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## THE ADAPTATION OF KHAZ'AL AL-MAJIDI'S *SEDRA*: PERSONAL AND POLITICAL MOTIVES

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### Abstract

This study aims to scrutinize the political and personal motives in *Sedra*, an adaptation of five plays by William Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*. Moreover, the paper sheds light on the political and personal implications of the adaptation. The study is based on Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, especially the journalistic questions 'Why'. Adaptation is a means of recreating and reproducing a literary work or works, such as plays, novels, short stories and performances to manipulate and preserve the informing source text. It is an engagement of the source(s) at a different time(s) and place(s) for different reasons to evoke personal and political changes and reflections. Accordingly, the study examines the personal and political motives and implications in an ancient Sumerian milieu. The paper concentrates on the techniques used by Khaz'al al-Majidi to expose his motives and how does he tackle the political and personal implication by

backdating the setting of the play. The study also examines the personal and political reflections of al-Majidi in the adaptation and how the adapter has used the cognitive, symbolic and rhetorical language to deliver the message and at the same time to avoid the dire political consequences of writing at the time of repression and tyranny.

**Keywords:** Khaz'al al-Majidi, Sumerian civilization, Sedra, adaptation, political and personal motives, Linda Hutcheon

### **I. Khaz'al al-Majidi**

Khaz'al al-Majidi was born in Kirkuk, Iraq in 1951. He is a poet, playwright and thinker with a doctoral in ancient history. He completed his studies in Baghdad and obtained a doctorate in Ancient History from the Baghdad Institute of Arab History for Higher Studies in 1996. He also received a second PhD in philosophy of religions in 2009. He worked in the Ministry of Culture Department of Cinema and Theatre until 1998. After that, for various reasons, Khaz'al al-Majidi decided to leave Iraq in search of wider climates to indicate and reveal many issues in his writing. He worked as a professor in ancient history and art history at Derna University in Libya until 2003. It allowed him to express his creative capabilities away from any form of censorship.

Al-Majidi is an author of more than seventy books on mythology, ancient history, ancient religions, history of civilizations, poetry and drama. In the field of poetry, al-Majidi has many collections issued in several volumes such as, "Yaqdhat Delmon" (The Wake of Delmon) (1980), "Ekazet Rambo" (Rambo's Crutch) (1993), "Fizea'a Mudhadeh" (Anti physics) (1997), "Film Taweel Jidan" (Very Long Film) (2009) and "Rubama... Men Yadri!?" (Maybe... Who Knows!?) (2013). He also wrote

many plays such as *Ozlah Fi al-Kerestal* (Isolation in the Crystal) (1990), *Haflat al-Mas* (The Diamond Party) (1991), *Hamlet Bila Hamlet* (Hamlet without Hamlet) (1992), *Kamar Min Dem* (A Moon from Blood) (1992), *Muftah Baghdad* (Baghdad's Key) (1997), *Sedra* (1999), *Musiqasafra* (Yellow Music) (2008) and *Al-Masrah al-Maftooh* (The Open Theatre) (2017).

## II. Historical Background

Any study of the adaptation of *Sedra* must give a fine description to the origin of the name 'Sedra' and where does it come from. Sedra is a modifying name of the Sumerian king 'Ziusudra', which means the one who made the life longer (Al-Majidi, *MutunSumar* 188) and it is also translated by Ira Spar as "Life of distant days" (par 2). Myths say that when gods created the universe, the functions and positions were divided among them. Cue group which is named in the Sumerian language GIGI, were entrusted with the task of rebuilding the land and farming it. This group of gods decided to declare disobedience and revolt because of exhaustion and hard work. Thus, to bear the difficulty of the work, the man was created to be a replacement for gods.

When people increased and their noise and hubbub on earth increased, the gods tried to limit their spread by imposing diseases and epidemics, but by the aid of the god Enki, also known as Ea, a man was able to get rid of the harms of diseases (Al-Majidi, *Jahim* 108). Furthermore, the gods determined to punish humankind by inducing infertility and drought, but eventually, they failed. After that, the gods decided to annihilate the humans, but Ea revealed the gods' decision to the

