



Jamal Mahjoub's *The Carrier* as a Re-writing of Shakespeare's *Othello*

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Received: 26-02-2017

Accepted: 03-05-2017

Advance Access Published: July 2017

Published: 01-09-2017

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.6n.5p.173

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.6n.5p.173>

Abstract

This paper examines how Arab British novelist Jamal Mahjoub appropriates and interpolates Shakespeare's *Othello*. Specifically, this paper argues that Mahjoub's historical novel *The Carrier* (1998) re-writes Shakespeare's *Othello* in a way that enables the novelist to comment on some of the themes that remain unexplored in Shakespeare's masterpiece. Mahjoub appropriates tropes, motifs and episodes from Shakespeare's play which include places like Cyprus and Aleppo, Othello's identity, abusive/foul language, animalistic imagery, and motifs like the eye, sorcery/witchcraft, the storm and adventurous travels. Unlike Othello's fabled and mythical travels and adventures, Mahjoub renders Rashid al-Kenzy's as realistic and true to life in a way that highlights his vulnerability. In addition, the ill-fated marriage between Othello and Desdemona is adapted in Mahjoub's novel in the form of a Platonic love that is founded on a scientific dialogue between Rashid al-Kenzy and Sigrid Heinesen, a poet and philosopher woman from Jutland. In this way, Desdemona's claim that she sees Othello's visage in his mind, a claim that is strongly undermined by Othello's irrationality, jealousy and belief in superstitions during the course of the play, is emphasized and foregrounded in Mahjoub's novel.

Keywords: Jamal Mahjoub, *Othello*, Appropriation, Arabic Literature in English.

I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice.
(William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 5.2.338-341)

Whatever might have been recorded about the man known as Rashid al-Kenzy has been scattered down the passage of centuries like a fine trail; difficult, if not impossible to follow. A thin and fragile course indeed, leaving only disparate fragments in the way of clues to be pieced together. (Jamal Mahjoub, *The Carrier*, 2)

1. Introduction

In her seminal essay, "The Arabization of *Othello*," Ferial Ghazoul argues that "[n]o work of Shakespeare touches chords of Arab sensibility and identity so much as the tragedy of *Othello*" (1998, p. 1). Ghazoul maintains that one reason why the play has been quite popular among Arab spectators, readers and critics is that Othello is a Moor, and therefore an Arab, in Europe, "necessarily evoking all the complex confrontations of Self/Other in a context of power struggle" (p. 1). As Ghazoul succinctly puts it, "when Arabs look into the play, their point of view entails seeing the Self facing its 'image' as delineated by the Other" (p. 1). In other words, for Arab spectators, readers, and critics, *Othello* opens the door wide open for reflecting on the centuries-long issue of the encounter between the East and the West and the concomitant themes of misrepresentation, transculturation and hybridisation among other questions that usually emerge as a result of the meeting between the two cultures. In this context, Arab authors, translators, critics and

dramatists have had differently commented on Shakespeare's *Othello*, discussing various aspects of the play and producing in the process a wide and extensive body of epistemological productions. Some of these authors, to quote Edward Said's words on the works of intellectuals from the colonial or peripheral regions, "set themselves the revisionist, critical task of dealing frontally with the metropolitan culture, using the techniques, discourses, and weapons of scholarship and criticism once reserved exclusively for the European" (1993, p. 293). This paper will examine how Arab British novelist Jamal Mahjoub draws on, critiques and supplements Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Specifically, Mahjoub appropriates some tropes, motifs and episodes that form the spine of Shakespeare's play. This paper argues that Mahjoub's historical novel *The Carrier* (1998) re-writes Shakespeare's *Othello* in a way that enables the novelist to comment on some of the themes that remain unexplored in Shakespeare's masterpiece. As the two quotations at the top of this paper suggest, Mahjoub seems to respond to Othello's plea to be remembered by creating the fictitious character of Rashid al-Kenzy whose story draws on, critiques, and supplements that of Othello. In other words, Mahjoub's novel appropriates and interpolates Shakespeare's play. First, Mahjoub's novel is set in the seventeenth century and relates the story of Muslim Arab scientist, Rashid al-Kenzy, who has been shipwrecked off the coast of the Danish peninsula, where his identity, like that of Othello, becomes a site of contention and dispute. Second, Mahjoub appropriates tropes, motifs and episodes from Shakespeare's play which include places like Cyprus and Aleppo, Othello's origin, abusive/foul language, animalistic imagery, and motifs like the eye, sorcery/witchcraft, the storm and adventurous travels. Taking into consideration the above similarities, one may convincingly argue that Mahjoub's novel can be read as a re-writing of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Mahjoub's novel, to use the words of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, appropriates and dismantles "the notions of power inherent in the model of centre and margin" (2002, p. 82). Thus, central to Mahjoub's novel is his endeavour to narrate the story from a new perspective in a way that re-writes, critiques and supplements the source text. In other words, by relating *mini narratives* rather than a single grand narrative, Mahjoub's novel foregrounds alternative histories and challenges various forms of hegemonies. The plotline of Mahjoub's *The Carrier* is split into two: the first one is that of Rashid al-Kenzy, a seventeenth-century Muslim Arab scholar who is shipwrecked off the coast of the Danish peninsula; the second plotline is that of Hassan, a twentieth-century Muslim Arab archaeologist who is recalled to decipher an Arabic inscription on a brass case found in an archaeological dig. Hassan puts together al-Kenzy's story which starts with his birth in Aleppo. Al-Kenzy grows up to be a scientist whom the Dey of Algiers despatches on a secret mission to acquire the optical device recently invented by the Dutch. Unfortunately, al-Kenzy finds himself shipwrecked off the coast of Denmark where he is captured by the mobs and called a sea-monkey and a devil. Luckily, al-Kenzy is rescued by Verner Heinesen, who recruits him as a translator. Al-Kenzy meets Verner Heinesen's sister, Sigrid, a learned woman who impresses him with her knowledge and analytic skills. However, incensed by bigotry, a mob led by the town's priest burns the Heinesens' mansion, accusing them of sorcery and collaboration with the devil. The second plotline in the novel, i.e. that of Hassan, reflects and comments on that of al-Kenzy.

