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Romeo And Juliet In Baghdad: An Intertextual Study From A Contemporary Iraqi Perspective

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Abstract

Literature is not concerned with certain nation. It is a product of experiences, philosophies and human trends towards best ways to understand life and ultimately to live peacefully. Global human issues are usually processed by different literary works that excite authors to assess certain values and beliefs among their communities. Ultimately, these assessments reflect what type of culture certain community has. By approaching to such human issues and studying the circumstances around them in the selected text, reasonable answers come simultaneously to understand the above mentioned experiences and human trends. By means of intertextuality, adaptation and appropriation, this study attempts to probe Monadhil Daoud Albayati's *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* (2012) as an intertextual text of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1596). In terms of structure and theme, the study reveals how the Shakespearean details framed Albayati's play. Some similarities and differences are valuable due to social and cultural points of view each plot has. Such plays confront the audience with universal truths: conflict persists across mankind and it must be addressed before it spirals out of control. But most of all, the ambition to love and be loved is present in all times and places, whether in Baghdad or Verona, for lovers like Romeo and Juliet, or for brothers like Montague and Capulet.

Key words: intertextuality, adaptation, appropriation, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*.

Romeo Y Julieta En Bagdad: Un Estudio Intertextual Desde Una Perspectiva Iraquí Contemporánea

Resumen

La literatura no tiene que ver con cierta nación. Es un producto de experiencias, filosofías y tendencias humanas hacia las mejores formas de entender la vida y, en última instancia, vivir en paz. Los problemas humanos globales generalmente son procesados por diferentes obras literarias que entusiasman a los autores a evaluar ciertos valores y creencias entre sus comunidades. En última instancia, estas evaluaciones reflejan qué tipo de cultura tiene cierta comunidad. Al abordar estos problemas humanos y estudiar las circunstancias que los rodean en el texto seleccionado, se obtienen respuestas razonables simultáneamente para comprender las experiencias y tendencias humanas mencionadas anteriormente. Mediante la intertextualidad, la adaptación y la apropiación, este estudio intenta sondear *Romeo y Julieta* de Monadhil Daoud Albayati en Bagdad (2012) como un texto intertextual de *Romeo y Julieta* de Shakespeare (1596). En términos de estructura y tema, el estudio revela cómo los detalles de Shakespeare enmarcaron la obra de Albayati. Algunas similitudes y diferencias son valiosas debido a los puntos de vista sociales y culturales que tiene cada argumento. Tales juegos confrontan a la audiencia con verdades universales: el conflicto persiste en toda la humanidad y debe abordarse antes de que se salga de control. Pero, sobre todo, la ambición de amar y ser amado está presente en todos los tiempos y lugares, ya sea en Bagdad o Verona, para amantes como *Romeo y Julieta*, o para hermanos como *Montague y Capuleto*.

Palabras clave: intertextualidad, adaptación, apropiación, *Romeo y Julieta*, *Romeo y Julieta* en Bagdad.

Monadhil Daoud Albayati: A brief biography

In 1960, Albayati was born in Basrah south of Iraq. He finished his school there successfully. Then, he has a High Diploma in Theatre Directing from the Theatre Academy in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and a Diploma in Directing from the Fine Arts Institute in Baghdad. He also has a PhD in performing Arts. He was nominated as a program supervisor at Spectrum London from 1995 to 1997. He starts his career as an actor. Then, he presents himself among his generation as a playwright after that as a theatre director.

Ultimately, he works as a director in the department of Cinema and theatre in the Iraqi Ministry of Culture. (Al-Azraki, & Al-Shamma, 2017: ix)

As an actor, he has appeared in many plays such as the Great Wall of China (Soor al-seen), The Court (Al-Mahkama), The Dramatic Wedding (Al-za-faaf al-dirami), Joan of Arc (Jan Dark), Hamlet Conference (Mu'tamar Hamlet), Richard III, and Tartuffe (Tartuf). As a writer, he has presented many plays such as Here is Baghdad (Huna Baghdad) and Time of the Mill (Zamen al-Mat'hana), and the play Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad (Roemo wa Juliet fi Baghdad) and Forget Herostratus! (Insa Herostrat). His directorial credits include The boy Mahran (Al-fata Mahran) and Cannibals (Akilat Luhood al-basher). All the above plays have been staged in Baghdad but his Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad received a production in Stratford, England, as well, at the World Shakespeare Festival in 2012. (Ibid ix) Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet's code