man of the flood. Al-Majidi states, the Flood was considered by the ancients as a turning point of ancient history that occurred a long time ago (ibid 109). The story of the adaptation of *Sedra* relates to Ziusudra, the hero of the Flood story in the Sumerian civilization, who has other similar names in the Babylonian Flood stories. The name Ziusudra consists of, according to historians, three Sumerian syllables, (Zi) which mean life, (u) which means day and (sud) which means long. His name likely means 'the one who made life long' and functions a symbol for eternity. In history, Ziusudra was the last king to rule before the Flood, and he was assigned to the list of kings who ruled for 3600 years. He was the son of Shuruppak, which is an ancient Sumerian place, the word son does not suggest the lineage relationship here, but it suggests that Ziusudra was from the city of Shuruppak, where the play's events take place. Hence, the adapter of this play consents the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian and Babylonian calendar to write on the events of modern history without departing from the axes of mythology and the basic texts. Furthermore, without resorting to the everyday lifestyle that often flattens the events of the story according to Muhammed Sayf (par 4), al-Majidi in his adaptation implicitly references to Shakespeare's plays.

### **III. Historical Sedra**

The name is derived from the name of the wise Sumerian king Ziusudra, who is considered the hero of the flood story in Sumerian civilization (Best 2). The reader may at first glance think that al-Majidi refers to the prophet Noah in the Torah, the Bible and the Holy Quran but, on the contrary, the adapter refers to 'the Sumerian' Noah. The Sumerian

Noah, based on many books of many historians, was Ziusudra the master of the flood at that time. Al-Majidi presented the story of the Sumerian Noah in his adaptation with the addition of three sons. Eventually, adaptation is not as much about religious motives as it is about literary motives. Al-Majidi gives *Sedra* some of Shakespeare's King Lear's characteristics, but three sons have replaced King Lear's three daughters. Shem (شام), Japheth (يافث) and Ham (هام) are the names of Sedra's sons in the play.

Shem is similar to Othello; he is black in colour and suffers from this problem as a sort of punishment imposed on him, while Japheth is much like the character of Macbeth, who aspires to be a king. Ham meets Hamlet, the innocent, romantic and anxious character and the first syllable of Hamlet's name is Ham. Furthermore, Lilith is Sedra's wife and according to Janet Howe Gaines, Lilith is "a Sumerian word for female demons or wind spirits" (12). Al-Majidi remembers that Lilith is Gertrude and Ophelia in *Hamlet* and she is Desdemona in *Othello* and she is Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (al-Majidi 141). Thus, al-Majidi builds Lilith's character from the features of most of the heroines of Shakespeare's plays. Lilith in the Sumerian heritage is the demon of the night who seduces men and al-Majidi makes her a meeting place for women with her good and evil attributes and qualifications. Additionally, the flood, similar to *The Tempest* by Shakespeare, was taken to be the core that the adapter starts to build his story of the adaptation. Al-Majidi reconstructed the five plays in a Sumerian myth or epic according to new perceptions and reflections. Linda Hutcheon argues, "adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" (7). Finally, al-Majidi reveals

the message that the world that the flood tried to wash away from evil is still filthy and the world awaits a new flood.

#### **IV. Adaptation and Personal and Political Motives**

In the 21st century, the theory of adaptation became more prominent and widely accepted by literary critics. Theorists like Linda Hutcheon reveal the ambiguity of fidelity and being loyal to the source text arguing that if the adaptation comes next or second to the original text, it does not mean that it is secondary. According to Roland Barthes, a text comes from a previous text (intertext) and according to Linda Hutcheon there is no original, and it is a process of recreating and rewriting. Most of the theorists writing about film adaptation leaving underestimation, disgrace, infidelity and secondary away without referring to them or theorizing them. A Theory of Adaptation by Linda Hutcheon could be considered one of the extended and forked books that could systematize and theorize most of the various adaptations from one mode or genre to another. It also provides the enjoyment of repeating the artwork with a variation.

Linda Hutcheon is a theorist, researcher and in comparative literature may be regarded as one of the canonical and influential theorists. She is focusing on postmodern theory, literature in Canada, feminism, parody, opera and adaptation (Boyd par 2). She identifies the enjoyment of the readers to the adaptation according to Leitch perspective as, "a constant shifting back and forth between their experience of a new story and their memory of its progenitors" (74).

## VI.A. Political and Personal Motives

As a matter of fact, it is clear that adapters already have their own political and personal reasons and motives to determine, first to make an adaptation and second, to choose which work will be adapted and which platform to go through. Accordingly, adapters not only reproduce the literary works with their own interpretation but also find them as if they belong to them and they are part of the adaptation. They make changes based on their perspectives and notions. However, some other critics and adapters have crossed borders and have gone a long way to argue that adaptation must be conscious, including profound changes, and that the original must be subverted. Otherwise, production will not be more than a reproduction of the same words of the same work. Keith Cohen points out, "the adaptation must subvert its original, perform a double and paradoxical job of masking and unveiling its source or else the pleasure it provides will be nothing more than that of seeing words changes into images" (qtd. in Giddings 12). Moreover, and in some cases, a homage to literary work is the only motive, because it is the only possible, allowed and permissible effort. For example, in 2005, when an attempt was made to adapt the plays of Samuel Beckett, either by inspired or experienced directors, Hutcheon declares, "the Beckett estate would allow no changes to the texts whatsoever" (93).