2. Discussion

As the above plotline shows, *The Carrier* appropriates several tropes, motifs and episodes from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Yet, *The Carrier* centralises some issues that Shakespeare's play marginalises. Particularly, Mahjoub's novel re-writes Othello's travels and adventures since his childhood and foregrounds the foundations on which his marriage to Desdemona are based. In this way, Mahjoub's *The Carrier*, to paraphrase Linda Hutcheon's words on adaptation as a process of creation, "appropriate[s] and salvage[s]" Shakespeare's *Othello* (2006, p. 8). In other words, the reader experiences Mahjoub's novel as a palimpsest through memory of Shakespeare's play "that resonate[s] through repetition with variation" (p. 8). As Hassan recovers and reconstructs the story of al-Kenzy, *The Carrier* recovers the voice of Othello and "re-writes, from a racialized perspective, the tropes of silence [...], solitude [...], melancholy and alienation" (Nyman; 2009, p. 74). As an Arab British novelist, Mahjoub "negotiate[s] identities from a vantage-point with firm links to Arab history" (Al Maleh; 2009, p. 13). His novels cannot be fully understood unless we take into consideration "the composite literary affiliations that inform them," including the language in which they are written and "the latent or 'hidden affinities' with Arabic literary traditions and with the history of the Arabic novel" (Gana; 2013, p. 11). According to Geoffrey Nash, Mahjoub's fiction can be seen as a site of "two intersecting circles: the civilisations of Northern Christendom and the Islamic South" (2007, pp. 87-88). It is not surprising then that Mahjoub draws on *Othello* since, as Kennedy aptly puts it, "Shakespeare's texts appear open – intellectually and theatrically unstable and subject to divergent understanding and assessment," and hence, they "proved functional in disparate cultural circumstances" (2003; p. 252).

One way of looking at how Mahjoub's *The Carrier* appropriates Shakespeare's *Othello* is to investigate how al-Kenzy's character is modelled with significant variations upon Othello. Specifically, while the two are outsiders to the communities in which they live, al-Kenzy, unlike Othello, is depicted as a scientist whose understanding of the movements of the celestial bodies is based on knowledge rather than superstitions. For instance, when Othello murders Desdemona, he tells Emilia that "it should be now a huge eclipse / Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe / Should yawn at alteration" (5.2.97-99). In addition, he blames the moon for making him behave in an irrational manner: "It is the very error of the moon / She comes more nearer earth than she was wont / And makes men mad" (5.2.107-109). In short, these quotations illustrate that Othello is portrayed, to quote Al-Shetawi, "as a fool, lacking domestic experience and knowledge of the ways of the world [...] incompatible with Venetian society on cultural level" (1999, p. 325).

In contrast, Mahjoub's al-Kenzy is a scientist who dreams of "devoting himself to the science of the celestial spheres" (1998, p. 58). As a learned man, al-Kenzy is in a position to know that there is "no sign of randomness" in the movement of the celestial bodies and that "each and every distance between the fixed stars was measured" (p. 70). At the Heinesens' house he "learn[s] that the sun was the source of the world's life and that the earth was a simple singing orb" (p. 274). Thus, by portraying al-Kenzy as a rational and learned man, Mahjoub's novel sheds light on aspects of Othello's character that Shakespeare has left unexplored or intends to distort. In other words, the novel fills in the gaps in Othello's life history and offers a new perspective for understanding his character. In this way, Mahjoub, to borrow the words of D'haen, "write[s] the West's 'Others' back into the West's cultural memory, not objects of the Western gaze and discourse, but as subjects in their own rights" (2005, p. 134). In other words, Mahjoub transforms Othello from a mythical warrior to a scholar whose mission is enlighten people and educate them. Thus, Mahjoub's novel may be viewed as "a wholesale re-thinking of the terms of the original [i.e. Shakespeare's *Othello*]," to borrow the words of Julie Sanders on the process of appropriation (Sanders; 2008, p. 28).

