

Hamlet's Road from Damascus: Potent Fathers, Slain Ghosts, and Rejuvenated Sons

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Abstract

This paper examines the intertextual relationship between *Hamlet* and Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008). It argues that the appropriation of Hamlet's intellectual and psychological inner conflicts in the novel highlights the complexities of ideological decisions Muslims in Britain face in post-9/11 times. Sami, the novel's protagonist, goes on a quest for salvation and truth that echoes in many ways Hamlet's anguished and prolonged search for evidence of his father's murder story, as narrated by the father's ghost. Just as Hamlet's revenge mission turns into a series of meditations on the human existence, death, and the futility of vengeance, Sami's negotiation with his late father's unwavering demands for secularism and repudiation of Islam complicates the shaping of the Muslim diasporic identity. A number of quotations from *Hamlet* that come at crucial moments in the novel, as well as Sami's Hamlet-like hallucinatory state, help steer him toward crucial self-realizations.

This paper examines Robin Yassin-Kassab's appropriation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into his post-9/11 novel, *The Road from Damascus* (2008). It presents a comparative reading of the two texts, identifying parallel techniques and crucial plot development that help Yassin-Kassab in problematizing the ideological representation of the Arab Muslim in diaspora. We argue that the hero of Yassin-Kassab's novel shares some of Hamlet's dilemmas, disillusionments, and experiences of attempting to find answers for urgent and persistent ontological questions. As the specter of the father dominates Hamlet and his pursuit of and resistance to revenge, Sami, the protagonist in *The Road from Damascus*, is haunted by his father's ghost while he explores his ideological affiliations.

Sami finds himself torn between his father's anti-Islamist pan-Arabism and his own allegiances and political convictions. Like Shakespeare's protagonist, who sets out on a psychological journey through which he asks a series of critical questions that eventually help him clear his mind and reach a sense of equilibrium, Sami's early confusion and procrastination turn into a profound and thoughtful quest that eventually cleanses his mind and restores his sense of self-respect and dignity.

Our reading of Yassin-Kassab's appropriation of *Hamlet* examines his use of the specter of the father, the father-mother-uncle triangle, in addition to his use of direct references to Shakespeare and his works. We argue that the appropriation of *Hamlet* into Sami's story is meant to complicate the binary opposition between secularism and Islamism and trouble some of the stereotypes associated with each. Through this complication, Yassin-Kassab proposes the viability of different paths beyond this binary opposition for the protagonist, who is meant to stand for Arabs and Muslims in post-9/11 Britain.

The references to *Hamlet* also intellectualize the debate over the relevance or resistance to the influence of Islam on the perception and reproduction of Arab Muslims' identities in Britain. They also humanize Arabs and Muslims as Hamlet-like figures whose relationships with the past (haunting fathers/home of origin) and present (location in British society) are far from stable and structured, but rather troubled and troubling. We argue that there is abundance of textual evidence to suggest that Yassin-Kassab appropriates *Hamlet* into his story, following a long literary tradition of adaptation and intertextualization of the play into Arabic literature and Arabic literature in diaspora. The paper explores the implications of such an appropriation on the story of Sami and the representation of Arabs and Muslims in post-9/11 Britain.

The Road from Damascus, which is written in English, is the story of Sami, the son of Mustafa Traifi, a deceased Syrian immigrant to England. He lives under the shadow of his father's academic distinction and his dogmatic atheism and secularism. Sami's father is a well-known intellectual and pan-Arab nationalist who passed away fifteen years ago. As the novel opens, Sami makes his way back to Britain after a sojourn in Syria, in which he tries to seek an inspiration for his Ph.D. dissertation on Arabic poetry. Attempting to fulfill his father's wishes and emulate his academic success, Sami is determined to write a dissertation that diminishes the influence of Islam on Arab cultural productions.

After Sami returns to his home in London, he is shocked to find out that his wife, Muntaha, has decided to wear a hijab/headscarf, reminding Sami of his mother, who made a similar choice years ago, despite the relentless objections of Sami's father. Ever since, Sami has categorized his mother's deed as an act of betrayal of his father's anti-Islamic stances and sentiments. Sami finds himself further pushed to the edge when his academic supervisor informs him that his research topic is not viable, reminding him of his obligation, as the son of a renowned thinker, to produce a first class dissertation. Deeply disappointed and disillusioned, Sami indulges in a world of sex, drugs, and alcohol. At this point of intense ideological self-doubt, Sami's father's ghost, taking the shape of a centaur, visits him in hallucinatory episodes to remind him of the necessity to avoid

Islam and Muslims, a demand that Sami heartily acknowledges. Sami is imprisoned for drug abuse, and his marriage begins falling apart after his wife discovers his infidelity during a two-day bender.

Out of house and without money, Sami turns to his wife's younger brother, Ammar, who has recently become a devout Muslim. Gradually, Sami's unwavering and unquestioned belief in his father's secularism and pan-Arabism crumbles and is replaced by self-fashioned spiritual inclinations that are akin to Islamic values and beliefs. Sami concludes his inner struggles by slaying his father's ghost and liberating himself from the confinement of his father's demands and commands. He realizes that he has been enslaved by his father's hatred and hostility to Islam and begins to look at life with fresh eyes. As Sami comes to terms with other possibilities beyond his father's doctrine, the 9/11 attacks take place, turning Sami and his ilk into targets of the British government. Sami is arrested and interrogated for standing outside a mosque in a London neighborhood. His beard, the police insist, has given them an incisive clue to indict him of complicity in terrorism. When the police recognize their mistake, they offer him the chance to work as an informer on members of Arab and Muslim communities, which he rejects. The novel concludes with Sami's reconciliation with both his wife and his mother, as he realizes that there are valid paths other than the one his father had chosen for him.

