The Arabization of Othello

No work of Shakespeare touches chords of Arab sensibility and identity so much as the tragedy of Othello. For one thing, the hero is a Moor and therefore an “Arab.” Furthermore, he is not simply an Arab character in an Arab context; he is an Arab in Europe, necessarily evoking all the complex confrontations of Self/Other in a context of power struggle. It is not surprising, then, to learn that the first translation and production of a Shakespearean play in Arabic was the Othello performed in Egypt in 1884 (Badawi, “Shakespeare” 183). I shall explore the history of Othello in the Arab World by examining not only its translation and interpretation in a different cultural context, but also and more significantly its manner of assimilation into the Arab literary consciousness, as well as its infiltration of Arab imagination and the Arab frame of imaginative reference as exemplified in adaptations, incorporations, and allusions to Othello in Arabic literary works.¹

Othello offers a special case of relations among literatures. It is the product of an acculturation involving a double circulation of the Other and a complex intertwining that combines the effect of an African/Arab (i.e., Othello and his background) on European imagination and, in a reversed way, its impact on Arabs/Africans. This exchange in both directions is necessarily modified by the perception of the Other and modes of literary production of the time. Through Othello, Shakespeare presented an outsider in Europe; when Arabs look into the play, their point of view entails seeing the Self facing its “image” as delineated by the Other. In such a case, there is always the temptation not only to adapt and

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all citations from Arabic and French are my translation. Titles of Arabic works are given in standard transliteration, followed in parentheses by the English translation. I am grateful in collecting the material for this study to the kindness of Khalida Said, Thurayya Al-Jindi, Emile Jirjis, and ‘Abd Al-Ghani Da’ud.
adjust the borrowed product to local conditions, but also to “correct” and revise the presence of one’s own “type” in the foreign text—to reclaim and “re-authenticate” the image.

For Arabs, Othello poses two issues in reception theory: the disturbing question of the alien Other undertaking to represent the Self, and the even more problematic question of defining the Self and redrawing its contours, since the very perception of the Self is a function of ideological priorities, and its representation is a function of artistic choices. It is easier to point out misrepresentations than to offer accurate representations. In Othello, Shakespeare does not simply present a portrait of an individual Moor in Venice; he presents a portrait of intercultural relations as conceived by an English Renaissance artist, and therefore his portrait is subjected both to the ideological field of the author and to the exigencies of his art. The adaptations of, and reactions to, the work in Arab circles often reveal the level of sensitivity of the “interpreters” towards the intricate issues of ideology and art.

Since the relationship of the modern Arab World to modern Europe is based neither on equality nor on fraternity, but on dependency and subjugation, the literary “dialogue” between the two is likely to be sharp and polemical. The history of a text like Othello will necessarily show a variety of such reactions, starting with pleasure derived from the presence of the Self in the canon of the Other, to anger at the deformation of the Self in a distorting mirror. This study does not attempt to survey all the instances of interpretive reactions to Othello among Arabs that can be witnessed in the choices made by translators, critics and creative writers’ adaptations and allusions to the work, but instead selects illuminating cases of the multifaceted operation of the “Arabization” of the work and the underlying efforts to repossess a foreign literary product centering around an indigenous hero.

Translation

The first translations of Shakespeare’s plays were undertaken at a time when a nascent theatrical movement was taking place in the Arab world. Thus the early renderings of the dramatic works were concerned with performance and audience, i.e., with the oral and lived experience rather than the textual and academic aspects of the work. The most celebrated and best-known translation of Othello is that of Khalil Mutran (1872-1949), the Lebanese-born poet who immigrated to Egypt. He translated Othello at the specific request of George Abyad—actor, director and head of the theatrical troupe known by his name—who asked for an Arabic rendering of the Shakespearean drama of the Moor. Mutran was reluctant at first, but when he attended Abyad’s performance of
Sophocles’ _Oedipus Rex_ he was sufficiently impressed to embark on the translation (Mutran 3). The play was performed in the Cairo Opera House on March 30, 1912. Abyad had returned to Egypt the year before, after a stay in France where he had learned the fashionable mannerist French style of acting. This style did not contribute to the success of the play (Adham 299). Mutran’s translation, which was to become the translation of reference for the coming six or seven decades, was essentially based not on the original, but on a French version of _Othello_ by Georges Duval (Badawi, “Shakespeare” 189).

The characters in Mutran’s translation, apart from Othello, kept their original names, approximating the French pronunciation. The protagonist’s name, however, was changed to ‘Utayl, on the grounds that it had to be an Arab name, not a European name, since he was a Moor. Thus Othello, pronounced by Mutran as Otello—following the French reading—was seen as the deformation of a possible Arabic name. Mutran argues in his introduction to the play that there are two Arabic names that could have been the original name: ‘Atallah (literally, “gift of God”) or ‘Utayl (the diminutive form of ‘Atil, which means “he who is unadorned by jewelry”). He concludes that it must be the latter, since the Arabic nominative declension of the name is “‘Utaylu,” which phonetically echoes “Othello” (3-4). Mutran’s argument handles the philological dimension as well as the cultural dimension: it dismisses the first option (‘Atallah) because the name is not found in the Maghrib where Othello comes from. Furthermore, the second option (‘Utayl) is probable, Mutran argues, because diminutives are endearing forms of naming, such as the Arabs often gave to blacks, including our protagonist.

Mutran’s version is presented to readers as Arabization ( _ta’rib_), and not as translation ( _tarjamah_), and the translator devotes a lengthy paragraph to explaining how Shakespeare himself seems to reflect the Arab spirit—thus Mutran not only appropriates the protagonist of the play, but also naturalizes its author. He does not appeal to the “universal” dimension of Shakespeare, but argues specifically on the grounds of the English bard’s Arab rhetorical sensibility:

In Shakespeare, there is doubtless something Arabic, and it is more evident than in, say, Victor Hugo. Has he read our language or was it transmitted to him in some accurate translation? I don’t know. But between him and us there are puzzling and numerous common features. He has our audacity for metaphor and its manipulation. And he has the same predilection for abrupt changes without prior preparation of preliminaries, pushing you suddenly from one intention to another, leaving you to ponder and find the link. He also has our infatuation with hyperbole which is probably used and sensed by only those writers and readers who have imaginative intensity and defiance, as it is often with Orientals and especially Arabs. On the whole, there is in the writing of Shakespeare a Bedouin spirit which is expressed in the continuous return to innate nature. (7-8)
Besides dwelling on the affinities of Shakespeare with the Arabs and restoring the “correct” Arabic name of the hero, Mutran is also concerned with stylistic issues. He reflects in his introduction on which style to adopt for his translation. This echoes the ongoing debate on the language of theater in a nation where the spoken language diverges from the written one, and where the vernacular and the literary idioms are not identical. Mutran emphatically rejects the use of a colloquial idiom, asserting that the vernacular has “shattered the unity of the [Arab] nation” (8). He also rejects the traditional Arabic rhetorical style, since such plays ought to be written, he says, to be understood and made use of. His rejection of the overwrought style that is practically incomprehensible is justified by appealing to authority. He cites a saying (hadith) by the Prophet Muhammad: “I have been ordered to address people according to their comprehension” (Mutran 8). He therefore opts for an intermediate style: literary but accessible, with the structure of sentences evoking the conversational rather than the ceremonial. His mode of translation, as he maintains, is loyal to the “original” except when syntax and linguistic conventions require transformation (9). This self-consciousness about style in drama reflects an anxiety concerning the appropriate language on stage in a culture characterized by diglossia, where a dichotomy between the spoken and written language exists. Mutran’s position demonstrates a concern for issues related to performance as well as to textuality, and he uses religious discourse to justify his use of a non-classical idiom for the secular text he is translating.

A more recent and more accomplished translation of Othello was undertaken by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920-94), a highly qualified Palestinian poet, novelist, painter, critic, and translator who had lived in Iraq since the partition of Palestine in the late 1940s. His translation has come out in several editions and printings (in Baghdad, Beirut, and Kuwait). In his introduction, one senses his acute awareness of the entrenched Mutran version which he is supposed to surpass. Not the least of Jabra’s advantages is that he translated from English. Still, he feels called upon to explain why he has changed the names of the characters as commonly known in the Arab world since the Mutran translation. Except for Othello, Jabra transliterates them to reflect the English pronunciation. Although Jabra does not agree with Mutran’s explanation of the Arab origin of the name Othello, he still feels he must adhere to Mutran’s legacy on this score. The hero—and by extension the title of the play—retains the name of ‘Utayl.

