

جمهورية الخوف: العدمية السلبية و العدمية الإيجابية في "انسوا هاملت" لجواد الأسدي

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Republic of Fear: A Passive and Active Nihilism in *Forget Hamlet* by Jawad Al_Assadi

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Abstract: Written in the shadow of pre-2003 Iraq, an ambiance marred by despair, fear and despotism, the play *Forget Hamlet* by Jawad Al-Assadi is an examination of Iraqis' spirit response to persecution. This study probes into how the play reflects two correlated yet distinct paths of grappling with the oppression perpetrated by an autocratic regime. Passive nihilism, as portrayed in the play, refers to a condition where characters succumb to the credo that life lacks essential meaning. Within this orientation people do not take action to shape their own life and accept whatsoever system is inflicted upon them. Following this line of framework, characters in the play namely (Hamlet and Polonius) succumb themselves to fate passively. On the other hand, active nihilism refers to a more defiant position. Characters who stand for this framework (Laertes and Ophelia) identifying the lack of meaning in life but choose to mold their own paths. This form of nihilism is represented as a way of resistance and liberation.

The study, likewise, probes into the psychological and social sways of living under dictatorial regime, where passive nihilism can lead to submission, active nihilism offers a path to empowerment and change. The study compares these two paths of grappling with the pre-2003 Iraq. Thus, Al-Assadi reflects on the means by which people may overcome the nihilistic void engendered by dictatorship and at the same time it is a call to act to show resilience in the face of adversity.

المستخلص : تدرس هذه الورقة البحثية مسرحية "انسوا هاملت" لجواد الأسدي بوصفها تقديمًا أدبيًا لردود الفعل العراقية تجاه الاستبداد في ظل نظام صدام حسين. وتُطبّق مفاهيم نيتشه عن العدمية السلبية والعدمية



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الاجابية في هذا التحليل. ومن خلال التحليل النصي، تدرس الورقة كيف تُجسّد شخصيات المسرحية هاتين الفلسفتين المتناقضتين. فمن جهة، تمثل العدمية السلبية الانحلال الروحي والخضوع للقمع، كما يتجلى في شخصيات هاملت، وجرتروود، والحفارين، وبولونيوس. ومن جهة أخرى، تتجسد العدمية الاجابية في التمرد والسعي نحو خلق معنى، كما نراه في شخصيات ليرتس وأوفيليا. تُعيد المسرحية صياغة مسرحية "هاملت" لشكسبير ضمن السياق العراقي، إذ ترمز إلى كلوديوس كديكتاتور شبيه بصادام حسين، في نقد لحالة الاستبداد السياسي والدعوة إلى المقاومة. العدمية السلبية تُبقي على اليأس، في حين أن العدمية الاجابية، رغم ما تحمله من مخاطر، تتيح التحرر من خلال المواجهة. أن المسرحية تُعد دعوة لرفض الاستسلام وتبني الفعل الجماعي ضد الطغيان و تدعو المسرحية إلى ضرورة امتلاك الإرادة للوقوف في وجه الظلم.

1- Introduction:

In 2003 Saddam Hussein was overthrown, ending the reign of a brutal autocrat. Saddam had oppressed Iraq for a long period, unleashing devastating regional wars and rendering the once-rich country a police state. For a long time, it seemed that his bloody hold over Iraq would remain for good, particularly in the aftermath of the calamitous military adventures against Iran and Kuwait, where an American-led coalition routed the Iraqi military in 1991. However, he was overthrown in April 2003 (MacFarquhar, 2006). Edward Said, a prominent scholar and critic, described Saddam as: "an appalling and dreadful despot," and condemned the Iraqi regime for its oppressive policies and human rights violations (cited in Bernstein, 2003, para. 5). In an analogous breath, Kanan Makiya, senior fellow at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, contends, in his magnum opus *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (1989), that fear is at the center of Ba'thi policy which has become the very foundation of the regime's policy. Makiya (1989) proclaims that, "In Iraq, the public has lost all sense of self;...Masses of Iraqis keep on dying for no palpably tangible reason..." (p. 46). In similar fashion, Hamid Al-Bayati, ambassador and professor teaching post-graduate scholars and diplomats at the United Nations and Washington DC., talking about the grisly havoc which clouded the lives of the Iraqi women during Saddam's reign, promulgates:

For twenty years of dictatorial regime of Saddam, Iraq was involved in wars against neighboring countries and the war such as the Iraq- Iran, the invasion of Kuwait, Desert Storm. Millions of Iraqis were killed, handicapped or went missing during these wars. Women and girls faced great problems of losing fathers, brothers and husbands. Saddam's regime also followed the policy of arrest, torture and execution against all the Iraqi

people and women were subject to the same measures. (cited in UpfTv, 2012)