Since its publication in 1998, Mahjoub's *The Carrier* has received a noticeable interest which is reflected in the number of articles written on this historical novel. For instance, D'haen argues that "[w]hat is at stake in *The Carrier* is obviously the relationship between East and West, between Christianity, or Europe, and Islam" (p. 127). For D'haen *The Carrier* is "a powerful warning as to the terrible consequences of religious bigotry, racial prejudice, and cultural chauvinism: all of these only lead to losses all around, never gains" (p. 132). Similarly, Tina Steiner's analysis of the novel concentrates on the fact that "transnational and translational collaborative spaces [...] are rare and constantly under threat by regulatory interventions of civic and religious authority" (2008, p. 52). Elsewhere, Steiner insists that *The Carrier* "suggests that spaces of knowledge production can link people in a way that is not hierarchical [...] and thus can be set against acts of prejudice and ignorance" (2008, p. 49). Seen from this perspective, *The Carrier* foregrounds transculturation which it views, to quote Kearney, as "a risky business, achieved only by a few, if at all" (2007, p. 138).

Mahjoub's novel can be positioned alongside other texts written by Arab authors who have appropriated and adapted Shakespeare's plays over the past years. However, unlike other Arab authors, Mahjoub's novel is written in English, and hence, one wishes to situate his re-writing of *Othello* within the context of burgeoning writings of Arab writers in diaspora. In other words, one may argue that Mahjoub's hyphenated identity as an Arab British writer enables him to present his Arab Muslim heritage within a context of diasporic experiences that entail the complex issues of immigration, racism, border crossing and transculturation. As Maysa Abou-Youssef Hayward aptly puts it, Arab writers in diaspora "operate not from one single center or point on the margin, but from a multiplicity of centers" (2013; p. 323). Hayward's words, in fact, echo Said's famous modus operandi of reading the cultural archive "not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and those of other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (1993, p. 51, italics in original). Through appropriating Shakespeare's *Othello*, Mahjoub draws on both his cultural heritage as a Muslim Arab and his lived experiences as a British citizen and utilises the genre of the historical novel "to challenge mainstream and repressive narratives" (De Groot; 2010, p. 3). In doing so, Mahjoub's novel "voice[s] an alternative, disquieting and destabilising past" (De Groot; 2010, p. 148).

Mahjoub's novel comments on Shakespeare's representation of the Moor, a controversial character who has been the subject of lengthy analysis and criticism since the Elizabethan period. In this context, Kim F. Hall concurs that Shakespeare's play is "embedded in older discourses of belonging and filiation, but it is equally important to think about the ways it can help us solve the 'problem' of race today" (2005, p. 371). Likewise, Mary Floyd-Wilson highlights the fact that modern readings of the play evaluate "how readily Othello falls prey to racial stereotypes" (2006, p. 146). Nevertheless, Singh argues that Western critics have ignored the "ideological underpinnings of Othello's identity and focused instead on the Moor's character in terms of psychological realism" (1994, p. 288). Singh points out that non-European revisionist readings of *Othello* render Shakespeare's tragedy as a "multivocal sit[e] of conflict" (p. 299, italics in original). In other words, Singh argues that as a play *Othello* is open to divergent interpretations, and hence, it has been frequently adapted, appropriated and transposed. Thus, in re/reading *Othello* from a non-European perspective, one should highlight the socio-political and historical context depicted in the play.

Shakespeare's *Othello* has been extensively adapted, appropriated and transposed in Arab countries. As Ghazoul succinctly puts it, "[t]he trajectory of *Othello* in the land of the Arabs shows [...] a will to challenge and revise what is conceived as a distorted image" (p. 27). *Othello*, to quote Ghazoul once more, "figures in passing or as a structural base in some Arabic literary works" (p. 19). Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* is by far the most elaborate Arabic re-writing of *Othello*. In her classic essay on the relationship between Salih's novel and Shakespeare's play, Harlow argues that *Season of Migration to the North* "is a rereading of Shakespeare's *Othello*, a restatement of the tragedy, a reshaping of the tragic figure of the Moor" (1979, p. 163). More recently, Arab American novelist Diana Abu-Jaber has incorporated Shakespeare's *Othello* and Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (among other literary and cultural productions) into her novel *Crescent* "in order to subvert misconceptions about Arabs in American literature and popular culture through a strategy of intertextuality" (Awad; 2012, p. 172).

Thus, it is apposite to investigate how in *The Carrier* Mahjoub appropriates tropes, motifs and episodes from Shakespeare's *Othello*. For instance, in his opening speech, Iago tells Roderigo that "Three great ones of the city / In personal suit to make me his lieutenant / Off-capped to him" (1.1.7-10). These three great ones who took off their caps to Othello as a sign of respect appear in Mahjoub's novel and they are given names. Rusk, a bishop, Koppel, a

merchant, and Holst, The King's Prefect, are described in the novel as "a delegation of black hats" (pp. 194-195). These "sombre men" who represent church, trade and commerce and state as Cooper argues, express their concerns over the existence of al-Kenzy in their midst (2008, p. 77). The town's fathers criticise Verner Heinesen's decision to employ al-Kenzy because he is one of the "[h]ethens, worshippers of the Anti-christ, in the devil's pay, tainted in the skin to match their souls" (pp. 199-204). Certainly, the two episodes are not identical, and one may even describe the relationship between them as "shadowy," to use Julie Sanders's words on the interplay between appropriations and their sources (p. 32), but Mahjoub's depiction of the three men and the purpose of their visit "carr[y] a physical palimpsest," inviting the reader to make a link between the two texts (Bosman; 2010, p. 295). In both works, three great men of the town speak on behalf of a person (or a group of people) on an issue that involves an outsider whose existence and actions are deemed controversial. Moreover, in presenting their case, the three men employ an abusive language that is reminiscent of that used by a trio of Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio when referring to Othello.