Jabra’s introduction gives the source of Othello (Cinthio’s Hecatommithi, 1565) as well as the textual history of the play. Furthermore, he opts to preface his translation with A. C. Bradley’s famous study of Othello that figured in his Shakespearean Tragedy
(1904)—a study Jabra sees as essential to understanding the drama of the Venetian Moor. Jabra also translates the first section of the editor’s introduction to the Arden edition of *Othello*, M. R. Ridley’s “The ‘Double Time Scheme’” (Jabra, ‘Utayl 9-66).

All the above shows a deep concern for contextualizing the work in its own historical and cultural situation, rather than appropriating it. Not only is Jabra painfully aware of the task and responsibility of the translator, he is also conscious of the relation of the text to its cultural background; thus he includes the roots of the text as manifested in its source as well as what he considers the essential critical piece in English on it. While Mutran’s translation can be seen as an effort to graft an English text onto an Arabic stem, Jabra attempts to transplant the text, making sure that it is accompanied by some of its native soil. Jabra’s philosophy of translation—as can be deduced from his practice—is to let the Other keep his/her identity, while Mutran is anxious to find or forge kin relations with the Other and subsume him. Jabra’s approach is dialogical whereas Mutran’s is immanent.

Jabra became enamored with Shakespeare when he was a teenager in Palestine studying at the Arab College of Jerusalem and reading Shakespeare in the original, as he documents in an essay entitled “Shakespeare and I”:

Even in those years I found what Arabic translations of Shakespeare were available on the whole rather dull, inaccurate and often incomplete. They seemed verbally awkward, bookish and strangely static. Somewhere at the back of my mind began the thought in those early years that one day I would try my hand at the impossible task of making Arabic versions of Shakespeare which carried the same verbal charge, the same evocative imagery and sustained metaphors, the same diversity of rhythm, tone, eloquence, word-play, etc. (Celebration 142)

Jabra indicated in an interview with me in Cairo that he treats translations of Shakespeare as if they were “sacred texts,” where no license with the original can be tolerated. It is this concern and respect for the original that caused Jabra to spend many years working on each of his Shakespearean translations. Needless to say, certain changes are inevitable in the process of literary translations, especially in imagery. Jabra reflected on the organic images and how to render the details in relation to the core as creatively and as coherently as possible. When translating *Othello*, he immersed himself not only in the world of Shakespeare, but also in the poetry of al-Mutanabbi (d. 965) and Abu Tamam (d. 864), two classical Arab poets known for the intricacy of their imagery. Furthermore, he informed me, he read the translations aloud so as to judge the oral impact of rhythm and cadence. He hesitated on the translation of songs—whether to render them in meter and

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with a rhyme scheme or to privilege meaning over form. He opted for the latter, while striving to create a singsong effect through alliteration and phonetic repetitions.

Jabra’s concern for the original stems from his aversion to adulteration and displacement. For him, translation is a mystery akin to the sacred mysteries of transubstantiation (*hilul*) where one is Other and Self simultaneously, when one has to be and not to be at the same time. Jabra’s sense of responsibility is not only to the language of origin, but also to the target language. His concern for the majestic equivalent of Shakespearean language in Arabic never ceased to haunt him:

I kept looking at the lines of the Fool and of Edgar in his pretended madness and wondered how they could be said in Arabic without losing their force. And yet I was sure that the richness and nature of Arabic language, if I knew how to draw on its expressive possibilities, would not let me down. For in order to translate effectively it was not enough to know the original well: you had to know your own language even better. (*Celebration* 143)

Jabra’s translation strategy and commentaries assume a universal literary power in Shakespeare that can be rendered in Arabic only by tapping the universal potential of the Arabic language. Translation, according to his understanding, works by connecting the deep underlying universal resources and structures.

Jabra undertook translations while involved in other creative activities. When translating Othello he was working on his novel, *Al-Bahth ‘an Walid Mas’ud* (The Search for Walid Mas’ud), 1978. Although the novel about Palestinian resistance and the play about tragic jealousy seem a world apart, one critic (Akram Maydani) saw Othello as a subtext of the novel (Jabra, *Celebration* 146)—a judgment that is difficult to go along with, though it fascinated Jabra because it showed the complementarity and correspondence of the different aspects of his cultural production.

When the Iraqi writer Najman Yasin asked Jabra about the diversity of roles he had assumed, ranging from poet, critic, painter, and translator to writer of novels and short stories, Jabra replied:

Even the translations I have done have been an extension of my literary interests. And because I breathe through translation just as I breathe through my short stories and novels, the books which I have translated are closely connected within my own intellectual disposition. In the one activity I find help and support in interpreting the other. (“Interpoetics” 208)

Jabra’s respect for the integrity of the Other does not exclude a measure of identification on the deep level between author and translator. He sees in the Shakespearean hero a “mask of the Self” (*Yanabi*’ 53) and a correspondence with his quest and bereavement:

Only as a writer intent on a creative task, impelled by love or the passion of a humanist, or even the intensity of a man in agony, can one really get anywhere near him [Shakespeare], round him. In the process one cannot help a secret em-
pathy taking place, a tacit identification, without which the resultant work would most probably be deficient. (Celebration 148-49)

Jabra’s sparkling translation approaches the original in force and passion. It is moving, majestic, and accurate. He follows the order of the verses on the page (unless it is prose), so the reader is visually aware of the poetic arrangement of lines in the original. He numbers the verses, making it easy to compare the Arabic with the original. However, he does not try to fit the translation into a given Arabic meter, which would have necessarily led to semantic compromises to suit the prosodic form. Jabra also reproduces, as best he can, the figures of thought in the original: parallelism, antitheses, etc.

Although the translation is faithful to the original, the few changes that are made are significant and clever. In the song of Iago about King Stephen (II. iii. 83-90),\(^3\) for example, there is a mention of English money: a crown and sixpence. Jabra turns them into dinar and dirham respectively—currency nomenclatures common in the Arab world. Jabra systematically sticks to the original key metaphors and complements his fidelity with discreet explicative footnotes whenever necessary, clarifying the way the discourse is dominated by metaphors from a given field—be it music (III. i. 1-7), war (II. iii. 24), etc. When there are untranslatable puns and verbal play, again Jabra points them out in footnotes; for example, he explains the duplicity of meaning in tail/tale (III. i. 8-9). Similarly Jabra elucidates—through notes—allusions that are likely to be missed by Arab readers. He does, however, keep his commentary to a minimum.

The poetic effect in Jabra’s translation comes from the diction, which is delicately and sensitively selected and combined to suggest lyricism and dynamism. For example, Othello addresses Emilia and asks her about the conduct of Desdemona with Cassio (IV. ii. 6-10):

Othello: What, did they never whisper?
Emilia: Never, my lord
Othello: Nor send you out o’th’way?
Emilia: Never
Othello: To fetch her fan, her mask, her gloves, her nothing?
Emilia: Never my lord.

Now for the word “mask,” the translator has a multiplicity of choices in Arabic. It can be rendered as qina’, hijab, burgu’, and khimar. Any of these four words could have worked. Qina’ indicates a cover for the face, with the same semantic and philological tones as in English. Both mask and qina’ connote today a disguising facial cover, while earlier they indicated simply a face-cover that could be used for disguise or protection. Hijab is currently

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\(^3\) References are to act, scene, and line.
used to mean a (woman’s) veil and so is *burqu* (the latter is more common in the Arab east). Both were dismissed by the translator in favor of *khimar*, which signifies the same thing, but it has a more poetic charge since it is associated with a famous verse by the Umayyad poet Miskin al-Darimi (d. 708) in his portrayal of a charming veiled woman who diverted a Believer from his worship:

Qul lil-malihati fl-l-khimari l-aswadi
Madha ardii bi-nasikin muta’abidi
(Tell the beautiful woman with the black veil [*khimar*]
What have you done to a worshipping hermit!)

This verse became so notorious that it worked as publicity for the sale of black veils (Ibn Khallikan 161). Jabra chose *khimar*, while Mutran used *hijab*—semantically equivalent terms, but poetically Jabra’s is more effective.

If Jabra privileges textuality and Mutran tries to strike a balance between fidelity to text and the demands of a live performance, the Egyptian playwright Nu’man ‘Ashur (1918-87) opts in his translation of *Othello* (1984) to privilege performance. In his introduction, he explains that he has translated the “dramatic language” of Shakespeare, that is, his translation “transpose[s] Shakespeare in a credible dramatic form to the audience” (90). He sees his use of vernacular (colloquial Egyptian Arabic) not as a mode of simplification or vulgarization, but as a mode of rendering Shakespearean spirit in dramatic language (90).

