In an interview, he argues that the portrayal of Hamlet as a theatre director relates to the importance of theatre and the struggle of Jordanian artists from lack of means (Sāmiḥ 2018). He carries on by stating the importance of having faith in art which is his real interpretation of Hamlet's soliloquy.

Ophelia in Mustapha's play is an actress. This choice of role reflects on both her importance as a female as well as the significance of the theatre in fostering awareness. The strength of Ophelia's character resonates with her ability to decide her own steps instead of having them decided for her. Naila Kabeer argues "one way of thinking about power is in terms of the *ability to make choices*" thus "*empowerment entails change*" (13). Indeed, Ophelia's rebellious character is fully shown in act three in which she puts a clear difference between her life story and a *Thousand and One Nights*. This distinction can be read as the playwright's message to draw a line between reality and fantasy. While the story of Shahrayar is merely exotic, Ophelia refuses to be compared to her for she lives in reality and aims to initiate a change in real life.

Mustapha's display of Ophelia's as a powerful actress stems from the strength she has in decision making. From the very beginning of the play, she is a determined character who is not easily manipulated by authority, she rather attacks it and remains loyal to the will of the masses. Her allegiance to truth and justice empowers her presence as an actress, and thus, a representative of youth values in the MENA region. Musa Shteivi argues that Arab women participated both physically and mentality in the Arab Spring revolutions (27). By using media, female contributors as Asmaa Mahfouz, Fatiha Al-Saidi, and Tawakul Karman, were able to mobilize groups and fight side by side with men to attain liberation (Ibid.).

It is significant to state that while the previous play shows a challenging journey of self-assertion for Laertes, Ophelia's journey is more assertive and this can be related to the fact that Mustapha's play is written in 2018, i.e. post Arab Spring. The significance of this detail relates perhaps to the success of some Arab Spring revolutions that open new possibilities for Arab youth to insert their values after overthrowing old regimes as those in Tunisia and Egypt.

In her reading of "empowerment" as a concept Kabeer writes: "Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect" (14). Ophelia's agency in the play hovers from being an ability to make choice and an exercise of ability on other characters. Her ability to choose not to conform to

the old generation's principles, as represented by Polonius, already makes her an empowered character in Kabeer's terms. For Badran, the youth uprisings in 2011 are inherently feminist as they call for both freedom and equality: "it announces itself from deep within the Revolution, which aims to resurrect the fundamental principles and rights of citizens and human beings" (2).

Ophelia proposes that Hamlet inserts modifications to the first scenes which we believe connotes the irrelevance of Shakespeare's content to Ophelia's vision as a young Arab woman who fights for social, cultural as well as political emancipation. Her exercise of power over Hamlet again conforms to Kabeer's term of "power over" (Ibid.). However, instead of being a negative term as Kabeer suggests, Ophelia's display of "power over" is for inserting a spirit of revolution inside Hamlet. Furthermore, the importance of writing is highly significant to Ophelia. This again entails the female mobilizations through social media in the Arab Spring. She repeats the word "write" roughly six times in one scene which is an indication of the importance of documentation in the process of change.

The clash between the old and young generation is highly present in Mustapha's play. In Act Four, when Claudius and Polonius discuss Hamlet's preparation for the play, they refer to Ophelia as an actress who helps him in the play and they are in love with one another. Claudius asks Polonius who the actress is and is amazed by the fact that she is Polonius's daughter. Polonius wants to live in his own fantasy; he wants to keep in his mind the image of the innocent, gullible and obedient Ophelia who does not have a voice and whose life is oriented by the men she knew in her life, namely Polonius and Laertes. As a representative of the older generation, he refuses to accept his daughter's vision of rebellion. Polonius pretends to have lost his daughter in the sea rather than admitting her betrayal and opposition of his authoritarian principles.

Hence, Arab women fight on two levels: their voices inside their small culture particularly the household and on a global scale in terms of politics. Kimberle Crenshaw writes that in terms of political reform, "women of color are both marginalized physically and culturally within dominant societies" (1250). The very notion of intersectionality is relevant in the sense that the fight of women of color in white societies is the same as the fight of Arab women in a patriarchal Arab society.

In Act Five, Mustapha shifts the utterance of the soliloquy of existence "to be or not to be" from Hamlet to Ophelia. The shift in the soliloquy from the male to the female is a hint about the significance of females in the making of change in society. Moghadam writes that Algerian revolutionary women while rarely "searched" by the French military "carried bombs" (82). Mustapha's text pays homage to iconic

revolutionary females: Djamila Bouhired, Djamila Bouazza, Hassiba Ben Bouali, Dalal Mughrabi and others who proved that the Arab female contradicts all the Western stereotypes and are indeed subjects of their own revolution. Ophelia's strength lies in her awareness of the situation she lives in and her will not to live another day with regret. One of the most important assets she uses is the appeal to people's hearts to make them aware of the crucial decision that must be made.

Gertrude tries to redirect Ophelia from the path she was heading to. Ophelia tells the queen that she is not conspiring against the nation, rather she aims at "buying the children's future with awareness" (my translation 13). Despite the fact that Gertrude and Ophelia are both females, their perceptions are completely different. Ophelia, thus, appears to fight on three levels: her fight to implant her identity in the family, her fight against patriarchy, and finally, her fight against the old generation's authority exemplified in both Polonius and Gertrude. Indeed, while Gertrude thinks of personal gains and her success by marrying the king and letting away her sorrows, Ophelia is a political and social activist who thinks of the well-being of the generation rather than her own sake.

Furthermore, not only does Ophelia appear to speak for the population, but she also comments on the failure of the Arabs to stand with the Palestinian question. Mustapha's critique of the Israeli-Arab alliances refers to the identity crisis that happened to the Arabs after the loss of the 1967 war with Israel which destroyed all hopes of achieving Pan-Arabism. For the playwright, the solution to restore the Arab identity is to defend Palestine from the "dull guest" instead of welcoming it with open arms. If we consider the Arab nation as the body referred to in the play, and reflecting on the Palestinian cause precisely, one may assume that treason done to Palestine and Palestinian by the Arabs is hinted to by Mustapha in order to reflect the difficulty of the struggle to restore what happened to the Arab nation.

In the last act, Ophelia seems aware of the reality of people in the kingdom. She is neither disappointed nor amazed by the loss of friendship, or the fading of people's laughter. She professes the idea of death as an expectation of Hamlet's fate. Notwithstanding, the ending, pessimistic as it is, reflects Ophelia's awareness and consciousness of her sociopolitical, historical and cultural surroundings. Indeed, Mustapha's Ophelia breaks away from Shakespeare's submissive and ignorant Ophelia.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Al-Assadi's *Forget Hamlet* and Mustapha's *Hamlet Ba'da Hyn (Hamlet a While After)*, recontextualize Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to reflect

the socio-political malaise of the MENA region. Namely, both texts re-read the Bard's tragedy in the light of the tragic situation of youth in the Arab world. The struggle of Arab youth, either men or women, cannot be read in the light of the Arab Spring only, but it is rather a result of decades of accumulation. The struggle for self-assertion for Arab youth, represented by both Ophelia and Laertes, seems to be quite challenging as the old generation keeps valuing authoritarian principles over the right of youth to live by democratic principles. Despite the challenges that Arab youth face, they were able, through their revolutions, to make their voices heard of the chaotic situation by asserting specific values.

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