This epoch of despotism engendered an ambience of malaise that engulfed the nation for so long and poisoned the country with an air of fruitlessness and nothingness which can be broached under the umbrella of nihilism. Under the broader concept of nihilism, the correlated concepts: passive and active nihilism can obviously be seen in the play *Forget Hamlet*. Passive nihilism, imbued by spiritual decline and retreat, echoes the nihilistic paralysis of some Iraqis under Saddam's reign. Nietzsche's "death of God," the breakdown of transcendent meaning, matches Al-Assadi's Denmark, in which Claudius's dictatorship rusts moral and political *modus operandi*. Claudius, a representation for Saddam, leaves citizens flooded in nihilistic despondency. Active nihilism, on the other hand, is a "violent force of destruction" (Nietzsche, 1984, p. 17) that discards inherited systems. Laertes and Ophelia go in line with this framework, attempt to disassemble Claudius's regime to forge new meaning, an allegory for Iraqi resistance.

2- Methodology:

This paper applies a qualitative literary analysis approach and uses the lens of Nietzschean nihilism to critically analyze Jawad Al-Assadi's *Forget Hamlet*. The study meticulously examines the play's characters, identifying which character is passive and which one is an active nihilist. Specific attention is to be paid to dialogues and actions that reflect Nietzschean nihilism, such as Hamlet's resignation (passive nihilism) and Laertes' rebellion (active nihilism). The analysis also examines allegorical parallels between Claudius's Denmark and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The study employs Friedrich Nietzsche's concepts of passive and active nihilism to broach characters' responses to oppression, contextualizing these with the socio-political context of pre-2003 Iraq. The research draws on scholarship on Ba'athist Iraq (e.g., Kanan Makiya's *Republic of Fear*). This contextual grounding elucidates how Al-Assadi's play *Forget Hamlet* critiques the mechanisms of fear and propaganda under despotism. The study compares the play to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and other Arab adaptations to examine how the play critiques the political ills during the reign of Saddam. This comparative approach amplifies how the play adopts universal Shakespearean themes, mainly the portrayal of paralysis and resistance.

The study expands understanding of how nihilism intersects with Arab adaptations of Western classics in dictatorial contexts. This intersection is anatomized by theatre which is a implement of reflection and reforming the socio-political ills. In the same spirit, the play reflects on the Iraqi societal responses to Saddam Hussein's despotism by framing it under the umbrella of passive and active nihilism, contrasting the play with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and highlighting shifts in character agency and political critique. Therefore, it is

of stupendous necessity to offer an overview of the theoretical framework of the study, namely passive and active nihilism.

3- Theoretical Framework: Passive and Active Nihilism:

Nihilism (from Latin nihil 'nothing') is a philosophy which entails that the human's existence has no value. Nihilism has also been a reference to certain historical periods like postmodernity (Gillespie, 1996). The term nihilism was *ipso facto* coined by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743 – 1819), a German philosopher, who promoted it as a flaw of the Enlightenment thought. However, nihilism as philosophy came to the fore and correlated with Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche described nihilism as a state in which the world is bereft of meaning, comprehensible truth, or essential value, so to speak. Similarly, Nietzsche exhorts the necessity to overcome nihilism and then only culture might have an underpinning to prosper (Ouaha, 2022).

In his magnum opus *The Gay Science* (1968), the German Philosopher declares that God is dead. Because God was the pivotal emblem of "transcendence", Nietzsche salutes the death of that delusion. However, according to Nietzsche, because God is dead thereby, truth is dead too. "Divine transcendence" was for long time the warranty of all kinds of cultural structures. God as an idea preserved as a centre for truth for scientists and philosophers, even after unchaining themselves from common faith (Hatab, 1987, p.92). Hatab, (1987), affirms that "Without God, we are left only with becoming, and secular systems which continue to seek a resolution of the negativity of existence (e.g., moralism, optimism, scientism) cannot claim any ultimate justification" (p.93).

Under this broader umbrella, there are two correlated frameworks: passive nihilism, marked by a decline of the spirit, and active nihilism where there is an ameliorating spirit characterized by the intentional formation of new principles (Hollingdale, 1984, p.160). Passive nihilists, for Nietzsche, are colored by a lack of willpower to craft their own essence, signifying a "decline and recession of the power of the spirit" (cited in Hollingdale, 1984, p. 17). Nietzsche characterizes passive nihilism as a form of existential resignation, where an individual perceives the world as fundamentally meaningless and existing only in a state of futility: "The power of the spirit can be so worn down that the previous aims and values are inadequate and it[can] find no more faith. It is unable to posit for itself, productively, a goal, a why, a faith" (cited in Carr, 1990, p.97).