‘Ashur occasionally skips some lines or passages, but he generally conforms to most of the dialogue and the act and scene divisions of the original. Clearly he is interested in the play as performed on the stage and the effect of articulations, attempting at times idiomatic renderings that are quite effective in Arabic, as for example Iago’s speech in the original “Though I do hate him, as I do hell’s pains” (1. i. 154), which comes out in Arabic literally as “You know that I hate him blindly” (‘Ashur 93).4

Criticism

Most of the criticism of *Othello* in the Arab world either concentrated on actual performances (in English or Arabic), or discussed the drama with lengthy introductions devoted to the dramatist

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4 Another colloquial version of *Othello* was performed in Cairo in the Avantgarde theater, during the season of 1988-89. It was prepared by Muhammad Safi Al-Din, directed by Sayyid Khatir, and entitled *Uray: Al-fawlah al-akhirah* (*Othello: The Last Round*). It was probably based on Mutran’s version and is characterized by contractions, the omission of the extended dialogues, and the shortening of the lengthy speeches. The changes indicate greater concern for dramatic effect than for the poeticy of the text. See also Ghazi Jamal’s commercial translation of *Othello*. 
and the Elizabethan stage. Surprisingly enough, the “Arabness” of the protagonist did not preoccupy critics as it did the poet-translators.

Mutran is only one of many who have tried to find links between Shakespeare and the Arabs, partly in jest and partly seriously. It started in the late nineteenth century with the Lebanese writer Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq (1804-88), who claimed that Shakespeare was an Arab whose real name was Shaykh Zubayr. Later, an Iraqi scholar, Safa’ Khulusi, devoted some research to the issue arguing for the Arabness of Shakespeare. An Egyptian scholar, Ibrahim Hamadah, took this controversy so seriously that he wrote a book refuting the Arabness of Shakespeare. The uncertainty regarding Shakespeare’s identity as well as his putative Arabic connections have contributed to kindling the polemic. Anthony Burgess, for example, has put forward the possibility that an Arab woman was the Dark Lady of the Sonnets; Frances Yates has argued that Shakespeare had read the Latin translations of al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham (d. 1039), the medieval Arab scientist known in the West as Alhazen (Badawi, “Shakespeare” 182).

Striking correspondences between certain episodes and plots in medieval Arabic narratives and those of Shakespearean drama have been used by some critics to argue for the migration of literary material and influence—though some of the narrative evidence is part of world folklore, and is not exclusively Arab. The Algerian comparatist Nasib Nashawi devoted a study to Shakespeare’s Othello and the Syrian poet Dik Al-Jinn (d. 850). The latter was a Moslem who loved passionately and married his Christian slave-girl, and ended up killing her out of jealousy; she was an innocent victim, but his cousin carried on an intrigue that closely resembles Iago’s. The scholar wonders if Shakespeare had

5 An example, among many others, is Al-‘Aqqad’s famous introduction to Shakespeare, Al-Ta’rif bi-Shakespeare.

6 It is interesting to note that while foreign actors and commentators were conscious about place when they were performing Antony and Cleopatra in Egypt, they could not connect the African hero with the fact of acting out Othello on the African continent. Thus Bonamy Dobrée, for instance, reviews the 1927 performance of Othello by the Atkins troupe in Cairo without any reference to the geographical location of the performance and its possible implications [Egyptian Gazette, Nov. 16, 1927] (‘Awad, Shakespeare in Egypt 57-59). This contrasts with what the star actress of the troupe is reported to have said [Al-Ahram, Nov. 25, 1928] about her anxiety in presenting Cleopatra on the shores of the Nile (‘Awad, Shakespeare fi Misr 147-48). This indicates that Egypt was seen in its pharaonic dimension, not in its continental (African) or national (Arab) dimensions.

7 See on the debate, among others, James Lardner, “The Authorship Question.”

8 The two most obvious elements are the similarity between the prophecy of Zarqa’ Al-Yamamah and the prophecy of the three witches in Macbeth concerning a marching forest (Nicholson 25), and the story of the “Awakened Sleeper” in The Arabian Nights with its analog in the Induction of The Taming of the Shrew (Ghazoul 108-20).
access to a biographical sketch of the medieval Arab poet since the episodes in both cases are parallel (Nashawi 173).

Irrespective of probability or likelihood, these studies show generally a certain predisposition among Arabs to seek links with Shakespeare, to claim Shakespeare or to find overlapping elements with him. This represents a dominant orientation in a historical era in which the intellectuals of the subjugated Arab nation wanted to demonstrate their cultural standing by asserting that their heritage was no less than the legacy of the colonizers—and what better way to claim cultural equality than to show that the great canonical writer of the English is kin to Arabs, literally or figuratively? Such an attitude contrasts with the distance maintained between Arabs and their ex-colonizers in the post-independence era, when the differences and oppositions are emphasized. Edward Said, the Palestinian-American critic, cites Othello, not as an example of cultural kinship and or integration but as an example of intrusion:

In Shakespeare’s Othello (that “abuser of the world”), the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play inside Europe. (71)

A post-nationalist approach is that of the Saudi-Arabian scholar Maijan Al-Ruwili, who concentrates on class distinctions and social climbing rather than on nationality or race when discussing Othello. Only in passing does he note Othello’s outsider’s status (108), and essentially argues that the behavior of all characters in the play—including both Othello and Iago—rings variations on the entrenched practice of favoritism. These three distinct attitudes, which can categorize Arab critical approaches towards Othello, correspond to the stages outlined by Frantz Fanon regarding colonized orientations towards the Self/Other (Fanon, Wretched 178-79).

In his study of Shakespeare among the Arabs, the Egyptian scholar M. M. Badawi describes the general attitude of reception to Shakespeare among Egyptian students—a description that can probably be extended to other Arab students of Shakespeare:

The average Egyptian student feels that the history plays are parochial and topical (in a dangerously narrow sense), and can be of interest only to Englishmen... He may get interested in the pattern of philosophical and moral ideas embodied in the plays, in the underlying opposition between order and chaos, but the idea of kingship and the figure of the king leave him utterly cold... As for the comedies, the lyrical and love elements, as well as the obvious comic situations, he finds appealing, but he is naturally dismayed by witticisms, the puns and other forms of word play... The appeal of the tragedies, on the other hand, is immeasurably greater.... [T]here is a general feeling among students that Shakespeare’s tragedies have a much more universal appeal than the rest of the plays (Badawi, “Shakespeare” 192)

At the turn of the century, Othello was performed in Egypt in the
big cities as well as in the provinces,9 by foreign companies as well as by local ones that varied considerably in competence. The title of the play has varied too, and included 'Utayl, Othello, The Moroccan General, The Cunning of Men, ‘Atallah. The names of the characters were at times Arabized when phonetic analogs were possible. Thus Iago became Ya’qub (the Arabic version of Jacob—a name shared by Jews, Christians and Moslems) and Cassio became Qusay (‘Awad, Shakespeare fi Misr 92). The audience attending the play varied too, from royal patrons and upper classes to the middle and lower classes. To guarantee the attraction and success of the imported artistic activity, there were often poetry recitals and musical and dancing interludes between the acts. Such adulterations of the dramatic dignity of the tragedy were often criticized by the local press (‘Awad, Shakespeare fi Misr 94-95).

The frequency of performances and the variety of productions as well as the attendance of foreign troupes at Egyptian productions and vice versa led to a plethora of commentaries on the quality of the acting and direction. Criticism rarely went beyond the nature of the performance to touch on literary and cultural issues. A dramatic critic of the time, Muhammad Amin, criticized Mutran’s ‘Utayl because he saw in his rendering of the text a closet drama, with a style of composition fit for reading, not acting (‘Awad, Shakespeare fi Misr 95). Muhammad ‘Ali Gharib criticized the translation of Othello for not omitting the pagan constructions in it, such as “heaven parodies itself” (‘Awad, Shakespeare fi Misr 100). While some argued for an indigenous theater that would represent local culture (an approach necessarily opposing translations and imitations of foreign works), others insisted on the local theater’s need to learn from world drama (‘Awad, Shakespeare fi Misr 150). It is interesting to note that even foreign troupes were aware of the role of the local audience in their performance. Atkins, the director of a visiting British troupe, even asserted in an interview (Al-Ahram, Nov. 15, 1928) that acting is a joint enterprise between audience and actors, with the success of the latter depending on the kind of audience it has at any given performance. In this context, Atkins expressed his pleasant surprise at the Egyptian audience and its intelligent reception (‘Awad, Shakespeare fi Misr 147). It is difficult to say whether his response was a matter of appreciation, relief, or condescension.