Arabic Adaptation of *Hamlet*

Yassin-Kassab creates an Arab Muslim Hamlet-like figure whose life is shaped, on the one hand, by a secularist heritage left to him by his father and, on the other, by an anti-Muslim intolerance and hostility created in the aftermath of 9/11. Yassin-Kassab's novel maps a post-9/11 diasporic Arab and Muslim tragedy "onto the template of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," to quote Graham Holderness's words on other adaptations of *Hamlet* by Arab writers in diaspora (Holderness 2006, 12). This is unsurprising, considering Shakespeare's global popularity and immense influence on world literature, which has led to the appropriation of his plays into international literature (Bosman 2010, Kennedy 2001, Sanders 2007). Julie Sanders demonstrates how processes of adapting and appropriating Shakespeare's plays are "complex means" that involve "multiple acts of mediation and filtration" (Sanders 2007, 62). Thus, "appropriations are often as much in dialogue with other adaptations as with the Shakespearean sourcetext" (62).

In this sense, the Arab world is no exception. *Hamlet* has always had a strong presence in contemporary Arab literary and cultural productions. As Holderness succinctly puts it, "Shakespeare's absorption into Middle East culture was not, by any means, a simple process of imperialist transmission and passive colonial reception" (Holderness 2006, 10). Shakespeare's plays have been adapted and appropriated in the Arab world since "the late-nineteenth century to

meet the needs of stage companies that were burgeoning in Egypt and other Arab countries" (Al-Shetawi 1999, 44). Al-Shetawi maintains that in the Arab world, Shakespeare's plays "were translated repeatedly and more often adjusted to satisfy the conditions of local theaters of the time." *Hamlet*, Al-Shetawi asserts, "has been assimilated in the fabric of Arabic creative processes" (60).

Al-Shetawi's remarks anticipate Margaret Litvin's recognition of "an Arab *Hamlet* tradition that has produced countless citations, allusions, adaptations and other intertextual appropriations in the past half-century" (Litvin 2007, 74).¹ This tradition, Litvin argues, is strongly linked to the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's "anticolonial revolution and the hopes it first inspired and then disappointed" (Litvin 2011, 34). She invokes Hamlet's most memorable and iconic phrases to describe equally uncertain times in the post-Nasser era:

The time has been most painfully "out of joint" in the ideological vacuum left by Nasser's 1970 death; the crisis of whether "to be or not to be" has arisen most sharply after the failure of Arab nationalism. This is true not only for Egyptians but for the generation of Arabs all over the Near East who spent their youth listening to Nasser's radio broadcasts and sharing his dreams (Litvin 2011, 34).

The invocation of Nasser is quite pertinent to our discussion of *The Road from Damascus*, since Sami's father appears as a domineering Nasserist figure whose anti-Islamist pan-Arabist legacy looms over not only Sami but also generations of ardent believers in pan-Arab nationalism. Arabs in diaspora are no exception in dealing with another shadow as they negotiate their hybrid identities. In fact, Nasser's death in 1970 generated mixed responses in the Arab world, as he was represented on stage in any adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as "Hamlet's father's ghost: awe-inspiring, betrayed, succeeded by men of lesser talent, and continuing to haunt the Arab political imagination" (Litvin 2011, 52).² What Litvin says about Nasser's representation in adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the Arab world applies, to a great extent, to the role Sami's father plays in *The Road from Damascus*. A fervent believer in pan-Arab nationalism, Sami's father's ghost haunts the novel and continually commands his son to continue to believe in Arab nationalism and to be as far as possible from Islam. In doing so, the ghost personifies Nasser's aspirations of a pan-Arab nationalism and hostility towards Islamism.

Intertextuality in *The Road from Damascus*

Yassin-Kassab's life and writings embody the complexities of an Arab identity hybridized in diaspora. He is an Arab-British author who writes in English and whose works examine the complexities of identity constructions for Arabs in diaspora as they mitigate their way around

thorny issues of migration, faith, and generational conflicts (Chambers 2011, Rashid 2012b). His writings belong to a burgeoning tradition of Arab writers in diaspora whose works simultaneously draw on their Arab cultural heritage and their status as citizens of non-Arab and non-Muslim countries. As Layla Al-Maleh argues, Arab writers in diaspora are "compelled, more out of necessity than choice, to negotiate identities from a vantage-point with firm links to Arab history, even when they [are] second- or third-generation writers" (Al-Maleh 2009, 13). The works of Arab writers in diaspora negotiate the space between the different cultures to which they belong. As Salhi puts it, Arab authors in diaspora live in a space "where both home and host cultures converge, intersect, and even clash" (Salhi 2006, 3-4). It is a space in which Arab and Western traditions, philosophies, and cultural artifacts blend and shape each other.

