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**THE THEME OF RELIGION IN  
HAMLET AND DATES ON MY  
FINGERS**

**A B S T R A C T**

The current paper aims at showing the similarities in terms of religion between Shakespeare's Hamlet and Muhsin Al-Ramli's Dates on My Fingers. The paper sheds the light on the characters, and context in both works. The study has concluded that there are many similarities as if Al-Ramli has adopted part of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The Ghost and the grandfather are similar in that both of them seek revenge claiming it to be religious. On the other hand, Hamlet and Noah are similar in that they both represent religious and secular ideology alike. Finally, both works represent the religious beliefs that were widespread at their times.

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موضوع الدين في مسرحية هاملت ورواية تمر الاصابع

ضياء رمضان علوان/ جامعة تكريت/ كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

**الخلاصة**

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى إظهار أوجه التشابه في الدين بين روايتي شكسبير هاملت ومحسن الرملي تمر الأصابع. يسلط البحث الضوء على الشخصيات والسياق في كلا العملين. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن هناك أوجه تشابه كثيرة وكان الرملي قد تبنى جزءاً من مسرحية هاملت لشكسبير. الشبح والجد متشابهان في أن كلاهما يسعى للانتقام بدعوى أنهما متدينين. من ناحية أخرى ، يتشابه هاملت ونوح من حيث أنهما يمثلان أيديولوجية دينية وعلمانية على حد سواء. أخيراً ، يمثل كلا العملين المعتقدات الدينية التي كانت منتشرة في عصرهم..

## 1.1. Introduction

Almost every literary work has some sort of religious reference whether implicitly or explicitly. This is because religion is found in all aspects of life. It is the laws and rules that organize life. In reading the literature of Shakespeare's works criticism, rarely there is not a religious discussion. This is due to the religious nature of the time of Shakespeare and the religious nature of Shakespeare himself. Robert Reed (1984) argues that in the Elizabethan era, the people thought that a ghost may return to earth if God permitted it. And because God permitted the Ghost of King Hamlet to return and demand Claudius's punishment, therefore, it is believed that the Ghost is transmitting God's command, the case where Hamlet is being the agent of God to punish the criminal. Omar Alsaif (2012) states that the play was written in an environment of religious beliefs.

Religion is not a new topic in Hamlet criticism. Philip Edwards (cited in Kastan, 2014) argues that he cannot see a further discussion of Hamlet which doesn't state it is a religious play. Omar Alsaif (2012) argues that it is hard to find a space in the discussion of Hamlet as there are so many people who did so. Thus, the discussion in this paper will revolve around comparing Hamlet with a modern novel to discover how the theme of religion is manipulated in old and new works.

Philip Edwards (2003) argues that the Play of Hamlet has three bases. The basic source of Hamlet is a story from the twelfth century which is Amleth, printed in 1514. The second source is a French version by Francoise de Belleforest published in 1570. The third source is old Fortinbras and old Hamlet. The difference of Shakespeare's Hamlet is the secrecy of the murder, the ghost urges the murder, the extension of Ophelia's role, and the death of Hamlet.

## 1.2. Overview of Dates on My Fingers

Dates on My Fingers is a novel by Muhsin Al-Ramli written in 2008. This novel takes place in Spain and Iraq. It is a blend of humor and tragedy. Saleem narrates the story of his family and his life in the exile. The novel starts with Saleem's meeting with his father in the father's night club in Madrid after ten years in exile. In narrating the story he moves back and forth between his life in Iraq and Spain. Saleem in the opening of the novel flashes back to his teenage years. When Noah, Saleem's father, takes his sick daughter to the doctor in Tikrit city and a driver harasses her. The father grabs the driver out of the window grabbing the driver's revolver, removing three bullets from its chamber and putting them in the offender's backside.

The young man happens to have strong government connections. Noah was thrown in the prison and tortured. Saleem's grandfather who is charismatic, God-loving and vengeance seeking rallies the men of clan and urge them to revenge. They attack the governor's building; three of them were killed while others were arrested and tortured. Finally, their family name in their identities was change al-Mutlaq to al-Qashmar. (naïve fool).