On the other hand, active nihilism embodies a form of power rising from the understanding that orthodox objectives are no longer adequate. According to Nietzsche, "[Nihilism] reaches its maximum of relative strength as a violent force of destruction – as active nihilism" (cited in Hollingdale, 1984, p.17). This form of nihilism involves the intentional dismantling of outdated values to pave

the way for the emergence of new ones. Nietzsche (1984) states that “A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as active nihilism” (p.45).

The passive nihilist and the active nihilist undergo an existential crisis, sensing that life and existence are futile. But, the active nihilist has the will to act and steps forward to take action flying in the face of futility, “reaching its apex of strength as a powerful destructive force” (Nietzsche, 1984, p.22). Moving swiftly on, it’s of a momentous importance to throw some light on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* appropriation in Iraq.

4- The Appropriation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the Iraqi Theatre:

Having been acquainted with the literary framework, now it is of acute necessity to proclaim that the play *Forget Hamlet* (a reflection of the status quo of the pre-2003 Iraq) may aptly be studied under the aforementioned lens. That being said, many critics proclaimed that William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is fertile soil for contemporary issues representation. In this vein, Thomas Cartelli (1999) contends that authors from the Third World use “appropriation” to Shakespeare’s original text by ascribing an innovative societal and political agency (p.17). The universal toposes tackled by Shakespeare are apt virtually to every age and every culture. Playwrights across the world adapt Shakespeare’s plays to address the socio-political and cultural subjects. According to Al-Shetawi (2013):

Because the newly-born Arabic drama was as yet unable to supply the burgeoning commercial theatrical troupes and companies with scripts, theatre managers resorted to translations of European plays to fill the gap. Shakespeare met the demands of stage companies. His plays, especially the tragedies, appealed to the taste of early Arab audiences thirsty for love stories or melodramatic feats performed on stage. (p.9)

Arab playwrights adapted Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* dwelling on the issues of their time. In the Arab *Hamlet* Tradition, Hamlet is not that of Shakespeare’s play who is contemplative of the “To be or not to be” anti-hero, according to Margaret Litvin, but rather a frustrated rebel, a feeble alcoholic, even a radically religious conflating ethical and political corruption (Dight, 2021).

As for Iraq, the Western-style theatre introduced formally to Iraq around the *fin de siècle* of the nineteenth century, brought up by the Christian clergy in the city of Mosul. However, there is a theory promulgating that theatre in Iraq preceded that of the Ancient Greece or Rome. The Iraqi scholar Fawzi Rashid has averred that theatre harks back to Mesopotamia with its rich cultural and religious rituals. Ceremonies and rituals have affected the enhancement of theatre in Greece (Amir Al-Azraki, 2024). Later on, *ad hoc* in the Abbasid epoch, Baghdad witnessed “performances with theatrical elements such as al-Hakawati (storytellers), Maqamat, shadow plays, puppetry, lamentation rituals, all of which have later become well-known in theatre scholarship” (Amir Al-

Azraki, 2024, para. 3). In analogous fashion, "religious rituals, particularly those related to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (Ta'ziyeh)", also abetted the prosperity of the theatre. Such rituals promoted the artistic spirit, fashioning an climate which incite theatre to thrive (Amir Al-Azraki, 2024).

Cut to the chase, William Shakespeare was introduced to the Iraqi stage after the British occupation of Iraq in 1914. Thenceforth, Iraqis staged Shakespeare's plays, under the aegis of Egyptian and Turkish troupes. A good example is when George Abyad troupe staged *Othello* and *Hamlet* in Basrah in 1927. Later, when Haki Al-Shibli established the Institute of Fine Arts in 1940, a more professional staging of Shakespeare's plays was carried out. Iraqi actors and directors trained in the United States and Europe presented Shakespeare's plays in Iraq namely: Mohsen Al-Azawi, Sami Abdal Hamid, Jaafar Alsaadi and others. They appropriated the plays of Shakespeare to the Iraqi context. Certain adaptations were reflection of the socio-political upheaval in the time of the Ba'ath reign (Al-Azraki, 2024). In this dim era, Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma (2017) contend that:

Iraq witnessed grave political and economic unrest during this time due to the invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf War, the Shiite uprising, and the imposition of economic sanctions. Saddam's regime continued to imprison, torture, and execute its opponents, and all these factors discouraged the staging of political content. Nevertheless, playwrights continued to employ traditional and historical Arabic and Western stories and dramas to comment indirectly". (p.xvii)

In this climate of fear spoke the playwright Jawad al-Asadi through his letters, aiming not only to entertain but to reform; that is the very key fulcrum of theatre. Theatre, thereby, "plays a vivacious role in framing people's minds; it is no longer a spatial arena solely for fun purposes. Accordingly, theatre reflects effervescently all aspects of the seared with scars land, Iraq" (Al-Moosawi, 2024, p.47). The Iraqi playwright and director Jawad al-Asadi was born in 1947 in the Shi'a holy city of Karbala, Iraq. He graduated from Baghdad's Theatre Academy in 1974 and fled the country in 1976, beginning a 27-year exile from Iraq. He is considered to be one of the most important playwrights in the Arab world today, because of "His creativity, ironic sensibility, and tireless devotion to his craft" (Litvin, 2006, p.2).