Most critics and analysts who have reviewed *The Road from Damascus* have pointed out that the novel raises the reader's awareness of the role Islam plays in shaping the identities of a large number of the characters. For instance, Catherine Rashid argues that "Yassin-Kassab challenges the critique of Islamic dogma by constructing a plot which follows an individual's partial conversion to Islam, through a *bildungsroman* structure" (Rashid 2012b, 94). Rashid maintains that since the novel focuses on the moral development of an individual "within a shifting diasporic community," *The Road from Damascus* can be viewed as "not only a novel of 'formation' but also as a novel of 'transformation'" (94). In other words, Rashid highlights how Islam plays a crucial role in the way in which Sami eventually begins to accept his identity as an Arab Muslim who lives in Britain. This realization is instigated by a humiliating racial profiling experience he undergoes towards the end of the novel, after the 9/11 attacks.

Reflecting the hybridity of identity of author and protagonist, Yassin-Kassab's novel draws on both Arabic and Western traditions. It employs intertextuality "as a creative strategy of resistance" (Awad 2012, 172) to produce a clear picture of spiritual and intellectual struggles that the protagonist undergoes. Intertextuality affirms the impossibility of the independence of texts. Since Ferdinand De Saussure's (1974) contribution to literary theory, which established a relational construction of language and meaning, other critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva insist on the indispensability of the social contextualization of reading. Kristeva (1986) posits the instability and disunity of texts. As Graham Allen argues, "The text is not an individual, isolated object but, rather, a compilation of cultural textuality. Individual text and the cultural text are made from the same textual material and cannot be separated from each other" (Allen 2011, 36).³ Readers read into texts the influence of other texts, acknowledging the textual fluidity of meanings. These moments of intertextual affinity do not only fold the linearity of time but also create "linkage

between literary creativity and political interpretations" and "renewed interest in the relationship between history and narrative" (Allen 2006, 5). Intertextuality thus provides the space in which history, narrativity, past, present, literariness, and politics come together.

The intertextuality in *The Road from Damascus* operates no differently. As a culturally hybridized author, Yassin-Kassab tells a story of an Arab and Muslim man's exploration of his ideological inclinations, a quest made perilous by a post 9/11 world that has metonymized 'terrorism' in beards and headscarves. He builds this story on intertextually punctured holes that allow Shakespeare's most famous play into the narrative of dealing with the specter of the father of pan Arab nationalism that haunts individual spiritual pursuits in a hostile British environment. It provides a cross-cultural context to what otherwise is supposed to be an individual religious choice. The oppressive secularist pan-Arab nationalism is only mirrored by the hegemony of the state at the end of the novel that essentializes Sami's identity into the binary opposition between a terrorist and a traitor to Britain or a spy and betrayer of his own kind.

In the midst of this polarity of routes, Yassin-Kassab appropriates *Hamlet* and invokes its protagonist's intellectual dilemma and restraint from action within limited and limiting spaces created by the specter of the father, the incestuous betrayal of the mother, and the colluding of the uncle. In this sense, Yassin-Kassab's novel can be seen as one of the contemporary texts that incorporate a Shakespearean plot within its pages. Drawing on *Hamlet* enables Yassin-Kassab to paint a realistic picture of the consequences of 9/11 on Arabs and Muslims in Britain. A Hamlet-like Sami is reduced by British police to an "Islamist terrorist" whose beard and skin color are evident marks for instantaneous indictment.

The frequent appearances of Sami's father's ghost, then, link Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As the appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet* unsettles and perturbs the Danish Prince's mind, eventually rendering him as an iconic contemplative figure who has captured the imagination of generations of readers and viewers worldwide, the appearance of Sami's father's ghost serves to initiate Sami's self-conscious journey of contemplation that leads him to question, challenge, and ultimately abandon his father's commandments. The appearance of the restless ghosts of the two father figures instills in their sons a desire to question and scrutinize what they are ordered to do, prompting them to go on self-probing voyages. While Hamlet contemplates death, the afterlife, and the futility of revenge, Sami's quest leads him to re-evaluate his father's antagonistic thoughts about Islam and reflect on his own beliefs and exigencies, eventually becoming a practicing devout Muslim.

Yassin-Kassab's novel contains numerous references to *Hamlet*. This is specifically seen when the omniscient narrator describes how Vronsky, a Russian immigrant to Britain during WWI,

"learnt English from the newspapers and from a leather-bound volume of Shakespeare" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 133). Few lines down, Vronsky muses that "*The Daily Mail* said one thing, but Shakespeare said another" (134). Vronsky cites Hamlet's words on man when he is talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about his depression and loss of interest in life: "What a piece of work is a man — how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension" (2.2.295-98).⁴ Echoing Hamlet's words, Vronsky describes his future wife: "In form, in moving, thought Vronsky, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel!" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 134). In addition, Marwan, Sami's father-in-law's commentaries on Shakespeare are commended by Jim, a British Council official who knew Marwan long time before his death (141). And Antony, head of a marketing company that Sami briefly works for, urges his employees to work hard and climb the business ladder, quoting Hamlet's words, "There are more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio" (273).