The head of the family Mullah Mutlaq decides that the clan (about hundred people) set off to another place. They established their own village which they called "al-Qashmar". Mullah Mutlaq urged his son to avenge against the young driver.

The story goes twenty years forward when Saleem immigrates to Madrid and finds a regular job. He finds his father there who happens to be a nightclub owner. Then Saleem narrates the story of his love to his cousin and her death. The novel is first and foremost an exploration of exile in the modern world.

### **1.3. Characters Representing religion in Hamlet and Dates on My Fingers**

#### **1.3.1. King Hamlet Vs. Mutlaq**

The similarities between King Hamlet's ghost and Mutlaq are obvious as if Al-Ramli, the writer of Dates on My Fingers, is adopting Shakespeare in his novel. A mysterious ghost shows up in the very beginning of the play of *Hamlet* and which is anxious for revenge. The apparition is a very important figure to the plot because it gives sense to the play. Without it, Hamlet wouldn't know who murdered his father and wouldn't take the measures he took in the play. According to Wilson (1967) the ghost represents the Catholic belief at the time of the Elizabethan England. He argues that there are three conditions which satisfy this claim. First, the spirit tells Hamlet that he is his father's spirit thus the first belief of the Catholics is satisfied. The second condition is the ghost's return from purgatory as he admits. His spirit is doomed to suffer during day and wonder during night until his committed sins during his life are purged. This carries the implication that the spirit came from a Catholic Purgatory. The third stipulation is that the spirit comes on a purpose which helps its soul rest in peace. The ghost comes to command Hamlet to revenge his death. This is the purpose of the ghost's return.

Knight, G. Wilson (1960) argues that the apparition is evil. It fills Hamlet's psyche with poisonous ideas. He states that Hamlet's evilness is stronger than that of all the characters together. Wilson (1967) points out that all ghosts are devil as the Protestants believe. They believe that the ghosts take the form of relatives or friends in order to harm those to whom they appear.

Joseph (1962) argues that the apparition describes the Danish moral situation and prescribes its remedy. It orders hamlet to avenge the king's murder to cleanse the state. Hamlet's response to the order suggests that it carries a force of religious obligation (Mark Matheson, 1995). When the Ghost meets Hamlet,

it uses a language that represents the voice of the dead. The Ghost affiliates with old religion. The speech by Hamlet's father's ghost, who describes himself as having been sinful during his life, reveals the depth of his faith, and includes advice about the sins that have been committed. Describing how he wants his son to kill his brother, he talks about the 'murder' in the context of his faith and justifies his request on religious grounds. (Miah, A.S.M., 2015).

The Roman Catholicism language appears in Hamlet in the meeting of Hamlet and his father's ghost where Shakespeare creates a purgatorial context for the Ghost. The spirit of King Hamlet ascertains his situation beyond the grave. It describes the "sulph'rous and tormenting flames" in which he must endure until his wrongdoings in life are burnt and purged away. The complaint of the Ghost introduces a language which is Roman Catholic. In the tradition of Catholic discourse, the power of speech is given to the suffering dead. The Ghost uses a language, when he encounters Hamlet, which represents the voice of the dead. The Ghost comes to Hamlet not to beg relief for its own pains but to request Hamlet to revenge "the death of King Hamlet and to restore order in the temporal political world." Hamlet's response to the order suggests that it carries a force of religious obligation."

(Mark Matheson, 1995)

Turning to the character of the Grandfather Mutlaq, we see that he is a religious man also. From the beginning of the novel Mutlaq is mentioned as a studying The Quran from his childhood. He had a maxim saying "If a dog barks at you, don't bark at it; but if it bites you, bite it back!". This maxim represented his philosophy in life. When he was a child, he used to attend the lessons of Mullah Abd al-Hamid for learning the Qur'an every day in the mosque carrying his copy of the Qur'an. He applied this maxim from the scene of the dog blocking his way to the mosque and biting him. He bit back the dog. Mullah Abdulhameed asked him about the blood Mutlaq responded "A dog barked at me; I didn't bark at it. But it bit me, so I bit it back!". The Mullah smiled and said to the children "Give him a round of applause!" and took off his turban to bandage Mutlaq's leg and gave him a handful of dates and patted him on the shoulder. In this scene, the Mullah celebrated Mutlaq's heroic self-defense. This maxim has become religious for him as Saleem says:

Since that time, this story about him has been famous, and Mutlaq began to take pride in it, considering his words to be a maxim he had discovered, a maxim sealed by the honor Mullah Abd al-Hamid had shown him...

