

## Heros in Modern Verse Drama of England and Egypt: The Similarities of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and al-Sharqawi's *al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr*

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### Abstract

*Historical events and the life of saints are good sources for dramatists to focus on important events of their time. This comparative research aims to elaborate on similar themes in the works of two significant Modernist dramatists, namely, Eliot and al-Sharqawi. Although these dramatists belong to two different geographical and cultural settings, Britain and Egypt, they portray the same themes in Murder in the Cathedral (1935) and al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr (1969). The question this paper tries to answer revolves around the similar depiction of death, God's will, sacrifice and the idea of victory in two aforementioned plays. In addition, this paper hopes to discuss why Eliot and al-Sharqawi have used verse drama for these special religious heroes. Besides, this paper will discuss the significance of historical events and the influence of Eliot on al-Sharqawi. These similarities are not simply the outcome of influences; that is why this research is going beyond the French school of comparative literature. In other words, the American school of comparative literature will also be used in this paper. We can conclude that al-Sharqawi has moved further; he tries to Arabicize Eliot's version of Modernism.*

**Key words:** Comparative literature, Verse drama, Modernism, Modern Arab drama, T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, al-Sharqawi, Al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr.



## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the similarities between T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1953) and al-Sharqawi's *al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr* (1969). Although the plays were written in two very different geographical and cultural settings, they deal with certain concepts in a similar way. The significance of writing in verse is one of the similarities that will be explained. Eliot is a prominent figure in this form of writing and his vital role goes beyond the Western world and reaches the Arab world. Thus, this paper will discuss Eliot's influence on modern Arabic poetry and drama.

Another similarity between the two plays is the idea of history as a subject matter. Both dramatists choose a historical event to find the solution of the problems bothering the human beings in the contemporary world. Besides, death and God's will, Eliot's and al-Sharqawi's plays end with the death of their protagonists who submit to God's will. Authority and the idea of conflict is also expected to be comparable between these two plays. Also, sacrifice in order to obey the divine order is a central point in our understanding of these two plays. In both plays, these concepts are present. Given these and other resemblances between Eliot's and al-Sharqawi's theatrical endeavors, this paper will fully discuss how two dramatists with different religious, social, geographical, and ideological backgrounds have presented their material in similar ways.

## 2 The Significance and Innovations of Study

The present study gains significance because firstly, it can shed more light on important aspects, namely the ideas of martyrdom, sainthood and sacrifice in both Islamic and Christian ideology and on how Eliot and al-Sharqawi have employed them in their plays. Secondly, it will trace the development of verse drama in modern Arabic literature in addition to modern English literature with focusing on the prominent figures of this genre who are Eliot and al-Sharqawi. Thirdly, it will explain the reasons of using historical facts in writing these plays. These areas are expected to be comparable in the current study.

This research is going to investigate why Eliot and al-Sharqawi have used verse drama in their plays and why both dramatists have relied on historical evidence and have changed the details of these historical events. In addition, this paper explores the way Eliot and al-Sharqawi have depicted the idea of martyrdom, sacrifice and revolution in these two plays. According to our knowledge, this comparative reading is the first study that will focus on two different contexts,



cultures and languages regarding their, namely Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and al-Sharqawi's *al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr*.

### 3. Review of Related Literature

In *Drama for Students*, Galens (1998) illustrates that *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) talks about the struggle between King Henry II and Thomas Becket. Thomas and the king are best friends, but each one has his own interest in the nation and they both think the other should be under his control. Eliot has depicted the conflict between human desire and God's will along with a number of complex spiritual aspects. His aim is to revive verse drama; he has employed his skills to write about historical events but from a modern perspective (pp. 228-236).

In *A Comparative Study of the Religious Values Portrayed in T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral and G. B. Shaw's Saint Joan*, Bahir (2015) claims that the First and Second World Wars have brought with them a pessimistic outlook because of the ugliness of these two wars. Thus, people of English society have begun to lose their faith and beliefs. That is why some dramatists have resurrected the concepts of religion and Christianity in their works. For instance, G. B. Shaw and T. S. Eliot has embedded the ideas of martyrdom, sainthood and sacrifice in their plays. The main function of a saint is not only to give advice, but also to reject the depravity of state towards people. In order to reinforce faith in God, the saint's mission is to sacrifice and die to achieve God's will. Martyr's blood is important to activate people from their recession and awaken their revolutionary process. Shaw and Eliot have used historical figures because "A nation which does not value its history and significant figures, leaders, martyrs is not worthy of respect" (pp. 12819-12837)

