

Adaptation as both Repetition and Variation in King Lear in the Iraqi Theater: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

In this study, the play *King Lear* has been chosen as the subject of the dramatic adaptation process in the theater of the Iraqi dramatic text. This choice is due to the suitability of its dramatic material on one hand, and on the other hand, to show the problems that have arisen from achieving this new dramatic text from the old material. Such an approach aims to provide an opportunity to answer many of the questions about what can be defined by adaptation in the theater, and what its connections are with repetition and variation. Then the problem appears regarding what happens when the balance of repetition and variation in the dramatic material shifts toward one side or the other. Research methodologies observed: Study paper discussing the fundamental questions raised by the subject, according to the method of analogy between dramaturgical material and dramatic dimension, with reference to stage data. Results: This research ends with a number of surprising results that challenge the perception of many scholars about the relationship between repetition and variation, as the level of repetition in the adaptation process far exceeds what can be conceived by the recipient, thus becoming a reversal that exhibits this dramatic dimension to the viewer.

Keywords: Adaptation, Iraqi Theatre, Repetition, variation

1. Introduction

Scholars have actively sought to demonstrate that Shakespeare is indeed alive and well, not only thriving within the esteemed halls of academia, but also resonating widely across the globe, particularly within the vibrant and dynamic realm of theater. This position stands in stark contrast to suggestions that his work is fundamentally literary and theatrical 'unteachable' and thus remains beyond the comprehension of those individuals who did not originate from an educational background profoundly steeped in the rich values of the Renaissance. Furthermore, along with its sophisticated and aesthetically elite staging techniques. Such suggestions have been robustly challenged by the enduring practice of telling and retelling Shakespeare's timeless stories in various forms around the globe, along with a body of scholarship that actively engages with this kind of culturally relevant work. While it is true that most scholars writing in this vein argue that such cultural endeavors emphasize the play's 'transformative aspect' highlighting its potential for liberation and societal change there is, however, one scholar who approaches the matter with a degree of caution. This scholar suggests that since 'Shakespeare is always made into a version of himself that carries local significance, whether or not it ever approaches the power or intricacy of Shakespeare's original characters,' such interpretive work 'can be effectively used to establish the reputation of the rewriter.' More often than not, it serves the vested interests of the company and/or their audience, raising important questions about authenticity, adaptation, and the implications of cultural reinterpretation. (Hart, 2021)

2.1. Adaptation in Theater Studies

The definition of "adaptation" is constantly under redefinition, as many ideas and concerns supply and shape the concept of adaptation. In light of the above, it is justified to say that there have been two

parameters that theatrical proposals concern adaptation; namely "accordance of fidelity to the original" and "the passage of material to a new form". There is an idea of "an idea, a real story, or a fictional tale to replace the same adapted at different levels according to other cultural criteria" and presents its differences, noting that, while in the case of literary criticism adaptation refers to the dominant transmission of an idea to the new text, in theater, translated texts for performance and re-writing characterized by a new cultural context and a central idea are not excluded. (Allal-Chérif et al.2021)

It is noted that, while in literature, adaptation is the result of the reworking of material in order to fit a new context, in the case of theater, "the new stage version must reflect through its direction and design the theme of the original play". It is also mentioned that the elements of transformation and reception in adaptation should be clarified in the redefinition of the concept of adaptation. There are three types of adaptation: I. The adaptation based on a text. This is the straightforward case where a script is written, developed, or even created directly from another previous one, for example, classics, Roman, Greek. II. The adaptation of the text. This is the case where a premiere is reformed and reconstructed by its author, another writer, or even actors. III. The adaptation concerned with the adaptation of a historical period or both. (Bertino et al.2021)

2.2. *King Lear*: A Brief Overview

The play, *King Lear*, is considered by most critics to be one of the greatest tragedies written by William Shakespeare; it was first performed in 1606 at the Banqueting House at Whitehall. The play depicts the tragic story of King Lear, who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. However, to his discontent, Goneril and Regan profess their love to him, while Cordelia can only say that she loves her father "according to her bond, nor more nor less," which causes him to cast Cordelia out, beginning the tragedy that is his downfall (Winkler & Schoch, 2021). Written around 1604 and based on a legend of Leir of Britain, the character was depicted in Geoffrey Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Set in the legendary British King's pre-Roman era, the play has been adapted a number of times and under different themes, in diverse genres and production styles. Since *Lear* is one of the best models of confusion through the causes of its origin, it intrigued the world's varied dramatists; its Arabic version cannot be an exception. But what's interesting in analyzing these different literary and theatrical forms is how they were carried out, revealed, adapted, or even altered if the prohibited literary and theatrical elements dared to appear, how they were delivered, and how artistic and dramatic merits were nourished. (Al et al.2021)