The Specter of the Father(s)

The novel's first lengthy reference to Shakespeare comes at the beginning of chapter 18. The chapter starts as follows: "In seventeenth-century England the verb 'to leap' was slang for to fuck. Hence the tendency of Shakespeare's livelier characters to visit 'leaping houses'" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 175). Right after this allusion to Shakespeare's witty employment of puns, the omniscient narrator informs us that "Sami had been leaping about in time. He had evaded news of one death and, as usual, frozen out the reality of another" (175). The first death that the above quotation refers to is the death of Marwan, and the second death is that of his father. Sami believes, however, that his father is still alive, a conviction reinforced by the frequent visits his father's ghost makes. To be sure, the omniscient narrator informs us that Sami "embarked on Hobbes' voyage, but had been brusquely hauled back to land by a hallucinated leaping horse. By his father" (175). This is only one of a number of visitations that take place at crucial moments in the narrative. Here, the visit coincides with the start of Sami's self-probing journey following his realization that his Ph.D. project has hit an impasse. When the ghost of the father visits Sami, he takes the form of a horse. The sound of the hooves often precedes these visits.

Sami's challenge to his dead father's desires is similar to Hamlet's procrastination in fulfilling the wishes of his father's ghost by avenging his murder. Sami and Hamlet question the desires of their respective fathers' ghosts, taking in a journey of self-exploration that complicates their lives, but ultimately helps each of them take a critical decision. As Janette Dillon puts it, "What drives Hamlet to unpack his heart is doubt" (Dillon 2007, 74). Sami's response to the ghost's demand

that he maintain the path chosen for him as a secularist and anti-Islamism intellectual is replete with doubt. He counters his father's formidable belief in pan-Arabism with growing doubts and persistent wavering between the fulfillment and the rejection of the father's desires. Hamlet doubts his father's ghost, instead seeking evidence before the fulfillment of the father's vengeful wish.

One, however, can read the ghost's demands beyond revenge since Hamlet's killing of Claudius will restore the throne to its rightful heir, which had been usurped by the murder of the father and the marriage to the mother. In this context, Sami's and Hamlet's doubts are similar as they hesitate and procrastinate in the fulfillment of the oppressive demands of their fathers to emulate their achievements (being a king or being an anti-Islam intellectual). Neither son is allowed different paths from the ones selected by the father. The specter of the father, thus, epitomizes the generational conflict between fathers and sons and past and present, as a bloody future awaits both sons' resolve to choose their paths (the final bloodshed scene in *Hamlet* and 9/11 in *The Road from Damascus*).

Dillon attributes Hamlet's doubt to the fact that "England in 1600 was reeling from a century of religious upheaval, as yet unresolved" (Dillon 2007, 75). She notes that it is no accident that Hamlet and Horatio are established at the start of the play as students at the University of Wittenberg, since this is the place where Martin Luther had nailed his beliefs to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1517. Dillon states that *Hamlet* recalls to an Elizabethan audience "the world of an older faith" as the ghost tells Hamlet how "the souls of the dead had to suffer in purgatory before they could be saved" (75). At the same time, Dillon maintains that the play "consciously puts opposing ideas into play, particularly in the last act, as Hamlet seems to reach a new calm based on a growing trust in providence" (75). In other words, Shakespeare's play presents Elizabethan audiences with complex, and even contradictory, religious doctrines that the skeptic Hamlet has to grapple with.

This augments Hamlet's dilemma, as he has to decide whether or not to accept the words of his father's ghost. As Dillon's words show, Hamlet encounters diverse religious narratives that should be scrutinized and questioned during the course of the play. In a way, this idea re-surfaces in Yassin-Kassab's novel, when Muslim characters "enunciate diverse and often clashing views of Islam," depicting a more nuanced picture of Muslim communities today and deflating the idea "that Islam is a consistent single entity" (Chambers 2012, 121, 125).

The ghost of Sami's father has never left his son. Early in the novel and during his visit to Syria, someone has hinted to Sami that his father, a staunch Ba'athist and a believer in Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism, has informed on Sami's uncle because of his Islamic inclinations. Subsequently, Sami's uncle, Faris, was jailed and tortured for nearly twenty years. On the last night of his visit,

Sami dreams of his father, an uncomfortable dream. In a recurring invocation of the image of the horse but this time in the form of a dream, Sami sees a dead sweating horse that "wore the face of Sami's dead father. Mustafa Traifi's face, elongated to fit the equine muzzle" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 10). When Sami wakes up, he remembers that he "had never been visited by his father in a nightmare form. All his dreams of him had been burnished memories, night nostalgia of the kind that occasionally provoked wholesome tears" (10). Sami muses:

There was nothing wrong in the father-son relationship, nothing except the fact that the father was dead, had been dead for sixteen years, was dead, embalmed and mummified. Mustafa Traifi, porcelain sepulchre. Mustafa Traifi, enshrined in Sami's head. The only member of Sami's family who Sami had no problems with. None at all. (10)

This changes, however, when Sami discovers his father's role in the incarceration of his uncle Faris, which leaves him paralyzed.

Upon his return to London, Sami reconciles with his dead father when he drinks a brand favored by his father. As he toasts his father's memory, Sami feels "tough and nihilistic" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 23). He confirms his position as a loyal disciple of his father who refuses his mother's act of betrayal when she has decided to wear a hijab, an issue Sami has to deal with personally with his own wife. He sees her desire to wear a hijab as a "threat [. . .]" that "represent[s] the end of everything Sami had hope for too" (3). The perception of the hijab for Sami begins as a visible renunciation of the father's secularist doctrine. The mother's and wife's decision to wear it represents a rejection of what Sami's father stands for and what Sami is compelled to emulate. As Sami's perception of Islam changes once he frees himself from the specter of the father, the hijab like the beard he decides to grow, transforms in ideological significance into a visible declaration of identity in Britain. They both transcend their religious meaning and become an emblem of difference and in post-9/11 times, a target for racial profiling. Sami's initial view of the mother's and wife's decision to wear the hijab as an act of betrayal changes into an opportunity for affinity against the father's dominance.