Romeo and Juliet belongs to a tradition of tragic romances dating back to ancient times. The plot is based on an Italian story translated by Arthur Brooke in 1562 into a verse called "The Tragic History of Romeo and Juliet" and recounted in prose as "The Pleasure Palace" by William Pinter in 1567. Shakespeare depends heavily on both but he expanded the plot with a number of supporting figures, especially Mercutio and Paris. It is believed to have been written between 1591 and 1596, and the play was first published in 1597. (Halion, 1998: 93)

It is worth to mention that Shakespeare's use of poetic structure is to raise suspense and tension. His expansion of minor characters, and his use of sub-plots is to decorate the story, has been praised as an early sign of his dramatic talent. Back to Shakespeare's time, the play Romeo and Juliet was extremely popular. Gary Taylor states that "it [is] the sixth most popular of Shakespeare's plays, in the period after the death of Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Kyd but before the ascendancy of Ben Jonson during which Shakespeare was London's dominant playwright." (Taylor, 2002: 18) Side by side with Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet is considered one of Shakespeare's most performed plays. It has been adapted many times for stage through ages up to now that makes it as one of the most famous global stories. (Ibid)

Shakespeare presents the theme of his play Romeo and Juliet through the concept of love and hatred through a relationship of great love between two lovers. This relationship collides with the obstacles of enmity between their families, preventing their happiness and ending in killing themselves.

This was a turning point in the life of the two families, as they realize that there is no benefit in enmity that led to the death of those they love. Consequently, love is not a lost effort but an offer of tolerance and living in peace, and a rejection of grudge, hostile conflicts and rivalries. Recent performances often set the play in the contemporary world making use of its code of popularity. Albayati's version *Romeo and Juliet* in Baghdad comes in this perspective. With the help of intertextuality, the study may be ascribed as a step forward in the field of drama appreciation.

Why intertextuality?

As it is applied to analyze the text chosen in this study, this section attempts to trace intertextuality and its reflections: adaptation and appropriation as useful approaches to literary analysis. As it is well-known for specialists that intertextuality refers to how texts interact with each other in terms of title, motif, theme, occasion ...etc. Texts may give more meanings when they are compared to well-known codes from previous texts. Intertextuality is not a matter of investigation, but it is about how texts intersect and clearly adhere to set patterns. Moreover, as an approach, intertextuality provides an analytical tool to explore similarities and differences among texts. It permits us to compare and to interpret the literary elements in texts without ignoring their historical and ideological aspects. Abrams, in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, defines intertextuality as:

a term used to signify the multiple ways in which any literary text is made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and illusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures. (1999: 317)

Historically, the notion of intertextuality is popularized by Julia Kristeva who states: "Intertextuality is now a common place of most literary debates" (2002: 8). Kristeva bases her theory of intertextuality on Mikhail Bakhtin's works. She ascribes to Bakhtin the discovery that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1986: 37). In this sense, the text is not an isolated object but rather a compilation of cultural textuality. Moreover, texts do not present clear meanings; they embody society's dialogic conflict over the meaning of words. Similarly, Ronald Barthes views the text as:

[A] tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture . . . the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. (1977: 146)

A part of intertextuality, adaptation recently gains a type of popularity in literature. In his glossary, William Simon states that adaptation is a form of intertextuality describing a text which has been taken from one context and changed into another. He adds that this process “gives the responder the opportunity to observe the old text from a new perspective.” (2004:1) Sanders believes that the practice and the results of adaptation and appropriation are interrelated. She also states that these creative processes are different. Adaptation may require additions, deletions and rewritings, but the work’s reference to the previous text can be felt.

Adaptation lies between two poles of the original source and the reconstructed text. It is believed that adaptations are not autonomous texts to be examined independently; these texts used to be considered as secondary and inferior to the original texts. Yet, in the last decades of the twentieth century, the view has changed. Adaptations began to be seen in a new light as increasingly rich texts worthy of research and investigation. According to Linda Hutcheon, the Canadian literary theorist and critic, to adapt means to adjust, to alter and make something suitable for new use and situation. She also confirms that adaptation is the process of creation and the product of reinterpretation. A simple definition of adaptation can be derived from her when she states: “[Adaptation] is repetition, but repetition without replication.” (2006:7) When we adapt a certain text, we openly show its relationship with another work in form or content. The adapted text, according to Gerard Genette is “created and then received in relation to a prior text.” (qtd. in Hutcheon 6)