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9 Othello was also performed in other Arab capitals, including Tunis, where in 1908 Muhammad Bourguiba, the brother of the ex-President of Tunisia, played Othello (Halima 34-35). He was also the dramatic instructor of the famous Tunisian actress and singer Habiba Messika, who played Desdemona in a 1920 production. In a curious case —where life imitates art—the theatrical star Habiba Messika was killed by a jealous admirer, who then committed suicide (Halima 161-63). Recently, a biographical film on Messika was made in Tunis under the title Habiba Messika (marketed internationally under the title La danse du feu). For further references to Othello in Arabic theater, see Tomiche 138, 206.
One of the more interesting critical explorations of Othello comes from Louis ‘Awad (1915-90), the Egyptian poet, novelist, critic, and translator (of Shakespeare among others). Having attended the Othello performed by Laurence Olivier in 1964, he wrote a journalistic piece that brought together a multitude of commonplace information, but also proposed some interesting ideas without pursuing them to their conclusion. The study is entitled “Shakespeare and Racism,” and in it he argues that white and black express states of mind rather than race. He goes on to commend Olivier for his interpretation of Othello, though the role had worried English actors and was often given to non-English actors since it was deemed not suitable for the English temperament. The tension in the argument between the rejection of racial issues on one hand and the acceptance of national character on the other is overlooked in ‘Awad’s study. However, he notices the superficiality of Othello’s conversion and the essential animism of his thought in contrast to the Christian structure of the play, with its reproduction in artistic form of the rite of Christian worship: the cycle of sacrifice, starting with the crime followed by punishment and concluded by repentance (‘Awad, Al-Bahth 119).

‘Awad finally proposes that Othello is the transformation of the myth of Atlas, the Titan who was turned into that great North African mountain range, and condemned for his rebellion to hold up the sky. ‘Awad compares this with the transformation of Orestes into Hamlet-Horatio (‘Awad, Al-Bahth 136). Frazer’s thesis that Greek myths and folklore were transformed into monotheistic narratives is implied here. The common geographical background of Othello and Atlas must have suggested this link to ‘Awad.  

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10 For an account of this performance, see Brown 299-300, and Wine 42-57.

11 It is surprising that such tenuous relations between Greek folklore and Elizabethan drama could be proposed by an Arab critic without entertaining the possibility of Arab folklore as a source. It seems to me that modern Arab critics could easily investigate such links, all the more because of the cultural, commercial, and military contacts with Europe at that time. After all, the source of the play, Cinthio’s Hecatomnithi, is fashioned after Boccaccio’s Decameron, whose distant prototype may be The Arabian Nights (Menocal 141). In many ways, whether or not there was direct influence, the story of Othello seems to be the romanticization of the story of Shahrazar and his adulterous wife. Desdemona seems to be an amalgam of the adulterous wife and the virtuous Shahrazad. She is in fact like Shahrazad but made to appear like the adulterous wife of Shahrazar. As for the situation of the Moor in Venice—a gross departure from the setting of The Arabian Nights—it can be explained as a modification triggered by the presence of Africans in Europe and their presentation in Renaissance drama, as documented in Jones’s Othello’s Countrymen. The prime example is Leo Africanus, who relates incidents and stories of African men in love with European women in his Description de l’Afrique (1550). The parallelism between Othello and Leo’s text has already been noted by Lois Whitney. The infatuation of “Abusahid, king of Fez, for the wife of Casino de Cheri” (Jones 21) is the most striking instance. Othello, one could argue, is the legacy of such Arabic and African lore, to which the Italian stock character of the wicked and the envious man is added.
The popularity of Othello has made the characters household names, used by writers to describe a person. Thus, for example, a dark Arab is referred to as an Othello (Soueif, Sandpiper 140), an innocent woman as a Desdemona (Soueif, In the Eye 344), and a wrecker of unity as an Iago (Idris 13-14).

Adaptations

A number of dramatic and cinematic works in the Arab world have been structured on the story of Othello, with enough variation in the plot line to suggest a free adaptation. The analysis of such works reveals the spectrum of ideological concerns and artistic orientations in contemporary Arabic culture. These adaptations have taken the form of folk theater and commercial cinema in Egypt, carnivalistic theater in Morocco, and avant-garde drama in Iraq.

A well-known Upper Egyptian adaptation of Othello took place in the late 1960s and was a great success. It was revived in Spring 1991 in the Egyptian provinces. This adaptation by Mahmud Isma’il Jad of Qina is entitled ‘Atallah (one of the Arabized forms of Othello); instead of using the original subtitle, “The Moor of Venice,” it is identified as “A Popular Epic”; Desdemona becomes Fatimah (a popular name for women in Arab-Islamic culture; the equivalent of Every Woman), Iago becomes Dahi (literally “immolator”), Cassio becomes Hasan (literally “beautiful/good”), cousin of Fatimah, and Bianca becomes a gypsy named Ma’zuzah (literally “dear woman”). It was first performed during a popular religious festival (of ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Maghribi of Qina) using the traditional folk songs of Upper Egypt and religious chants in honor of the Prophet. The play opens with a chorus of singers called madahin (literally panegyrists).12

The first Act takes place in a cafe where ‘Atallah—a respectable and generous outsider who ends up marrying Fatimah, daughter of Shaykh Radwan—is being discussed, in a dramatic exposition of the main characters. ‘Atallah has lent money to Fatimah’s family to pay for her operation and to provide for other family needs, without boasting about his deed. Fatimah is considerably younger than ‘Atallah, and is—in contrast to him—literate. When ‘Atallah asks for Fatimah’s hand, her mother is reluctant and casts doubts on the propriety of the marriage. She reminds her family that Fatimah is supposed to marry her cousin Hasan—as traditional Arabs prefer first cousin marriages and these are arranged for

12 ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Maghribi (of the Maghrib, i.e., Moroccan) is the patron saint (wali) of Qina. He came originally from the area of present-day Ceuta and was educated in Fez. After his pilgrimage to Mecca, he settled in Qina and died there around 1195 (Garcin 161).
them in childhood. In engineering his plot, Dahi plays on the fact that both Fatimah and Hasan are literate and cousins intended for each other.

The second Act opens with the wedding of Fatimah and ‘Atallah. Dahi gets an acquaintance to pick a fight with Hasan, which mars the happy occasion. When ‘Atallah wants to know how the unpleasant quarrel started and who is to blame, he asks Dahi, who insinuates that the fight was triggered by Hasan’s rejection of the wedding. ‘Atallah, who had asked Hasan to be the manager of his mill, is miffed by his behavior and loses faith in him. Dahi then advises Hasan to get Fatimah to intercede on his behalf. Hasan, having done so, departs. At that very moment ‘Atallah arrives, and Dahi insinuates a suspicious departure. Fatimah’s plea on Hasan’s behalf irritates ‘Atallah even more.

When Fatimah accidentally drops the silk handkerchief given to her by ‘Atallah, Wadidah (literally “friendly woman”) picks it up and gives it to her husband Dahi. The handkerchief is then used as a proof of betrayal as Dahi claims he saw Hasan with it.

In the third Act Hasan gives the handkerchief he finds in his pocket to Ma’zuzah. When ‘Atallah asks Fatimah for the handkerchief, he discovers she does not have it, which confirms his suspicion. Dahi conceals ‘Atallah and talks to Hasan about Ma’zuzah while ‘Atallah assumes the conversation is about Fatimah.

‘Atallah determines to kill Fatimah and goes to find her asleep. The rest of the drama follows the plot line of Othello with appropriate changes in dialogue to suit the change in cultural context. When confronted by Wadidah, ‘Atallah produces the handkerchief as the ultimate proof of betrayal. Wadidah then explains, and Dahi subsequently confesses. ‘Atallah commits suicide but leaves a repentant Dahi to suffer all his life for his crime.

The play triggered a great deal of discussion, mostly welcoming it as an event. For instance, Ghadah Al-Samman, the Syrian novelist and journalist, applauded the transformation of Othello into a peasant art work, told by a hakawati (traditional story-teller), accompanied by a rababah (traditional chord instrument) chorus, and beautifully directed by Emile Jirjis. Sami Khashabah, an Egyptian critic, felt that ‘Atallah was outstandingly successful in its use of a chorus. The director managed to make the chorus functional as well as relevant to the cultural environment. The chorus commented on, set forth and linked scenes.

Louis ‘Awad, by contrast, criticized the play on the grounds that it is not genuinely “rural,” since it represents the conquering intrusion of Cairene norms into the countryside. Furthermore, he questioned the ability of folkloristic art to express the complexities of modern man in developing countries (‘Awad “Al-Arajuz”).