The Freudian Triangle

At the center of Sami's quest for self-knowledge is a triangle that is not different from the one present in *Hamlet*. In *The Road from Damascus*, the father-mother-uncle triangle creates a second and more powerful specter that haunts Hamlet/Sami and their pursuits. In unpacking this parallel of triangles, we rely on Freud's reading of a subtext in the play that psychoanalyzes

Hamlet's reluctance and procrastination, which Freud (1945 [1899]) reads as a manifestation of the Return of the Repressed: the oedipal desire. We find this reading enriching to our discussion of the intertextuality in Yassin-Kassab's novel. Freud argues that the infant son develops forbidden sexual desires towards the mother, and since he views the father as a rival for the mother's love, he harbors the desire to kill him. These forbidden wishes are repressed by the fear of castration, a psychological mechanism through which the authority of the father is asserted on an unconscious level. These desires remain latent in the child's unconscious and surface only in neurotic symptoms such as madness, displacement, and impulsive and irrational reactions.

According to Freud's reading of *Hamlet*, Claudius usurps Hamlet's place as king and as the mother's lover. Hamlet's initial struggle before the visit from his father's ghost is with the incestuous and hasty marriage between his uncle and mother. Once the ghost reveals the truth about his murder, Hamlet's anger towards the mother is compounded, as the betrayal is doubled. Freud notes, however, that Hamlet's own oedipal desires motivate his hesitance to exact revenge against his uncle. He unconsciously recognizes in Claudius' incestuous marriage to Gertrude a fulfilment of his own repressed oedipal desire, and this affinity becomes an obstacle in his quest for revenge. Unable to reclaim his throne without dealing with the second forbidden usurpation, incest, Hamlet postpones his act of revenge, as neurotic symptoms of madness and displacement conceal the Return of the Repressed, which is the desire to marry the mother and kill the father.

The marriage between Gertrude and Claudius represents a moment of incestuous sexual affinity acknowledged by Claudius himself, who declares Gertrude "our sometime sister, now our Queen" (1.2.8). This acknowledgement of incest motivates Hamlet's anger and frustration with the reenactment of his forbidden desires. Freud reads Hamlet's instinctive act of killing Polonius, Ophelia's father, mistaking him for Claudius, as an impulsive enactment of oedipal desire to kill the father/father figure. It is no coincidence, according to Freud, that this scene occurs in the mother's bedroom when mother and son are engaged in intense moments of confessions. Polonius, hiding behind a tapestry, momentarily appears like a ghost, which makes Hamlet's act of stabbing him a double act of oedipal killing involving both the specter of the father and the uncle. Once Gertrude is accidentally killed when she drinks from the poisoned cup that Claudius intends for Hamlet, Hamlet is freed from the shadow of the repressed, and he eventually kills his uncle by forcing him to drink from the same cup, yet again uniting the incestuous couple. The rotten state in Denmark of mixed forbidden blood and sex ends with the bloodshed of all sinful parties.

The triangle in *The Road from Damascus* also consists of father-mother-uncle and is rife with betrayal. While the incest in *Hamlet* is sexual and marital, it is ideological between actual brother and sister in *The Road from Damascus*. The ideological affinity between Nur, Sami's mother, and

brother against her late husband's atheist convictions is interpreted by Sami at one point as an act of betrayal. The uncle who spends years in the oblivion of Syrian jails due to the betrayal of Sami's father wins the mother's conviction when she decides to cover her hair and make her ideological difference visible. This act of affinity is further complicated when Sami's own wife follows suit and wears the headscarf. This ideological mimicking creates a window of release that allows Sami to slay the ghost of the father as wife and mother become doubles through the head cover.

The fulfillment of the oedipal desire, while interrupted in *Hamlet* by Ophelia's suicide, is allowed in *The Road from Damascus*. The triangle in *The Road from Damascus* operates similarly to *Hamlet*'s in endearing the uncles to the protagonists in both texts. In *Hamlet*, the uncle represents a fulfillment of Hamlet's latent oedipal desires, hence incapable of being killed. In *The Road from Damascus*, the uncle represents the ideological fulfillment of incest while simultaneously fulfilling the role of the victim of the father that Sami eventually embodies. The death of the father is supposed to instigate Hamlet's revenge quest; however, it hinders that revenge, since the story is a reversal of the development of the Oedipus Complex. According to Freud, the killing of the father is the ultimate unfulfilled pursuit of the infant boy as he goes into maturity, but in *Hamlet*, the story begins with the death of the father and the resurrection of his specter. Sami's struggle concludes with the killing of the (ghost of the) father. Marrying the mother is allowed on an ideological level, as both turn into practicing Muslims and renounce the ideology of the father, and also on a sexual level, when Sami's wife mirrors his mother's ideological decision and wears the hijab.