As the above example shows, Mahjoub's novel appropriates Shakespeare's *Othello* in several ways. These include the historical frame, places like Cyprus and Aleppo, Othello's origin, abusive/foul language, animalistic imagery, and motifs like the eye, sorcery/witchcraft, the storm and adventurous travels. *The Carrier* is set in the seventeenth century, the century in which Shakespeare wrote his greatest plays, including *Othello*. Notably, the novel opens on a "late afternoon [...] in the year of the Hegira 1016, or 1609 in the Christian calendar" (p. 2). Significantly, in the world of *The Carrier*, the Hegira (Islamic) calendar rather than the Gregorian calendar is the main calendar, highlighting the novel's underlying goal of re-writing history from a Muslim and Arab perspective. The novel, as Nyman argues, uncovers "silenced histories" of non-Europeans (2013, p. 230). According to Steiner, Mahjoub situates *The Carrier* "in the interstices of different [...] historical periods to signify the multiple translations that have always offered and still offer sites of connection" (p. 41). Mahjoub's choice of the genre of the historical novel to re-write *Othello* is significant because the historical novel gives a "clear sense of connection with the past, and an awareness that the events of history have an impact upon the contemporary" (De Groot; 2010, p. 29). In Mahjoub's own words, setting the novel in the past has given him "the possibility to see more clearly," and to comment on the present without restrictions (Sévry; 2001, p. 91).

The tempo-spatial framework that Mahjoub's novel employs is intricately linked to that of *Othello*. Places like Cyprus and Aleppo that are visited by Othello himself during his life time are also represented in Mahjoub's novel. Othello is sent to Cyprus to protect it from the Ottomans because, as the Duke of Venice explains, "the fortitude of the place is best known to you [Othello]" (1.3.223). This means that Othello knows Cyprus very well, indicating that either he has frequently visited it or has even lived there for a while. Othello himself does not conceal his satisfaction at re-visiting Cyprus and hopes that Desdemona would like it too (2.1.201-211). Similarly, in Mahjoub's *The Carrier*, Cyprus is a place of which al-Kenzy has fond memories. He lives in Cyprus over a year where he is recruited by "a very wealthy timber merchant, Sidi Hamed Hazin" who was looking for someone to help him administrate his library (pp. 84-85). However, when he arrives in Cyprus he finds out that he is recruited to read stories to entertain Sidi Hamed Hazin's young disgruntled wife (p. 84). In a way, this echoes another scene from Shakespeare's play whereby Othello narrates tales to Brabantio that Desdemona greatly enjoys, and hence, falls in love with Othello. On the one hand, Cyprus is associated with the knowledge that al-Kenzy acquires through reading "an enormous collection of books" at Sidi Hamed Hazin's library (p. 85). On the other hand, Cyprus is associated with al-Kenzy's sexual plunder. Unlike Othello, who is unable to consummate his marriage in Cyprus and eventually strangles his innocent wife for purported adultery, al-Kenzy makes love to Sidi Hamed Hazin's wife, but then flees the island fearing that Sidi Hamed Hazin may one day slit his throat if he finds out about his adulterous relationship with his young wife.

Another place that is also vital in Shakespeare's *Othello* is Aleppo, a place that Othello refers to in his final speech. For Othello, Aleppo is the place where he has enacted his loyalty to Venice by killing "a malignant and a turbanned Turk" (5.2.351). Few lines earlier, Othello compares himself to a 'base Indian' who threw a pearl away and began to "[d]rop tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinal gum" (5.2.345-349, emphasis added). Despite the fact that critics disagree on the interpretation of the above lines, they surely point out that Othello has been at least once to Aleppo (most probably as a soldier) and he has even taken note of the peculiarity of the city's vegetation. In Mahjoub's novel, Aleppo is a central place too because al-Kenzy was born in Aleppo to a Nubian slave from her master, Sayed Abdelrahman al Jabri. Furthermore, the way Aleppo is described in Mahjoub's novel reminds the reader of Othello's aforementioned speech, especially employing words like "trees" and "tears":

The region of *Aleppo* in the season of drought, some thirty odd years earlier. The esteemed silk merchant Sayed Abdelrahman al Jabri lay sweating in the suffocating silence of listless afternoons in that intolerably long summer, when the apricots were burned crisp and brown before they could be plucked from the branches of the *trees*. In the orchard behind the big house the harsh sun had shrivelled the leaves into dangling, thirsty *tears* of amber. (p. 25, emphasis added)

In both texts, Aleppo is the place where the identity of each hero was formed and shaped. Aleppo is al-Kenzy's birthplace. By the same token, in Aleppo, Othello shows his heroism and dauntlessness by killing the turbaned Turk in defense of Christians, and hence, he presents himself as a loyal and worthy Venetian citizen. Moreover, in the two texts, the city is identified by its trees and vegetation.

