

Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama in Iraqi Universities: A Pedagogical Reconsideration



DR MAJEED MOHAMMED MIDHIN is an Assistant Professor in Literature and Contemporary British Drama at the University of Anbar, Iraq. In 2017, he obtained a PhD in Literature from the University of Essex under the supervisions of Dr. Clare Finburgh and Dr. Elizabeth J. Kuti. He also has an MA in English Literature from the University Of Baghdad-College Of Languages. His field of interest is contemporary and modern British drama as it touches the immediate needs of people in society. He has published widely on British theatre, theatre criticism and Shakespearean drama. He also has participated in many colloquiums, conferences and seminars inside and outside the UK. Majeed works as a theatre translator. This year Majeed will be translating, among others, *Staff Happens*, by David Hare, from English into Arabic.

No doubt, William Shakespeare is an iconic figure all over the world. He is no longer exclusive to one country. Though he died four centuries ago, his themes and opinions, presented in his plays are still alive. They acquire the attention of a wide range of scholars who devoted their efforts to decode Shakespeare's messages. Moreover, the world-view of Shakespeare varies from one generation to another without a last consensus among them. So, to travel through four centuries of conflicting ideas and opinions is not an easy task to do. On the one hand, Shakespeare is still regarded as a controversial playwright whose plays' ideas are liable to multiple interpretations and because those ideas can be applicable to different cultures and societies.

Therefore, we cannot imagine studying or teaching literature without due reference to Shakespeare. Interestingly enough, as Iraqi scholars and teachers, we always believe that Shakespeare is more eastern than western.

Before going into details with teaching Shakespeare in Iraqi universities, it is important to shed light on the history of Shakespeare performance in Iraq. Looking back to the performance history of Shakespeare in Iraq, we see that his plays acquired a great attention for those who are interested in theatre. Many of Shakespeare's plays are presented on Iraqi theatre. At this point, I cannot fail to mention that the first

production was in 1924 when Jewish Literary Association presented *The Merchant of Venice*. In 1926, the students of Private School in Baghdad presented a play called "For the Sake of People". This play was inspired by Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Again in 1929, the Jewish School presented *Hamlet*. Also in 1935, the Followers of an Acting Association presented Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

All these plays are presented in Baghdad. Moreover, there are other productions in other areas such as Basra and Mosul. However, Shakespeare's plays need intellectual and responsive audience. So these early productions are presented to the elite of Iraqi society.

The last production was of six scenes from different Shakespeare's plays by Salh Mansi in 2016. These scenes are presented under the title "Treason" in Baghdad. However, it does not mean that Shakespeare disappeared before 2016. On the contrary, in 1971, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was presented in Mosul. In 1982, The Iraqi National Acting Troupe presented *A Midsummer Night Dream* by Iraqi director Dr. Sami Abdul Hameed. In 1985, Salh Al-Qasab directed Shakespeare's *King Lear* during Baghdad Festival for Arabic Theatre. In 1986, Dr. Sami Abdul Hameed composed a dramatic text, taken from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. In 1988, the director, Shafeeq Al-Mahdi presented Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

As we see, Shakespeare's plays have a wide resonance among Iraqi people. He has deep roots in Iraqi culture.

In Arab World in general and Iraqi society in particular, early modern drama, especially drama of William Shakespeare occupies a prominent place in educational syllabus not only in secondary schools but also in university level. It plays a vital role in creating a frame of mirror by which students see the Western world. Shakespeare's plays give them a fruitful source of Western culture. Through these plays, our students have known the principles of love, sacrifice and forgiveness. The old view of hostile West is demolished with the above themes.

Shakespeare can serve English departments in area of criticism, especially at the undergraduate level. As we already know, much of the new critical excitement in literary studies has been stimulated by Renaissance scholars reexamining their period and major authors. By and large, this tradition of Shakespeare teaching in Iraq has

been beneficial to our cultural and intellectual life. Today Shakespeare figures on the B.A. English literature curriculum of every Iraqi university. A good teacher does not find it difficult to communicate his/her joy of Shakespeare to his class, however poor the proficiency in English of that class may be. At the postgraduate level, the teaching may be much more analytical, speculative, and theoretical but the student's first and major response must be from the play as acted. As a teacher, no final solution or thesis concerning the play is given. This must be discovered by the student himself.

As far as university is concerned, students at departments of English, in Iraqi universities, are exposed to Shakespearean drama. Different genres of Shakespeare's plays are dealt with in deep and close analysis. Culturally, teaching Shakespeare's plays gives Iraqi students an insightful knowledge about the Western society as mentioned before. In doing so, their pejorative views about this society are drastically changed. In previous times, eastern people are used to look at Western people negatively without any values. Teaching and understanding Shakespeare's plays and the values presented help people think deeply in the dialogue of cultures. In other words, all people share same values regardless religion, ethnicity and language.

Accordingly, teaching Shakespeare is highly recommended here in undergraduate and postgraduate as well. Depending on class participation, the play is given much chance to be explored. Taken into consideration that the themes of Shakespeare's plays are universal and timeless, Students are motivated to read, discuss, analyze, memorize and act by using audio-visual aids. Shakespeare's characters are to handle as real people to make students understand and comprehend the torment of the character such as Hamlet.