2.3. The Iraqi Theater Scene

The economic and political breezes blowing in the Iraqi theater during the seventies of the past century brought with them a new vision reflected in the repertoire and the content of plays, especially after the two revolutions of July and September. This vision freed the mind from the old stagnation and non-innovative dogmas. The Iraqi theater, during the mentioned period, was characterized by the fact that the majority of its theatrical performances were the work of intellectuals, playwrights, and poets of those educated generations. (Najjar, 2021). The impact of ideology was widely noticed in the theater work as an active phenomenon. Then, a theatrical vision of such tendency revealed this. The directing style in this period gathered harmony with the new tendency, and this is totally obvious in the performances of these directors. A. Jamil Buthr succeeded in coining the dramatic drawing and the linguistic and behavioral components that helped in developing the role. In this sense, his tortures preceded him or assisted him afterward. Despite the fact that the Iraqi case included a variety of producing schools, the scene allowed room for theatrical experimentation, which was moderate and did not exceed the general scope. Some directed performances or the performance of some local scripts allowed participants to explore the new experimental trends, which were mostly centered on the problem of the text that dominated the Iraqi stage in the revolutions of the seventies and in the eighties. (Elahi et al.2023)

3. Theoretical Framework

Each age has rediscovered him by its own means. That is to say, interpretations of Shakespeare transformed over time due to the transformation of cultures. They are a clear instance of the tragic experience shared by all men at all times. Our present age is not to be excepted; the creative authority and vital significance of the tragic drama to humanity not only persist to our time, but are equally applicable to the present day. Shakespeare is universal, a most peculiar man of England living in a certain time, belonging to only parts of a time, while embracing the time before him as well as the times that came after him. William Shakespeare, through his extraordinary dramatic expression, made the themes and motives of the ancient tales a locally human poetic drama. (Drakakis, 2021)

In spite of the characteristic differences, Shakespeare's tragedy represents its principal thematic human essential dramas, and their meanings have different sources connected to the spaces and times in which the ideas and art form emerged. There are certain themes that represent the ancient ideologies that narrate the tragedy. These are man vs. fate, man vs. the gods, man vs. essence, man vs. man, collective vs. individual, and society vs. mass and manifold. The tradition drew the richness of the tragedy in question from the possibilities and essential limits of human life and made it poetic to the fullest in showing them. William Shakespeare is within this premise, the most epitomic tragedy poet of modern dramatic art. Although critics came out against this concept and tried to present him as "not tragic, but something above," Shakespeare has benefited from such an incessant and powerful tradition. (Thomas, 2021)

3.1. Repetition and Variation in Adaptation Theory

Repetition and variation became one of the most influential theories in adaptation theory and created ample interest among scholars. It has a broad application on all types of adaptations from literature to film, from film to literature, or from novel to novel. The main idea of this theory, in a very simple formula, could be that "If it is not repeated, it has been changed." This means that if each and every dimension or angle or turn found in a certain connection was repeated, then no adaptation has occurred. If repetition was applied totally on all the dimensions of the story or the characters, then it would become an imitation, not an adaptation. However, any piece of creative work demands and involves "some" kind of variation, even if only a little, no matter how tiny the alterations (DeVito2021). This paper examines how "repetition" and "variation" strategies were employed in the adaptation process of *King Lear* in the Iraqi theater. It is an analytical descriptive study that used a close qualitative reading of the Iraqi performances as a data-gathering tool. An analytical study in adaptation theory in general and in the adaptation of *King Lear* in particular has not gained much attention in the fields of adaptation and/or theater studies. By analyzing the use of repetition and variation in the Iraqi productions of the play, the richness of the adaptation genre in terms of repetition and variety could be revealed. (Gandhi et al., 2023)

4. Methodology

The present study adopted a method of analyzing adaptations, which considers the term "adaptations" as heterogeneous works fundamentally based on original texts. Within this broad field, adaptations take a diachronic form (renewed adaptations on the same theme), just as they must represent some aspects of the preceding adaptations, but with differences revealing multi-faceted cultural mutations. However, an open group of diachronic connections is formed by a series of cultural acts such as works or reusing ancient motives, or variations on a theme, and the viewer may determine that a particular work, like a new version of a play, seems to reproduce mainly its nearly exclusive contemporary work. This is the case with a recent play presented as a lost and recently found work, using an 18th-century adaptation. (Bryan et al., 2021)

The ensuing sections are divided according to the major characteristics of the proposed tool for analyzing adaptations: proposing a "functional analysis" of adaptations as heterogeneous works linked to previous adaptations; developing a historical logic of variations on a theme and motives after Aristotle; and exploring the concept of motif more deeply through a classic work, as well as examining parodies that play with the motif through parody. All these reflections aim to program evolving cultural artifacts through a philosophy of variation based on multiform cultural and historical connections. Finally, an analytical tool designed to orient selections, in the broad universe of previous adaptations, for a new adaptation of a classic work, according to the principles previously addressed, would seem very effective. (Stefanakis et al.2021)