In addition to clarifying the fact that Aleppo is al-Kenzy's birthplace, the above quotation introduces the reader to al-Kenzy's father who is identified as an esteemed silk merchant. Few pages earlier, the reader is introduced to al-Kenzy's mother, Butheyne, "a slave woman" from Nubia (p. 15). Few pages later, the reader is introduced to al-Kenzy's brother,

Ismail, the legitimate son of Sayed Abdelrahman al Jabri who was born on the same day Rashid was born (p. 28). In other words, in *The Carrier* we are introduced to al-Kenzy's family members. In *Othello*, bits and pieces about Othello's family members are scattered here and there, but they are never named nor personalised. Othello's father, mother and brother are hastily mentioned in scene three of act four. Othello's parents are mentioned when Othello tells Desdemona the history of the infamous handkerchief, claiming that the handkerchief was given to his mother by an Egyptian charmer as a tool to secure Othello's father's love to her (3.4.58-68). Later on, Othello's brother is mentioned by Iago when he describes Othello's fury: "And, like the devil, from his very arm / Puffed his own brother" (3.4.137-138). Unlike al-Kenzy's family members, Othello's parents and his brother remain anonymous despite Othello's claim that he descends "[f]rom men of royal siege" (1.2.22). Mahjoub's transposition of the genre of the source text facilitates his endeavour to shed light on the hero's origin and ancestry since in a play information trickle to the audience through un/reliable characters, whereas in a novel, the author has got the power to manipulate readers and adequate space to narrate and elaborate on incidents and episodes with authorial voice.

In fact, in addition to giving names to al-Kenzy's family members, in Mahjoub's novel, al-Kenzy's noble origin and lineage is highlighted despite the harsh circumstances that he undergoes. As the novel opens, al-Kenzy is arrested and brought to the qadi (the judge) in Algiers who notes that "the refined manner in which he [al-Kenzy] speaks the language of the Prophet tells us that he is, or once was, a man of some standing, [...] He paused, looking Rashid al-Kenzy in the eye" (p. 14). The qadi is right in his speculations for al-Kenzy went to school in Aleppo at a time when only privileged people received any kind of education. Othello's birthplace and family tree remain enigmatic in Shakespeare's play, rendering the eponymous hero rootless, nomadic and prey to Iago's intrigue. On the other hand, Mahjoub introduces al-Kenzy's roots and his family history. In this way, Mahjoub's novel fills in the gap left in Shakespeare's play in terms of the hero's origin and ancestry.

Yet, Mahjoub's appropriation of *Othello* is not limited to the tempo-spatial framework that he employs in the novel, but it encompasses a number of recurring tropes, motifs and episodes. The way the qadi looks Rashid al-Kenzy in the eye (looking for evidence to confirm what he believes to be the truth) is reminiscent of Othello's incessant demand of an ocular proof of his wife's infidelity (3.3.362-363). From here onwards, the eye becomes a central motif in the play. When Desdemona denies Othello's accusations of unfaithfulness, he looks her in the eye: "Let me see your eyes / Look in my face" (4.2.25-26). Iago notes that Desdemona's eye "sounds a parley to provocation" and Cassio describes it as "[a]n inviting eye [...] right modest" (2.3.21-23). In addition, Desdemona tells Othello that she can read his anger through looking at his eyes: "And yet I fear you, for you're fatal then / When your eyes roll so" (5.2.36-37). Similarly, in *The Carrier*, the eye is a central trope. Al-Kenzy is scared to look Sigrid Heinesen in the eye and fears "meeting her gaze" (p. 228). When he finally looks at her, he is "mesmerized [...] by her green eyes" (p. 244). As the two take to each other and exchange knowledge about the stars and planets, al-Kenzy looks her in the eye and meditates: "These were the same eyes that he had seen and avoided for weeks and months" (p. 247). In other words, in the two texts, the eye plays a crucial role in initiating and developing the relationship between the two lovers, and hence, reinforces Desdemona's statement of *seeing* Othello's visage through his mind. In short, in both works, the eye is a trope that mediates a detrimental and fatal love relationship.

In addition to the eye, Mahjoub's novel appropriates a number of other tropes and motifs that are prominent in Shakespeare's play. These include abusive/foul language, animalistic imagery and motifs like sorcery/witchcraft, the storm and adventurous travels. As the play opens, Iago uses abusive/foul language and animalistic imagery to describe the Othello-Desdemona marriage and to incite Brabantio to prevent such a union at any cost. Besides, Othello is also referred to as "an old black ram" and a devil (1.1.88-91). Iago warns Brabantio that if he does not disrupt this union, he will have his "daughter covered with a Barbary horse" and "have coursers for cousins and gennets for Germans" (1.1.107-112). Iago tells Brabantio that Othello and Desdemona "are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.115). Later on, in order to incite Othello against Desdemona and Cassio, Iago uses animalistic imagery, describing them "as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys" (3.3.406) and Othello unconsciously repeats Iago's words when he invites Lodovico to dinner: "You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus. Goats and monkeys!" (4.1.263). Poisoned by Iago's lies, Othello himself begins to use abusive/foul language, calling Desdemona "a subtle whore" (4.2.21) and "that cunning whore of Venice" (4.2.91). He even asserts, in a conversation with Emilia, that Desdemona "turned to folly, and she was a whore" (5.2.130).