Some studies have been conducted to the play, examining the layers hidden within the text. To begin with, Hanane Bessami and Yousef Abu Amrieh (2022) examine Jawad Al-Assadi's depiction of the generational clash in shaping the future of the Arab world. In the play *Forget Hamlet*, Jawad Al-Assadi "show how Arab youth revolt against old governments that keep limiting their visions of a democratic state" (p.173). Within similar context, Amaal Alkory and Hayder Jalil Hasan (2023) state that *Forget Hamlet* is a depiction of

the state of many Arab countries. The play shows the social ills and political abuses that engulf the Iraqi people. In so doing, the playwright refers to, “the role of intellectuals toward the abusive policy which negotiates more and rebel less” (p.162).

Within analogous climate, Ziad Mohammad in his article "Shakespeare and intellectual castration in the Arab world: Hamlet as a detached Arab intellectual in Jawad Al-Assadi's *Forget Hamlet*" (2022) proclaims that Al-asadi aimed to show the quandaries of the Arab intellectuals under the rule of Arab governments. Ziad's study shows *Forget Hamlet* to be an instance of the political repression that “targeted Arab intellectuals in the Ba'athy Iraq, headed by Saddam Hussien. The study discusses the theme of the neutral Arab intellectual who kept a silent position in a time of political crisis” (Mohammad, 2022, p.238). On the other hand, Salam al-Asadi in “Jawad al-Asadi's *Forget Hamlet*: A Study in Adaptation and the Concepts of Economic Lures and Legal Constraints” (2021) proclaims that the economic lures charm the adapter to retain the structure and some rudiments from the original play. According to Al-Asadi (2021), the playwright makes use of “the word 'Hamlet' in the title and retains the character names and setting of the play. For the legal constraints, the adapter modifies the sequence of the events as well as adding scenes and omitting others. Additionally, he manipulates the development of the characters in the play” (p.259). However, no erstwhile study, to the best of my knowledge, examined the play through the lens of passive and active nihilism. The current study bridges this gap.

5- Passive and active nihilist reading of *Forget Hamlet*:

The play *Forget Hamlet* by Jawad Al-Asadi is an "upside-down" adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The play is set in a dystopian and despotic Denmark under the reign of Claudius, who is depicted as an oppressive monarch. The play rants against despotism and the abandonment of those are morally, socially, and politically bound to fly in the face of tyranny. The play first staged in Cairo in 1994 under the title *Ophelia's Window*, the play was retitled for publication in 2000. The new title of the play, which is *Forget Hamlet*, “as it reminds us of the figure of Hamlet,... asks us to forget him...the audience is made to recall a previous, more impressive version of Hamlet while it watches the hapless non-protagonist on stage” (Litvin, 2006, p. 2). Even the characters are aware of this, like when Horatio says: “You are not the Hamlet I know and have lived with.” Hamlet responds: “Well, maybe I should change my name” (Al-Asadi, 2006, p.22). Al-Asadi urges the audience to forget Hamlet, breaking the fourth wall, and thus asks the audience not only to forget Shakespeare's Hamlet, the eponymous protagonist of the play, but he promotes the audience to discard passivity and embrace action and resistance.

Unlike Syrian playwright Mamduh Adwan's *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* (1976), where Hamlet turns into a revolutionary character, Al-Assadi's Hamlet remains passive character; a deliberate criticism of Iraq's muffled intellectuals and people in general. Likewise, Egyptian director Ahmed Abdelhalim's *Hamlet in the Slums* (2021) makes use of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to censure poverty, but *Forget Hamlet* effectively merges nihilism with Iraq's political ordeals. According to Litvin (2006), Arab Hamlets frequently represent "frustrated rebels," but Al-Assadi's Laertes and Ophelia surpass this trope by exemplifying Nietzschean self-creation.