In *Egyptian Drama*, Whittingham (1976) states that early mid- nineteenth century has witnessed the first endeavor in producing drama in Arab countries by Lebanese dramatist Marun al-Naqqash. This is because of the rise of colonialist movement in Arabic world. Drama is used as a tool to warn society about the dangers of colonialism. Moreover, intellectuals have employed another instrument to uncover these dangers. They have used journals to disseminate the idea of breaking the colonial restrictions and getting liberation. Since 1950s, drama has had an important role in Arab culture; it started with Egypt that gained its independence from colonialism in 1953. Therefore, the drama has been given a lot of attention in order to increase the cultural awareness of Egyptian society. Between mid-fifties and seventies, Egyptian theatre and Egyptian drama was in its golden age and played a prominent role in all political processes. Drama has had a significant role in social issues, as well as the liberation of Palestine from colonialism and war with Israel.





Tragedy in the Arabic dramatic works has started since the 1930s and 1940s as a result of translation of European tragedy (pp. 13-17).

In *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, Badawi (1987) points out that neo-classical poet Ahmed Shawqi (1868-1932) uses verse to write drama for the first time in Arabic Literature. Ahmed Shawqi changed his style of writing to produce verse drama, particularly in the last four years of his literary career, when his reputation was at the heights, as the best poet not only in Egypt but also in the Arab world. Between 1923 and 1928, he produced six tragedies and one historical drama, *Masra' Kilyubatra (The Fall of Cleopatra, 1929)*. In this play, he is under the influence of Shakespeare in which he shows the last days of Cleopatra. After Shawqi, al-Sharqawi has proved himself as one of notable figures in Egyptian drama. Early in his literary work, he was a novelist and then he turned to writing verse drama. In 1959, he wrote his first play *Ma'sat Jamila (The Tragedy of Jamila)* but it was not performed in Cairo until 1962 (pp. 207-219).

In *Al-Ta'azi Performance in Iraq: A Study of Their Literary, Social and Political Significance*, Al-Jumaili (1999) highlights on how Muslim and also non-Muslim poets in addition to dramatists are affected by the tragedy of Karbala. The essence of their works concentrates on themes of political and religious significance. Also, he clarifies that the word 'Al Ta'azi' has been associated with the tragedy of Karbala. This tragedy illustrates the conflict between two schools, the legitimate school and the illegitimate school. The first one is represented by Imam Husayn's moral school and the second one is represented by Yazid's non-moral school. In this tragedy Imam Hussein rebelled against Yazid's corrupted regime. Imam Husayn sacrificed not only himself, but also everything he possessed to protect the prophet Mohammad's religion. That is why the word 'Al Ta'azi' makes the audience feel compassion, kindness and mercifulness towards him. In chapter 5, Jumaili has devoted his study to focus upon al-Sharqawi's play *al Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr* and how al-Sharqawi has employed historical events, particularly Imam Husayn tragedy to write his play (pp. 131-140).

## 1. Methodology and Theoretical Framework: Verse Drama as a Modern Technique

The question this paper tries to answer revolves around Eliot and al-Sharqawi practice of verse drama for their religious heroes. . In addition, this paper hopes to discuss the similar depiction of death, God's will, sacrifice and the idea of victory in two aforementioned plays. Some literary figures, including Eliot, stated that there are topics which can be expressed only in poetry and prose falls short of expressing



them. Eliot, in various articles and lectures, voiced his support for verse drama and elaborated on “the demands of drama as a genre and those of verse plays in particular” (Tydeman, 1988, p. 15). What is significant in the essays of T. S. Eliot and other analysts is that “the impetus towards a modern verse drama grew out of two approaches to the solution of contemporary problems; one was political and the other was religious” (Lapworth, 1988, p. 71).

In his *Poetry and Drama* (1950), Eliot clarifies the reasons of using verse in writing plays: “not only my own reasons for wanting to write in this form, but the more general reasons for wanting to see it restored to its place”(p. 11). He further said that his luck in writing *Murder in the Cathedral* was that it was the first of its kind. He contended that verse plays should either deal with a mythological topic or be set in a remote historical period so that the characters were permitted to speak in verse. *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) meets this criterion. It is a poetic drama that summarizes the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in the Cathedral in 1170 A.D. In a letter to Ezra Pound, Eliot wrote, “If you write a play in verse, then the verse ought to be the medium to look through and not a pretty decoration to look at” (as cited in Gannon & Levensohn, 1965, p. 16).