William Verrone in his *Adaptation and the Avant-Grade* defines adaptation as: “the study of transcription, which is a form of translation ... one thing, is being transformed into another.... Adaptation can ‘borrow’ or ‘transfer,’ as some of the typical descriptions go, but, more appropriately, they exploit ideas, image clusters.” (2011:18) Moreover, Julie Sanders sees adaptation as the “reinterpretation of established texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an ‘original’ or source text’s cultural and/or temporal setting.” (2006:19) As such, adaptation is a process of involving the transition from one genre to another. It can provide more perspectives to the meaning of the text and its cultural significance. Adaptation therefore should be:

...seen as a formal entity or product. . . an announced and extensive transportation of a particular work or works. This “transcoding” can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a dif-

ferent point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation. (Sander, 2006: 7-8)

Nevertheless, Sander adds that adaptation provides commentary on a source text. This commentary aims to revise a point of view from the original text with hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalized. As such, adaptation is a matter of appreciation of a notable text giving it an acknowledgement of having creative and interpretive engagement with the adapted work. This work is considered as something second but not secondary; in the sense that it shares the importance with the first original text.

In adaptation, we become part of the process of rewriting the original in order to create conceptual plans, so that we understand both the process of adaptation and the final result of adaptation. Adaptations tell new stories simultaneously; more accurately, what one receives from reading an adaptation is the narrative construction of the new text. According to Hutcheon:

An emphasis on process allows us to expand the traditional focus of adaptation studies on medium specificity and individual comparative case studies in order to consider as well relations among the major modes of engagement; that is, it permits us to think about how adaptation allows people to tell, show, and interact with stories. (2006: 22)

Theorists of adaptation believe that the story is a prominent factor in transposition of one genre to another. All the elements of story are to be sought in adaptation such as themes, characters, points of view, symbols ...etc. Among them, themes are considered the easiest to be adapted. Characters on the other hand are important as we can find the same character in various works as we see in this study later. They are the axial points in adaptations because they can engage the audience's imagination by recognition. Moreover, the point of view is also important in the adapted theme as it directs the receiver towards certain events and characters. A narrator usually describes, explains and comments so that he/she can penetrate into the minds of character and the audience as well.

On the other hand, appropriation may keep certain features of the original text but the new text does not acknowledge its relation with the preceding work. Appropriation refers to the practice of borrowing or adopting, which considered in adaptation studies, is not a detriment at all but rather a way of viewing the original work in a new way, and one that also allows us to see the original as a foundational text on which to build and interpret. Authors who engage in appropriation do so for the purpose of reevaluating

the source text(s) from which they borrow, while at the same time creating an exclusively new form of material. Moreover, appropriation is an act of examination through what is potential in the original texts that the writer can see to uncover how something new is created.

To appropriate, then, is to engage and go through the process of intertextuality, the process of examining the ways in which texts interact and in which readers respond to the text that can inform text adaptation. What this means is that the text may serve as a critique of the original adapted source text. Critics agree that appropriation can do the same engagement as adaptation but frequently adopts a posture of critique. As such, appropriation may import elements or features of the original, including themes, motifs, subject matter, but in a way that allows us to see both the originality of the new work and to point us back to the source for reexamination. According to James Young, appropriation may become authentic artworks themselves, even if they look to other texts for other material. He states:

Works that are an expression of an artist's individual genius are characterized by personal authenticity. ... All things being equal, a work of art that is an original expression of an artist's genius is more valuable than a derivative one. The original art work opens up new perspectives. It excites the imagination in new ways. (2010: 47)

Appropriations and adaptations are therefore as creative and innovative like the original work. Appropriations sometimes invite comparison and contrast evaluations, but texts that rewrite other texts by exploiting them with either exploitative appropriation or adaptation become texts beyond imitative products. The rewriting of a text invariably transcends mere imitation by adding, supplementing, and improving. The result is not mere replication, but rather complication and expansion. Thus, the reader will be able to see source texts are amendable to expansion by appropriation and adaptation; that may make the new texts better than their source texts in terms of creativity and representation.

Appropriations become new forms of representation through their style, theme, mood, or form. Relationships between intertexts and their referents also remind us of the process of revision of texts in a way that oblige the reader to reexamine the original works. Many writers utilize appropriation in order to represent their subjects, and to find alternative ways of rethinking the precursor texts.

As adaptations are often concerned with providing commentary on source texts, appropriations of styles or themes from previous works can provide a critical perspective. Some adapted works use appropriated material to

form and offer radically new perception of the original, even as it divorces itself from the original to become something as original as the precursor text that inspires it. In today's society, it is debatable that almost any cultural fact or manifestation is somehow influenced through appropriation. The acknowledged intertextuality of literature encourages an ever-evolving construction of meaning, and the new text participates in the process of changing meaning as it supports expanding meaning. As Sanders suggests the relationship between "appropriations and their sources begins to emerge, then, as a fundamental, even vital, aspect of the reading or spectating experiences, one productive of new meaning, applications, and resonance" (32). In this sense, appropriations enrich and elevate texts rather than steal their essence from them as was traditionally assumed.