Muhammad ‘Udah, a prominent Egyptian journalist, was more
analytical in his article entitled “Shakespeare for the Masses.” He thought the adaptation and direction of ‘Atallah, by Jad and Jirjis respectively, was exemplary. It offered a new approach to Shakespeare that “kept his spirit, but recreated his text,” making the play an authentic model for Egyptianizing the world legacy. ‘Udah condemns the habitual stereotyped presentation of the countryside, the stock presentation of peasant and land-owner, and the imposition of cosmopolitan themes and poor performances on the rural community in the name of progressiveness, and he advocates a true popular cultural expression—not mere revolutionary slogans—of the kind that has been achieved in the play.

Abdul Mun‘im Salim, an Egyptian dramatist and short story writer, pointed out how the racial issue in Othello has been dropped in ‘Atallah and replaced by emphasis on the generation gap between the young Fatimah/Desdemona and ‘Atallah/Othello on one hand, and class difference of rich/poor on the other hand. Salim ascribed the success of the play to the imaginative transplanting of the drama—through the addition of local color and the modification of the plot—to a new place and habitat.

In an article by an anonymous author in a drama review, the play is seen as particularly successful since it deals with an Upper Egyptian issue: revenge and excessive emotionalism that often lead to crime. Thus the reviewer sees the relevance of the play and criticizes the Cairene audience that snubbed the play for not matching the original. The very fact that the audience in Qina responded to the performance by warning the hero about the villain’s plot is seen as a sign of success. Another reviewer in a local paper points out how the Qina Othello ends up by asking the audience their views on what happened (Baqtar), thus adding a Brechtian touch.

All in all, the adaptation integrates the work into its performative context, rendering it organic while raising social issues. It strives to produce a critical consciousness among the spectators that would help them resolve some of the persistent ills of their own society.

If this adaptation of Othello represents the rural, peasant, folkloristic and socialist perspective, then the 1983 film adaptation of Othello entitled Al-Ghirah al-qatilah (Murderous Jealousy), directed by Egyptian director ‘Atif Al-Tayib (1947-95), may be seen as the

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15 Emile Jirjis graduated from the Institute of Dramatic Art (Cairo) in 1963. His direction of the play was derived from his belief in the notion of al-masrah al-shamil (total theater), with music, dance, and multiple artistic media—most appropriate for rural Egypt. His approach to decor is simple, but not simplistic; and it can be realized in any village anywhere (“Mumathilu al-aqalim” 32). Jirjis received the second prize for directing this play.
ideological perspective of a national-bourgeois, urban, upwardly mobile, capitalistic middle class projected onto Othello.

The plot of Othello is adapted in this film to comment on fidelity and betrayal in the highly unstable social and economic order caused by the introduction of privatization and the “open door” policy that characterized Egypt in the 1970s. It presents the story of Dina/Desdemona and ‘Umar ‘Atallah/Othello. The latter is a proud engineer who is reluctant to marry his beloved Dina because he cannot provide the bourgeois lifestyle that befits her. When a promising possibility of a higher standard of living is on the horizon, he marries her, but refuses to invest her money in his enterprise. They go for a trip with his long-standing friend Sami/Cassio, along with Mukhlu/Iago and his wife. Instead of a handkerchief, a necklace becomes the token. Mukhlu/Iago convinces ‘Umar/ Othello that it was given to Sami/Cassio. The movement between Venice and Cyprus is replaced by movement between Cairo and Alexandria. Dina goes back to bring her jewelry to help her husband who is financially in need, but he is too proud to accept the offer. Thus she entrusts the jewelry to Mukhlu/Iago. Dina’s innocent trip to Cairo to help her husband is misconstrued by ‘Umar/Othello as a weekend spent with his friend Sami/Cassio. ‘Umar/Othello goes to strangle Dina/Desdemona, while Mukhlu/Iago takes the jewelry and tries to escape. In the meantime Sami/Cassio arrives with the needed money. A dog prevents Mukhlu/Iago from departing and his theft is uncovered. Everything falls into place and Dina/Desdemona is saved; it is a melodrama that ends well and that reverses the tragic principle.

Another adaptation of Othello that transforms the Shakespearean plot is by the Moroccan ‘Abd al-Karim Birshid. His dramatic adaptation was performed by the Dramatic Avantgarde troupe of Casablanca in 1975-76, directed by Ibrahim Wardah. The play is entitled ‘Utayl wal-khayl wal-barud (Othello, Horses and Gunpowder). In the play black African masks and sub-Saharan music were used. Besides ‘Utayl/Othello and Maymunah/Desdemona, the cast of characters includes Shahrayar, the Play Director, and Mr. Ambiguity, among others.

The influence of Pirandello is seen in the dialogue: there is a theater within a theater, and a reflection on acting while acting—a sort of mise-en-abyme, giving the text a self-reflexive mood, and reflecting the poetics of both The Arabian Nights and the French nouveau roman. The play evokes varied myths, such as those of Atlas, Oedipus, and Jonah. In an intertextual play within the Play, ‘Utayl/Othello, annoyed with Mr. Ambiguity, tries to strangle him while the latter reminds him that he is not Maymunah—a common Arabic name for a girl, which also echoes Desdemona (Birshid 13). The shifts of scenes represent the mental states of the Direc-
tor, in a way reminiscent of Fellini’s *Otto e mezzo* ("8½").

In this play, the betrayal of Shahrayar—his wife’s adultery with a black slave—is evoked and compared to ‘Utayl/Othello. But Shahrayar here is not the all-powerful Oriental despot, but a Third-World ruler who exploits his people in the service of external powers. He is a Shahrayar seen through the prism of Frantz Fanon, and especially his *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952). And here the Pirandellesque approach, the masks, the impersonations—all begin to have a Fanonesque dimension. Shahrayar admits that he is a pawn made to hate slaves though he is one himself (Birshid 27). The criticism of Shahrayar is possible only through the clown’s jokes (Birshid 31-32), in themselves “plays” akin to the Play in question. In this context acting, pretending, and alluding become a reference to the inability to speak directly and thus an invitation to the audience to reconsider and reflect on the far-fetched, hidden, and indirect message of the Play. Thus the Director becomes the invisible hand that moves the actors/pawns. By extension and implication the Director becomes an allegory of the decision-maker behind the scenes, the imperial power. And here again, there is an interplay between the technical and dramatic sense of the term “scene” and its general and metaphoric sense.

Othello is presented in the adaptation as a Moroccan mercenary (Birshid 37) who goes to Indochina to fight. His mother gives him an amulet to protect him on his voyage. His father gives him prayer beads and advises him to recite the Quran. Maymunah/Desdemona gives him a strand of her hair, requesting fidelity. She is “the spirit of my village,” as ‘Utayl/Othello says. Perhaps this explains the need to kill Maymunah, so as to free himself from his roots (Birshid 43).

The drama, as the Director (a character in the Play) says, has to have a struggle, and the choice is between siding with the victims or the executioner. ‘Utayl is tempted by medals, toys and gunpowder, and in a vision resembling one at the opening of the Play, he is shown going to fight enemies—unknown to him—in Indochina. In a different setting, ‘Utayl accuses the Director of being Iago (scene v), and attempts to strangle him. The ship, a symbol of history, sails on.

The drama is a one-act play in seven scenes, the last of which is called “the game of illusion and reality,” a rubric that carries with it the very notion of theatricality. Birshid calls his theater *ihtifali* (celebrationist), as if it were a carnival. He advocates “celebrationist realism” and reproduces the role-playing of everyday life on stage in order to bring home the reality of daily pretenses. Putting on and taking off masks fills this function. The author asserts that all his plays end without conclusion, i.e. are open to the possible, so that the work will continue to be written, as it
were, in the mind of the spectator (Qissimi 489).

While Jad’s Upper Egyptian folk adaptation tries to deal with traditional issues (revenge, marriage with outsiders, and generation gaps) by combining Shakespeare with folk drama, the cinematic adaptation joins Shakespeare to economic wishful thinking, and Birshid’s adaptation marries Shakespeare to Fanonesque perspectives and Pirandello’s dramatics, the Iraqi poet and dramatist Yusuf al-Sayigh, in his two-act play “Desdemona” (1989), combines Shakespeare with a detective story plot and the Rashomon effect. How the intrigue takes place, who the traitor is, and what his motivation might be—all these issues are raised, but not resolved. Philosophical indeterminacy is combined with the labyrinthine detective plot.