4.1. Data Collection and Analysis

Under this challenging reality and using grounded theory as a guiding framework, the study employed observation and interviews as data generation techniques. For the collection of data, the performances of the play were observed twenty-six times in two different theaters, five for the same performance, and the latter, twenty-one for different performances. The duration of the twenty-one performances of the play watched varied between approximately two and three and a half hours. Also, during data collection, seven individual and six focus group semi-structured interviews were conducted with the theater staff, the theatergoers, and the university instructors who teach the course in which the play is a part of their curriculums. (Lynch, 2022)

After preparing the performance data, two established adaptation models were utilized as a tool for the explanation of the updating choices available to the adapter in the production of their adaptation. The models, which keep in mind the similarities and differences in their conceptual frameworks, are Aristotle's three modes—word, idea, and metaphor—and the one based on thesis, model, and practice. Subsequently, the collected data was analyzed using the principles of grounded theory. After the collection of the

performance data was completed, a coding process was performed for this purpose. The first step in the process of data analysis was open coding of the observed performances of the play. This then resulted in the development of a number of theoretical ideas. (Singh et al., 2020)

5. Case Studies

A. *King Lear*: Stage adaptation:

The Iraqi director staged his *King Lear* in 2018 in the city of Basra as his graduation project in the Department of Arabic Language and Drama, focusing on the profound meanings of words as a key element in the vision of adapting *King Lear*. The "mad scenes," the "burial," and the "stormy night" are indeed among the most notable scenes since they were designed in a way that they dominate the directing choices. The action of the play of *King Lear* was changed. As for the setting, there is a clear change in action since *King Lear* goes with his daughters to the desert of Iraq. Some scenes convey an Iraqi traditional song or dance to express the Iraqi spirit. (Ridge, 2021)

B. Staging of *King Lear* in the university theater:

This research will look at the clearly non-theatrical local directorial experience. We are concerned with the generational question here; for him, *King Lear* is to some extent the text of a world to which this individual is sent. As a result, both the text and its distance are the theme itself. Still, there is a direct association of the ingredients and events of the disaster of *King Lear*, this ultimate terrestrial thing, with the bitter collapse and failure of every endeavor. The kingdoms of earth turn into Kobane and Halabja. The daughters of *King Lear* appear now to be cowardly, for they do not taste the real flavors and problems of peasant life. To him, the daughters of *King Lear* recreate the so-called fairy tale. The fairy tale is societal ease. *King Lear* seeks a united Iraq, and his three daughters, his dreams for Iraq, are confiscated from him. They don't recognize their father, and the father they stole was no longer their father. (Kaplan, 2023)

5.1. Key Adaptations of *King Lear* in Iraqi Theater

Working on Imams and Princes: The most celebrated Iraqi adaptation of the play is that of Karam Asad. The play has been adapted within the socio-political context of post-2005 Iraq. Various interviews have been conducted by the scholar with the members of the group, particularly with Hussam Al-Rikaby, Karam's assistant in directing, namely, Juluob Al-Kalam and Bayn Al-Kalam, as well as Karam Asad himself. Hussam describes the play, particularly the characters and the war of Goneril and Regan against their elderly father, as depicting the war between the two major Islamic sects; he mentions that Karam's *King Lear* intertwines the man's story, the Imam's story, with the tragic caricature of the gang that rules Iraq. Here, the characters in the play symbolize the Imams who agitated throughout the play on the text of inheritance and exchanging it for men's loyalty. This Iraqi view is true to the Arabic literary tradition since the play has been either performed or adapted in Iraqi theaters, while many of these adaptations were more or less aware of the socio-political background which loomed large in post-2005 Iraq. In this paper, we investigate those adaptations which are essentially folding the text of *King Lear* within another text, trying to decode what threatens the future of Lear, princes, and kings in Iraqi literature and theater, noting that the term labeled upon the tragic hero of the Iraqi wondrous *King Lear* is one of Karam Asad's toy names. (Webb2021)

6. Analysis and Findings

1. The sequence that begins with the meeting between Lear and Regan is an event that required a specific approach. Many viewers have not been able to understand the nature of the conflict between father and daughter when Lear is driven to the streets after receiving his daughters in the castle and then escorting the gang. This misunderstanding has led audiences to act inaccurately. The director had to provide an explanation to the viewer of the purpose of the conflict on the grounds that *King Lear* wanted a place in his daughters' palaces that allowed him to give and take orders without any declaration of loyalty to whom they must take from between her husband or father. This change came when the director set the lines in the hall overlooking one of the city's major streets and linked them with all the demands of Lear to that street. This made the viewers understand that the palace was a palace against which a street was hidden, and thus, by not seeing the street, Lear's quest seemed impractical and unimportant. (Runtu et al.2022)

