

## AL-MA'ARI AND SHAKESPEARE

*Dr. Akram Shalghin, Associate Professor, English Literature, Amman, Jordan*

**Abstract:**

*A precise description of this study can be summed up in the perplexing existential conceptions of both life and death for two literary figures, William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) and Abu al-A'ala al-Ma'ari (973-1057). Though the old question of "to be or not to be" which was articulated by William Shakespeare within a certain context and specific conditions related to the situation within which his central figure Hamlet found himself, it seems to shape a quite considerable part of his overall philosophy on life and death. The just-mentioned way of thinking is parallel to, or has many in common with, that of the Arab poet Abu Al-A'ala Al-Ma'ari. This study is particularly concerned with the works of these authors which explore the identity of human beings and, likewise, their relevant attempts to find meanings for their lives. Moreover, it also examines the question of disillusionment which sometimes results in a moral paralysis and death wish.*

The two figures, al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare, focus precisely on the difficulties that encounter human beings when they try to adapt themselves to the unpleasant world which constantly contradicts their principles and values. Their works, likewise, embody the idea that harsh circumstances and cruel nature are bent on crushing and destroying humans' hopes, expectations and ambitions; they, furthermore, reveal humans' limitations when they show humans as powerless and unable to stand against all these challenges. Hence, the ultimate question they pose is to do with how humans can act when they realize their limited capabilities and that they are surrounded by the evil inside and outside themselves!

Despite all the above-mentioned difficulties, the two writers believe in what is termed as 'commitment' though they are cautious about being completely immersed in tiresome social life, as their biographical sketches reveal, though it is not so extensive in the case of Shakespeare's life.

Given this reality, al-Ma'ari partly isolates himself from active life but at the same time he provides constructive social criticism and tries to cultivate his garden. On the other hand, regardless of the various contemporary difficulties in his time, social, theological, and the like, Shakespeare, draws his characters far from having one-dimensional behavior, they do not only act but they also react; he makes his characters insist on the action and on preserving their human values regardless of the consequences.

As remarked above, remoteness describes the apparent relationship or connection between the two literary figures; the time and place differences are profound factors insofar as there are many centuries that separate al-Ma'ari from Shakespeare. Likewise, they belong to two geographically different places; their two cultures are opposed to each other, in other words, the respective ubiquitous cultural concerns and traditions are shaped accordingly, facts that further distance them. Additionally, there are also great differences in the personal lifestyle of both men. Nonetheless, there is a strong affinity between the two literary authors, especially in connection with the existential dimension of their writing.

It may seem a little odd or even anachronistic to attach existentialism to al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare since this trend is closely associated with Modernism, the age in which humans have been able to excel in most branches of science. But ironically this progress has been accompanied by disillusionment and loss insofar as the basic questions which are related to humans and life, in general, are concerned, and the very identity of humanity is now being constantly questioned. Humans now seem as oscillating between

survival instinct to assert themselves and between Thanatos or death wish which releases their consciousness. The life of modern humans, especially in the West, is highly complex. It is not coincidental that existentialism should be established to crystallize human fear of emptiness and loss to the extent of making them wish for annihilation.

It may not be fair to impose existentialism upon two writers who are somewhat difficult to classify and who do not systematically propagate any theory. On the one hand, al-Ma'ari is the poet of his age when he deals with politics, religion, society, and ethics. Shakespeare also tackles contemporary issues in his attempt to represent all the classes of his society. On the other hand, one can easily detect that behind the social face of these poets there is a divided personality between responding to daily life and between a running desire for oblivion, the cause of which may be related to the demands of life in general and disappointment in human nature and its limitations in particular. Death wish is the natural reaction for al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare since they visualize human life as burdensome and sometimes a kind of curse.

Whereas al-Ma'ari's thoughts are conveyed directly through his poems, Shakespeare's thoughts are approached through his dramatic characters since they are not the architects of their personalities or the creators of their thoughts; thus, their philosophy is framed by his own.