Madness and Suicide

Other points of parallel between the novel and the play concern the two protagonists' erratic behavior, which is spurred by the intervention of the specters of the father into their lives. Sami's initial response to the ideological threat is indulgence in the world of drugs. Disconnecting his mobile, Sami goes on a journey into the city's underworld. In a night club, he has sex with a girl whose name he does not know. Once he wakes up, Sami is visited by his father's ghost:

Not when at his back, above him, there is the heavy thud of hooves, an equine slobber, a flurry of dust (thick, red Syrian dust), and the beast rearing on its hind legs, flanks shivering and scattering blood. He doesn't want to see the rider [. . .] The apocalypse horse is its own rider. It has a human face: the leering, fish-eyed face of Mustafa Traifi. (Yasin-Kasebb, 2008, 166)

Ashamed of what he has done, Sami does not listen to his father. He runs away. Wandering aimlessly around the city, Sami looks like a mad person, which creates a parallel to the appearance of mad Hamlet following the visit of his father's specter. In fact, Ophelia is stunned to see Hamlet with "his doublet all unbraced" and his stockings "fouled," looking "pale as his shirt" (2.1.74-81). The shopkeeper of the store in which Sami enters is astonished to see him in his horrendous shape, "bloodshot, semi-dressed, canal-stained" (177).

Sami has surely been derailed from the path his father has carefully drawn for him. It is not surprising then that Sami apologizes for his procrastination and assures his father's ghost of his full obedience: "'Despite whatever you've done,' he muttered, 'I don't hold anything against you. Despite it all. Just leave me alone, then. I'm doing this for you. Steering clear of Muslims. No need to worry. So leave me alone'" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 178). As Sami continues his voyage into the streets, he gets arrested for using drugs. A prison inmate advises Sami to "'[d]istinguish false from true visions. Stand in Satan's way'" (82). Sami "felt he was on the verge of something. The lifting of a veil. The Greek word for it is apocalypse" (181). At this moment of crisis, Sami is visited again by his father's ghost:

Sami heard the briefest clack of hooves. Mustafa Traifi's face began to form.

"Oh fuck off," said Sami. Mustafa disappeared.

There were tears in his eyes, but he didn't brush them away. What he did this time was face facts. Heard the echo of his own "fuck off" in his ears. Words with no audience, for his father was really gone. (184)

Sami muses: "Nothing was left of Mustafa Traifi, it was time to admit that. Time to stop behaving as if his father was still here. And time, therefore, to examine all the superstitions he'd built around his father's ghost" (184). Spurred by the prison inmate's warning of false visions and urging to confront Satan, Sami begins to investigate the ideas his father has implanted in him.

This is similar to Hamlet's decision to act logically and investigate the narrative of his father's ghost, which Hamlet begins to suspect and interrogate. He wonders whether what he has seen is a manifestation of the devil, who "hath power to assume a pleasing shape" — that is, the shape of his father — and exploiting his "weakness and my melancholy" (2.2.531-40). Similarly, Sami begins to question his father's ideas and thoughts: "The God fiction, for instance. He'd believed as passionately as he could that it was fiction because he'd thought it was manly and worthy of his father's pride to believe so" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 184).

As Sami begins to find alternatives for the thoughts his father has instilled in him, he becomes a Hamlet-like meditative figure. Dillon makes a link between Hamlet's meditation on death and contemporary anxieties over the location of religion in politics and society, which is similar to Sami's conflicted pursuit of identity among combating ideologies. Dillon argues that in the scene in which Hamlet discusses death with the gravedigger, albeit in a comic way, he "recalls an older tradition of Christian drama, combining the fear of death with the hope of resurrection, at the same time as it moves towards a new secularism" (Dillon 2007, 70). This uncertainty is further centralized in Hamlet's internal torment and manifested in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Hamlet's meditations on death and the afterlife are part of an internal conflict that he undergoes once his father's ghost informs him about his murder at the hands of his uncle. Hamlet's soliloquy reflects Elizabethan debates about these thorny and crucial issues. According to Claire McEachern:

This afterlife was by no means an uncontested site. Different stripes of Christianity defined the nature of connection between now and later in different ways. Skepticism about the afterlife's very existence was also present in this period, as was indifference or insouciance. (McEachern 2010, 196)

To a large extent, Sami's meditations on death and the afterlife echo those of Hamlet and reinforce the Hamlet-like meditative figure that Sami takes on as he questions his father's hostility and resentment toward Islam. Similar to previous adaptations by Arab writers, Yassin-Kassab's "Hamletization of the Arab Muslim hero" grants Sami "psychological depth" and "recognition as a moral subject" (Litvin 2011, 92). Sami contemplates:

What if he were to believe, positively, in a God, in the unseen? To believe that death was not death but another kind of life? Would that be wrong? Would it be wrong to at least aspire to such a belief, to hope? Was hoping wrong? Faced with injustice, the absurdity, the unthinkability, of death. For it is unthinkable, once you've noticed yourself living, to stop.

No, not wrong. Perhaps not right either. But not wrong.

You could even say that the weight of blindness falls on those who don't stir to hope, so blind they are to the absurdity of death. The careless atheists, like him. The materialists who sneer at religious emotion. You could even say that it is they who are in denial.

For Sami this was a great leap, across, out, into the abyss. Towards what? Would something be there to meet him? To stop him falling through the void? (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 184)

In fact, the novel contains significant passages meditating on death and, in different ways, giving explanations to Hamlet's inquiries. Significantly, Muntaha is the character who offers these clarifications, especially in her conversations with Gabor. In one place, she explains death from a Muslim perspective, which parallels Hamlet's famous soliloquy. Quoting Muslim scholar Ghazali, she describes death as "mysterious" and a transient dream-like state of being in which the souls of the dead "sleep and dream of the state they'll be in after the Last Day" (145). Yassin-Kassab's novel seems to explore what Hamlet refers to as the "undiscover'd country from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (3.1.78-79).