Later on, Mutlaq applied this maxim to invoke vengeance not defense when he gathers his sons, grandsons, brothers and their sons to storm Tikrit and liberate Noah from the government. The Grandfather imposed a religious nature on this vengeance as Saleem says:

The men sat in small groups while Grandfather reminded them of the raids of the first Muslims and recited the Qur'an...

Therefore, the men when going to fight such a battle, they are convinced that they are right even if they will die. This is related to the Islamic belief which is based on the Prophetic Hadith:

"He who dies while defending his property is a martyr; he who dies in defence of his own life is a martyr; and he who dies on defense of his faith is a martyr, he who dies in defence of his family is a martyr."

(Nawawī, & Khan, 1989: Hadith No. 1356)

However, if they are plotting this vengeance for the sake of God, they forgot that Islam doesn't allow fighting the ruler even if he is tyrant. This opinion is agreed upon by the authentic Muslim scholars. Hence, Mullah Mutlaq told them to fight the government and liberate Noah, reinforcing them by the Quran and the stories of the first Muslims forgetting that it is forbidden to fight against the ruler. So, this battle was not for the sake of God but it is the tradition of the Arabs that they have as the Quran calls it (the bigotry of ignorance). The words mean (hamiyyat al –jahiliyyah) that a man does something unworthy and improper only for the sake of his honour and prestige.

The Ghost tells Hamlet the same concerning revenge. He uses expression such as "that incestuous, that adulterate beast,... seduced,... lust,... "which have religious implications. He adds "If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not. Let not the royal bed of Denmark be A couch for luxury and damnèd incest." So, it is very apparent that the two characters give a religious implication to which they are calling. The Ghost tells Hamlet about his happiness that he is eager to revenge.

Another religious reference is when the Grandfather called the people who died during the clashes martyrs. Saleem says:

We learned the following day that three of our men had been killed—Grandfather said “martyred”—in the clashes in the smoke in front of the provincial government building,...

The grandfather repeats his saying twice in the novel. This is to convince himself and the others that they did the act of vengeance for the sake of God and they were right. However, the grandfather forgot that no one except Allah knows the martyrs. So, it is acceptable to say that whoever died defending his property is a martyr, whoever died defending his own life is a martyr but it is not acceptable to say X or Y is a martyr as the Hadith in Sahih Al-Bukhari says:

I heard Allah's Apostle saying, "The example of a Mujahid in Allah's Cause-- and Allah knows better who really strives in His Cause----is like a person who fasts and prays continuously...

Therefore nobody knows who is martyr particularly because we don't know the intentions of people. Moreover, those three who were killed and the Grandfather calls them martyrs, they were not in jihad. So, the Grandfather defended his dignity covering his deed with a religion. This cover is to convince oneself that he is doing right. This is may be due to the his past experience in fighting the British army in Iraq as Saleem says. Muslims believe that jihad is fighting whoever invades your country, therefore the Grandfather's past experience was one of the factors that led to the clash and his belief that those who are killed are martyrs. But as mentioned above, he fought for dignity not for religious reasons. His dignity is obvious when saleem in the second chapter narrates the story when Mutlaq cut off his wife's finger when they quarreled one month after their marriage. She raised her voice threatening to complain to her brother and pointing her finger at him. "Swelling up in pride, Mutlaq flew into a burning rage. He grabbed her index finger just above the first knuckle and picked up a knife that was beside him on the edge of the stove. He chopped the finger off at the knuckle and shoved the severed fingertip into her pocket. It was the size of a small stone or a date, its blood draining out." Saleem says that his Grandfather hates the hypocrites but in fact he is one of them. Because most of his behaviours don't reflect the Islamic faith. They reflect the behaviours of people in Jahilia.