Al-Asadi situates his play in an Iraqi ambiance overwhelmed by war, turmoil, and political upheaval. In this ambience, the characters' struggle is a response to the loss of freedom and safety. The play's characters often seem paralyzed by despair, a hallmark of nihilistic literature. According to Dr. Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz who is an associate Professor Middle Eastern Literatures , "The play is critical of dictatorship, autocracy, suppression of freedom of speech and oppression of the populace" (Mahfouz, 2016, para.14).

Forget Hamlet represents Iraq in a state of turmoil in the aftermath of murdering the old King. In the play Hamlet remains passive, while Claudius becomes a butcher. Seeing such play, the "Iraqi audiences found these themes especially relevant due to the political unrest and authoritarian rule that characterized the political scene in Iraq for over half a century" (Al-Azraki, 2024, para.2). The play maps two paths taken by characters: Hamlet as well as Polonius symbolize the passive nihilists who do not have the will to act against Claudius. On the other hand, Laertes alongside Ophelia are active nihilists who rather than yielding to hopelessness, they forge their own paths. Bearing in mind that Laertes and Ophelia are more interesting to Arabs than Hamlet himself, since "Hamlet already has the advantage of being inherently part of the system as a prince, Laertes represents the voice of the oppressed Iraqis whose freedom of expression has been chained by Saddam's dictatorship" (Bessami & Abu Amrieh, 2022, p.179)

The play starts by describing an atmosphere of unrest and unease: "An atmosphere of mirrors and masks. All the dramatis personae seem lost; their facial expressions indicate confusion and anticipation" (Al-Asadi, 2006, p. 9) which sets the whole mood of the play that shows how, out of tyranny and oppression, katzenjammer has clouded Iraq. Drawing on Matthew Arnold's, a nineteenth-century English poet and critic, proclamation that "literature is a criticism of life" (cited in Castle, 2013, p.2), one can bluntly notice that the miasma in the play represents the sick malaise which hovers over the wounded land of Iraq because of the tyranny of Saddam. Interestingly, history may present us only with facts and accounts but in order to know more about people's feelings, thoughts and testaments, literature is the only path to be

undertaken. In this context, the Iraqi prime minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani, responding to question about the reign of Saddam Hussein, avows vehemently that:

As a journalist, you were not allowed to speak freely. The era of Saddam's despotism was marked by the rule of one man, one party, mass graves, chemical weapons, and futile wars: an eight-year war with Iran, a war with Kuwait, and the imposition of sanctions. I am one of the Iraqis whose family had five members executed by Saddam, and I am one of those who lived through the sanctions, experienced the brutality of the repressive apparatus, witnessed the violation of sanctities, and the suppression of freedoms for all components of society. (BBC News, 2025)

In *Forget Hamlet*, Claudius and Gertrude kill the old king. However Claudius forges a story according to which the old king was killed by a servant. Ophelia, from her window witnessing the crime, refuses the forged story and informs Hamlet that the servant is innocent. However Claudius kills the servant before he could utter the truth. Hamlet, nevertheless, is indifferent of the fact that his father was slaughtered: "He killed my father or he didn't kill him – it's all the same to me" (Al-Asadi, 2006, p.22). He gradually becomes autistic, searching for serenity by locking himself in his chamber reading "Theology" (Al-Asadi, 2006, p.11). In the meantime, Claudius becomes horrendously a butcher, executing his opponents. His "guillotine" tirelessly is "going around the clock, day and night" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.21), as one of the gravediggers describes the state of the nation at the time. The allegorical parallel between Claudius and Saddam Hussein is central to the play's socio-political critique. Al-Assadi's use of ritualistic virulence (e.g., Claudius's guillotine), which draws from "Ta'ziyah"'s staging of martyrdom of Imam Hussein, is a subversive act of testimony. According to Al-Shetawi (1999), *Forget Hamlet* suggests that humans may become "victim of crime unless we stand up to stop it" (p.48). The dialogue and imagery in the play draw parallels between the fictional character Claudius and Saddam Hussein, emphasizing the vicious methods deployed to sustain power. After all, this the very crux of literature, according to Aristotle, Sidney and others, who "assigns to poetic imitation a moral function whereby it should present situations which are morally instructive or edifying" (Habib, 2005, p.53).