The appeal of adaptation is based on varied types of reasons and motivations. For instance, in the case of Shakespeare, the adaptation of his plays is mainly considered as a tribute. On the contrary, some adapters and critics attempt to revolt against the canonical impact of cultural authority.

They consider the author of the adapted play as a juggernaut that hinders them from taking place in the literary work. Marjorie Garber talked about some adapters' impression of the author of the adapted text as a haughty one such as Shakespeare, which is "a monument to be toppled" (10).

Obviously, adapters engage in cultural and social criticism when adapting a specified literary work and thus political motives and agendas should float accordingly. Adaptation may include criticism of imperialist politics, the emphasis on feminism, anti-war productions, post-colonial topics, the class system, and many other political issues. Adapters then apply their modifications to express their political views; as Hutcheon states, "this kind of political and historical intentionality is now of great interest in academic circles" (ibid 94). Having discussed this, it would seem that all this information is relevant to why adaptation takes place and to "adapters' deeply personal as well as culturally and historically conditioned reasons for selecting a certain work to adapt" (ibid 95).

## **V. *Sedra's* Personal and Political Motives**

### **V.A. Personal Motive:**

Shakespeare has been a challenge for many adapters and a source of influence. Concerning al-Majidi pays homage to Shakespeare in his five adaptations, *Hamlet Bela Hamlet* "Hamlet without Hamlet 1991", *Pyramus and Thisbe* (1998), *Sedra* (1999), *Lady Macbeth* (2011), and *Hamnet*(2011), which is a reflection of the story of Shakespeare's son. Al-Majidi collects his five adaptations and publishes them in *The Hell of Shakespeare* (2017). Furthermore, al-Majidi in writing *Sedra* has not only reinterpreted or reproduced the adapted work, but he has also taken a



position in the development of the story by all the modifications and changes relates to his experience, concerns and knowledge. Al-Majidi is not concerned with Shakespeare's plays as much as he is with the Iraqi Sumerian myths of the Sumerian Flood legend and monumental figures of the Sumerian civilization, such as Sedra, Lilith, Shuruppak and Ninkasi. Nevertheless, the adapter takes into consideration the aesthetic concerns in his adaptation of the five tragedies of Shakespeare. He kept some hints on each of the five plays of Shakespeare or his distinguished characters. Al-Majidi borrows the ghost appears in front of Hamlet's eyes without exposing his murderer to near the image to the readers and viewers that Ham is Hamlet, "How can a king roam as a ghost through these ruins and with this majesty.. Does he not have the right to say something about his murderer.. Who murdered you?" (al-Majidi, *Jahim* 208). Accordingly, al-Majidi is concerned with Shakespeare and the Sumerian myths simultaneously as a reflection of his experimental, ideological, educational experiences.

Al-Majidi abolishes the presence of the central character, who is Sedra. He opens the text for other characters making them the main ones, as he did before in his play *Hamlet Bela Hamlet* "Hamlet without Hamlet", as he excluded Hamlet from the play. Therefore, al-Majidi gives his attention mainly to Shakespeare, but the myth of flood and the legendary Sumerian characters. The adapter moves from writing the five plays to merging them in one play, and this, of course, requires deleting many events and characters. Al-Majidi selects the prominent characters in the five theatrical work of Shakespeare, and some characters play the role of

more than one character from the five plays of Shakespeare. For instance, Lilith plays the role of Hamlet's mother in some events and becomes Lady Macbeth in other events as well as Ophelia in others. Emra also embodies more than one character in the play for example; he embodies Macbeth in some events:

Lilith: Fear not, you are far from any doubt.

Emra: I am innocent of his blood! (Al-Majidi 179)

On the other hand, we see Emra playing the role of Claudius:

Lilith: why you came back?

Emra: to see all of my inheritance. (Ibid 181)

Obviously, Lilith plays the role of Lady Macbeth in the first quote and Gertrud in the second one. Furthermore, Sedra's sons play the role of King Lear's daughters at the beginning of the adaptation but later, they became different characters as they had been. For instance, Ham plays the role of 'Cordelia', the youngest daughter of King Lear:

Sedra: Now what do our youngest and dearest son say to us?