The play was produced by three different Iraqi directors—the most prominent being Ibrahim Jalal, who developed a theory of performance combining Brecht’s intellectual distancing with Aristotle’s emotional catharsis. The other two directors were Naji ‘Abd Al-Amir and Salah Al-Qassab (Yahya, “Al-Tajrib” 144). It was also reproduced for the radio in Egypt by Abu Bakr Khalid. The variety of the productions attests not only to the continual interest in the play of Othello, but also to the ambiguity inherent in this Iraqi adaptation and the continuing possibilities for re-interpretation.

Since the plot of Othello is known and ever-present in the mind of the spectators, al-Sayigh dispenses with exposition and prologue and starts with the murder. The play is set in a contemporary investigation setting with hidden tape-recorders that are replayed and secret chambers in which the confessions and claims of others can be heard. This reproduces the ambiance of a police-run state, characteristic of many post-independent countries in the Third World. Everyone seems to be implicated depending on whose account one follows. Alternate and contradictory views of the murder and its motivation are presented. On one hand, ‘Utayl is portrayed as impotent and Desdemona as a virgin; thus the killing is motivated by frustration rather than jealousy. On the other hand, ‘Utayl is also projected as sleeping with Emilia, who is infatuated with him and hates the snobbish Desdemona. It is, therefore, an issue of either subsexuality or supersexuality; what is at stake is either an impotent Othello or a randy Othello. With frequent flashbacks, we are made to waver between an Iago who deceives an

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14 The “Rashomon Effect,” an expression that derives from Kurosawa’s film Rashomon, refers to the effect of conflicting multiple points of view in narrating the central crime, which cannot be synthesized to establish the truth (Heider 73-81).

15 For further information on the reception of the play, see Yahya “Yusuf Al-Sayigh” 76-81 and Al-A’raji 59-63.
Othello, and an Othello who deceives an Iago by going to bed with his wife Emilia. The motif of the handkerchief is present, but what it demonstrates is controversial. Some characters maintain that it was given by Othello to Emilia, and so when Iago displays it to prove Desdemona’s betrayal, this could hardly have convinced Othello. The murder was not, therefore, a product of Moorish gullibility. While Iago thinks that Desdemona is too good for Othello, Cassio in this play thinks, in contrast, that unworthy Desdemona is no match for Othello. Cassio’s homoerotic attraction to Othello, as suggested by the dialogue, drives him to convince Othello of Desdemona’s “infidelity.” As it turns out, Othello’s attempt at strangling the still virgin Desdemona does not kill her, but she commits suicide when she overhears the accusations of Cassio.

The play circles around the impossibility of comprehending the truth behind the intention of the (conjugal) crime on one hand, and on the other it shows how every character is implicated in the crime—each in his/her own way. No one is really innocent. Each is jealous of the other and would like to harm him/her. The conclusion, as put in the mouth of the investigator, is: “There is no absolute traitor. The crime is a complete institution” (Al-Sayigh 27). Gender issues, sexual desires, and power perspectives intermingle to show the complexity of human relations and envies, and the difficulty of isolating facts and arriving at truth; eventually the entire network is responsible, not only a given individual. The play does not attempt to present a clear-cut solution to the riddle of the murder, though it creates a dark mood piece, where the opposition between innocence and guilt are blurred since everyone participates in a murderous institution.

The Intertext

Othello figures in passing or as a structural base in some Arabic literary works. It is present in the form of a reference to the Shakespearean play, a discussion of it, or a comparison to it.

One of the most important novelists in the Arab world is the Sudanese Tayeb Salih, best known for his seminal novel Mawsim al-hijrah ila al-shimal, 1966 (Season of Migration to the North, 1969). Too complicated to summarize, the novel is essentially about a prodigal Sudanese, a product of English colonialism, who excels in his studies, seduces white women, kills his English wife in a moment of erotic ecstasy, and after serving his prison term, goes back to a Sudanese village. There he lives incognito until one day he disappears in the Nile. The story is narrated by a younger-generation Sudanese who has come back from his studies in England and meets the protagonist Mustafa Sa’eed in the village. He gradually
begins to put together the different pieces of Sa’eed’s life as he hears them from different and conflicting sources. The translator, Denys Johnson-Davies, says about the novel:

_Season_ has been variously described as an “Arabian Nights” in reverse, or as a story of a modern-day Othello who seeks to turn the political tables on the West by bedding as many of its women as he can. (Johnson-Davies v)

There are two direct references to _Othello_ in the novel. The protagonist Sa’eed compares himself to Othello as he talks to Isabella Seymour, an English woman whom he seduces. The author also reproduces Desdemona’s chain of emotions when encountering Othello and links them to Seymour’s psyche—a chain that will be reproduced by other English women who fall in love with Sa’eed:

There came a moment when I felt I had been transformed in her eyes into a naked, primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungles. This was fine. Curiosity has changed to gaiety, and gaiety to sympathy, and when I stir the still pool in the depths the sympathy will be transformed into a desire upon whose taut strings I shall play as I wish. “What race are you?” she asked me. “Are you African or Asian?” “I am like Othello—Arab-African,” I said to her. (Salih, _Season_ 38)

Mustafa Sa’eed also relates:

The ships at first sailed down the Nile carrying guns not bread, and the railways were originally set up to transport troops, the schools were started so as to teach us how to say “Yes” in their language. They imported to us the germ of the greatest European violence, as seen on the Somme and at Verdun, the like of which the world has never previously known, the germ of a deadly disease that struck them more than a thousand years ago. Yes, my dear Sirs, I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history. “I am no Othello, Othello was a lie.” (Salih, _Season_ 95)

The implication of the above is that an outsider is not assimilated to the civilization of conquering Europe, as Othello was, but stands out as a poisonous thorn in its flesh.

Mustafa Sa’eed’s English wife, Jean Morris, was also not Desdemona; the handkerchief token was played in reverse:

I knew she was unfaithful to me; the whole house was impregnated with the smell of infidelity. Once I found a man’s handkerchief which wasn’t mine. “It’s yours,” she said when I asked her. “This handkerchief isn’t mine,” I told her. “Assuming it’s not your handkerchief,” she said, “what are you going to do about it?” On another occasion I found a cigarette case, then a pen. “You’re being unfaithful to me,” I said to her. “Suppose I am being unfaithful to you,” she said. “I swear I’ll kill you,” I shouted at her. “You only say that,” she said with a jeering smile. “What’s stopping you from killing me? What are you waiting for? Perhaps you’re waiting till you find a man lying on top of me, and even then I don’t think you’d do anything. You’d sit on the edge of the bed and cry.” (Salih, _Season_ 162)

Clearly the inversion of the type of hero (_Othello_) and his function in Europe is followed by inversion in the rest of the motifs. An anti-Othello in Salih’s novel finds the handkerchief of his wife’s lover and is unable to rise to the occasion.
The comparatist Barbara Harlow sees *Season* as an ironic counterpart to *Othello*:

*Season* is, generally, a novel, a form imported by the Arabs from the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Europe and the Middle East confronted each other over issues of culture, colonialism and curiosity. But if *Season* is, by Western literary critical definitions, a novel, it nonetheless participates as well in what, in Arabic literary terms is called *mu’aradah*, literally opposition, contradiction, but here a formula whereby one person will write a poem, and another will retaliate by writing along the same lines, but reversing the meaning. Tayeb Salih’s use of the “novel” form might be taken as a practice of this sort. It is a re-reading of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, a restatement of the tragedy, a re-shaping of the tragic figure of the Moor. (Harlow 75)

This desire to counter the Shakespearean image of Othello, and by extension the Orientalist image of an Arab, takes in *Season* the form of a revenge that is no longer conjugal jealousy but collective rage. The crime is not undertaken as an emotionally miscalculated passion, a flaw, as in the Elizabethan drama, but designed in a cold-blooded and calculated way. Violence, duplicity, fragmentation, and schizophrenia seem the inevitable results of North-South encounters in colonial enterprises, as the novel suggests. The protagonist Mustafa Sa’eed is Othello and Iago simultaneously.

The Ugandan novelist and critic Peter Nazareth confirms this when he points out the function of Othello in *Season*:

Mustafa’s constant linking of himself to Othello reveals both his wish to understand himself through art, and his inability to do so since his reference to Othello comes out of his desire to exploit the white women for revenge. Othello too was an Arab-African who lived in the alien white world, and this is why he could be manipulated into believing Desdemona had betrayed him: but he killed her out of love, not cultural or historical revenge. (Nazareth 131)

Another Arab critic, Afnan Al-Qasim, argues that Sa’eed rejects the identification with Othello partly because he is unable, like him, to kill himself after killing Desdemona/Jean. Thus, according to the critic he does not fall into a classical Shakespearean type of tragedy but into a classical melodramatic tragedy. Al-Qasim sees the hero as reversing the tragic *hamartia*; instead of possessing a human flaw, he becomes, in *Season*, a sort of superman who aspires to a utopian society. Thus he is unable to represent the dialectical struggle of reality (Al-Qasim 20-22).