Being born to suffering in life is no less than the victimization of the parents to their children, thus Al-ma'ari has shocked the human conscience in his well-known outcry, which he requested to be inscribed on his tomb: **"This is my father's crime against me, which I committed against none"** It clearly illustrates existence as an unforgivable crime. This is a terrifying human shriek that expresses al-Ma'ari's indignation about having to endure the consequences of his father's crime. There are so many poems by al-Ma'ari which show his resentment of just being alive and his unyielding spirit for nothingness. He often wishes that the newly born baby is hurried to inevitable death: "If only a new-born child died at the time of giving birth, and was not breastfed by his postpartum mother"

He expresses his wish that human beings would not reproduce new victims -so to speak - to this world, that is why he desires immediate death to any newcomer to this life exactly at the very moment of being born; meanwhile, he does not miss to draw a reference to the state of the mother after giving birth, hence indirectly draws upon the pain caused in the reality of birth and recreation. He insists that we must avoid procreation since it is a terrible crime inflicted upon the innocent who is thrown into an evil environment:

"Like manipulative orators, fathers commit a crime by imposing existence on their children.

What has caused your children to abandon you is their vengeance that they are your offspring.

They realize that their father has thrown them into arid existence, what a life!"

Al-Ma'ari is uncomfortable with what religious teaching recounts about the life of human beings and its value for Its Creator. He even goes so far as to blame God Himself for this unnecessary or meaningless life and its painful death, he regards this process of creating life and ceasing it eventually only to enliven it again as a pointless act; it is a kind of contradiction from which human beings suffer:

"Oh, Lord! You have forbidden premeditated murder, yet, you have sent two angels to do the same thing!

You pretend that there is another life; it would be much better if neither existed!"

Similarly, Shakespeare has often created in his tragedies many characters that are doubtful about the whole teleology of life and they express a strong desire for non-being. Richard II may stand as an outstanding example for this state of loss and confusion of a to-be-or-not-to-be situation:

Sometimes am I, king;

Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,

And so I am. Then crushing penury

persuade me I was better when a king

Then I am king'd again; and by and by  
 Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,  
 And straight am nothing. But what 'er I be,  
 Nor I, nor any man that man is,  
 With nothing shall he be pleas'd till he be eas'd  
 With being nothing

As Derek Traversi remarks, the subtle formulation of the expressions which fluctuate between a king and a beggar and being and non-being leads Richard to face nothingness which he sees as an integral part of human life. Therefore, he yields to accept this bitter fact, while his opponent Bolingbroke avoids this confrontation by pursuing authority. Eventually, Richard realizes that both ways are marked by some kind of illusion. Thus, nothingness dominates everything and is looked at as a release from tiresome life and burdened consciousness. Similarly, the reaction Macbeth reveals upon hearing of Lady Macbeth's death is a bombastic philosophical reaction; perhaps in English poetry these are among the most powerful lines in terms of their philosophical views, they represent emotional outbursts which are highly original and evocative of contemplating the very essence of all life as he asserts that life is devoid of meaning and intent:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.

These lines correspond to Macbeth's negative experience in the play, but Shakespeare gathers momentum to vividly show life as an apparition swinging in the trap of 'nowhere' and of the changes of 'tide' and doomed to total oblivion. Macbeth at the end sees life as a candle with a dim light that when it is put out some sort of salvation is achieved:

“Outs out, brief candle”

Here Macbeth reveals a torn human self, yearning for death without any hope of continuing a life stifled by ambition for empty authority. This is the same experience of Al-Ma'ari when he resents the attitude of those who want to devour life, he typically urges restraint:

“All life is exhaustive! I wonder how humans demand more of life!

Step lightly, I guess that the salt of the earth comes from these corpses!”

In the same way that Shakespeare expresses through Macbeth that only the fools who are tempted by apparent happiness, al-Ma'ari bitterly concludes that life is a tiresome business and it is wise to be content with the minimum of everything and to withdraw from the 'sound and fury' of existence. He imposes on himself imprisonment which isolates him from people, in addition to his two natural prisons which he sees in his blindness and the containment of his spirit within a contaminated body:

“I see myself trapped within three jails, so don't ask about the clear news!