Even Gertrude, in the long run, laments the country sinking in a "big puddle of blood" (Al-Assadi, 2006, 2006, p.44). Gertrude, in Al-Assadi's play, is conspicuously complicit in Claudius' usurping the throne, and her guilt over her role in the murder of her husband haunts her. She becomes more and more unhinged, inept to endure her burden. She is aware of the moral decay around her but feels powerless to change it. Her final act of drinking poison is a passive act of embracing her doom, a resignation to the nihilistic world she abetted to

incept. Claudius's reply to her state of feebleness, "All I did was wipe out those who were plotting against me," which underlines the callous and suspicious nature of such regimes (Assadi, 2006, p.44). It reflects the *ipse dixit* habitually given by despotic rulers for their actions, framing them as necessary measures to maintain control and eliminate any threat to their authority. Thus, Claudius is not the guilt-ridden king of Shakespeare's play but a monstrous, practically mythological character "wild buffalo" who demolishes anyone stands in his path (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.22). He is a symbol of absolute power and brutality, ruling through fear and violence. His reign is marked by constant executions, symbolized by the ever-active guillotine. At any rate, the vicious misdeeds throughout the play imbue a state of fear coercing characters to take up two paths: one which can be framed into passive nihilistic angle and the other is active nihilist angle into which characters can be categorized theoretically. This sentiment aligns with Kanan Makiya's *Republic of Fear* (1989), which posits that fear under Saddam's regime bred either submission or covert defiance. Nevertheless, Al-Assadi's play extends Makiya's analysis by framing resistance not merely as political dissent but as an existential imperative.

Building on nihilism dual frameworks, Hamlet in the play represents passive nihilism. He is fully acquainted with the oppression of Claudius' regime, and he shirks his responsibility to exert vengeance, even after knowing the identity of the murderer of his father. And here lies the rub, Hamlet's tells Ophelia that his father, "died, we will die, he will die. A long train of dead people," every acute speech divulges his immersion into passive nihilism mode (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.30). He expresses a detachment from the world and its concerns, proposing that the death of his father and the actions of Claudius are negligible to him. He looks at life and death as part of an inexorable cycle, bereft of any intrinsic meaning. Hamlet also avows that "Death is a sleep. Sleep is a sleep in death. What's the difference?" which further illustrates that he has fallen prey to the lures of passive nihilism (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.30). He equates death with sleep, suggesting that both conditions are similarly barren of meaning. He perceives no point in engaging with a world that is essentially fraudulent and futile. His passivity reflects a deep sense of despair and acquiescence. In most of the *Hamlet* adaptations, Claudius, the representative of Arab presidents and tyrant rulers, is faced by the passiveness of the sedentary "Hamlet, an emblem of the Arab intellectuals, clergymen, politicians, and academics who were paralyzed by their fears and desires and evaded their obligations towards their nations" (Abushalha, 2022, p. 8). The Prince Hamlet becomes a destitute and unable to face state oppression. In the end of the play, Claudius orders the killing of Hamlet who surrenders willingly to death as if nothing of importance to him even his own life, when he was sitting in a washbasin filled with water. This act

of immersing himself in water represents his wish to leave the world totally, to dissolve into oblivion rather than defying the revulsions around him.

Hamlet, then, divulges the grounds of his inactiveness, vulnerability and resignation to his close companion Horatio. The speech is germane to the fretfulness and predicament of virtually every Arab man facing a sense of *aporia*, “there were two Hamlets living in one body: one vicious, pledged to the dagger, dreaming of salvation and killing Claudius and revenge; the other, a Hamlet disillusioned and full of anxiety.” (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.38). Overwhelmed by a devastating sense of hopelessness, Hamlet is relegated to become a spiritual man and passive nihilist. He recognizes the vanity, paltriness and emptiness of life submerged with injustice, suppression and state despair. Mahfouz (2016) states that “Al-Assadi’s Hamlet is a representative of the silenced, depoliticized, and intimidated mob” (para.15). Likewise, Hamlet states that he took up seclusion in order to evade the filthiness of power. Power, according to him, is “an eternal curse, a wild animal that opens its mouth greedily to positions of rank and blinding lights,” and “a spiritual person has no business with it” (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.38). This orientation aligns the play with the Arab tradition of *Hamlet* in which Hamlet is the “Arab intellectual, a figure who is commonly portrayed as impotent when it comes to responding positively to the miserable conditions of his country” (Al-Shetawi, 1999, p.48). As such, unlike the contemplative, revengeful Hamlet of Shakespeare, Al-Assadi's Hamlet is passive character. He is reluctant to exert vengeance, even after knowing about his father's homicide. Rather, he withdraws into theology and melancholy, standing for the disenchantment of the intellectuals and people to face dictatorship.

On the other side, Laertes, “The blind man” (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.9), as active nihilist, though regularly refers to the meaninglessness of this world; still he, along the play, stands for what is right. This sense meaningless of life is reflected in his avowal, “What’s driving me mad is being in the walls of this palace” (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.12). From a nihilistic framework, the palace represents a corrupt and futile social structure—a microcosm of a realm bereft of righteousness. Laertes demands that he is to be taken “outside Denmark” and “buried outside Denmark” (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.12). Before departure, however, Laertes seeks to expose Claudius’s killing of the “just king” and he scathingly rants against Hamlet for avenging his father (Al-Assadi, 2006, P.18). In another speech he sums up his whole philosophy regarding the world he lives in: “Oh, what a filthy world!” (Al-Assadi, 2006, p. p.14). This indicates that human existence is tainted by violence, betrayal, and moral failure; an acutely realistic representation of Saddam Hussein’s reign which is engulfed by the pervasive sense of hopelessness and despair experienced by those who lived under his brutal regime.