Discussing modern Arab verse drama, Badawi illustrates “classical Arabic literature did not know drama in the sense of an established art form which provides an imitation of an action on the stage through dialogue in verse or prose by human actors” (as cited in Rahman, 2015, p. 29). Drama in its Western form inaugurated in the Arab world in 1847. It was on this date that “Marun al-Naqqash had established his theatre in Beirut and introduced his three plays, *Miser (al-Bakhil)*, *Abu'l Hasan the Fool (Abu'l- Hasan al-Mughaffal)* and *The Sharp-Tongued Envious Man (al-Salit al-Hasud)*” (Najm, 1961, p. 275). Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932) is a respectable figure in Arab theatre because he was one of the precursors of using old Arabic poetry to write drama in verse. Following Ahmed Shawqi, a new generation of Arab writers appeared. One of the writers belonging to this generation is al-Sharqawi who is best known for using ‘new’ poetry in the forties. Al-Sharqawi’s style of writing changed to verse drama in the fifties (Badawi, 1992, pp. 358-360). In other words, al-Sharqawi has not followed the same style that Shawqi had followed in writing his plays. “His talent in writing verse drama is most evident in his play *al-Husayn Tha’iran and Shahidan (al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr)*” (Badawi, 1992, p. 361).

All the events and changes in the socio-political arena of the Arab world imposed changes on the theme and style of the writers and, in particular, dramatists. The thematic part of their poetic plays did not stop at a certain point, but expanded



to contain their ideas about the realities of life and future visions. It is noteworthy that the development in the style of writing modern poetry, that is, free verse instead of vertical poetry (*al-Shi'r al-Amudi*), helped in “achieving flexibility and suitability with a wide capacity to carry different meanings to the audience” (Al-Bahrani, 2012, p. 104). In this regard, al-Sharqawi, as an indispensable practitioner in the course of the development of the Arabic poetry, used free verse instead of vertical poetry to increase the ability of portraying the reality of life and delivering it to audience easily. Al-Sharqawi wrote a series of poetic plays in which he addressed the concerns of the society and its future aspirations as well as the most important events surrounding the social life (Al-Bahrani, 2012, pp. 96-97). The content of most of these plays was accompanied by the critical views expressed in the language of a poetic play.

## 5. Historical Framework: Why History Matters?

History is one of the many sources available for writing plays. It is important to note that a dramatist's function is different from a historian's function. Dramatists does not write to show the past or to draw attention to the ideal issues of the past; rather, a dramatist chooses an immortal historical event to find the solution of the problems bothering the human beings in the contemporary world. That is to say, a dramatist does not try to “present historical truth as it is, but tries to revive historical figures who have carried dignified values and their lives had introduced magnificent indications” (Mandoor, 1971, p. 6). Religious and historical figures play a significant role in forming modern poetic texts because “these figures had been related to important events and situations; thus, recalling them would lead to the enrichment of the poetic contents and reveal meanings that is difficult to talk about them directly” (Ziyadat, 2012, p. 82). In other words, the texts of the poetic plays were characterized by using history to narrate great events that enabled writers to find a variety of different subjects, arousing a high response on the part of the audience and a sense of collective impact on significant issues. In general, drama is the “establishment of a contact between the playwright and his audience in which the dramatist conveys his message containing knowledge, information, instructions, skills, moral lessons, etc., to the audience to exert influence on them” (al-Diailij, 2011, p. 11).

Both Eliot and al-Sharqawi produced their major plays by relying on a source called history. The underlying incidents in their plays are determined by historical events, but each playwright treats these facts differently. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, for instance, Eliot employs very little historical information. The play





narrates only one important event: murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. In fact, he celebrates the martyrdom of a saint to indicate that this religious figure and the setting in which he is located has more to offer than a mere historical story. *Murder in the Cathedral* does not stop at presenting the conflict between Becket and Henry II, but skillfully makes us aware of “the presence of a political and constitutional theme which had a great deal of relevance to Europe in 1935” (Tydeman, 1988, p. 37). Also, al-Sharqawi in *the al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr* has chosen a prominent figure from real life, Imam Husayn, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) who was martyred on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 680 (10 Muharram AH 61) in Karbala. He has turned to history to write his play about Imam Husayn. According to the principles of Shi’a Islam, Imam Husayn revolted against the oppressive ruler, Yazid, and sacrificed his life and the lives of his beloved ones in the service of God.

In his verse plays, Eliot determined “what subsequent playwrights would be quick to learn from him: that past dramatic forms can still serve current needs” (Burt, 2008, p. 357). It is unanimously agreed that Eliot was the chief figure in making English drama aware of its origins which goes back to the church (Hamed, 2014, p. 47). He wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* upon the request of the dean of the Cathedral of Canterbury in 1935. The dean asked Eliot to write an original verse play with a religious topic pertaining to the Cathedral’s history. “The result was *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) which was performed in Canterbury Cathedral” (Hamed, 2014, p. 47). The subject of the play centers around the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, whose conflict with his former friend King Henry II caused his murder in 1170 as he was praying in Canterbury Cathedral.