Eventually, Sami's meditations lead him to reject his father's adverse thoughts toward Islam. Sami here can be seen as Hamlet, who towards the end of the play develops trust in providence: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10-11); "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.197-98).⁵ Hamlet's quest leads him to question the usefulness and worth of revenge. Hamlet, to use David Bevington's words, "feels sure that divine wisdom is somehow in charge of all that happens; now he sees that pattern with more confidence and faith in an unseen goodness" (Bevington 2006, 96). In other words, Hamlet "put[s] himself at the service of an overseeing providence to which he now trusts his whole life and mission" (98). Thus, when his father's ghost appears to him, towards the end of the novel, Sami does not hesitate to slay him, avenging all the people, including his uncle Faris, who was victimized by Sami's father and his repressive ideologies that allow no dissent:

He [Sami] turns around, finding a sword's handle in his grasp, and the centaur snorting and galloping at him. He stabs it upwards through the throat, through flank and gristle, pushing hard.

[. . .]

More stabbing, more gore. The son sacrifices the father, whose horse body quickly dissolves. Mustafa raises a palm in farewell. (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 281)

Once Sami slays the ghost of the father, he regains his freedom and begins to look upon his life with serenity. The omniscient narrator informs us that "mosques didn't frighten him [Sami] since he'd stopped believing in Mustafa's ghost" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 204). Sami now realizes that "[t]here were paths other than the one his father had trodden. Other, but not necessarily mistaken. Paths taken, for instance, by his wife, or by his mother. Other, valid paths" (10-11). As the novel closes, the reconciliation between the son and mother is complete. Sami and his mother discuss,

for the first time, their past. Asking his mother for clarification about the role his father played in informing on his uncle Faris twenty years ago, Nur offers a more benevolent and tolerant reading of the past:

"He [Sami's father] thought there'd be one nation. One Arab nation from the Ocean to the Gulf. What we have now is everything but. We have everything smaller and everything bigger. Little sects and ethnicities, little nationalisms, and big Islamism. But no Arab nation. If they hadn't tried so hard to force us into it, maybe it would have happened." (340-41)

Nur's words are quite interesting because she clearly reveals that Mustafa Traifi's unwavering and dogmatic faith in pan-Arab nationalism prevented him from being more lenient towards other ideological approaches, particularly Islam. Mustafa Traifi's belief in pan-Arab nationalism surely reminds us of Gamal Abdel Nasser's dreams and aspiration for a pan-Arab nation that has little, or even no, space for Islamism. As Litvin notes, Nasser underlies and enables "Arab Hero Hamlet: Shakespeare's Hamlet understood as a visionary activist, a fighter for justice brutally martyred by an oppressive regime" (Litvin 2011, 36).

Hence, it is quite fitting that the novel complicates Sami's inner conflicts of choosing between Islam and nationalism by bringing into the picture Hamlet, who in the Arab world is understood as "largely a product of Nasser's revolution and the way that revolution was lived out" (Litvin 2011, 36-37). In this way, Hamlet is more than a charismatic Shakespearean hero, but he is strongly affiliated with and deeply engrossed in pan-Arab nationalism — lived, adored, and idolized by a generation of Arab intellectuals represented in the novel by Mustafa Traifi.

Once Sami frees himself from his father's ghost, he realizes that "faith is not synonymous with backwardness, nor secularism with humanism" (Jaggi 2008, par. 5). In one place, he states that "Islam is something you find inside yourself rather than in any specific country" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 221). He even starts to perform prayers because "He had no opinions to prevent him from doing so" (222). Through his brother-in-law, Ammar, he begins to integrate into the Muslim community, which is more accepting of his choices and newly found identity (224). Now Sami looks at his past with a kind of regret:

He considered how different to his illusions the world actually was. He'd thought he was holding the fort of secular humanism, but the fort had already fallen. In its rubble a marketplace of religion had set up, where people thrashed and struggled to attain uniqueness of belief. (244)

Sami realizes that "secular humanism was a late nineteenth-century hiccup, an antiquated European gentleman's daydream. And Mustafa's daydream too, of course" (245)).

Post 9/11 Hamlet Hero

Yassin-Kassab's representation of Sami as a Hamlet-like figure is meant to humanize Arabs and Muslims, who after 9/11 have been demonized, criminalized, and dehumanized. Sami's journey away from the shadow of the father and his secularist doctrine enables him to make some insightful and even-handed comments. The novel, which is written in English, addresses mainly Anglophone culture and readers for whom Hamlet represents, *inter alia*, nobility and honor. Sami is meant to be an Arab Muslim Hamlet who lives in diaspora. Like *Hamlet, The Road from Damascus* ends in mass deaths that have enduring repercussions for contemporary life. As the attacks of 9/11 take place in the United States, Arabs and Muslims in the West experience a backlash as "[r]epeated references to 'Islamic terrorists,' even 'Islamofascists,' have justified many acts of discrimination, both large and small" (Scanlan 2013, 22).