Laertes vigorously stands against Claudius' oppression. Laertes' rage and alacrity to face Claudius unswervingly reflect his denunciation of the existing pattern of things. He seeks not to fashion a new structure of values; rather he strives to rip down the oppressive constructions that chain Denmark. For instance, Laertes, on the day of the coronation, challenges Claudius, telling him: "We are ready for blood, O master of Denmark" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.19). Laertes' defiant opposition to Claudius is best framed into Nietzsche's (1984) "violent force of destruction," endorsing resistance through dismantling tyrannical systems. Laertes' speech is catalyst for people who take action in the face of what is wrong rather than succumbing to despair. In this context, Laertes' words reflect a deep disenchantment with Claudius whom he sees as a corrupt and illegitimate ruler. He states, "We attend your celebration and your coronation only to bear witness to your guillotine," suggesting that he looks at the celebrations and ceremonies as mere facade that mask the brutal reality of Claudius's rule (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.19).

Laertes feels that Claudius has reduced the people under his mercy to mere pawns in his game of power. This sentiment aligns with the nihilistic view that life is meaningless and that individuals are often at the mercy of sways beyond their control: Laertes says, "We have become your food! The meals for your table! Your witnesses, and also your killers!" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.19). Not only political decay prevails the palace and Denmark but also the moral decay which Laertes' sarcastically echoes when he says that Hamlet's "mother will sleep tonight with his uncle in his father's bed" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.19). This contempt is not only personal but extends to a broader reprimanding of the societal mores and values that countenance such corruption to thrive.

Laertes's political spirit can be viewed to be an emblem of valor that would indeed spur other youth to rebellion. However, for Polonius, only thinking of rebellion is lunacy. This is obvious in his endeavor to silence Laertes: "Laertes, show some wisdom, or you'll lose your head. The guillotine will be very busy these days, and Claudius won't spare even his own mother's womb!" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.18). But Laertes's awareness of the socio-political malaise of the "rotten kingdom" makes him an independent rebel in the state who strives to set things right or at least divulging the tyrant transgressions (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.27). Laertes might be correlated to the Iraqi resistance who stood firm against Saddam's crimes. Within this context, in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991, the Kurds and the Shia rebelled against the massacres inflicted by the regime. Lawrence E. Cline, who is a professor at the American Military University, contends that:

Shia insurgent operations, together with harsh government responses, have continued since the 1991 uprising...More widespread unrest occasionally flares, such as that following the assassination of a senior Shia cleric and

his sons in February 1999. Numerous protests reportedly erupted, with Iraqi security forces killing some of the protesters and arresting large numbers. The government reportedly routinely responds to potential unrest through torture and executions. Although insurgent operations and popular protests have ebbed and flowed, they generally have been controlled by the government. (Cline, 2000, p.16)

By the same token, silencing Laertes was Claudius's main desire for he was anxious that Laertes's sense of courage would abet others to stand up against oppression which later embodied in Ophelia's attempt to correct the status quo of things.

The revolutionary spirit is similarly a cachet of Laertes's sister Ophelia who after sending him to the sanatorium, she overtly relinquishes her father when he labeled Laertes "unsound man" (Al-Assadi, 2006, 27). Ophelia's renouncement of her father renders her too an active nihilist; she articulates "We'll renounce you. You're not my father" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.27). She views her father to be a passive person for not protecting his son Laertes, "You slaughtered your son with your own hands!" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.27). Likewise, she scolds Hamlet and plea him to save Laertes, averring that "Laertes is in danger! (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.29). When she feds up with him and that he is no longer the Hamlet she once knew, she avows:

Ophelia: Get yourself to a monastery; that would be more merciful. There you can focus your body and your mind on the pressing theological questions. There you can have more peace and quiet to ask and re-ask your question, "to be or not to be."...