Eliot’s choice of the subject matter was quite shrewd and tactful because the story he narrates in *Murder in the Cathedral* is dramatically rich and can easily catch the attention and admiration of theatre-goers (Jawad, 1979, pp. 43-49). Though Eliot avoids putting much emphasis upon the conflict of King and Chancellor, the confrontation is embedded in the fabric of Eliot’s play despite the fact that it is not the center of the action. History is neither ignored nor deviated; rather, Eliot’s text “becomes an example not just of something happening in time but a sequence leading to a timeless moment. In the opening of the play the historical events are interwoven with emotional fears expressed by the Chorus, and their reactions dominate our response” (Lapworth, 1988, p. 8). The presence of the Chorus is significant. “To reinforce the idea of the saint’s spiritual isolation, Eliot included a chorus of unknowing women of Canterbury, who must struggle to come



to terms with the saint's journey and its meaning in their lives" (Smith, 2009, p. 252).

As with the Arab dramatists whose texts entailed an important era in the history of the Arab nations, the dramatic texts seek to revive intellectual and educational contents that treat and urge towards moral purity, national pride, struggle against colonialism, building a free society and criticizing all the mistakes and negative situations. That is why, "the playwrights had used history in order to face political and social conditions for current and future times" (Farhān, 2001, p. 26). Tunisian playwright, Bockthir Douma (2016) explains in his article that drama enables human beings to learn salutary lesson from their predecessors (p. 125). Drama, Douma (2016) contends, has witnessed, over the ages, a tremendous development in which its appearances have changed from the temple, into the church, to the general squares and then to the modern theatres (p. 126). Douma (2016) further claims that "my interest in historical drama arises from my predilection to look back to our old events and heritage as I believe we cannot deal with our reality and comprehend it unless we understand our past and take salutary lessons from it" (p. 126).

In the 1940s and 1950s, the greatest dramatists looked back to the history to elaborate on contemporary events by resorting to old values and principles. The contemporary Arab dramatist found in Imam Husayn's revolution the perfect means to express the contemporary situations and social sufferings -- for instance Arab's failure in gaining their independence after the Second World War (1939-1945). Imam Husayn's personality is represented as the symbol of a revolutionary against the forces of tyranny. His character is not limited to the Shiite poets, but also Sunni poets turn to his revolution "because Imam Husayn does not represent a sect and excluding the other ones" (Ziyadat, 2012, p. 94). The dramatization of the event "is a unique attempt by a Sunni to dramatise the events culminating in the tragedy of Karbala and, moreover, to adhere closely to the conception, . . . That the struggle was between the forces of light and darkness" (Alhajri, 2007, pp. 170-171).

As an Arab playwright concerned with social issues, al-Sharqawi used drama as a powerful tool to express his voice pertaining to social and political activities. Similar to Eliot, he decided to use theatre to be a suitable medium to reveal his ideas to the audience. His works "represent a reproduction of historical events in a way which accords with the demands of social and political realism" (al-Jaiyar, 1988, pp. 159-161). Furthermore, what al-Sahrawi has in common with Eliot, among other factors, is his tendency to keep the essence and spirit of history, discarding its details. Therefore, when he decides to dramatize the story of the great Islamic





figures such as Imam Husayn, “he presents an imaginative recreation not a documentary historical work. Thus, his works are those of a creative artist who takes his inspiration from history” (Alhajri, 2007, p. 166). Badawi (1987) asserts that al-Sharqawi’s play *al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr* is not “meant to be a historical play: in it the historical events are used as a peg on which to hang a modern message or rather a message of perennial relevance: al-Husayn is treated as a prototype of a revolutionary who opts for martyrdom in defense of truth and justice” (p. 219).

## 6. Discussion and Results: A Close Look at *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr*

### 6.1. Death and God’s Will

The idea of sacrifice in order to obey the divine order is a central point in our understanding of Eliot’s play. From the very beginning of the play, Becket reveals his preparedness to die to preserve the authority of the church: “Loathing power given by temporal devolution, / Wishing subjection to God alone” (Elio, 1962, p. 14). When the Chorus expresses its anger over the prevailing death and corruption covering the earth, Becket calms them by speaking of the redemptive power of his death: “Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy, / When the figure of God’s purpose is made complete” (Eliot, 1962, p. 43).