In contrast, Muhiy al-Din Subhi sees in *Season* an exploration of social relations. Both in *Season* and in *Othello* the tragic is seen to be the outcome of a cultural encounter that embodies a misunderstanding. Both heroes are unable to establish meaningful human relationships with the Other, and fall easily into devastating misunderstandings. According to him, Othello and Desdemona represent the relations of an aging Arab-Islamic culture with the childlike renascent Europe, while in *Season* Jean represents a strong Europe, dictating the conditions of war and peace. In fact
the feeling of communication between the hero and heroine of Season comes from their shared pleasure in a crime, as if the twain can only meet at the brink of death. The critic sees the protagonist as carrying the collective memory of the Arabs who have been constantly threatened from the time of the Crusaders to that of Zionist settlers, and passing through direct colonialism. Thus Sa‘eed is seen as a personification of that resentment (Subhi 39-65).

In lectures and interviews, Tayeb Salih has admitted not only to the influence of Shakespeare, but also to a desire to match what Shakespeare did, saying: “By creating a mythology, ultimately we have to present something of our mind” (Hijab 66). He added that he wanted to create a character who is all intellect, without heart, as well as to represent the illusory relations between Arab-Islamic culture and Western European culture, and that Sa‘eed himself returned to Sudan as a kind of colonialist (Muhammadiyah 125-26). Tayeb Salih explained the relationship between Othello and his own protagonist (Mustafa Sa‘eed), saying that the reception of Othello in Venice was unconvincing, since Othello accepts his role as an army general fighting on behalf of Europe. The drama of Othello is presented as a sentimental one, though, Salih believes, it should have been considerably more than that: a cultural drama. Salih then removes the drama from its individual and romantic perspective and situates it in a social and cultural context. For Salih, Mustafa Sa‘eed is a more genuine portrait of a “Moor” in Europe. He murders Jean Morris, the anti-Desdemona figure in the novel, because he refuses to play the role assigned to him by European culture. In the trial, Salih explains, Sa‘eed realizes that he has failed as an actor because the role is not realistic. Sa‘eed’s return to the Sudanese village represents his desire to give up acting and go back to his roots. The tragic element according to Salih is that having been accustomed to “acting,” he was unable to shed the masks and personae, and he was forced to act there too (Muhammadiyah 132-33). In fact what Salih is arguing, through an elaborate narrative and intertextual structure, is what the American writer Thomas Wolfe said in far simpler terms: “You can’t go home again.”

Salih wanted to revise Shakespeare and correct Othello’s image by presenting a more authentic representation of a “Moor” in “Venice” seen through the prism of a colonized person whose roots are ruptured. He can neither graft himself properly onto the Other nor rejoin the source.

In her “novel of formation,” Bildungsroman, entitled Lina: Lawhat fatat dimashqiyyah, 1982 (Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl, 1994) after the name of the Damascene heroine, the Syrian novelist and poet Samar Attar (Al-‘Attar) tries to link the story of Othello to the collective poetic reservoir of the Arabs while lean-
ing on it as a metaphor of possessive love, jealousy, and erotic fantasy.

References to Othello abound in the novel, starting with the young man with “jealous” eyes who is infatuated with Lina, and threatens to “strangle her” and strangle himself if he finds her with another man, and who gives her “a bad translation of Othello” (Attar 163). Later on, the heroine describes her anxiety as she is getting ready to participate in a school performance of Othello (Attar 174-78). Lina, who is playing Desdemona, thinks of her jealous beau—likely to be among the front-row spectators—as she approaches the stage. Her interior monologue revolves, then, around the love-hate relationship between them, and she sees herself as nothing more than a “white ewe” tuples by a “black ram” (Othello, I. i. 89 and 88 respectively). Othello’s description of Desdemona as a “strumpet” (V. ii. 78, 80) is recalled as well as Iago’s: “you’ll have/your daughter cover’d with a Barbary horse; you’ll/ have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have/coursers for cousins, and gennets for Germans” (I. i. 110-13).

Mixing animal and human elements, and recalling erotic images, Lina incarnates Desdemona, while imagining her young boyfriend in the black figure. The last scene of the school play, as Attar narrates in her novel, is so convincing that a voice in the audience cries: “Don’t strangle her!” (like the audience in Qina in Upper Egypt when Jad’s adaptation was presented), and applause is mixed with girlish whimpering. When Lina’s young man expresses his love in possessive terms, she recalls Othello’s words before murdering Desdemona (Attar 192). The rumors of Lina’s rebellion and the feminist dimension of the novel overlap and crystallize. In an associative chain, Lina recalls literary scenes of love: from The Arabian Nights, from courtly and Udhri love (unconsummated love typically associated with the Arabian Udhra tribe in early Islam), etc. only to conclude to herself, half sarcastically, that lovers have not been strangling their beloved ones only because the opportunity was not present (Attar 194). In the protagonist’s revolt against patriarchy, she thinks of other cases where men abused women. She toys with the idea of Shakespeare’s possible exposure to the life story of the Syrian medieval poet Dik Al-Jinn of Homs—whose biographers expounded on his murdering his beloved and innocent wife accused falsely of adultery and his belated recognition—and muses that this rather than Cinthio might be Shakespeare’s source. Eventually, she falls back, not on the possible historical link between the two dramas, but on cultural dispositions and ethnic similarities. Lina concludes that the poet of Homs and the Moor of Venice both belong to her race and culture: they both exhibit jealousy and male possessiveness.

The Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr’s short story entitled “The Sor-
rows of Desdemona,” which appeared in her translated collection *The Wiles of Men and Other Stories* (1992), revolves around a young girl who is rehearsing the role of Desdemona for a high school performance of *Othello*. The director of the school play is the teacher Mrs. Inayat, who is highly admired by Muna, the student protagonist. The story opens as follows:

Mrs. Inayat came up to her and touched her head with the palms of her hands, causing her to bend forward, and said in her English that seemed as though it had been running in her blood for generations, “No, not like that, Muna. Desdemona couldn’t be like that in this situation. Be more frightened, more submissive and miserable, with your head like this—bend forward.” (Bakr 27)

The interior monologue of the student actress reveals her feminist inclinations and impatience with male authoritarianism. She is contrasted with her teacher, Mrs. Inayat, whose mother followed her father “like a dog following its master” (Bakr 28). At one point in the rehearsal the teacher tells her students:

“That was what Desdemona’s feelings were—a mixture of fear, pain and contempt. She was suffering just like a sparrow that is incapable of battling against the wind. Do you understand? Listen: human beings can express such pain in many ways. Now close your eyes and for three minutes think about Desdemona’s sorrows and how you’d express such pain. Come on, let’s begin.” (Bakr 30-31)

In Muna’s stream of consciousness, focusing on how her family would treat her with mistrust and victimize her as a girl, she somehow manages to reproduce the sorrows of a Desdemona:

Muna too closed her eyes and thought about Desdemona’s sorrows, saying to herself that her young brother would open the door and scream “Muna’s come!” He would point to his throat with a quick gesture as though someone were cutting the throat of a chicken and would stick his tongue out gloatingly. As soon as the door closed her mother would be in the hallway, meeting her with abuse, and she would say that she had been at school in the group taking coaching in physics, and her father would shout out that he had the curriculum of the group and that there were no classes on a Tuesday. She would go on swearing to him that she was telling the truth, and he would shout and say he wasn’t a liar, then he would go up to her and give her two slaps across the face. Of course as usual she wouldn’t cry; she would look at him with contempt and her mother would drag her away by the hand, weeping and cursing fate which had afflicted her with daughters. In a histrionic movement her father would approach her in an attempt to strike her again, but her mother would entreat him by the beloved Prophet and his own virtuous mother not to do so, and she would heap more abuse on Muna, reminding her that her father was a sick man and that she’d bring about his death by such behaviour. She would want to scream, to utter long, endless groans, to weep, to throw up everything in her stomach. (Bakr 51)

The point that Salwa Bakr is trying to make, without ever stating it, is akin to the one made by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story “La Busca de Averroes” (Averroes’ Search): in order to enact an emotion you have to find its correlative within you. Muna’s victimization corresponds to Desdemona’s.