There may be another reason that justifies the Grandfather's claims. This reason is that some muslim scholars say that the ruler who doesn't rule with Quran and Sunnah is a disbeliever as the Quran says:

And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed –  
then it is those who are the disbelievers.

But there is a lot of discussion about this Ayah between the scholars about the belief of this ruler. Some scholars said that the reference of the word *disbelievers* here is to the jews. Others said that it refers to muslims. Others said that it is not bigger disbelief (kufur akbar).

When the police released Noah, he came to the Grandfather and vowed to revenge as is clear from the scene:

“I will shave his head and his mustache, and I will tattoo or burn ‘Qashmar’ onto his forehead.”

Grandfather said, “When?”

“I don’t know. But I will most certainly do it.”

Grandfather brought him a Qur’an and said, “Swear on this.”

So my father put his hand on the book and took an oath, feeling satisfied in what he had resolved to do when he heard the satisfaction in Grandfather’s voice.

Afterwards when the Mutlaq family moved to establish their ideal village, the Grandfather delivered a religious message to them. It was advice and rules for their life. He said:

“O people of Mutlaq, be united as one! Show each other compassion, care for each other, and tend to your women and your flocks. Watch out for the hypocrites in the government: do not believe them, do not make friends with them, and do not allow any marriage ties with them. Build your world here according to what God wants and what you want. Do not ask the government for any documents or alms or property. As for the fuel and the medicine you need, barter for it with the people of Subh, but do not engage them in conversation, and do not ask them about anything at all.

“Never forget your vengeance!” (He looked at my father as he said this.) “When the number of your men exceeds seventy—the number of the Prophet’s companions in the Battle of Badr and the number of his grandson Hussein’s companions at Karbala—start blowing up the pillars of government! Strike them with an iron fist, wherever you are able! Bear patiently the disgrace of your surname Qashmar until you take revenge. For I fear you would forget your rightful claim if you forgot the insulting name.

As mentioned before, the audience of the Elizabethan era believed in the ghosts and their return. Unlike Muslims who believe in ghosts in a different way. Muslims don't believe that the ghosts of the dead return from afterlife. They indeed believe that there are ghosts but these ghosts either Satanic ghosts or believers. There is belief in witchcraft and supernatural beings known as jinn (genies). The jinn can harm people when they enter their body. And this is proven in the Quran as Allah says:

Those who eat riba (interest) will not stand (on the Day of Resurrection) except like the standing of a person beaten by Shaytan leading him to insanity. That is because they say: ‘Trading is only like Riba’

Therefore, the writer of the novel mentions that the Grandfather found someone to cure the disease of Saleem's sister. After being desperate of doctors remedies, he said “*In that case, forget the doctors. The only hope is in the remedy of God,...*” So he decided to take her to one of his Kurdish friends who possesses miraculous powers. He is in the Sufi tradition. After treating her, he said that: “She was possessed by a demon, God curse it! It was feeding on her blood, so I killed it.” This is the only mention of the ghost in the novel because the Muslims believe in ghosts in this way not like the Elizabethans.

### 1.3.2. Hamlet Vs. Noah

The ghost binds Hamlet to vengeance. It tells him that he is obliged to revenge the murder. Hamlet is seen as powerless to face the orders of his father's spirit, and his inability to counter his father's cultural authority is clear in the play. Omar Alsaif (2012: 133) argues that Hamlet was religious for he was part of his community which was religious at that time. He says that he doesn't commit suicide because of religious reasons. Furthermore, he argues that "Some of Hamlet's words show him to be pious and strongly against immorality. He criticizes the spread of inebriation and debauchery in his society". Hamlet says:

This heavy-headed revel east and west makes us traduced and  
tax'd of other nations: They clepe us drunkards, and with  
swinish Phrase Soil our addition; and indeed it takes. From  
our achievements, though perform'd at height,

(Hamlet, I.4, 17-21).

William Hamilton (1964) argues that Hamlet cannot decide between the Catholic, Protestant and skeptical points of view. He asks whether the Ghost is "a spirit of health, or goblin damned," brings airs from heaven or blasts from hell, charitable or wicked. He becomes sure when he designs the play. He designed the play to test whether the Ghost is good or evil. Omar Alsaif (2012) argues that Hamlet becomes sure that the Ghost is not evil when Claudius goes out through the play. Hamlet was religious for he was part of his community which was religious at that time.