Al-Sharqawi applied the idea of God’s will to both parts of the play, *al-Husayn Revolutionary* and *Martyr*. In spite of al-Husayn’s awareness that he is not able to win the military battle, he stays true to his ideal which is surrendering to God’s will. Al-Aqad (2013), a well-known Arabic writer, delivers his ideas about martyrdom by saying “and who is considered to be the martyr if he is not the man who suffers and knows that the reality will betray him yet he continues until the end” (p. 72). Al-Husayn, in a conversation with his brother Mohammad, explains that he will go to Mecca with his family. Hence, Mohammad advises him to stay beside Zamzam and Prophet Ibrahim’s place. Al-Husayn replies “God will care for us, we are late and it is time to leave. . . . God will do what He decides” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 a, p. 62). In the second part al-Husayn says: “(Praying) I will do the impossible for the sake of You. Light my way from the rays of Your wisdom. As I am going to be the martyr of right” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 84).

Becket prefers the will of God to his own will. He preaches about the value of death in the sake of God: “I give my life. To the Law of God above the Law of Man” (Eliot, 1962, p. 46). When four murderers approach to kill him in the Cathedral, Becket meets them with valor and asks the other priests to be courageous.



He himself opens the door to his murderers to keep the dignity of the Cathedral as a holy place and avoid any mundane fight taking place on the soil of this holy ground of God: “Unbar the door! Unbar the door!” (Eliot, 1962, p. 46). He assures the Chorus and three priests that it is up to the will of God, whether he will die or live. Thus, he implies, there is no reason to be scared: “For a little time the hungry hawk/ Will only soar and hover, circling lower, / Waiting excuse, pretence, opportunity. End will be simple, sudden, God-given” (Eliot, 1962, p. 18).

Eliot has given Tempters significant roles to highlight Becket as a real character. He rejects the first three Tempters because they represent mundane pleasure. The Second Tempter, for instance, offers him the power of being once more a Chancellor, but he firmly refuses: “Those who put their faith in worldly order/ Not controlled by the order of God, / In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder,/ Make it fast, breed fatal disease” (Eliot, 1962, p. 22). The crucial moment of play is when the fourth Tempter offers Becket the glory of martyrdom. This temptation is unusual and, thus, Becket is confused. He cannot resist this temptation because he cannot decide whether it is his ambition that obliges him to be martyred or it is a temptation. Finally, “he understands to [have] the glory of martyrdom, he should obey God’s will” (Al-Husseini, 2009, pp. 77-78). He states that any attempt to defy the will of God is a “fatal disease” (Eliot, 1962, p. 22). His acceptance of God’s will in the first part of the play is actualized in the second part when he encounters his death at the hands of the Knights (Tydeman, 1988, p. 46). It is “upon his consecration to perseverance in his career and the world’s denial of its value that the dramatic conflict of the second part hinges” (Jones, 1960, p. 83).

Similarly, after offering his apology to al-Husayn and his sister, al-Hur suggests that al-Husayn ought to avoid fighting Yazid’s army by escaping from an unknown road to Madina. Al-Husayn, like Becket’s fourth temptation, is faced with the most difficult decision of his life. If he accepts al-Hur’s suggestion and runs away from Karbala, he is able to save his life as well as the lives of his family and disciples, but he has neglected the will of God. If he stays and fights with the Yazid’s army, he most probably dies, but has fulfilled God’s will. Al-Husayn chooses the latter: “I am going in the way of truth and I will not return even if it ends with my death” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 16).

Al-Sharqawi, like Eliot, gave Umar the role of the fourth temptation. That is to say, Umar’s words look like the fourth Tempter. In a conversation between Umar and al-Husayn, the protagonist reiterates his decision to complete his divine mission: “If you give up, we [Yazid Army] will grant water to your kids and women. While you [al-Husayn] are unwilling and arrogant they will die here. You are responsible



in front of Allah, if they lost their life (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 64). These words by Umar cannot stop al-Husayn. Al-Husayn does not dither because he is not there to quench his worldly desires. Al-Husayn is on a mission from which he well knows there is no return: "I [al-Husayn] will resist and it is not a shame for a brave man if he is aimed at gaining the justice and striving for its sake. So if I stay alive, I will not be regretful, and if I die, it does not matter" (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 83).

Becket concludes that his sacrifice will have meaning "only if it is done for the love of God (with charity)" (Gannon & Levensohn, 1965, p. 36). Once the path is clear and the purpose determined, Becket recalls all significant moments in his life from his thirst for worldly praise to his appointment as Archbishop. Eventually, he assures himself that being the servant of God is much more honorable than being in the service of the King. Though he defends his past deeds before the Knights in Part II, he declares his readiness and eagerness for death at the will of God: "Death will come only when I am worthy, / And if I am worthy, there is no danger. I have therefore only to make perfect my will (Eliot, 1962, p. 43).