To sum up, appropriation points to a distance from the original source, so that the resulting adaptation becomes an entirely separate product. Putting texts against each other signifies a shift toward outright speculation on the part of the reader. The viewing experience becomes one of questioning just as it is one of enjoyment. According to Sanders, "The spectator or reader must be able to participate in the play of similarity and difference perceived between the original, source, or inspiration to appreciate fully the reshaping or rewriting undertaken by the original" (45).

¹ *Romeo and Juliet* in Baghdad

Based on the preceding section of intertextuality, the text of the Iraqi playwright Albayati's *Romeo and Juliet* in Baghdad will be tackled intertextually with the text of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. With great diligence, intolerance has come to an end, and with a clear and deliberate approach to the Iraqi reality of violence and tension after 2003, the play in its new version, tried to approach the difficult events experienced by the country. It highlights the suffering of two Iraqi lovers in a country of conflict and chaos. After sever subsequences, the discourse revolves around a culture of change.

The theatrical experiences that deal with the Shakespearean text as a dramatic anchor that possesses the elements of drama with great distinction

1 A Play by Monadhil Daoud Albayati. An English version. In *Contemporary Plays from Iraq*, edited and translated by A. Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma with an Introduction by Marvin Carlson. All subsequent quotation will be from this version; page number will only appear after each quotation.

are different. This is true whether at the level of the dramatic event, the poetic language or the various characters. This diversity has added limitless stretches of interpretation, both globally and locally, in which Iraqi authors or directors exert efforts to tackle one of Shakespeare's texts.

Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad is produced specifically for the opening of the World Shakespeare Festival in the city of Stratford, England held with the London Olympics 2012. (Ibid ix) The play starts with a title resembles Shakespeare's with an addition of (... in Baghdad) to justify certain aspects of appropriation such as setting, characterization, plot, conflict and theme of the play. Historically, Baghdad (the capital of peace) as it is well known has a reference to where stories of love should be. As a city, Baghdad is a symbol of prosperity, knowledge and One Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights). So there is an interrelation between the love story of the Shakespearean version and the title of the updated version of Albayati which means that Baghdad can be a place for love if people decide that.

Thematically, the text of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* derives the theme of love from the original text with episodes to condemn the idea of sectarian conflict that was born in Iraq after the US occupation of Iraq. It reflects the years of occupation greatly affected in the social, cultural and political life in Iraq. The author presents the play with its well-known Shakespearean characters (Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, Tybalt, Paris) but with Iraqi features. The plot has adapted the Shakespearean tale and details but with Iraqi events through which he wants to highlight a contemporary phase from Iraqi history after (2003). The play documents the features of the conflict that took place in the Iraqi cultural and social arena. It also criticizes those who are behind the stirring up the sectarian strife and the parties benefiting from it.

In sixteen scenes, the play tells the story of two Iraqi families belonging to two different sects. Disputes and religious intolerance lead to their opposition to the marriage of a young man from this family to a young woman from another family. They decide to marry secretly, despite opposition from their parents. At the end of the play, they were killed in a terrorist explosion in a church in Baghdad.

Although expressions such as Sunni and Shiee have become recently common in the Iraqi community, they have not been explicitly put forward in the play's events, with the names of Veronese characters. The two families (Capulet and Montagu are brothers here) argue over the ownership of a boat they inherited from the father. In this way, the question of who runs the helm becomes a metaphor for the conflict in Iraq and the big question

is always like this: who governs the country?

In an interview with Afrah Shauqi, one of the protagonists of the adapted version, expresses his delight to embody the role and describes his feelings by saying: The play may make you nervous, there is something unclear and even disrespectful to re-show the family quarrel between the Montagu family and the family of Capulet in mass murder, In the form of a struggle for power between two communities.²

Albayati, the playwright and director of the play, states in an interview with Fayhaa Alsameraee, that his play is an invitation to put the traditions behind which intertexts with the Shakespearean version. People want characters like Romeo and not Thebault. They want the popular hero again. All you wish for the play is to be corrective and to impose the truth on all the bad values. He also adds that he cannot say that watching the play will make the public want to see more about Iraq, or to understand it more. But Iraq has dreamers, as elsewhere. The play is a call for beauty amid torment deserves to be heard.³