These tropes, images and words are appropriated in Mahjoub's novel. The Danish mobs perceive al-Kenzy as a devil and an animal. Klinke, Verner Heinesen's butler, echoes Iago's abusive words when he tells his master: "Nobody knows what it [al-Kenzy] is, really. You know what people are like, sir. Some are calling it a sea-monkey, a monster, from the deep; others call it the messenger of the devil himself" (p. 125). Verner Heinesen becomes "curious about this 'sea devil'" (129). Other people call al-Kenzy "[a]n ape of some kind" (p. 130), while for Pastor Hans Rusk, al-Kenzy is "the devil himself [...] in the form of this wretched, tarry beast" (p. 262). The abusive/foul language that people use to describe al-Kenzy has a spillover effect. Since al-Kenzy lives with Heinesens, Sigrid Heinesen is verbally abused and, like Desdemona, is called a whore. As Iago-like Pastor Hans Rusk incites people against the Heinesens for housing al-Kenzy, he asks "[c]an we be sure that she [Sigrid] is not the devil's whore, that she does not carry the fruit of his evil seed in her womb?" (p. 263) As Nash succinctly puts it, Rusk's words represent the position of "an obscuranist church and state" that govern the local populace, a position presented by Mahjoub to "challeng[e] and eventually undermin[e] European notions of superiority" (p. 99). In short, al-Kenzy, like Othello, is described as an animal, and Sigrid, like Desdemona, is called a whore. Significantly, in the two works, this foul and abusive language is used in a

context reeking with the stench of chauvinism, intolerance and bigotry. In such a context, Pastor Hans Rusk impersonates Iago's villainous role.

Not only does Rusk describe al-Kenzy as a devil and Sigrid Heinesen as the devil's whore, he also declares that the Heinesens and al-Kenzy are implicated in using sorcery and witchcraft, a motif that strongly permeates Shakespeare's play. Pastor Hans Rusk asks "What evil sorcery could they not conjure up with the help of this apprentice of Satan's, whose body is the colour of darkness, a sure sign of his tarnished spirit?" (p. 263) Prior to this incident, it was only al-Kenzy who was accused of sorcery on several occasions. In Algiers, al-Kenzy is arrested for sorcery (p. 12). When he reveals his identity as a learned astronomer to Verner Heinesen, the latter asks: "What are you, Moor? A magician? A sorcerer?" (p. 211) These accusations of sorcery mirror those of Brabantio who blatantly indicts Othello of using "spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" and "witchcraft" to enchant Desdemona (1.3.60-65). Brabantio insists that Othello has "bound" Desdemona "in chains of magic," "practised on her with foul charms," and "[a]bused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals" (1.2.62-81). Al-Kenzy and Othello are the victims of bigotry and prejudice championed by narrow-minded people like Pastor Hans Rusk and Iago, respectively.

As the above three paragraphs illustrate, the abusive/foul language and animalistic imagery make Mahjoub's novel echo Shakespeare's play in the sense that Othello and al-Kenzy are identified by the mobs as devilish outsiders. By employing these motifs, Mahjoub's novel draws on, critiques and supplements Shakespeare's play. As Sanders puts it, appropriation involves "a process of reading between the lines, offering analogues or supplements to what is available in a source text, and drawing attention to its gaps and absences" (p. 60). In this context, the motif of storms and travels is of paramount importance in the two works. In *Othello*, Montano eloquently describes the storm in the following lines:

Methinks the wind hath spoke aloud at land,
A fuller blast ne'er shook our battlements:
If it hath ruffian'd so upon the sea
What ribs of oak, when mountains melt on them,
Can hold the mortise? (2.1.5-9)

Montano highlights the fierceness of the storm. Luckily for the Venetians, the storm has "banged the Turks" (2.1.21) and "drowned" their fleet that was preparing to attack Cyprus (2.1.201). The tempest has separated the Venetian army from its valiant leader, Othello (2.1.31-34), but Cassio is hopeful that Othello will survive the storm because "[h]is bark is stoutly timbered, and his pilot / Of very expert and approved allowance" (2.1.48-49).