From the beginning of the play, al-Husayn has realized that he will be killed. Yet he has never stopped fighting with his enemy although he knows that he cannot win militarily. Al-Husayn had refused to turn back because he possessed a degree of awareness that reassured him to revolt against Yazid who tried to distort the face of justice and freedom: "I [Al-Husayn] do not give up as a slave I will not give you as the humiliated on [ . . . ] I am not a coward to run away" (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 32). The idea of death is represented through al-Husayn's speech with his companions around him: "We are all stand by you to meet death" (al-Sharqawi, 1969 a, p. 163). Al-Husayn, like Becket when he left the door open, moved towards death on purpose despite the fact that he was told not to do so. Becket knew that if he left the door open, his murderers would enter the church, and yet he did so. Al-Husayn also was well aware of his fate right from the moment he embarked on his journey. Al-Husayn recognizes the importance of revolution and he attempts to fulfill it even though it costs his life: "No... I [al-Husayn] will try to conquer them. No... try to be against the oppression and injustice. I will fight in the name of the poor, defending their right. I will not stay silent in the wrong doing I will fight them to death" (al-Sharqawi, 1969 a, p. 81).

## 6.2. Authority and the Concept of Conflict

Tunisian theatrical director Azooz (2016) in his article explains that theatre is considered to be the father of all the arts, not because several artistic forms are intermingled in it, but because the theatre, along with its aesthetic, artistic and





entertaining nature, is a deep and precise intellectual work that does not present a speech but rather shapes life in a different way through characters' events (p. 122). "Its plot is based on the idea of conflict or struggle, between good and bad, which allows it to be revolutionary art against the wrong attitudes and corruptions of society. In other words, theatre always aspires and invites us to have a better life" (Azooz, 2016, p. 122). In a play, the conflict emerges as a result of disagreement in ideas or difference in the way actions are done (Sarhan, 1989, p. 78). They are considered to be essential in the play because they reveal the position of man and his relation to what surrounds him. "The struggle is a process that aims at reaching a specific purpose and a specific goal" (Sarhan, 1989, p. 78).

Eliot has written a number of poetic plays through which various ideas are portrayed and embodied to reflect the needs and reality of modern time as well as Eliot's intellectual background (al-Bahrani, 2012, p. 87). In his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot explained his thoughts about how to deal with religious ideas and illuminate their importance for human beings. At the same time he wanted to boost the audience's psychological ability in supporting his approach. This can be done by "spreading ideas that demonstrate determination and inspire the spirit of resistance to confront various challenges and instincts that threaten human beings" (al-Bahrani, 2012, pp. 87-88).

Eliot has depicted Thomas Becket as a protagonist who struggles with the king as well as with himself. In other words, this play entails two kinds of conflict. The first conflict is presented by Becket, who has to encounter King Henry II's threats; that is to say, the Church is against the State. *Murder in the Cathedral* "was a declaration that there were certain areas over which the State had no jurisdiction" (Tydeman, 1988, p. 38). Eliot portrayed the external conflict between King Henry II and Becket: "You are the Archbishop in the revolt against the King; in rebellion to the king and the law of the land; You are the Archbishop who was made by the King; whom he set in your place to carry out his command" (Eliot, 1962, p. 38). The second conflict, and the more important one, refers to Becket's internal conflict. "Eliot released and transfigured the mounting pressures of this internal conflict by transmuting them into the desperate spiritual struggles that confront his protagonist, the medieval English Archbishop Thomas Becket, in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935)" (Cuda, 2009, p. 10).

In the same manner, al-Sharqawi alludes to the historical conflict between the right Islamic of religion and the deviated Islam of state. This conflict is historically accurate and symbolically important. Al-Husayn's revolution represents the concept that was developed on the idea of rejection of Umayyad ideology that was based on



injustice and destruction. This revolution was a supreme example, that inspires various revolutionary meanings against any oppressive regime (Al-Bahrani, 2012, p. 119). Al-Sharqawi was influenced by Imam Husayn (PBUP) because his revolution was described as the revolution against the unjust authority and an attempt to redirect Islamic Ummah to the right place. Imam Husayn “forms a great model for every oppressed person to devote the renaissance and revolution concepts against the oppressive authorities” (Al-Bahrani, 2012, p. 120). Al-Sharqawi is the prominent dramatist who has written tragedies, but he has not adopted European tragedies. The reason is that the playwright, just like any other contemporary writer, employed “themes in his plays that were concerned with resistance and revolution” (Whittingham, 1976, p. 17).