It's the loss of my sight; Being forced to commit myself to be always at home, and the containment of my soul within a dirty body!”

It is noteworthy that many pessimistic existentialists see the spirit as imprisoned and consequently yearns for death to be released from the demands of the body. Philip Larkin, the modern English poet, expresses this notion beautifully in his human cry in the bewilderment when he says, 'a desire for oblivion runs.' However, al-Ma'ari does not have a fixed opinion about the spirit for he sees it at one time as an independent essence imprisoned within the body to be tested, and at another time he looks at it, just like the

materialists, as a power connected with the body and ends in death.

Perhaps the reasons or motivations which have led al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare to establish their tragic vision are mainly related to their knowledge and awareness of the limitations of human nature and the complicated motivations of humans which only serve his egoism in one way or another. For that reason, al-Ma'ari realizes that humans have always to adapt to society even at the expense of some of their principles. His adoption of dissimulation of his religion is part of his social policy to keep his true belief to himself:

“Never tell anybody about the essence of your religion, otherwise you're deceived!  
Be silent, for one's speech may cause destruction! If you have to speak, try to be clear and brief!  
What I say is not the whole truth, but it has varieties of metaphors.”

It is clear that these lines indicate that Al-Ma'ari sometimes hides behind the deceptive and evasive language to deal with people, especially the mob, but he reveals his true opinion if circumstances are favorable, as is the case when he denies the major religions of his time and associates faith with irrationalism and naivety:

“Hanifs (Muslims) are stumbling, Christians all astray  
Jews wildered Magians far on error's way.  
We, mortals, are composed of two great schools  
Enlightened knaves or else religious fools.”

By the same token, Shakespeare demonstrates that humans have to compromise since they cannot challenge the current tide, and hence their tragedy. In *Love's Labor's Lost* Berowne, one of the men of the court adopts this pragmatic conclusion, which expresses the morality of the play as a whole:

“Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves,  
Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths.”

Is it not pitiable that the real tragedy of humans should be related to their inability to realize themselves without having to sacrifice their ideals? Is it not most unfair that humans have to lose themselves to achieve a so-called acceptable life to satisfy society? What existence is it if we cannot reconcile ourselves to our pledges!? All these questions make Shakespeare realize that humans have to limit their ambition and accept bitter reality. Moreover, the tragedy of existence is particularly embodied in humans' fear of the destructive power of time which is willy-nilly annihilating them and gradually stifling their spirit:

“Against my love shall be as I am now,  
With time's injurious hand crush'd and o'erworn...”

Nature, circumstances, and 'fate' are forces bent on destroying humans' life and putting an end to their ambitions and aspirations. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the two lovers are always thwarted by circumstances that they can neither control nor understand:

“A great power than we can contradict  
Hath thwarted our intents”

The death of Romeo and Juliet at the end represents humans' real tragedy and their inability to confront a ruthless destiny. The question is how can humans realize themselves and respond to their environment within these limitations? More difficult still is the consciousness of humans which enables them to see the dimensions of everything around themselves, particularly the bitter reality which points to boredom and vacuum. Shakespeare comes to the same conclusion of the Arab poet Abu At-tayeb Al-Mutanabi that “The mindful person suffers even if he lives in paradise for using his logic, while the ignorant one enjoys the hardest kind of life!”

In the sense that the more knowledgeable and conscious humans are the unhappier they are bound to be, Shakespeare portrays Gloucester, the blind man, to symbolically embody this idea in *King Lear*:

“I have no way, and therefore want not eyes;  
I stumbled when I saw.”

The vision here is a penetration into the essence of everything and a realization of the ultimate truth about humans' nature, their limitations, weakness, and susceptibility to depravity. It is the same stunning vision of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that forces him to cry at the last moment of his life, "The horror! The horror!" since he can have a glimpse of the truth and humans' dark heart.