Like Othello's ship, al-Kenzy's is washed away by a vehement *storm*. The pilot of the ship, Captain Darius Reis, like that of Othello's, is described as a man whose "skill as a pilot was second to none and his services were in great demand" (p. 82). His ship is "a large urca, a vessel of about 120 tons [...] constructed in the northern style with a heavy, flat stern" (p. 81). The storm in Mahjoub's novel seems to be as violent as that in *Othello*: "The storm grasped the ship by the tail and shook it for nearly a week [...] The waves were harsh and sharp as crystal shards and they cut through the sails like windy lances" (p. 117). However, while Othello's ship endures the storm, al-Kenzy's eventually collapses: "[T]he ship undid itself, stich by stich, plank by plank" (p. 121). Interestingly, in both texts, the storm plays a central role in the development of each text's love relationship: in *Othello*, the storm disperses the Turkish fleet, and hence, allows Othello to be re-united with Desdemona; in *The Carrier*, the storm washes away al-Kenzy on the Danish shores where he eventually meets Sigrid and falls in love with her.

The above adventure is only one in a series of adventures that al-Kenzy experiences during the course of his life. While Othello's adventures that allure and mesmerise Desdemona are mythical and imaginary, or, as Iago puts it, "fantastical lies" (2.1.221), al-Kenzy's are realistic and even pathetic. Defending himself before the Duke of Venice, Othello describes how Desdemona has fallen in love with him through listening to his exotic adventures:

And portance in my travailous history;
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven
It was my hint to speak - such was the process -
And of the cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders. (1.3.133-146)

As Harlow puts it, the story Othello narrates to Brabantio which eventually enthralls Desdemona "is itself an elixir no less potent than demonic drug" (p. 164). Harlow maintains that it is in response to these "piteous lies" that Tayeb Salih wrote *Season of Migration to the North*, a text that re-writes *Othello* (p. 165).

Mahjoub's reaction to these lines is different from that of his compatriot Tayeb Salih. In *The Carrier*, Mahjoub does not embellish the adventurous travels of Othello/al-Kenzy since his boyish days. The novel depicts how al-Kenzy was born in Aleppo, moved to the Valley of Dreamers, travelled to Cyprus, and then departed on a course that took him to Alexandria, and then later to Cairo and Tripoli, and eventually to Algiers (p. 95). The Dey of Algiers sent him to the Netherlands to acquire the newly-invented telescope: "Algiers was the first knot in a long, twisted vine that would lead him westwards" (p. 60). Unlike Othello's mythical travels, Al-Kenzy's are unembellished and unexaggerated; they are

by no means exotic. For instance, en route to the Netherlands, he visits, and describes, a number of Spanish ports, the most important of which is Cadiz. Some of his travels are actually disappointing and boring and certainly none of them is exotic: "They remained stranded in that port for eleven days. Eleven days when *nothing* happened" (p. 62, emphasis added). Overall, the two texts highlight the two men's adventurous travels. However, while warrior Othello's tales beguile Desdemona, those of diminutive al-Kenzy are disappointing and anti-climactic. The difference between the two men's adventures is the difference between the episodes of a mythical narrative and those of a realist story.

Mahjoub's appropriation of Shakespeare's play confirms Graham Holderness's stipulation that "Shakespeare now exists in an environment of textual multiplicity. The text is multiple, iterable, subject to an inevitable law of change. It is never original, always copied" (2005, p. 6). By incorporating tropes, motifs and episodes from *Othello* into his historical novel, *The Carrier*, Jamal Mahjoub "recover[s] a lost historical memory, or one which through its modern hegemony the West has chosen to forget" (Nash; 2007, p. 99). By presenting al-Kenzy as a scientist who since his childhood has "devote[d] [himself] to studying the universe in all the wonder in which God created it" (p. 36), Mahjoub brings to light "the wealth of scholarship of the East, buried under the hegemony of Western traditions" (Cooper; p. 72). For instance, al-Kenzy spends hours in the Heinesens' library and "[t]he books clutter[ed] up his head as he eagerly absorb[s] their knowledge" (p. 241). He is a scholar who is eager to unearth the influence of Islamic knowledge on Western civilization:

He [al-Kenzy] was deeply buried in the study of the influence of al-Tusi's couple mechanism upon the thinking of Copernicus. If a link could be forged between the mind of a revered scholar such as al-Tusi and the radical theories of a accursed unbeliever like Copernicus, then it would not seem so very far removed as might at first be perceived. If he could establish the line of thought connecting the two apparently separate spheres of East and West. (p. 246)

Al-Kenzy is aware of the magnitude of his mission. Mahjoub foregrounds the fact that al-Kenzy's mind - rather than his body - is the source of his strength and power. In this sense, al-Kenzy is actually Othello's foil since in the play he is called valiant, but when "forced to deal with domestic life, he proves to be *wanting in reason*" (Al-Shetawi; 1999, p. 321, emphasis added).