We are informed that before the play begins, the argument between Becket and King Henry II has started because Henry wants Becket’s complete obedience, but Becket is a man described by the First Priest as one “Loathing power given by temporal devolution, / Wishing subjection to God alone” (Eliot, 1962, p. 14). Becket believes in the authority and rule of God. The lines “Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the still unshapen: I have seen these things in a shaft of sunlight. Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen” (Eliot, 1962, p. 12), refer to the historical conflict between Church and State. However, as mentioned earlier, the play’s main focus is not on historical accuracy, but on the implications of the Church-State conflict for the struggle between good and evil: “I [Third Priest] see nothing quite conclusive in the art of temporal government, / But violence, duplicity and frequent malversation. King rules or barons rules: [. . .] And the steadfast can manipulate the greed and lust of others” (Eliot, 1962, pp. 12-13).

In the play, the struggle entails the conflict between contradictory desires, Yazid’s desire to take the pledge of allegiance by force and al-Husayn’s desire to reject giving the oath of allegiance to Yazid. In other words, the struggle revolves around the head-on clash between the decent cleric and the tyrant ruler. Al-Sharqawi does not wait a long time to reveal the features of conflict because everything is prepared in advance through the conscious historical precedence formed in the mind of the audience and the writer together about the nature of the conflict: “You [al-Husayn] know there are two kinds of agreement for Yazid. The one that now we are acknowledging if Allah will and the next we did already, oh Husayn”, to which al-Husayn replies, “It was taken under the duress” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 a, p. 24).

Although the three knights tell Becket he is in revolt against the King, he only accepts the charge when the King’s commands are in opposition to God’s. In other words, it does not matter for Becket whom he opposes; what matters for him is



that he opposes whoever and whatever that opposes God's decree: "This is not true. Both before and after I [Becket] received the ring. I have been a loyal subject to the King. Saving my order, / I am at his command, / As his most faithful vassal in the land" (Eliot, 1962, pp. 38). The climax of the story occurs when the Knights, having been ordered to kill Becket, recounts the political charges leveled against Becket and gives him warning that he will be killed if he does not "depart from this land" but Becket rejected Knights' threats "If that is the King's command, / I will be bold" (Eliot, 1962, p. 40).

The idea of revolution in al-Sharqawi's plays is an important phenomenon that aims to rebel against intolerable situations. These situations can appear in a family, society, or even in an individual. Al-Sharqawi, like Eliot, has dramatized the idea of conflict between the king, Yazid, who wanted to maintain his kingdom, even forcefully and the revolutionary man, al-Husayn, who confronted Yazid's injustice. Al-Husayn's duty is to fight cruelty as much as he can: "The believer should revolt against the king who oppresses people. This is what we [al-Husayn's disciples] taught altogether. [ . . . ]. Human dignity is his attitude, in his defending of the weak" (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 51).

The struggle between religion and secular authority is intensified. Al-Husayn, in his conversation with Umar, represents an advisor rather than an enemy to Umar. In the following lines, al-Sharqawi describes the everlasting conflict between religion and corrupt monarchy: "Oh Ibn Saad we fought together. And we defeated the cruelty and oppression everywhere. And we lifted up the human's banner in the face of the gate", but Umar justifies the reason he must obey Yazid in giving up religion as "The need for the state and the burden that has increased on us oh Husayn!" (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 50).

### 6.3. Sacrifice and the Idea of Victory:

The death of the martyr represents not the defeat, but the victory of the individual; "the issue of a conflict in which the individual is ranged on the same side as the higher powers, and the sense of suffering consequently lost in that of moral triumph" (Butcher, 1932, pp. 311-312). A martyr prefers to die gloriously rather than living under the oppressive power of an unjust sovereignty. This is the case for both martyrs in Eliot's and al-Sharqawi's plays. "Although the death of Thomas Becket is quite tragic, he achieves the glory of martyrdom" (Bahir, 2015, p. 12826). Becket himself announces that he will achieve victory in spite of his death: "We have only to conquer / Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory. Now is the triumph of the Cross" (Eliot, 1962, p. 46).





Based on Christian principles, Christ's sacrifice is the utmost sense of obedience before the will of God (Gannon & Levensohn, 1965, pp. 37-39). Becket refers to Christ and his own sacrifice in the following lines: "We mourn, for the sins of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice that another soul is numbered among the Saints in Heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men" (Eliot, 1962, p. 33). The second part of the play also starts with a chant of the Chorus. The Chorus feels the world is replete with corruption and has a sense of foreboding that a disaster is about to happen. The only solution under this situation is a sacrifice which can cleanse the earth of its evil: "The peace of this world is always uncertain, unless men keep the peace of God. And war among men defiles this world, but death in the Lord renews it" (Eliot, 1962, p. 35).