Likewise, al-Ma'ari characterizes life as utterly evil and he deplors the helpless situation of humans. His vision is, consequently, deterministic and he sees the humans' will as constrained or stifled a plethora of powers beyond their control:

“My birth is not my choice, nor is so my old age or life, am I still able of drawing a choice?”

Moreover, al-Ma'ari believes that humans inherit their irredeemable evil nature:

“We are trapped by evil nature that is beyond reform, it's rarely that a good person may break the rule!

We haven't ourselves chosen to spoil our ethics; it is rather a fate that has determined everything!

If our origin is evil, the offspring is bound to follow suit! How to expect loyalty from the son if the father is treacherous?”

In addition to heredity which makes humans prone to depravity, Al-Ma'ari illustrates human life under the mercy of a tyrannical environment which further prompts them for evil and exploitation. Perhaps the corrupt society in which Al-Ma'ari lives may partly be responsible for this pessimistic outlook. Political life, in particular, is hopeless and dominated by dictatorship:

“What a horrible stay! How many times do I have to live among people led by corrupt rulers! They abuse people and allow themselves to deceive them, and exploit their resources while presumably they're appointed to serve them!”

No less corrupt are men of religion who impose on others rules which they permit themselves to violate:

“Hang on! You are deceived by an imposter preaching women! He forbids you to seduce the beauty in the morning, while he devours her in the evening!”

The real issue now is: what is the use of human values within such a limited human nature which is surrounded by inside evil? What can people like al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare do within a chaotic and corrupt world? Is withdrawal from active life the right solution, or should humans confront the challenges of existence? As for al-Ma'ari he prefers to withdraw from active social life. However, this attitude is not negative; he tries to reform society in his way. His attack against the world of politics and the corruption of men of religion and the people around him is a kind of constructive criticism the aim of which is to modify people's attitudes, if not to change them radically. One feels that al-Ma'ari implies that, although human nature is corrupt, humans can, and should, control their evil. Al-Ma'ari's personal life is a demonstration of his serious attempt to refine nature and cultivate his garden. His ambition is not related to the world of politics or to wealth accumulation as is the case, for example, with al-Mutanabbi, but rather to the legitimate sphere of literature. Certainly, al-Ma'ari realizes that too much involvement is something risky and he does not usually rush where angels fear to tread. One main reason for this attitude is his doubt whether this life has any teleology at all. Thus, when one thinks deeply of the 'noise' of life one concludes that 'singing' and 'weeping' are alike:

“It's pointless in my belief whether one weeps or sings!

Likewise, it's the same whether that dove weeps or sings on the shaky branch!”

Why should one bother about anything if there is no ultimate meaning for this life? why should one weep or

sing or have any attitude if life is absurd and our endeavor is in vain? Meanwhile, humans cannot refrain from action even though they realize the emptiness of everything. The real dilemma of humans is that they can never accept to bury themselves alive and give up their whole humanity. Al-Ma'ari expresses his predicament in many emotional outbursts and his somewhat contradictory attitude towards religion and God.

All these puzzling issues are dealt with by Shakespeare throughout his works which he crystallizes in Hamlet's well-known dilemma:

"To be or not to be, that is the question"

What can Hamlet do when he is uncertain about anything, not even his real motivation for revenge which might be marred by the Oedipus complex. That is why he wonders:

"The world is out of joint, oh cursed spite  
That ever I was born to set it right"

Furthermore, he is surrounded by a corrupt society blinded by greed and authority. Worse still: what does he achieve when he decides to act? Has he rescued the world or perhaps made it messier? If that is the case, is it justifiable to refrain from action and accept a somewhat negative existence? the implication is, although Hamlet cannot change the world he has to act and insist on human action to realize himself, for without some sort of commitment there is no self-realization. Humans are not skeletons and the moment they visualize themselves as such they cease to be.