Ham: Nothing! (Ibid 165)

Hence, al-Majidi maintains some features of the characters and keeps the general atmosphere and the grandeur of the adapted texts. However, in the case of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, al-Majidi takes only the idea of the storm and leaves out all the characters of the play and its events. He adds his cultural identity to the adaptation by putting it in a

historical context to broaden the cultural capital and social awareness of his audience.

*Sedra* could also be considered as a feminist, emphasizing the role of Lilith in deciding the events of the play and their consequences. Lilith is a pivotal character in the play; she moves other characters as well as the events through her cunning and clever speeches and acts. After seducing Shem, Japheth and Emra by working on their minds and their ambitions and desires, she states, "As the boats of gold plunged into the depths of oblivion, I went with my boat to the heights.. I will bury these crowds by my hands who were annihilated by the strifes and the kingship greediness" (ibid 226). Al-Majidi emphasizes the role of women in Sumerian society and civilization, and the respect and honour they had in that culture. As an example, the anthem recited by the chorus in the opening scene mentions Sedra's mother and then Sedra's father:

Felicitate to our great mother,

Human loves human by you,

God loves human by you.. Our mother.

Father who carries the universe's secret,

The Immaculate and innocent from every filth. (Ibid 152)

Likewise, the speech of the cassock reveals how the Sumerian woman is faithful to her husband. The Sumerian woman could be a wife, a mother, a priestess or a housekeeper and works side by side to her husband. In this adaptation, the woman is presented as the only salvation

for man: "I will stay with my husband, giving him water and feeding him with love... I will stay with my husband, next to him" (ibid 153). So, unlike Shakespeare who often looks with either indifference or even with contempt at women, al-Majidi speaks highly of women and describes her important role in the Sumerian society.

Whoever imagines in a hurry that *Sedra* is a raw mix of tragic Shakespearean characters falls into a big mistake. Not to forget that the myth of Flood and the hero of the flood is nothing but a mythical story that does not carry aesthetic and psychological dimension that the play determines to highlight. There is no arbitrary transformation or movement in this adaptation. Everything is thoughtful and tied to hidden codes and symbols. Needs to reflect and navigate to understand and shed light on that codes and symbols, especially, the historical trait. Finally, *Sedra* is not a preparation for the Hebraic, biblical, or Islamic story of the flood, as some might imagine, but it is a pure textual synthesis. The incident of the flood is the source of its inspiration without borrowing the exact details of each story (ibid 105).

#### **V.B. The Political Motive**

Al-Majidi discusses politics in Iraq indirectly, the projections and indications are not obvious having multilayers of interpretations. The indications are in symbols, allusion and eclectic images so as to avoid incarceration or even assassination by the dictator at that time. Al-Majidi reveals that on many occasions, "Lilith: Ham, your father is bloody" (ibid 194). One of the indications is that Sedra has three sons similar to the

dictator at that time, the first one is so ambitious to get the leadership so as Shem, "Rather, it is a bundle of your ambitions with leaves and thorns" (ibid 156). At that time, a rumour mushroomed when the eldest son of the dictator was subjected to an assassination on a street in Baghdad; it was the dictator who tried to punish him for his ambition to gain the rule. The eldest son was left disabled because of the assassination attempt, "Shem: I wish you had completed your anger, eliminated me out of existence" (ibid). Furthermore, the middle son stands for Japheth the adaptation of Macbeth, the faithful military commander and the second ruler behind his father, Sedra: "Lilith: you were really the only man among them .. a man with a keen sturdiness in which there is no time and no place for him" (ibid 195).

Another political indication is flattering and glorifying have been done by the entourage, relatives and sons. These kinds of people hide or distort the truth to the people in the authority and increase the ruler's paranoia: "Japheth: how can you ask about my love to you and my thinness indicates that..Your lineaments have settled in myself and I do not see the connection of my feelings, except to repeat your name" (ibid 164). Lilith plays the same trick with Japheth when she tries to confess to him that he is the true heir of the throne: "Lilith: You are the next crowned king ... you alone and no one can compete with you" (ibid 196). Ham also exposed that issue by comparing these kinds of people with foxes, "Foxes energize the place with honeyed talk and shaking tails" (ibid 186). On the other hand, any person who opposes the ideas, inspirations and aspirations of the ruler is severely punished, even if he is one of the closest relatives.