The blood of a martyr, the Chorus states, empowers the goodness and creates holy places on Earth. Martin Luther King says "I've conquered the fear of dying, and a man that's conquered the fear of dying has conquered everything" (as cited in Roth, 1968, p. 1148). In the same manner, Becket knows his blood will enrich the power of God on Earth and as a result is ready to offer him his blood: "We thank Thee for Thy mercies of blood, for Thy redemption by blood. For the blood of Thy martyrs and saints" (Eliot, 1962, p. 53). Becket's death brings peace and tranquility to the Church. It will cleanse not only the church, but the whole world of contaminations and tyranny: "And the world must be cleansed in winter, or we shall have only / A sour spring, a parched summer, an empty harvest" (Eliot, 1962, p. 35).

In a similar way, if al-Husayn would have yielded to the Army of Yazid, he would have saved his life as well as the lives of all his beloved family and disciples. However, he chose to die because he knew that his death will bring the death of Yazid's ideology. In the words of Badawi (1992), "al-Husayn has no other course but to take up arms, knowing full well that victory will not be his lot against such a vastly superior enemy. It is al-Husayn's fate that he should choose to fight God's battle, irrespective of the result" (p. 361). This victorious death of al-Husayn is the beginning of an ideology which will always remain insurmountable even in the face of the most powerful oppressors. "The holy blood of a murdered saint will lead the human society to some good changes and to an overwhelming success, especially in the social and political field" (Bahir, 2015, p. 12832). Thus, al-Husayn claims "From my bloody heart will shine the splendor of the new dawn. From the heat of the thirsty liver, the happy time shall spring. Blessed for anyone who gives precious values to the life" (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 70).

Once the Archbishop is murdered in the Cathedral, the Chorus predicts that his blood will bring peace to the world and cleanse it from evil deeds: "Clear the air!



Clean the sky! wash the wind!, wash them wash them!” (Eliot, 1962, p. 48). Becket’s remarks once more reveal that his sacrifice is a ritual act necessary for preserving the power of God on Earth: “A Christian, saved by the blood of Christ, / Ready to suffer with my blood. This is the sign of the Church always, / The sign of blood. Blood for blood” (Eliot, 1962, p. 46).

Once the destiny is determined by God, al-Husayn is ready to accept it. He endures all difficulties imposed on him and his family because he firmly believes it is a divine test for him. “No there is no way. I [al-Husayn] revolted to close the doors of darkness. This is my destiny as I try to eradicate the oppressions and harnessing the chaos” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 a, p. 83). Victory of the spiritual world is the victory of all people who are deprived of their rights. Al-Husayn seeks revolt against to correct social corruptions that distorted the face of the world intentionally or unintentionally. Thus, al-Husayn defines his idea about sacrifice: “The one who comes with me [To Karbala] is the victorious. [ . . . ] It is for sure the clear victory” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 a, p. 84).

In another dialogue, al-Husayn states that the life with oppressive ruler is humiliation and death is the victory for the brave man: “I know the brave man does not care about mundane issues when it comes to distinguish between dignity and humiliation” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 37). Did al-Husayn’s ideas end by his martyrdom? No. Al-Husayn never ever ends: “You will always Remember me” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 130). There is no day mentioning that al-Husayn had faded because he is the revolutionary hero who sacrificed himself for freedom. His struggle against tyranny remains when al-Sharqawi concludes: “Remember me [al-Husayn] when your governors are lying, betraying and murdering. And the strongest men are hypocrites. And the ones who are supposed to care for your benefits. [...]. Remember me” (al-Sharqawi, 1969 b, p. 130).

## 7. Conclusion

Focusing on the similarities between the two plays, this paper concluded that the plays under study, though written in different locales and by playwrights different in terms of ideological background, have significant resemblances. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, T. S. Eliot has portrayed Becket as a protagonist who struggles with the king as well as with himself. In other words, this play entails two kinds of conflict. Becket, as Eliot implies, quenches the thirst of humans for power with his own blood. Similarly, in the *al-Husayn Revolutionary and Martyr* the struggle entails the conflict between two antithetical desires, religious and worldly desires. Al-Husayn, as depicted by al-Sharqawi is a martyr whose blood demolishes



the kingdom of the oppressive Yazid. Had he surrendered to the tyrant king, he would have saved his life, but this is against his Islamic beliefs.

In both plays, the protagonists are strong followers of their religion. Central to our understanding of Eliot's play is the idea of sacrifice to show submission to the divine order. Victory in these two plays is achieved through the protagonists' sacrifices. This paper focused on some underlying and significant similarities between the two plays under study.





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