There is no doubt that wise people do not give themselves totally to instinct and greed, but this does not mean that they have to freeze themselves and declare their bankruptcy. Most existentialists, especially Sartre, believe in commitment, even if it is related to their individuality. Both al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare realize fully the question of commitment even if it is personal or related to the world of literature. In other words, they advocate a balance between the hell of self-communion which inevitably leads to despondency and despair, and between the hell of a fully active social life which usually leads to avarice and lust. If al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare sometimes express a desire for oblivion, it is merely an expression of human frustration or emotional outbursts as a result of internal and external pressure. Even those Shakespearean protagonists who die at the end like Hamlet do so after having fulfilled their moral obligation and responded to the challenges of life. Despite everything, King Lear realizes that the only solution for humans is to respond fully to life and accept it on its terms. Shakespeare himself writes with full conviction that it is possible, at least poetically, to change or modify certain social attitudes and this is one reason for writing. He is a prolific writer who knows that his writing is a kind of mission for all humanity to interact with life and contemplate the truth of existence without any rashness.

Both al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare do not want humans to be mere spectators on the stage of life, although some of their writings may appear to urge withdrawal. Neither do they desire humans to do anything at the expense of their integrity by giving themselves totally to active life which may tempt them to exploit others and blind them to see the reality of everything! Al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare are not politicians, economists, or sociologists but rather poets who are pained to see that humans are so selfish and utilitarian by nature, that if they are let loose, they may end up not only destroying their fellow human beings but also themselves. Rarely do we find the likes of al-Ma'ari and Shakespeare who have shaken in their immortal works the human conscience to establish a well-balanced life that should leave everlasting human marks on existence.

**References:**

- **Al-Haidari**, Dr. Nabeel, *Al-Ma'ari a Revolutionary: From Politics to Isolation*. Beirut: Dar Al-Arab, 2016.
- **Barkooki**, Abdulrahman, *Sharh Diwan Almutanabbi*, Qafiyatulmeem. Egypt: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2014.
- **Canning**, Patricia. "For I Must Nothing Be': Kings, Idols, and the Double-Body of the Sign in Early Modern England. " *Critical Survey*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2012.
- JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/42751003. Accessed 16 Mar. 2021.
- **Flynn**, Thomas, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press 2006.
- **Greenblatt**, Stephen. *Will in The World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* Paperback April 24, 2014.
- **Grigoryan**, Sona, Central European University, Budapest, 2018.
- **Hussein, Taha**. *Renewal of Abilala's Memory*, Cairo: Darilma'arif, 1963
- **Larkin, Philip**, "Wants," in *The Less Deceived*, London, London: The Marvell Press, 1977.
- **Salloum, Habeeb**, "Abu Al- 'Ala' Al-Ma'arri: Arab Poet and Philosopher Extraordinaire", in *Arab America*, AUG 16, 2017.
- **Shakespeare, Tom**, *Al Ma'arri: visionary free thinker*, <https://farmerofthoughts.co.uk/article/al-maarri-visionary-free-thinker/>
- **Shakespeare, William**, *Richard II*. Charles R. Forker ed. the Arden Shakespeare, 2002.
- **Shakespeare, William**, *Macbeth*. eds. Dr. Barbara A. Mowat & Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library: Mass Market Paperback July 1, 2003.
- **Shakespeare, William**, *Love's Labour's Lost*. ed. H. R. Woudhuysen. The Arden Shakespeare. 1998.
- **Shakespeare, William**, Sonnet LXIII: "Against My Love Shall Be As I Am Now" in Katherine Duncan-Jones ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. The Arden Shakespeare, 1998.
- **Shakespeare, William**, *Romeo and Juliet*. Yale University Press. 2004.
- Shakespeare, William, *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Ed. Jay L Halio. Cambridge University Press, 1992/2005.
- **Shakespeare, William**, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Ed. Sylvan Barnet. USA: Chamberlain Bross, 1963.
- **Traversi, Derek**, "The Young Dramatist and Poet", in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: The Age of Shakespeare*, Ed. Boris Ford, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982.
- **Traversi Derek**, *Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V*. Stanford University Press, 1961.