Sedra punished Ham when he told him something other than the words he hoped to hear and expected from him as the dearest and the most loved of his sons the interpretation of the dream he has and asked his sons to interpret it. Ham did not flatter his father, rather he told him the truth, which might have saved humankind, but the love of power and tyranny that blinded his insight made Sedra angry at his son's words and punished him for his interpretation. Sedra reacts to Ham's interpretation and states, "Let this part of the land be for you and your children ... the desert ... and let it be a ruin for you wherever you go" (ibid 166). Al-Majidi reveals his criticism and rejection of Divide and Conquer Policy followed at that time to conquer lands and minds: "Now, I will start my game ... Now I confuse their tongues ... and separate their words. To make each one of them speak a different language and it will be difficult for them to understand and speak to each other" (ibid 210-211).

Another indication of the bloodshed and horror among the people at the time of writing *Sedra* is revealed by the way Emra describes Sedra. Emra describes Sedra's egoism, cupidity, tyranny and totalitarianism: "The water was ascending and Sedra was ascending in his extravagance, and his instincts intensified and we have faded away because of the intensity of the water.. he shines while we're getting darker" (ibid 182). Moreover, Lilith speaks of Sedra's bloody attitude toward anyone who stands against him and his obsession with killing and torturing people when she addresses Sham and says:" Sham, your father is bloody.. Therefore, you can either be like him or kill him... The mind will go crazy and the blood will rise" (ibid 194). In one of his speeches, Ham depicts the ruler brutality when he

describes that the ruler can blink an eye or with a movement of his hand order those close to him to kill people: "Whenever the executioner laughed, his hand became stronger and shed many people's blood" (ibid 216). Emra also adds that Sedra fabricates his tricky plot on the people who are against him and imprisons, punishes or murders them, which is the easiest thing you can see during the dictator's rule, which al-Majidi referred to when Emra says, "he was so eager to marginalize others..under the pretext of statues..fetishes...And everyone between his jaws rotating" (ibid 183). Al-Majidi also referred to the bringing of relatives closer to rule and authority, even if they are not qualified, and leaving others regardless of their qualifications. The dictator deliberately assigned his relatives and members of his clan, regardless of their eligibility, to high positions, "People were running towards the ship in order to get rid of the water's anger, but he closed the doors of the ship on their faces. He elected the sons.. relatives.. friends and went out with them" (ibid). Besides, he is the only one who is free and lives in prosperity but others live in misery. Emra states, "The breed of creatures in the ship stopped due to excessive fear and unknown destiny ... but Sedra alone was breeding and increasing his joy and strength" (ibid 219). Al-Majidi moves to criticize the grinding wars that the political system has fought, in which many people have fallen victims as if they were sheep being led to slaughterhouses. Lilith states, "Smoke and weapons spice these sheep and lead them to the slaughterhouse" (ibid 209).

Al-Majidi tries to ignite the seed of optimism in some dialogues and encourages people to regain their lost identity and turn the steering

wheel to the right side. He tries to send the message to the people that they should rise against the political system and exterminate the bloody, corrupt people who brought the situation to what it is now. Lilith says, "The body must be shaken, and levers, columns, boats, corrupt stars and bones will fall" (ibid 196). The last scene reflects the optimistic ideology of Khaz'al al-Majidi, which is 'Waiting for the New Flood'. Al-Majidi calls for a new spirit that could wash the pessimistic one and retain an optimistic ideology. Furthermore, to get rid of all the people who put the land into ruin and restore the optimistic spirit. So, al-Majidi summons another Sedra to lead the ship to salvation and prosperity:

Rise, build your ship and rule it!

We will wash this land from evil.

Rise Sedra.. Rise. (Ibid 230-31)

## VI. CONCLUSION

Evidently, the adaptation of al-Majidi includes personal and political implicationsand, too. It is a critique of the dire political situation and the tyrannical system at that time. Consequences of any political discussion or criticism then in Iraq would be dangerous and life threatening. Al-Majidi, therefore, only hints at those political issues indirectly and it is the reader's tasks to uncover them and understands the horror and fear people experienced then and the hazardous situation of the Iraqi writer and intellectual who worked in the shadow of that tyrannical regime.

The ideas of the adaptation fluctuate between good and evil, truth and illusion, greed and conviction, treachery and loyalty, and the sacred



and the profane. The adaptation shows that evil is inevitably fleeting and the sun will rise again one day in its familiar form to displace the sordid interests of humans. Accordingly, the end of the adaptation is a direct message to the readers and the viewers that the second flood is absolutely coming and it is an optimistic message for changing the dark reality of the modern world.

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