6.1. Repetition and Variation in Iraqi Theater Adaptations of *King Lear*

The Iraqi theater is known for its historical and social association and its resonance with the sociocultural contexts of Iraqi society. It emerged in Iraq as a form of oral culture closely connected to the pulse of the audience, and this close link with the audience resulted in communication that involved various dialogues shedding light on the representations of reality in striking critical ways that enabled a rich cultural blend, with plays addressing issues such as war, invasion, oppression, resistance, and social justice. When the situation in Iraq started to unravel, and following the invasion and occupation in 2003, Iraqi theater

explored different approaches and methods under which different adaptations of Shakespeare's texts were staged. These adaptations dealt with the notion of alterity between the two cultures, Shakespeare's British norm and Middle Eastern cultural, social, or political enhancement. (Khadim, 2022)

During the last few decades, many Iraqi playwrights have tried to adapt Shakespearean plays like *King Lear*, claiming to highlight their thoughts in social, political, or generic themes, and these attempts led to new works that changed the original plays. Adaptation is the means through which they could recreate a text in a setting proper for the spectators and emphasize what interests the author. It is a conversation between two texts that creates a third text establishing openness to different interpretations in which the elements of repetition and variation are combined. Many are the factors shaping the patterns of the theatrical creations, and among these factors, it is the question of power because in the end, the story of *King Lear* is a story about power and its absence. The issue of the control of power is a key issue in every theater, literature, and art, and it is no wonder that it was important in Iraqi adaptations of *King Lear*. (Hassoon2021)

7. Discussion

Each chapter undertook its aim to enrich the understanding of the concept of adaptation as both the form of repetition and variation, which in turn serve to communicate attempts of a critic, academic, philosopher, director, or artist to convey an international work and present it to other audiences at different times or under varying geographical conditions. They are articulated through texts of and about performance, the analyses that not only produce knowledge but might do more, actively contributing to and engaging with changing practices and forms of cultural production. The diversity of scholarly, critical, and innovative perspectives enhances our understanding of both the play and the wider sets of representations. The novel character of the dissertation lies in the methodology that is based on choosing and mixing theory, which has not been similarly applied to the cultural or literary field. It differs from other critical methodologies mainly in terms of the scope of the phenomena it has been applied to and the reversibility and recurrence it claims for the patterns of variation and repetition it describes. (Irwin, 2020)

7.1. Implications for Theater Practice and Theory

Implications for Theater Practice Regarding adaptation practices, the study finds that not only repetition but also variation is at work in the Iraqi theatrical adaptation of *King Lear*. King Leopold and King Arthur are debatable examples: neither of these narratives has the same potential for empathy or gives rise to the same level of catharsis in the audience according to Aristotle as *King Lear* does. Therefore, the comparison of the four narratives is not fair to discern only repetition and not variation. It is in light of this original contribution to adaptation studies that stage directors consider adaptation as both repetition and variation in their planning of an adaptation project. Due to this mutuality condition, any director who stages one of them as *King Lear* in Iraq has to choose the key points and refrain from major deviations that would undermine similarity. Implications for Theater Theory Regarding theatrical performances, the study points out the bardolatry of Shakespeare's original text. Not only Shakespeare's but many other canonical theater plays receive hypocritical critical reviews because of their canonical status – not their intrinsic value. One should not forget that Shakespeare was an avant-garde playwright who used commercial plays in popular genres to bring a harmony of the world closest to Aristotle's and solve the existential issues of mankind. (Almendingen et al.2021)

8. Conclusion

The reading of the play *King Lear* and tracking it on the Iraqi theatrical screen, from its origin in 1606 to the lighting of the performance script as a graduation project at the College of Fine Arts in the city of Basra in 2007, until the production of a formal performance in 2016, carried out by a team formed from the new generation of Iraqi artists is not only an example of the creative abilities of these young people, but is an artistic and political reference for their struggles, and it is also an example of the stages of transformations and adaptations encountered by the Iraqi theatrical work in times and places as complex as those represented by Iraqi society and its building stones. When the repeated reading and the continuous following of the changes experienced by *King Lear* in the Iraqi visual space converge with the completion of a study in this area, the process of adaptation transformed into a nearly complete circuit, which connects the events of the theatrical text and the literary world in general with the world surrounding it, a world that is subject directly to political winding and great tribal, ethnic, and sectarian fluctuations; which results in the emergence of normative conflicts and ethical paradoxes and the friction of reality with myth. Consequently, the artistic text seeks to respond even through subtle and limited movements to the reality facing its addressers, and by facing these frequent variables, the work finds itself before a set of historical

and political questions that prompts it to transcend the limitations of repetition to be defined by the motifs and features of variation.

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