Rajiv Thind (2014) states that as a student of Wittenberg, it is most likely that Hamlet was Protestant. Wittenberg was a place of theological debates and ideas, and included a curriculum based heavily on contemporary Christian theology and doctrine. Wittenberg is where Martin Luther had posted his celebrated 95 theses to the church door in 1517.

On the other hand, Noah also has religious tendency as is seen explicitly in the novel. When Mutlaq binds Noah to vengeance he brought him The Qur'an and told him to swear on it. Noah put his hand on The Qur'an and took an oath. He obliged himself to this oath throughout the rest of his life. The other indicator is that he memorized all the Qur'an. Moreover, when he hired Fatima to work for him, his condition was that she memorizes Surah Al-Baqarah. But then he turns to another person when he travels to Spain. He launches his own bar in which he drinks alcohol and starts illegal relations with women. But he keeps his religious tendency as said by Fatima when he examines her every month with Surah Al-Baqarah. Saleem explains that Noah has a dual character:

So, he still had the Qur'an memorized... He had made Fatima memorize the Cow Sura, yet he spanked her whenever she passed by him... He now drank wine voraciously, yet he was the one who never left a prayer, a fast, or any religious duty unfulfilled. He lived with Rosa, and she wasn't his wife... His mouth poured out the coarsest of curses in all languages, yet he was the one who



never uttered an offensive word in his life. This is as Saleem says a temporary change because he has the two characters but he didn't abandon one of them for good.

#### **1.4. The Religious Context in Hamlet and Dates on My Fingers**

Shakespeare through Hamlet represents the religious beliefs at his time. In Elizabethan England the debate was more increasingly associated with the Catholic and Protestant religions. the question of religion had begun before Elizabeth I became the Queen, exactly during the rule of Elizabeth's father king Henry VIII. King Henry wanted to marry another woman and to get divorce, as his wife was unable to give birth to a male; this was something the Catholic Church does not tolerate, It led him to change the rules by opposing to Luther's Reformation. The king married several times until one of his wives gave birth to a boy he named Edward (VI) who will rule England about six years before he died at the age fifteen. Mary, Edward's maternal aunt, will govern England for five years and one of her aims was to make Britain a Roman Catholic state again. For that reason, she accepted to marry King Philip of Spain, but they weren't able to give birth to any children; at that moment, her dream was lost. We can underline that the personal desires of King Henry VIII played an essential role in the religious transformation in England. England in two decades had gone from Protestant under Edward VI's reign, to Catholic during the rule of Mary and back again to Protestant with Elizabeth I.

(Zakaria Yahdih, N.D.)

Al-Ramli, on the other hand, is also representing the religious beliefs which are widespread in the Iraqi society at the time of writing the novel. Through the character of Noah, he represented the layman who is neither completely pious nor completely sinner. He represents the extreme Islamists who are the fighters of the Al-Qaeda or nowadays ISIS through the character of Mutlaq. He carries all of their beliefs and views towards the government. He doesn't consider the government a Muslim and he calls for fighting it just like ISIS who claims to fight the unbelievers but they fight other Muslims instead. This representation is very clear in the oration that the grandfather delivered when they moved to their new village.

#### **1.5. Conclusions**

Shakespeare and Al-Ramli represent the religious tendencies of their societies through their writings skillfully. Both King Hamlet's Ghost and Mutlaq force religious justification in their call for revenge. In both works the personal desires play important roles in shaping the ends and justifications. In Hamlet for example, the personal desire of the Ghost to revenge casted a religious justification on the act. Christianity doesn't allow the Ghost and Hamlet to kill Claudius because he married his deceased brother's widow. Hamlet wants to

revenge not the murder of his father but the marriage of Claudius to his mother. So why this reason not that? Both of them use a language which arouses the zealous feelings inside their hearers. Both Hamlet and Noah have complex characters which have religious and non-religious sides. Noah wants to revenge the harassment of the young man to his daughter while he himself has illegal relations with women. This shows us the complexities in their characters.

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