Unlike Othello, al-Kenzy is not a warrior whose adventurous travels hypnotise the listener. Al-Kenzy's travels are triggered by an indefatigable quest for knowledge. At one point he questions the viability of his quest: "Rashid considered the foolishness of his undertaking. Surely no amount of learning could be worth enduring this?" (p. 96) In spite of this moment of doubt, al-Kenzy's remains loyal to his cause. The novel highlights how he is a brilliant scientist who is in a position to "establish the line of thought connecting the two apparently separate spheres of East and West" (p. 246). He is extraordinarily smart: "God, in his wisdom, gave Rashid al-Kenzy a keen mind and he would indeed need every ounce of that which was given him to find his way out of the maze into which the Almighty was about to cast him" (p. 16). After he was forced to leave Aleppo following the sudden death of his brother, al-Kenzy heads to the Valley of Dreamers, "[a] place where for decades men have sought freedom from those who would shackle their minds and bodies" (p. 36). There, "[f]or over ten years he has not spared a moment's thought for his days at the academy [...]. In this way learning became his life, his family, his home" (p. 68). Al-Kenzy's stay at the academy has widened his horizon: "The world grew bigger, more colourful, more filled with noise and light than he had ever known in that great house where he was born to serve. He unlocked the cage of mathematics" (p. 70). When zealots razes the academy to the ground (the way bigots burn down the Heinesens' mansion later in the novel), al-Kenzy enters the employment of Sidi Hamed Hazin in Cyprus "reading his way through the stacks, mountains of written works" in the old man's library (p. 89).

It is not surprising then that when al-Kenzy arrives in Jutland, he is equipped with knowledge and well-versed in Muslim and Arab sciences and speaks various languages (p. 211). At the house of Heinesens, which is "laden with pile upon pile of rolls, scrolls, manuscripts, books, charts, maps, papers of every size, shape and description," al-Kenzy immerses himself in reading (p. 210). Moreover, Sigrid Heinesen "guid[es] him along a path, feeding him fragments crumbs to keep him on the right track [...]. She has begun to teach him things which he has never dreamed of" (pp. 237-238). He "is struck by the sharp intensity of her mind. She knew so much! She has devoted her life entirely, selfishly, to learning [...]. In this they are *bound*" (p. 245, emphasis added). Once more, al-Kenzy can be seen here as Othello's foil since the latter's admiration of Desdemona is eroticised. For instance, when Desdemona inquires about causes of the brawl between Cassio and Montano, Othello neglects her question and demands that the two of them should go to bed: "All's well now, sweeting, / Come away to bed" (2.3.248-249). Unlike warrior Othello, scientist al-Kenzy respects and is respected by Sigrid since the two have unquenchable passion for knowledge.

The relationship between the two develops into a Platonic love where they hold in esteem each other's critical and analytical skills. As Sigrid Heinesen teaches al-Kenzy about latest Western theories in cosmology, al-Kenzy informs her about the contributions of Eastern scientists to the field of astronomy. For instance, Sigrid "speak[s] without hesitation" about *Hebdomades* (p. 233) and asks al-Kenzy challenging question such as "Does that not tell you of the significance of this work?" (p. 235). On his part, al-Kenzy enlightens her about Muslim scholar Nasr al din al-Tusi and suggests that "Copernicus must surely have known of the ideas of Nasr al din al-Tusi" (p. 239). In other words, the Platonic love that *binds* the couple reflects how the two are passionate about learning and acquiring more knowledge. In this way, *The Carrier* comments on the foundations on which the marriage between Othello and Desdemona is based. In other words, the al-Kenzy-Sigrid Heinesen love affair perfectly contextualises Desdemona's famous line "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (1.3.253), a line the content of which has been strongly undermined by Othello's irrationality, jealousy and

belief in superstitions during the course of the play. As al-Kenzy and Sigrid fall prey to bigots and zealots in *The Carrier*, the reader is enticed to re-think *Othello's* tragic ending since Mahjoub's representation of the Othello-Desdemona/al-Kenzy-Sigrid's relationship makes *Othello's* closing scene implausible and farfetched. In this way, Mahjoub's novel makes a significant intervention by drawing on, critiquing, and supplementing a theme that Shakespeare's play has left unexplored.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, one may argue that *The Carrier*, to borrow Said's words once more, "offer[s] an alternative narrative that can be read as part of a story already well known to European audiences, but not until now known from a native point of view" (1993, p. 303). Indeed, Mahjoub's historical novel appropriates Shakespeare's *Othello* in several ways. The novel is set in the early seventeenth century, the century in which Shakespeare wrote his greatest tragedies, including *Othello*. The novel borrows tropes, motifs and episodes that form the spine of Shakespeare's play. Specifically, the historical frame, places and cities like Cyprus and Aleppo, animalistic imagery, abusive/foul language, and motifs like the eye, sorcery/witchcraft, the storm and adventurous travels are all incorporated into Mahjoub's novel, and hence, the reader is invited to draw a parallelism between the two texts. Significantly, Mahjoub transposes Othello's fabled and imaginary adventures and travels that captivate Desdemona's heart to realistic narratives about the "fortunes and misfortunes" of al-Kenzy (p. 215). Moreover, through depicting al-Kenzy as a man whose "mind [is] as swift as a hawk" (p. 32), *The Carrier* properly contextualises Desdemona's claim that she sees Othello's visage in his mind. In this way, Mahjoub responds to Othello's pleas to tell his story without "malice." Through appropriating Shakespeare's play, Mahjoub recovers Othello's voice, retells his repressed tales and unveils distinguished aspects of his character that were eclipsed by Iago's intrigue and the ensuing tempestuous and catastrophic events in one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies.

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