In this sense, the novel attempts to portray some of the hardships that Arabs and Muslims in Britain have undergone following the attacks. The parallel between Sami and Hamlet draws a more realistic image of Arabs and Muslims that counters and undermines images circulated through media "in which the propensity for extremism and violence of a small segment of politicized Islam is magnified and projected onto Muslim communities around the world" (Morey and Yaqin 2011, 18).

With this in mind, Yassin-Kassab depicts the repercussions of 9/11 events on Sami's life. The suicide attacks take place at the moment when Sami awakens and begins to see reality clearly. He is bewildered as "he had no scale to measure the event. Nothing inherited from Mustafa. No nationalist way of judging. No Qabbani verse to help him" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 315). Sami reverts to his mentor, Tom Field, for explanations, who offers a pessimistic version of what will happen:

"I said something big was planned. And there you have it, a couple of days ago. The catalyst. The trigger. Well then, watch it unfold. Enjoy the . . ." — his flow broke and resumed as he stripped and stacked — — ". . . the oil wars, Or not. As the case may be."

[. . .]

"It's how they'll exploit it that's the point. And that isn't difficult to predict." (324-25)⁶

It does not take long for Tom's apocalyptic words to turn true for the "war on terror" has already started. Sami, who has just grown a beard, gets arrested outside a Brick Lane mosque.

As the police carry out their investigations, Sami realizes that he was in this situation because of "The burden of the beard [. . .] The burden of belonging. Just when he was sorting himself out the external world took a lurch for the worse" (333). Once the police discover Sami's true identity, they release him. In a reminder of one of the most frequently employed motifs in *Hamlet*, which is spying and betrayal, the police offer Sami to work as a spy and an informant on his Arab and Muslim community, which he categorically refuses.

In order for Yassin-Kassab to present the dilemma of Arabs and Muslims in Britain post 9/11, he draws on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. By presenting Sami as a Hamlet-like figure, Yassin-Kassab presents to his Anglophone audience an Arab Muslim man whose life has been shaped by ontological complications, psychological conflicts, and spiritual quests. Yassin-Kassab creates an Arab Muslim figure whose life is shaped, on the one hand, by a secularist heritage left to him by his father and, on the other hand, by Islamophobia and post 9/11 hostility. Sami's choice for Islam over secularism occurs about the same time as the 9/11 attacks which instigates another war, the victims of which were innocent bearded Arab and Muslim men like Sami and headscarves-wearing women like Nur and Muntaha.

Conclusion

Just like the ghost of Hamlet's father, Sami's father's ghost haunts the novel, and hence, enables Yassin-Kassab to explore "a mind in crisis" (Sanders 2007, 54). By employing intertextuality, *The Road from Damascus* vocally denounces the war on terror and the environment of witch hunting and spying that has prevailed in post 9/11 Britain. In this sense, the novel, to quote Scanlan's words on the postcolonial novel after 9/11, "haunt[s] and indict[s] the war on terror" (Scanlan 2013, 33). Through deconstructing the monolithic representation of the Arab Muslim in diaspora, Yassin-Kassab complicates the binary opposition of the secular/religious Arab Muslim. By drawing on the psychological depth that is the hallmark of *Hamlet*, the novel imbues Sami with sophistication as intense as that of Hamlet. After all, what we learn from Hamlet is that life choices are more than "to be or not to be" because, as Sami finds out, there are other "valid paths" (Yassin-Kassab 2008, 11).

Notes

1. In her seminal book, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost*, Litvin (2011) argues that there are three main phases of postcolonial Hamlet appropriation in the Arab world. In the first period, which Litvin calls Nasserist revolutionary optimism (1952-1967), Hamlet is "an emblem of interiorised subjectivity and psychological depth" (2011, 83). In the second phase, which Litvin associates with the complete Arab military defeat in 1967 and

the death of Nasser in 1970, "Hamlet has become an Arab revolutionary hero, a martyr for justice meant to mobilize audiences against" tyrants (83). In the last phase, which Litvin links to the past thirty years (since about 1977), Arab dramatists have "deployed *Hamlet* for dramatic irony," whereby the hero-Hamlet of the previous two phases "has become a foil for pointedly inarticulate and ineffectual protagonists" (83).

2. It is noteworthy that Arab British playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam's adaptation of *Hamlet*, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (2006), is written in English. For a comprehensive discussion of the play, see: Holderness 2007.
3. See also Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (2008).
4. All references to *Hamlet* are to the Arden 3 edition, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (Shakespeare 2006).
5. Janette Dillon uses these two quotations to argue that "faith in providence was central to Calvinist doctrine, and Calvin himself used the same example of the sparrow from the New Testament (Matthew 10.29) to insist upon it" (2007, 75). As explained earlier, Dillon argues that Hamlet's doubts about the ghost's demands of revenge stem largely from the religious upheaval England was witnessing around the time Shakespeare was writing his plays.
6. Asked by Claire Chambers (2011) on his opinions on 9/11, Yassin-Kassab replied: "The whole thing is very suspicious. I don't go along with the blatant conspiracy theorists, but I feel certain Osama bin Laden — wittingly or unwittingly, perhaps just out of stupidity — is working for America, because al-Qa'ida has saved the Empire's skin on three occasions that I can think of" (Chambers 2011, 199). Yassin-Kassab explains these three occasions in the same interview. To some extent, Tom Field voices some of Yassin-Kassab's perspectives on 9/11.

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