Ophelia: Search for the cause of your father's death! Search for his killer! That will bring back your manliness. (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.30)

Ophelia's exhortation to Hamlet to go to a monastery is an instruction to lead a more meaningful life than wasting his time reading around. Hamlet, in Al-Assadi's play, is viewed to be "non-heroic figure and even the memorable quotes, which are supposed to be his, are ludicrously mimicked by other characters to show his embarrassing dumbness" (Mahfouz, 2016, para. 14). In the same spirit, Ophelia instructs Hamlet to check the cause of father's death which is, of course, a call to action and a refutation of Hamlet's passive accustomation of his father's murder. She propels him to take responsibility and exert justice, which goes in rhythm with the active nihilistic framework of challenging the status quo of things. Ophelia, thereby, might be seen to be an emblem of the Iraqi women who are resilient women. The Iraqi-German activist and feminist Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali (2007), contends that the Iraqi women pre 2003 "are not mere passive victims of circumstance: they have been resourcefully, creatively and actively trying to adapt to rapidly changing situations; they have resisted political oppression" (p.1).

As such, nothing like the Ophelia of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, who is depicted as "submissive to the power structures of her patriarchal society, al-Assadi's Ophelia refuses to remain a politically inactive woman and joins the opposition against the tyrant King Claudius" (Mahfouz, 2016, para.16). Ophelia becomes a Hamlet's substitute and holds Hamlet's silence to be a shameful. In reprimanding Hamlet, Ophelia is reproaching the people's indifference to the carnages inflicted by the regime and labeling this silence to be "unforgivable crime." (Al-Assadi, 2008, p.28). Ophelia, thereby, is iron-willed, critical of Hamlet's passiveness, rendering her a voice of opposition in the face of Claudius's transgressions. Yet, she is eventually powerless in the face of the regime's brutality. This coerces Ophelia to slide into a state of perplexity and impart to Horatio what has become of the world around her: "Then he mocks our heritage, laughs at our deaths. He's turning the country into a general graveyard" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.30). Claudius's appointment as king and his mockery of the heritage and deaths of his subjects parallel Saddam Hussein's rise to power and his disgracing Iraq's heritage: "Like Nebuchadnezzar, he wrote his name on many of the bricks, with inscriptions such as: "This was built by Saddam, son of Nebuchadnezzar, to glorify Iraq." (Damon, 2013). Both maintain control through fear and oppression. The connection between the fictional character and the historical tyrant underscores how literature can serve as a mirror to real-life events.

Even The gravediggers, the chorus of the play, voice their bitterness at the dreadfulness of the regime. They passively recognize the meaninglessness of life but respond with cynicism rather than action. In the epilogue, the gravediggers reflect on Hamlet's death and the vainness of his philosophical musings: "He kept philosophizing", as if they are criticizing Hamlet's indulging in too much thinking and inaction which leads to societal failure (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.51). Their act of tossing Hamlet's book into the air represents the vanity of his intellectual pursuits in the face of death and deterioration. Thus, the gravediggers' chorus mirrors the Hakawati (storytelling) which serves as a counter-discourse of cultural testimony.

The play ends when Laertes rises from his coffin and in state of rebellion slay Claudius in a duel and sits on the throne: Laertes and the king, "duel, in cinematic slow motion. Laertes advances toward the King to cut him down. He slaughters him...Laertes sits on the throne as though it were a sculpture of a human body" (Al-Assadi, 2006, p.50). This is a *Deus ex machina* which helps to resolve the impasses of the human characters. The term is currently utilized for any device with which a writer resolves a story (Abrams & Harpham, 2015, p.78). This *Deus ex machina* offers the revolutionaries a glimpse of hope that autocracy is not perennial and the people will attain freedom ultimately if they step forward. In making the active nihilist Laertes victorious, Al-Assadi

proclaims that change may come from action, not from philosophical or intellectual meditation. Laertes's ascension to the throne entails that confrontation which may lead to change.

Conclusion:

In *Forget Hamlet*, Al-Assadi censures the paralysis of the passive people who permits dictatorship to take over, while instantaneously promoting the upholding of activism. The analysis unveils that passive nihilism, which is epitomized by Hamlet, Gertrude, the Gravedigger and Polonius, reflects a succumb to tyranny, marked by spiritual decay and inaction that perpetuates systemic despondency. In stark contrast, active nihilism, epitomized by Laertes and Ophelia, is a defiant rejection of passivity, and promotes resistance through the dismantling of tyrannical structures and the conception of new meaning. The play frames Claudius as a Saddam-like despot and critiques the mechanisms of fear which perpetuates totalitarian regimes while valorizing collective agency as a means of liberation. The play's conclusion, in which Laertes takes over, buttresses the impression that those who fight back may change the course of history. Essentially, *Forget Hamlet* spurs the audience to take action rather than yielding themselves to hopelessness. In this regard, *Forget Hamlet* speaks to the whole world about the struggle against tyranny and the dangers of passivity. As such, Al-Assadi orients the audience to acknowledge the necessity of taking action in a time of need. All in all, this study delineates how theater is both a cultural mirror and an implement for political change.

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