The play reveals the disagreement between the sects that is condemned obviously in two important scenes: The first occurs in the opening scene where the history professor appears on stage addressing the characters: "Alas, our homeland had become an arid wasteland, unable to support our ambition... I do not belong to you." Then, addressing the audience: "I want to inhale the fragrance of palm trees, not the stench of wars. I crave the lover's night, the night of those deeply in love... bear witness. I belong only here in Baghdad, and to Romeo and Juliet." (75) The second scene is the last of the play in which the professor is also on stage after the murder of Romeo and Juliet in the church. He picks up the scarves of the two lovers, all the rest of them, to give it to their parents; reminding them of the tragedy that of their contradiction and conflict. "The history professor hands them to the families. The two brothers shake hands and exit." (105) With the help of symbolism of Shakespeare's play as the embodiment of the idea of love, Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad approached the Iraqi tragedy. Taking the international symbols of love as an essential point to build the theme and plot as well, some threads of the famous story (the conflict between the families of the two lovers) are intersected. Moreover, certain modifications are made to conform the Iraqi environment and the type of

² An interview in Arabic made by Afrah Shauqi. It is published in *The Middle East Journal* No. 12196 April 2012.

³ <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=313805&r=0>. Retrieved on 1st of Nov., 2019.

conflict occurs between the warlords in which the innocent are victims. The deadly instrument is extremist terrorism infiltrated by religious statements that prohibit joy and love as in the bombing of the Church where Romeo and Juliet choose to go.

Sami Abdel Hameed, a Professor, senior actor and director, states that when I asked the director why you kept the names of the characters as they are in the Shakespeare text and did not convert them to Iraqi names, he answered saying that the names are necessary to refer to the Shakespearean text as intertextuality permits. The environment indicates that the events take place in Iraq and perhaps in Basra and not in Baghdad, where there are no sailing ships except in the Shatt al-Arab, and his justification lies in the assumption and not in the reality of living. He wants to combine reality and imagination, between what is and what should be. Again, when he asked the director what is the relationship of terrorism in the story Romeo and Juliet, he answered that he wanted to confirm that this scourge had contributed in feeding the sectarian conflict. He wanted to condemn the crimes that killed thousands of Iraqis. Theatrical art is a mirror of reality, which reveals its positives and negatives. In order to make art affected its audience, it must criticize what is negative and condemn what is behind, otherwise it will become superficial and pass in the minds of spectators without benefit.⁴

This conflict between the sects, which is rejected by all Iraqis who call to be removed and overcome. The play comes to promote this example of that rejection. although some who see the show in Baghdad think that it is a mere reference to the power struggle between the two main sects in Iraq but the show condemns sectarian intolerance as many agree about.

Not to forget, the character of Paris and the way it has been adapted as Romeo's rival to the heart of Juliet, becomes a terrorist coming from abroad to destroy Iraq and its people. Paris appears as a religious and extremist interested in murder and destruction. Thus. It is different to his character in Shakespeare's version as a merchant. On the other hand, the figure of the priest in Shakespeare's work is different from that of the Iraqi work as a professor of history but both play the same role as a light who may guide others. Ultimately, the conflict appeared to be among the public and in the original one, it is a noble and aristocratic.

⁴ In Attaakhi Journal. 17/05/2012. <http://altaakhipress.com/viewart.php?art=13070> . Retrieved on the 3rd of Nov., 2019.

Conclusion

With the help of symbolism of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* as the embodiment of the idea of love, *Romeo and Juliet* in Baghdad approached the Iraqi tragedy since the occupation of the country in 2003. Taking the international symbols of love *Romeo and Juliet* as an essential point to build the theme. Moreover, threads of the famous story that is of the conflict between the families of the two lovers are intersected. Nevertheless, certain modifications are made to conform the Iraqi environment and the type of conflict occurs between the warlords in which the innocent are only victims. The deadly instrument is extremist terrorism infiltrated by religious statements that prohibit joy and love as in the bombing of the Church where *Romeo and Juliet* found dead.

The real story of *Romeo and Juliet* in Baghdad is of the audience, who see their lives played out before their eyes. The drama was a chance to create enough distance from their own stories so that they could look at the effect of the nine years after the occupation on their homeland, with its immense loss, death and suffering. The play at its heart is a universal story of the birth and development of conflict, stoked by fear and misunderstanding. It shows how outside forces can stoke conflict and divide groups of communities, and reflects on the need for unity. The text in its conclusion says, stop hatred and destruction, Iraq is a country of love and tolerance.

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