In these two narratives by two Arab feminists, the identification is not with an “Arab” Othello, but with the victim Desdemona.
Here, as well as in the two works to be discussed next, the author’s imagination is captured more by the issue of the innocent victim than by national identity. It is not ethnicity that matters but oppression, and therefore there seems to be a shift from a nationalist to a moral perspective.

Othello is also incorporated in Al-Waqai’ al-gharibah fi hayat Sa’id Abu Al-Nahs al-mutasha’il, 1974 (The Secret Life of Saeed, The Ill-fated Pessoptimist, 1982) by the Palestinian Emile Habiby (1920-96), which was originally published in Haifa in 1974. It has been described by Edward Said as “a carnivalesque explosion of parody and theatrical farce,” and it has been called “an Arab Tristram Shandy” (as quoted in the blurb for the 1989 edition). The novel is about a Palestinian picaro living in Israel, who eventually is transformed from a servile character into a combative one. The thirty-seventh chapter of the novel is entitled “How Saeed Finds Himself in the Midst of an Arabian-Shakespearean Poetry Circle.” What is humorous in the title is the contrast between the length and style of the heading, made in the traditional manner of Classical Arabic books on one hand, and the content—Shakespeare’s poetry—on the other. Furthermore, the hyphenated epithet, “Arabian-Shakespearean,” is pregnant with the tension caused by joining two separate and distant poetics. The scene is an Israeli jail where the warden is conversing on Shakespeare with the Palestinian prisoner Saeed. The latter, trying to accommodate and please, is most willing to take the part of Desdemona—implying a willingness to play victim.

Then he [the warden] stood up and began acting the role of Othello giving Desdemona the fatal kiss. I stretched out on the ground like her, but he said, “Get up! It’s not time for that yet!” (Habiby, Secret 129)

Later on, the guard asks the ill-fated prisoner what he talked about with the warden, and Saeed says: “Oh, about Shakespeare and Othello and Desdemona. . . I quote from the first and lie down like the third” (Habiby, Secret 129). The jailers give him a terrible beating, insult him, and call him “our very own Shakespeare.” While he was hoping to show off his culture to his masters and impress them, he is met with ridicule as if he were Candide.

The Moroccan critic Sa’id ‘Allush points out that Habiby makes use of established models of heroism drawn from literature. Such ready-made heroisms are poked fun at, creating a tragi-comic work (‘Allush 64). The protagonist’s use of Shakespeare inverts the tragic pathos into farce.

When I conducted an informal interview with Habiby in Cairo, he would not give me a reason for having chosen to refer to Othello specifically in his allusion to Shakespeare, but he informed me that he was dazzled by Paul Robeson playing Othello, and specific-
cally by his articulation of the lines: “I kiss’d thee ere I kill’d thee, no way but this,/Killing myself, to die upon a kiss” (V. ii. 359-60). When Saeed, the servile protagonist—anxious to please his oppressors, the Israeli jailers—plays Desdemona and lies down, helpless and victimized in front of the warden playing Othello, the scene does not evoke pity but ridicule. Here, the feminization and victimization of the Palestinian in Israel are both asserted and later rejected. By the end of the novel the docility of the protagonist Saeed is changed into resistance. The function of laughter is to break the crippling effect of fear and intimidation. Palestine and the Palestinian resistance are therefore the crux of the novel, and the invocation of Othello is a motif that simply foregrounds the issue.

Palestine and the Palestinian cause are also the core of another play called Litamut Desdemona (Let Desdemona Die), 1970, by the Lebanese playwright Raymond Gébara, first performed in the Baalbek International Art Festival in the Fall of 1970. The play is supertitled: “A Dramatic Nightmare.” It was written against the background of the Palestinian tragedy of 1948, the Arab defeat of 1967, and the then recent death of President Nasser of Egypt and the fratricide known as “Black September.” The cast of characters includes seven males and one female—all nameless. The play presents a web of Pirandellesque horrors, requiring one of the characters to play the victim. Text, slides, music, and multivisual techniques were used in the performance and are indicated in the stage directions. There are no references to Othello in the text of the play aside from the presence of Desdemona in the title. Clearly, Desdemona intersects with the content of the play in the theme of innocent victim. The play itself does not evoke the political, except indirectly, and at a second remove in the order of hermeneutic interpretation. The spectator is confronted with a Christlike allegory projected in an avant-garde dramatic mode. From this postmodern “passion play,” replete with religious suggestiveness, the spectator is expected to make the link with victimized Palestine, a country that has not only been usurped by an enemy, but also renounced by its sister Arab countries. A critic and a prominent political scientist, Ghassan Salamé, who studied the Lebanese theatrical movement wrote:

It is interesting to note in relation to [Gébara’s] Desdemona how a play that has no reference whatsoever to public life can give rise to a political interpretation. On the surface of it, Desdemona is the story of a group of actors who are unable to perform their play unless one of them agrees to play the victim. The man without a number, the weakest of all, the last comer, is thus dragged, semiconscious, to be crucified. He is a naive person caught by his own goodness; he is the person who must die so that others may live. . .

The political interpretation cannot take place except a posteriori, and that is what makes it dicey. . . Isn’t Gébara wrong in leaving the field open to surmises by
not citing at all Palestine which, as he maintains, is the principal theme of his work? (Salamé 100-01)

Other works may be cited that have used Shakespearean texts to establish correspondences with the situations of the collective Self in the Arab World. The Egyptian author Ra’fat Al-Duwairi wrote a play, *Shakespeare malikan* (Shakespeare Rex), 1975, which was performed in Cairo in the popular district of ‘Ataba in 1976 under the more commercial title, “Shakespeare in ‘Ataba.” The play presents a semifictional biography of Shakespeare that portrays him as moving from being a commercial artist with his comedies to sacrificing material benefits for the sake of genuine art as presented in his tragedies. In this, the author indirectly condemns the erosion of artistic principles and values by financial temptations, as reflected in the literary scene in Egypt in the age of the “open door policy” in the 1970s. He calls for artistic integrity via Shakespeare.

Although *Othello* is mentioned in *Shakespeare malikan*, the play does not dwell on Othello. It essentially articulates the wavering of the artist between authentic art and commercialized art in terms of Hamlet’s self-interrogation: “To be, or not to be: that is the question,” i.e., to be or not to be an Artist.

Another play that uses the Othello motif is *Al-Muharrij* (The Jester), 1973, by the Syrian poet and dramatist Muhammad Maghut. The play denounces the ills of Arab society and its political order through satire. In this three-act play, the first act is devoted to a troupe of failed players enacting *Othello* in a poor neighborhood of an Arab city. Their performance is introduced as “committed art,” and the audience criticizes it on various grounds, including the adulteration of the purity of Arabic. What the actors perform in this play within a play is a comic version of *Othello* in the exaggerated melodramatic tradition of Yusuf Wahbi, the famous Egyptian stage and film actor, while the female dancer plays Desdemona, appearing in modern costume, swinging her handbag, and chewing gum. (Badawi, “Introduction” 15)

What transpires from the Arabization of *Othello* are the various concerns of Arab thought and culture as they evolved from the early to the late twentieth century. The trajectory of *Othello* in the land of the Arabs shows the waverings between fascination by, and anxiety about, the Other. Further, it demonstrates a will to challenge and revise what is conceived as a distorted image. One can also detect in the use of the English play a ploy to foreground issues that deal specifically with the Self.

In a seminal article on influence, by the late Egyptian critic

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16 This parallels *Othello in the Land of Wonders*, a play written by the late Iranian writer Gholamhossein Saedi in the mid 1980s, raising issues of women’s rights, censorship, and religious government when staging *Othello* in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Safa 131-63).
Abdul-Muhsin Taha Badr, it was argued—using the example of the impact of Charles Baudelaire on 'Abd al-Rahman Shukri—that the “influence” of the French poet on the Egyptian poet comes from the correspondence of Baudelairean imagery to Arab folk images, abundantly present in popular strata but unarticulated in the high tradition and the Arabic canon. Badr convincingly argues that the images gathered by Shukri from Les Fleurs du mal activate latent and repressed imagery in the receiver (Badr 52-69). An investigation of Othello’s Arabization makes it possible to generalize Badr’s thesis, demonstrating not so much that Shakespeare, the Other, can be grasped only through looking inside the Self, or that Shakespeare functions as a foreign literary curiosity, as that Shakespeare offers both a revealing mirror to the Self and a view into Elizabethan English literature. In that sense, Shakespeare’s Othello in the Arab world functions like the windowpane in Mallarmé’s poem “Les Fenêtres” — both transparent and reflective, allowing a view of the external while simultaneously reflecting the internal scene.

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